

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

UNIT ONE

SESSION THREE: THE DISTINCTIVELY HUMAN

The core of our existence is our spirit and the primary force of our unfolding is our spirituality. Spiritualization implies surrender to the Transcendent and the discovery and acceptance of one's unique spiritual life direction in the light of the Transcendent. Spiritualization entails secondly the incarnation of one's spiritual life direction in the personal and vital aspects of our total self. For the Christian this process is seen most deeply as the graced discovery, acceptance and unique incarnation of the presence of Christ in our life.¹

The basic and ultimate thrust of Christian life consists not so much in the fact that a Christian is a special instance of humankind in general, but rather in the fact that the Christian is simply a human being as he or she is. But the Christian is a person who accepts without reservations the whole of concrete human life, with all its adventures, its absurdities and its incomprehensibilities. A real non-Christian on the other hand, a person who could not even be called an "anonymous Christian" in the ultimate depths of the way he or she lives out human existence, is characterized precisely by the fact that they do not muster this unconditional acceptance of human existence. In the concrete, Christians are people who are distinguished in a great variety of ways from non-Christians: they are baptized, they receive sacraments, they belong to a very definite organization, they receive norms from this organization, they have to acquiesce calmly in a certain lifestyle with the same kind of patience with which they confront the uncontrollable givens in the other areas of their life. The really ultimate thing is that they accept themselves just as they are, and do this without making anything an idol, without leaving anything out, and without closing themselves to the totality of what in the ultimate depths of reality is inescapably imposed upon human beings as their task.²

Yahweh says this: They have found pardon in the desert, those who have survived the sword. Israel is marching to his rest. Yahweh has appeared to me from afar; I have loved you with an everlasting love and so I still maintain

¹ Adrian van Kaam, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Self Direction*, Dimension Books, 1976, 9-10.

² Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, Seabury Press, 1978, 402.

*my faithful love for you.*³

*The Spirit himself joins with our spirit to bear witness that we are children of God.*⁴

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THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- * *The formation of the human person is ultimately spiritual formation.***
- * *All human beings have a margin of freedom which they can enhance or diminish.***
- * *All human existence is always part of the formation mystery and therefore part of the giving and receiving of form in some way.***

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Call to Mind a Good Person You Know

If I were to describe someone to you as being “deeply human,” what characteristics and qualities would come to mind? Outstanding intellectual capacity? Maybe, but not necessarily. It is possible to be very gifted intellectually and also be very superficial, perhaps quite silly or even nasty. Much work for other people? Perhaps, but again such a person might not necessarily be “deeply human” and vice versa, someone who is deeply human might not seem to do much for others. And whatever we might say about what a person *does* none of it gets to the core or essence of being “deeply human.”⁵ Concretely it is extremely difficult to describe what constitutes “deeply human.” However, we typically recognise it when we meet a person who is in fact “deeply human.”

This line of questioning and reflection is not pursued here with the expectation of finding “the answer,” as if there is a clear and indisputable definition of the “deeply human.” It is introduced, rather, to encourage thinking about the “depth dimension,” that part of our humanity that holds our best

³ Jeremiah 31:2-3.

⁴ Romans 8:16.

⁵ Of course, if a person does wicked things that would obviously preclude them from being described as a “deeply human” person. Similarly, we do spontaneously recognise in good actions the evidence of deep humanity. The medieval philosophers would say, “Agere sequitur esse” (“To act/do follows/expresses to be.”) In other words, “do” follows “be.” “Be” is the core of it all.

possibilities yet can be easily overlooked and bypassed in the busy-ness and sheer materialism of life or under pressure from greed or selfishness or fear or anxiety.

In our first session, reference was made to a lecture by Norman Lear. In particular, Lear spoke of:

the mysterious inner life, the fertile invisible realm that is the wellspring for our species' creativity and morality. It is that portion of ourselves that impels us to create art and literature, and study ethics, philosophy, and history. It is that portion of our being that gives rise to our sense of awe and wonder and longing for truth, beauty, and a higher order of meaning. For want of a better term, one could call it the spirit-led or spiritual life of our species. Whatever we call it, we have long recognised its presence and accepted that it sets us apart.

It is that “mysterious inner life ... the wellspring of our species ... that sets us apart,” that we wish to discuss here. We will call it spirit and assume that it lies at the very heart of our beings, constituting us in significant ways as unique in the created world.

Everything That Exists Manifests Form in a Limited Way

We will use expressions like “giving and receiving form” and “changing forms.” The word “form” is primarily used to refer to the essence of a person, event or thing, the deepest identifying reality of that entity. Sometimes the word “form” is also used to refer, by extension, to what are in fact partial expressions of the deepest identifying reality or essence of the person, event or things. For example, we speak of “the form” your life might take at a certain time and we may actually be talking about something that misrepresents who and what you most deeply are, your true form. Or we talk about “being formed,” and that might be positive or negative.

Three obvious factors emerge generally when we speak of form:

- Firstly, form – or the essence of a person, event or thing – is a dynamic reality, it is never static. Form, of its very nature, is in flux.
- Secondly, form, as we experience it in people, events and things, is always manifesting – for better or worse – the inherent struggle for full realization, form pushes for total expression. This tendency occurs within the limitations, imperfections and sheer opaqueness of the world as we know it.

- Thirdly, forms come and go. Forms are constantly disappearing and others appearing in the world as we know it.⁶

Form is implicit in, and partially manifested through the limited expressions of the person, event or thing in the concrete. In a perfect world that form would be explicit in, and totally manifested through the person, event or thing in the concrete. There would be, in that perfect world, an uninterrupted harmony of being. In fact, there are moments when we get intimations of such a harmony. It is wonderful to meet a transparent person, one in whom that depth dimension of form shines out. However, in this obviously imperfect world the expression of form, will always be somewhat opaque and dissonant, never entirely in tune. No human life in this imperfect world will ever exhaust the possibilities of the form it bears within.

