

The Archeology of Faith



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I came across this quote recently in a book called *The Catholic Experience* by Lawrence S. Cunningham: “There is a popular tendency to think of religion in general and Catholicism in particular as a set of propositions (dogmas, creeds, statements, etc.) to which we either give or fail to give our assent. ... It is not unfair to ask about one’s position on this or that religious or moral position, but it rarely seems as profitable as the far more basic and illuminating question: How does faith shape the trajectory of one’s life?”

I was reading Cunningham against the backdrop of this issue of *Health Progress*, with its special section exploring questions related to formation for lay leaders of Catholic organizations. The five articles in that section reminded me of my own “formation program,” one that was largely self-directed. For one thing, it predated most formal programs for laity, and for another, I was not preparing for ministry in the church. Rather, I was seeking a deeper knowledge of the faith traditions of Western culture, and particularly my own, as background for what was then my work as a reporter covering religion for a secular newspaper. There is no question though, that entrance into a master’s, and then a doctoral, program in historical theology (with an emphasis on American religious life) drew me ever more deeply into the riches of my own Catholic tradition. I still think of it as an archeological expedition in which layers and layers of fascinating material were unearthed.

Inevitably, some of it was dark. Christian history was, after all, shaped by fallible human beings. But all together, these years of study were inspiring, enriching and intellectually stimulating, and there is little doubt that my growing knowledge of my Catholic faith shaped the trajectory of my life.

The formation programs going on today, not only in Catholic health care, but also in Catholic education and other spheres of Catholic organizational life, many still in early, experimental stages, provide opportunities for people to engage in similar expeditions, with rewards to be gained for themselves and for the organizations they serve.

The articles in the pages ahead are less about what is learned in these programs and more about goals and methods, but it is exciting to know that, because they exist, faith is increasingly shaping the trajectories of our leaders’ lives.

You’ll find in these pages, too, a deadly serious “flu game” intended to get health care leaders thinking about the potential impact of a pandemic on health care resources, a report on an exhibition that highlights the contributions of American nuns (and might suggest a destination for some travel), and an analysis of what Pope Benedict XVI’s latest encyclical might mean for Catholic health care.

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