The Nature and Importance of Christian Spirituality

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ABSTRACT:
This article is a meditation on Exodus 3:11, in which Moses asks God “Who am I?” as Moses feels unfit to do what God has commanded. God’s answer seems to be no answer at all, and the conversation reaches its climax in God’s self-proclamation of “I am.” This Scriptural passage reveals that spirituality is the process of coming to know oneself by knowing God and the main action of spirituality is prayer.

Christian life centers itself upon a loving relationship between God and the human person. As the love of God satisfies the fundamental needs for inward peace and fulfillment, the testimony of Christian love is a force of change in both human societies and personal struggles. The process of coming to know oneself by knowing God in the midst of these changes is spirituality. Since it is vital for people to understand themselves to avoid despair, spirituality is necessary, and the main action of spirituality is prayer. Without prayer, Christians cannot know themselves because they
are relating only to themselves and not to God, who promises that God’s presence is the answer to all humanity’s questions of identity.

Spirituality and identity go hand in hand as both try to address fundamental concerns about one’s place in the world. These age-old subjects are combined in Moses’s question: “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11) Moses is asking God about his identity because he does not understand who he is or why he is important. We, too, struggle to understand ourselves in similar ways. In response to Moses’s question, God says, “But I will be with you,” (Exodus 3:12) and it is a baffling answer since it appears to be no answer at all. The response from God is even more puzzling since it is wholly focused on God, and it appears as though Moses’s identity is included inside God’s identity. So Moses asks who God is, and God says “I Am,” and every question after this statement returns to the same confusion of, “Who am I?” (Exodus 3:11)

As we seek our identity, we wonder how it is that we are loved by God, by friends, or even how we love ourselves when we know our own faults and hard-to-forgive mistakes. This question is always on our minds and such tension is the beginning of spirituality, which is “certainly to speak about God … but it is also to speak about man, with whom God wished to establish a relationship in love.”¹ We sometimes carry presuppositions about spiritual life and how complicated and invisible it seems, the kind of suppositions that come from seeing the lives of the saints or other extraordinary people in their astounding meditations and literature, living a life in denial of the world and having amazing religious experiences. To aim towards these examples of spirituality is intimidating and seems to be designated as something only friars, monks, and cloistered nuns are meant for. The reflections and analysis from vowed religious themselves, however, point to the contrary. The center of the Christian life is spiritual poverty, not rigorous asceticism. Aquinas noted that the life of the ascetic is not the only one the Christian can follow; the life of the layperson can be lived with as much charity as that of the monk.² The Desert

Mother Theodora of Alexandria in the fifth century mentions this as well, “Neither asceticism, nor vigils nor any kind of suffering are able to save, only true humility can do that.” Such poverty is the center of the spiritual life; it is why Christians are called to be poor in spirit, but the ultimate aim of such humility and love is union with God. The human person is created in the image and likeness of God in order to know and understand God, who is love, so the goal of all human desires is to love; the world created by God reflects and aims towards God because God, as love, is forever present.

Sin by consequence is the act of pursuing things that are devoid of love, and original sin becomes a disconnect with God that results from humanity willingly disuniting with love as love is meant to be. Moses’s question to God is the very reflection of this tragedy: he is not able to recognize himself despite his intellect because of sin. Humanity’s fall into sin is disunity, an inability to fully recognize love despite being made in the image of love, where “they have not the same resemblance to God as in the first days of man’s creation.” In this sense an act of love begins within a person but ends just as quickly because despite the desire to love, the soul has only itself as a point of reference. The human person descends towards a new low in life when they were created to ascend in both thoughts and actions; in desiring greatly yet living without the satisfaction of those desires, the soul cannot comprehend life. Such a life and its effects on humanity are summarized in Wisdom 14: “For the idea of making idols was the beginning of fornication, and the invention of them was the corruption of life; for they did not exist from the beginning, nor will they last forever. For through human vanity they entered the world, and therefore their speedy end has been planned” (Wisdom 14:12-14). In the corruption of sin, the soul does not know itself because it is disconnected from God. Union with God is the natural consequence of the soul, but the soul must be in conversation with God to reach this joyful end.

