

“Love and Music” (Roddy)

We hear a lot today about “culture wars” and we ourselves may have experienced firsthand culture shock either inside or outside of our own country. Culture is one of those terms that is so encompassing that we can sense its meaning better than we can define it. Culture refers to a people’s whole way of life, their acts, beliefs, customs, languages and traditions.

Anthropologists tell us that unlike some animals who are biologically determined to act on the basis of information carried in their genes, humans could not deal with one another unless culture defined what to do and what to expect. They say that the process by which people become part of their native culture is called “enculturation.”

So we’re all enculturated to the degree that we are part of our native culture. Those who prefer to identify more as counter-cultural may feel more encapsulated than enculturated.

Some of you may remember the book first published in 1958, *The Ugly American*. It became a runaway national best seller and coined the phrase for tragic American blunders abroad. This expose of American incompetence, arrogance and corruption in Southeast Asia sold multi-million copies and prompted Eisenhower to initiate a study of our military aid program that ultimately brought about much needed reform.

Had this book been written in the 16th or 17th century it might well have been titled *The Ugly European*. Europe was the dominant culture and the lands of Western Europe were joined culturally and religiously by Christendom. Not infrequently, missionaries accompanied imperial forces who were bent on conquest, conquest that was ostensibly justified by religious motivation, the spreading of the good news of salvation to the indigenous peoples.

It’s important to acknowledge—and history will testify to—a different kind of missionary venture, one that stands in stark contrast. It was several centuries ahead of its time and so enlightened that ultimately the institutional church suppressed it.

Some have called these more enlightened missionaries “pioneers of enculturation.” Rather than spread a foreign gospel, these men were more intent on studying the native culture and discovering the truth and wisdom, the sacred revelation contained therein. They wanted to become enculturated.

Their stories deserve to be told. Matteo Ricci lived in the mid-sixteenth century. As an Italian Jesuit, he was one of the first Westerners to be allowed to enter the xenophobic society of 16th century China. By mastering the Chinese language and the Confucian literary classics, he transcended his status as a foreigner. The imperial court and the educated recognized him as a distinguished scholar. He wore the appropriate attire, “...silk dresses and published works on such topics as astronomy, science and philosophy.” He was particularly admired for his map-making skills as well as for being an accomplished teacher of mnemonic techniques, that is, ways of memorizing things.

Ricci did not concern himself with making many converts. As a Confucian scholar he

was convinced "...that the ethical precepts of Confucianism—the dominant religious underpinning of Chinese culture—were reconcilable with Christian morality."

At the time of his death at age 58, hundreds paid their final respects as his body "lay in state." The emperor decreed that he be buried in a special tomb, an unheard of honor for a foreigner and even rare for any Chinese.

Because Ricci acknowledged the veneration of family ancestors and the important role it played in Chinese culture, his entire project was condemned by the Vatican in 1704. By judging the toleration of ancestor rites as superstitious and idolatrous, Rome rejected all the good Ricci had accomplished in reconciling the gospel with Confucianism. This fateful decision caused the Catholic Church to be "...deprived for another 200 years of the wisdom of non-Western paths to God."

Roberto de Nobili, a confrere of Matteo Ricci's, walked a similar path a generation after his fellow Jesuit, this time in India. Like Ricci, he took great care not to impose his own Western culture. In following the example of Ricci who dressed as a Mandarin scholar, Nobili adopted the robe and customs of a Sannyasi or Indian holy man. Before that, he mastered the Tamil language. As he deepened his understanding of Tamil and in the process the subtleties within Hinduism, he became increasingly aware that the highly caste-conscious Hindus regarded the Christian missionaries and their converts with utter contempt. They found the Europeans' leather shoes, alcohol consumption, carnivorous diet as well as their primitive hygiene offensive. The offense was compounded by the foreigners' complete disdain for the indigenous religion and culture.

Roberto de Nobili's intensive study of both the Hindu religion and culture gave him access to the people whom he came to love and admire. It is likely that he was the first Westerner to master Sanskrit and so was able to read the classics in their original language. His move from a house into a simple hut and his vegetarian diet of rice and vegetables signified an identification with the people.

The local church in Portuguese Goa criticized the extent of Nobili's adaptation to the culture. He defended himself by providing documentation of the fact the early church had sanctioned and integrated different pagan customs and rituals. Unfortunately, the local church conference that condemned this enlightened Jesuit was not impressed. In time, however, his case reached Rome and de Nobili was vindicated by Pope Gregory XV.

