

Rooted in Christ... Signs

Introduction

When we realize that we are rooted in Christ and have the responsibility to nourish and deepen our roots – our spiritual life – we might ask:

How do we know we are growing?

Trees grow, plants grow, children grow... I remember my mom marking our refrigerator with pencil marks recording my height... and how proud I was as these marks got higher and higher.

(Of course, some growth is not necessarily welcome... for example, our waist size!)

I want to talk a bit about spiritual growth... about the deepening and developing of spiritual roots in our life.

How do we know we are growing spiritually?

What is our goal?

What do we want to grow into?

Mathew Kelly in his beautiful book **Rediscover Catholicism** says that we need to grow in *holiness*.

Some look at "holiness" as being too "churchy". A reporter once asked Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta if she was a "holy" person. She looked right at him and said, "It's my job to be holy, it's your job to be holy too. Why do you think God put us on this earth?"

Jesus describes "holiness" by saying, "*Love your God with your whole heart, your whole soul and your whole mind; love your neighbor as yourself.*"

I want to look as some signs of interior growth in *holiness* and exterior growth in *holiness*.

What does "holiness" feel like? What does it "look" like?

Kelly describes *holiness* as growing into the *best versions of ourselves* that God wants us to be.

I would describe it as our *transformation* into other Christs and bringing Christ into our world... our continuing Christ's mission in our world.

I Transformation...

Some basic questions...

What is your life all about?

Why are you here?

Where are you going?

Who are you?

Are we merely entertained consumers who live in a Paradise of Stuff which yields momentary pleasure with little happiness or meaning?

How influenced are we by TV's seductive and constant pitch of "new and improved" stuff, guaranteed to make our lives easier and to make us happy- money back guarantee!

Do we get blinded by a culture of “What’s in it for me?” And “If it feels good do it.”

In the twelfth chapter of his letter to the Romans Paul describes how early Christians should behave... in the midst of a pagan culture. He exhorts:

And now, brothers, I beg you through the mercy of God to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, your spiritual worship. Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that you may judge what is God’s will, what is good, pleasing and perfect. (Rom 12:1-2)

Listen to this other translation of this passage:

So here’s what I want you to do. God helping you: Take your life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him. Don’t become so well-adjusted to your culture that you fit into it without even thinking. Instead, fix your attention on God. You’ll be changed

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from the inside out. Readily recognize what he wants from you, and quickly respond to it. Unlike the culture around you, always dragging you down to its level of immaturity, God brings the best out of you, develops well-formed maturity in you

Be transformed.

Be changed from the inside out.

This is a key image Paul uses when speaking about Christians living in the midst of a pagan culture.

Christians who are rooted in Christ are *transformed* – changed.

(Listen to some more of Paul's teaching on this:

We know that God makes all things work together for the good of those who have been called according to his decree. Those whom he foreknew he predestined to share the image of his Son, that the Son might be the first-born of many brothers. (Rom 8:28-29)

All of us... are being transformed from glory to glory into his very image by the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor 3:18))

All spiritual growth is about transformation.

II Interior Growth

Let's begin with how this *transformation* expresses itself *interiorly* as we grow in holiness,

or as we grow into the best version of ourselves that is God's will for us,

or as we become more like Christ.

I would like to talk about three signs of this interior growth.

I'm sure there are many others.

I would like to deal with Forgiveness, Peace and Wisdom.

Forgiveness... We Experience Forgiveness

Awhile back a person came to me for confession and said she had not been to confession for a year. Then she said that her sin was anger. That was all she said. I asked her if that was getting better or worse. She said it was the same.

If you went to a doctor and said your arm was hurting / he would ask you where the hurt was and ask you to describe the pain. Was it a lot of pain or a little bit of pain? How long have you had this pain? He would probably examine your arm and he might suggest you get an x-ray of the arm. The question would be... what is causing the pain and what to do about it?

The woman in confession was unwilling to give me any more information. She just wanted absolution and be gone. Is that what God's forgiveness is all about? How can the divine physician

begin the healing process if we are not willing to open our hurting heart and guilty conscience to God by means of the confessional?

Can you and I readily admit that we are sinners and in need of healing?

How have we sinned?

Do we realize that our sin offends God... listen to Jeremiah the prophet preaching to Israel about how their sinfulness offends him...