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Spirituality then is an interior life full of difficulty in which the soul must suffer to deny sin and love God with a greater love than the soul has for sin. Often when a person recognizes their identity in the person of Christ, they resist the change that cleaving to God will make in their identity and fall back toward old habits. Perseverance before their own resistance to change is spirituality, without which identity does not change for the better. The interior life itself recognizes a human person’s natural direction is God and understands the difficulties in desiring God. How to approach these difficulties of spirituality rests in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity. The aim of these virtues is to move towards God: faith as the supernatural realization and reality of God, hope as the desire for God because of God’s promise, and charity as the love of God for God alone because God loved us first. All three are necessary for the spiritual life where the soul, “illumined by faith thus advances toward God by the two wings of hope and love.”5 The spiritual life is a life in the present, where faith, hope, and all other graces move the soul to act in charity as it welcomes the intimate presence of the Trinity despite brokenness.

Moses acted upon all three virtues: faith in experiencing God firsthand and, despite an immense fear, still being unable to say no; hope in witnessing God’s freedom; and the charity to do what God invited him to do. Though God revealed such graces to Moses, Moses chose to accept the relationship between spirituality and an active life in the world. Spirituality as a result is not abstract but effective because one is set apart from the world and their uniqueness is observed, just as it was for Moses before the people of Israel and before God. “But I will be with you,” (Exodus 3:12) is God both promising hope and giving Moses his identity by showing him in whose image he is created.

In all decisions that were made, Moses did not act alone and did not think or converse with himself — he talked with God; the best way then to summarily show how the spiritual life is related to one’s personal life is through prayer and states of prayer. Prayer is a conversation with God, but more so it is a conversation of love with Christ for the sake of

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friendship — if we choose to pay attention to it. While great examples of prayer become a complete interior possession of the Holy Spirit in adoration and the willingness to listen, our prayer often falls short of this ideal. Because of our own and the world’s sin, it is difficult to pray: culturally there is little incentive for religious practice, and internally we have no true drive to pray because of our love of the sins we see before us. Sometimes our prayer in insincere: “After having elicited some few affections in a half-hearted way, and without conviction, and formed some vague resolutions which aim at the cure of no evil, at the practice of no virtue, we make haste to quit prayer, to divert our mind in active work, and to forget our resolutions almost as soon as made. And we call that a prayer!” Such a state can easily create despair and give little reason for charity, but in the knowledge of sin is understood the grave mistake being made: we are conversing with ourselves. Prayer is the continuing promise of hope if someone is willing to work to listen to God; sin is the desire to go back and replace true love with dishonest love.

Certainly, to advance in prayer one needs individual guidance and relationships to work through the circumstances; no person can find the fulfillment and beauty of prayer alone. Not only must friendships and communities therefore become places to grow in and learn prayer, but they also must become areas where there is depth as much as variety of prayer. Otherwise, Christians run the danger of committing acts of substitution to replace prayer.

The tragedy of sin as the unwillingness to recognize God as love is not merely individual but also societal. Contemporary life causes little desire for spirituality because modern culture can only comprehend the love that fades away. Such a dim perception of love, however, does not mean the human person is ignorant of what is missing; rather, they have no guide. Christian hope is a radical hope with radical claims, where identity, love, and meaning are found united in a single person. “Now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall

7 John Paul II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, 2001, 34.
see him as he is (1 John 3:2).”

The happiness of Christianity is declaring both joy and endurance in the face of sin, knowing work must be done, internally and externally, for the sake of love. Under such a reality did John Paul II write, “Let us go forward in hope! A new millennium is opening before the Church like a vast ocean upon which we shall venture, relying on the help of Christ…the Christ whom we have contemplated and loved bids us to set out once more on our journey: ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.’”

Spirituality is important for Christians as the practice of avoiding sin and loving God, which allows them to create community in alignment with love for the sharing of goodness. Success in prayer is a rich internal life from which action may be taken and friendships formed that help one along the way. Even more importantly, the witness of faith becomes a force of change in the world as much as within oneself, and the act of community becomes an invitation to change society. From this depth of knowledge came the response to the simple question of a scared shepherd and runaway murderer, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11) With such simplicity did God respond, “But I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you, that I have sent you: when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain.” (Exodus 3:12) So God responds to us when we remain in conversation with and find our identity in God.

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8 1 John 3:2 (RSVCE).