This is more obvious with the higher orders of nature – for example, the human form – than with the lower orders of nature – for example, the form of a stone. When form emerges with particular clarity, it catches our attention. We call it beautiful, striking, marvelous, wonderful and so on.⁷ It is a delight to be with a person who “shines,” as it were, someone in whom there is a certain radiance. There is, quite literally, a beauty about that person’s life. It is good to have such people around and it is good to be around such people. Their lives have a truly spiritual quality, in the best sense of that word.

The world of people, events and things is always caught up in the giving and receiving of form. We have referred to this as the formation mystery. The world is a mass of emerging forms. Nothing is so solid or so static that it avoids this process. The ancient landscapes are what they are today because their forms have emerged over millions of years and will continue to do so. The rivers and oceans of the world were not always as we see them today. Part of the wonder of the world is precisely this forming process.

Today we are very aware that some of the changing forms of the natural environment are portents. Rather than a felicitous emerging of nature’s form, too often we see a suppression of nature’s form through pollution of the environment. In such instances there is a de-forming or mal-formation. Deformation or malformation is a contortion that typically occurs when people, events and things are not allowed to be themselves as they are in themselves.

We have promoted deformation in many parts of our world because we have ignored the natural laws of formation in the cosmos. Rather than proceed in mutuality, by way of a genuine conversation with nature, respecting what things are, we have tended to proceed unilaterally, imposing our will on nature and using

⁶ Recall the discussion of continuity amidst change in the mystery of life in Session Two of this Unit.

⁷ See Michael Whelan, *Living Strings*, E J Dwyer, 1994, “Goodness and Beauty”, 53-64. For the medieval thinkers, beauty is the brilliance of form in and through matter.

and abusing it with disregard for the consequences. There never was a time in human history when it was more important for us to reflect on the mystery of formation, acknowledge it humbly, and work to cooperate with it intelligently as participants rather than conquerors.

Another name for the human form is the human spirit. Distinctively human formation is spiritual. All human formation is, in the end, spiritual formation. Another name for spirituality is human life formation.

Good News and Bad News

This process of emerging forms – of giving and receiving form – operates in the pre-animate as well as the animate forms. It is perhaps more obvious in the latter. “Life goes on” we say. We human beings, if we pause and reflect, are aware of the emerging forms and even the suppression of forms in our individual and group lives. At times this awareness is forced upon us painfully and, try as we may, we can only respond to it. Perhaps we just react to it. We cannot stop it.

At no point in our lives is the manifestation of form – the expression of who I most deeply am – ever completed. Life formation is a lifelong process. I am always able to be formed anew, at least in principle. The good news in this is that no circumstance – short of death or the total deprivation of consciousness and/or freedom – leaves us without the possibility of *re-formation*. Life is merciful. *Dum spiro spero* (“While I breathe, I hope”).⁸

De-formation is also implied here, however, as a constant possibility. Human formation is not automatically life giving and creative – it may be formative or deformative. The emerging form of my life as body-person may be more or less in *harmony* or *consonant* with my choices and actions. That is, the truth of who I am, may be more or less facilitated or more or less obstructed by me.

The Pig’s Advantage

Pigs, like all pre-human beings, are not burdened with consciousness and freedom. Pigs do not ponder meaning and purpose, nor do they write books about “the pig’s condition.” “The human condition” is however a matter of concern –

⁸ Though we would of course have to acknowledge that tragically, on occasions, human beings may be reduced to a state in which they are simply not capable of *initiating* any kind of response that might bring about a positive re-formation in their lives. For example, apart from physical limitations – such as those involved, say, with Alzheimers or perhaps severe head injuries such as might be sustained in a motor vehicle accident or brain damaged from excessive and inappropriate drug use – we should also note the possibility of emotional and even spiritual limitations. For example, I may, through repeated acts of selfishness and greed over a long time, so suppress the true form of my life that I may be humanly incapable of reversing that. Herein lies the value of supportive communities, good therapists and caring individuals who can “walk with” another when he/she is struggling.

implicitly or explicitly – for human beings. As a human being, I lack the pig's advantage.

I have both the obligation and the privilege of more or less influencing and shaping the emergence of my form. Implicitly and/or explicitly, I develop patterns of thought and attitudes that significantly influence the choices I make and thus the life formation process that unfolds for me. I am able to give *direction* to my formation. Indeed, if I do not take up this project of giving direction to my life, forces from beyond myself and even within myself, will give that direction. I am never without direction. The question is: Which direction?⁹

For this reason, we speak of responsibility, and accountability. An essential mark of maturity is the ability to respond appropriately to the circumstances of life. Life is not what happens to me but what I do with what happens to me. Put another way, I am mature to the extent that I am able to work together with the truth of who I am and the truth of the circumstances in which I find myself. A healthy social environment is the normal means by which I will grow into and maintain this response-ability.

In ancient Greece, there was an inscription over the temple of Apollo at Delphi: "Know thyself!". Self-knowledge and self-awareness has always been fostered in the great religious traditions as a basis for healthy living. How could we facilitate the expression of harmonious forms in our lives if we remained ignorant of our true nature?

