



THE SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

Formation in the Christian Contemplative Life

The Spiritual Journey Formation in the Contemplative Christian Life

“The Most Excellent Path, Part 1”

Excerpted from

The Spiritual Journey Part 5, Divine Love: The Heart of the Christian Spiritual Journey

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THE HEART OF THE CHRISTIAN SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

I would like to emphasize the heart of the Christian spiritual journey from different aspects. And this heart, of course, is the divine love and its unbelievable but determined will to transfer or to transmit to us the absolute maximum of the divine life, light, love and happiness that we can possibly receive.

In 1 Corinthians 12, a whole chapter, Paul describes in great detail the charismatic gifts which are given to build up the Christian community, like the gift of tongues, interpretation of tongues, healing, prophecy, working miracles, inspired teaching, and the gift of the word of wisdom. All of these are given to encourage and to build up and to strengthen the community as a whole.

But they don't speak directly to the transformation of our faculties, and the very root of our being which has a great need of healing in the light of the distortions of the false self-system that we've spoken about earlier, which distorts and puts out of perspective the great gift of being created in the image of God. And that image is our basic goodness which nothing, nothing on earth or in the next life or anyplace in all creation or beyond it can ever change. This is the great dignity of the human being to be totally open and capable of divine union in the fullest possible degree

Paul, having whetted the appetite of his disciples and friends for the spiritual journey, then says this extraordinary thing: “Now I will show you the way which surpasses all the others.” So, however great these charismatic gifts may be, they don't excel the straight and narrow path that Jesus has taught by his teaching and his example and

especially in his Paschal mystery. They don't come any way near the extraordinary gift of inward transformation in which the divine life is actually transmitted to individual human beings and through them transmitted to the community, not so much through action but through being; that is, the transformation of the inmost being into the dependence on, sensitivity to, and manifestations of the Spirit.

THE GREATEST OF THESE IS LOVE

Here's what he says: "If I speak with human tongues and angelic as well but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and with full knowledge comprehend all mysteries; if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give everything I have to feed the poor and hand over my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient. Love is kind. Love is not jealous. It does not put on airs. It is not snobbish. Love is never rude. It is not self-seeking. It is not prone to anger. Neither does it brood over injuries. Love does not rejoice in what is wrong; but rejoices in the truth. There is no limit to love's forbearance, to its trust, its hope, its power to endure. Love never fails. Prophecies will cease, the gift of tongues will be silent, knowledge will pass away. Our knowledge is imperfect; and our prophesying is imperfect. When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away. Then I shall know even as I am known. There are in the end three things that last: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love."

We've just listened to this marvelous hymn to divine love. We're not talking about sentimentality or feeling of love but love in the sense of the substantial and self-giving love that in the Greek language is called *agape* and which is the love that is proper to the movement of unconditional love in the Trinity between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The wisdom of this passage is enhanced by that other saying of John, which is simply: "God is love;" that is to say, God doesn't just show love; but God is love. And so, having looked at the whole panorama or process of the spiritual journey as a growth in love and a letting go of attachments to false objects of love or imperfect objects of love, we may see why Paul puts such great emphasis and calls this the path ... the most excellent path ... to the fullness and depth of divine knowledge, the values of the Gospel, and the full assimilation of Christ's message in life; which is not just a teaching but is the actual transmission of Christ's experience of the ultimate reality and whom we call God, in the Christian tradition, as love.

Christian tradition is really the story of how well or not so well generations of Christians have understood that it's the experience of the living Christ, the assimilation of Christ's experience of God as a loving parent so-to-speak. We call him sometimes Father. This doesn't exclude the fact that this is not like any Father we know. God is Father in the sense of the source of our being at every level and the source of every other being. So, the word Father adds a personal note of relationship to this extraordinary mystery that we call God.

Love, then, is the secret of secrets. God is love. And God is hidden from us chiefly because we don't yet know how to love in this way. And this is the purpose of the spiritual journey and of contemplative prayer and of Centering Prayer, which is totally in the service of this project to get to know through a practice the deep knowledge of God as Paul calls it; and to open ourselves profoundly and ever more comprehensively

to the influence of the Spirit who communicates to us, twenty-four hours a day if we're willing, this presence which is basically love.

