

Father Thomas J. Quinlan, "Fool For Christ"

Calvin Thomas, Jr.

COM 360

Dr. Susan Fournier

November 2, 2009

Father Thomas J. Quinlan, "Fool For Christ"

The text lists four ways that stereotypes impede communication, and cites Steele and Aronson's research that stereotypes can distract the individual stereotyped (Steele & Aronson, 1995), creating a self-fulfilling prophecy and lowering performance. (Jandt, 2010, p. 89) A recurring theme of the interview was the subject's effort to offset the effects of racism by addressing the role of communication by the dominant as well as the minority (in this case African-American) cultures. Additionally, the subject's unorthodox approach to the priesthood, violating common expectations of how priests should behave, allowed him to be more persuasive (Seiter & Gass, 2004, p. 56).

The interview subject, Rev. Thomas J. Quinlan ("TQ," as he is known), was born in Springfield, Massachusetts in 1929, the oldest of 10 children in an Irish-Catholic family (Coit, 1981). He has a childhood memory of a single black family that regularly attended his parish's church, and that no one knew the family or interacted with them. He made a point that this was not a language barrier, "This wasn't the Italian parish or the Polish parish, this was an English-speaking parish." His early experience brings to mind the text-referenced work showing views on race are rooted in early childhood socialization (Jandt, 2010, p. 47).

TQ admits his lack of interaction with people of color during his childhood, as well as his

family's blue-collar, working class roots put him at a disadvantage at most of his parishes in that, "Half of it's been in uppity suburbia, everybody had a degree, a profession and a briefcase." He contrasted those parishes, with his postings to inner-city churches where he had to learn, "How black people had been cut off from society. People didn't have checkbooks; they didn't know how to use money. They went to terrible grocery stores." His early interaction with African-Americans showed him a community indifferent to the police and cynical of government. As a white priest, he often bore the brunt of their frustration. Their indifference to conditions echoes the findings of Jackson, Shin and Wilson that not only were they acknowledging the superiority and privilege of the dominant culture, they had internalized their own inferiority (Jandt, 2010, p. 31) (Jackson II, Shin, & Wilson, 2000).

Even as black parishioners took out their frustrations on him, TQ turned their frustration back on them by reminding them from the pulpit he had no choice in being white, "because my parents were white when they had intercourse, what was I going to do about it?" During his tenure at The Basilica of St. Mary's of the Immaculate Conception, Quinlan based liturgical years around "Star Wars" featuring Darth Vader as the devil, as well as a liturgy based on "The Wiz". TQ freely alludes to the Expectancy Violations Theory aspect of his approach, stating, "My parishioners presume I'm crazy anyway, so I get away with murder." (Witt, 1981) Former parishioners echo the tenets of the theory, commenting, "Coming down the aisle on a motorcycle isn't so important compared to having people go home and spend three hours discussing it...Most people go home and they don't remember the homily five minutes out the door. But with T.Q., whether it's negative or positive, he makes you reflect on what you've heard." (Szabo, 2000) Grounding his behavior in the Old Testament, Quinlan asks, "Don't you think Jesus ruffled the feathers of everyone he ever met?" (Priest's style unconventional, 2000)

His forays into integrating pop culture with the liturgy paved the way for and paled in comparison to the liturgy for 1981. That year Quinlan guided the predominantly African-American parish at St. Mary's in a liturgical year based on the life of slave rebellion leader Nat Turner. TQ used Nat Turner's life to connect black Catholics with African-American history. "You can't get 'Rootsier' for the African-American," TQ explained. "You can't get more into black culture in America than to reflect on the meaning of the Nat Turner insurrection." TQ tied Turner's mission to free slaves to Christianity's tenet of liberating oppressed people. Quinlan used Turner's belief he was destined for greatness as an object lesson on the connection between language and self-image, reminding them, "That was some statement for a black slave to make 153 years ago," he told the congregation. "That was saying, 'I am somebody' and 'black is beautiful' long before the first slaves were freed." (Witt, 1981)

TQ addresses how harmful stereotypes permeated issues such as which mass people attended. He noted that few whites attended 5:00PM mass at St. Mary's (predominantly black),

“That’s in the black neighborhood, and I’m afraid my car will be stolen. If it were a poor white neighborhood it would be the same thing, but they don’t see that. Black equals bad, bad equals inferior.” This observation mirrors the findings of Maddox and Gray who found skin color as an important factor in white and black representation of African-Americans (Maddox & Gray, 2002), as well as Dixon and Maddox’s findings that dark skin tone was all that was needed to trigger racially stereotypical associations with black criminals (Dixon & Maddox, 2005).

Maddox and Gray write that “light skin is generally valued over dark skin,” and TQ observed this first hand, recalling an African-American/Filipino family in the parish where he saw the lighter skinned children were treated better than the dark-skinned youngest son. He also related how the nuns would choose the light-skinned girls to crown the Virgin Mary during the May Procession. When asked how he changed predominantly black St. Mary’s views on race, he replies, “When I went there, they were a colored parish,” and relayed how most of the parish hierarchy were “high yellows,” acknowledging, “It’s a skin thing, but it’s a sociological category for me.”

