

The Intimate Presence of God

A Seven-Step Spiritual Journey



by Donald Stoesz



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Preface

Inspiration for this book has come from questions raised about the meaning of belonging and intimacy in a prison setting. Intimacy with God is a prerequisite for knowing how to be intimate with others. I have developed a spiritual journey course that takes participants along a path in which they experience the love and care of God. Starting with a *via negativa* approach, in which the transcendence of God and suffering of the world are acknowledged as fundamental, the rest of the journey considers the importance of familial influences, moves on to spiritual mentors, proclaims the centrality of Jesus and the church, reflects on the importance of service in the world, takes account of the role of the Holy Spirit, and ends with a consideration of the mystery of God. Each session consists of an hour to an hour and a half of reading, reflection, meditation, prayer, and sharing.

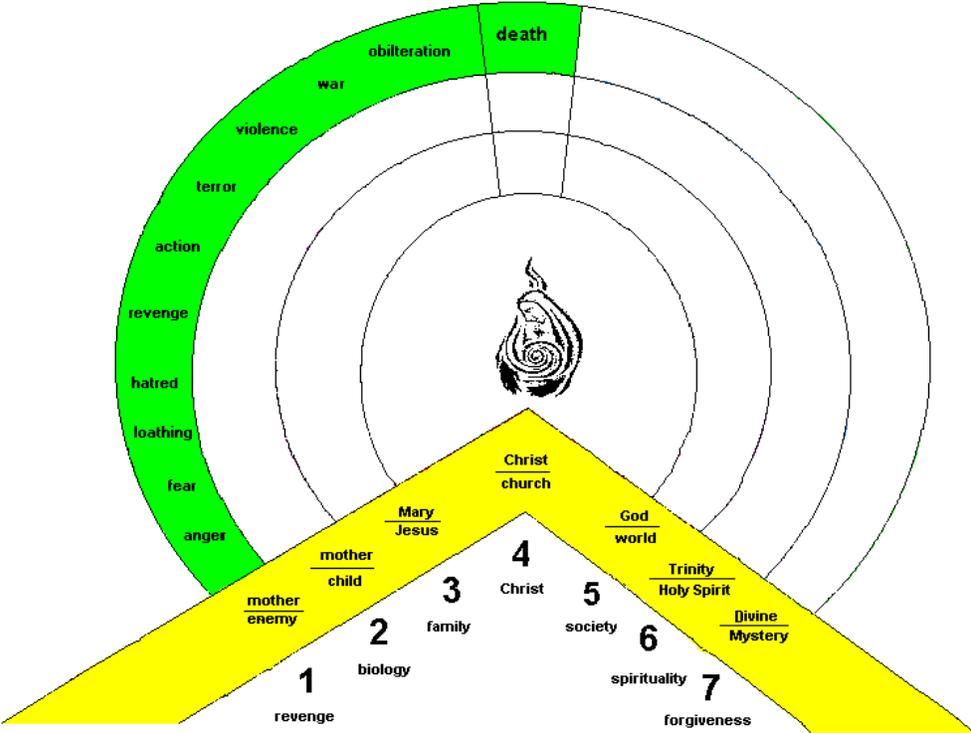
The labyrinth is a practical way of making this journey real. Walking inwardly along its narrow path during the first three stages enables one to let go of obstacles, understand the role of biology, and acknowledge the influence of spiritual mentors. Standing in the centre of the circle during the fourth step makes one appreciate the salvific and comforting role of Christ. Walking the narrow path outwardly in the next three stages anticipates the things we have yet to accomplish. The world, Holy Spirit, and mystery of God put our earthly adventures into the proper perspective.

I would like to thank the people who have made this book possible. Their cajoling, stories, encouragement and sense of wonder have helped me understand what it means to be truly free.

Donald Stoesz
Advent, 2019

Chapter One

Mother of our Enemies



Introduction

I went in 1995 to a Buddhist professor by the name of Victor Hori¹ and asked him to offer a series of meditation courses in the prison in which I was working. I believed at the time that quiet meditation in the chapel would offer inmates relief from the tension and violence that was occurring at the prison.

The three-hour conversation that ensued changed the way I thought about spirituality. Victor presented me with a basic lesson in two types of meditation. The first was an “other-worldly” mysticism while the second was a “this-worldly” mysticism.² Prone to other-worldly pursuits, Zen Buddhism led its adherents on a tranquil spiritual journey in which one forgot the woes of this life and focused on the idyllic aspects of paradise. One left this world behind figuratively if not literally as one let one’s anxieties and fears and worries go in order to become enveloped in a serene atmosphere of calm and silence.

I believed on first reflection that this type of meditation was ideally suited for prison life. The sheer weight of negativity that invaded one’s life within a jail-house mentality begged for a way out, an escape in which one, for at least a little while, could find emotional and social breathing room for one’s soul. The chapel offered an idyllic locale in which silence allowed one to let down one’s guard and breathe easily for the first time in weeks.

Hori made me rethink the appropriateness of this approach. He suggested that this spirituality was liable to make the inmates less prepared to cope with the harsh reality of prison life. The idyllic world they inhabited for a few hours through meditation made the brutal life to which they had to return starker in all its blackness. The result of other-worldly mysticism was depression and despair at ever getting out of the mire in which one was stuck.

Hori suggested that concentrating on the dire straits in which one was in gave a person a better handle on how to cope with the daily tensions of life. Focusing on the extent to which life was hell had the paradoxical, euphoric effect of enabling one to rise above the circumstances in which one found oneself. Reflections on the sheer madness of the prison experience had the curious effect of making one feel sane and normal.

Hori’s comments struck an accord. Far from running from the evil that prison represented, facing bizarre and difficult situations made it easier to work inside this type of environment. Through morbid humour and ironic retort, one could look past the grimness of prison to its precious human, inner side. The delicate part of human passions and emotions came bubbling to the surface as one learned to crack the hard, outer shell.

This spiritual reversal was effective on a personal level. For several years, I had suffered from depression. I realized I should welcome instead of dreading the onslaught of these weekly bouts. I learned to let depression wash over me like black rain, and as a result, it became curiously more bearable. Perhaps there was something to be learned in the depression itself, something that was worth handing on to others.

I became convinced that this new type of “reality”³ therapy was the way to go in terms of spiritual direction. Identifying the banality of the world enabled one to experience the higher aspects of life. Planting one’s feet squarely on the ground produced a journey of high hopes and expectations.

This bias toward the realistic side of life made me decide that any spiritual journey needed to begin with this dark side. Obstacles and brokenness and dilemmas and tragedies and heartbreak and downright evil and enemies had to be faced before one could think about an intimate relationship with God.⁴ This spiritual journey begins with a reflection on what it means to face and overcome evil.

Propensity to Sin and Destruction

What is it about human nature that invites self-destruction instead of self-fulfillment, attracts enemies instead of friends, opposition instead of accord, dissonance instead of peace and tranquility? We can point to enough examples of missed opportunities and lost friendships that we begin to wonder about ourselves and our predilection toward the downward spiral of cynicism and despair.

Our range of emotions illustrates unhappiness with ourselves and the world around us. We get angry when we cannot have our own way, we want revenge when we and our loved ones are hurt, we lash out when mistreated or offended, we rage against the world when its planets appeared aligned against our best interests.

Expression of emotion reveals more about us than we realize. The anger that rises to the surface illustrates the not-so-long-forgotten resentment we still carry around. Our defensiveness and possessiveness reveal the basic insecurities we harbour about our jobs, our identity, our fundamental worth, and our broken relationships.

Emotions are the internal barometer that make us aware whether we have been able to “get over” conflicts and unresolved issues in our lives. They also illustrate how fundamentally at war we are with our own members (Romans 7:23). There is a sense in which we can never find the peace we are looking for. We experience a deep sense of alienation and loss over being separated, grief and despair over failures, and anger and resentment over wrongs done to us.

The word that theologians use to describe this personal state is sin. Our very beings gravitate toward the self-destructive, finding misery the best company. As I say so often within the prison context, no one with whom I have spoken wished they would go to jail when they grew up. Yet they ended up there. None of us

wished evil upon ourselves or others when we first opened our eyes onto this world. Evil has nevertheless “come upon us.”

Naming these fundamental lapses is an essential part of this first step. It is good to be aware of what human beings are capable of, for then we will not be disappointed. Perhaps that is why I work in a prison setting. I am reminded of the lengths to which people will go to harm themselves and others.

A question that arises in our reflections of evil is the extent to which we are culpable for these actions. To what extent did “the devil make me do it”? To what extent do we take responsibility for our own actions? The most frequent conclusion is that it is about half and half. Our willfulness and stubbornness have brought us to the place we are today, and so we have no one to blame but ourselves. We have made our bed and so we lie in it. We own the trouble we have caused, even though we never anticipated the disastrous outcome with which we now live. We would take many of our actions back if we could, but we only benefit by looking back at what could have been. The limitations of our bodies and souls are infinitely clearer twenty years later.

We spend as much time righting the wrong we have done as getting into trouble in the first place. This is as it should be, given the fact that God has created us with a will to act. God has enabled us to be responsible for ourselves by giving us internal checks and balances so that we do not go off the deep end on either side. God has provided us with the inherent capabilities of controlling our emotions, of channeling our thoughts, and of inspiring our actions so we can “cut our losses” and accomplish that for which we were created.

I do not want to move too quickly to this area of personal engagement. If everything is placed too readily on the culpability of the will, we delude ourselves. We have not yet come to the point of realizing the extent to which life is out of control, of realizing that evil resides outside as well as within us, that there is an objective as well as subjective side to sin. We need to recognize that anger and conflict and destruction are very much part of the world in which we live. Taking off the rose-coloured glasses of our wish-fulfillments, we see that brokenness, divorce, separation, and rejection are very much part of our lives. There are deep divisions -- not only in our being -- but in the being that is the world.

Names for this dividedness and alienation are sin and death. No matter how importantly we live in this world, we will die. This death will create a ripple effect of grief and despair by those people who have loved us. Our world is oriented toward death and so it is better to embrace this fact than deny it. War is a personification of death writ large. It is a willful act of collective conscience that rushes us to death more quickly than we had anticipated. Disease and earthquakes result in the same grief. The world, that is to say “God,” is no respecter of persons. Evil continues to be real and so it is better to face it in our personal and collective lives than to wish it away.

Personification of Evil

One of the things that happens as we think about the impact of brokenness and evil is that we tend to personify it. Evil is not only tethered to our will. It breaks free to execute its wanton destruction. We feel overwhelmed by the destruction we have caused, by the inevitable decision we have made. Events lead in the opposite direction from what we had intuitively intended. We personify sin in order to tell others we feel overwhelmed by the influence of another, inherently unhealthy force. We name evil as personal, as spiritual, as having a will of its own that wreaks havoc on our lives.

Part of the reason for the objective nature of sin is that there are real enemies whose goals conflict in a fundamental way with our own. Personal, social, and national enemies exist because of our willful reach for power and control, a reality no less real on their part. The Bible is rife with examples of enemies and the destruction they wrecked on Israel, Jesus Christ and, by extension, the church. The church has been no more angelic in its crusadic fervour to rid its lands of pagans and infidels.

What we have, then, is an externalization of evil that we call our enemies, an objective reality to which we need to respond. This objective fact leads us to spiritualize the warfare in which we are engaged by naming these other forces as Satanic. Evil and Satan are simply collective ways of identifying personal and social forces that are experienced as stronger than our own will. The feeling of being overwhelmed leads us to personify that which we thought was manageable.

A personification of evil can be healthy. A recognition that we are fighting against “principalities and powers” rather than “flesh and blood” (Ephesians 6:12) helps us acknowledge the fundamental helplessness of our position. We cannot destroy physical beings without understanding the opposition of these so-called “material” forces within a larger emotional, social, and spiritual framework.

This holds true as much in the personal realm as in the political. The “demon” drink that has a hold of us points toward a deeper ailment. That fame-seeking friend who steps in the way of others to get what they want is symptomatic of a deeper ill. The demon drink and Machiavellian friend become personified as that which has a stronger hold on us than we had first imagined.

Mother of Our Enemies

We can put a face to the evil and sin of which we have been speaking. If it is true that sin needs to be expunged before God can dwell within us, what better way to think about this evil than to see a *mother of our enemies* within the image of Madonna and child?

This suggestion may come as a shock. We are accustomed to viewing the Madonna and child as a positive image of our sacred mother and Lord. Yet is this

not precisely why Christ came into the world, to reconcile the world to himself, including the enemies who hated him (2 Corinthians 5:19)?

Eschatological resolution is the reason we take the time to look at the face of our enemies. Pictures in the newspaper put a face to those who want to do harm. Evil and sin have become personal. The image makes us face the fear and loathing within ourselves, the desire for revenge that spurs us on to war. We walk along this vengeful road to reach the possibility of forgiveness and reconciliation.

A particularly poignant passage in the Bible helps us think about enemies. Judges 5:28-31 offers a vignette of a Canaanite woman who is waiting for her son to come home from battle. The reader already knows that the woman's son, Sisera, a mighty military commander, has fled the scene of battle and been ignobly killed by Jael. The text taunts the woman in her false expectations of victory and glory. Knowing that there will be tremendous grief in her household tonight, it closes with these vindictive words: "So perish all your enemies, O Lord!" (v. 31).

An Appropriate Response

We identify with the Hebrew text insofar as we want sin and evil expunged from our lives. We want to live in peace with no fear of attack from our enemies. The Hebrew Bible fulfills this promise when it says that the people of Israel "had rest for forty years" after this decisive battle (v. 31).

The battle against evil is never ending. Israel herself lost the land as well as the Temple after the demise of the Davidic kingdom. Failure and loss, exile and punishment are as much a part of our lives as success and peace.

The battle against sin and evil in our personal and social lives is also a never-ending one. One needs to be vigilant in order to escape the snares of bitterness, vengefulness, lust, pride, and power. We can claim victory over these things in the name of Christ.

How are we to deal with the anguish and grief we see on this woman's face? We cannot help but feel sorry for the Canaanite woman even though her inclusion in the text is meant as a sign of mockery instead of respect. The fact that she is mentioned at all shows that the Hebrew writer is aware of the tragic consequences of war. Fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters will grieve the inevitable loss of life that comes with "fighting for what is right." No rhyme or reason can be given for why freedom and justice and truth necessitate the spilling of so much blood. Why do human beings have to be so vicious to each other to prove their own "righteousness"?

We identify ourselves as mutual mothers of tragedy beyond the high fences and bomb-ridden fields that separate us from each other. We know that our sons and daughters will also be killed, making it no easier for us to go into battle in the first place. We can identify with each other in our common humanity -- even as the war of alienation and hatred widens the gulf between us.

