

Creating a Spiritual Heart Our Sp Life – Transformation

Introduction

In this conference I would like to talk about some elements of Christian spiritual maturity. Many of these elements would apply, in my opinion, to spirituality in general... for example, AA spirituality.

Since Vat II (1962-1965) the Catholic Church has experienced a renewed interest in spirituality that encompasses a wide range of elements: the primacy of religious experience; biblical spirituality; renewed liturgy; recovery of the traditions and spiritual classics; interest in Eastern forms of the spiritual life; the relationship between spirituality and psychology; liberation and feminist spiritualities; and mysticism.

Modern spirituality is centered on the deepest values and meanings by which people live.

In his fascinating and challenging book entitled *The Great Spiritual Migration*, Brian McLaren describes spirituality in these words:

... That soul work that teaches us to open our deepest selves to God and ground our souls in love...

I Prayer

In this conference I would like to describe some ways our life is transformed by 'growing' our spiritual life, by that 'soul work' McLaren refers to. I might describe this growth as a transformation or as a conversion... an emotional, intellectual, ethical and spiritual transformation or conversion... changing the way we usually view and live life.

Prayer is part of this spiritual growth. I deal with growing our prayer life in another conference entitled "Keep Your Eyes on Jesus".

Let me briefly say this about prayer.

Prayer

Rabbi Abraham Heschel in an essay 'On Prayer' in the magazine *Commonweal* (6/18-27/'07) says the following:

...All things have a home: the bee has a hive, the bird has a nest. For the soul, home is where prayer is... I enter this home as a stranger and emerge as next of kin. I may enter spiritually shapeless, inwardly disfigured, and emerge wholly changed.

Prayer is an absolute need for our spiritual life.

Mother Theresa said that *prayer is making room for God in our hearts.*

At times 'prayer' can be a challenge in our lives for several reasons:

- Business of daily life;
- Fears and worries;

- Addiction to smart phones, tablets and other forms of social media – we don't want to miss anything.

The problem is that without the discipline of prayer it is difficult to enlarge and develop our spirituality.

In my conference on prayer I examine the foundation of our Christian spiritual life as built on our relationship with Jesus. The letter to the Hebrews 12:2 counsels us to 'keep our eyes on Jesus.'

Who is Jesus to you?

What do you admire about Jesus?

Are you devoted to Jesus?

Finally, do you live your life trying to walk in the footsteps of Jesus?

Paul's letter to the Romans, 12:2, speaks about a transformation of our lives.

... Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...

In my conference on 'prayer' I deal with some practical ways we might develop our prayer life.

- Practical preparation for prayer time;
- Lectio Divina – a way to pray;
- Meditation – a form of prayer;
- Dialogue with Jesus;
- Other beautiful forms of traditional Catholic prayer practices, including Eucharistic Adoration, Stations of the Cross, The Rosary, Litanies and Prayerful Aspirations.

Our spiritual life is built on our relationship with Jesus.

Our relationship with Jesus grows thru our prayer life.

II Growing Up

As we grow older there are some questions we need to ask ourselves...

What does our society tell us life is *all about*?

- Making money?
- Being successful?
- Being recognized and admired?
- Surviving with 'The Survivor'? Proving 'You've Got Talent'? Scoring a big music contract thanks to 'Voice'

None of these goals are bad in themselves.

However, is this what life is all about?

What is your life all about?

What are your dreams and goals in life now?

Have these changed over the course of your life?

Have you changed over the course of your life?

Remember,

- Spirituality is centered on the "deepest values and meanings by which people live. ...
- Spirituality is centered on that soul work that teaches us to open our deepest selves to God and ground our souls in love.

I want to look at some characteristics of growth which we will experience as we develop our spiritual lives – that 'soul work' McLaren speaks of. These characteristics will enrich us and others throughout our lives. They will influence how we think, act and emotionally react to life.

III Gratitude

I believe that gratitude is an essential part of a healthy spiritual life...

A person who practices gratitude notices the goodness and beauty in life, even among the small things.

