

CONFERENCE EIGHT

PASTORAL CONSIDERATIONS: IDENTITY AND SPIRITUAL UNION

We have completed the consideration of the spiritual program offered by the Church and found repeatedly in the document of Vatican II, *The Constitution of the Church*. This and the following conferences will treat of related, principally pastoral, considerations. In this conference I will discuss our identity, and the identity we should find in others. This is necessary for our own balance and for our practice of charity. Through this exercise we can practice the spiritual ecumenism that Vatican II declared was the most important element in ecumenism. This conference will be completed in Conference Ten which will treat of dialogue as distinct from the evangelizing mission of the Church.

We are stabilized by knowing who Jesus is and who we are, by knowing Him and knowing ourselves. Even after receiving all the sacraments, and studying theology, and becoming priests, it is not easy to really believe that “Jesus loves me.” Nor is it easy to know oneself. It is one thing to know the revelations made by Christ; it is another to assimilate them. We believe that Jesus has laid down His life to prove His love for us, that He has given Himself to us in Holy Communion to merge His being with ours, and to unite us with each other. But do we really believe that we are loved by Him and by the Father? Now what makes this assimilation so difficult for most of us? First of all there are our sins, then our weaknesses, then our experience of our limitations. We are aware of straying from Him at times, even perhaps most of the time.

Among our limitations is the fact that we have a fallen human nature. That means that our imaginations and emotions may rebel against our will and reason. They may bring thoughts and feelings to us that we may find objectionable. For example, we might have an obscene thought just as we are receiving Holy Communion. We have the sense that if other people knew what we thought and what we feel, they would not love us. And we know that God does know our thoughts and our emotions. So we feel unlovable. We may have been absolved by our sins, yet they stain our memory. Because of absolution and expiation our sins may not stain our souls, but our memory is stained, and despite our regained innocence the sense of having sinned may burden us.

As priests we know the answers to these difficulties. But do these answers sink in? It is only through ongoing prayer and reflection that we can offset this sense of not being loved, by the mystery of Christ’s love for us.

Our balance requires a double knowledge of ourselves – what we are of ourselves, and what we are by grace. St. Paul said, “By the grace of God I am what I am.” So what are we by grace? By grace we are partakers of the divine nature, heirs of Heaven, other Christs, His priests and prolongations, by which He mixes with His people here and now. And what are we of ourselves? The Father said to Catherine of Siena, “I Am Who Am and you are who are not.” St. Paul asks us, “What have you that you have not received?” We have received our human nature, salvation and sanctification, the priesthood, our education, the beneficent circumstances of family, friends, and so on. These are gifts in the natural and supernatural order. So what are we of ourselves? Nothing. The Old

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Testament says, “All nations are as nothing before God.” So also are all individuals, of themselves. Of ourselves we are nothing. Moreover, the only things we can claim as exclusively our own, as originating from us, are our sins. The disorder of sin has its first beginning in my will, in nothing else. So the fallen human nature, the rebellion of emotions and imagination against the will, the weaknesses and limitations, they are mine. To reflect only on these leads to discouragement, timidity, and worse. While the reflection on our participation in the divine nature, on our being other Christs may lead us to self-satisfaction and pride. Therefore, we must know both these things about ourselves in order to have a balanced view. Our sins may stain our memory, they may haunt us, but they do not stain the soul – since they have been forgiven and absolved.

The negative remarks made to us in our childhood, especially by parents, are usually engraved in the cognitive sense which replays them on occasion. This is not our intelligence or our conscience. But it accuses us. “You are bad, bad, bad,” it may say. Besides our external senses of sight, hearing, touch, and smell, we have interior senses, and the cognitive sense is one of these. The imagination imagines a rose. The memory says, “I saw it at such a place and at such a time.” The cognitive sense says, “It is good.” The cognitive sense gives a value judgment and the emotions follow upon this judgment. If it is a negative judgment, then a negative emotion follows. Upon the judgment, “You are bad,” follow the emotions of shame, guilt, and sadness. The cognitive sense corresponds in humans to the instinct or estimative sense in animals. A lamb knows by its instinct that a wolf is dangerous. The cognitive sense has something of the aspect of reason, but it is a sense. It cannot take circumstances into account. Those words it repeats may have been said when we were five, and referred to a prank of ours, and elicited an exasperated remark, but all these circumstances are not taken into account by the cognitive sense. A mother may miss Mass because she is at home taking care of a sick child, and the cognitive sense not being able to take this into account says, “You missed Mass, that’s a mortal sin. You committed a mortal sin.”

