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On Being a Contemplative Apostle

In my first blog post July 2020, I shared how the ordaining bishop gave me the title “Worldly Mystic.” Reflecting both a monastic background and active priesthood, this title gives name to the personal charism I discerned throughout formation. This charism is being a *contemplative apostle*, and it consists of the following principles: 1) living a discipline of the heart for the sake of others, 2) being firmly rooted in the world while not attached to it, and 3) participating in the transformation of all life in God. Looking back over this initial phase of

priesthood, as fraught with global and personal turmoil it has been due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the death of my beloved mother, and numerous other factors, I now briefly reflect on what it means to live out this vocation.

Discipline of the Heart for the Sake of Others

God calls us to full union with him, and as a result we are to be *other-centered*. This is because, in addition to communing with us his subjects as objectively and wholly other, we usually encounter God through other people. As a Trinity of Persons, God himself is other-centered, sacramentally overflowing into his creation through the church. In accordance with divine providence, when we grow in God's image by prayerfully prioritizing the needs of others, he satisfies our own as an afterthought. While we are responsible for our discernment in living life to the fullest, this is how God often works – by lifting us out of our self-obsession and into a genuine interest in others.

How has God done this in my life? For starters, he provided the foundational insight that grace builds on nature. Given that *human* nature denotes having free will, this means that, though grace is a free and unearned gift from God, we must prayerfully choose to receive it in order to be changed by and act on it. If we are to be sincere people of faith we must allow God to change our hearts, for we cannot give away a spiritual experience we do not possess. This is our discipline, and a disciplined heart is first and foremost *disciplined*. On one hand, such discipline most importantly means being willing and available to love God and neighbor. On the other, consequently engaging disciplined habits such as prayer and meditation, exercise, study, and working effectively with others, helps us to be spiritually authentic and relatable.

This does not mean earning the love of God! No one can do this, and his all-encompassing love is freely available to all people at all times. For people of faith, having a

disciplined heart simply entails freely embracing the disciplines God has given us, so as to prepare us to effectively engage other people with the love of the Gospel. We are all made for this divine initiative – to do whatever we can to introduce other people to a God and a faith they can know, love, and share.

Worldly Rootedness and Non-Attachment

How do we participate in this divine initiative while being rooted in and yet non-attached to the world? In doing so, are we genuinely engaged in prioritizing the needs of others? While there are millions of ways to answer these questions, experience strongly suggests that whatever the answers might be for each of us, they are based in the fact that we are planted in *this world*. Heaven or hell is our destination, but we are born here and live in the now. As chaotic as the world often is, God is encountered in real life. As such, prioritizing the needs of others means accompanying real people with real problems.

What sorts of problems? Most people have bigger fish to fry than being distracted while praying the rosary, and worldly rootedness means fully receiving what people confide to us while remaining detached enough to not let our other-centered objectivity be compromised. Compassion is not co-dependency, and being other-centered denotes attentive, active listening and giving beneficial feedback when appropriate, without projecting our psychological baggage onto other people. We must remain focused on the other, for sometimes we will engage in spiritual discernment with people whose marriages are collapsing, who are mentally ill, underemployed, or experiencing injustice. When doing so, we must be truly present with and accompany them in a manner that transcends mere surface wants, prioritizing their greatest needs of the heart.

This takes both effort and practice, and sometimes we will have to stretch ourselves to meaningfully communicate the love of God to other people, especially when their problems merit more in-depth reflection than fundamental theological answers can provide without further dialogue. Faith is not magic. Even while upholding church doctrine and the need for virtuous living when working with others, we must also be mature enough to detach ourselves from the results of our efforts, for the conversion of hearts is God's business and not ours. God is playing the long game, and we exist in this world for a bare moment. Yet grace builds on nature, and the world is the place where God is encountered. Even upon entering heaven and becoming saints, when called upon to intercede, it will still be in *this world*. An other-centered, disciplined heart understands all of this, embracing non-attachment as necessary toward contemplative apostleship.

Transformation of All Life in God

It is a given that only God can transform all life, though we can participate by how we run the little corners of the world he gives us to manage. By moving beyond our comfort zones and approaching the people we work with creatively and with open hearts, we can make a vastly more powerful difference than we realize. My own experience bears this out.