One way of coming to grips with the impossible reality of enemies and war is to realize that these acts and events are geographically farthest away from God. Even though God has allowed humankind to act in this way, God never intended it to be this way. Alienation and abandonment came as a result of the fall. God is in the suffering rather than in the triumphant march of victory. God is in solidarity with the pain humans experience instead of in the harm that they inflict.

One way of naming this divine distance is to speak about the absence of God. God is absent in these woeful events, sad that humans have gone this far away from the Father, committed to showing them a new way, should they want to listen. *Step one* of revenge and *step seven* of forgiveness are integrally linked. We can understand *evil* by not understanding it. We give it up to God in divine infinity. We know that *reconciliation* will come at the end of the rainbow. We wait until we stand before the ultimate mystery before life's tragedies become clear.

Conclusion

Let us review the steps we have taken. We began with the reality of sin and evil, acknowledged the personification of Satan in these musings, and went on to put a human face to our enemies. As for sin within ourselves, we have acknowledged and confessed it. We have acknowledged the brokenness of our lives and asked for forgiveness and grace to carry on. As for the reality of evil, we have been realistic about its dire consequences and committed ourselves to fighting it. We know that temptations and conflicts and disappointments will continue despite God's victory. We pray for resolve and strength to face the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

As for the existence of Satan, we have affirmed the principalities and powers that are beyond the control of our human wills. We call on God to put them under Christ's feet. We acknowledge the tragic impact of natural and historical and spiritual forces without demonizing them.

As for the enemies who collaborate against us, we recognize their human faces and affirm our solidarity with them in their grief and anguish at the tremendous cost of life. We affirm together with God that Christ has reconciled the world to himself. This is an eschatological reality. Forgiveness and grace, understanding and empathy, latitude and magnitude are placed within the divine infinity that is the mystery of Christ.

Sin, evil, and our enemies are realities we acknowledge without being overcome, dilemmas that we accept without giving in, conflicts that we engage in without losing heart, and a deep sadness that we embrace within the loving heart of God, knowing that we can give them up to the comforting divine presence.

Questions for Reflection

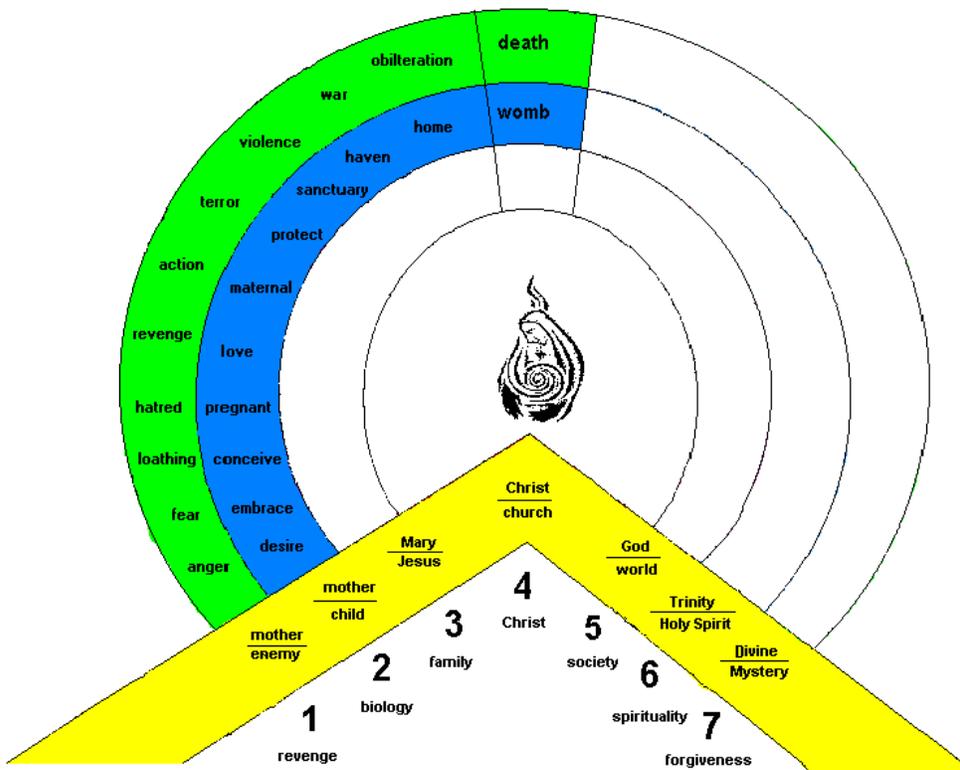
1. Make a note of the brokenness you have experienced. Have you been able to grieve these losses?
2. Does talking about Satan and the “principalities and powers” help come to terms with the dark side of life?
3. Jesus assumes that we have enemies and that this has some spiritual value (Matthew 5:43ff). Is it useful to think in these terms?
4. I have spoken about mourning in solidarity with our enemies for the great tragedies of life that pit us against each other. In what ways is this possible?
5. I have suggested there is a continuum between revenge and forgiveness, between hate and love (cf. Ephesians 2). To what extent can these two opposites be linked? To what extent does reconciliation have to wait until the final revealing of the mystery of God?

Prayer

I acknowledge, O God, the hurt and suffering around me. I realize that it has as much to do with the reality of sin and death in the world as with my own propensity to cause hurt and harm. Forgive me my transgressions, so that I am renewed each morning to meet you in the world that is in your care. Amen.

Chapter Two

Mother of Our Birth



Introduction

The absence of God has become abundantly clear in the first chapter. We have learned what it means for the earth to be a “formless void” and for the “face of the deep” to be covered by darkness (Genesis 1:1-2). We have come to terms with the presence of evil despite God’s goodness, the reality of sin despite faith, and the proximity of our enemies in spite of attempts at reconciliation.

This externalization of evil and grief at suffering has opened a place to embrace the essential goodness of creation. Far from abandoning us, God has destined us to fulfill our divine purpose, to embrace the world and all that is in it.

The second step is like the one Nicodemus took when he came to Jesus in the middle of the night and asked to return to his mother’s womb to be born again (John 3). Crises make us face the core of our being to understand the telos of our lives. We reflect on the path we have traveled to start all over again, in order to make right that which has gone wrong.

This is essentially a joyous experience because it enables us to relive the past, to act as though we can start all over again. We use our hindsight to strike a new path, to chart a new course for ourselves. Nicodemus was right: we can re-enter the womb of our mothers by reliving the expectations they had for us, the expectations we have for ourselves.

This return to our innermost child generates a true picture of our positive nature, enabling us to know and act upon the talents with which we have been born. Our parents encouraged us in all these ventures, affirming us each step of the way. Our parents drove us to piano lessons, watched our hockey games, comforted us when we were sad and angry and affirmed our natural strengths. For some of us, that involved academic pursuits; for others, it was a technical preoccupation; for still others, it was the finer touch of cloth and culture. Each of us blossomed under our parents’ tutelage, having been given the requisite nutrients and care.

Infrastructure of Care

Not all these past experiences were as rosy as I have made them seem. There was much to be desired in the type of care we were given. The vulnerability of youth opened new possibilities for the future. We know how sensitive we were as we grew up in the fold of our parents’ love. We know how much love it took for them to love us, to listen to our point of view even as we were distancing ourselves from their values and beliefs. We know how much effort it took for them to provide care even though they disagreed with the way that we were living.

Let us reflect upon this infrastructure of care. The only way we can grow up is if there has been nourishment for us to trust others, love for us to feel safe that we can share our innermost secrets and fears with others.

I would like to affirm this vulnerability. We need a vast amount of support and affirmation and trust and commitment to accomplish anything. This has come from many people: parents, teachers, friends, and coworkers. We are trusting of their inherent commitment to us as equals, as adults, as fellow sojourners on the path of life. We yearn for their faith in us, their trust that we can hold up our side of the bargain.

Our parents yearn for recognition that they started us on the right path, that their efforts have not been in vain. They yearn for recompense for the years in which it seemed only a one-way street, when they were giving to us without seeing much in return.

Response of Adulthood

The best response we can make to our parents is to say Yes! we have grown up, we have become adults, we have matured and made our own mistakes. They no longer shoulder the burden; it is now ours to bear. We take responsibility for the decisions we have made and stand in gratitude for what they have done for us. We can only respond with affirmation that they were willing to “carry” us for thirteen or eighteen or twenty-eight years of their lives, until we felt sure-footed enough to stand on our own two feet. They provided the context into which we leaped for joy that there was someone who loved us, someone who cared enough to hold us.

This emphasis on the way of life into which we were born is so we can evaluate our state of affairs. We can only be adult if we have left the care of our parents behind and become our own, internal authority. We no longer rail against our traditional parents because we have become parents of our own. We have had to wrestle with being our own authority.

The irony of this situation is that we recognize more of ourselves in our parents than we would like to admit. We recognize more similarities that place us on a trajectory of continuity with our inherited past. This is not to say that we need to embrace the past as future. We need to affirm the limitations of that past to move beyond it to our own world of care and delight.

The second step is selfish in the sense that it makes us focus on our own strengths and weaknesses. We become self-absorbed, even hedonistic to understand what it is that we really want out of life. What is it that makes us yearn for pleasure and fulfillment? What is it that makes us reach out for intimacy?

Was intimacy and love an integral part of our physical, emotional, and social bonding to our mother and father? Does not the very word “mother” conjure up all sorts of warm, comforting images? Is not the hardest-core person among us reduced to emotional ashes when the extended care of their mother is mentioned? Eulogies sprout forth in the gap of realization that a romanticized past can scarcely make up for a difficult future. These words of praise conjure up the knowledge that one can never go back again. Intimacy needs to be reinvented for oneself.

We come to the place of distance, that spacious expanse that makes us aware that the lives of our parents need to be lived all over again in us. We are the ones that now have a family. We as father and mother who now act as traditional authorities to our children, causing the same fits of consternation in them as we had in response to our own parents' retorts. We have no way to go but through this situation with the same love that our parents carried for us. We can only hope along with our forebears that our children will be as gracious and forgiving of our mistakes, even as they accept themselves as our offspring. Nothing will change the fact that they will turn out as vastly different from us as we have from our own parents.

A Look Forward

Let us end this second stage by looking at our wish-fulfillments. Taking the time to reflect on the room our parents made for us makes us grab on to the opportunities we dreamt about as we were growing up. Like the very creation of the world, we were given a myriad of opportunities to make things turn out right. We took advantage of these offerings, plunging into our work and play for all it was worth to see what would come of it. We are content to contemplate these unbridled forays. We nevertheless pause, knowing that the true measure of these successes is to be found in our current situation. Are our aspirations truly reflected in the life we are living? Has the creation of ourselves resulted in as rich and multi-layered a world as God created? Can we lay claim to these fulfilments?

Can we lay claim to that which God intended for us and hold it up high for all to see? Can we see the best we have to offer even as it is being hidden under a bushel? Is not the journey back into the womb a cry of contentment in the sense that we can still draw on these familial and emotional bonds to sustain us for the future? God has intended us for good no matter where and what we have been. The subjectivity of our souls, buried deep in the past, calls us forth to reach out a hand to others, to say again to all who will hear that we have something to offer. The fact that our parents pushed on with desire despite misgivings means that we can do the same for our children. We can have faith in God and the future even if we have no faith in ourselves.

Questions for Further Reflection

1. Name the divine purpose for which you were created. Be specific in terms of your gifts, talents, and abilities.
2. How do you view your biological family? Did they provide the infrastructure of care mentioned above? Were there some limitations to the care they provided?
3. Are there other people who encouraged you in your pursuits?
4. Are you content with the life you lead? What would you change if you could?
5. To what extent does your inherited past destiny the way that you will live?

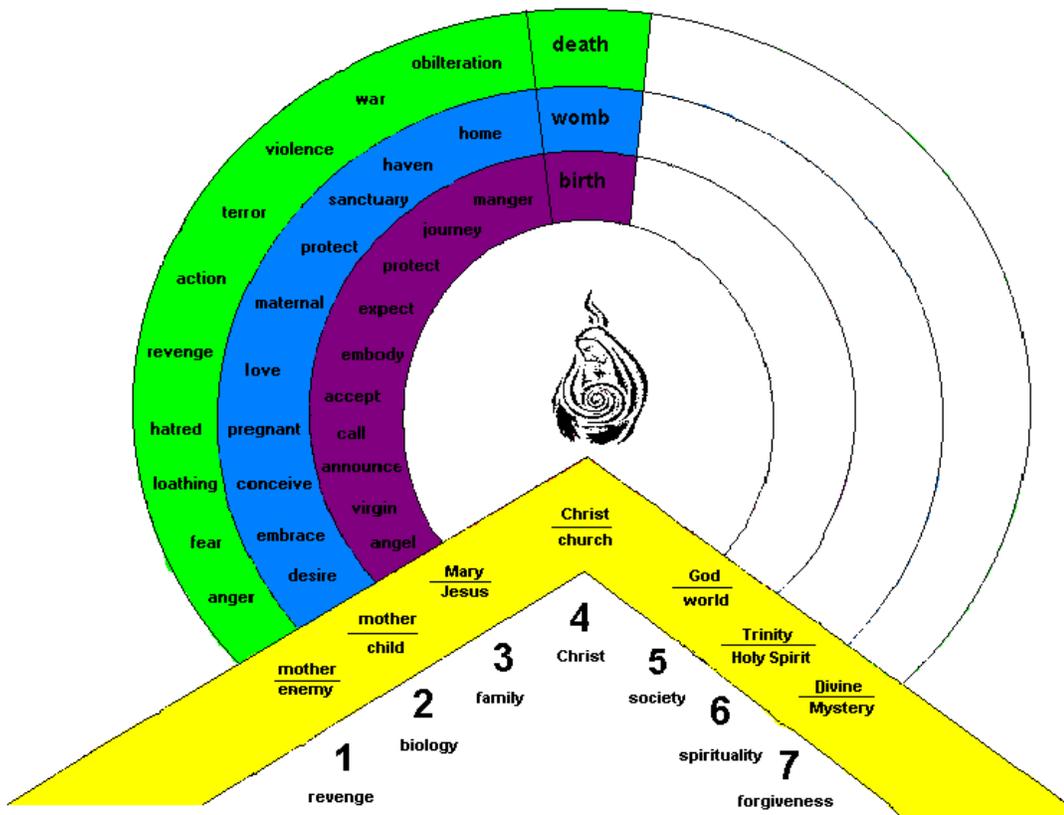
6. Is a comparison with your family a useful way of defining yourself?

Prayer

Thank you, God, that you have created me in the image of yourself, as essentially good, open to the possibilities in the world. Thank you for forgiving my wrongs so that I can be reconciled and renewed to serve You. Thank you for the care that I have received from my parents, loved ones, peers and mentors. May their dreams of what is possible be incarnated in my will, purpose, actions, and life. Amen.