We must learn to identify this broken record as not our conscience, our intelligence, and we must counteract it by sound judgment. Then we will be less afflicted by negative thoughts about ourselves and by lowered self-esteem. On the other hand the cognitive sense may repeat what was told it in an early childhood moment, “You are wonderful, you are precious.” Here too we must disconnect from this cognitive evaluation, which pats us on the back.

Christ came not to call the just but sinners. Our weaknesses and limitations do not turn the love of Jesus and His Father from us, but draw them to us, since they love to act through mercy, and mercy can exist only in response to need. We are needy, and that is why Jesus is attracted to us. There is nothing else in us that draws Him to us but our misery. Our Lady expressed this in her Magnificat, “He has looked with favor on his lowly servant.” Mary was destined to be conceived in original sin. There was nothing there for God to love outside of His own design to make this nothingness, destined to be born in sin, to be His Mother. All else, her immaculate conception, her perfections, were His gift. They did not exist as that which drew His love. Rather, it was His love that brought her and her perfections into existence. St. Thomas says that even creation is an act of God’s mercy. He looks upon the nothingness outside of Himself, and in mercy He creates, and fills the void with something, something in which then He is well pleased. We must understand that our faults and sins do not turn us away from Him. Rather we,

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because of them, turn further from Him, withdrawing. St. Therese on the other hand gives us the only true response to sin: She tells us that if she were covered with sin she would throw herself broken heartedly into His arms and His flaming love would burn away her sins. This is also David's response to his sin as given in Psalm 50 (in some numerations 51) the Miserere. We have nowhere to go after sinning but to Him who can heal us and desires to do so. It is He who gives us repentance.

Jesus, knowing us as we are and loving us as we are, sees our potentialities for improvement and desires that these potentialities be actualized. A father accepts his infant son exactly as he is, without the capacity to talk, walk, reason, and play baseball. But he does not want the infant to remain an infant all his life. He is content to have the infant go through the stages of development, with reverses and progression. His love urges Him to help this process, so that his infant son may become a mature individual. We must accept ourselves as we are, with our failures and regressions, but we need also to accept our potentialities to grow and the means by which this growth occurs – socially, emotionally, intellectually, and above all, spiritually. Above all spiritually because spirituality purifies our motivation, clarifies and strengthens it, and promotes our growth and well being.

Our knowledge, artistic and productive talents, our skills in thinking and working are perfections of our faculties, i.e. of our intelligence. But the moral virtues perfect us as human beings. In technical terms, the former are perfections *secundum quid*, and the latter perfections *per se* – of our humanity. We need both sets of perfections, but it is the moral virtues, our perfections as human beings, that are the most important and indispensable. We obtain them through grace, prayer, the sacraments, and the practice of the virtues. We all have this potentiality to grow in these moral virtues and that is what God expects of us.

Unfortunately, the universities neglect the growth of these virtues, and that is why, unless students take other means to grow humanly, they tend to produce lop-sided individuals. Teachers who give a good example of moral virtue, and who are truly concerned about the moral development of their students can counteract this tendency of the universities, and this is attested by students who have had the good fortune of meeting such a teacher along the way of his or her education.

Newman clubs and campus ministry should redress the one-sided development promoted by universities. They should promote the spiritual, religious, and moral life of students. For this they should introduce them to the Church's spiritual program and help students to grow spiritually as well as intellectually.

Professor Jerome Kerwin, who was the Dean of the Social Science Division of the University of Chicago and a professor of sociology in the thirties, had a student who told him she intended to commit suicide. He explained the Gospel to her and she found in it a reason for living. Now this would be against the law today. However, if he had introduced her to a satanic cult, the law would find no objection. Something is drastically wrong here.

When we remember what we are by grace, we say with St. Paul, "I can do all things in Him who strengthens me." When we remember what we are of ourselves, we give thanks to God for His gifts, and are vigilant against the erring inclinations within us, that we may avoid acting them out.