Finally, in the light of the foregoing, recall a central the theme of this course: LISTEN! PAY ATTENTION! BE ALERT! STAY AWAKE! BE WHERE YOU ARE! BECOME WHO YOU ARE! There can be no authentic spiritual life unless we are effectively committed – implicitly or explicitly – to listening honestly to what is happening. Denial, obfuscation, flight and evasion – in a word, dishonesty – are the great enemies of our humanity.¹⁰

The Ultimate Ground of Human Nature is Spirit

Our bodily form is a manifestation of our spiritual nature. In our most human moments our lives are most expressive of the human spirit. Any of those

⁹ St Augustine makes a pertinent observation: "Love cannot be idle. What is it that moves absolutely any man, even to do evil, if it is not love? Show me a love that is idle and doing nothing. Scandals, adulteries, crimes, murders, every kind of excess, are they not the work of love? Cleanse your love, then. Divert into the garden the water that was running down the drain. Am I tell you not to love anything? Far from it! If you do not love anything you will be dolts, dead men, despicable creatures. Love, by all means, but take care what it is you love." (St Augustine, *Sermon II on the Psalms*, 31:5)

¹⁰ We should note that denial and dishonesty can take many forms. We are all geniuses at self-deceit. Fr example, repeated choices and actions that spring form and foster greed or selfishness or hatred etc will also tend to feed into general mood of dishonesty. See how we humans can rationalize just about anything. And vice versa, repeated choices and actions for the true and the good and the loving tend to beget a mood of honesty and transparency in our lives.

attributes that we might expect to find in the “deeply human” person – freedom, grace, love, compassion, wisdom, kindness, trust, generosity, the ability to forgive, artistic creations, courage, integrity and so on – are ultimately expressions of spirit. We cannot quantify them, examine them under a microscope, or even adequately describe them in any rational way. In the end they are symptoms of the mystery that life is, dim reminders of the Great Mystery beyond the mystery. All those qualities reflect the qualities of being – the good, the true, the one, the beautiful. And they are only empirically verifiable in their manifestations and effects, not in their substance.¹¹ But we normally know when they are there and when they are absent. Their presence bespeaks harmony, beauty, goodness, right order, what ought to be.

We quite rightly also admire and foster achievements of a different order, such as business acumen, sporting ability, efficient work, organizational competence, and so on. We would not, for example, be too concerned about the kindness of the person building our house but we would like to know he or she was a competent builder. However, beyond the problems to solve and functional jobs that pepper daily life, we look for something more from people than mere competence and usefulness. In our saner moments, what we value most about human life – even the most materialistic among us – is these higher qualities of the spirit.

The rationalistic and functionalistic mindset, so characteristic of our modern Western cultures, finds this difficult to cope with precisely because the world of the spirit is so mysterious and elusive. What the man or woman in the street experiences in the depth dimension of their humanity, is not what the rationalistic thinker describes in abstractions, no matter how precise or logical the description might be.

The English business consultant and social critic, Charles Handy, offers an astute observation, speaking of what he calls the “MacNamara Fallacy”:

*The first step is to measure what can be easily measured. This is OK as far as it goes. The second step is to disregard that which can't be easily measured or to give it an arbitrary quantitative value. This is artificial and misleading. The third step is to presume that what can't be measured easily isn't really important. This is blindness. The fourth step is to say what can't be measured really doesn't exist. This is suicide.*¹²

¹¹ You cannot “prove” the presence of, say, love. What you can do is point to this or that behaviour as evidence for the presence of love. But we are all too familiar with the possibility that the “evidence” can be counterfeited. Love is other than the behaviour.

¹² Charles Handy, *The Empty Raincoat*, Arrow Business Books, 1994, 219. See also Michael Whelan, “What Matters in the End: Spirituality for our Time”, *Inform*, 43.

To begin to think of myself as ultimately and essentially a spiritual being is, in fact, to embark on a never ending journey. It is a journey which I do not ultimately control either. The human spirit beckons me to leave the realm of the controlling ego and submit to much wider and more profound possibilities. I can facilitate this journey, I cannot determine it. Recognition of this journey lies at the heart of all the great religious traditions, the lessons of Lao Tzu, Confucius, Buddha, the Hebrew Prophets, Jesus of Nazareth, the Australian Aborigines and the North American Indians for example. It represents what is most wonderful about us, as well as what is most dangerous. The highest and deepest expressions of humanity are expressions of the human spirit. Life formation is liberation – liberation of the spirit, emergence of the deepest possibilities. The scholar of comparative religion, Huston Smith, writes:

“Religion alive confronts the individual with the most momentous option this world can present. It calls the soul to the highest adventure it can undertake, a proposed journey across the jungles, peaks, and deserts of the human spirit. The call is to confront reality, to master the self. Those who dare to hear and follow this secret call soon learn the dangers and difficulties of its lonely journey.

A sharpened edge of a razor, hard to traverse,
A difficult path is this – the poets declare!

“Science, as Justice Holmes was fond of saying, makes major contributions to minor needs. Religion, whether or not it comes up with anything, is at least at work on the things that matter most. When, then, a lone spirit succeeds in breaking through to major conquests here, he becomes more than a king – he becomes a world redeemer. His impact stretches for millennia blessing the tangled course of human history. ‘Who are the greatest benefactors of the living generation of mankind?’ asks Toynbee. ‘I should say: ‘Confucius and Laotze, the Buddha, the Prophets of Israel, and Judah, Zoroaster, Jesus, Mohammed and Socrates’.

“The answer should not surprise. Authentic religion is the clearest opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos can pour into human existence. What then can rival its power to touch and inspire the deepest creative centers of man’s being? Moving outward from there into myth and rite it provides the symbols that carry history forward, until at length its power too is spent against the world’s backwash and life awaits a new redemption. This recurrent pattern leads even the unpius like George

*Bernard Shaw to conclude that religion is the only real motive force in the world.*¹³

The amazing driving force behind what Huston Smith describes so vividly, is the human spirit. We are more able to say what spirit is *not* than what it *is*. For this reason we tend to leave it alone. For this reason, also, it is often enough discussed in ways that are not very helpful. Yet it is the most foundational thing about being human. If we do not endeavor to address it intelligently and creatively we run the serious risk of deformation or simply falling far short of our potential as human beings. There is perhaps no better reason than this for pursuing the study of spirituality as a rigorous discipline.