Chapter Three

Mary, Mother of God



From Creation to Redemption

Each of us discovered the divine purpose for which we were created in the second stage of our spiritual journey. We placed ourselves into the larger framework that is our family of origin. We evaluated the past, found a place for ourselves within it and grabbed on to the destiny for which we were created. The third stage represents a shift from *biology* to *spirituality*, from the procreative process of our mothers to an identification with the one who conceived and gave birth to Jesus, Mary, Mother of God.

The best way of making this transition is to view it in terms of creation and redemption. Even though God created the world and pronounced it good, Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise as a result of their sin. Even though God fashioned a family through the faithful followers of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the twelve sons of Israel went to live in Egypt. Even though God gave the ten commandments to Moses, the people of Israel made a golden calf and worshipped it. Even though God established a royal lineage through Saul, David, Solomon, and Rehoboam, the kingdom was divided, and the people were exiled to Babylon.

God had to do something new to redeem the people from their sin. He chose a young virgin by the name of Mary to conceive and bear a son through the miraculous working of the Holy Spirit. Her son Jesus came to be known as the Son of God because of obedience to his Father and sacrifice on behalf of humanity.

Divine Procreation

The reasons for God's choice of Mary as the handmaiden of salvation are extraordinary. Mary fulfills the divine purposes for which the universe was created, and the people of Israel were established, while expanding the definitions of family, love and salvation in the process. God fashioned the first world through a command of his Word. This speech-act was inadequate because the people still did not follow God. God therefore chose the very human, biological process of birth to show men and women that he truly loved them. The divine, creative Word had to be incarnated into the flesh God had formed in the first place to be effective. Mary became part of the immediate family of God to show others what family is.

This insight becomes even more powerful when one realizes that God had already tried to convince the world of divine love through the call and formation of a specific human family. Isaac was miraculously conceived through Sarah and the seed of Abraham as a result of three angels that visited Abraham. This divine beginning was not powerful enough to convince the world because of the infighting and recriminations that occurred among the clans of Jacob. Inherent limits to

biological descent had to be transcended for the concept of a spiritual family to take hold.

Mary fulfilled the expectations of Israel by standing in a direct line to the ancestry of Abraham. She exceeded these covenantal bonds by becoming the Bride of Christ. There is no other way of becoming bonded to the heart of the world than through Mary's conception of Jesus through the overshadowing of the Most High. Divine procreation had to occur for the genealogy of Israel and the word of creation to be fulfilled.

Spiritual Premonitions of Mary

Three historic factors help explain the role of Mary in our spiritual journey. The first has to do with progressive internalization of the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament. The second has to do with the role Wisdom played in the history of Israel's faith. The last factor has to do with the preparatory role of other women in placing Mary front and centre as the handmaiden of the Lord.

The institution of the Ten Commandments came at a crucial time in the history of Israel. Freedom from Egypt was all that was on their minds as the enslaved Jews crossed the Red Sea and made a break for liberty. They had no idea how to become a people on their own. God gave them a holy, collective framework by which to live. These tablets were placed in an ark of the covenant along with the heavenly manna and Aaron's budding staff. This ark headed the procession of Jews as they made their way to Canaan.

The symbolic centrality of these holy words was evident as the ark was placed in the holy of holies of the tabernacle and temple of God. David brought the ark to Jerusalem after he had captured and named the city as the capital of Israel. His son, Solomon, built a beautiful temple so that the words of God could find a final resting place.

The subsequent destruction of the temple, exile of the people, and rebuilding process made the prophets rethink the meaning of the divine covenant. Jeremiah believed that a new covenant would have to be internalized before the Jews could hear the word of God again. And what a new indwelling it was! Mary became the new ark of the covenant in which the budding host of heaven came to live and breathe and bond with the people around him. The divine word was reborn within the temple of God that was Mary in order for the body collective to be shaped and molded into the likeness of God. Mary was the vessel in which this divine recreation occurred.

Proverbs echoes this sentiment when it speaks about the role of Wisdom in the creation of the world. After it says that Wisdom was created at the beginning of God's work, Proverbs continues: "I was beside him, like a master worker; I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always" (8:30). It is easy to imagine Mary in this role, being delighted before the Lord so that God could recreate the world. Far from being a divine cohort, Mary was a human catalyst that redefined the meaning

of divine intimacy in the world. Far from life being defined within a spoken boundary rule, the intimate act of love called Jesus came to define our avenue to and embrace of God.

A final spiritual premonition helps us in our devotion of Mary. The New Testament opens with an Israelite genealogy in which the ancestry of Mary and Joseph is traced back to Abraham. The unique aspect of this history of “begetting” is that four women are included in the list: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. The mere mention of these names alerts the reader to the fact that these women became grafted onto the ethnic lineage of Abraham through their spiritual faithfulness. Tamar, a foreigner, claimed her leviratic rite to carry on the name of her husband by sleeping with her father-in-law, Judah. The resulting son, Perez, became the great, great, great grandfather of Boaz, who entered a leviratic marriage by taking responsibility for Ruth. Having been left peopleless with the death of her Jewish husband, Chilion, Ruth, a Moabite, vowed her loyalty to her Jewish mother-in-law, Naomi.

Rahab’s and Bathsheba’s stories of insertion into the people of God are no less spectacular. As a prostitute who lived on the threshold of life in the city wall of Jericho, Rahab was assured of her safety in return for hiding the Jewish spies from her own people. She became the mother of Boaz, who married Ruth. In a similar way, Bathsheba, although or perhaps because she became a wife of David through an act of adultery and treachery, convinced her husband to put her son, Solomon, on the throne in place of several others. She became the queen mother of Israel, of which Psalm 45 and I Kings 2 speak.

These spiritual portents pave the way for our embrace of Mary as the forerunner of salvation. Each of the named women faced their circumstances bravely and acted courageously in the belief that God would make things right. Mary endured the stigma of her unusual circumstances, accepted her spiritual destiny, and became an intrinsic part of the salvation story. Like the women before her, the promise of a son was assured through a grafting on to the husband of God.

Embrace of Mary as our Mother

The above biblical analogies make the transition from our mothers to the mother of our Lord. Identification with our family of origin took us back to the act of creation. We discerned our worldly destiny by aligning ourselves with the future for which God had created the earth.

This act of creation was limited because it placed us in a vicious cycle of endless pro-creations. The history of Israel is our history in the sense that we go back to cultural and religious and family infighting when there is a spiritual lack in our lives. We are not content to follow God because we see so much around us that is inviting. We are caught ensuring our biological destiny at the expense of our spiritual inheritance.

God orchestrates an escape from this hedonistic absorption by entering the ancestry into which we were born. Mary fulfills the nationalistic aspirations of the clannish tribes of Judah by becoming one of them. Through her identification with this genealogical destiny, she breaks the divine right of kings by becoming the mother of the one to whom all can get married.

Our journey is similar in that our primal identification with our mothers opens us to another mother whose long spiritual shadow falls far into our past and future. Our receptivity to this maternal spirituality redefines the familial link we considered primary in the second stage of our journey.

Let us take a moment to think about what it means to embrace Mary as our mother. This fundamental openness to a family other than our own takes us on a long journey from which there is no return. Once we have acknowledged the other as primary, we cannot but follow that path into the heart of God. Mary provides us with a mystical closeness that makes the faith walk easier to manage. She makes us aware of others because of her openness to forfeiting her rights of a natural family in favour of an everlasting, spiritual home.

We embrace Mary as the one who has become mystically bonded with God. She is the bride of Christ, the mother of Jesus, and the daughter of God because she has given up all aspects of her identity to the one that makes her whole. She is all these things because she is the maternal framework into which Jesus brings her and us salvation. We feel safe to enter the sanctity of God because of the spiritual nourishment Mary provides us.

We should not be afraid to adore this spiritual family because it opens a whole new world of empathetic identification. Jesus himself made it clear that there was a large gap between his natural and spiritual family. His real mother and brothers became part of the body of Christ when they abandoned their own hereditary rights of blood and kin in favour of their relationship to Jesus as Saviour, Master, and Lord.

This spiritual transformation is clear in several biblical passages. Mary provides the way by which Jesus can turn water in wine at the wedding feast (John 2). She becomes the “natural” mother of John at the foot of the cross even as she becomes saved through her spiritual adoration of her suffering and crucified Jesus (John 19:25-27). She becomes part of the faithful church as she gathers in prayer with the disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem, after the ascension of her Lord (Acts 1:14).

These key moments in Mary’s life enable us to identify as parents and fellow believers on the path of faith we have followed. We are transformed into an inclusive spiritual family as we see Mary become part of the spiritual legacy of faith. Having been the natural mother of Jesus, she becomes the spiritual mother of the church as she joins the family of faith.

Mary, Mother of God

Our final consideration of Mary has to do with her identification as the mother of God. She is, for lack of a better term, the framework, the house, the home, the spiritual womb in which we find God. Like my mother who pointed me to the divine destiny for which I was born, Mary points me to the redemption for which I was created. Mary offers a spiritual rebirth in the same way that my family has granted me a physical existence.

I have been encouraged to think about Mary as the Mother of God in a devotional sense. She enables us to become parents to all whom have been abandoned, to all who are not our kin, to all who need us even as we place our own children front and centre. She opens that space which is maternity and paternity writ large, open to the sky and earth. The state, the family, the community, the town and the city; all become our parents even as we become theirs. Mary as the mother of God embraces us by saying loud and clear: there is a family to whom you can belong.

I have been encouraged to imagine Mary as the mother of God in another, technical sense. She has been identified in a mystical sense with the body of Christ, the church. The church is viewed as feminine because it is into her bosom that we go each Sunday; her nurturing care sustains us for another week; her hierarchical framework under God places us into our proper perspective; we are members of the greater body that is Christ's.

The most obvious representation of this Church-Christ relationship is the image that has occupied our attention: Madonna and child. Christ is a baby within Mary in the same way that Christ is within us as we sit in the sanctuary that is our spiritual home. Mary as the church envelops us as we become childlike within the salvific reverence of Christ as our Saviour and respect for our fellow parishioners as our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters.

Questions for Reflection

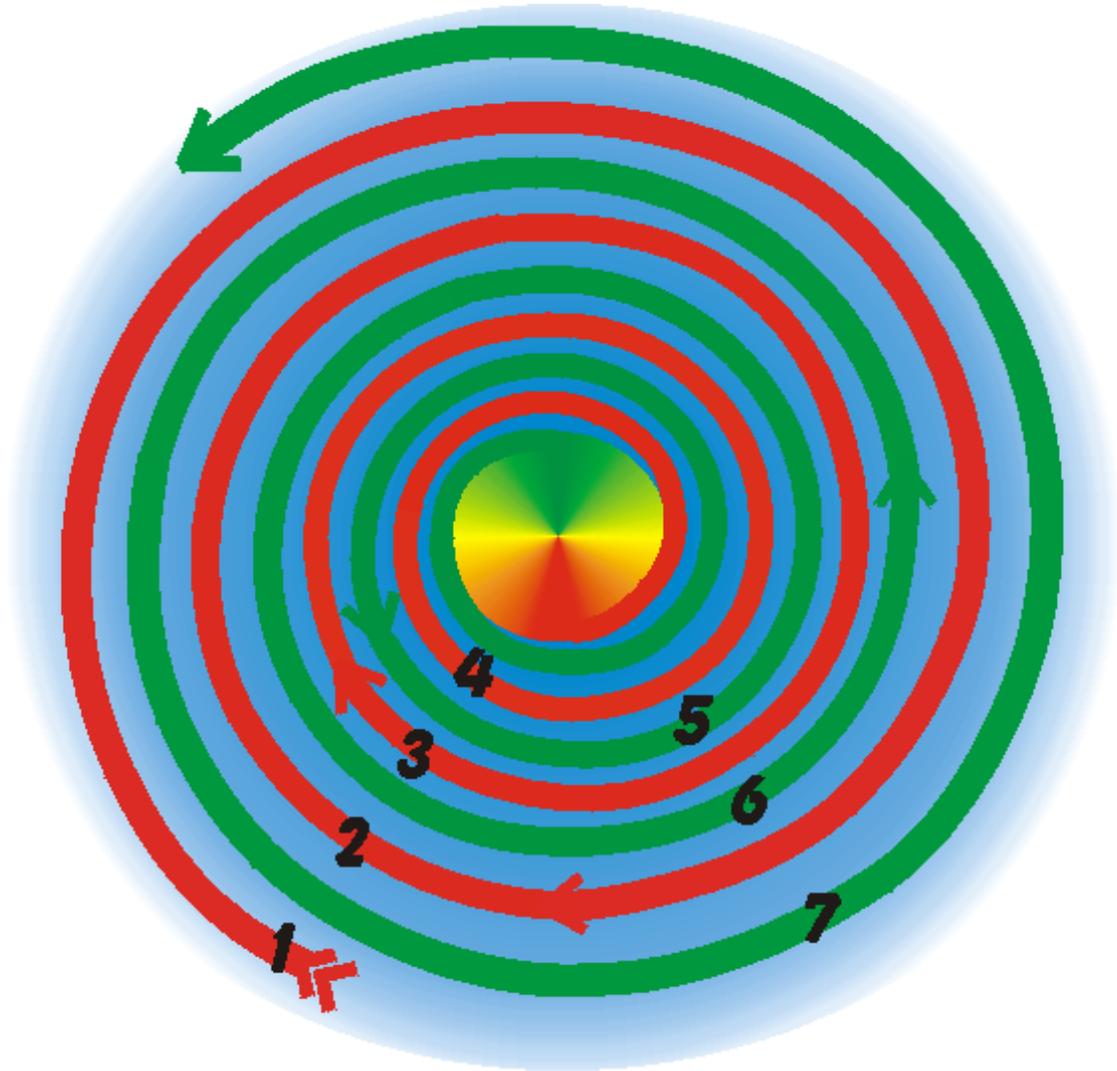
1. How does Mary help us move from our biological past to our spiritual future that is Christ?
2. How does the transition from word to flesh, from creation to procreation help us better understand the salvific process?
3. How does Mary as the Mother of God help us in our devotional life?
4. How does Mary as the mother of the church enhance our understanding of and participation in the body of Christ?

Prayer

O God, thank you for so many people that have pointed the way toward you, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Mary, contemporary prophets and theologians, our pastors,

mentors, friends, and fellow believers. Thank you for these people, who have showed us that we can move beyond biology to become part of your spiritual family. Amen.

