

Renewal—What Kind of Person is Being Formed?

*(God) said that we were "gods" and He is going to make good His words. If we let Him—for we can prevent Him if we choose—He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though, of course, on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful; but that is what we are in for. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p 174-5*

One diocese I worked with saw congregational development as being about creating communities of Christian formation. This was an approach that helped focus parish and diocesan energy and resources around something people cared about. It started with clarity about the end result we were seeking. What did we hope would happen to people as a result of being part of a parish church? What does it mean to grow into the fullness of your baptism, to be an apostolic Christian, to "be renewed in the spirit of your minds...to put on the new nature?"

The parish is in the business of formation. The formation of people is an aspect of everything that happens in a parish—liturgy, social life, spiritual guidance, education and Christian action. A related leadership task is to help people accept responsibility for their own spiritual life, for how they manage their Renewal-Apostolate Cycle. We do that best by establishing the climate, structures and processes that make up an environment in which people can grow in the Christian life.

It is useful when a parish regularly holds up two or three ways of describing the kind of person being formed. There are, of course, more ways than just two or three. Over time we want to expose parishioners to a wide range of models. But during any one time period it's useful to focus on a limited number of ways. At the same time we want to avoid offering just one language system with its danger of creating literalists among our more immature and experimenting members. Here are a few possibilities for describing what we are seeking.

One Baptized into the Body of Christ

A new person in Christ; becoming salt, light and leaven; growing up in Christ. "Buried with Christ in his death...share in his resurrection...reborn by the Holy Spirit." "An inquiring and discerning heart, the courage to will and to persevere, a spirit to know and to love you, and the gift of joy and wonder in all your works." A believer in God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit; called to "persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return...proclaim by word and example the Good News...seek and serve Christ in all persons...strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being."

An Ordinary Life – A Holy Life – A Heroic Life

Having what Augustine called "a real life." A life reflecting the glory of God. A process of formation in which we develop the longings and hungers that change us and change the world. The longing for justice and mercy, a hunger for life with others in community, a longing for wonder and awe, and the humility to seek just an ordinary life, a life without great trials and without having to face great evils.

We each have different ways into this ordinary, holy, heroic life. For me one way has been the work of the angels. The angels are about our moments and seasons of wonder and awe. These moments are, for me, times when I'm not quite tuned in, or when I am half awake, just beginning to stir from sleep, or drifting off over the computer, and see and feel an experience, another person, or my own life, in some new way. I see something of the glory, beauty and terror present.

On occasion, the moments are more immediate. In sitting at a bar, looking at a friend and knowing that it is a holy moment, a meeting connected to the ways of eternity. Or, of glancing across the aisle during Mass and realizing that the person you find most annoying is oddly beautiful. You don't want to get too worried about these moments. Soon enough you'll return to your usual state of blindness and annoyance.

There are also seasons of wonder and awe—months and even years in our life, or the life of a people, when glory breaks loose. These are the times of being fully alive, times of rich and deep relationships, times of struggle in which all might be lost except that solidarity with others who also are in the battle.

The angels allow us to see that *greater things* are happening within, among and around us. They bring the deepest and best parts of us into view – so we can know wonder and awe.

The story of Mary and Martha is all too frequently twisted by preachers to avoid making us uncomfortable. They offer the ways of Mary and Martha as equally valid paths. But that's not the story. Our Lord gives us a challenge—“*Mary has chosen the better part.*” To receive the challenge, and the grace that accompanies it, is to enter into our own life in a new way. We come to see and understand that the Eucharist is not only about us being fed so we might feed others; Eucharist is an end in itself. Just being with one another and God in communion is the purpose and completion of life. We come to understand that sitting on a porch drinking fine Scotch or cheap beer is not just a break from the struggles of life, but is a taste of eternity.

The Full Stature of Christ

There is, of course, Paul's understanding of what God is doing in our lives, e.g. in Ephesians that we are to grow into the full stature of Christ; that the graces and practices necessary for that growth are humility, gentleness, patience, forbearance born of love, eagerness to maintain unity in the bond of peace, truthfulness mediated in love, mutual kindness, tenderheartedness and forgiveness; and in Galatians that the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Seven Deadly Sins

A definition of sin offered by Richard Holloway (one-time Presiding Bishop of Scotland) is "a wrongly directed effort; a good drive that fails to find the right object; a good thing in itself that is done to excess." (*Seven to Flee, Seven to Follow*, 1986). This fits Newman's understanding that, "Evil has no substance of its own, but is only the defect, excess, perversion, or corruption of that which has substance." Martin Smith, in his book on reconciliation, urges, "Fix your mind on the positive virtues, of which sins are the shadow." In a related understanding, Martin Thornton viewed the purpose of self-examination as aiming at "*tranquillitas*; not the suppression of desire, not *apatheia*, but harmony between the elements of personality." So, in all this we are dealing with health and wholeness rather than simply avoidance and self-protection.

In some of the material below I'm drawing on Holloway's work.