Just how important this is in the Christian perspective is a little hard to grasp without a practice. It's also hard to grasp it because we're used to thinking of love in so many different ways. The English word just tries to cover all different kinds of love; such as, the love of friendship, the erotic love between lovers, the love of a child for its parents, the love of a parent for the child, the love of one's land, the love of one's country, and indeed, the love of ourselves. This word that Paul is using in that text I described is not just any kind of these loves; but is everything that is good and beautiful and true in each of those relationships magnified trillions of times to a presence that is burning with love, a fire that is so intense that we can't see it in this life without turning into a grease spot. No one can see God and live, as the Scripture tells us in another place. And so, God has to sort of veil his presence with various forms of hiddenness and by working through secondary causes so that we don't feel the intensity of his love in such a degree that it forces the soul out of the body.

THE DIVINE ESSENCE

St. Augustine says that the Eucharist is the milk of the divine presence that God has provided in this life because of our weakness and it's only in the next life when we've been prepared by this special food for babies, so to speak – it's only then that we're ready to sink our teeth, so to speak, into the solid food of the divine essence beyond which there is no greater delight.

The Eucharist is one of the greatest symbols of the pure love of God, of the erotic love for God ... so to speak. By using that word erotic, I mean it's the desire for God, the longing for God, and for the reward of experiencing God's love that is so much a part of the early stages of our spiritual journey. And yet this is only the beginning. This kind of love for the sake of the rewards of love gradually is purified and transformed into the very kind of love, the agape, the unconditional love ... the love that has no possessiveness, the love that gives itself away tirelessly, the love that is so great it almost wants to throw itself away in order to manifest this total inclination or even necessity to pour out its mercy and tenderness and goodness upon all God's creatures, especially those who can appreciate it, who can know it and who can respond to it

You, I'm sure, have read great romantic literature at some time in your life and there's a saying, of course, that among great lovers, love becomes so intense at times that they can only describe it by wanting to "eat each other up." This is a kind of metaphor, of course, to describe the intensity of wanting to possess the other person from every point of view and to become the other person, to enter into the depth of oneness, to plumb each other's body, soul, and spirit because the love is so comprehensive and intense.

We think of the Eucharist perhaps; too much as a ritual. And the ritual is important, but it's a sign to us of a mystical peak of Christian experience when it's properly understood. When we receive the Eucharist, we're plunged instantaneously into the depths of the Trinity. Through contemplative prayer this extraordinary inflow or explosion of energy is gradually unpacked so that, little by little, we begin to perceive what great gifts we have received in the communication of the divine life which could not be more intimate.

When we eat something, what happens to the food? It's transformed into our very bodies and cells and bones and sinews. So here the intensity of God's love recommends itself to us because God gives himself into our hands to be eaten. This is the ultimate vulnerability of God, the ultimate expression of the divine humility which literally is giving himself away to sinners, and sometimes to people who don't care, sometimes to people who haven't the remotest idea of the incredible love behind this, this gift in which God is saying: "Don't you love me enough that you want to eat me up too?"

And St. Augustine warns us: when we receive the Eucharist, though we receive the species of the bread and wine into our bodies and they are transformed, much more are we eaten or devoured or consumed by the divine presence and the intensity of divine love and changed or transformed into the very body of God, as well as into his dispositions, into his Spirit and into his very ... share, at least, into his very divine life.

When we receive the Eucharist, it's as if we enter into this tremendous embrace. This tremendous sigh of almost boundless satisfaction pours over us and pours out of God. It's as if the Holy Spirit placed a great big kiss in the center of our being and it began to ripple out to every aspect or part or level of our nature: body, soul and spirit, flooding it with the divine energy of light, life and love.

THE CELLS IN THE MYSTICAL BODY

And so, this, this ... the Eucharist transforms us into the mystical body of Christ and, according to Paul, we become what might be called holons within the greater holon of Christ's mystical body. Or another image, we become cells in the mystical body. And that means that in each of us, as our spiritual thirst for God increases, each of us has within ourselves the whole program of divine transformation. Because the Spirit of God, like the soul in the body, fills the whole body spiritually and every part of it and every cell of it.