The Labyrinth of God

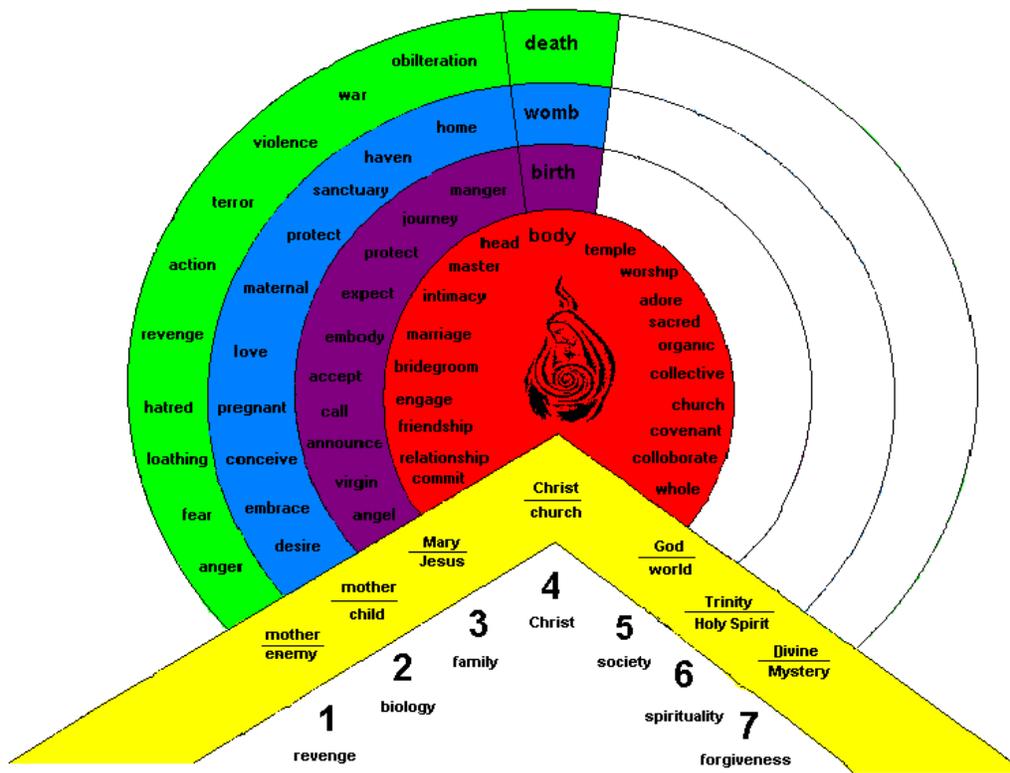


Portable Labyrinth as Used in Bowden Chapel



Chapter Four

Christ, our Bridegroom



Introduction

The purpose of our spiritual journey has been to get closer to God. We have done this by getting rid of the obstacles in our lives, by reflecting on the spiritual nurture of our families, and by journeying with Mary along her walk with Jesus through his short life.

Each of these steps has represented a haven in which we have pondered what it means to meet Jesus. Naming our enemies has freed us up from being afraid of them; honouring our parents has enabled us to become less dependent upon them; and recognizing Mary has provided us with the requisite spiritual resources to enter the inner sanctum that is God.

The unique aspect of the fourth stage is that neither Mary nor our parents nor the mother of our enemies stand as the final *encadrement* within which we nourish our faith. The infrastructure of care is stripped away to reveal Jesus, the Christ. We have graduated from co-dependency on our fears, our mothers, and Mary to becoming dependent on Christ alone.

The most visible sign of this transformation can be found in the image itself. A mother image has dominated the first three stages of our spiritual journey. We have recognized our solidarity with our enemies through the grief and suffering of their mothers. We have acknowledged ourselves as children of our own mothers. We have recognized the birth of Christ through Mary's conception, pregnancy, delivery, and care. We have "stood in" as the child within the mother in each of these stages.

The difference in the fourth stage is that even as we continue to stand as the child within the structure of care that is our mothers, the mother image transforms itself before our very eyes into Jesus. The person who now holds us within his bosom is Christ. He has been transformed from the son of Mary to Christ, the Son of God, who holds everything within himself.

The radicalness of this transformation cannot be overemphasized. Everything up to this point can be interpreted as a dependency relationship that has simply prepared us for becoming an adult, a unique individual, a person who is ready to accept Christ as their bridegroom. Everything after this point represents an intimate relationship with Christ himself.

Christ, our Bridegroom

The first thing that should be said about our relationship as bride to the bridegroom is that it frees us from all dependency relationships. It is as if we have grown up for the first time, as if we have been finally accepted as adults in our own right. We have been given the freedom to make our own decisions, to fall off the path if we so wish, to do with our lives whatever we want.

This coming of age through Christ can be attested to experientially. I remember my first euphoric experience of Christ as a teenager. I was sixteen, going through an identity crisis, had some relationship issues, and was contemplating the future. I was spending the weekend at a lakeside camp during a winter retreat. What I experienced that day was a new relationship with Christ as friend and brother. I realized that no amount of rejection by my friends, no amount of despair about my future, no amount of ambiguity about my identity could separate me from the love and care of Christ. I knew that, no matter what, I could call on Christ and talk to him about the situation. I could pray hourly and daily about the dilemmas in which I found myself.

This experience was the beginning of my friendship with God. Unlike some of my friends, who experienced God as judge and punisher, I felt in solidarity with God. God stood by my side. My relationship with Christ eased the anxiety I had about making friends, about being accepted, and about accepting myself.

This euphoric experience is understandable from a psychological point of view. Many psychologists have remarked that we are able to enter relationships with others only after we have accepted ourselves. It is only after we have gone beyond dependency on our parents that we are able to engage other people. It is only as we accept our own shortcomings and mistakes that we can enter joyously into another relationship.

I believe that one's relationship with Christ facilitates and nurtures the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The fact that we can accept Christ as our Saviour, and God as our Father frees us from being overly dependent on our earthly parents. We have been liberated to make our own mistakes because we know that God will stand by us no matter how many times we fail.

This adolescent liberation of spirit prepares us for a long-term relationship with Christ. It enables us to love someone without feeling confined by them; it is possible to be committed to Christ without feeling hemmed in. It is incumbent to be engaged and committed and "married" to Christ before one can be married in human terms. The adult-adult relationship that is fostered through one's worship, adoration, and submission to Christ prepares one for a similar level of sacrifice and deference to one's spouse.

Meaning of Intimacy

We come now to a sustained reflection on divine intimacy. What does it mean to be married to Christ? How does it compare to being married to one's spouse?

It should be said at the outset that being "married to Christ" has a long history in the church. Priests and nuns take the vow of celibacy, poverty, and obedience to fulfill their calling by God. Their ministry role is bound up with being husbands and wives to Christ and fathers and mothers to the church. There is even a special ceremony involved in which ministerial candidates receive the marriage ring of Christ.

This level of commitment to Christ is analogical for all believers. All of us are part of the royal priesthood and so it is not a stretch of the imagination to consider us all married to Christ. The Bible speaks numerous times about Jesus as the bridegroom and we as the bride of Christ. Only the most intimate, emotionally binding, and socially sanctioned form of human friendship can compare with our relationship with Christ.

The initial euphoric experience that I had of Christ as a teenager was only a foretaste of what was to come in my faith in God. I was naive about what it meant to be committed to Christ, never mind other relationships. My conversion experience was just the beginning of a journey that would take me many different places.

All initial relationships enable us to know what it is like to enter into a life-long commitment. Rejection, false expectations, assumptions about the other, and one's unwillingness to compromise become obvious as one spends an increasing amount of time with one's "true love." Intimacy comes with the cost of loyalty, trust, forgiveness, and acceptance. What appeared self-evident on first glimpse is now more elusive. We retrace those first few encounters of intimacy in order to know how to re-create it.

There is a similar pattern of trial and error when it comes to God. The first emotional high that we experience in our relationship with Christ is soon replaced with a type of discipline that channels these feelings into a routine of praise and worship. This could mean anything from singing to praying to studying the Bible to participating in worship on a weekly basis. The subjective, emotional high of spiritual transformation becomes routinized within an objective action that channels and sustains these new spiritual feelings.

Becoming attached to a fellowship of believers is the most habitual way in which one's experience of God is fostered. The very act of commitment to God on a highly personal level is reenacted analogically through one's newfound commitment to believers with whom one may have very little in common. The spiritual link of fellowship with the unseen God keeps believers together.

A similar process is at work in the intimate contact with one's significant other. Intimacy finds itself in need of a social framework that can handle the range of emotions and feelings that love brings. One finds oneself committing oneself to much more than one had bargained for. One's daily life is interrupted and interfaced with the other person's needs and wants and wishes. The social and cultural manifestations of what began as a very private affair are astounding. New associations, acquaintances, habits, and plans are the ripple effect of the love that one has for another person.

The most common social form of this new love is marriage. This publicly sanctioned event honours and protects the vulnerability and trust one has shown to the other person during the process of courtship. Public acts of commitment safeguard the portals of emotional excess that is a part of all love relationships.

Objective external forms need to match and channel the subjective highs and lows that ensue with one's willingness to sacrifice all for another person.

The most common public form of religious commitment is baptism and/or confirmation. The external sign of water demonstrates that one has gone through an initiation and purification process. One has stepped from one side of the great divide of faith to the other through one's intimate relationship with Christ. The baptism and/or confirmation is simply a way of expressing one's faithful loyalty to this new spiritual partner.

Christ, Master of our Bodies

One of the things that happens as we become intimate with our earthly partners is that we become emotionally hooked by the other person. Our lover has a great deal of control over us because he or she knows our weaknesses, our vulnerabilities, and our emotional triggers. They can withhold love, be critical, and uncompromising if we go against their wishes. We find ourselves intertwined in each other's social and emotional and spiritual lives.

The same holds true with Christ. Our first euphoric, spiritual experience made us want to give everything over to God. We realized we could live happily if we gave our minds and souls and hearts and bodies over to the divine. We let God take control of our life. We started doing exercises to keep a healthy body; we maintained healthy relationships in order to keep emotionally sound; we devoted ourselves to literature and films that had redeeming qualities in order to better educate ourselves; and we maintained our spirituality by reflecting on our relationship with the Transcendent.

The most useful religious way of defining this relationship to Christ is to see ourselves as the Temple of God. One will recall that the ten commandments and history of salvation were first housed in the ark of the covenant. One will recall that this ark of the covenant came to rest within the Holy of Holies in the Solomonic Temple located in Jerusalem. This ark symbolized the sacred link between God and the people of Israel.

As the Temple was destroyed and rebuilt during and after the exilic period, the people began to wonder about the eternal link that they had with God. How eternal was this link if it could be destroyed by human hands?

The sayings of Jesus regarding the destruction and rebuilding of the temple in three days pointed directly to the fact that Jesus was the new Temple of God. The ten commandments, which the prophet Jeremiah had predicted would be written in the hearts of humankind, were now part and parcel of who Jesus was. The temple curtain could be ripped in twain because Jesus stood where the Holy of Holies was before. Jesus was the Lamb that was slain on the altar. Jesus was the treasure housed in the vessel of the ark that was Mary.

This new understanding of the Temple transferred the worship of God to the embodiment of humanity. Jesus, incarnate in the flesh, signified the importance of

the body for everyone. We are the Temple of God that houses the divinity of Christ. Christ is the one who transforms us from inside out and from outside in.

Christ is more like the houses and tents in which we live than the church in which we worship. Christ is more like our bodies because Christ was the one who was born and died in the flesh. He was the one who was reborn in the flesh through the resurrection by God. We get a better idea of what Christ is like when we clean our rooms and wash our floors than when we genuflect before the cross in the sanctuary. Christ is purifying and disciplining us at every point in our lives because he lives within the temple that is us. We have become spiritualized through the recognition that we are not our own. God rules us in every pore and blood vein in our body.

Christ, Head of the Church

This embodied view of God has been a long time in the making. We saw earlier how God created human beings to live within the world. We noted that the ten commandments had to live within our hearts in order to be effective. We saw how the ark of the covenant had to become human flesh in order to bear the mystery of God. We saw how the lamb had to be human-amorphized in order to represent the true sacrifice of love and trust and spirit. We saw how Christ had to become the temple itself in order to reveal the divine within the human. That divinity had already been innate with the birth of humanity. It was just that human beings did not realize the extent to which God dwelt within us.

This new embodied view of God has ramifications beyond our personal, mystical, and emotional attachment to Christ as his Bride. The objective counterpart to Christ as intimate lover is the church as the body of Christ. The fellowship of believers is bound together in a collective identity that expands and reinforces one's own personal faith. Like Freud's id, which represents one's subconscious spiritual desires, Durkheim's collective unconscious encompasses the social cohesion that followers of Jesus adopt as they are drawn to the corporate body known as the church.⁵

This collective bond with Christ needs to be put in the strongest religious terms because of its alienation from the natural bond that is family. Christ himself had to struggle with his own identity vis-a-vis his natural and spiritual family in order to know the will of God for his life.

We go through the same process as we are drawn from step two of our familial bond to steps three and four in which we voluntarily enter the inner sanctum that is God. This mystical union with the divine is an organic whole in which all members of the body work together to sustain the whole.

The human body is a fitting analogy for this structural unity because it lends itself to the natural transition from biological to spiritual family. Jesus was born of Mary and acted in solidarity with humanity in his life, ministry, suffering and death. At the same time, Jesus became unified with God through his will, death,

and resurrection. This new bodily whole can only be described in the most mystical terms as the new body of Christ. Just as the resurrected body was the same and different for Jesus after his crucifixion, the new body of Christ called the church is both an extension of what Christ represents as well as a new social entity. We live within the church (Christ) in the same way that Christ lives within us.

Christ is the head of the body even as we are the extensions of his will and spirit throughout the world. Christ rules over the church in the same way that he rules over our own bodies. Because he loves and cares for us, he takes actions to guide and correct us on our path. In the same way that a spouse has power and control over us because we have given everything up for them, Christ has our full emotional and social and bodily attention. He rules over us because he has given everything up for us. His vulnerability has won us over to trust and commit ourselves to him without fear of our deepest secrets being betrayed. We have left ourselves wide open to his guidance because of ultimate care that he has given and entrusted to us. There is no better way of defining this bond than by saying that we are the body of Christ. Like Jesus within Mary, we are in the very womb of the church.

Worship of Christ in the Sanctuary

The personal and social relationship with Christ described above is a helpful way of understanding the structure within which we come to faith. These subjective and objective frameworks channel and establish our emotional and relational stability vis-a-vis ourselves, our families, our faith, and our social and political networks.

Left out of this picture is the entry into worship which sets the tone for all that faith represents. Worship of Christ stands in between our furtive personal prayers and our social fraternizing with fellow believers. The Eucharist represents an objective manifestation of the most intimate relationship we have with Christ while leaving the Achilles heel of religious organizational problems to one side. No matter how badly worship is conducted and with the sort of people with whom no one wants to associate, the very act of public adoration opens a window onto the true nature of our emotional and spiritual health.