Thomas Traherne, a poet from the 17th century, puts it this way:

Is not sight a jewel? Is not hearing a treasure? Is not speech a glory? O my Lord, pardon my ingratitude, and pity my dullness, who am not sensible of these gifts. The freedom of thy bounty hath deceived me. These things were too near to be considered. Thou presentest me with Thy blessings, and I was not aware. But now I give thanks... (Growing into Community, C. Pohl, ftnt # 36, p. 186)

In this quote we notice one important aspect of gratitude... gratitude to God. The person of gratitude realizes that his or her whole life is in the context of God's patient grace, God's mercy and loving care. We see more and more of our life as God's quiet gift of grace.

As a person grows in gratitude he or she realizes the truth of what St.

Therese the Little Flower said towards the end of her life, even in the midst of her suffering and pain: *All is grace.*

Gratitude to God becomes a part of our identity...

The Sick Young Woman

It's funny... often it seems that when I am working on a talk stories about my topic pop up, unbidden. It's almost as if God says: heh, check this out.. I recently read this story and it touched my heart.

A few months ago a young, beautiful, healthy college student, suddenly and without warning, lost control of her body and was paralyzed from the neck

down. Her friends sent prayer requests to everyone they knew and fortunately a few months later, the girl recovered.

When she returned to school, her friends noticed that her smile was brighter than before; it was almost as if she had seen Heaven.

There was a visible change of attitude; she was kinder, happier, and paid attention to people more than ever.

She started sending emails to her friends and family expressing her love and gratitude for all they have done for her.

She sent emails to her parents, thanking them for all the sacrifices they made for her since she was born.

Although everyone loved the change in her, they had to ask her what caused this change in her?

She explained that when she had been immobile in the hospital and thought she would never walk again or would maybe even die, that the most painful thing was the regret she was feeling that she had not lived her life fully.

Now that it seemed to be too late, it all seemed so clear that she had not loved enough, used all opportunities to serve.

She suddenly knew that all the grudges she held, and all the time lost thinking about those who had wronged her and how to avoid those she didn't like, had been a waste of her precious life.

She thought about how much time she spent being mad and miserable for all that went wrong, and how little time she spent rejoicing for what went right!

In her remorse, she begged God in prayer to give her a chance to live again so that she could make things right, and God heard her prayers.

When this young woman recovered from her mysterious illness she responded with *gratitude*.

Her illness became a milestone in her spiritual growth...

she had a conversion of heart... her heart was 'transformed'.

She changed the way she looked at her life and the people in her life.

She changed the way she emotionally reacted to her life.

Her view of God changed. The way she prayed changed.

III Pain and Suffering Transformed

How have the experiences of your life and especially the difficult times affected you?

Have the years flowed over us like water over stones – leaving the stones unchanged?

Years ago I picked up a rock from a stream bed and examined it. How many years has the stream's water been flowing over this rock. On the outside the

rock is wet. But when I broke it open, it was still dry. No water had touched the rock.

My experience has been that even difficult times of pain and suffering can help our spiritual life grow.

Life's sufferings can deflate our grandiose ego... our imperial ego which tries to control life *too much*, which places me at the center of life *too much*, too given to self-pampering.

In the experience of the young woman described above it was pain and suffering that broke her heart and the seed of God's love was able to enter and flourish.

Have pain and suffering helped to change our lives?

Has life made us jealous, angry, bitter and even rageful because it has not turned out our way?

When we prayerfully look at Jesus on his Cross we can see that Jesus transformed His darkness into light.

Depression

In a wonderful book entitled **The Noonday Devil** by Andrew Solomon, the author describes in vivid detail his own experiences with his deep, deep depression, and how he slowly rose out of it, with the help of his psychiatrist and his meds.

He then turned his experiences into an insightful and challenging book.

Rather than deny his depression, or pretend he never had it, he shares four lessons, which he learned from his brokenness.