A Margin of Freedom

All distinctively human life formation is more or less freely chosen formation. Freedom is not a static “thing” that is simply there. It is a potential that may be actualized or remain just that – a potential. It is won or lost, enhanced or diminished in accord with the way we use it. Like the muscles of our bodies, which tend to atrophy without use, so freedom slips away from us if we do not exercise it. Freedom is also a profoundly paradoxical reality. The ultimate freedom is the ability to be simply what I must be. This level of freedom is hard won, a characteristic of the truly mature person.

Generally understood, *freedom is our ability to choose*. This is a spiritual quality. The most basic freedom of all is our *ability to choose an attitude*. No matter what circumstances we might find ourselves in, we have the ability to choose an attitude to those circumstances. Victor Frankl, in his little classic, *Man's Search For Meaning*, has noted this well in his description of the experience of the concentration camps of World War II. He throws up a paradox: Individuals in prisons may in fact be more free than those who imprison them. People like Nelson Mandela confirm this. Frankl writes:

We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they were sufficient proof that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way. ...

“The way in which a man accepts his fate and all the suffering it entails, the

¹³ Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man*, Perennial Library, 1958, 11-12.

way in which he takes up his cross, gives him ample opportunity – even under the most difficult circumstances – to add a deeper meaning to his life. He may remain brave, dignified and unselfish. Or in the bitter fight for self-preservation, he may forget his human dignity and become no more than an animal. Here lies the chance for a man either to make use of or to forgo the opportunities of attaining the moral values that a difficult situation may afford him. And this decides whether he is worthy of his sufferings or not.”¹⁴

Social, political, economic, cultural and religious freedom are not denigrated by understanding freedom in this way. Human beings have a right to a freedom that gives them access to the basic necessities for a dignified life, if those basic necessities are available. In other words, no one has a right to deny anyone these basic necessities. Denial of these freedoms is a tragedy if not a crime. The right to social, political, economic, cultural and religious freedoms is grounded in the freedom that is part of the nature of the human person. All these subsequent freedoms are said to be human rights because they express and defend what we most deeply are as human beings.¹⁵

Freedom – ultimately a matter of spirit – pertains to the very nature of the human person. Freedom is the most profound manifestation of the human spirit. Freedom is both *from* and *for*:

- The exercise of freedom generally demands freedom *from* certain constraints. With regard to the deepest freedom – the freedom to choose an attitude – we must work to be free from inner constraints of anxiety, fear, prejudice, chronic anger, vengeance, unreal expectations and so on, if we are to enhance that freedom. Certain people – precisely because they have this freedom *from* inner constraints, are able to engender freedom in other people. They create space, as it were, for others to be free. They engender a sense of possibility where impossibility seemed to dominate.¹⁶
- The freedom *from* also implies freedom *for* something. We remove the constraints so that we are more free *for* facilitating the truth of who we are and what the particular circumstances ask of us. Freedom *from* constraints

¹⁴ Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1974, 65 & 67.

¹⁵ All recognitions of human rights are founded on some notion of natural law. That is, when we acknowledge the dignity of the human person – we recognize someone who has *this* nature that we call “human” – we are compelled to also recognize certain implications or consequences that necessarily go with that nature. Is there any other basis for talking of human rights?

¹⁶ The persistent and consistent application of something like the method of listening described in Eugene Gendlin’s book, *Focusing*, can contribute significantly to removing those constraints to inner freedom by helping us to work through them and grow because of them. People who have not done this work and remain constrained by inner burdens of anxiety, anger, and so on, diminish the freedom of their environments too. They may tend to be self-absorbed and thus suck the energy out of relations. They may also have “strings attached” to their relationships and personal agendas mingled in their comments and conversation. Thus the communication can be manipulative.

without some intention of exercising freedom *for* responsible behavior is not freedom at all but mere license. To give people freedom *from* constraints without helping them to be accountable and holding them responsible is deformative. The ultimate expression of freedom is found in our being who and what we are – what we must be.

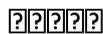
All healthy life formation is built upon the basic premise that human beings have a margin of freedom. That is, they have some ability to make choices concerning their circumstances in life. To deny this truth is to move down the path of deformation. Our schooling systems, social welfare systems, criminal justice systems, medical systems, without an appreciation for the freedom of the individual would tend to beget only two categories of people – masters and victims, those in charge and those being looked after. How can we hold people accountable if they are not free? What could responsibility possibly mean without an assumption of freedom? What would be the point of therapeutic work or attempts to rehabilitate criminal offenders, if we could not appeal to some capacity in people to choose alternatives?¹⁷

¹⁷ Stanley Kubrick's film, *A Clockwork Orange* (1972), is a rather terrifying presentation of a rehabilitation process which assumes the very opposite – the thug concerned is subjected to behaviouristic processes which leave him bereft of his humanity. The film comes to an ironic triumph when the behaviouristic constraints are removed and the thug regains his ability to be a thug once again.

THE UNIVERSAL CHRISTIAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLE

*** Christian life formation is a never ending graced process of facilitating the emergence of the Christ Form in our lives.**

*** Our freedom blossoms through Him, with Him and in Him.**



The Earth is Full of the Goodness of God

In our Christian tradition we acknowledge God – the Great Mystery beyond the mystery of formation – as the Origin of all that is. Every nature or essence that exists bespeaks the Creator. “The whole of creation is groaning in one great act of giving birth.”¹⁸ The forms of all people, events and things are particular – and dim – expressions of the Eternal Nature. All things point, as it were. Each person, event or thing is a reminder of the possibilities that our world holds, the ordered and benevolent purposes inherent in the formation mystery.