I would like to dwell on this aspect of faith in order to sum up what we have been speaking about in this fourth step. Our identification with Christ as the Bridegroom is best manifested through our worship.

Let us begin with the prayers and songs that we use. Prayers and songs by their very nature come from our heart and soul. No matter how many different scripture texts are read or what new insight the priest shares, the prayers and songs are often the same. They set the tone for worship because they reflect the unconscious cry of our innermost feelings. The same songs are sung again and again because they reach beyond speech to the id of our emotions. The very act of singing and praying comes from within the bowels of our bodies.

The Scriptures and the meditation speak to the more rational part of our nature. They appeal to our experience through knowledge of Jesus and wisdom of the reflections that the pastor gives. One of the focal points of the service is the lectern because that is from where truth and liberty and justice are uttered. A good priest sums up everything that we have been thinking that week and breathe life into those reflective veins. A text jumps out at us as we relive that which is most true about our own identity.

All of this is preparatory for the actual partaking of communion. No matter how loudly we speak or hear or think or reflect or sing or express ourselves verbally, the actual communion with the body of Christ is what sets Christians apart from other fellowships, faiths, and friendships. Christians claim that they experience the actual presence of God in their lives as they partake of the bread and the cup. These minute foretastes of the kingdom orient the proper intimacy of all relationships. They set the emotional and spiritual and physical tone of how intimacy is experienced with our partners, our friends, our co-workers, and our fellow Christians.

The fact that we partake of communion rather than a meal denotes the connection between our spiritual intimacy and all other relationships. Far from usurping us for himself, Christ leavens the loaf by blessing and condoning and affirming the possibility of being intimate with others. The fact that we partake of God in the communion service means that we have accepted ourselves for who we are and are ready to give ourselves to others. We can be reconciled to others because we have been reconciled to God.

The minute nature of the partaking says much about our current state of affairs. We have become addicted to all forms of desires and cravings, fulfilling our wishes by eating too much, loving too much, and buying too much. We have become satiated with all forms of excess in order to fill our souls.

Christ is telling us through the service of his body and blood that a little is enough. It is enough to reach out our hand slowly and gently and wait for a response of acceptance or rejection. It is enough to reflect quietly in the stillness of silent prayers as we literally collect our thoughts and children and loved ones around us. It is enough to go gently in the night, knowing that one has tried all sorts of things to be recognized, accepted, and appreciated. It is enough to let one's soul repose and know that the tiniest morsel satisfies.

The tangible eating of the bread and drinking of the cup represents a spiritual consummation with Christ. No amount of subjective ranting, doctrinal niceties, or religious organizational charts can replace the integrity of mind and body that comes together when we proclaim the mystery of love in the host that is raised before us. This special partaking of Christ stands in for what we mean when we laugh and cry, weep and mourn, love and accomplish. All other constellations of love and fidelity are realigned in their proper order when we submit ourselves before Christ in the holiness that is communion.

Worship in the sanctuary is a holy act that replicates all the other holy acts of love and marriage and commitment and childbearing. In this tent that is our bodies, in this tabernacle that is the treasured vessel, in this temple that is the Lord, in this woman that is the church, and in these commandments that are our hearts we consummate our love for Christ. As a result of our affirmation of love for Christ, all other acts of love become framed within the proper architecture of affection.

The font at the entrance to the sanctuary helps situate our acts of worship within a baptismal context. The ritual of being immersed in a bath on a daily and weekly basis makes it clear that this act of worship is set apart from all other things. Our immersion in the experience of God is prepared for at the entrance and beginning of the service through the cleansing of confession. We make ourselves right before God in order to be loved of God.

The sign of the cross at the front of the church reminds us that this mystical encounter is with a very earthy God. The cross brings us right back to the idea of conception for it was here on earth that Jesus was born, lived, and died. Our faith and love of Christ is an affirmation of history as much as it is a mystical experience of heaven. The mystical points us back to the real of which we are an integral part. Our love and marriage to Christ has everything to do with the love that we express to our spouses, the friendship that we offer to our co-workers, and the commitment of care that we give to our children. The cross brings us back to the mystery of birth and death that is the life of Christ.

One last example illustrates what the act of worship means in the context of our love for Christ. Some years ago, three-dimensional puzzles came on the market. We were asked to stand several feet back from the picture, focus our eyes on the centre of it, and hold our stare until the two-dimensional features of the flat surface transformed themselves into another picture behind the first image. It took a while for our eyes to become accustomed to this new way of looking at things. Once it happened, we were astonished at the results. We realized that there is much more than meets the eye. There are worlds beyond the everyday encounters that we have.

Our experience of Christ is similar. Worship can be repetitious, with little relief in sight for a truly glorious experience. We roam around, seeking worship in different forms in order to achieve the initial high we experienced in our personal relationship with Christ.

What we do not realize is that the third dimensional depth of our faith is right before our eyes, waiting to be discovered. Like rediscovering our love for our wives and husbands thirty years after the fact, we realize that Christ is present despite our worship. There is so much going on, on the two-dimensional surface that we fail to concentrate long enough to see and feel Christ's presence. We need to worship again in order to see what we can see.

Questions for Further Reflection

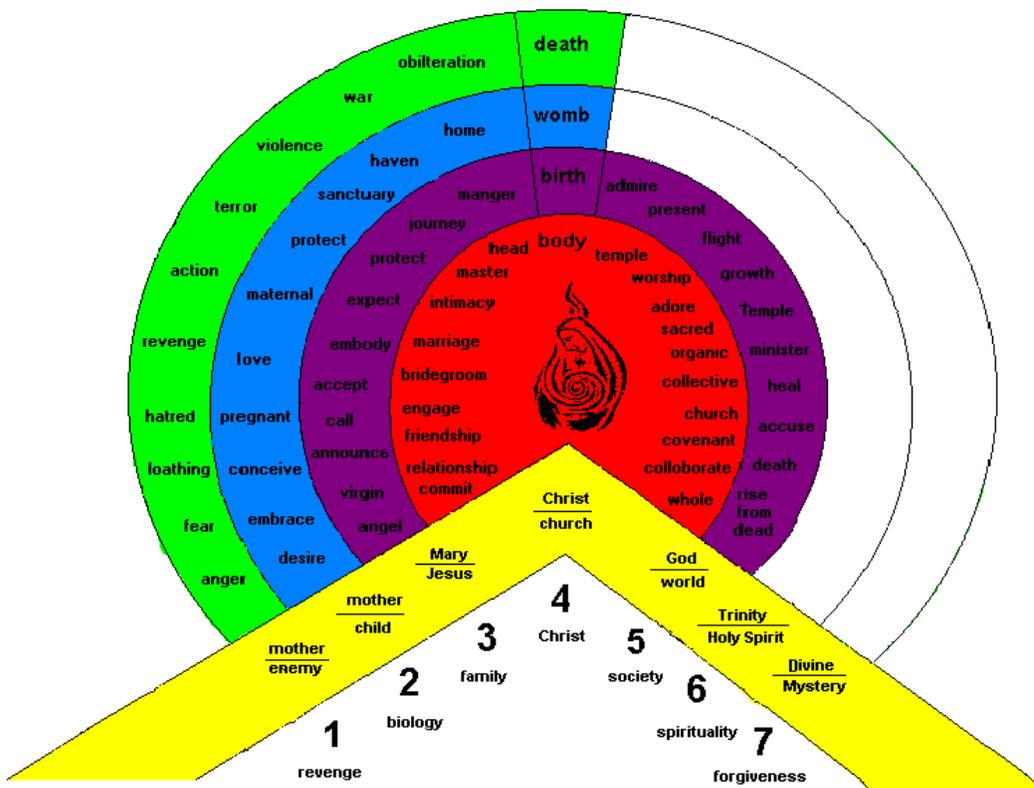
1. What does it mean for us to be married to Christ as bride and bridegroom?
2. What implications does this analogy have for our intimate relationship with our spouse, our friendships, the parental care of our children, and our contact with other parishioners?
3. Would it be fair to say that Christ rules over us in similar ways that our spouse does?
4. How can worship become a better objective reflection of our intimate relationship with Christ? Make comparisons between worship and other expressive acts such as love, sports, movies, entertainment, social functions, fellowship, and work.
6. To what extent can church replace family as a collective, organic, covenanted whole?

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for representing the most intimate form of relationship from which we can learn about all other emotional, social, religious, spiritual and obsessive bonds. May the divine presence that pervades the church, world, and others also radiate from ourselves. Amen.

Chapter Five

World as God's Body



Introduction

Who would have thought we would find Christ where we only saw mother and child before, the church where we only saw ourselves in our infancy? Reflecting on the woundedness of our inner child has been a healthy start to our journey of healing. Yet this was only the beginning. We have grown up, we have matured, we have forged ahead on many ventures. We have succeeded and failed and succeeded again. Our woundedness has as much to do with our adult journey as our younger life. The current dilemmas of married life, children, careers, heartache, and emotional turmoil are as real as the memories of childhood nightmares.

Our journey of healing has taken account of this fact. We have identified the image as our mother, as the one who holds and bears us, as the one who nurtures and cares for us. We have identified the image as the Christ, the one who identifies with us in our journey to intimacy, to womanhood and manhood, to being bonded to the body of Christ, to becoming parents of children.

This maturation process has involved an adult-adult relation with our spouses, our lovers, our friends, with Christ, and with our parents. We can only go so far back into our childhood before we go forward and deal with the future death of ourselves and our loved ones. There is no comfort in this knowledge. It is a bare fact that focuses the mind on the need to live fully in touch with each other and with each moment of our lives.

Part of this collective identification has entailed being drawn into the body of Christ. We can live alone only so long before we reach out for recognition of our anger, our loneliness, our anguish, our loss. The mere gesture of reaching out for attention signifies meaning. It shows that we trust, we care, we love, we long. We affirm life through this gesture of solidarity with the positiveness of humanity.

The body of Christ becomes alive in this process, a living organism, a place where we find rest and contentment. The body of Christ puts us in touch with that which is larger than life, with that which is at the foundation of our being. We drink from the living water, the water that nourishes us, the water that becomes part of our being as we swim out in the middle of the ocean. Tidal waves of feeling and emotion and grief wash over us as we are swept over the brink.

What is this brink? It may only be death to self, but it may be loss of life itself. Losing oneself into another is the only way that true union and effacement occur. It is that journey from child to adulthood, from singleness to married life, from believer to incarnation in the lifeblood of the church. We are grafted fully on to the mystically resurrected body of Christ the church.

We could say that we have arrived, we have experienced everything there is to know about God. Our ecstatic experience in the sanctuary rivals anything there is to be experienced in the bedroom or in the middle of a rock concert. We go no further than corporate worship. It challenges our senses in the middle of our union with Christ as our bridegroom, our lover, our master. He is the head of the body. We know now that it is a simple and right thing to follow (rather than to lead).

To end it all here, however, would be an illusion and travesty of justice. It would be to short circuit that which we are only beginning, that which we have learned in order to transmit. We did not go to school only to turn around and refuse to read and write. We did not go through the agonizing process of socialization in order to live as a hermit in a hut in the middle of the woods. We did not believe there was yet hope for our soul only to throw it away now that utopia seemed too fantastic to be real. We did not go through steps one to four in order to end up barricaded behind church walls in the belief that no one would find us there. Where is sanctuary to be found if nothing is sacred anymore? Church has become more of a symbol of what we would like to hold dear than what it is in fact.

Our lives and the lives of others are sacred, something worth living for, something we hold close to our hearts. I do not want to have any more illusions than the ones with which I have been blessed. I already have more than enough for myself.

If God is more than our universe of projected wish-fulfillments, then God is more in the marketplace than in the shrines of churches we have erected. As a chaplain in a prison environment, it is a lot easier to stay cooped up in the office than to pound the pavement of suffering and shame and fear and violence that is everyday life in an institution. It is easier for inmates to hide out in the chapel and in their prayers and in their worship than to face the bullies and suspicion and taunting and shame that is a reality when religion hits the fan.

If God is real and living in the universe, then why is it so hard for us to take God at the word and live in confidence in the world? It is this "stepping out" which constitutes stage five of our spiritual journey, a course of action that explodes the body of Christ into the body of the world, of which God is the head.

O Starry, Starry Night

We begin the fifth stage of our spiritual journey by focusing on the star that can be found just above the center of the Madonna image. When we lift the star from its embedded position, we are transported several hundred yards away and feel as though we are looking at the image from a distance. Stars provide a three-dimensional perspective by which to gauge the size of the earth, the moon, the heavens, and ourselves. The stars at night instill awe at their depthless splendour. We feel as though we are about to fall into them because we have so little peripheral vision by which to gauge our next step, our next adventure.

Paul Ricoeur speaks about this phenomenon of distancing regarding the Bible.⁶ The Bible alienates us as well as invites us into its redemptive healing. Some passages are difficult to understand, much less "apply" to our lives. They speak about judgement and furor and submission and wrath in the most gruesome manner. How can this be redemptive? We can only respond by saying that this reverence, this awe, this distance between ourselves and God is a good thing, a needed thing so that his tongue of fire does not wrap itself too tightly around our slight frames.

The star in the image reinforces the distance of time that stands between us and Christ's birth, the distance of relations between Mary's family and our own, between the apostles and us as disciples, between those Jews who expected him and those Gentiles who were astonished at him, between those figures of Jesus with blond hair and blue eyes and those of a more realistic, swarthy, dark, Semitic, imposing nature. Let us not fool ourselves that Jesus would feel most comfortable with our family or in our home and church. He may prefer to visit those people down the road.

I cannot help but think of Christopher Columbus, who was willing to fall off the end of the earth for his anticipated cargo of spices and fine linens. I am sure he had doubts about the sanity of his voyage. He was courageous enough to believe that one shore led to another, rather than to the rumoured dragons that lay in wait.

Our journey is similar in that we venture out to see what we can see. This is doubly true for those who have faith in the stars as a road map of life. The wise men took them at face value and traveled afar. The convergence of three stars into one grand, sparkling constellation could only mean one thing. God was making things new in a history that was old and circled forever around the north pole.

A Christmas tale speaks about a fourth wise man, a person who was late in leaving, late in arriving, forever finding the warm ashes of a fire that others had left behind. This man came to Jerusalem when Christ was dying rather than being born. He experienced along with the first disciples the mystery of re-birth that Christ's resurrection represented.

We enter as participants into this picture through this fourth wise man. Although not kings or princes, we follow those who came from the other side of the earth in order to witness a portentous thing.