- ❖ *When you have been depressed you lose some of your fear of crisis... I made it through one.*
- ❖ *I learned compassion... I know what other sufferers are going through and I want to help.*
- ❖ *Depression at its worst is the most horrifying loneliness, and from it I learned the value of intimacy... I can help others in their loneliness – not necessarily with answers, but with simple companionship.*
- ❖ *The unexamined life is unavailable to the depressed. I learned to examine my life and see the good in it and not take my friends and loved ones for granted. (PP. 436 – 438)*

The author learned the great value of adversity and discovered values and family and friends and a desire to help others, and not take joy for granted. (P 439)

The author learned that our needs are our greatest assets – we come to know ourselves through adversity – not illusions – and we open ourselves to others in our weakness. This can create bondedness. (P441)

We will all suffer at times in our lives. People hurt us, tragedies sting us, worries and disappointments burden us and fears weave a cocoon over our hearts.

This suffering and pain can lead to resentment, anger, worry and self-centeredness.

Or it can lead to understanding, sympathy, empathy and even forgiveness...

People in AA learn how their pains and sufferings can help others in their addiction... they don't shut the door on their past. They use their past in service to others.

For Christians, through our prayer and our walking with Jesus, our suffering can soften our heart rather than harden our soul.

Spending time at the foot of the Cross can bath us in the blood and water that flowed from the heart of Christ.

We can learn to lead a life of compassion, patience, mercy and forgiveness. What a beautiful growth of our spiritual life and indeed our entire life.

IV Forgiveness

I want to stay with this topic of life's difficult times and I want to talk about forgiveness.

Ronald Rohleiser in his wonderful book *Sacred Fire*, remarks that life is a conspiracy between God and nature to mellow our soul.

He says:

... All of us have been wounded. No one comes to adulthood with his or her heart fully intact. In small ways or traumatic, we have all been treated unjustly, violated, hurt, ignored, not properly honored, and unfairly cast aside. We all carry wounds, and, with those wounds, we all carry anger, bitterness and some nonforgiveness. (P 257)

These wounds can easily embitter and harden our soul.

If our spiritual life is to grow we need to deal with these challenges in our life, to recognize God's grace even in the midst of them, and to mellow our soul, rather than harden our hearts through resentments, bitterness and even hatred.

Rolheiser continues:

... As we age, we can begin to trim down our spiritual vocabulary, and eventually we can get it down to three words: Forgive, forgive, forgive! To

die with a forgiving heart is the ultimate moral and religious imperative... All the dogmatic and moral purity in the world does little for us if our hearts are bitter and incapable of forgiveness. (P. 256)

If we listen to the words of Jesus, and observe his own actions, we encounter the teaching and life style of forgiveness. Jesus challenges us to be people of forgiveness.

What can we say about forgiveness on our life's journey?

Forgiveness is not about *forgetting*, nor is it *pretending* we're not hurt or angry. It is not necessarily *reconciling* with the person who hurt us – at times that would be neither possible nor healthy. Forgiveness is not about *getting back* what we lost. Nor is it *pretending* that we messed up and are to blame.

What *is* forgiveness?

Forgiveness is more than just an individual act of forgiving. Forgiveness is a way of life, a lifestyle. It is a way of behaving which influences one's whole life – a general tenor of our journey of life.

Jesus' Teaching

For the Christian, forgiveness is a way of life and not just a belief. Forgiveness is seen against the backdrop of the teaching and life of Jesus whom we follow.

A number of Jesus' stories focus on forgiveness. The Prodigal Son of Luke (15) shows us the father's mercy or undeserved forgiveness of his son who has squandered his part of the inheritance and shamed the family name. The father takes him back.

And, of course, we know that Jesus goes further than this. He practices what he preaches.

From the cross we hear Him pray:

Father, forgive them, they do not know what they are doing. (Lk 23:34)

God's dream for us, given us by Jesus, is that God wants to mend our world. Mercy or undeserved forgiveness is part of God's way of mending.

By our Baptism we are bonded to God's dream and God's mending work.

