

Embodied Theology: Stability of Heart in the Christian Tradition

David Keller, ObiSB 8/28/2018

One of my mentors at St. John's Abbey was Godfrey Diekmann, OSB. He was fond of pointing out that one of the foundations of the Patristic period (the second generation of Christianity) was "a loving search for God, not only an intellectual search, but also a spiritual search, an advance in holiness..." Fr. Godfrey was passionate that the Church must recover the firm integration present in the Patristic period of *theologia mentis* and *theologia cordis*, the integration of mind and heart in our life with God.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century we can use "an advance in holiness." Our ability to discern just solutions to complex problems in society is crippled by fear and the desire for self-sufficiency. Blame and violence lead us away from that love-impelled vision and creativity which have their source in God. How can the richness of the Christian spiritual tradition become a source of vision and strength for individuals and institutions in modern society? What unique offering can we make?

In the 1930s Evelyn Underhill, like Fr. Godfrey Diekmann, saw the need for "an advance in holiness." She said:

"We are called to be saints – self-emptied vessels of the holy – not for our own sake, but for the sake of the world. Every Christian has to look squarely at this ideal. It does not mean self-loss in an organized religious society, which depends on God and believes in Him, and teaches morals and faith. It means self-loss in the world's workshop, tools of righteousness unto God, every ounce of energy, all powers and talents, used, not for us, but for Him. There is something terrible, a genuine crisis, demanding real courage and trust, involved in choosing God."

But "holiness" and "saintliness" are not popular vocations these days. The atrophy of the desire for saintliness, the denigration of holy living, and the intentional de-sacralization of human life and the world of nature are the roots of the alienation and conflicts of the modern world. Therefore, the path toward the transformation we need in our lives today must become a process wherein the inner "eye" of the soul becomes the "eye" of love. This path will restore our natural inner goodness. It is none other than the path of saintliness and holiness that Fr. Godfrey and Evelyn Underhill challenge us to recover. It is a change of consciousness that will enable us to see and care for human beings, other living creatures, and the earth as sacred. Jesus said, "If your eye is single, your whole being will be filled with light." To acknowledge and be grateful for the sanctity of life will restore an unblemished world. We can begin with an attitude of gratitude.

In contrast to the wisdom of living in the beauty of holiness, the conventional wisdom of modern society exerts constant pressure on individual religious and political traditions to achieve domination over other traditions for their own self-preservation. We live in a world of growing hegemonies that make it difficult to honor one another and seek the common good. This is not the natural state of humankind. The divisiveness within modern society feeds on self-centeredness, self-interest, and self-assertion. These are the real weapons of mass destruction and they create an illusory security that can only be preserved by force.

This illusory wisdom and its consequences on human life and the world of nature does not and cannot eliminate the sanctity of creation. But it blinds us to the truth of reality and therefore our desire to honor and incarnate the natural sacredness of life.

The ills of modern society cannot be healed by the minds and consciousness that created them. What is needed is a change of consciousness that will transform our scattered manner of living from self-preservation to mutual inter-dependence. Rather than depending on ourselves, this requires a desire to depend on the grace (the transformative energy) of God.

A Path Toward Holiness

The need for emptiness in modern society

In order for this transformation to begin, an **exile** must take place. This voluntary withdrawal from our individual and collective control of our lives will place us in an environment of listening to and resting in God's presence. Voluntary solitude may be an uncomfortable experience because it requires letting go of control of both the experience and its outcome. In the words of Mother Mary Clare of the Anglican Sisters of the Love of God, "Prayer, which is the fruit of true conversion, is an activity, an adventure, and sometimes a dangerous one, since there are occasions when it brings neither peace nor comfort, but challenge, conflict and new responsibility."

The inevitable result will be self-knowledge that unveils self-centeredness and its consequences. This awareness can lead to a genuine desire for newness of life. This desire is often the result of genuine sadness and suffering for the consequences of our self-centeredness and a growing vision of God's awareness of our authentic nature. This is repentance, but it is not self-loathing or movement from, an "evil" state to a "good" state. Repentance is a constant threshold leading toward a life of holiness. In this way, the exile is a positive experience that becomes a grace-filled environment for daily re-birth with the Holy Spirit as midwife.

The "exile" is the "room" that Jesus exhorts us to enter when we pray. "But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret..." (Matt 6:6) This room is where the center of our being meets and is filled with God's presence and desires for us and the world. Eventually we become in our daily life what we experience in our inner room, our exile. Our thoughts, our words, and our actions will flow from the experience of God in our inner room. This is what St. Paul called "putting on the mind of Christ." It enabled him to say, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives within me." The desert fathers and mothers called this "living an un-divided life."