We enter the grand stage of life as weary, dusty travelers who have already been on a long journey and have many more miles to go. We approach Christianity and cities and lights with fear and trembling, for we are from afar, behind walls, behind fences, isolated, alienated, tortured, terrified, marginalized. We see only desert between ourselves and that promised, fantasized oasis of which others speak. We cannot believe that this little one will be king. We almost turn away in disbelief, were it not for the paranoia Herod had that this little, tiny, mustard seed of faith would be strong enough to crumble his shored-up empire. How can we believe, were it not for God?

God of World Religions

Let us look a little more closely at the image of Madonna and child. Is it not interesting that the face with the "longer" nose looks more Semitic than European? The hands that comfort the child is Ethiopian black. The shawl that is her hair and her clothing is clearly middle Eastern, maybe Arabic. The child within her is as much a product of that culture and that religion as our own. The tongues of fire that rest on her head are from every nation on earth (Acts 2: 5-13). We can no longer look at this image with standardized eyes.

The same holds true for the wise men of which the Gospels speak. They came from the East, which can only mean Babylon and Persia and China and Alaska. Or was it the caravan route to the north-west that led from Syria to Cyprus, Greece, Rome, Spain, Europe, England, Scotland, and Ireland? Or was it the trade routes to the south that led from Egypt to the Nile, Kenya, Uganda, Nimbria, South Africa, and on to South America from which the wise men came?

The singular, cultural story of Israel is blown apart when one realizes that the Zoroastrian kings of Persia, Cyrus and Darius, liberated the Jews from Babylon and helped them rebuild the temple (2 Chronicles 36:22-23, Ezra). The Queen of Sheba from the south, like the Ethiopian eunuch of the New Testament, came to pay homage to Solomon and his vast kingdom (I Kings 10; Acts 8). The legendary trek of Paul to Spain under girded the Western mission of Christianity. The fabled journey of Jesus to India held sway in the minds of Easterners as they contemplated the relation of Christianity to their Buddhist, Hindu, and Confucian faith.

These factors distance the story of Jesus in relation to the trade delegations of the world. We have oriented ourselves according to the Hebrew Bible because this book, along with several Eastern spiritual texts, are the oldest ones we have with which to compare. Zoroastrianism continues to be a live force in Iran despite Islamic influence. Revisionist historians of Africa have seized on biblical passages that speak of the importance of Ethiopia. For them, Mount Sinai is in Africa, not the Middle East (cf. Galatians). Moses is their hero, not the Jews. Black liberation is mapped out as much in relation to the European colonization of the last two hundred years as their theological reflections on Israel.

Christian believers should not be surprised by this turn of events. We ourselves are guilty of the most revisionist type of rewriting imaginable. We have taken the Hebrew Scriptures, reinterpreted them according to our own understanding of an ancient Jewish rabbi, added a different ending to the story, and claimed that this is what God intended all along.

Star of Bethlehem

Reflection on other faiths deepen our worship of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and Son of God. Let me give an example. The star of Bethlehem we have been following may in fact be a star of David, a star which through its heavenly

symbolism invokes a monotheism stricter than Christianity. Judaism considers the star of David to be an important religious symbol because it reinforces the fact that it worships a Creator rather than a creature, a singular God instead of the "panentheistic," triune divinity to which Christians ascribe.

The star of Bethlehem moves us from a Christocentric to a theocentric perspective. We are speaking of God's body rather than of Christ's body, the world and creation rather than the church, life in its fullness instead of Christianity in its specificity. This distancing with respect to the manger scene has brought us into orbit with other religions. Both Judaism and Islam, not to mention Zoroastrianism, use the starry heavens for their religious symbolism. The crescent moon guides the religious rhythm of Ramadan feasts, daily prayers, and yearly celebrations. Islam underlines the fact that Mohammed was a prophet in a long line of prophets who pointed his finger toward God rather than claiming a place with God. The starry heavens remain above while the rat race of religious convictions remain below. Islam is in close continuity with Judaism with its kosher observances, prophetic utterances, and prayerful fasts. Christianity represents an historical hiatus between these two venerable religious traditions.

Zoroastrianism completes the tripartite circle with its worship of the Sun of God. Cyrus' speech to the Israelites in Babylon has been included in the Hebrew Scriptures (Ezra) because it validates the universal significance of Judaism's God. Cyrus not only announces that God is the Lord of all the heavens. He gives his blessing to the rebuilding of Solomon's temple within which this supreme God is pleased to dwell. No wonder the Jews predicted that all nations one day would come to bow down at Zion's mountain. Like Pharaoh in Egypt begrudgingly acknowledged fifteen-hundred years earlier, the God of Cyrus' slaves was mightier than all the kingdoms over which Cyrus ruled. Who else but the very Sun could represent such a ruler and provider over all the earth? To what else could human beings turn than that which represented a shelter of warmth, provided growth, and set the limits to humanity's daily course on this earth?

It is interesting to note that both Judaism and Islam have chosen a "lesser" constellation as their primary religious symbol. Kantian nominalism in the service of moderate monotheism is at work here. What better way of speaking about the mystery of God than to use a dark night symbol to point to the rays of the divine that shine during the day? No eyes have stared at the sun face to face and lived. We need a humbler, softer light so that our eyes can get accustomed to the apertures of openness needed to comprehend God. The stars and moon are fitting constellations that enable us to see God and live.

Cross of Jesus

Christianity has its work cut out in convincing Judaism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism that it is their equal when it comes to monotheistic underpinnings. Unlike the other three, Christianity has a cross as the unifying symbol of its worship. The cross is an

earthy, man-made entity that appears to have little in common with the starry heavens from which we have just returned. It represents a humiliating, vilifying, execution-style of death that is at the very opposite end of heavenly permanence. Jesus' divinity ends in the dirt and dust of humanity of which only a tomb will suffice. What a morbid way to emulate and raise up a god!

An Old Testament parallel springs to mind. When the people of Israel were being killed by poisonous snakes, Moses lifted one of these snakes on a stick for all the people to see (Numbers 21:4-9). This action saved the people of Israel. They were healed whenever they looked up at the very thing that was killing them.

This paradoxical solution, reminiscent of Louis Pasteur injecting vaccine poison into his sheep so they could live, is at the heart of what Christ's death represents. The only way death can be defeated is by facing it head on, by acknowledging one's mortality, by being willing to suffer at the hands of those of whom one is most afraid. This raising up of death's dark poison, of the snake's seductive presence, neutralizes and rids the body of any evil that may remain. The acknowledgement of dust to dust, ashes to ashes, makes the possibility of no existence on the other side less fearful.

The tree has been stripped and hewn in order to serve as a cross. Jesus has been prepared and shaped into death's dark mould so that the latter has no more hold over us. The heavenly bodies of which we spoke take account of this earthly body in order to come to terms with material existence. One cannot hold up the sun and moon and stars as stellar constellations without asking what that has to do with the very place from which those luminary bodies are viewed. That place is earth. Christ's answer is that the sawdust and bodily dust and sweaty dust and bloody dust are at one with the earth, which is at one with the universe, which is at one with God. The stars above have everything to do with that upon which they shine. The cross can be lifted as yet another planetary constellation that explains the foundation of the universe: a wooden star that brings heaven and earth together.

Living Word

Another example of the monotheistic underpinnings of Christianity has to do with the creation of the world with a word. We spoke above about how masculine such an image is, how presumptuous it is to speak about creating the world in an instant, with a command, an order, a decree without so much as a pregnancy to stand between conception and birth.

The reason for this spoken bias has to do with Judaic and Christian reticence to imagine God in a cavorting relation with a mistress, a goddess, a consort from whom the world is born. This reticence is understandable. Monotheistic religions have safeguarded the portal of its singular understanding of God by replacing the mistress with a book, a word, a revelation by which we understand God. Muslims, Jews, and Christians have come to be known as people of the book, as the people who hold the laws of God sacrosanct. These laws have become the underpinnings

of Western civil society. They are the basis upon which we punish murderers, put thieves in jail, and make adultery an acceptable reason for divorce.

These sacred precepts do not say everything there is to know about God. The Scriptures we hold dear do not satisfy our longing for God. As the Old and New Testament writers knew so well, this lack has to do with the fact that the word needs to be attached to a real universe, a real body, a real time to make sense. God created the world in seven days so that we would have some idea of how to order our weekly existence. The words of revelation to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were written down so that we would have some family with whom to compare ourselves. The words of prophecy to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Habakkuk were attached to the fate of kingship so that we would have some idea of how to order our social and political lives. Words were rooted from the very beginning into the universe of being.

This was still not enough. One recalls the interesting episode in which Ezekiel was asked to eat the scroll that had been given to him by God. God tells Ezekiel that divine words are not hard to understand, they have not been written in a foreign language or spoken by a strange tongue. They are words that the people of Israel can understand with their ears and accept in their hearts. Ezekiel eats the scroll and finds that it tastes as sweet as honey.

These words recall the Psalmist, who says that the commands of God are sweeter than the honeycomb, that they are more desired than gold (Psalm 19, 119, cf. Revelation 10). These metaphors under gird the impression that the words of God need to be consumed in a material, bodily manner, that they are effective to the extent that they are exemplified in life.

The birth, life, and death of Christ became a living Word in a way that Ezekiel and the Psalmist would never have imagined. Word and image, mind and body, universe and creation, pregnancy and monotheism become one in a way that the people of the Book did not expect. We eat the scroll of God when we take communion, when we imagine the broken body that was hung from a cross, when we drink of the cup which symbolizes the lifeline of hope that keeps all of us, including creatures, alive. The word of God has been reattached to the umbilical cord of life in a way that demonstrates the connection of one ruler to every aspect of the universe. None of us as representative of a monotheistic religion can avoid using human analogies to speak of the one and only God. Jesus is the human light through whom the word of God shines.

Birth of a God

Up to this point, we have stayed close to home, close to those of us who regard Abraham as our spiritual descendent. What of those other religions for whom talk of prophets and priests and law and creation are foreign? Is there a place for Jesus within Hinduism, Buddhism, and native spirituality, not to mention Wicca, Confucianism, and the Sikh religion?

The best way of answering this query is to tell a story. In 1995, I attended a feast of Ram at the Hare-Krishna temple in Montreal. I was together with several Sri Lankan, Hindu friends with whom I worked. I met several families, as well as the guru of the temple. We ate a vegetarian meal together and attended the evening service conducted in honour of the god Ram. The chanting music was more amenable to Eastern ears. The seating arrangement was on the floor. The guru's meditation on family and relationships was like anything I would have said, using different texts and illustrations. The food offering to the gods was not something for which I had any common experience.

What struck me most was something that occurred half-way through the service. Because the feast was in honour of the birth of Ram, a cradle had been brought and installed toward the front of the sanctuary. Children were invited to go up and gently rock the cradle, which was on a swing. In that moment, I was transported into a more familiar, worship-service setting, in which the birth of Christ was re-enacted with the help of a baby doll, a manger scene, and a few wise men standing around in housecoats. I could not help but think that we also celebrate the birth of a God. What more appropriate way than to offer gifts to him, which we then take home and consume? The food offered at the temple was consumed in a similar manner by priest and parishioners.

Is this Hindu feast so different from our own way of thinking? I became a more devout Christian that day, in the same way that my Hindu friends would often stop and pray in front of Jesus and Mary that we had in the chapel. I realized that Christ is the God of the universe. Who am I to question his presence throughout the world? Together with my Hindu friends, I worship the birth of a God which brings us closer together, not farther apart. God has included us in the world, not excluded us from it.

Sacred Grounds

A similar "ah ha!" experience occurred when I came to work as a prison chaplain at Bowden Institution. I noticed that the sacred grounds were located right next to the chapel. These aboriginal grounds included an Inuit tent, an aboriginal tepee, and a sweat lodge.

I was pleased with this state of affairs. Finding an appropriate location for these grounds had proven elusive in other institutions. In one instance, the grounds started out near the kitchen, moved closer to the units, moved farther away toward the industrial part of the complex, and finally found its resting place close to the chapel.

This final move created tension between the priest and aboriginal elders. Drumming practices and powwow services occurred too frequently during Mass. Parishioners in the chapel could not hear what was being said amid the cacophony of sound coming from outside. When the priest raised his objections, threats were made of staging a re-enactment of the sixteenth-century martyrdom of Brebeuf and

his colleagues at the hands of the natives (statues of these early Canadian martyrs are prominently displayed on Quebec's catholic cathedrals).

The simultaneous timing of services also occurs in the institution in which I work. The drumming and chanting and cries to the Creator mix in with the silent pauses Bach and Beethoven and Wesley and Luther have incorporated into their spiritual hymns to Christ. This dissonance between the drumming of the "same" note and the harmonious melodies of choral singing underlines the alienation of cultures and traditions.

This distance is brought to the foreground in other ways. The tepee within a forest of warmth stands in sharp contrast to the constructed chapel of brick and stone. The round igloo of snow in the middle of the tundra uses more appropriate, insulating technology than that of the wooden temple, which needs to be fortified against the cold.

The sweat lodge is where fire and water meet for the native person. His sweat and blood become mingled in the darkened feast of prayer and fasting that is the perpetual ritual of initiation and transformation. For the Christian, the baptismal font of cold water at the entrance, along with the fire of the spirit that is God's perpetual promise, become the two handmaidens of faith.

Let us reflect on these contrasting rites of passage. In one, the person enters naked and alone to face his visions, his ancestors, his sign, and the physical fire of God's spirit. For the other, a dressed-up, three-piece suit will do within the context of a more restrained form of irrational worship. No sweaty palms here, only an internalized spirit within an external infrastructure.

The fifth step of our spiritual journey begins right here, in the pitch blackness of a small hollow on a grassy plain on a sunny day in the shadow of the chapel. We have moved from the church to the world, from the chapel to the sacred grounds, from the body of Christ to the body of the world. The elders know that God was in this land long before the white man came. Native spirituality acts in a dynamic, corrective manner to offset the overwhelming influence of Christianity. This symbiotic relationship is a healthy one. How else to explain the growing critique of technological advances based on environmental friendliness, of video techno-games based on quiet repose, of wanton disregard for life based on respect for the elders, for the mothers that bore us?

This critique becomes most evident when we compare the communal rituals of Christ and Creator. There was no book in those days, only the oral tradition of the elders and the pipe that was handed down from ancestor to ancestor. There was no musical rendition other than the chanting of drums, more reminiscent of birds and wolves than choirs and orchestra. There were no chairs to sit on, tables to feast on, raised platforms to preach from, or hanging crosses to worship. There was no correct direction to face except outward to the four corners of the earth, and inward to the tight circle of fellow believers and confessors and visionaries and compatriots.