Prayer helps us to understand what this means for our lives,
as we follow in the footsteps of Jesus.

I want to turn our attention to a recent "Forgiveness Story" which occurred during the first week of October, 2006, in Lancaster County, PA.

A depressed and angry bus driver shot 10 young Amish schoolgirls in their one room schoolhouse in central PA.

The entire Amish community reacted with grief, but also with words and sentiments of forgiveness for the disturbed individual who had perpetrated this crime.

One of the parents of the slain schoolgirls went to the home of the killer and told his wife that the Amish community forgave her husband for what he had done.

The Amish community also offered to share some of the monies that were given to them by fellow Americans...

the family could use it for the education of their children.

The wife of the gunman who killed the girls released a statement thanking the Amish and others the Lancaster County community for their "forgiveness, grace and mercy."

She said that her and her three young children have been overwhelmed by the community support since the Oct 2nd shootings.

I remember seeing an interview on TV with a Mennonite midwife who had been present at the birth of many of the slain girls.

When the interviewer asked her what her reaction was, she responded that she grieved for the loss of such innocent life, but that she, along with the Amish families, forgave the killer.

The interviewer was stunned and at a loss for words.

She didn't know what to say.

She stood there with the midwife, speechless.

In our violent, revenge-soaked society, the midwife's response made no sense.

The interviewer asked, "How can you say that?"

The midwife answered that this was her belief and the belief of the Amish community.

Jesus showed us the way.

Either we live with resentments, revenge and rage in our hearts, or we forgive and walk in the footsteps of Jesus.

Do we have a hard time understanding that?

Would we react in the same way?

What stories of forgiveness do you know?

Have you met any *Forgiveness Mentors*?

If so, talk with them. Ask them questions. And listen to their stories.

V Blessing and Cursing

Another part of the development of our spiritual life involves blessing and cursing.

Story... The Wise Man and the Bandit

Once upon a time there was a very wise man who was on his way to a village on the other side of the mountain to teach, to beg, and to call more disciples to follow his way. He intended to take a shortcut over the mountain pass to save time. But immediately the people and his friends said, "No, don't go that way. The pass is filled with bandits lying in wait for you and if they find you don't have money or jewels they will kill you brutally.

The wise man couldn't be bothered with such warnings, and he continued on his way. Well, no sooner had he climbed high into the pass when a notorious bandit appeared, bearing down on him with sword in hand and shouting, "Your money or your life!"

The wise man looked up at the man astride his horse, pulled out his empty pockets and said, "I guess it's my life, since I have no money."

As the bandit moved toward him, sword in motion, the wise man stopped him in his tracks: "You know the rules. If you take my life, then you must at least grant me a last wish!"

The bandit stopped. "Alright. What do you want? Make it quick old man."

The wise man said, "My wish is simple and has two parts. First, see that great tree over there and the limb that extends far out over the path? Cut it off!" The bandit grinned and in seconds the limb lay on the ground. "Alright old man, what is the second part?"

The wise man turned toward him and said very quietly and steadily, "Now put it back on again."

The bandit was speechless and then started laughing uproariously. "You are the stupidest man I've ever met! No one can put a limb back on a tree after it's been cut off! Insane! You're idiotic."

The wise man looked at him and said, "I am not the one who is stupid. You are. Anyone can destroy. Any child without knowledge can cut things up. Anyone can main, kill, mutilate and undo reality. It takes no power or intelligence whatsoever."

The bandit was caught off guard. The wise man continued, "What takes power, real power, is to be able to heal, to bring life, to restore, to stand in

the breach, to undo the evil and the destruction that you've done in the past. That takes real power, imagination, and creativity. What you've done takes nothing at all. Anyone can do what you've done. They eyed each other for a long time. Then the bandit got off of his horse, laid down his sword at the wise man's feet, knelt in respect before him, and humbly asked, "Teach me that kind of power."

We have that power to give life... to bless others rather than curse others.

Jesus would give us that power.

