EXEMPLA USAGE IN CATHOLIC PAROCHAIL SCHOOLS

Janet N. Dressler

When speaking with other University of Delaware students of my own age who attended Catholic grade school or high school, I have noticed a high degree of redundancy in reported classroom experiences. The pattern of similarity is most evident when the discussion concerns nun teachers, and in particular the exempla they tell within the classroom. These anecdotes and short narratives were told by nuns to students in order to emphasize a moral teaching or doctrinal lesson which, if left unsupported, could easily go unattended by a disinterested or unconvinced student. As Joseph Mosher explains in The Exemplum in the Early Religious and Didactic Literature of England, the exemplum serves a variety of purposes:

> (1) to furnish a concrete illustration of the result of obeying or disobeying some religious or moral law; (2) to give proof or confirmation of the truth of an assertion; (3) to arouse fear in the sinful or to stimulate the zeal of the godly: (4) to make clear the meaning of some abstruse statement; (5) to revive languid listeners, evoke interest or laughter; (6) to eke out a scant sermon by "farsing" it with tales.[1]

I discovered that these stories often became the topic of conversation when students reviewed their Catholic school years from the perspective of maturity. Surprisingly, many students recounted similar varsions of the same stories despite differences in the locale of the schools they had attended, and in the religious orders of the nuns who taught them.

I began to collect exempla from a series of schoolmates in the Fall of 1973. I collected my data randomly, employing information given by any student who had attended Catholic school and was willing to contribute. However, I was cautious to speak with students who had attemded different schools and who had contact with various orders of nuns. Beginning with students who definitely had had Catholic schooling, I pursued leads indicated by my initial informants. Some of the people immediately recognized what type of stories I sought, but had difficulty in recalling specifics of the stories; others immediately recounted stories that they claimed would always be vivid in their minds. I found that the most effective method of collecting was to engage in conversation a pair of students who had been classmates in Catholic school. This method produced the greatest flow of information because the students could stimulate and add to each other's recollections.

Inquiry through the Spring of 1974 among these and additional informants has disclosed that the pattern is more pronounced and far-ranging than originally anticipated. Indeed, the stories appear to go to the heart of Catholic education on both the grade school and high school levels.

A preliminary evidence which prompted the inquiry hinted that the method of teaching through exempla had been widely practiced by many orders of nuns in diverse locations. In my concern to protect those who have helped to shape this paper, I have given my informants pseudonyms, named only the location of the schools they attended, and classified the order of nuns who taught them. Where two names are joined together, the students had previously attended school together and gave me their accounts jointly. Where two locations and classes of nuns are given for one name, the first refers to grade school attended while the second refers to high school attended.

INFORMANT	SCHOOL LOCATION	ORDER OF NUNS
Anne	Wilmington	A
Betsy	Wilmington	B
Barbara	Wilmington	C
Chris	Dover	D
Donna	Philadelphia suburb	E
	Philadelphia	E
Eileen	Malvern, Pa.	E
	Malvern, Pa.	F
Frank	Wilmington	D
Fred	Wilmington	D
Greg	Chester, Pa.	G
Helen	Wilmington	B
(Myself)	Philadelphia suburb	E
	Philadelphia	F
Judy	Wilmington	B
Kathy	Claymont	H
	Wilmington	B
Leo	Boston	E
	Atlanta	B

The technique of instruction through exempla has been used in all areas of the Catholic child's life, including his relationship to God, church, school, and home, and even his external social relations. The importance of the narratives becomes evident as one examines their content, classroom use, and role within the Catholic educational system. Accordingly, in this paper I present a series of stories actually told to students by the nuns who taught them in Catholic

school. I attempt to explain the reason for their continuous circulation within the classroom, the motivation behind the telling, and their impact during the process of religious indoctrination at the grade school and high school levels.