This is particularly so in the case of human nature, for we are made in the image and likeness of the Eternally lovable and the Eternally Good Mystery. Thomas Merton puts it succinctly:

*To say I am made in the image and likeness of God is to say that love is the reason for my existence, for God is love. Love is my true identity. Selflessness is my true self. Love is my true character. Love is my name.*¹⁹

Some of the Fathers of the Church, when speaking of the revelation that we are made in the image and likeness of God, stressed freedom as the key to that truth. Jean Daniélou writes of St Gregory of Nyssa for example:

*Freedom is a divine quality, and God could not create man in his image without giving him free will. And it may be noted here that Gregory, following Origen (and, indeed, anticipating St Bernard)), stresses free will more than intelligence in his analysis of man’s likeness to God.*²⁰

Even the deformative expressions of human life formation – if only by default – call us to ponder what might be. When our human natures are

¹⁸ See Romans 8:22.

¹⁹ Thomas Merton *New Seeds of Contemplation*, New Directions, 1972), 60.

²⁰ “Introduction” to Jean Daniélou and Herbert Musurillo, eds, *From Glory to Glory*, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1961, 12.

expressed in more or less authentic form, they are a beautiful reminder of our origin, the Great Mystery beyond the mystery. They invite deep gratitude and quiet wonder and joy. The goodness and beauty and love reflected in authentic human form points beyond itself to that Great Mystery. At our best we are sacraments of the Beyond, beautiful reminders of Beauty Itself.

I can truthfully think of my human vocation as a call to be a transparency through which the Divine Light shines in the world in a unique way. A good person is a transparent person. St Irenaeus of Lyons, writing at the end of the 2nd century, puts it beautifully:

*For the glory of God is a living human being; and the life of the human being consists in beholding God. For if the manifestation of God which is made by means of the creation, affords life to all living in the earth, much more does that revelation of the Father which comes through the Word, give life to those who see God.*²¹

In being the flesh and blood reality through which the Great Mystery finds its way into the world at this time, in this place, in this unique way, I discover my unique and communal identity. In my uniqueness I allow a specific shaft of Divine Light to enter the world. In our communality we allow a full spectrum of Divine Light to become visible.

For the Christian, therefore, we can say living is epiphany²² in a twofold sense:

- In the first place, the world of people, events and things, reveals or shows God to us.
- In the second place, it is our vocation to show God to our world of people, events, and things.

Life formation is a constant process of invitation and response. My unique and communal nature, in conversation with the circumstances in which I find myself, is an invitation. I must respond. To the extent that I respond faithfully, in accord with the truth of who I am and the truth of the circumstances in which I find myself, to that extent my life will express my authentic form. That authentic form allows the Great Mystery, in all its Goodness, Love, Truth, Beauty and Unifying Creativity to be an active force among us. To that extent the Kingdom will have come!

²¹ St Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against the Heresies*, Book 4, 20, 7.

²² Our English word *epiphany* has its roots in the Greek word *phaino*, meaning *to show*. Thus, the feast of the Epiphany is about God being revealed or shown to the world. By extension we can regard the whole of creation as *showing* God. All we need are the eyes to see.

Christ Our Light

The Great Mystery beyond the mystery is enfleshed among us. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”²³ Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, the Light of the world. In Him, with Him and through Him, I will find the fullest expression of my nature.²⁴ Christ is the Eternal Form in our midst, the incarnate expression of the essence of God. That Christ Form is in us, enabling us to be what we are called to be.²⁵ Our lives as disciples of Jesus are a never-ending process of fostering, facilitating and submitting to the expression of that Christ Form in our unique and communal way.

Christ calls us into communion with Him. In Him, with Him and through Him, we find communion with other people.²⁶ Indeed we find communion with all that is. The Christ Form is one of Love and Liberation. Christ speaks in the depths of my heart, in my consciences, in the people around me, in the events of the day, and in the created world. Christ invites me to listen and be drawn beyond the darkness that besets the human heart. Christ seeks not to dominate and subdue, but to love and liberate. When my life formation is pursued humbly and honestly in submission to the Christ Form, my own life form begins to take on the same characteristics as the Christ Form. It is my very nature to manifest God just as it was Jesus’ nature to do that.

The signs that might remind me that I have much work to do in this regard are unmistakable. They are anything that is contrary to the Christ Form – hatred, lack of forgiveness, oppression, vengeance, selfishness, all the various “isms” – egotism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, sectarianism, fundamentalism etc and all that enslaves, oppresses and inhibits me and others from authentically expressing my unique and communal form of human nature as one set free in Christ.

The signs that I am growing into my unique and communal humanity are likewise unmistakable. They are all the things that are in accord with the Christ Form – love, forgiveness, freedom, compassion, generosity, big-heartedness and

²³ See John 1:14.

²⁴ We not only find our place in the world through Him, with Him and in Him, Jesus finds His place in the world today through us, with us and in us. It might be helpful to remember this at the doxology in the Eucharist when, at the end of the Eucharistic Prayer, the celebrant holds the consecrated bread and wine up and proclaims: “Through Him, with Him, in Him! In the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours Almighty Father, forever and ever!” And we all respond as one: “Amen!”

²⁵ This would be the place to discuss baptism – our being “baptized into Christ Jesus” (Romans 6:2). However, we do not have the time to give it the attention it requires. Suffice it to say, baptism is a topic that needs extensive and renewed attention. We probably do not reflect nearly enough on the power and significance of our baptism. What does it mean for us on a day-to-day basis – to be baptized into Christ Jesus?

