



Priestly People

SERVANTS OF THE PARACLETE

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Where did we go wrong?

Lord make us turn to you let us see your face!

In 1973, Karl Menninger, MD, the renown psychiatrist wrote a book entitled, *“Whatever became of Sin?”*

It caused considerable discussion at the time, both in the religious and psychological communities. His contention was that we live in an age of darkened spirit and hardness of heart and that this malady is not being properly named.

The problems of our age are moral and spiritual and are symptoms of sin. Thus, they are not understood or corrected by applying pure psychological or social remedies. Anxiety and guilt continue to stalk our psyches. Sin is our problem, yet we call it everything but that.

The rock-solid foundation of a spiritual life must be a clear awareness of our sinfulness coupled with a deep confidence in the infinite mercy of God. Sin without mercy produces guilt, depression and despair. Mercy without sin reduces God to irrelevancy. We appreciate being found only to the extent that we know we are lost.

Jesus told the story of the rich man and Lazarus to illustrate the problem of sin (Luke 16: 19-31). The first verse of that parable simply describes the rich man as one who “dressed in purple garment and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day.”

There is no attribution of sin or evil to him, yet the rich man went to hell when he died. The rich man is presented as a man who had it made, one who had achieved “The American Dream”. Since he went to hell he was certainly in a state of sin and just as certainly oblivious of it.

He had five brothers equally oblivious to their deadly state of soul. Oblivious sin is something more than simply doing evil deeds or omitting to do good deeds. It is condition of soul that precedes the sinful behavior and lies at its root yet remains subtly hidden.

In the language of traditional spirituality, that condition is characterized as possession by one or some combination of the seven capital sins. Those sinful propensities or tendencies are: PRIDE, ANGER, LUST, ENVY, GLUTTONY, GREED and SLOTH. These are the first fruits of Original Sin which can strangle the soul and kill it by becoming the center around which a person’s life is organized.

Unfortunately, they are the capital virtues of our culture and acting on them is encouraged in every way possible. Thus, we see fulfilled the words of St. Paul, ... they know ... That all who practice such things deserve death, yet they not only do them themselves but even encourage others to practice them” (ROMANS 1:32).

The scripture is full of examples and stories of deadlines of the sin which lies buried within us, ready to be activated by the proper provocation or stimulation.

Abel and Cain were caught in this pattern (GENESIS 4: 1-16). Abel’s sacrifice was pleasing to God and that activated Cain’s angry envy. He acted it out by murdering his brother. In a real sense he was a murderer before he killed. Pride made him cover up his deed before God.

David the great king, the ancestor of Jesus, one day after a siesta, saw Bathsheba naked on the adjoining rooftop (2 SAMUEL 11:1-26). His lust was activated and possessed him so thoroughly that he committed adultery, treachery, deceit and finally murder. Little did he suspect that all that evil was lurking in his heart waiting for the right stimulus to come to life.

The story of Naaman the leper illustrates how a spiritual problem can be concealed behind a physical disease (2 KINGS 5:1-15). His presenting physical problem was leprosy, but his far more deadly spiritual issue was his arrogance, anger and pride. Yet, when he humbled himself, the pride was healed, and he was also cured of his leprosy.

Jesus often showed himself to be more interested in the spiritual condition of those who approached him than in their other troubles or diseases. His concern is summed up in the parable of the Prodigal Son which ends with the apparently virtuous older son being revealed as consumed by hateful resentment and anger toward his father and brother (LUKE 15: 11-32). His spiritual condition was far more serious than that of his younger brother whose sins were more common and open and straightforward. There are lessons here for us around our grudges and resentments which produce apparent compliance but secret defiance.

It is the roots of sin that are deadly to the soul. Our sinful actions spring from those roots. Everyone has a different configuration of deadly tendencies based on genetic predispositions, family patterns habits of sin and areas where grace has been at work.

Since sin itself is a mystery, its presence can only be revealed by the grace of God. We simply do not know the extent of sin in our lives unless we are informed by the One who created us and loves us. Thus, frequent examination of conscience is so important. This is not the same as spiritual introspection. It is rather a humble prayer that God show us our sinfulness, then removes it or reduces its hold on us.

