

2013/2014 Graduate Research Grant Report
Religion and Diversity Project

Paul L. Gareau

Department of Classics and Religious Studies
University of Ottawa

Journeying to the Father: Researching Faith and Identity in a Contemporary Catholic Youth Movement in Canada

Thesis Project Description

The Catholic evangelization movement has become an increasingly significant element in the Canadian Catholic landscape over the past 20 years. This movement promotes a form of personalized, at times, ecstatic or charismatic devotion while remaining highly conservative by deferring to the authority of the Catholic Church for the sake of disseminating Catholic values and worldview. The main concern of this movement is that religion, specifically Catholicism, continues to lose social and civic prominence in the modern world, which has enshrined liberal values of individualism, pluralism and secularism. Their program of ‘proselytization from within’ seeks to engage “Cultural Catholics” (i.e. people raised in the socio-religious context of Catholicism) into actively asserting their religious identity and promoting Catholic values in their public lives. Today, many Catholic youth in Canada are actively engaged in the conservative religiosity offered by this evangelization movement. Their presence on the public landscape as involved religious persons raises questions about the contours of Canadian diversity and the place of religion in shaping modern Canadian identity.

In order to investigate this socio-religious and political phenomenon, I have centred my research on a single case study: the annual revival weekend designed specifically for Catholic youth aged 13 to 18 called *Journey to the Father*, which takes place every second weekend in July in the hamlet of Saint Raphaels, located one hour southeast of Ottawa. I have over the past 3 years engaged the discursive and symbolic space that is generated over the weekend, charting the social and symbolic impacts of the participants’ experiences during the event and when they return home. My aim is to emphasize specifically how the youth participants negotiate (i.e. appropriate and/or negate) the confluence of Catholic values of institutionalized religiosity and the variety of charismatic religious experiences as a tier in the construction of identity. This research explores how the youth who are engaged in the Catholic evangelization program see themselves and the world around them.

Fieldwork

With the financial help from the Religion and Diversity project, I was able to cover the travel costs for a large part of my field research. First, this funding allowed me to travel to Saint Raphaels to attend the 2013 Journey to the Father conference. This was my third and final attendance having participated in 2011 and 2012 conferences. There I was able to gather participant observation data, and do a series of interviews with organisers and volunteers. This trip and the ones prior will help me write a more comprehensive, detailed, and nuanced ethnography of this experience.

Secondly, I was able to organize two research trips to separate towns in South-Western Ontario at the end of March 2014. Each trip took 2 days with overnight stays in hotels and with over 2,400 km of travel overall. My purpose was to set-up series of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with young people (ages 13 to 18) who had participated at Journey to the Father. I was able to contact two youth groups and set-up these interviews. I interviewed 5 young people per session, with a total of 10, 45-minute interviews per trip. Over the stretch of my fieldwork, I was able to gather a total of 20 interviews. This is very important due to the fact that is rather difficult to organize research with young people for many reasons—i.e. lack of time due to busy schedules, lingering confusion over their participation in the research, busy youth group leaders, parental consent, etc. Ultimately, these interviews were due to the willingness of youth group leaders and participants.

These interviews revolved around questions of religious identity in Canada today. My interlocutors were asked to describe their religious identities at home, in their communities, and at school, to express their experiences of Journey to the Father in terms of the religious and the social, to reflect on gender and what it means to be a Catholic man or woman, and to explain their current attitudes, feelings, difficulties, and/or concerns of being young and Catholic in Canada today.

Reflections on Research Experience

These interviews were a very rewarding experience. What struck me, as it should, was the depth and variety of response from my young interlocutions; regarding the responses from individual participants and between each group.

Each participant had varying understandings of what it meant to be Catholic at home and the significance expressing that identity in the public sphere. Each person also had different experiences of Journey to the Father varying from highly religious to widely social. There also

emerged a similarity between groups due to the fact that each group had to drive over 600 km to go to the conference, and yet differences between the former being their first time while the latter having participated for years. Some of them thought very deeply of the theological impact the conference had on their religious identity, while others saw socio-political impacts, while still others had trouble discerning and explicating the visceral and highly embodied experience. Each participant in their own way spoke of the effect that religious experiences like Journey to the Father had on what it means to be young and Catholic today. I walk away with a greater appreciation of the particularities of Catholic identity vis-à-vis the diversity and pluralism in the Canadian context.

I wish to thank my advisor, Lori Beaman and the *Religion and Diversity Project* team for allowing me this important experience. Without this funding, I would not have been able to make this research trip happen. The means to travel and accommodation allowed me to maximize my experience and find extremely important data to my doctoral research project.