²⁶ This would be the place to discuss St Paul’s notion of “the body of Christ” (eg see 1 Corinthians 12:12-30). However, we do not have the time. We might find there, when we reflect on it, the seeds of some excellent understanding of social justice, for example, to say nothing of the dispositions we develop daily with regard to other people, events and things.

all that liberates and promotes the authentic expression of my human nature as one set free in Christ.

Facilitating the emergence of the Christ Form in my life and world is a matter of work and effort as well as grace. There is nothing automatic about it. Nor is it a question of mastery. And it is a work that must be lifelong. One of the central tasks of the community of the baptized is to usher the child into this lifelong process in an appropriate way. The child learns primarily by contact with people who are actually living what they intend the child to live. Initially that contact is literally tactile. Through human touch good parents endeavor to communicate faith, hope and love for that child. Slowly the values of the parents are caught by the child. “Telling” and excessive “negative reinforcement” tend to be counter-productive. And where the environment of faith, hope and love is not consistently lived out in the experience of the home, that “telling” and “negative reinforcement” may in fact be quite destructive. Gradually, as human beings grow they become increasingly able to stand on their own two feet and make decisions appropriate to their own life. If they have been immersed in an environment where people embody the Christ Form, that is likely to be a major influence on the decisions they freely make as adults.

Freedom is of the Essence

One of the greatest gifts I can give other human beings is a realistic sense of their own freedom. And I can only do that if I have won a significant margin of freedom in my own life. All freedom is for truth. The only ground for the emergence of anyone’s freedom is truth. The truth sets us free.²⁷ Ultimately truth and freedom merge in Being. Hence the observation: The ultimate freedom is the freedom to be what I am, one made in the image and likeness of God. Thus we read in the Vatican II document, “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:”

Only in freedom can human beings direct themselves toward goodness. Our contemporaries make much of this freedom and pursue it eagerly, and rightly to be sure. Often, however, they foster it perversely as a license for doing whatever pleases them, even if it is evil. For its part, authentic freedom is an exceptional sign of the divine image within man. For God has willed that we remain "under the control of our own decisions" (cf. Sir 15:14) so that we can seek our Creator spontaneously, and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to him. Hence, our human dignity demands that we act according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within, not under blind internal impulse nor by mere

²⁷ See John 8:32.

external pressure. Human beings achieve such dignity when, emancipating themselves from all captivity to passion, they pursue their goal in a spontaneous choice of what is good, and procure for themselves through effective and skillful action, apt helps to that end. Since our freedom has been damaged by sin, only by the aid of God's grace can he bring such a relationship with God into full flower. Before the judgment seat of God each of us must render an account of our own lives, whether we have done good or evil (cf. 2 Cor 5:10)" (Gaudium et Spes, 17)

There can be no true morality without freedom. Likewise there can be no genuine discipleship without freedom. Central to my religious project as a Christian is an affirmation of my responsibility and accountability, and a dedication to facilitating the growth of freedom in myself and others. To the extent that I am unfree I am unable to be committed as a genuine follower of the Way. "Christ set us free, so that we should remain free."²⁸

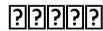
Grace does not take away freedom – it presumes it and enhances it. Grace and freedom go hand in glove. Grace invites my free response, and to the extent that I am willing and able to respond I facilitate the liberation of the Christ Form in my life and world. And to the extent that the Christ Form is liberated in my life and world, I am free. Freedom begets freedom. Freedom, rightly exercised contributes to the expression of authentic formation.

Deformation is, in part at least, a direct result of freedom misused or denied. In this way freedom is also diminished. As an adult I may find myself the victim of certain deformation, the result of earlier life experiences. These may leave me with unresolved conflicts, excessive anxiety, chronic anger, the recurring desire for revenge and so on. If this is the case, I may benefit from professional help in working through these unwanted results of deformation. There is no future for me in harboring them. They diminish my freedom. It is a seductive but ultimately destructive temptation to hide behind blame and find an identity as a victim in life and thus cut off significant possibilities for formation. Whilst I gently and compassionately acknowledge those deformative realities, I must also gently and compassionately acknowledge my own responsibility for my life as an. I am free to choose a creative and life giving attitude to these experiences. Paradoxically, such choices may be among the most formative decisions of my life.

The whole point of freedom is that we are able to cooperate with grace in becoming who we most deeply are. In turn, freedom, which pertains to the very nature of who I am in Christ, is enhanced the more faithfully I pursue and submit

²⁸ St Paul's understanding of the freedom wrought by Jesus Christ is another profoundly rich topic we should reflect further on. However, time does not permit that here. We might ponder on it though in the light of the tendency the Christian Churches seem to have shown for many generations to control the lives of the baptized – even at times torturing and killing those who rebel against such control. What does freedom mean in the light of Christ?

to my unique and communal life in Him. The more I submit to this pattern, the more I will want, and be able, to submit to it. The more I come home to my true self in Christ, the more the form of my life will emerge. In this it will become increasingly obvious that I am made in the image and likeness of the infinitely lovable and loving Mystery.



Snippets for Meditation

(1) *“The Lord will never ask how successful we were in overcoming a particular vice, sin, or imperfection.*

“He will ask us, “Did you humbly and patiently accept this mystery of iniquity in your life? How did you deal with it? Did you learn from it to be patient and humble? Did it teach you to trust not your own ability but My love? Did it enable you to understand better the mystery of iniquity in the lives of others? Did it give you the most typical characteristic of truly religious people - that they never judges or condemn the sin and imperfection of others?”

“Genuinely religious people know from their own lives that the demon of evil can be stronger than any human being even in spite of their best attempts; they know that it is the patience, humility, and charity learned from this experience that count. Success and failure are accidental.