Thus says the Lord...Your crimes have prevented these things (God's blessings), your sins have turned back these blessings from you. For there are among my people criminals; like fowlers they set traps, but it is men they catch. Their houses are as full of treachery as a bird-cage is of birds; therefore they grow powerful and rich, fat and sleek. They go their wicked way; justice they do not defend by advancing the claim of the fatherless or judging the cause of the poor. Shall I not punish these things? (Jer 5:25-29)

God is angered by the way people treat people; by the way our sins hurt people...

Who of us can say that we have not hurt people?

But we say it so blithely!

But God knows the truth about us.

Jeremiah also tells us that God does not remain in anger. Jeremiah describes God's continued love for us, though we are sinners...

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God says... Is Ehphraim not my favored son, the child in whom I delight? Often as I threaten him, I still remember him with favor. My heart stirs for him. I must show him mercy, says the Lord. (Jer 31:20)

Do we realize that Jesus shed his blood so that our sins could be forgiven?... That is how much God loves us.

We must never make light of our sins as if God's mercy and forgiveness are cheap. God's forgiveness and love are a costly grace. At the Eucharist we remember the cost of our forgiveness...

My body broken for you, my blood shed for you... so that sins may be forgiven.

As we are rooted in Christ we begin to realize our sinfulness.

As we approach the light we begin to see the truth of darkness.

As we experience healing we begin to see the depth of our sinful infections... the residue of our guilt and the ache of our sinfulness.

As we approach the Truth we begin to recognize our need for honesty in asking for healing.

This need not cause us depressive guilt or paralyzing anguish... because we begin to grasp the depth of Christ's redeeming love for us...

Now we begin to recognize the depth of our sinfulness and the cost of our forgiveness.

This is the forgiveness we experience. This forgiveness takes time to heal us of our sinfulness. Give time time. Don't rush it. It is not cheap grace. But it is grace! We begin to see that our world is full of grace.

Once we begin to experience the depth of God's forgiveness of us, we can grow in our forgiveness of others. I can't say much about our forgiving others here... I would refer you to the Monastery website where I have posted my reflections on how we exercise forgiveness...

www.catholic-church.org/stpaulsmonastery

Wisdom... Sophia

The word wisdom, *Sophia*, appears 75 times in the New Testament.

Sophia is the gift of God that allows us to see our lives and the events of our lives as God sees our life. (St. Thomas Aquinas)

Wisdom allows us to judge life from God's point of view.

Sophia widens our perspective beyond the merely political, economic or cultural... and certainly beyond our cultural individualism, hedonism and pursuit of mediocrity.

In the first chapter of Paul's first letter to the young Christian community in the Greek port city of Corinth Paul contrasts worldly wisdom with God's wisdom. He poignantly writes:

The message of the cross is complete absurdity to those headed for ruin, but to us who are experiencing salvation it is the power of God. Scripture says,

"I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and thwart the cleverness of the clever"... (1 Cor 1:18-20)

(Has God not turned the wisdom of this world into folly? Since in God's wisdom the world did not come to know him thru "wisdom,"

it pleased God to save those who believe through the absurdity of the preaching of the Gospel. (1 Cor 1:18-21))

In the second chapter of this same letter Paul goes on to explain:

There is, to be sure, a certain wisdom which we express among the spiritually mature. It is not wisdom of this age, however, nor of the rulers of this age... no, what we utter is God's wisdom: a mysterious, a hidden wisdom. God planned it before all ages for our glory... God has revealed this wisdom to us through the Spirit. (1 Cor 2:6,10)

There is another translation of this second passage that helps us understand the message in more modern terms: (The Message)

We, of course, have plenty of wisdom to pass on to you once you get your feet on firm spiritual ground, but it's not popular wisdom, the fashionable wisdom of high-priced experts that will be out-of-date in a year or so. God's wisdom is something mysterious that goes deep into the interior of his purposes. You don't find it lying around on the surface. It's not the latest message, but more like the oldest – what God determined as the way to bring out his best in us, long before we ever arrived on the scene. The experts of our day haven't a clue about what this eternal plan is. If they had, they wouldn't have killed the Master of the God-designed life on a cross....(1 Cor 2:6-10)

But you've seen and heard it because God by his Spirit has brought it all out into the open before you. (1 Cor 2:6-10)

Notice this *Sophia* of God... It's different from our worldly wisdom.