- **Pride.** Self esteem raised to an inordinate level, so that all sense of proportion is lost
- **Envy (jealousy).** "Sorrow for another's good," "Satisfaction at the misfortunes of our friends." A characteristic of envy is that it offers no real pleasure, it is without fun; other sins offer some gratification. Symptoms include malice, being good at noticing the defects in others, hypocrisy, dejection. Envy may lead into the third sin.
- **Covetousness (avarice).** "Itching hunger for the good things of life" (success, possessions, popularity). It shows itself in conspicuous consumption of things or people, fear of aging. [Note: pride and envy are rooted in a sense of inadequacy. There is in us a "deep longing to be accepted and appreciated; the need is to know that we are loved as we are."]
- **Anger.** A disproportionate response to danger; phases that are destructive—impatience, retaliation, lack of control, resentment. The antidotes are to give ourselves to systematically willing another person's good and to act quickly as anger breaks out to minimize the damage.
- **Lust.** A distorted instinct that is good in itself. It is rooted in a pursuit of pleasure that gives permission for exploitation, even if mutually agreed upon. There is a danger of moving into an addictive cycle and diminishing ones capacity for committed, joyful relationships. C.S. Lewis saw this as the least significant of the sins.
- **Gluttony.** Much the same as the above in its dynamics. The person is driven to a pursuit of satisfying appetites—too much drink, food, smoking, talk; compulsive behavior. They are natural instincts that are allowed to play a disproportionate role and can end up dominating the personality. An approach to lust and gluttony is learning self discipline and redirect the instincts toward "the good."
- **Sloth.** "The instinct for rest and creative idling taken and distorted into an unattractive passivity," "everything is too much trouble." It is a disease of the will, it numbs the will. Instead of taking our life in our own hand we drift along, not really being bad people (we don't have the energy for it). Sloth does create the conditions under which evil takes hold in society. It may be related to why people seem to resist "giving themselves" to another, to their work, and to civic life.

Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit

- **Fear (awe).** I'd understand it as fear that you will not have the life you could have; the life God wants for you. It is as opposed to a life that is not for "the good" or that is trivial. This is the "fear that establishes proportions and recognizes consequences" and may lead "to a realistic, rueful ... almost humorous awareness of our true state."
- **Piety (affection).** "A kind of fondness or love, a recognition of what you owe the land that bred you," gratitude for the love, forgiveness and understanding one receives
- **Knowledge.** A capacity to accept paradox, to hold things in balance, to see more completely. It is the knowledge of God and the dynamics of awe and affection.
- **Courage (fortitude).** Closing the gap between belief and action "by reaching beyond themselves to Christ," rather than "by pulling Christ towards them and adapting him to their own uses." Standing fast even though you want to run. Especially needed in moral life, the world of ideas, and in personal relations.
- **Counsel (guidance).** An openness to the Holy Spirit; openness to an energy for good that comes from beyond ourselves. It is related to developing a capacity for listening and an inner silence.
- **Understanding.** The gift of balance, an awareness of the situation. It is "knowing when to celebrate and when to lament." This is self knowledge. It is seeing the world rightly -- that the creation is good, that God is encountered through it.
- **Wisdom.** The coming together of the other six gifts; wholeness. Most contemporary books on the spiritual life speak of spiritual maturity.

Four Cardinal Virtues

The four are interdependent; if you don't adequately possess one of them, the others are distorted in some fashion.

- **Prudence.** In the most down-to-earth meaning we are speaking of having good sense; the capacity for practical judgment. The virtue of it is in being grounded in reality and directed toward what is good. It assumes openness to reality. This is not the same thing as excess caution and a withholding spirit.
- **Justice.** The virtue is rooted in the assumption that we live with one another. That then presents us with several issues to address, including -- what we as individuals owe society; what we own other individuals; what society owns individuals.
- **Fortitude.** This is about removing barriers to justice. A central element is perseverance. Justice is only possible when we stay with the work before us. It is not the same as stubbornness.
- **Temperance.** Self-awareness and self-control are needed if we are to enjoy life and at the same time be good people. The work that has been done in recent decades on emotional and social intelligence is a resource.

Episcopal Spirituality

The parish is forming a baptized person for living the Christian life as expressed in the Anglican tradition.

The Christian life is a life lived within a particular tradition. We all live someplace, in some tradition of the church, which means that the parish is not just concerned with the formation of “a Christian” but of a Christian in the Episcopal tradition of spirituality. This is a certain way of being “Christian.” We need to avoid the artificial logic that says, “I am a Christian first, and a particular religious denomination, second. God does not call us to be Episcopalians, he calls us to be Christians.” I’d suggest that God does call us to live as Christians within particular traditions, communions and families. The different ways of being a Christian are not some mistake, or secondary concern, but are at least ways of addressing the diversity of spiritual temperament found among people. Many of us also think that some ways are better than others; that some spiritualities are more likely to result in adults who are more grounded in the life of God, more self aware, and more inclined to responsibility in daily life.