It is well worth our while to ponder our sinfulness and to bring our state to the infinite mercy and forgiveness of God. That defines who we really are redeemed sinners, those who have gone wrong, but have been set straight.

Lord make us turn to you, let us see your face!

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Suffering and Presence of God!

Since suffering is so pervasive it is imperative that we explain it well to ourselves and to our people!

I believe that our catechesis does not sufficiently address the problem of suffering and how to find God and His will in it. Many Christians unfortunately believe the solution posed by Job's friends, namely that suffering must be a divine punishment for personal sins or misdeeds. In addition to such misguided theology, there is a prevalent philosophy in our culture that it is acceptable to do bad things to bad people. Much of the violence in our society portrays the good imposing evil on bad. In such a cultural climate, whenever people suffer, they naturally conclude that they must be bad.

Jesus addressed that problem when he commented about the tower of Siloam that fell and killed 18 people (LUKE 13:4-5). He asked whether they were more guilty than everyone else in Jerusalem. He then stated an emphatic "NO!". Suffering is a part of life, and at its deepest level, it is inappropriate to question God about the fairness of it.

When we ask "why?" of God concerning our suffering, we are equivalently asking God to give an account of his motives. We then place ourselves in the position of critics and judges of God, asking Him to explain Himself for our approval. Yet suffering cannot be explained to our satisfaction since it is a profound mystery. Moreover, for the most part, we are antecedently convinced that it does not have any value, so we refuse to accept it. In order to break through our prejudice, He sent His son into the world and did not spare even Him from the necessity of suffering (ROM. 8:32).

When we are scandalized by suffering, it is impossible to be aware of the presence of God at any but the most superficial levels.

There are two sequential incidents in Matthew's Gospel, in chapter 16: 13-23, which illustrates this point very well. In the first, Jesus asks the disciples who people think He is. They bring forth all the options that were then circulating. In our day, we point to all the worldly messiahs offering innumerable paths of salvation and happiness for our acceptance. It was no different in Jesus' day.

He then asked the disciples Who they thought He was. You can almost hear their silence as they try to sort through the popular opinions to see which one they like the best. Finally, Peter blurts out, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God!". Peter simply said the first thing that came to his mind, oblivious of its source.

Jesus discerned the spirit that had inspired Peter's observation. He called Peter's attention to the source of his insight by

saying, "Blessed are you Simon son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father."

For Peter's part, he did not have the slightest idea where the insight came from. He did not discern the spirit, but Jesus did it for him. Jesus recognized that it was the Father who had selected Peter at that moment to become the rock on which He would build his church. Peter was largely unaware of what was happening. Jesus, then tried to call Peter's attention to the interior quality of the experience he just had, an experience different from the way the inspirations of flesh and blood come to us and feel.

In the next story, Jesus goes on to draw out the implications of what Peter had just announced. The Messiah must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly, be killed, and on the third day, be raised. Jesus, for his part was doing His own discerning of the spirit, obediently hearing and freely accepting it.

Peter's response to this announcement was to take Jesus aside and rebuke Him. Peter affirmed that as the one upon whom the church was going to be built, he was going to have a say in how it was done. He knew that people would be repelled by negativity and talk of suffering. In order to be popular, a church needed to be founded on positive and inspirational images, not turning people off with talk of suffering.

The response of Jesus to such as image of church was swift and incisive. He said "Get behind me Satan. You are an obstacle to me. You are thinking not as god does, but as human beings do!"

Even after the Resurrection, the disciples failed to get the point of the necessity of suffering. He rebuked the disciples on the road to Emmaus. "Was it not necessary for the Messiah to suffer these things and enter into His glory?" (LUKE 24:26)

Saint Paul picks up this messianic theme and applies it to himself and by extension to all Christians, in one place saying, "...in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ..." (COL. 1:24). There are many similar statements in other writings of Paul.

In order to continually experience the presence of God and to be able to discern His spirit consistently, it is necessary to face the necessity of suffering and ultimately death as integral to the Christian understanding of redemption. Jesus has removed the quality of scandal from suffering and death and made it the means of salvation. Since suffering is so much a part of human life, it is imperative that we find meaning in it, and help our people do likewise.

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