

NATURE AND GRACE

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On Catholic Spirituality and Psychological Well-being

Being a healthy Catholic means laying a psychological foundation for spiritual well-being, then building upon it a theology of *opening* to the love of God. Our psychological selves, formed both in the womb and in early childhood, and refined by the events of our lives, are the Nature within which Grace and Spirit seek to dwell. As Catholics, we are exhorted to be unafraid to choose life over death: to act on behalf of our shyest, most cherished hopes for our potential, rather than give in to shame and fear that we are inadequate. We are called to live in the matrix of not only the social context of original sin, but as Matthew Fox says, original blessing as well.

But in our history, the catechesis of human nature and grace has stopped short of integration, leaving us with a duality of good and evil. As spiritual directors know, no (w)holiness comes of trying to live on one end of such a polarity. The work of uncovering our inner shadow can bring us to psychotherapy, where we heal wounds, and engage in dialog with our dragons rather than slay them. *What did it mean that Jesus entered a desert place to engage with, but not destroy, his demon?* And how do we, in that same process, avoid a practice of shaming ourselves, but instead, engage ourselves in inner dialog with what needs and desires underlie choices which are sinful, which "miss the mark" and take us off our pathway with God? These natural drives and desires must be attended to, and, like untamed horses, be gently and firmly led to a *large* pasture, with room for ambiguity, and with a gate, for the entrance of mystery. Both are part of the fullness of life.

The purpose of this journal is ...

...to meet the needs of modern Catholics for integration of spiritual and psychological well-being.....to address pastoral concerns in both the light of faith, and scientific knowledge about human beings and the human condition.....to encourage inquiry, reflection, and discernment, respecting always both the *internal forum* of the individual and the *wisdom of the community*to create a safe place to risk struggling with, and even losing ones way for the sake of a more life-giving way....

Welcome to *Nature and Grace*. This small publication is begun in hope of creating *home* for the intimacy we each seek with our God. It was inspired by a love: of Jesus, of the Church, and of integrity. May your use of it be as a companion on your journey.

NATURE AND GRACE SEEK TO DWELL IN ONE PLACE. THAT IS WHY THE POET RUMI SAID,

'LET YOUR HEART BE SILENTLY DRAWN BY THE STRONGER PULL OF WHAT YOU REALLY LOVE.'

The Gospel is for *us*. The goal of pastoral theology, then, is to make the Gospel livable. Not a millstone, but a comforter.

Catechism 101 Revisited

On Being Seen, Known, and Loved: Psychotherapy in the Service of Soul

We are the object of God's desire. We are also the subject, giving God pleasure....Imagine making God laugh.

"Why did God make me?" asks the Catechism we grew up with. "To know God, love God, and serve God," comes the reply. This is our first invitation to life. And with this invitation comes the truth that if we will know God, then She will know us, as a mother knows her child. *Intimately.* We are the "object" of God's desire. We are also the subject, giving God pleasure. Together, we and God dance and dream.

How do we, as Church, know this? Because our faith, in its Western imaging of the Divine as Father, Mother, and Companion, rests squarely on what we know of the development of the human infant. Our Judeo-Christian religion gives voice to an ancient, collective *emotional and psychological experience of being known by God*, as a child is known (to a degree) by its parents. We hear it in Psalm 139:

..It was you who created my inmost self, and put me together in my mother's womb...You know me through and through, from having watched my bones take shape when I was being formed in secret, knitted together in the limbo of the womb...

A baby forms his initial self-image by looking into his mother's face. In the normative situation in which this child is a wanted child, he will see love in her eyes. Her delight over him tells him he is delightful. When he becomes able, he smiles back at her, she laughs in delight, and he feels his budding autonomy in this reciprocity. This is how he comes to know himself, and it is the foundation for his Selfhood, his spirit. *Imagine making God laugh.*

With a sense of selfhood, or identity, we approach spirituality and religion with a sense of being called into

full expression of ourselves. We carry over, from our parents to God, a sense that being seen is safe, and more: it is an invitation to become who we are.

When this regard by mother or father is lacking, we experience this as a wound in our sense of self. In fact, we may grow up with a sense of *lost self*. Author John Bradshaw explains this reality as the result of psychological abandonment and shaming. A few problems result: when we are without a strong core self-identity, coming to religion is fraught with fear, guilt, and shame. God is then someone to be feared and avoided out of our fear of rejection, since God has then come to embody for the person a bigger image of those who have abandoned or harmed us. The other problem is becoming over-scrupulous about spiritual practices and disciplines, and doctrinal laws, which then no longer serve as a gentle yoke, or as Meister Eckhart would say, a "bridle of love." This spiritual perfectionism is rigid and deadened, and comes from the fear of annihilation of the self should one fail. It is as if the adult, living still in the childhood trance of abandonment, feels, "I must change myself to be acceptable to God, and to avoid more abandonment."

Spiritually-sensitive psychotherapy attempts to help us integrate and transcend our personal history, *redeeming* it. Personal accountability for current behavior is clearly separated from what we can never be held accountable for, but to which we must attend regardless, namely, the hand that life deals us. In therapy lies an opportunity to restore a clear and life-giving meaning to the Catholic concept of *original sin*. While personal, current behavior which misses the mark and turns us away from companionship with God, is addressed by the concept of sin, original sin is something quite different. A better name might be, *original loss*. Original loss, more than the term original sin, retains the sense that we are not blameworthy, but have simply been reared in

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a familial and societal matrix in which, as theologian Monika Hellwig wrote in her book *What are the Theologians Saying?*, we are “shaped by those who lived before...we profit from [their] goodness and suffer from [their] failures.” And their woundedness. And we are graced by their redemptions, their integration of shadow and light, and their transcendence.

And with such an understanding of the real breadth of our inheritance, perhaps it would not be wrong to call it *original legacy*. What then would baptism mean? Remembering that this is a sacrament of welcome and blessing, we are really acknowledging and supporting a human being who is entering into its journey through both light and darkness, delight and pain, to experience not only these, but to further integrate these into whol(i)ness, by the grace of the Holy One.

It is crucial to our maturing faith and well-being, that we go further back in Catholic spirituality to reclaim a scripturally-based truth: that *original “sin” is not the foundation upon which we are to conduct our lives*. Matthew Fox, in his book *Original Blessing*, provides a theological counterpart to original sin which expresses each person’s selfhood as implicit, and *prior to* maternal (and paternal) influence because *divine love and regard for the person have existed in anticipation of you,*

of me, of all persons. The writer of Psalm 139 says more:

...for all these mysteries I thank you: for the wonder of myself, for the wonder of your works.

And so let us return to the subject of our need to be known by someone, known by God. The process of therapy and spiritual direction is a process of allowing oneself to be seen, and known, and loved. This opens us, readies us, for our yearning to be seen by God. In Amber Terrell’s book, **Surprised by Grace**, her spiritual teacher speaks of being seen:

[..Being seen] is the same as being found...and then the search begins for that which can find [you], for that which can truly see [you]...[and when you are seen], you see what you are yearning for, you see who you are. You are found. There is an energy that is so strong from just seeing, that it evaporates, dissolves, burns up, removes, any possibility of hiding... and there is seeing all around. Who can say how this seeing will radiate out? We will see. We will see.

Next issue will continue this theme by exploring our fear of being seen in our shadow. —L.T.