

Spiritual *and* Religious

Perspectives and Context

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Catholic. Pastoral. Trusted.

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Introduction

When I was about nine years old, I was at home during a nondescript morning on a day off from school. With our mother at work and our sitter nearby, my two sisters and I sat quietly on the floor of the living room, trying to occupy ourselves with whatever board game we could manage to play together without fighting.

It was a typical January day in Michigan: overcast and snowing. The weatherman said we were experiencing “lake effect” snow, but it sure looked like it was accumulating at a frantic pace. I remember wondering if I would have to go outside and shovel the driveway soon. This possibility made my attention to the board game more intense, as if my commitment would somehow excuse me from shoveling!

As lunchtime neared, our sitter, a senior in high school, prepared tomato soup and grilled-cheese sandwiches for lunch. This was and remains a perennial favorite lunch (and sometimes dinner). The menu suggests that it must have been a Friday, because that was a traditional lunch when abstinence from meat every

Friday was still a normal penitential requirement in Catholic discipline and practice.

Our regular sitter watched over us to earn some extra cash. In between her assigned duties, she also did her homework. Her textbooks, piled high on the kitchen table, were carefully positioned and ready for her use. Some texts were open to a particular page for study, while others just sat on the table, perhaps for easy reference or in a certain order of importance known only to our sitter.

On this day, I recall that I excused myself from the board game, walked into the kitchen, and, with some effort, pulled myself up onto one of the kitchen chairs near the textbooks. I then took a book to examine it. I don't remember the subject matter, but I recall exactly how I felt as I paged through the text. I was devastated. I was overcome with high anxiety and a sense of impending doom. I didn't understand a thing I read! I recall thinking to myself, *When I get to high school, how am I ever going to be smart enough to understand all this stuff?*

I pushed myself away from the table, climbed down from the chair, returned to my place on the living-room floor, and went back to the game. My sisters

probably didn't notice my change in mood, but I most certainly did. The grilled-cheese sandwich and tomato soup did nothing to lighten my disposition. I remained sullen and withdrawn throughout lunch. After eating, I turned down my sister's invitation to resume our game. I excused myself, went upstairs to my bedroom, and remained in my funk for the rest of the afternoon.

When my mother got home from her long day at the office, she busied herself with making dinner, despite being tired. I emerged from my room (but not from my mood), trudged down the stairs, and helped set the table for dinner. As she expertly handled her tasks, she soon sensed something was amiss with me and asked what was going on. When I shared with her my experience with the textbook, she responded by giving me one of those looks that only a mother can give to her son. It seemed to me that she was wondering, *What have I done? Where did this child come from?*

Once she recovered from her surprise, she calmed herself and comforted me. She assured me that when I became a student in high school, I would be well prepared to read and study the assigned texts. She also let me know that few nine-year-olds could understand a high-school textbook, so I should not be too concerned.

Because I knew my mother was trustworthy, I immediately felt relieved and reassured.

I have often recalled this charming childhood episode. I bring it to mind especially at times when I have felt ill prepared to take on a particular task or challenge. To this day, I can easily replay my mother's soothing voice and words of reassurance: "You will be prepared when it is required of you." When I recall the moment and her calm, confident voice, I am inspired and no longer anxious. I understand that if I take each component of the challenge as it unfolds before me, if I connect with the experience as it is revealed, if I resist the urge to try and speed up my pace unnecessarily, in the words of the wise mystic Julian of Norwich: "All will be well."¹

I have also learned that this memorable encounter with my mother was an example of the tender manifestation of love and trust between a mother and a son—and it was more. In those few minutes, I was mentored by a person who was familiar with the path that was to unfold as I matured. As my mentor, my mother taught me that I would one day acquire the intellectual skills I needed. She knew the path. She had walked it too. And she was able to clearly speak words that I could believe. I was encouraged. Anxiety was replaced with confidence.

CHAPTER ONE

Relationship

The Call to Respond to Mystery

“Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you.”