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As St. Paul says, we are body, soul, and spirit. But we tend to take our identity from our body image. We are white, yellow, black, or red skinned. We are male or female. We have heterosexual or homosexual inclinations. As a Jew I think of myself as first of all a Jew, and then as a human person. Persons with a homosexual inclination think of themselves as first of all a homosexual and then as a human being. The body and its tendencies and qualities divide us. But we are first of all human beings, then male or female, white or black, homosexual or heterosexually oriented. That unites us. The soul, which animates the body, is a spiritual substance, without parts, without division, without anything in it that can wear out, age, or be destroyed. It is specifically the same in each of us, making us human beings. That is what unites us. Moreover, we are all of the same race, descended from Adam and Eve, brothers and sisters. This is even being discovered scientifically by microbiologists who find this written in the DNA. These scientists, who usually are evolutionists, nevertheless call this one woman from whom they trace the DNA of all living human beings, Eve!

But since our soul is spiritual it does not make the same sensible impression on us as do our senses, emotions, and sensible inclinations. That is why we think of ourselves in terms of the body. But the prayer of Jesus, that we may be one, that we may be one as He and the Father are one, is realized by a union in spirit – by our having the same faith, the same hope, and the same charity. “The love of God is poured forth in our souls by the Holy Spirit who is given to us.” That is what makes us one – we are one in soul by nature, one in soul by grace.

The meditation on these fundamental truths should help us to discover and overcome our biases, prejudices, and discrimination. This meditation can help us to have the charity of Christ, which extends not only to our friends but also to our enemies. We should apply this meditation to those who frustrate us, irritate, and annoy us. This enlarges our hearts, mellows them, overcomes our severity and haughtiness, and unites us to the Hearts of Christ and Mary, which are open to all human beings, and respect all beings in accord with their place in the universe.

Our Lord says of the pagans that they love those who love them. Now love does beget love; that is natural. More is expected of us as Christians and as priests. Christ explicitly says that we must love our enemies. He tells us that the Father sheds His sunshine upon the good and the bad, and that our love must be perfect as is His. Enemies are those who harm us, who delight in tripping us up, who rejoice in our misfortunes and try to bring them about. Certainly most, if not all of those who frustrate and irritate us do not fall in this category. Therefore all the more should we accept and love them.

The priest is called to be all things to all men and women. It is unbecoming of him to harbor discrimination, bias, and prejudice. Moreover, it is his role to help his people to overcome these incursions into their charity. With this in mind and with our call to ecumenism, I will review some of the prejudices common among us.

With regard to religions, we recall that all Christians, whether evangelicals, fundamentalists, main line, who are baptized validly, are brothers and sisters in Christ by virtue of the sacrament of baptism. The divisions do not come from God, but from man. Vatican Council II says that in these separated churches and groups there are rays of truth and means of sanctification. Some of their adherents may cultivate the truth and means of sanctification available to them more assiduously than do our Catholic people cultivate theirs.

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Then there are the Jews, which Pope John Paul II reminded us are our elder brothers. He said that there is an intrinsic connection between the Catholic religion and the Jewish religion. With regard to the sensitivity of Jews, we must remember that Catholics and Christians have subjected them to centuries of mistreatment and discrimination. Father Edward Flannery of Providence, RI, a diocesan priest recently deceased, opened my eyes to the extent of this persecution by his book *Twenty-three Centuries of Anguish of the Jews*. In view of this persecution Jews must overlook a great deal to look favorably upon Christians and the Church. As a teenager, boarding a bus, I was called by the driver, without any provocation, a Christ-killer. A very saintly Trappist priest-monk told of how as a boy, he and a few other Catholic boys had thrown manure into a synagogue. Actually my own contacts as a Jew with Catholics were very pleasant. I did not feel as much discrimination from Catholics as I experienced from Protestants. Indeed I felt a certain warmth from them. I remember how a grammar school Irish Catholic boy, Tom Heaney, would send me a Christmas card each year. Nevertheless, for many Jews, the cross is the symbol of the Russian pogroms in which Jews were tortured and killed, and women raped.

Nostra Aetate has pointed out that not all the Jews of Christ's time were involved in his death, and certainly not the Jews of succeeding generations. The charge of deicide is also refuted. Legends of Jews drinking Christian children's blood at their sacred feasts were calumnies that began persecutions in the Middle Ages, and even during modern times. If the Orthodox still remember the barbarous sacking of Constantinople by the Crusaders, and the Muslims remember how the same Crusaders waded in Muslim blood, is it surprising that Jews are wary of churchmen who have been persecutors up to Vatican Council II's *Nostra Aetate* which some of them opposed?