And the image that is used for this is DNA. In other words, the Spirit dwelling in each holon of the mystical body has a program and puts at our disposal all the potentials we need to be transformed from the very roots up into the mind of Christ, into the divine light and love, and into the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God, of course, is not a geopolitical institution; it's not a form of politics; it's not a project for world supremacy. It's a state of consciousness. And precisely the state of consciousness that it communicates is the state of consciousness that Jesus enjoyed as God's son made flesh, made human. So that it's Christ's experience as a human being of the ultimate reality of the Father, of the Father whom he calls Abba to emphasize the closeness, the nearness, the tenderness of the ultimate mystery as he experienced it.

IT'S EXTREMELY INTIMATE

Thus, the word that Jesus uses for Father is not a formal word, or even a – while it's not disrespectful – it's extremely intimate and it really means "Daddy" or "Papa" or "The Old Man" – in some cultures may be would be suitable. In other words it expresses this intimacy, this at-ease-ness, this trust, this confidence in God's protection, this certitude that God is always leaning over us tenderly, is guiding as if by the hand, but more intimately, is guiding us from within – to bring us, step by step, to the evolution of those powers that he gave us through the Baptism and, especially, the Eucharist – those transforming powers which we call the theological virtues, the fruits of the Spirit, and the seven gifts of the Spirit – which are gradual assimilations of the

mind of Christ and proof that the living Christ is risen within us and is manifesting himself in our activities, even in the most insignificant ones. Because God comes to us in the Eucharist, not just for a few minutes; Christ comes to stay there forever. And actually, he's already present and the Eucharist only enhances that presence or enables us to come to Christ who is already there and waiting for us with open arms.

GOD IS INVITING US

Now the importance of love, then, is not just its character of sheer gift. Love is based on friendship. Love is based on a relationship that is growing to the point of commitment. And it's when we commit ourselves to a practice of prayer and to a life of change that we begin to understand what is actually at stake in this marvelous process.

God is inviting us into ever deeper levels of knowledge and transformation. And here is one of the sayings of Jesus – a consideration that must be presented to balance this idea of God's sheer gratuity in inviting indeed every human being into the Kingdom, into Christ's experience of the Father, the Abba, the loving God. And this is a saying that we hear when Jesus was on his last journey to Jerusalem. He's going on his way and a young man rushes up and kneels before him and says: I want to follow you wherever you go.

And Jesus asked him: Well, why don't you keep the commandments? And the young man says: All these I have kept from my youth. And Jesus looked upon him with love and said: Well, only one thing is missing. Go, sell everything you have. Give it to the poor. Come, follow me and you will have reward in heaven.

Well the young man was very rich, and he wasn't quite prepared for this new step of self-surrender and love. So, he went away sad. And this caused Jesus to turn to his disciples and say: How hard it is to enter the kingdom of God. At this point, then, Jesus only emphasized and said ... not only how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven, but he even said: It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom. And the disciples who were still in business and hadn't quite given up their worldly aspirations at this point, they said: Oh God, who can be saved? This was too much for them.

The harshness of the saying reminds us that wisdom teachers often exaggerated in order to make a point to catch the audience's attention so that a greater, a greater understanding can be communicated. So what Jesus meant it's not wealth itself; but, rather, that any possession at all; that is to say, any attachment to our possessiveness is an act of self-centered love which is extra baggage and with that baggage, you can't get through a needle. Any extra stuff has to be left behind. And so, there's a certain delicate humor in this tale because if a camel with its two humps can't get through, this is a sort of hint that, boys, you're not gonna get through either; and, girls, you won't get through unless you unload some of your attachments, your baggage, your possessive attitude.

Then come, in other parts of scripture, other things – like: if you don't let go of your family, friends, relatives, property, you can't be my disciples. ... Or, you have to enter the narrow gate. All these are symbols that the love that lies on the other side of the narrow gate is so pure, so precious, that you just can't live there or be happy there or feel at home there if you bring with you the self-centered projects for happiness,

especially those that we've described earlier as the emotional programs for happiness which are false values and which are basically self-centered values, or identifications with the group; whether ethnic, family, national or even religious, in which we have an attachment – usually to be accepted by the group.

This divine love, then, is totally gratuitous. But it's realistic. It challenges us at the same time as offering us this immense gift. What we have to let go and allow God to take away any attachment that is self-centered. So, the divine action goes after our selfishness. And this is the source of what we call sin: our unwillingness to let go of the support systems that we counted on to keep our false values in place and our idealized image secure.