Part of TQ’s communication strategy with the African-American community was to use his actions as a priest, friend and advocate to reinforce his genuine concern for the parish. His non-verbal actions had to reinforce his communication. His observation that it takes a long time for black people to trust someone, especially if they are white, displays cultural sensitivity that showed genuine respect. He was acutely aware that the black parishioners were constantly observing and evaluating to determine if he really believed in what he said, and if he “practiced what he preached.” TQ observed that once the Africa-American community was convinced that he considered himself equals with them, he was able to communicate on a deeper level.

An ongoing effort in the African-American community was to counteract the effects of negative stereotypes. While actions such as introducing the African-American flag and the seven principles of African unity caused controversy with the whites, and even some blacks within the parish, he wanted to overcome the “clichés” that were holding African-Americans back. His efforts predate research by Steele and Aronson on the risk of confirming negative stereotypes about one’s group (Steele & Aronson, 1995), and while their research looked at standardized testing, TQ feels those stereotypes, or “clichés” affect all aspects of self-identity. Quinlan recalls firing two white nuns at The Basilica of St. Mary’s of the Immaculate Conception, “Because they would not make the school black.” “They didn’t understand why you have to tell a little black kid, every day, you’ve got to say, ‘I am somebody.’ It sounds like a cliché, it sounds boring, it sounds dull, it sounds stupid to white people, but not to black kids.” TQ talked about the lack of positive self-image and the pernicious effect of self-hate and emphasized the need to start early in life to instill self-esteem in black children.

TQ emphasizes the importance of language, and hints at the linguistic determinists' view of language controlling thought (Jandt, 2010, p. 131) when he excoriates black parents for the way they talk to their children. When a black parent tells a child, "Put your black ass down here," TQ points out, "There's no difference between a black ass and a white ass, so why emphasize it? It's a hidden form of self-hate, inferiority." That observation brings to mind the definition of power distance where less powerful members of a society expect and accept the unequal distribution of power (Jandt, 2010, p. 177). In addition to expecting and accepting this inequality, TQ takes the black community to task for perpetuating this mindset through language.

For all of his escapades, chronicled in of 20+ boxes documents donated to the Sargeant Memorial Room of the Norfolk Main Library (Ruehlmann, 2009), TQ's overarching message is that a member of the dominant culture can use the Expectancy Violations Theory to gain acceptance, fight the effects of negative stereotypes in the minority culture and enable integration. His propensity to shock and defy the expected behavior for a white priest in a predominantly black parish took an entire congregation off guard and made them susceptible to his message. (Jandt, 2010, p. 56) TQ witnessed the negative effects of stereotypes, not only in reinforcing the inaccurate beliefs of the dominant group, but also by reinforcing stereotypical behavior of the typecast group. (Jandt, 2010, p. 89) Quinlan's focus on the children and insistence on early and continual positive messages and images brings to mind Hurley's work on self-image of African-American children. Hurley's observation that identity formation in children of color develops differently from the development of dominant culture children (Hurley, 2005) dovetails with TQ's interview observations on the self-image needs of black children.

The lengths TQ went to in earning the trust of the Tidewater African-American community paid off as St. Mary's tripled its congregation (Priest's style unconventional, 2000), became a minor Basilica, and was home to the first African-American Pastor in the Diocese of Richmond (The Catholic Diocese of Richmond, 2009). Father Thomas Quinlan empowered that community spiritually, politically and economically, aem the tools to challenge authority, challenge themselves and to change how they look at themselves. In the words nd gave thof Wayne Dyer, "When you change the way you look at things, the things you look at change."

Works Cited

Coit, J. (1981, May 10). St. Mary's Radical Priest. *The Virginian Pilot* , pp. 31-33.
Dixon, T. L., & Maddox, K. B. (2005). Skin Tone, Crime News, and Social Reality Judgments:

Priming the Stereotype of the Dark and Dangerous Black Criminal. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology* , 35 (8), 1555-1570.

Hurley, D. L. (2005). Seeing White: Children of Color and the Disney Fairy Tale Princess . *The Journal of Negro Education* , 221-232.

Jackson II, R. L., Shin, C. I., & Wilson, K. B. (2000). The meaning of whiteness: Critical implications of communicating and negotiating race. *World Communication* , 69-86.

Jandt, F. E. (2010). *An Introduction to intercultural communication: Identities in a global community* (6th ed.). (T. R. Armstrong, D. Saoud, A. Baker, A. Viriding, & G. Dickens, Eds.) Thousand Oaks, California, United States: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Maddox, K. B., & Gray, S. A. (2002). Cognitive Representations of Black Americans: Reexploring the Role of Skin Tone. *PERSONALITY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY BULLETIN* , 28 (2), 250-259.

Priest's style unconventional. (2000, July 8). *Expositor* , p. C5.

Ruehlmann, B. (2009, March 22). Controversial Priest's Papers Enter Eclectic Collection. *The Virginian Pilot* .

Seiter, J. S., & Gass, R. H. (2004). *Perspectives on Persuasion, Social Influence, and Compliance Gaining*. Boston, MA, USA: Pearson.

Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* , 69 (5), 797.

Szabo, L. (2000, June 24). "Fool For Christ": Priest Whose behavior Sometimes Shocks Brings His Unorthodox Ministerial Ways to Beach Church. *The Virginian Pilot* , p. E1.

Witt, A. (1981, April 16). Slave's Life provides basis for masses. *The Virginian Pilot* .