Caiphas, who with the Sanhedrin, was responsible for Christ's death, was known in the Talmud to have been a corrupt person. The *Catechism of the Council of Trent* states that it is our sins which crucified Jesus.

The Muslims are apt to be stereotyped according to the belief and behavior of the fanatical fundamentalists among them who are a vociferous minority. Because of the declining population in Europe, Arabs are migrating there in significant numbers. There is an active dialogue going on between Muslims and Catholics. The international association of Muslims condemned the fanatical GIA of Algeria for putting to death several peaceful Trappist monks at Timberline in 1997, monks who had the best relationships with their Muslim neighbors. At the moment⁵ five monks have returned to this monastery, and an official of the Trappist Order, Dom Augustine Roberts, the Procurator General, stated that their return was an evidence of their forgiveness of the GIA, a forgiveness testified by the murdered monks, before they were kidnapped and killed, for they had been forewarned by previous visits of the GIA. However, these monks are being prevented by the government from reoccupying their monastery. They did return there to celebrate the anniversary of the death of their comrades. Two hundred Arab Muslims surrounded the monastery with rifles to protect them and to show their solidarity. This was at the risk of their lives, for this made them marked men in the eyes of the GIA.

In a similar manner, we must avoid harboring prejudices against Hindus, and Buddhists, and those of Native American religions. Among races, prejudice against

⁵ Refers to 1999 when these conferences were given. Ed.

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blacks receives much deserved attention. Asian immigrants have been showing a great deal of seriousness in their study and work, and advance rapidly in American society. Our Prior at St. Joseph's Abbey is a Vietnamese who was elected abbot for two six-year terms at the Trappist Philippine monastery at Guimaras. He accomplished immense benefits for that monastery building permanent structures and developing industries for its self-support. He also oversaw the foundation of a monastery of Trappistine nuns and established a school for the aborigines of the place. Returning to Spencer, he was appointed Prior.

Sexual orientation should not be a matter of prejudice. The Church teaches that a homosexual orientation is disordered, but so is the promiscuous orientation of many heterosexuals. Homosexuals can be very considerate, cultivated, and refined persons. They may attain a high degree of holiness. On the other hand those who proclaim themselves gay and are aggressive in seeking to legitimize homosexual behavior are quite different. But discrimination against their orientation is sinful.

Gender likewise should not be a basis of prejudice. Women who do the same work as men should in justice receive the same wage. Discrimination against women because they are women, or against men because they are men is a disorder. At present some members of the feminist movement exhibit a prejudice against men, their so-called patriarchal oppressors.

We do not have to approve of wrongful behavior. Nor do we have to carry on a relationship with one who is abusive to us. Our Lord wants us to accept humiliations, but He does not want us to be doormats. Abused children usually consider that there is something wrong with them, rather than with the perpetrator of the abuse, especially if it is a parent. This leads to repression of their anger and a lowered self-esteem. In therapy in an adult who had been abused as a child the anger surfaces as self-respect begins to assert itself, and the adult now realizes that the perpetrator's activity was injurious and wrongful. When this adult has advanced sufficiently in treatment, the psychiatrist may carefully set up a confrontation with the parents. Often besides the perpetrator, the other parent has not protected the child but has allowed the abuse to continue without an intervention. In this confrontation, the first object is to overcome the denial on the part of the parents of the abuse, then to make the parents realize the harm that has been done, and finally, if an abusive pattern has continued, to lay out the conditions on which an ongoing relationship is possible. Now this is the point. The victim of this abuse does not have to continue in an abusive relationship as an adult. He or she can lay down conditions which eliminate the abuse, and which have been carefully worked out between the patient and the doctor before the confrontation. This plan then becomes the condition for a continuing relationship. The victim can forgive the parents, but not continue to expose him or herself to the pattern of abuse. Restricting in this way a relationship which is abusive is compatible with forgiveness and love.

In this conference I have pointed out that while we tend to base our identity on our body image, our soul is the more important part of our human nature and that which makes us human. Since all human beings have a soul which is specifically the same, that is human and that makes us members of the human sapiens species, considering our identity from the point of view of our soul, of our being human, unites us. This pertains to race, religion, gender, and our inclinations. This is a basis, but not the only basis for our charity reaching out to everyone. That we are all children of God, and that grace is

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available to all, and that Jesus died for all, are further bases for an all-extensive charity.



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