





THE MORAL LIFE BY DEACON JAMES KEATING, PH.D.

THE CALL TO COMMUNION

Soft it approaches... a ray of light, brief as an instant, simple to grasp as the glance of two eyes. It contains a promise... liberation from the unbearable dungeon of my ego.... The gaze is perfectly tranquil, having nothing of magical powers or hypnotic compulsion; a questioning gaze which allows my freedom.... I lower my eyes; I look to one side. I don't want to say 'no' in the face of those eyes. I give them time to turn away.... These 'ghostly hours' recur more and more seldom, and the enveloping layers of everyday life grow stronger and thicker around me. I seal myself off from God and this becomes my usual state.... Maybe this is the habit of sin, the habit of evil.

Hans Urs Von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*

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Our goal as Christians is communion with the Holy Trinity, but often this goal becomes obscured due to sin. Any giving of the self over to God is always a response to his own giving of the self over to us and for us. Grace is simply our participation in God's own loving act of self-giving. Heaven, then, is entry into the divine bliss of not existing for oneself. Sin is self-enclosure, isolation, loneliness.

Our capacity to give of the self comes from our freedom and reason, but most especially it is called forth from us by the continual outpouring of God's own love for us as ordered toward our salvation. We live to respond to divine love through the power of his own love.

We struggle to be so available to God since becoming holy always appears as threatening to we who still are in "love" with sin. But once we are engaged by Christ, we become available to truth and to ourselves and, most vitally, to others. Christ enables our openness, aiding us to reform our hearts so they might become homes for the poor. His Spirit encourages us to host the needs of others, to become victims of the needs of the poor, as is Christ. Since sin is within us, this call to self-giving is first experienced as constraint, not freedom; fear of loss, not gain of eternal life. The holy person makes a shift from what she is in her own mind to what she is in God's mind. We are holy when "our" truth is the same as God's truth. In becoming holy we have moved from sin (illusion) into reality, and there we meet God—because God only dwells in reality. (CCC, §2466)

How do we keep looking at the "eyes of God" and not become distracted, lost, or self enclosed in the "layers of everyday life"? The resources we need to stay within the gaze of God at the parish level are key to preventing this "thickness" from obscuring our view of God. It is the parish's mission to facilitate a formation of mystical moral abundance by providing:

- instruction in *prayer* and experiences of actual praying;
- skills for listening and *discerning* the moral truth;
- *communal support* so that when one's conscience receives a truth that calls him or her to suffer its transforming power, there is the hope that such may be accomplished and not simply dismissed as "impossible" to achieve.

What is common to these three movements of parish-personal life is that they aim the participant toward *communion*:

- communion with God in prayer,
- communion with virtue in the discovery of truth,
- communion with other disciples in a fellowship of conversion.

A few assumptions ground these movements of communion:

- I want to know and be known by God;
- I want to be affected by the moral truth;
- I want these two goals so badly that I am willing to share life with others who are so inclined as well.

Parishioners need to personally appropriate these realities if a life of moral-mysticism is to be lived. The three assumptions imply a deep participatory commitment, not a tangential association. The parish community is to be established upon an ever-deepening call from Christ to come more into union with His Paschal Mystery. Thus, adult faith formation and homilies ought to be ordered toward helping parishioners know and be known by God, assisting persons with discovering the desires unleashed by but perhaps now dormant since Baptism, assisting persons with the appropriation of trust so that true community based upon faith can flourish.

Unlike political imagination, the predominant one in American culture today, a mystical moral life is not about factions, camps, and power; it is about *being overpowered* by truth—the truth about Christian identity being founded upon communion with God, virtue, and the welfare of other persons.

To be called by Christ to the fellowship of conversion and worship, which is the parish, is to first become one who is vulnerable to change. How do we create a culture of conversion within the parish? The scriptural template for discipleship is: Christ finds us in one “place” and leads us to another—from death to sin and “the world” to new life and life abundant (Jn 10:10).

One is responsive to the call of Christ because one sees that life does not lie in one’s own theories or ideas, ideas that are defensively protected. Spiritual life, life to the full, is born of knowing one’s lack, one’s neediness and limit before divinity. Our parishes may be smaller in the future but the gaze of each parishioner into the eyes of God will be deeper and more generous.

Here we always encounter a caution that the Catholic Church is for “everybody” and so it is. The parish ought not to frighten people away by becoming “elitist” or too supernatural in its order. However, we must

also admit that the parish’s mission is not to receive Americans and leave them as such. The community is to receive them and then suffer with them the coming of Christ into each soul. No one has to divide sheep and goats prematurely. Each of us will encounter the Paschal Mystery assuring that such dividing will be accomplished. Living in reality is not the same as living in popular and political American culture.



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