“The joy of the Christian is never based on their personal religious success but on the knowledge that their Redeemer lives. The genuine Christians are those who are constantly aware of their need of salvation.

“Acceptance of the mystery of iniquity in our project of existence is a school of mildness, mercy, forgiveness, and loving understanding of our neighbor.”²⁹



(2) *“We must weakly carry our cross’ Thérèse remarked. Yes, if we love mercy, we must consent to leading our lives and carrying our cross deplorably badly. Only then do we know that we haven’t been cheating, we know that we’ve reached the light at the last. Yes, says God, this is all I ask of you and you will be my disciple.”³⁰*

²⁹ Adrian van Kaam, *Religion and Personality (Revised Edition)*, Dimension Books, 1980, 14-15.

³⁰ Bernard Bro, *The Little Way: The Spirituality of Thérèse of Lisieux*, Christian Classics, 1980, p.82.

(3) *“God is not a ‘problem’ and we who live the contemplative life have learned by experience that one cannot know God as long as one seeks to solve ‘the problem of God’. To seek to solve the problem of God is to seek to see one’s own eyes. One cannot see one’s own eyes because they are that with which one sees and God is the light by which we see – by which we see not a clearly defined ‘object’ called God, but everything else in the invisible One. God is then the Seer and the Seeing and the Seen. God seeks Himself in us, and the aridity and sorrow of our heart is the sorrow of God who is not known to us, who cannot yet find Himself in us because we do not dare to believe or trust the incredible truth that He could live in us, and live there out of choice, out of preference. But indeed we exist solely for this, to be the place he has chosen for His presence, His manifestation in the world, His epiphany. But we make all this dark and inglorious because we fail to believe it, we refuse to believe it. It is not that we hate God, rather that we hate ourselves, despair of ourselves. If we once began to recognize, humbly but truly, the real value of our own self, we would see that this value was the sign of God in our being, the signature of God upon our being. Fortunately the love of our fellow human beings is given us as the way of realizing this. For the love of our brother, our sister, our beloved, our wife, our child, is there to see with the clarity of God Himself that we are good. It is the love of my lover, my brother or my child that sees God in me, makes God credible to myself in me. And it is my love for my lover, my child my brother, that enables me to show God to him or her in himself or herself. Love is the epiphany of God in our poverty.”³¹*



(4) *“No one, even in the most advanced societies, is totally liberated from the past and never will be. The stubborn element of the given remains alongside freedom, to condition, limit and even frustrate it. All of us find ourselves thrown into an existence which we did not choose and the circumstances of which we did not choose, and it is from that point on that we begin to exercise whatever freedom is open to us.”³²*



(5) *“Now my saying that it is impossible for those who pursue a life of virtue ever to attain perfection I shall also explain in the following way. The sovereign and highest Good, whose nature is goodness, this is divine nature itself; and whatever perfection can be conceived in such a nature, this He is called and is. Now since we have shown*

³¹ Thomas Merton, “A Letter on the Contemplative Life” in Lawrence Cunningham, ed, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master – The Essential Writings*, Paulist Press, 1992, 425-26.

³² John Macquarrie, *In Search of Humanity*, Crossroad, 1983, 18-19.

that the only limitation of virtue is vice, and since the divine nature excludes anything that is contrary to it, then it follows that the divine nature is conceived without bound or limit. But the soul that pursues true virtue actually participates in God Himself, because he is infinite virtue. Now since those who have come to know the highest good, desire completely to share in it, and since this good is limitless, it follows that their desire must be co-extensive with the limitless, and therefore have no limit. Thus it is absolutely impossible to attain perfection; for, as I have said, it cannot be confined within limits, and the only determination of virtue is that it is boundless. How then can you reach the boundary you are looking for if it does not exist?

“But though my argument has shown we cannot attain our goal, we must not, for all that, neglect the divine command, ‘Be you perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48). For though it may not be possible to completely attain the ultimate and sovereign good, it is most desirable for those who are wise to have at least a share in it. We should then make every effort not to fall short utterly of the perfection that is possible for us, and to try to come as close to it and possess as much of it as possible. For it may be that human perfection consists precisely in this constant growth in the good.”³³

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(6) *“Who am I? ... I am one loved by Christ.”³⁴*

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(7) *“The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what person knows another’s thoughts, except the spirit which is in that person? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God.”³⁵*

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³³ St Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, I, 8-18. St Gregory (330-395) was the younger brother of St Basil who consecrated him bishop of the Cappadocian town of Nyssa. He was not particularly good at administration and leadership, his main claim to fame being his intellect and his ability to write. He is sometimes referred to as “The Father of Christian Mysticism”, also “The Doctor of Desire”. *The Life of Moses* is a classic and seminal text in the tradition of Christian mysticism.

³⁴ Thomas Merton, “Conference on Prayer,” *Sisters Today*, XLI (1970), 5.

³⁵ 1Cor 2:10-11.

(8) *“Make your home in my word, you will come to know the truth and the truth will set you free.”³⁶*



(9) *“Ever since that day I have realised that man’s soul is a terrible and dangerous coil spring. Without knowing it, we all carry a great explosive force wrapped in our flesh and lard. And what is worse, we do not want to know it, for then villainy, cowardice and falsehood lose their justification; we can no longer hide behind man’s supposed impotence and wretched incompetence; we ourselves must bear the blame if we are villains, cowards, or liars, for although we have an all-powerful force inside, we dare not use it for fear it might destroy us. But we take the easy comfortable way out, and allow it to vent its strength little by little until it too has degenerated to flesh and lard. How terrible not to know that we possess this force! If we did know, we would be proud of our souls. In all heaven and earth, nothing so closely resembles God as the soul of man.”³⁷*



(10) *“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our Light, not our Darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you NOT to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people will not feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own Light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.”³⁸*



(11) *“Spirituality is, in simple terms, the process of becoming a person in the fullest sense.”³⁹*

³⁶ Jn 8:32.