Upon starting at my former assignment, Divine Savior Holy Angels All-Girls' High School, I had very different ideas about working with people than the ones I have now. The school hired me to be a priest chaplain and theology teacher, and though I knew it was a high school, I also knew that as a college prep institution, the level is sky-high and hard work is assumed. Wanting to demonstrate a proper work ethic, I meticulously wrote out all my homilies as scripts, and treated each class session like a graduate seminar. Within about a month, it became obvious that I would have to change my approach. There was something askew, and I

felt like a sea captain whose navigator just told him their course was off by a few degrees – while another thousand miles would result in being disastrously lost, there was still enough time to adjust and chart a renewed, steady course.

In doing so, the first thing I did was stop writing out my homilies, instead delivering them extemporaneously with the message tailored to current events. This got me away from the script on the pulpit and freed me up to walk around, making eye-contact and real time connections while preaching. Properly reading the room sometimes involved doing things that made me stretch, such as singing, telling jokes, speaking in Spanish, sharing personal anecdotes, or getting them pumped up enough to actually cheer if circumstances made it appropriate.

The second thing I did was change how I ran the classroom. Though the students are very smart, to keep them connected enough to learn meant leading them from where they are, not where I thought they should be without first getting to know them. I switched from incredibly dense presentations and insisting that students participate in-depth on every slide, to vastly improved presentation slides featuring less text for better extemporaneous delivery, more focused participation slides, lecture worksheets so they would know how to take notes, additionally utilizing multi-cultural images and concepts to help relevantly connect theology to students who are not necessarily Catholic, Caucasian, or affluent. God is in the real, and to acknowledge diversity is to embrace real life – there are vast differences among human beings. Living wisely and effectively in a diverse world takes prayer, prudence, and patience, and we must be respectful of one another and remain open to dialogue and mutual understanding.

The third thing I did was teach them to question authority. This does not mean being disobedient or disrespectful but engaged in life enough to verify truth claims for themselves. We cannot transform life if we are in denial about what it is and how it is lived by others. I strongly

encouraged my students to be critical thinkers who build their positions on logic and facts, and while outside of theology and matters of faith it was not my purview to tell them *what* to think, I intended to teach them *to* think (within reason given the scope of my subject matter).

Questioned authority is validated authority, and the truth always holds up. God gave us the capacity to question, and he rejoices when we freely embrace the truths of authoritative claims for ourselves.

The fourth thing I did was change the classroom itself. DSHA is a Catholic school, focusing on educating the whole person. This not only means very high academic expectations, but also an emphasis on ministry, service, and building community. It did not take me long to realize that what the students are going through is actually a *formation* process, very similar to what I experienced in seminary. Priestly training is long and arduous, and I found myself feeling great compassion for my students. I discerned that transforming my own understanding of what being a priest chaplain and theology teacher meant could result in actions that transformed their lives for the better, so I decided to create a sanctuary for them, a safe space where they could feel at home. Creating this space involved a radical change in décor!

I bought LED lights, plasma balls, lava lamps, a galaxy projector that filled the ceiling with heavenly images, even acquiring a disco ball that filled the room with bright, undulating colors while music videos played on the large screen in front of the classroom. During lunchtime these decorations were all turned on in an otherwise dark classroom, and the result was that the students felt like they were in a safe place where they could rest easy for a little while. They loved it, and were subsequently more and not less connected to the curriculum. In this way, by transforming the environment wherein which they would learn about theology, they were able to make greater and more personal connections with God and real life.

By managing my own little God-given corner of the world in such a manner, a place was created that could foster the personal transformation of each of their lives, animating the contributions they make to the world with infinite meaning and value, for they come from the infinite God we learn about in theology. Occasionally during classes or spiritual direction, I saw the lights turn on in their eyes and knew we had made a difference. It is humbling to behold. Encountering even one priest who seeks to understand them profoundly impacts young people.

Now that I have entered my new assignment as parochial vicar at Divine Savior Catholic Church and as a member of the Salvatorian Provincial Council in the United States, I will continue seeking opportunities for transformation – to leave behind a legacy of love and service that magnifies and spreads the reign of God. Personal experience reveals that such opportunities are often rooted in subtle changes that unfold from individuals and magnify throughout their extended communities. If we are faithful in prayer and attentive in discernment, we will be shocked to discover a multitude of amazing things we can do to make a difference. This all begins with being other-centered, continues in a spirit of being grounded in reality without seeking to control it, and is perfected by prayerfully seeking to magnify the reign of God.