In the very early years of Catholic education there is a need for nuns to instill faith in children and to convey doctrine in a way which is memorable. Since in large part the process involves a kind of "spiritual indoctrination," the teaching is often strict and dogmatic. There is a tendency to over-emphasize scripture and related sacred teachings for the sake of emotional and intellectual impact. Consequently, the dramatized presentation often characteristically intensifies the Church's official position on matters of doctrine and accepted standards of conduct. This pattern of Catholic education dates informally to the earliest days of the Church, and continues - albeit with gradual changes - into the present.[2]

The method of classroom storytelling for educational purposes is predominant in matters of ethical and spiritual learning. Hastings, in The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, notes the importance of such "gentle forces of persuasion" which lead the individual members of a group to submit to the group's traditional injunctions without any show of coercion.[3] What Hervé Carrier says in The Sociology of Religious Belonging about such a propagation of beliefs explains the process with more detail:

> The transmission of doctrine is for a religious group the very condition of its survival: it is not only an educative function that it performs along with other services -- it is a way of integrating and rooting the faithful within the community.[4]

Carrier goes on to show that the transmission of the religious message is only one step in engendering a comprehensive and stable attitude t that results from the unification of all levels of sacred and secular behavior. This synthesis is a basic goal in Catholic education; ideally, one learns to live life in a Christian and, more specifically, a Catholic way.

The ultimate responsibility for setting the goals of Catholic education rests with Papal authority. In his encyclical letter entitled "Christian Education of Youth," Pope Pius XI has outlined the philosophy behind the educational process in contemporary parochial schools:

> Since education consists essentially in preparing man for what he must be and for what he must do here below, in order to attain the sublime end for which he was created, it is clear that there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to man's last end; and . . . there can be no ideally perfect education which is not Christian education.[5]

Thus, the ultimate goal of Catholic education is meant to be a life directed toward God in worship and in service. In order to achieve that end, the Catholic educational process extends itself to all aspects of the student's life.

Nearly all of my student informants, young adult men and women between 18 and 22 years of age, recalled being told explicitly that anyone who was not Catholic could never go to Heaven, regardless of how "good" a life he had led. Barbara, for example, told about a girl in her grade-school class who became hysterical at this thought because her father was not Catholic. She feared that he would be deprived of this reward despite his goodness in her eyes. The young girl was assured that although he could not expect to be rewarded with a place in Heaven after death, his good life nevertheless would save him from punishment in hell.

This concept that Heaven is reserved solely for Catholics seems to be upheld at all levels of Catholic education, including the Catholic university. In American Culture and Catholic Schools, Emmett McLoughlin, and ex-priest, re-evaluates the Roman Catholic concepts he was required to teach as part of a course in "Psychology for Nurses." Despite the fact that half the girls in his classroom were non-Catholic, his job was to teach the practice of Catholic baptism for all dying babies, regardless of the religion of the parents. The rationale for this policy, he writes somewhat cynically, was " . . . that if the parents had any sense, they would know that the Catholic Church is the true church and would want their babies baptized." This same line of logic was used in encouraging the nurses to call him or another priest to give the Catholic last rites to all patients brought in unconscious.[6]

Linked to such teachings is the in-group consciousness which is strongly emphasized in the early years of Catholic grade school. Both Anne and I recall that our schools were directly across the street from a public school, and that we and our classmates used to stare at the non-Catholics (whom we ignorantly called "publics"). We felt sorry for them. We were convinced that they would never go to Heaven, and came to believe that they were necessarily "bad" people. This idea was strengthened by the nuns' insistence that we associate only with children from our own schools, thereby avoiding the "downgrading" influences of other youths. In high school, nuns made references to public school pregnancies, vandalism, and moral transgressions in general in order to strengthen our ties with our Catholic peers and community. Hopefully, these ties would be evident in all activities but especially in those of a religious nature.

As a child I shared almost all activities and experiences solely with other Catholics my age. This corporate group identification in turn led to a kind of social isolation, wherein all experiences took on a religious hue. Carrier notes this process by observing

that shared religious experience not only integrates a religious group, but serves to help separate it as a sociological unit from the exterior world. "Religious doctrine," he argues, "tends to gather together the initiated and to segregate them from those who do not share the faith. The integrating power of doctrine becomes part of a complex phenomenon in which one discerns communion with one and the same faith."[7]

During the first few years of Catholic grade school, the child learns most of the major doctrinal lessons of the faith. Much of this instruction draws heavily upon oral exempla used in the classroom. But by the time of early adolescence, increased emphasis is placed upon lessons of social behavior and decorum in addition to the topics of physical and mental purity.