³⁷ Nikos Kazantzakis, *Report to Greco*, Faber, 1965/1989, 356-57.

³⁸ Nelson Mandela, from his 1994 inaugural speech as the first President of the new South Africa. This same thought may be found in Marianne Wilkinson, *A Return to Love: Reflection the Principles of a Course in Miracles*, Harper Collins (Aquarian Paperback), 1992, 165.

³⁹ John Macquarrie, *Paths in Spirituality*, Harper and Row, 1972, 47.

(12) *“The candle of God is the soul of a human being.”*⁴⁰



(13) *“As far as I could see, what distinguished one human from another in captivity was his ability to make very different decisions: to accept his fate or make active judgments about the life he chose to lead, regardless of his circumstances. A prisoner of war might be treated like an animal, but he still had the power to choose not to become one, or act like one. Equally, a guard might be ordered to act like an animal, but he still held the power to choose not to become one, or at least one not so vicious. The life of a human is always filled with decisions. The ultimate challenge for us, as prisoners of war and individuals, was to search for the right kind of answers that might lead us home – with our own integrity still intact.”*⁴¹



(14) *“On 20 March 1995, members of a Japanese religious sect, Aum Shinrikyo (or Aum Supreme Truth), carried out a nerve gas attack on the Tokyo subway, leaving twelve people dead and thousands ill. One of several ‘doomsday cults’ linked in recent years to mass murder and suicide, Aum Shinrikyo attracted many highly intelligent and well educated young people, including chemists, physicists and medical specialists. As the report of the World Commission of Culture and Development observes, these people possessed a formidable mastery of scientific know-how, but no iota of know-why. ‘I did not want my life to be meaningless,’ a senior sect member said.*

“Across the Pacific some years later, a special young American was grappling with similar questions. Conceived in the hope that he would turn out to be a genius, Doron William Blake was named after the nineteenth-century English Romantic poet and painter William Blake, from whom his mother claims direct descent. His father is among some of ‘the world’s finest intellects’ – Nobel laureates, professors, artists and musicians – who donated semen to the Repository for Germinal Choice – better known as the genius sperm bank – set up in 1980 by a Californian millionaire optometrist. His mother knows his father only as Batch 28. Doron is, indeed, mathematically and musically very gifted, but he is no Nietzschean superman. His manner is diffident and he stammers. He finds science boring and he hates competitive sport. In 2001, he was

⁴⁰ Proverbs 20:27.

⁴¹ Rowley Richards, *A Doctor’s War*, Harper Collins, 2005, 181-182.

*studying comparative religion at college. He told and interviewer: ‘You know why I find religion so interesting? Because I am not sure quite who I am or what is meant for me. I want to feel I have my place in the universe’.*⁴²

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*THE BRAIN is wider than the sky,
For, put them side by side,
The one the other will include
With ease, and you beside.*

– *Emily Dickinson, CXXVI, Complete Poems*

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⁴² Richard Eckersley, *Well & Good: Morality, Meaning and Happiness*, Text Publishing, 2004, 1-2.

Suggestions for further study

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| Cinema | <p><i>The Elephant Man</i> (1980) with Anthony Hopkins and John Hurt, directed by David Lynch. (Contains the poignant lines of the physically deformed man: “I am not an animal I am a human being.”)</p> <p><i>Love and Death on Long Island</i> (Dir: Richard Kwietniowski, with John Hurt, Jason Priestly and Fiona Loewi. Eccentric British writer, Giles De’Ath (Hurt), who stumbles into the wrong movie theatre, becomes obsessed with one of the actors, flies to Long Island to meet her and fulfil his fantasy relationship. Commentary on a culture devoid of any real purpose.)</p> <p><i>One Night the Moon</i> (A short Australian musical drama, based on a true story from 1932. Contrasts the indigenous connectedness with the deeper forms of things with the superficiality of some of the white settlers. This is a simple and beautiful little film.)</p> <p><i>Rabbit Proof Fence</i> (2001)</p> <p><i>Whale Rider</i> (2002)</p> |
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Suggested Exercises

1. Begin each day this week by saying a brief prayer offering your life and work to God. Express the desire to be the place where God enters the world and brings freedom. (You might use the Prayer of Abandonment of St Ignatius which we saw in the last Suggested Exercises. You could perhaps reflectively recite the Our Father. You might do such praying on your knees by your bed, first thing after rising.)
2. Ask yourself a number of times this week what you are feeling at that moment or what is happening. Make it an open question. Do not answer the question. Just pay attention. It is all part of fostering a gentle self-presence, a disposition of self-accompaniment and attentiveness.
3. Reflect on the question: What does it mean to be “baptized into Christ Jesus”? (You might meditate on Romans 6:2 etc.) In what sense – if at all – could you regard your baptism as an event of freedom?
4. Our bodylines urges us towards certain needs (such as sleep and food) and certain satisfaction (such as particular kinds and amounts of food, sexual expression). Sometimes our urges towards satisfactions – which can be driven not by the biology as such but by psychological factors (such as anxiety) – can get confused with our needs. Indeed, sometimes the desire for this or that satisfaction can be perceived by us as a need. In the coming days pay close attention to the urges of your body. See if you can distinguish between needs and satisfactions. For example, you might pay attention to feelings of hunger and the urge to eat – how much is a need and how much a desire for satisfaction, and is the desire for satisfaction masking something else?