Emptiness leads toward fullness: the path to stability of heart

Our voluntary exile into an environment of listening, letting go of control, and repentance mirrors the incarnation of God's presence in the life of Jesus, who emptied himself to share and

transform human life. The Greek word for this self-emptying is *kenosis*. It is a fundamental dimension of following Jesus but is not its goal. *Kenosis* creates space for the grace-filled environment mentioned in the preceding paragraph. It is the natural threshold toward *union with God* that gives birth to God's presence in our thoughts, words, and actions. The Greek word for this union is *henosis*. The desert mothers and fathers called this *stability of heart* or *purity of heart*. The self-emptying of *kenosis* and the union of *henosis* are integral parts of the same reality: authentic human life. Stability of heart is formed by the attitude of openness to God within the quiet listening and emptiness of contemplative prayer. This open and flexible heart gives birth to an inner tranquility that firmly places the heart and the intellect together in the communal life of the triune God.

Stability of heart is the locus of union with God and it erupts into every facet of a person's life. This is what Jesus called the Reign of God. Although it is formed in quietness, its sharing in the communal life of God includes being present to God in the midst of challenges and influences of daily living that call for our attention yet can scatter our spiritual center. Stability of heart is the "cell" or, as Jesus called it, the "inner chamber" formed by our pattern of personal prayer. This intimacy with God is the center-point that guides and empowers all human speech, learning, desires, and actions. The stability of heart present in each person within the community of Jesus' followers builds and nurtures the life and conduct of the community. It transforms the community by manifesting the communal life of God in the community's life. It is a silent form of praying, "Your kingdom come on earth as in heaven."

Stability of heart is formed through stability of community, a manner of life that is constant either in one physical location or through a rule of life shared by persons living separately. In either case, stability of heart is given birth within community and helps form and sustain the unique life of the community.

Contemplation in a World of Action

Throughout the history of Christian spirituality there has been a collegial relationship between contemplative experience and active engagement with the needs of the world. They are two aspects of the same reality. Neither should be emphasized to the diminishment or exclusion of the other. The self-emptying and openness of contemplative experience is the womb giving birth to compassionate relationships, words and actions in our daily lives. Opportunities for spiritual growth and transformation challenge each person to manifest God's presence in a complex world.

Over time, our periods of "exile" will gradually become a pattern of prayer in which we *experience and become formed by the God we believe in*. Each person's period of exile (*kenosis*) is a sacrificial offering of herself to God that opens the space for the *logos*—the Word of God—to become a living presence in her life (*henosis*). This dual sacrifice of openness and union is an offering that completes the formation of each person's life. God receives our sacrifice and speaks us into fullness of life. In the words of St. Paul, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." This happens every time we pray and reaches unique consummation in the Holy Eucharist.

The recovery of saintliness and awareness of the sacredness of life that Fr. Godfrey and Evelyn Underhill call for will happen one person at a time. Each person is needed for the transformation of society and its institutions.

We do not know, with our senses or intellect, what is really possible for human beings. Yet there is *another form of knowing* that releases immense power for love and compassionate engagement in the world's conflicts and challenges. It is a relationship that releases living water for the life of the world. The desert abba Paul of Thebes reminds us to "Keep close to Jesus."

Three questions for reflection...

During my reading and contemplative prayer this past year I have discerned three questions that I believe individual Christians and Christian faith communities must consider at the present time.

This is prompted by my firm conviction that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—and his continuous presence among us through the Holy Spirit—brings both the opportunity for transformed human life and the responsibility to mend and transform broken human lives and institutions. The fact we share this opportunity with other world religious traditions does not diminish our unique Christian commitment to the life of the world.

Here are the questions—as followers of Jesus Christ—we must consider and discern where they lead:

What are the most urgent needs and challenges that confront national and international societies at this time in the twenty-first century?

How will following Jesus Christ enable individual Christians to become personally involved in responses to these needs and challenges?

How can Christian faith communities challenge and engage society with spiritual formation and worship opportunities commensurate with the human problems we face at this time?

Here is a poem that may help in this discernment process:

An Encounter with Abba Poemen

Abba Poemen said:

"We do not need anything
except a vigilant spirit."

"Where will I find it?"

"Journey
toward silence
that takes you beyond words."

"Then what?"

"Wait...and see."