At about the age of thirteen years, personal health and cleanliness becomes an important issue since the student's body is changing. At this point, my informants tell me, the nuns' stories are mainly preoccupied with teaching respect for parental and religious authority figures, and with explaining the contagion of germs from contact with money, bannisters, doorknobs, or any unclean public place. Greg says that stories a nun told his class about the possibility of developing leprosy came to upset many parents of his classmates, but that the nun continued to tell the stories anyway. Leprosy was the disease most used by nuns when speaking of illness or physical pain on earth, since a person inflicted with leprosy becomes unsightly, rotted, outcast, and, most importantly, incurable. Although some people are said to die of the disease, leprosy is almost always presented as a disease where the person plagued with it sits and rots while in intense pain.

By the time the student enters high school, he or she has acquired a substantial interest in the opposite sex. In an effort to subdue that interest, nuns make "sex" and "dating" the focal point of most lectures. It is quite noticeable that when dealing with this age group lecturing is more frequently and successfully employed than storytelling. Perhaps the nuns realize that older students have become more aware of such methods of indoctrination and that they are thus less susceptible to their influences. Yet the stories have not disappeardd entirely. Instead, their context has matured.

Most talks on these subjects are given by nuns exclusively to groups of girls. There is no problem with this approach in either private academies that host only girls or even in co-educational schools which are physically divided according to sex. But even in co-ed classes, which until recently were very rare in Catholic high schools, I am told that boys were always sent out of the room to do something else when these lessons were taught.

The dress code for Catholic young ladies was an important issue in all Catholic high schools. Aside from the school regulations con-

cerning uniform length, no make-up, and conservative hair-dos, the nuns taught proper standards for social dress as well. Anne, Betsy, Barbara, Eileen, Kathy and myself vividly recall the warnings issued against patent-leather shoes because they reflect your underwear, pearl necklaces because they reflect down your dress, and white hair ribbons because they remind boys of bed-sheets. Also, we were all told that a girl should always carry a phone book on a date in case there is a crowded situation and she has to sit on her date's lap -- then she can put the phone book between the two of them. The latter seemingly absurd practice was experienced by Leo, one of my male informants. He and some friends had driven from the University of Delaware to a women's Catholic college in Philadelphia for a weekend date. While they were trying to squeeze five girls into the already crowded car, a nun came rushing out to issue a phone book to each of the five girls so that they could place them between themselves and the boys' laps.[8]

Other "procedures" of dating were taught in the classrooms. Anne remembers being told that if a boy tried to kiss her on a date she should shout: "Stop, Satan, for I am a child of Mary!", and then call the police. I was told that before leaving for a date the couple should stop before a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary and ask her assistance for a pure evening.

Giving warnings against all sexual activities, without giving any explanations of the "danger", is a practice of many nuns who want to teach the lesson involved but shy from including either reasons or details. The only sex education I ever received in Catholic school was in my freshman year when three days of Science class were preempted for mandatory instruction on venereal diseases. I remember being very conscious of the nun's nervousness with this alien subject that she was required to present. She stressed that we should hide the booklets away from male students and our brothers, that we should not discuss the subject among ourselves, and that once the topic was finished being taught we should consider the subject closed and not mention it again. Barbara and Betsy, who attended high school together, were not so "fortunate" as to receive this instruction. They were told by a nun who was their Biology teacher that they could get VD from kissing, but she explained neither why nor how.

Although minor offenses against the strict sexual code of behavior are often mentioned, the act of sexual intercourse goes practically unmentioned. This leads to vague references to girls who "get in trouble." The more innocent girls who hear this expression, however, misunderstand the concept. I clearly recall a lecture given in my homeroom class on the last day of my freshman year in high school. The nun emphasized that we should watch ourselves and be careful if we went swimming that summer with boys. She added that one of her students the previous year was not able to return to

school because "she wasn't careful." In my extreme naivete, I had no concept of what could happen to me, nor did the nun ever try to explain it. Helen says that in seventh grade she was told about a girl that the nun had once taught "who was very good as a student and had gotten all A's in Catechism (religion class). The girl 'became pregnant somehow' and had to leave school -- which shows that besides knowing your Catechism, you must also practice it."

