

## Must we all look like cookies from the same batch?

December 13, 2015, By Daniel J. Bauer

Regular readers know that I rarely write about religion. This is of course by design. For a column to survive the proverbial test of time, it's got to offer variety to readers. I've never taught a course entitled "Column writing 101," but if I ever do, I'd likely make a lot of noise about variety as one of the keys to success.

So, I often remind myself not to give my customers (and readers for writers are customers) the same thing to eat every time they sit down at my table.

An even more important reason I avoid over-doing a focus on the religious, or spiritual in life is that I do not want to be too predictable. After all, I happen to be a Roman Catholic priest ("shen-fu").

When this newspaper began to run my words in this space 20 years ago, one of the few requests I made was that it identify me not only by my name and place of work, but by my vocation. I want people to know who and what I am. And, yes, I am proud to be a shen-fu.

Since we're in the neighborhood, I'll also tell you softly the acronym after my name appears because I asked for that, too. I am happy for you to know that I belong to a religious order of Brothers and priests. The tag "SVD" signals the initials of our Latin name, "Societatis Verbi Divini." In English, we're known as the "Society of the Divine Word." We are a community of about 6,000 members, and do various forms of missionary work in over 55 countries. We cherish members from those different cultures as well. (Not many SVDs are Donald Trump fans. Probably none.)

"Variety" being the theme for the day, let me ask if you caught that cool article in the China Post this week about some unusual Buddhist monks in a promotion in Tokyo that covered a range of interests and professional skills ("Japanese Buddhist monks," 12-10-15, p. 12.) The monks competed with one another in chanting sutras, preaching sermons ("homilies" for Catholics), leading religious ceremonies related to dying and death and, believe it or not, throwing karate chops.

Space limits prevent an explanation here on why my colleagues over there got themselves into this contest. I must say, however, with both a grain of humor and of salt, that this is a story that could shake up the Catholic world in a very good way.

We Catholic shen-fu, like our friends who are rabbis and Protestant ministers (note: not "Christian" ministers, because we too follow Jesus and thus are also Christian) inherit by profession a large basket of expectations and duties. We are fairly well trained, actually, for most of what's in that basket. In the USA, shen-fu are typically college graduates who have also earned Master of Divinity or M.A. degrees in Theology that demand four years education beyond bachelor's degrees. Our church demands equivalent credentials of our priests elsewhere, too.

How many of us Catholic "shen-fu" would willingly subject ourselves to competitive evaluations with one another in how we celebrate spiritual ceremonies, or preach, or how we deal with people in need as they grieve the passing of a loved one? I doubt that the number of volunteer competitors would be great. And as for a score on our athletic skills, particularly at Karate, well, ah, may we change the topic?

A beloved local professor of literature, who went on to become a best-selling author, once loudly remarked to me at a table filled with colleagues, "You do not sound like a shen-fu in your columns." Her words dropped a curtain of silence over us.

At the time, I wasn't sure how to respond. Was this a positive or a negative about me? I recall putting on a brave grin and saying that I try to be the best shen-fu I can be in whatever I say or do. But even today, her words bother me.

May a mother be a good mom, but in a way different than other mothers? May a father be good in his own way? Is every unmarried person in the world doomed to be labeled odd or somehow not right? May people dress and wear their hair as they prefer, despite the opinions of others? Must all shen-fu look alike? Must all shen-fu express their minds and hearts exactly the same, as if they are cookies of the same batch off the same cookie sheets from the same oven?

Are Buddhist monks allowed to be good at both sutras and karate?

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## Talking points

- 1) This column focuses on the Q of VARIETY. Are your days every week a little bit 'various' in activities, or do they all seem to be the very same? Is your life interesting or a little boring?
- 2) An old saying in English is "Variety is the spice of life." How can you make your days and life 'different' and 'fresh' every day or every few days?
- 3) This column speaks of a Japanese Buddhist monk who is very good at karate. Why may it be interesting to realize professors or doctors or moms or dads or monks or SHEN - FU may have hobbies or skills different than what we may expect?

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