Three centuries later, Pope John XXIII would add his pontifical seal of approval to the work of pioneers like Matteo Ricci and Roberto de Nobili. In calling the Second Vatican Council in 1962, he opened the windows of the Catholic Church and in so doing, conservatives say, caused all kinds of confusion. What flew in was the liberating spirit of pluralism that is not threatened by, but embraces human differences.

By acknowledging that the "call to holiness" is universal, meaning that intimacy with the divine is not only reserved for people with sacred vows, and in recognizing the "signs of the times" as a source of ongoing revelation, Pope John had a profound impact on the

lives of many Catholics. I myself am a prime example as is my ex-Jesuit partner from whom you'll be hearing shortly. In our relationship, I'm the prose and he's the poetry.

The more I learn about his time in Korea in the '60s, the more I'm reminded of the "pioneers of enculturation." A Maryknoll sister who had been in Korea some time before Bill arrived told me that he was the first American priest she had ever heard preach in Korean. He claimed that he memorized it. Like Matteo Ricci, he's good at mnemonics!

In 1963, the president of the Jesuit university where Bill was teaching told him to put on a play in honor of the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. It seemed incongruous to ask students barely able to speak English to now speak Shakespearean English. Then again, obedience is highly prized in the Society of Jesuits. Bill persevered and wrote ten songs found in the plays of Shakespeare.

The next year, Father Bill was determined to find more culturally appropriate material. This research turned up a story near and dear to the heart of every Korean and he set it to music. The rest is history, which I'll let him tell you. I'll just say what one discriminating reviewer said. James Wade hailed Father Cleary as the Rodgers and Hammerstein of Korea.

(Quotations from Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*, New York, N.Y.: Crossroad, 1999.)

My Good Luck (William Cleary)

This is my GOOD LUCK story. My life, like yours, I'm sure, is full of bad luck: but last January some GOOD LUCK befell. My musical play CHUN HYANG SONG was going to be performed at Seoul's biggest and newest convention center, and we were invited.

Switch channels: imagine me age 40, half my age now. Korea was a 3rd world country: I was a Jesuit missionary priest teaching at a new college – Catholic of course. COLLEGES HAVE PLAYS they said. Do one. I did. A piano came by air from a wild friend; I started writing music. First year I wrote music for Shakespeare (It was 400 years since his birth, and I wrote 10 songs).

Then by wonderful GOOD LUCK, the second year I wrote 12 songs for Korea's greatest myth, a heroic woman story straight from Confucius. Her name was Chun Hyang – and Koreans – it turns out – are berserk about her. Her greatest virtue is FAITHFULNESS. Her home town, Namwon, is still called the Town of Faithfulness. Annually for 71 years now they have a CHUN HYANG FESTIVAL there – and that's where Roddy and I should be next May 5. Wish us luck.

Roddy and I flew out of Vermont last 4th of July and saw the show in Korea 3 times, then – HAVING GOOD LUCK WITH BLOOD COUNT which was disconcerting – we flew back. Now, by more good luck, we have received a DVD of the show, and you can see some of it after the service if you want a taste of what it's about. Stay for 5 minutes if you're just curious.

THE SHOW HAS the taste of Korea then and now, the taste of feminism both Confucian and modern, and of creativity and music, then and now. Some rhythms are ancient, some are modern. It opens with a jazz dance, then a waltz, for instance.

Chun Hyang as a story starts with a fine rice wine, two teenagers who fall in love, crossing the walls of caste, and that is mixed with human heroism and beauty and the dynamic of passionate feelings. Sometimes, when you give and receive an extra lucky love, you need to rise to FAITHFULNESS, almost the same thing as gratitude, and you make promises to be true. That's where my heroine shines, and almost dies for it.

And where there is the human voice for promises, there is music and IF YOU'RE LUCKY song. Yes, songs came, love songs: even though I had a perpetual vow of celibacy at the time; not as perpetual as I had planned. In the story, when Chun Hyang gets married to her NOBLEMAN LOVER, they promise to be true for a hundred years. That became a song. "For only a hundred years?" Chun Hyang asks in one song. "That's only a touch of love. That's not very much of love." You can hear hunks of all the songs at www.clearyworks.com.

See: our appetite for love, the world over, is infinite. Her lover sings an answer, in a matching song: "Only for 100 years" and the two songs are finally sung simultaneously, her question, his answer. Like Broadway has done too, more than once: two songs at once.

Good LUCK may not be infinite, but love can be. And I wish it to all of you, both love, and luck. Don't feel too negative about your luck. Buck Owens used to sing: "If it weren't for my bad luck, I'd have no luck at all!"