The Episcopal Church has developed a form of Christian spirituality that has emerged from its roots in Anglicanism and in the American experience. That spirit can be found in most parishes and dioceses of the church. A way of expressing the elements of that spirituality is to say that it is: Christian, balanced—holistic, world-embracing, adult, organic, open-minded, and a spirituality of beauty.

Other frameworks for thinking about the formation of Christians in the Episcopal Church’s tradition include:

- Jim Fenhagen in *The Anglican Way*—holy worldliness, personal holiness, and comprehensiveness.
- John Westerhoff in *A People Called Episcopalians*—explores characteristics such as liturgical/biblical, communal, sacramental, and pastoral.
- The Christian Life Model—developing a strong life of worship, doctrine and action.
- Benedictine Spirituality—living in the dynamics of the Promise: Obedience, Stability and Conversion of Life.

A Christian Spirituality

Grounded in the love of God for humanity as seen in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, Christian Life is life lived in Christ: “Christ in us and we in him.” Worship, doctrine and action are the means by which we participate in the life of Christ’s Body, the Church; in her unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity. They are the means by which we participate in the Church’s mission “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ.” We are restored to unity as we are drawn into the prayer of Christ, the mind of Christ, and the work of Christ. In prayer, study, and work we become instruments of God’s holy mission.

A Spirituality of Beauty

We tend to take delight in the natural rhythm of life. We rejoice in the beauty of creation and have a strong commitment to environmental protection. Our worship strives for good music, a sense of flow and grace, and poetry and drama. We seek beauty in our worship space using artists, live flowers, and real candles in creating an appropriate climate.

An Adult Spirituality

We value **personal responsibility and freedom** in the process of shaping and living life as a Christian. Adults are invited to **explore and experiment with** the resources of Christian and Anglican spirituality to discover ways that best nurture them in the Christian life. We understand that what feeds one person may not feed another. We each work out our relationship with God, each other, creation and self in unique ways. The adult Christian shapes a spiritual life that fits his or her personality and circumstances. Please note -- this isn't about whether children are included (they are) but about what kind of adults we hope children will become.

A World-Embracing Spirituality

Our tendency is to **affirm life and this world**. Those things in life that give us pleasure are understood as being fundamentally good. Fun, our bodies, material things, good food are all accepted as part of living a full life. Our call to faith is linked to hope and love rather than fear and guilt.

For most of us the **Christian life is lived in the context of our family, work and civic life**. Those are the places in which the love of Christ may flow through us to offer light and hope in the world. We generally see that process as organic rather than planned. To the extent we have been touched by the love of God we will show that love in our daily life.

We see Christian faith as **having political implications**. Episcopalians have a long history of involvement in the civic life of communities and the nation. The individual Christian is called to both inform and act on their conscience. The church doesn't usually ask its members to accept particular political views but it does ask members to consider in their thinking and decision making what might be understood from the Scriptures, what the church has learned over the centuries (as seen in the Tradition and the contemporary councils of the church) and in their own Reason. As a church we take positions on public issues. While these positions are often on what is seen as the more liberal side of the political spectrum; they frequently exhibit an Anglican comprehensiveness in affirming the complexity of a situation.

A Balanced—Holistic Spirituality

We are moderate, seeking a balanced, reasonable approach to life. It is a life in which prayer, work, study and play have a rhythm. We seek to take into account the whole of experience, ambiguity and all. We attend to the whole and the interdependence of its parts in how we live as people and parish communities. We are interested in the whole person—mind, body and spirit—and the whole of faith, in all its complexity and with all its paradox.

An Organic Spirituality

We understand individual spiritual development to be rooted in communal daily prayer that shapes our relationship to God. Decisions are made in the context of common prayer so the Holy Spirit fills and enfolds us. We are sacramental—"outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace." As Christ was the sacrament of God, the church is the sacrament of Christ in the world. Martin Thornton put it this way: "The prayer and life of each member is wholly dependent on the health of the total organism." It's a very radical statement about the holiness of the church.

An Open-Minded Spirituality

Our way has stressed **an open-minded, searching approach** to faith. Engagement with God and the church is intended to open us to the mystery that is God. So doubt, questioning, exploration and openness to new insights is a path to God and wholeness of life. This involves being open to what may be learned: from studying and praying the Scriptures, from the wisdom gained as the church has struggled with life's issues in the past, from the councils of the church today, from the insights and views of other people, and from the application of our own reason and what we have learned from our experience.

We see value in **comprehensiveness and ambiguity**. Our way includes holding opposites in tension, appreciating paradoxical thinking, assuming that what appears to be irreconcilable differences may contain a balanced truth, allowing a certain messiness and grayness in our theological and ethical thinking. Living in this way means developing a tolerance of differences in thinking and practice. It also calls for a capacity to listen deeply and respectfully, to have courage in expressing one's own understanding, to wait on God in silence and with patience. Our unity is not the unity of sameness of thought but a unity of trust in God and God's wisdom. It's the unity of the Eucharist and a shared life. This makes for a roomy church with space for many (as long as they will accept allowing space for others).