Modification of Worship

Three Christian habits become modified in the light of this worshipful stance on the part of our aboriginal brothers and sisters. The first is the tendency to mistake the Book for the real thing, to engage in a bibliolatry that forgets that a real person is being talked about, that a story is being told. Like the people of Gilgamesh as seen through the eyes of a recent Star Trek episode, aboriginal people communicate through stories. Their parables become open-ended counsels that point to the way in which deer can be hunted, fields can be tilled, relations can be maintained, and life can be lived in harmony with the earth. The Bible is full of creationist tales that use the earth to make a human point. The process of the written word is meant as a point of communicative continuity, not alienation through written symbolization.

The second habit has to do with our worshipful posture. A recent controversy within the Sikh community in Vancouver, British Columbia, had to do with the use of tables and chairs in their dining room and worship area. Traditionalists wanted to retain a squatting posture on the floor while the progressives wanted to incorporate a more western style. This controversy, which resulted in violence, demonstrates a large gap between worlds. As Witold Rybczynski has pointed out, the chair is a relatively recent invention.⁷ For a long time, it was used to impose authority (chairperson) rather than offer a sense of comfort. Even today, worship committees are hesitant to make parishioners too comfortable when they worship God. Seats are designed somewhere between upright concentration and reposing rest, in the same way that sermons tread a fine line between judgement and grace.

For all this controversy about proper chapel furnishings, the sweat lodge posture of reclining and kneeling and sitting cross-legged is closer to the eating position of the disciples of Jesus at the Last Supper than the western need to be several feet off the floor at all times. I am not sure whether a restitution of the early church model includes this feature, but it must be noted that a squatting posture continues to be preferred in many cultures. We should be open to modifying our architectural prejudices to accommodate more worshipful stances (such as kneeling more often?).

This hiatus in domestic design points to the larger problem of worshipping God in a strange land. Like the igloo in colder climates, the sweat lodge is more attuned to the whims and demands of the earth than the constant warmth of the chapel. It is mobile, like the tabernacle in Israel. It is close-quartered, as though face-to-face encounters in the middle of the dark are something we desire in this vast, open land. It is hot, more in touch with the volcanic centre of the earth than the winter-blown snow outside. It is hollow, to signify that we came from the earth and to the earth we shall return. It is sweaty, to signify in a physical manner the degree of material transformation required to move to a state of purity and cleansing.

It is prayerful in a furtive sort of way, directed as much to the elder to open up the flap before one's insides come out, before one makes that panicky, mad dash

to the door, stumbling over hot rocks and feet and people to grope one's way outside without permission and pride in order to catch one's breath. There is no security here, only the terror of one's steam-filled breath and anxious body that rocks to and fro to calm one's inner spirit. Prayers become real enough in an atmosphere such as this. One can only pray that one's ancestors and one's relations and one's self will be liberated from such a stifling presence of tight relations.

We are thrust back into the very womb from which we came. Is not the swirling whirlwind we contemplate the very sweat lodge of which we speak? Does it not make sense to go back to mother earth, to acknowledge her presence and power over us? Just when we were certain we had made that mad dash to independent, alienating freedom, we find ourselves back in the womb of mother earth, back in that organic infrastructure from which we were reborn.

There is no easy answer to the query of those who wonder what happens inside that wigwam womb. One emerges more serene from those bowels of hot rocks and steam, quieter, more mellow, more aware of one's schizophrenia, paranoia, and desire for success and fame and freedom and intimacy. Did we not just emerge from the fourth stage of our spiritual journey, in which we experienced intimacy in our soul with our Maker? What more do we need than to enter again into that prayerful posture on a more regular basis? Who else will liberate us from ourselves, for whom we are trying to win the one-hundred-meter dash?

To be in touch with the earth means to respect our dependence on her for air and breath and life and round circles. It is good to know that we can sit in front of each other without having to see anything other than the darkness that enters our retinas and that closeness of comradeship that marks our journey.

Body of God

We come back to the idea of the world as God's body. There is such an intimate relation between God and the universe that one affects the other. This is not an original idea. Grace Jantzen has pointed out that even the early church fathers were led to use this metaphor⁸ to explain what Jesus meant when he said that he loved the world, that he has been sent to save the world, and that he was concerned about each hair that fell from our heads. How else to insist forthrightly that God has become one with the world?

This image of the world as God's body fits in with the spiritual journey on which we have traveled. Are we not attached to our enemies in a downward destructive manner? Are we not dependent upon the way our parents raised us? Was not Jesus Mary's first son, God's only Son, to whom Jesus expressed his affection and love? To say that the father and I are one is to say that Jesus is connected in every way to what the father is like, here and now, there and thence. The intimate connection of mother and daughter, father and son can only serve as a contiguous symbol of what we mean when we say that the world is connected to God.

I do not know whether this means that God's sovereignty is compromised because God is "dependent" upon what happens to the earth. Neither the charge of panentheism or pantheism meets the point. This is, after all, a metaphor, like being a bride to the bridegroom of Christ. This does not mean that we cannot get married. It does mean that we need to reflect on how many ways we are committed to Christ.

The same holds true for the world as God's body. There needs to be a much greater respect for the way in which nature can bite back at us. Like history, nature has a dynamic that plays into how we are going to fare. If we did not listen to the howling storm before we left, we should not be surprised if we are left out in the cold. The body needs to be taken care of, so it does not die of a heart attack, so it does not wheeze its last breath. Let us consider the earth, like God, an extension of ourselves, out of whom we have been born and into whom we will die.

Conclusion

Let us consider how the mystery of God in the sky can be connected in an intimate way with the mystery of life on earth. One of the things that fascinate me when I look up into the sky is that I am looking up at a personification of ourselves and our world. I see Orion the Hunter, keeping watch over his flocks by night. I see Big Bear caring for Little Bear. I see the Milky Way sending its nurturing arch across the sky. The northern lights are dancing to the latest jig. I see Scorpio the Scorpion, Sagittarius the Archer, Leo the Lion, and Cygnus, the Flying Swan.

These constellations are projections of what we are, a drama in the sky re-enacted before our very eyes, a road map to the challenges we face in our lives. Is it any wonder that the sky and earth are alter-egos of each other, two universes dancing to each other's beat and singing to each other's pipers? God in heaven is the head of the universe. The earth that is God's personified body reflects to the head all that happens.

We have come full circle to the starry, starry night with which we began. Who would imagine that this is one giant road map, a giant screen that projects back to us what we need to know, where the wise men end up, what the animals are up to, what happens to Jesus, and where the kingdom is going from here? In the same way that Jesus liberated the animals from the temple when he drove them out, so too, have we been driven from the domestic manger scene to the wild animals and jungle and world politics outside. May the lion and the lamb lie down together! Much eschatological hoping is needed to quell the beasts that lurk within and without. May God grant a bodily resurrection of the earth in the same way that he promises it for us, dust of dust and ashes of ashes!

Questions for Further Reflection

1. How comfortable are you speaking about the world as God's body?

2. To what extent has ecumenism and the inter-religious dialogue helped you become a better Christian?
3. How could the presence of God in the world become so vague and/or so eclectic that it becomes meaningless to use such language?
4. What benefits are there in embracing the idea of God permeating the whole universe?
5. Who has helped you the most in coming to terms with your mission in the world?

Prayer

Thank you, God, for bursting the bounds of my understanding so that I can see you at work throughout the world. Thank you for other religions, which relativizes my own and makes me aware of the universal divine presence. Thank you for the image of a body that helps me imagine how you are integrally related to the world. Amen.

Introduction

The fifth step of our spiritual journey enabled us to move from church to world, from the complacency of our pews to the challenge of seeing Christ in all the people we meet. This step necessitated courage and commitment along with a call to mission. We entered the world with the assurance that God had been there first and would continue to bless us in our ministry.

There is danger in identifying God too closely with the universe. We may believe that we are such an integral part of the organic whole that no further steps are required. We have found our niche within the grand, divine scheme of things and so are happy to live out the rest of our days within this milieu.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The realization that God is greater than the church has simply given us a new challenge. It has made us realize that we need a lot of help to deal with the day-to-day dilemmas in which we are involved. Letting God permeate the full range of our existence has made it obvious that we have a long way to go to arrive at our goal. Many things still need to be jettisoned from our load. We need some clear directions for the road ahead.

The person that helps us is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the one that came after Christ to guide us through the many situations in which we find ourselves. The Holy Spirit is the one who comforts us when we are sorrowful and liberates us when we are oppressed.

The best way of describing the role of the Holy Spirit is to view it in relation to a corporate structure from which we need to be liberated. Despite of the comfort we have found in the church and the world -- the body of Christ and the body of God -- we have become mesmerized by their safety. We have fallen into the traps of appeasement and acquiescence instead of becoming motivated by a sense of mission.

Every structure, left to its own devices, will form a hierarchy. And every hierarchy will abuse its authority and power over time. That is why the Protestant Revolution became a reality. That is why the Council of Trent met to reconsider its theology. That is why the second Vatican Council convened and issued its proclamations. That is why Pentecostalism has had such an influence in the twentieth century. That is why Martin Luther King Jr. was so effective.

The corruption and misrepresentations from within, and prejudices and opposition from without, have caused charismatic leaders to arise and set the record straight. They have shown us a new way of looking at Christ. They have made it plain that we have a much too narrow conception of the church. These Spirit filled leaders have enabled us to see ourselves and others in a brand-new light.

The image upon which we have been reflecting gives us an indication of this transformation. The Holy Spirit is shown not only as a whirlwind within the bodily

structure of Mary and Christ, but also as a flame that extends over and beyond that with which we are comfortable. The tongues of fire that rested on the apostles of Acts are re-imagined as a flame that spreads like wildfire beyond the church and world to heaven itself. We never know where the Spirit is moving because it has a way of getting out of our control. It takes us places we would never have imagined.

Holy Spirit in our Personal Lives

Let us take a moment to think about how the Holy Spirit has been working in our lives. Can we point to specific instances and moments when the Spirit opened new doors for us or brought us into a new sanguine appreciation of life?

The conversion experience I had during the revivals of the 1970s has re-manifested itself in innumerable ways. Who would have imagined that I would end up as a prison chaplain instead of university professor? Who would have imagined that Naomi and I would end up with four children instead of none, as we first feared? Who would have thought that I would learn French in Montreal and then end up in the middle of the western prairies where no-one even thinks about what language they will speak when they open their mouths? I would have imagined none of these things in my wildest dreams. And yet they came to pass.

Who else but the Holy Spirit can lay claim to such bold, dramatic strokes of the historic brush? I am sure that it is the same for you. We become more and more amazed at life's surprises as we grow older. Every day of life becomes a miracle of gratitude and grace. Every expression of love, unity, graciousness, and truth is held onto for the precious thing it is. Amid all that we experience, we stand amazed at the hope we find within us.

One way of locating the Spirit is to ask how accepting we have become of the path God has chosen for us. How humble have we been in acknowledging the cloud of presence that goes before us in the blinding, wintry fog? How content are we to be and let be, even as God opens new challenges on a daily basis? Have we settled into the sharp, learning curve God has prepared for us? Or are we still lost in space, grabbing onto those fleeting moments of peace and tranquility that come floating by us as we remain suspended in thin air? The Holy Spirit has a funny way of having us arrive at a different exit point than we had first imaged.

Holy Spirit in our Social Lives

Another way of contemplating the Holy Spirit is to place ourselves within the larger network that is our social life. The Spirit promises that we will never be left without two or three to gather in his name, to stand in solidarity with one another. How has the Spirit moved in our social lives? What indications have there been that God is alive and well and living where we are at? There is so much more than our marriages and our friendships and our churches that need to be honoured as the place that God is at work.

Each day someone brings us the Word of the Lord for that day, without them or us knowing it. We simply must be prepared to listen for its utterance. Yesterday someone accused me of having nothing to offer them but the love of Jesus. Today, someone told me how he had given someone a drink of water after eight of them had run for the border for fourteen days in the middle of a desert. That person is alive today as a result of this believer's gesture of compassion.

Our social networks expand innumerable when we take heart that the Spirit is working through each person we meet. The Spirit is trying to tell us something. Are we taking the time to listen? Our spiritual world is expanded tenfold when we accept the fact that God is communicating to us through many more people than we accept. This is the only way that we can come to understand what true friendship is about.

Holy Spirit in our Corporate Lives

What about those corporate structures in our lives, those things that rule over us more completely than other networks? The Holy Spirit came especially for these frameworks. God knew that the temptation of humans to abuse the power of the kingdom was so inevitable that the Holy Spirit would have to come for us to rise beyond these bodies. We are institutionalized from birth, and that socialization process is so complete that it takes the rest of our lives to be liberated from its vices.

We have seen that such an institutionalization is necessary, even laudatory in the spiritual steps leading up to this point. We have our mothers and Mary and Christ and the church and the body of God to thank for bringing us to this place. Yet it is only as we are liberated from these preconceived notions and structures that the Holy Spirit moves freely.

Ecumenism would never have happened if we would have stayed contented with our denominational divisions. No new members would have joined our churches if we would have been content to let our procreative nurturing fill our benches for the next generation. Our sense of mission would have been stymied if we would not have become convinced that we have something to learn from other people, even other faiths. Our very lives have been transformed as a result.

There has been much talk in the last forty years about liberation theology. This liberation can take place only if we believe that there is a fundamental duality, a foundational conflict from which we need to be released. The conflict in the world, as described in the first stage of our journey, thrusts us onto our spiritual path in the first place. We have been liberated from evil and corruption by being enveloped by the body and blood of Christ. We have been liberated from the confines of that body in order to bring the truth of our witness to all those around us. Like our mothers who bore us so that we could go off on our own, so has the body of Christ embraced us so that we can become independent. All corporate

structures need to be renewed and replaced continually for the Spirit to be active. May that happen within each of the churches in which we are in.

Conclusion

The boxes of doctrines and utopias and emotional attachments and social ties and spiritual paths by which we live need to be opened in order to allow the Holy Spirit to breathe. Far from escaping these boxes, which represent our lifeline to God, we need to embrace the houses in which we live in order to find the doors and windows that lead us outside. The Holy Spirit renews us daily in order to give us hope within the walls in which we find ourselves. Let their very narrowness supply us with the richness of hope that makes their transcendence possible. It is only within the rules and laws themselves within the birth of Christ, that we find the wherewithal to have Christ “a venir.” The greatest inventions have come from dire circumstances. We have been forced in those situations to focus the mind in order to liberate the body. The resurrection of Christ is but a foretaste of the invincibility of life that the Holy Spirit promises on a daily basis.