A nun who taught Barbara and Betsy was a bit more daring in her references to sex. Unfortunately, she was also quite inaccurate. She told them that extreme care must be taken with men because when a man and a woman lay in bed together, the sperms could "just hop right across the bed." She left the subject at that.

When the act of sexual intercourse is either mentioned or suggested, the tone is often quite dramatic. Helen related an interesting story that she claims taught her the lesson of chastity. She was told:

> There was a young couple who were engaged to be married and who were deeply in love. The night before their wedding the man talked the woman into having sex and so they did. On the way home, while he was driving his bride-to-be that night, they had an accident and the woman was immediately killed. Since she had just committed a mortal sin by having pre-marital sex she went straight to hell, and her boyfriend realized that it was all his fault. They buried her in her wedding dress and the man was so overcome with grief at the sight of her and the thought of what he had done to her, that he went insane and has been in a mental institution ever since.

Helen added that she never could understand how making love could be a sacred act when the two people were married and a mortal sin if they weren't -- even if they loved each other so much. She said,"I could never get up enough nerve to ask the nun about this, but I still couldn't understand it." McLoughlin points out that, in the eyes of the Catholic church, any violation of its sexual standard will damn the soul to hell. He notes Herbert Jone's summation which explains that:

> "All directly voluntary sexual pleasure is mortally sinful outside of matrimony. This is true even if the pleasure be ever so brief and insignificant. Here there is no lightness of matter."[9]

McLoughlin then continues by emphasizing that these "voluntary sexual pleasures" that are mortally sinful include thoughts, looks, songs, and jokes as well as kisses and touches.[10] This philosophy brings to mind the famous cases of "mental rape" for which boys received detentions in a large Catholic high school about ten miles

from my own. In the school building, the boys were separated from the girls by an imaginary wall down the center. For looking longingly at a girl who was, perhaps, 100 feet down the corridor, a boy could be charged with "mental rape" and be punished by being detained after school to pray in the chapel, write a paper on the wrongness of the act, or perform servile work.

Another important area of exempla telling concerns the subject of religious vocation. It was apparent to me in the 1960's that either religious vocations were dwindling or the need for nuns had become greater. A campaign to encourage religious vocation was initiated by the Church, by which a special prayer was added after each mass, as well as after morning prayers in the classroom.

During the high school years, lectures concerning sex and dating often culminated in encouragement towards religious devotion and the ecstasy that lifeling dedication can bring. Emmett McLoughlin explains the pre-occupation with oocational rccruiting in the Catholic high school. He says that rapid expansion of the parochial school system had caused an unsettling shortage in both male and female vocations, especially in those religious orders that staff the parochail schools. He notes the constant emphasis placed on a vocation being a personal call from Christ. If unanswered, great amounts of spiritual grace were rejected; if answered, security, happiness, and heaven were the rewards.[11]

This concept, which so strongly discourages rejection of a personal gift from God, is one widely employed by the nuns to evoke conviction from the student. Anne, Betsy, Barbara, Donna, Helen, and myself were all told repeatedly that if you have received a vocation from God it can neither be ignored nor refused; if you are being called to the sisterhood, you must answer or you will never find peace or happiness in life. Helen says that at about the age of fifteen (freshman year in high school) she was told about a girl who thought she could ignore the vocation to which she was being called:

> There was a girl being called by God to be a nun but she didn't want to sacrifice her life to answer the call. She spent many years going from job to job but she could never find anything that she was good at or liked. She also looked for a man to marry so that she could become his wife and a good mother but she couldn't find anyone who made her happy. She became so upset one day that she went to church to pray and to ask God what she should do with her life. Just as she was praying, a nun walked into the church and she knew that she must be a nun if she were ever to be happy in life.