We are a community with a memory... We *celebrate* that memory each time we attend Mass. That memory reveals to us God's

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Sophia... God redeemed our broken sinful world thru the suffering of His very own Son, come among us.

We live in a culture that so often denies suffering, pain and death... our culture longs for science and technology to do away with pain.

We need to deal with pain and suffering / and do everything we can do to alleviate them... but will we? Pain and suffering are woven into the fabric of our existence. So much pain and suffering are the result of sin... how we hurt each other. Can science and technology do away with sin? Read your newspapers each day.

Our world is still broken. Many people become very angry and cynical because our culture does not produce the relief (and could I say *salvation*) that so many commercials promise.

But for us who are rooted in Christ...

We now view our lives thru the wisdom of the Cross.

At each Mass we remember our suffering God.

God will not be overcome by sin and evil and darkness.

God will not let us be overcome by the powers of darkness and evil.

The darkness and evil of sin and suffering will not win out.

The Powers of darkness will not overcome our world.

Our God bears sin and death in His very own body to conquer them with love and forgiveness.

This is the Good News that Jesus preached and lived.

God will not let our world go unredeemed.

God would help us to die to our sinful self, our greedy self, our arrogant self, our lustful self, our envious self, our lazy self, our fearful self... so that we might experience God's graciousness love and forgiveness in our lives and bring God's healing and compassion into our world.

This is God's *Sophia*.

What a gift... to know God's love for our world and for us...

to look upon our world as God looks upon it.

To begin to see our role in God's plan for our world.

This is *Sophia*.

Story

I remember once when I talked with a man who was going through a difficult period in his life. He had lost his job. His wife was sick. He had kids in college... what else could go wrong?

I asked him how he was holding up under all of this stress. I asked him if he were able to pray during this difficult time. His answer surprised me.

He assured me that he trusted that God would help him thru this tough part of his journey. He said that he looks at the crucifix and He knows that Jesus the Good Shepherd will not abandon him, for Jesus knows what it is to suffer. He trusts Jesus. He continues praying every day. He knows that life can throw these curves at you... but with God's help and the help of the friends and family

that God had blessed him with... with this help he can and will make it.

That's Sophia.

Peace... Shalom.

Look at John's Gospel account of Christ's appearances to his disciples after his resurrection – after Jesus' coming to new, vigorous, and energizing life.

Jesus' first words are: Peace (*Shalom*) be with you." (Jn 20:20) (Lk 24:36)

Peace was the gift of the Messiah... Don't fear... have *Shalom*.

Too many people today are enmeshed in a cocoon of fear and worry,

or imprisoned by resentments or addictions.

Too many people are trapped in their own little world.

When we become rooted in Christ / a whole new surplus of meaning beyond our own lives opens up to us... new vistas appear... our sight widens, our insight deepens... our world changes.

Many people begin to experience a deeper sense of Peace in their lives.

This term Peace, *Shalom*, appears over 100 times in the New Testament.

I might describe *Shalom* as the serene awareness that God loves us, walks with us, is on our side, wants us to flourish, and will help us.

Peace is an experience of grace – it is God’s gracious gift to us... thru Christ.

In every one of Paul’s letters to the early Christian communities he begins by praying that God’s Grace and Peace be with them.

2 Cor 1:2

Grace and Shalom from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

Gal 1:3

We wish you the favor and Shalom of God our Father and of the Lord Jesus Christ.

What a beautiful prayer...

That God’s graciousness and *Shalom* be with the early Christian communities.

Shalom was the gift of the Messiah which the people Israel waited for...

Once again, I would describe it as a serene awareness of the gift of God’s saving blessings present in our lives... an awareness of our right relationship with God and with others and with our world thanks to Jesus suffering and death.

This is the gift of the risen Lord whose body was broken and whose blood was shed so that we might be saved and experience God's blessings...

We are now justified, redeemed and reconciled with God.

We are called and strengthened for a right relationship with others.

We know that we are forgiven.

We can now say that beautiful Psalm 23:

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

Or again Psalm 62:

My soul rests in God alone, from whom comes my salvation.

The person who knows this knows Shalom.

Contrast this with sin...

What does sin bring about?

Sin complicates our lives, confuses our minds, and hardens our hearts.

Sin can have devastating effects in our lives... and the lives of others.

We all know this from experience.

