

Heart of Faith
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The Sonoran desert was in bloom as I made my annual pilgrimage to St. Anthony's Monastery in Arizona. The dry March heat was pleasant and I found myself alert standing through the all night vigil of the Annunciation which began at 12:30AM and concluded at 8:30AM with the fresh light of day greeting us as we emerged from the fragrant, icon-illuminated darkness of the Sanctuary.

On this trip I was able to speak briefly with the Geronda, a former Abbot of one of the monasteries on Mt. Athos, make my confession and venerate some of the monastery relics which I discovered include a piece of the True Cross from a fragment kept for millennia on Mount Athos and a bone fragment from St. Mary Magdalene.

I had never had the opportunity to venerate these relics before and I didn't know which ones the Monastery had. When the small fragment of the cross, embedded in a larger wooden cross, was placed in my hands, I held it to my heart and tears flooded through me in a great wave. For a second there was no difference between 33 A.D. and 2001 A.D.

It was of particular interest to me that I felt this while being tired and physically sick at the time. There was even some residue remaining of the self-hatred that I was dealing with, left over from irrational blame of myself for not being able as a young child, to heal my mother and father of their illnesses which had been unconsciously aroused again by current family circumstances. This coupled with pride and self-will operating in my life in the present had been part of my discussion with the Geronda earlier. As the elder had

suggested, “The devil has used your childhood pain to deceive you and attack your prayer.”

It was true. Like a tag-team match of wrestlers; pride, lust, gluttony, vainglory, accidia, rancor, greed and despondency had robbed me of my sense of belovedness and the inclination to pray the Jesus prayer, substituting thinking instead—a bad mistake. Beginning with the provocations of one and then joined by another and another, sometimes invisible and sometimes deliberately evoked, my undisciplined attention had once again begun to run amok, hither and yon. Like an orphan running away from the structure of boarding school, without any particular place to go, I had wandered off the path into trouble, attracted by memories of past sins and hints of those yet uncommitted, shimmering in the counterfeit golden promises reflected from the treasures of God deep in my own heart. I was looking in the wrong direction for what is always found at home in the relationship most taken for granted and repeatedly undervalued.

This state had been affecting my counseling work in ways that probably were not perceptible on the surface, but I knew I was not giving people the quality of simple attentive presence that the mystery of Christ in our midst invites us too when our hearts are light and open and we are obedient as best we are able. My heart had become “burdened with cares of the world” and the inevitable fallout from self-directed ill-will due to awareness of my own sinful inclinations and the accumulated stress of working with hundreds of other souls who have sought to lay down some of their burdens in my office.

That is one reason I so value regular retreats to the desert (and to confession!) to be shorn, like a lamb, of the layers of accumulated mental and emotional possessions that weigh me down and steal the joy of God’s salvation from me. In the Orthodox Christian

Church, we soon learn that the shame and humiliation felt in confession are sure signs of the working of the medicine of Grace reaching the heart as the crust of self-will and vainglory are sloughed off in the moment of re-turning to God. It is only when the ego lowers its head to the floor in shame that the heart realizes in sorrowful joy how it is being lifted up by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit blowing on it freshly from the lips of the Risen Lord, before whose icon we kneel and from whose hand we receive blessing and in whose Word we find abundant life. Strange it is that we wander away over and over again. As St. Paul himself observed “The good that I would do I do not and the evil that I hate, that I do!” Surely, we cannot expect more from ourselves than he, and yet, we take consolation in the saint’s words, for real faith is always put to the test by shouldering a cross in this world; the cross that pays the price of being capable of loving and being loved, precisely because *we are free not too*. We are not robots. God paid an enormous price for this and each one shares in this who wishes, as the Velveteen rabbit and Pinocchio fervently did, *in order to be real*.

There is a saying among the Omaha nation, “If you speak from the heart you will be answered from the heart.” I believe it is also true that if you listen from the heart, people are more likely to hear their own hearts speaking. Both depend on a sense of belovedness that allows for shedding the unnecessary baggage of emotional reactivity, unforgiven debts, worries and all manner of passions that choke the joy of life. I know that the most important preparation for doing the work of pastoral counseling, is honoring the ascetical yoke of prayer, repentance, confession, worship and obedience to the commandments of Christ. For it is only a guileless and humble heart that can evoke the same in others and this comes only from being in atonement with the Source. As the Lord has stated, he is the vine

that gives life to Creation and we are the branches. “Cut off from me you can do nothing.”