All six informants who relayed this idea of obliged acceptance of a vocation immediately added that they used to pray constantly that they would not be called by God to become a nun, because then they

would have to answer it. Admission of this fear shows a high degree of success by the nuns; by planting the suspicion in the girls that they might be receiving such a call, they caused the girls to look for signs from God. Thus, the possibility of those girls becoming nuns themselves was significantly increased.

Through example of the exempla presented in this paper, one can readily see a repetition of similar themes and motifs in stories told by nuns in Catholic schools. It is important to notice that the similarity exists despite differences in either geographical location or in the religious order of the nun who tells the story. The main function of this teaching method is to add substance and credibility to religious beliefs or doctrines by means of a story that surrounds that belief. As Frederic Tubach explains in Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales,

> . . . the exemplum is an attempt to discover in each narrative event, character, situation or act of paradigmatic sign that would either substantiate religious beliefs and Church dogma or delineate social ills and human foibles.[12]

It is certain that these stories were intended to be believed by the student -- my personal fear was that any misdeed by myself would ultimately make me the subject of another nun's story in the future. The power of credibility can be ascribed to the nuns themselves who demanded the child's respect and in fact used exempla that would render respect. For example, two male informants reported that their early-adolescent defiance for authority was squelched by such stories. Supposedly, to hit a nun, priest, or parent would result in a shrivelled arm for the offender.

The truth of the event is relatively unimportant, but it is important that the members of the folk group continue to work within the system of beliefs and thus do believe that the people involved existed. It is almost certain that the nuns who told the exempla did not know the individual characters specifically or personally, yet the exempla were always presented in the manner characteristic of legend. Namely, the stories were told as if the nuns did know the personna in the accounts, or else someone they knew and trusted had known them.

The subject areas usually cover some unusual or catastrophic happenings (for example, being killed immediately following pre-marital sex), and the intention is to warn the student of the dangers involved in areas of interest, especially those of sex and dating.

The didactic nature of these exempla cannot be denied. Those stories which surround important areas of anxiety such as belief in the religion are extremely crucial to the effectiveness of Catholic school instruction. Doubt or misunderstanding by the child could cause a series of spreading disbeliefs; "faith" is all-important. The nuns

have found the exemplum (although they would never refer to it as such) to be an effective instrument in affirming that faith. Their efforts have been successful for one main reason -- the students have faith in the stories themselves. And that credibility, finally, is the crucial element.

In her book entitled Storytelling, Claudia Royal describes the form and use of storytelling in religious education and even gives instruction on how to develop this technique. Although her writing is geared to the use of stories that teach by positive moralizing, her philosophy is applicable to the nuns' stories that use an anti-hero to show undesirable traits to children. She writes: "The well-chosen story, effectively told, can be used to form ideals and to mold character. It provides an inner path to the child's life. It can make an appeal to the emotions and stir the will to right action,"[13]

The important characteristic of stories is the thoughtful use of imagination. In the bleeding host exemplum, of which there are five versions, each teller has the option of addition, subtraction or elaboration. This use of a high degree of imagination parallels that which the child must accept and employ when faced with imcomprehensible matters of faith. George Cutten explains how creative thought is used in matters that are iifficult to understand in ordinary terms:

> God is created in demand for an ideal, and also to explain experience. It is the matter of ideals and the relation of ideals to conduct that imagination stands supreme. Character is regulated by ideals. The idea which we hold before us is externalized in conduct, for our ideas tend always to express themselves. With the ideal before us imagination becomes strong to overcome evil and crystallize the good . . . The ideals, above all else, are both sources and stimuli of man's religious life and development.[14]

How is the continual flow of such storytelling preserved and maintained? Although it may seem probable that these stories are taught to the younger nuns within the convent as a suggested method of teaching, I believe that this is not the case. My own experience in teaching younger children is to employ devices which, as I recall, worked effectively on myself. Thus the nuns have reason to repeat stories that they heard as Catholic girls in a parochial school, and which have yielded such long-term effects. Therefore, a self-perpetuating operation is established due to its success throughout the ages. As McLoughlin explains:

> The boys and girls who enter seminaries and convents come to their teachers in a sense "predigested" . . . They have been subjected to the same intense, rigid, if confusing, moral code and have lived up to it; or they wouldn't be this far.