Questions for Further Reflection

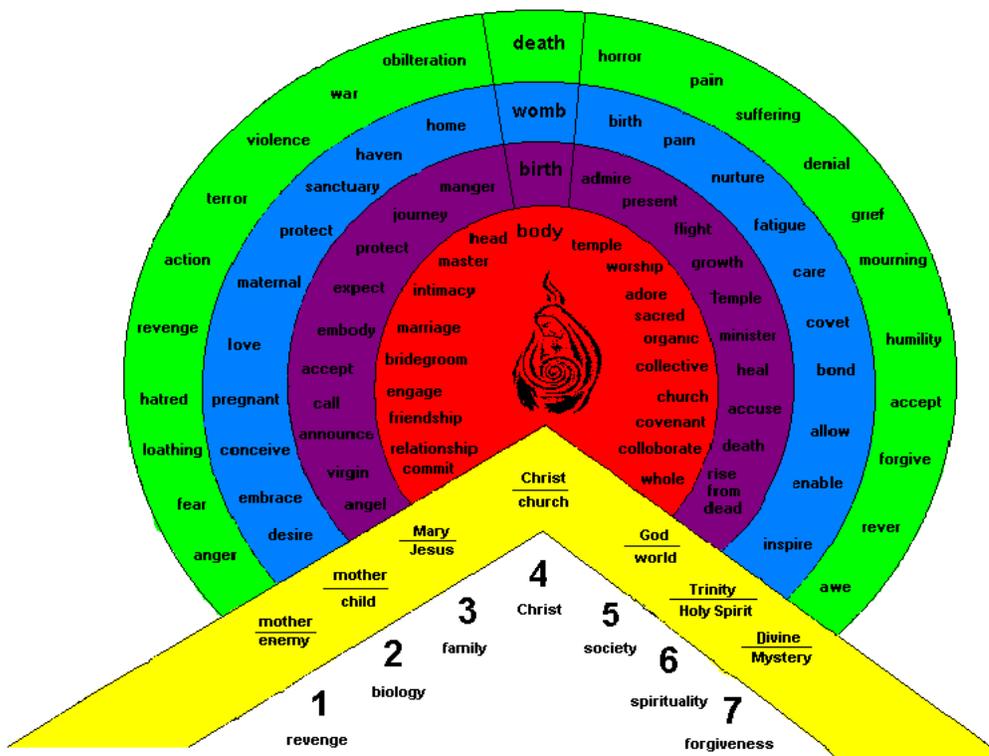
1. To what extent do we need to be liberated from the corporate structures within which we find ourselves in order to be truly born of the Holy Spirit?
2. To what extent is the continual newness of our personal and social lives an inherent part of what we were intended for in the first place?
3. What do the manifested excesses of the Spirit in our lives indicate about our spiritual and emotional hunger?
4. How is the Spirit tied to the Father and the Son -- the body of Christ and the body of God -- even as it moves us beyond the shape of its enveloping circle?
5. Where is the Holy Spirit moving in your life -- personal, social, and corporate?

Prayer

Thank you, Lord, for renewal that happens each day, each moment, each week. Thank you for wiping the slate clean each morning so we can begin again as though we have just been born and reborn. Thank you for the healing and advocating power of the Holy Spirit, who has liberated us from so many things.

Chapter Seven

Mystery of God



Introduction

We have experienced much on the first six stages of our spiritual journey. Having arrived in the heart of God, we began our long journey outward to the world and beyond. This has been an invigorating, refreshing journey. Having renewed our relationship with Christ, we have thrust ourselves into the midst of the world in order to fulfill our mission.

The final stage of our journey is a denouement in the sense that an ever-receding horizon separates us from the reality of God. No matter how exhilarating our journey has been, we have arrived at the mountain overlooking the imperial city instead of within the celestial home itself. We stand from afar, embracing the fact that God remains outside of our grasp.

This fact is especially true in relation to our enemies. No matter how much we want to forgive and let go, we realize that there continue to be areas in which we guard our resentments, we nurse our wounds, and we are unable to forget the past. Even though God has brought us close through his forgiveness, we continue to hold others at arms' length.

The same is true for our relationship to our families. The dynamics of our family life continue to play havoc with our feelings, no matter how many times we have resolved these issues in a family conference with great intentionality.

Our mystical relationship to Christ continues to journey along a bumpy path from subjective awe to realistic embodiment. Our prayer life is not as frequent as we would like it, and so we stumble along with very human-like responses.

Our involvement in the church continues to be one of pain and ambivalence as a result of the many scandals that have rocked the church in recent years. It has been hard for us to separate the wheat from the chaff, the real contemplation of God from the weight of lesser things that drag us down.

The world, in turn, is more than enough for us to handle. We are faced at every turn with another Rubik's cube to unscramble, another challenge with which to deal. The richness of our experience deepens our own sense of inadequacy, as well as increases our reverence for those who seem so at ease within all situations.

Image of A Horizon

Let us take a few moments to think about images that help us live in the gap between the presence and absence of God. The image of a horizon has been mentioned. The horizon of God gives us a perspective by which to gauge our

current actions, our current involvements in the real life of religious and social dynamics. Having gone into the heart of God, we are now able to put that experience into a broader context. The surrounding space makes us aware of the limits of our euphoric experiences.

The horizon keeps us honest for we know that the city of God is still on the other side of the great divide. We have not completed the arc of our destiny. The richness of God's grace will be even more profound than it has been in the past.

The horizon also gives us hope for we know that there is light at the end of the tunnel, that the sun has set just beyond the reach of our desires. Far from falling off the edge of the earth, we know that the circle of God's creation will enable us to find a shore that is attached to our current expectations.

Idea of Silence

Another idea that comes to mind is that of silence. So much is defined by that which we take for granted. Music is punctuated again and again by those pregnant pauses. These silent moments of expectation make us sit at the edge of our seats, wondering what will come next, the violins, the oboe, the drums, or the brass section. We did not realize how taut our bodies had become until we were forced in that quiet repose to come to terms with the silence of our own thoughts. It was then that the music could begin anew, with real impact.

Silent retreats have helped us to define the busyness of our lives. The older we have become, the more we have had to focus on that which is important and let so much of the rest go. The one mark we have been able to make is to allow the space of others to fill our lives. It is in silence that the room has been filled with the glory of life.

Mystery of God

We come to the mystery of God. Mystery novels are so exciting because they make us read fervently for two hundred pages in order to find the one-page solution to the convoluted plot in which we have become entangled. We are willing to go through all that just to find some relief and hopefully redemption at the end of the day.

Our experience of the mystery of God is similar. We have been intensely involved in the first six stages of our spiritual journey, only to find ourselves on the rim of our expectations. We have arrived at the open field of our dreams, only to realize that the world outside our tight circle of hope is expansive.

This is what it means to fall into the mystery of God. The ambivalence of our feelings and hurts hang in midair like clothes drying in the wind, for all to see. We have no place to hide except in the middle of public view. God is omnipresent, which includes that graciousness of mystery in which we are our awkward selves. The gap in between where we have come from and where we are going is satisfaction enough for having striven.

It continues to amaze me that we write things in black and white in order to feel safe in our beliefs. I have been as guilty of this as the next person. The very fact that we write our beliefs and experiences down in our confession of faith means that there is more to be said about the presence of God. The written word speaks volumes about what cannot be spoken, what cannot be resolved until the end of time.

The book of Revelation is so exotic for this reason. The writer knew that the book could never be complete without a grand vision of what heaven on earth was like. Scott Hahn has suggested that this vision is something we experience in the middle of Mass.⁹ I have alluded to similar experiences in the course of this spiritual journey.

Revelation's grand visions stop at the sixth stage, and then repeat themselves before timidly announcing the possibility of a seventh and final step. The Lamb of God explodes the rest of our musings. That ultimate mystery of power and triumph, the Lamb of God makes us reconsider the forcefulness of our forays. Revelation continues to stand in awe of the final mystery because the author does not know how to adequately describe it.

We have a similar dilemma in this seventh and final stage. All that we can do, as John the Baptist did, is point to the Messiah. The rest is up to us, to follow the path of that sign in order to do obeisance before our Master and Lord.

Conclusion

I trust that you have found this spiritual journey as refreshing as I have. There are many other ways in which this journey could be sketched, this labyrinth could be walked. I have chosen this route because it has encompassed the most salient aspects of my own experience and faith. Above all, it has under girded my own expectations of Advent, Christmas, and the Incarnation. It has made real that which we celebrate once a year: the coming of Christ. The very fact of a human birth within a human family has enabled the rest of us humans to partake in the divine reality that is God.

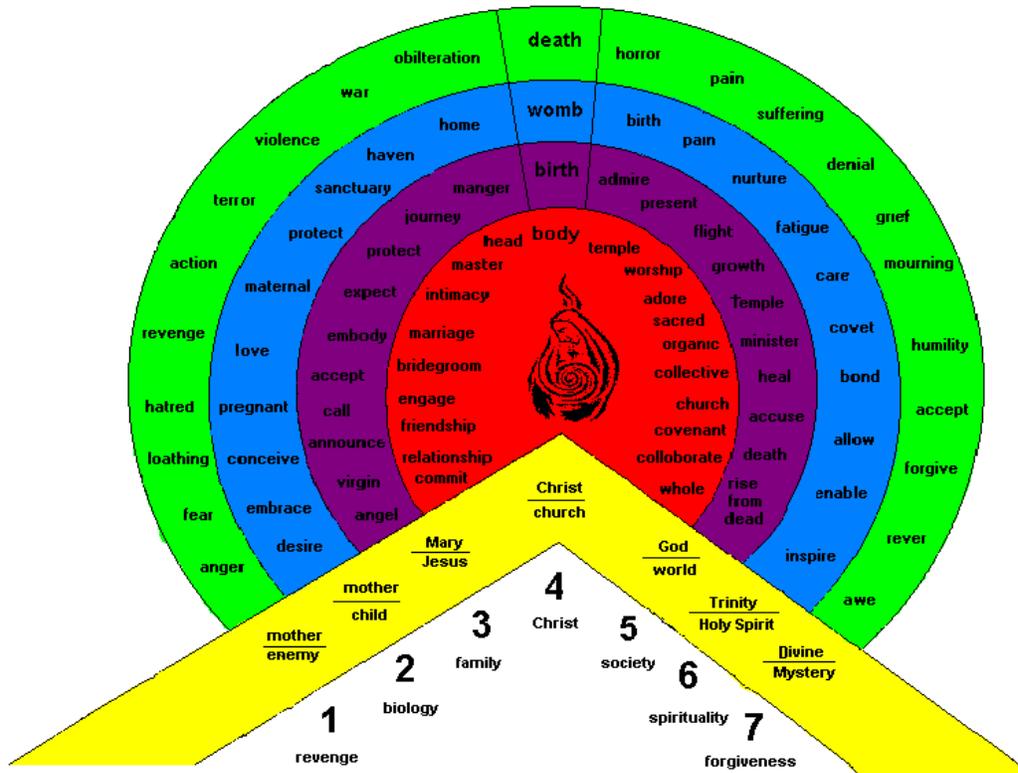
Questions for Further Reflection

1. How comfortable are you letting the ambivalence of life rest in the mystery of God?
2. Are there other images that are helpful in describing the mystery of God?
3. To what extent can you identify with Moses looking across the Jordan River to the Promised Land, or with Paul who sees God "through a glass darkly?"
4. To what extent can we include the mystery of God within our ecstatic experience of Christ?

Prayer

Thank you, God, that we can fall into your divine mystery and be encompassed by it! May our ecstatic experience be reminiscent of what it means to spiritually and relationally whole. Amen.

Epilogue



Two exercises help us embody and mimic what we have been experiencing.

Nimbuses of God

The first exercise entails a finger exercise by which one traces one's index finger through the seven steps of concentric circles upon which we have journeyed until we come to Christ and the church. The order of sequence in this journey is from revenge (1) to forgiveness (7), from the biology of birth (2) to the charisma of the Holy Spirit (6), from the family of God (3) to collective society (5), until one reaches the body of Christ (4), from which all other stages emanate.

Labyrinth of God

Another way of facilitating this process is walking a labyrinth. This journey is also directional in that one takes a path to the heart of God and then retraces one's steps to the world and beyond. The yellow colour of the first three stages of the portable labyrinth illustrated at the centre of this book represents the light to which we are increasingly attracted. The red colour of the centre represents the intensity of the ecstatic experience. The green colour of the last three stages represents the dispersion of light and oxygen.

The drawn image of the labyrinth at the centre of this book offers another way of naming this spiritual experience. The red colour of the first three stages represents the passion of love that one experiences as one nears the heart of God. The yellow colour intermingled with the red in the fourth stage represents the light that emanates from this deeply intimate moment. Like the portable labyrinth, the last three stages of the drawn image represent a greening of the earth. The drawn image facilitates a finger exercise in which one traces one's spiritual journey from one to seven.

The portable labyrinth facilitates a walking exercise in which one stops at each station along the way, recalling each lesson learned by placing a small note at that station, and then continuing. The seven notes are retrieved at the end of the walk, together forming a culmination of one's experience.

Prayer

O God, infinite, divine, unknowable, ultimate mystery beyond all things. Thank you for condescending to our very human broken existence so that we can become divine like you. Amen.

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Endnotes

¹ For a sample of Victor Hori's writings, see *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kaon Practice* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2010). A recent note by Victor Hori regarding the difference between two schools of Buddhism: "All schools teach the Buddhist lesson on suffering: all existence is suffering. Some schools teach that suffering can be transcended and left behind (people read Zen Buddhism that way). Some schools teach that suffering is transcended only when you live your suffering. The True Pure Land school is sometimes read this way. For a brief and easily readable account of True Pure Land Buddhism, read *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace* by Alfred Bloom. I do not want to comment on whether a certain school of Buddhism or certain practice of meditation is more appropriate for prisoners. I do not have enough experience. My released prisoner however had converted to True Pure Land Buddhism. He read a pamphlet that started off "all existence is suffering." As soon as he read that, he knew he had found his religion, he said," *Email correspondence with Victor Hori*, December 2018.

² Max Weber analyses these two concepts of mysticism, *Economy and Society*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, Volume 1 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), pp. 541-556.

³ In his book on reality therapy, William Glasser assumes that each patient can take responsibility for themselves and have their needs fulfilled by accepting the reality of the situation and finding solutions to their problems that increases their capacity for living holistic lives, *Reality Therapy* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 42-45.

⁴ Gregory Baum advocates for such an approach in his book, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1994), p. 7. Scott Peck has developed a Christian spirituality on this basis, starting off his book with the sentence, "Life is difficult," *The Road Less Travelled* (New York Touchstone Books, 2001), p. 15.

⁵ Gregory Baum has reflected on the significance of psychology and sociology for theology, *Religion and Alienation* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 2nd edition, pp. 105-124.

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, edited and translated by John Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 131-144.

⁷ Witold Rybczynski, *Home* (New York: Penguin Books, 1986).

⁸ Grace Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984).

⁹ Scott Hahn, *The Lamb's Supper: The Mass as Heaven on Earth*, (New York: Doubleday, 1999).