As the fragment of the cross was placed in my hands, my confusion and cloudy mental state parted like lightning through dense fog. Weeping and holding this sacred relic to my heart, there came a kind of subtle whisper from the more peripheral layers of my mind: “How do you know this is really a piece of the True Cross?” I was aware at that moment of the power to shift my attention to entertain the question “How do you know this is genuine?” but it would have meant forfeiting the emerging sense of heartfelt remorse and closeness to the Lord’s sacrifice which was flooding through me. Elder Paisios of the Holy Mountain says that provocations from the demons are like airplanes that suddenly pass into the air space of the psyche, but it is not necessary that we build them a landing field in the heart. Let them pass on through.

While repentance, born of Grace and working through faith is beyond me to create for myself, I see that my *assent* is needed when such moments of Grace are given. It is definitely a relationship and not an invasion. And one must learn to wait with alertness until such moments come. This is part of the training of all night Vigils. The seed of the Word is planted in the heart and at a moment when we do not expect, God may command it to bloom. We must have oil in our lamps and be ready to enter when the door unexpectedly opens. Oil comes from having paid attention and kept watch for the treasure one’s heart yearns for.

A friend of my told me the story of his visit to Mount Athos where upon his initial arrival, he was present for most of an eleven hour Vigil service that was in process. At the end, the Abbot asked him, “How did you like our service.”

“A bit long,” he responded.

“Ah, yes, but did you notice that you became quiet only in ninth hour and that it was only in the eleventh hour that the mystery began to enter into your heart?”

“When the Son of Man comes again will he find faith on earth?” While it is not within human power alone to preserve the warmth and sweetness of Grace when it is offered by God, as St. Paul’s lament poignantly evidences, the heart begins to know the anguish of losing it. Then prayer and watchfulness are born in earnest and the soul springs forth like the bride in the Song of Solomon, running through the streets of our lives, barefooted, single-mindedly seeking her Beloved, who in humility and purity, has turned back at the first hesitation in receiving Him.

Mental skepticism, which is the core of the scientific method, is capable of serving many masters and for different purposes. Albert Einstein observed that reason is a “very strong muscle, but it must never be in charge.” This is reserved for the heart. It is, as the hesychasts have repeatedly confirmed, in the deep heart which reveals itself in stillness when the mind is in the heart, that real discerning intelligence is found.

Reason and the scientific method have made it possible for human beings to land men on the moon, discover penicillin, transplant organs, develop cybernetic technology and map the human genome. But reason has also served in the crucifixion of Christ, the attempted genocide of Bushmen, Armenians, Native Americans, Jews and countless other populations along the way, showing us how to exterminate quickly and cleanly any physical trace of the soul’s incarnation of the Divine Image. While a very valuable tool, in and of itself, reason is incapable of bringing us to faith or, in spite of Immanuel Kant’s commendable efforts, to bring us to ethical *intent*. Faith is not something “I” think myself into or *do* by myself independent of a love relationship with the Ontological Source of

personhood, the hypostasis of Christ. The transformation which faith makes possible when the heart repents in the presence of the Living God results from a personal I-Thou encounter that is even more real than the common everyday variety we routinely experience more superficially among friends and family most of the time.

The very conception of sin obtains only where the relations between the Absolute God and created (hu)man assumes a purely personal character. Otherwise, we are left with nothing but some intellectual assessment of the perfection of forms of existence. Sin is always a crime against the Father's love. Sin occurs when we distance ourselves from God and incline towards the passions.¹

Reason alone and the skepticism demanded by scientific enquiry cannot plumb the depths of the *conviction of things unseen*. If being born as a human being, witnessing a Universe expanding, a consciousness growing, flowers blooming and men and women offering themselves for love at the expense of their own lives, doesn't offer the possibility of faith, neither will seeing someone raised from the dead or any other so-called "miracle." Faith comes from another domain and brings with it eyes to see the world from a *heart of love as personal*. This cannot be created or established by scientific inquiry, nor does it exist as mere mental thoughts unmetabolized by heart and soul and left unexpressed in actions. "They love me who obey my commandments." Even the devils believe that Christ exists. In fact they *know* it, nevertheless, they do not existentially embrace Christ in life. They are essentially *without faith*.

Being a believer has little to do with mentally assenting to, or verbally declaring doctrinal truths whose existential promises we have no experience of, and whose sacred power has not won us over, dwelling in our depths and upholding our action.

The heart 'believes' when it trusts in its action a road on which mountains will have to be moved, and camels will have to pass through the eye of a needle. Belief is what we are prepared to do, to give, to risk, to lose, for love.²

The question that posed itself to me as I felt my heart open to the mystery of the holy cross, disguised as if it were an examination by reason, originates from a source that ultimately precludes faith. In fact, as Archimandrite Sophrony observes, *In the impulses and actions which our reason justifies, we cannot see 'sin'.*³ This is not reason's fault, but the fault of the impulse or "I" that co-opts reason for this purpose, replacing the heart of faith with a heart of stone, made cold by demonic *unfaith*.

