

THEOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL CONSIDERATIONS

Incarnational Theology

In the Mystery of the Incarnation, God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Consequently, our human flesh is forever the meeting place of God with men and women. Our humanity in all its aspects is, therefore, holy ground. The human body and human sexuality are profoundly sacred, to be cherished and revered as privileged ways for people to come into contact with the Mystery of God. Spirituality based on this view of humanity empowers a person to make of these truths a lived reality in dealing with the practical situations of life.

Sadly, the full meaning and implications of the Incarnation have often been set aside as if they were too good to be true. Unable to comprehend that God could be humble enough to take up the weakness of human nature, Christological heresies through the centuries have watered down or denied the full meaning and power of the Incarnation. In so doing, they weakened and set aside the idea of the holiness and dignity of human nature. A kind of dualism resulted, which set the realm of the spiritual, the soul on a higher plane over against the material, the body, our "lower nature." Needless to say, this devalued notion of the body tended to weaken and destroy the notion of sexuality as a profoundly sacred reality. The integration of sexuality and deep spirituality was lost. Negative attitudes towards the body and sexuality became common, while the realm of the spiritual was safely set apart where it would not be contaminated by the material, bodily side of life. The attitude of reverence for the gift of sexuality was replaced by the outlook of a materialistic culture which exploits sex in many ways.

Current theology and spirituality have gone far in the effort to reinstate the values of Incarnational theology, to restore the sense of the sacredness of the human. However, we are still reaping the bitter fruits of failure to appreciate the sacredness of human sexuality. Many religious and priests, Franciscan friars included, received formation that included negative and even repressive attitudes toward sexuality. People were taught to pray and to engage in many practices of a fervent spiritual life which brought them close to the Lord, but these practices would often turn out to be a spirituality that was not really in touch with the practicalities of real life. Unable to deal with some very human psychological factors, out of touch with powerful emotions and needs for intimacy, this kind of spirituality was ill equipped to help friars deal with sexual needs and issues of intimacy. People with severe human problems, many of them sexual, found that prayer alone was not an adequate solution for their difficulties.

Spiritual Roots of Sexual Abuse

When people consecrated to God in the priesthood or religious life engage in dysfunctional behavior, such as sexual abuse of minors, one can only conclude that such behavior is symptomatic of serious and deeply rooted personal problems. Experience teaches that individuals who perpetrate such abuse are seriously wanting in regard to a spirituality that is in touch with their practical lives. The mystery of God fails to influence their choice of actions in significant ways. If their relationship to God is not vital, their relationships to other people are often woefully inadequate as well. Intimacy needs go unrecognized and unmet, and low self-esteem results. Often, these individuals deal with their alienation by compulsive absorption in only seemingly healthy involvements such as excessive work, and in patently unhealthy actions such as sexual abuse.

Needless to say, these unhealthy ways of coping only serve to accentuate the troubling personal difficulties of trying to live devoid of intimacy with God and others. Such people are alienated even from themselves. Dysfunctional and compulsive behavior such as sexual abuse proves an inadequate substitute for true intimacy. People who engage in this behavior are so very lonely and estranged.

The irony is that some, if not most, of these people are well educated and pastorally skilled in many ways. They may hold positions of authority which set them as mentors, teachers and spiritual guides for others. The problem is, however, that they are attempting to inculcate into others truths and ways of living they themselves have never integrated into their own lives; or perhaps they have gradually lost the power of ideals and values once interiorized but long neglected. Such men are in the painful position of leading a double life, living a lie as they try to teach and model for others a way of life they do not espouse deep in their own hearts. Small wonder that feelings of dishonesty and hypocrisy further erode self-esteem and serve to give greater impetus to abusive behavior. And all the while, the mind, in the face of the enormously painful truth of what is really going on builds up an ever more impregnable wall of denial.

How Can We Help the Situation?

Evidently, recovery from such spiritual disability requires that friars be helped once again, or perhaps for the first time, to espouse and live deeply the life they may have already vowed. This is absolutely necessary and crucial if there is

to be any chance for recovery from and cessation of abusive behavior. Is there any hope that this deep commitment can and will take place?