Elements of blessing and cursing... (See Ronald Rohleiser, *The Holy Longing*, pp. 203ff)

1. Look at someone with positive regard... This gives the vibe that I am glad you are here, you bring something into my life *versus* looking at someone and thinking, 'you're an idiot, who do you think you are, you think you've got talent... you don't – you're full of yourself.' Unlike God, cursing tries to deny joy, suppress life, squelch exuberance and shame enthusiasm. Why do these things threaten us? (Body language can also get either of these attitudes across.)
2. Speak well of someone, saying something genuinely positive to someone *vs* being threatened by their energy and holding back any positive words = cursing subtly. Or being downright mean and demeaning toward a person... perhaps making fun of him or her... or bullying that person.
3. Give away something of our own life so that someone else can have more life (eg... mentoring, time, experience, wisdom) *vs* cursing which demands that you give something to me that will build up my life.

When was the last time you blessed someone either by the way you looked at them, or by the words that you used, or by sharing with them something of yourself which enriched their life... your time, your encouragement or some of your wisdom?

As our spiritual life develops and grows God blesses us and we take the opportunity to bless others. Life is not about what we can take from the table. Life is about what we can bring to the table.

Blessing is a way of giving life.

VI Communal Spirituality

I want to finally point out that for Christians our spiritual life is communal... as it was for Israel at the time of Jesus and for the disciples of Jesus from the beginning.

For the early Church and over its history the spiritual life of individuals was always in the context of the worshipping Church.

Paul challenges the early Christian community in his letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 10:25

... We should not absent ourselves from the assembly, as some do, but encourage one another.

Pope Francis puts it this way:

But there's a danger of forgetting that He saved us individually but at the same time as part of his people or community, His people. The Lord always saves his people. From the moment he calls Abraham and promises to make them his people. And the Lord saves us as part of this community. That's why the writer of this Letter (to the Hebrews) tells us: 'Let us be concerned for each other.' There is no salvation solely for me. If that's the way I understand salvation, I'm mistaken and going along the wrong path. The privatization of salvation is the wrong path." (Talk on Jan 29, 2015)

We are a part of a community of disciples...

Another way of looking at this...

Hell... Picture a circle of people sitting side by side, so close to each other that their shoulders are touching. In the center of this circle is a big pot of delicious looking and smelling stew. The scent of it makes you want to try some right now.

The folks in the circle have a large wooden spoon with a long handle taped to their right forearms. They are yelling at each other angrily, they looked lean and hungry... there was no happiness there. The problem was that because they were so close together they couldn't get a spoon of the delicious stew into their mouths. They would bump into each other when they tried to feed themselves.

This is truly hell.

Heaven... Picture a circle of people sitting side by side, so close to each other that their shoulders are touching. In the center of this circle is a big pot of delicious looking and smelling stew. The scent of it makes you want to try some right now.

The folks in the circle have a large wooden spoon with a long handle taped to their right forearms. These folks are happy and joyful, smiling and joking, and well fed.

What's the difference... ah, then you notice it. Each person is dipping his or her spoon into the stew, and then feeding each other. They are taking care of each other first.

We are on our journey with others. We are not isolated monads of self-interest who are self-determining consumers purchasing our way to happiness.

We Christians are on the road together and we need the Christian community to help and encourage, sustain and bless us... We need to do the same for others.

Conclusion

Our Christian spiritual life is founded on our relationship with Jesus. We journey as a community of disciples of Jesus. Our prayer lives are centered on Jesus... Paul the Apostle encourages all of us to "keep your eyes on Jesus." (Heb 12:2)

As our spiritual life grows we become grateful people, people who recognize how gifted we are, both by God and by others. We learn to give thanks. Life's difficulties, tragedies and sufferings teach us compassion, sympathy, patience and courage.

With the help of God and others we learn over time the importance of forgiveness in our life, lest we remain embittered and resentful and hardened.

We become people who bless rather than curse in our relationships. After all, we are disciples of Jesus, God's greatest blessing to us.