MATTHEW 7:7

“God leads the child he has called in wonderful ways. God takes the soul to a secret place, for God alone will play with it in a game of which the body knows nothing. God says, ‘I am your playmate! Your childhood was a companion of my Holy Spirit.’”

MECHTILD OF MAGDEBURG

“To seek is as good as seeing. God wants us to search earnestly and with perseverance, without sloth and worthless sorrow. We must know that God will appear suddenly and joyfully to all lovers of God.”

JULIAN OF NORWICH

“Thou takest the pen and the lines dance. Thou takest the flute—and the notes shimmer. Thou takest the brush—and the colors sing. So, all things have meaning and beauty in that space beyond time where thou art. How, then, can I hold back anything from thee?”

DAG HAMMARSKJÖLD, *MARKINGS:
SPIRITUAL POEMS AND MEDITATIONS*

“God’s presence accompanies the sincere efforts of individuals and groups to find encouragement and meaning in their lives. He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth, and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart, even though they do so tentatively, in a vague and haphazard manner.”

POPE FRANCIS, *EVANGELII GAUDIUM
(THE JOY OF THE GOSPEL)*, 71

Relationship with the Divine

A singular, powerful, theological and dogmatic truth¹ within the Christian spiritual tradition is riveting in its assertion and in the ramifications of the pronouncement. The assertion: each member of humanity has been called into life by a Creator God² (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 199) and as an individual uniquely loved by the Creator. The *Catechism*, quoting the document *Gaudium et Spes* (Joys and Hopes) of the Second Vatican Council, expresses this dogmatic truth in these words: “For if man exists, it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence” (CCC 27).

As if this dogma is not enough, the Christian tradition further insists that the Creator God desires to be intimately in relationship with creation, specifically with humanity. In other words, not only does God love his creation, but God desires also to be loved in return by his creatures. The give and take is active and includes all those qualities that are fundamentally necessary for any other relationship that humans can experience.

For each person who accepts this theological viewpoint as it has been preserved and nurtured in the Christian tradition, there is the ability to join an indi-

vidual response of belief with the responses of countless other men and women through the ages who also accept this singular expression of faith with enthusiasm. Many people, therefore, join their voices with those of the Church when it teaches that “in many ways, throughout history down to the present day, men have given expression to their quest for God in their religious beliefs and behavior: in their prayers, sacrifices, rituals, meditations, and so forth. These forms of religious expression, despite the ambiguities they often bring with them, are so universal that one may well call man a religious being” (CCC 28).

Christian believers assent they are religious beings and believe that statement from the *Catechism* is a revelation, or the revealed Word of God. Revelation comes to the people of God through Scripture, tradition, and our observance of the world (Creation). These three components are the “converging and convincing arguments” of the order and beauty of the universe (CCC 31). As powerful as these components are, there is yet a more compelling argument.

For most people of faith, the ultimate experience that proves to them the presence of Divine Mystery³ is a personal encounter with the inexpressible but nevertheless

convincing presence of a sense of being that they identify as sacred and divine. As Christians, a traditional way to understand and fully appreciate such a personal encounter is to seek further enlightenment about how this type of encounter has been lived out in the past. It is quite helpful to turn to the stories of ancestors in faith to see how they experienced their encounters with the divine. Sacred Scripture is the place to start.

Ancestors in Faith—Old Testament

It is reasonable to believe that people have always wanted to encounter the “other,” “divinity,” or God. At certain times in history, people were preoccupied primarily with physical survival, so this curiosity was mostly set aside. When they had survival and safety measures in place, the desire was reignited in their imaginations, their feelings, and the deepest parts of themselves. We know this to be true because archeologists have uncovered numerous ruins, paintings, and other artifacts that represent humanity’s quest for encountering what I am calling “the presence of Divine Mystery.”

Our ancient ancestors looked back at where they had journeyed from and shared stories that captured some of the essence of what they recognized as important. In