Such hope is fostered by a study of the psychological maturity of American priests published by the Bishop's Committee on Priestly Spirituality in a document entitled "The Spiritual Renewal of the American Priesthood." There is no reason to doubt that the results fit the situation of many religious as well. The pertinent text, slightly adapted to fit the situation of the offending friars reads as follows:

A large proportion of American priests [and religious] are underdeveloped psychologically. This does not mean that they are sick, but that their growth has been arrested. Generally they have not worked through the problems of intimacy, and their level of maturity is lower than their chronological age. They do not relate deeply or closely to other people. In itself, this is not an indictment of their spirituality, because they may possibly have a high degree of theological love for their fellow men and women but are unable to show it. In this case psychological blocks prevent the manifestation of love.

As a matter of fact, however, the spiritual life of these priests [and religious] is generally of a piece with their emotional arrest. Their faith tends to be superficial and not integrated into the rest of their lives. They tend to excuse themselves from the pain of the growing process into full maturity in Christ. The priesthood [the religious life], the Church, and the faith are used as screens and cover-ups for psychological inadequacy; religious ideals remain abstract and unactualized.

Once a psychological awakening occurs, however, and they come alive and start moving forward again as developing persons, they experience a spiritual conversion as well and begin to make progressive efforts to realize the spiritual ideals of the priesthood [and the religious life]. In similar reciprocity, a spiritual conversion can confront the immature person with the challenge of the Cross, by calling him to undergo the pain of growth into freedom or by helping him to accept what cannot be changed.

It would be hard to find a better statement of the challenge to spiritual growth that confronts some friars of St. Barbara Province at the present time. Sobering as it is, this study holds out hope that a psychological and spiritual growth process can begin which will deal realistically with dysfunctional behavior, and in particular, the issue of sexual abuse.

Nothing less than complete honesty, openness and sincerity in facing the present situation will do if true healing is to occur. This is the case for any spiritual growth, and it is surely needed in these crucial circumstances where the tendency toward denial is so strong. Needless to say, friars need a great deal of support and acceptance, as well as loving challenge and confrontation, if they are to be completely honest.

The Province can help this recovery process by providing and insisting upon adequate therapy and spiritual direction for friars who have perpetrated abuse. Moreover, the Province can provide preventive medicine by offering workshops, retreats and other programs dealing with issues of intimacy, sexuality and the affective life of the friars. But the Province and its administration can do only so much. When it comes to spiritual growth and striving for solid maturity, no one can do a friar's work for him or force him to grow. Deep personal reflection and prayer, fruitful use of spiritual direction, willingness to share personal faith and problems with one's brothers in the fraternity, and other aspects of a spirituality that is more than superficial can be implemented only by individual friars who make these things a regular part of their lives.

In this connection, it is worth citing Wayne Fehr's research on the importance of one's relationship to and understanding of God in the process of recovery for religious professionals in crisis:

The pathology of each patient almost always involves long-established images of God which are enslaving and anxiety-producing. The radical shift in mentality, ways of feeling, and patterns of behavior include new images of God which are liberating and empowering. (Fehr, W., "The Spiritual Assessment of Clergy in Crisis," Action Information, Alban Institute, Washington, D.C., 1990, vol. XVI, no. 4, p. 8.)

Evidently, all of this challenging work requires a great deal of courage and humility. It demands the recognition of personal weakness, sinfulness and serious misconduct. It requires one to experience a deep need for mercy and forgiveness. If all of this seems threatening, it is also vital to recall that it is precisely in the owning of our helplessness and need that we meet the God of mercy and forgiveness. This experience of meeting the God who forgives leads to a sense of inner healing and personal integration that comes in no other way. It is a fundamental movement of the spiritual life that brings life out of death, health out of sickness, new ways of living and acting out of our former dysfunctional attitudes. It is an experience of healing witnessed over and over again in the scriptures and in the lives of those who have opened themselves to the healing grace of God. Such a graced moment seems now at hand.