From this perspective, like the angels who fell with Lucifer, even if I were to be with God at the very moment when the universe was first created, it would still not be possible to come to faith through this means, because certainty and the absence of all questions due to perfect knowledge, is the only thing that could satisfy that motivation or intention which is attempting to use reason to arrive at faith (or subtly, to avoid surrendering to it). This kind of satisfaction is possible only for God Himself! Thus *pride* is hidden behind the seemingly "neutral" skepticism of reason which withholds personal involvement until a guarantee (aka control) is wrested from the deep heart of love and given to the cold heart of the mind outside or "above" the heart—the place of prelest or spiritual deception.

This reluctance to love until there is security is rooted in self-preservation and always resists God and the surrender that love invites.

Nothing that is unclean – which means proud – can draw near Him. Pride is abomination, the opposite of Divine goodness. Pride is the principle of evil, the root of all tragedy, the sower of enmity, the destroyer of peace, the adversary of divinely

—established order. In pride lies the essence of hell. Pride is the ‘outer darkness’ where (hu)man loses contact with the God of love. “They loved darkness (John 3:19).” Repentance alone can deliver us from this hell.⁴

If at the moment of my encounter with the “true cross” I had ignored the heart of faith to respond to the wolf disguised in the lambskin of reason’s skepticism, it would have been because I was preferring *knowing* over *loving* and *being loved*. That which is not willing to love until it is God, is *Satanic*. “*Knowing ever more and more and yet never coming to faith*” applies well to the impulses that prompt us to investigate and philosophize at the very moment of standing on Holy Ground. At such moments, repentance, worship, awe and love are the only threads that are worthy of being woven into a wedding garment in preparation for the Divine Feast.

Standing in the presence of the only Begotten son of the Living God and asking, as Governor Pilate did, pathetically, non-committally, dismissively, “*What* is truth?” at such a moment is demonstrative of a state of pride and fear that ultimately leads to despair. Pilate’s *critical examination* of the *living human document* standing before him, failed to recognize the true proportions of the event because he preferred to deal with *what* instead of *Who*. Without faith, Pilate was blind to the deepest mystery of life, which is that it is fundamentally *relational* and *Triune*— I, Thou and Father, Son (Community qua Body of Christ) and Holy Spirit.

Pilate’s mistake is too often our own. To the degree that I fail to plumb the depth of the mystery of which *I AM* made, not by standing outside it, presuming to know about it, but by entering into intimate relationship with the One who *is* love and continues to love forever, no matter what the cost, I fail to find the pearl of great price— “the person in the heart.” For

the human problem is the problem of love and it cannot be solved apart from the heart of faith in God Whom reason alone cannot fathom, but exists only to serve.

This is why the fundamental problem of pastoral counseling is one of *personhood*. All human illness is ultimately an illness of spiritual alienation; from God, self, others and the whole created order. Pastoral Psychotherapy is an expression of the action of God's Grace mediated to the world, for as it is beautifully stated from the Hasidic perspective, *Human beings are God's language*. Early Christian voices were of the same perspective as summarized by Metropolitan Heirotheos Vlachos, echoing St. Basil in the 4th century, "The Church is a hospital and priests are psychotherapists."

It is hopefully now clear why the training ground for pastoral psychotherapists has always been and should remain, the same as that for true Christians. Anything less that does not serve the ends of the Mystical Church of Christ, by participating in and bearing the same Holy Cross as Him who laid down his life for us, can only serve another and make that cross heavier for all the rest. As the Lord told his disciples, counseling mercy toward all, "Anyone who is not against us is for us." (Mk 9:40) There is no in between. Christ did not come to free us from the cross, but to empower us to pick up our cross and place ourselves firmly beneath it, calling on the Lord to help us bear it for the sake of the whole world or as the priest intones in each Divine Liturgy, "For those who love us and for those who hate us." This is the Way of our Lord. Thanks be to God.

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¹ Sophrony, A. (1988). *We Shall See Him As He Is*. Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist. Essex, England. P20.

² Moran, J. (in press) "Spiritual Warfare: The Relevance to Modern Therapy of the Ancient Eastern Orthodox Christian Path of Ascetical Practice." in Muse, S. ed. *Raising Lazarus: Integral Healing in Orthodox Christianity*. Holy

Cross Orthodox Press: Brookline, MA.

³ IBID p34.

⁴ IBID pp29-30.