Think about persons whose lives are consumed by envy, sloth, arrogance, lust, anger, greed or gluttony... the seven Deadly Sins. (See my sermon on "The Seven Deadly Sins" on our website.)

Too many people's lives are burdened and twisted by self-centeredness and selfishness... is that what God wants for us?

Is that the "best version of ourselves" which is God's saving will for us?

When we are rooted in Christ we experience God's *Shalom* in our hearts... inner peace... even in the midst of the storms of life.

Forgiveness, Sophia and Shalom... God's gifts to us... sign of interior spiritual growth.

II Exterior Growth

What are the exterior signs of being rooted in Jesus?

Story... The Nursing Home Angel

I remember once I was giving a Lenten parish Mission in one of our suburban parishes.

I was touched by a one of Jesus' disciples... one of God's "little people". She's not a celebrity. She's not one of the rich and famous. She's a widow, who lived in the parish, who went to Mass daily, and who took daily communion to the people in a nursing home in her parish.

I accompanied her to that nursing home one morning, a cold and windy winter morning...

and for me it became a journey up the mountain with Jesus...

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*where I saw people transfigured momentarily
in the presence of compassion and love.*

*The woman bringing communion -
bringing Jesus - to the old and frail in the nursing home -
she knew all of their names, and they knew hers.*

*When she entered a room the people in the room looked up,
saw her,*

and many of their faces lit up with a smile of recognition.

*She would go over to the person receiving communion,
give them a hug and a kiss on the cheek...*

and greet them by name.

She introduced each one to me.

*I told them who I was and that I was privileged to bring them
communion on this day.*

*We prayed together... shared a bit of Scripture, said the Our
Father, then they received the Body of Christ...*

*Afterwards we held hands, I blessed them, and we chatted when
it was possible.... Then we moved on to another resident.*

*The woman I accompanied told me how she felt so blessed to be
able to serve these little people of God, our brothers and sisters
in the family of God.*

She seemed to glow in the presence of these residents.

*And so many of them responded with a smile and with gratitude
that she would visit them and bring Jesus to them...*

You probably won't read about this woman in tomorrow's newspaper, or hear what about what she does on the radio. But to me, this is what life is all about... this is what our journey and call from God are about... this is what exterior transformation into other Christs is about.

We are graced by God to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, continuing Jesus' work in our world, allowing ourselves to be God's instruments in our world.

So many in our world would look at those old people in our story above as useless... a drain on the resources of their families and our society. This is not how we who are rooted in Christ look upon them. We look upon them with the eyes of Christ. These are our brothers and sisters.

This is **our** call... this is what **our** life's *journey* is all about.

Conclusion...

A Story

The old cathedral was a site to behold with its ancient art, its ornate woodwork, and its stained glass masterpieces. The tour guide offered spiritual and cultural insights that satisfied most of

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the tourists. But one little girl was curious about the people depicted in the windows.

"Who are those people?" the girl asked and pointed to a large and colorful stained glass window.

"Saints," the tour guide answered.

"Oh!" The sun was bright, the window large, and the girl was tiny in comparison. The sight overwhelmed her.

The tour guide began to move, but the girl was still awestruck and curious. "Hey, wait," she called out. "What do saints do?"

The tour guide didn't want to spend time on a lesson about the saints. So he just said, "Saints do good things for God."

That evening before bedtime prayers, the little girl had an announcement for her mother. "I know what saints do, Mommy. I know the good thing they do for God."

"Really. What is it?" Her mother asked.

"Saints let the light shine right through them."

Do we let God's light shine thru us?

That's what *transformation* is all about.

Mathew Kelly in his book **Rediscover Catholicism** describes this as letting God help us become the best version of ourselves we can be.

Each of us will be different. Each of us has our own talents, our education, our work experience, our family experience, our energy, our personality... but we are transformed when we let God's light shine thru us.

Pope's talk to young German Catholics in late September of 2011 during his pastoral visit to Germany Benedict XVI said:

There is no saint, apart from the Blessed Virgin Mary, who has not also known sin, who has never fallen. Dear friends, Christ is not so much interested in how often in your lives you stumble and fall, as in how often you pick yourselves up again. He does

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not demand glittering achievements, but He wants His light to shine in you. He does not call you because you are good and perfect, but because He is good and He wants to make you His friends. Yes, you are the light of the world because Jesus is your light.