> Their very presence proves that the emotional panoply of medals, statues, rituals and devotions, . . . have been very successful.[15]

He later says that all nuns and priests are required by Canon Law to perform a one-week to ten-day retreat each year. On each of these days the retreat master preaches several sermons. In them he places a great amount of emphasis on sin, purgatory and hell.[16] Thus, the nuns, even at a mature age, have not yet escaped the Church's great concern with these subjects. As a result, their predominantly religious thought finds its way into their own classrooms of young students.

The stories are told in hopes of commitment by the students to their religion. But even though fear may cause adherenee to moral standards, virtue itself is a personal lesson that must be learned by the individual. As Frank McQuilkin believes, "Students have a right to be taught, not importuned. Christ must be chosen, not imposed -- and sometimes we must wait years for a true, free choice to be made."[17] Most of my informants showed bitterness at the fact that they were not allowed the option of free choice, and so they now see the falseness of the choice that was made for them years ago. For them the effect of the "emotional panoply" was temporary because it was imposed, and not chosen.

The ecumenical movement of the last decade has favorably affected the Catholic Church in many ways. Fortunately the use of such stories has diminished among with the memorization of catachism questions. I spoke to a few young nuns who affirmed my belief that these stories are now found only in the classrooms of the older nuns with whom the era of exemplum-telling in Catholic education will end. The younger nuns seem to realize that the temporary success of fear-oriented storytelling ultimately creates negativity in the maturing adult, and have thus rejected their use. Nonetheless, the substantial body of exemplum material surrounding mid-century Catholic education is still alive in the memory of its students long after the actual classroom experience.[18]

NOTES

1. Joseph Albe t Mosher, Ph.D. The Exemplum in the Early Religions and Didactic Literature of England, (New York: The Columbia University Press, 1911). p. 8.

2. In The Exemplum in England, Joseph Mosher explains the difference between "example" and "exemplum". The former was used to refer to bestiary passages, figures of speech, moralizations and analogies, and generally as an illustration. The latter term, he explains, was used in a more restricted sense and "grew up in the Roman Church as a distinct species of illustration based upon actual or supposedly actual happenings" (p. 6).

Mosher notes that the exemplum was established by Gregory the Great (540-604 A.D.) who believed that to present people with the actual experiences of other men was most often more effective than to teach solely through precept.

3. James Hastings, ed. The Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. 5 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1927), p. 429b.

4. Herve Carrier S.J. The Sociology of Religious Belonging (New York: Herder, 1965), p. 139.

5. Pope Pius XI. "Christian Education of Youth," an encyclical letter (The Paulist Press, 1929), p. 5.

6. Emmett McLoughlin. American Culture and Catholic Schools (New York: Lyle Stuart Press, 1960), p. 217.

7. Carrier, p. 141.

8. Although my informant claims that he was personally involved in this incident, we should note that those who tell such "city legends" characteristically place themselves within the story to add verification to the account.

9. Heribert Jone. Moral Theology (Westminister, Maryland: Newman Press, 1952)

10. McLoughlin, p. 51.

11. Ibid.

12. Frederic C. Tubach. Index Exemplorum: A Handbook of Medieval Religious Tales, Folklore Fellows Communications No. 204 (Helsinki, 1969), p. 523.

13. Claudia Royal. Storytelling (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1955), p. 19.

14. George Barton Cutten. The Psychological Phenomena of Christianity (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 19 2), p. 339.

15. McLoughlin, p. 209.

16. Ibid., p. 226.

17. Frank McQuilkin. "Can We Teach Commitment?" Commonweal (March 31, 1967), pp. 48-49.

18. Professor Robert D. Bethke provided extensive help during the revision of this paper, which was originally submitted in a preliminary version for one of his undergraduate folklore courses at the University of Delaware. I, however, assume full responsibility for the collection and analysis of the data.