

SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND CARE

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Anything we do as a Christian must tend to a single ideal: union with God through the incarnate God, our Lord. The Christian's whole vital activity is one, God the object of our desire. And the road which leads us to Him is also one: incorporation in Jesus Christ and the participation and imitation of His mystery in our life.

This is about our personal relationship with God, but not just our personal relationship with God. It is also about our corporate relationship with God as members of the Body of Christ. However, it is also about our call by God to be vehicles of His/her love and presence by the fact that we are members of the Body of Christ. When people see us they should see Christ, they should experience something of the love that God has for them – an awesome and daunting and overwhelming call. It is our call as clergy, as Christians, to proclaim and BE the Good News.

Our ordination vows include (BAS, page 647) that I (we) will be diligent in the reading AND study of the holy scriptures AND in seeking the knowledge of such things as make us a stronger and more able minister of Christ. We also commit to minister the word of God and the sacraments of the new covenant, that the reconciling love of Christ may be known AND received.

As we prepare to live out our Christian identity three things are involved. a) academic knowledge about the Bible, church history, Christian doctrine, etc.; b) development of skills we need to carry out our ministry and calling (e.g. ministering to the sick and dying, preparing people for baptism and confirmation, counselling the troubled, etc.; and c) our spiritual formation as deacon, or priest, or bishop. That is growing into our identity as (BCP, page 544) “a member of Christ, the child of God, and an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.” This is a life long journey and endeavour – not just part of our preparation for ordination – as our ordination vows make clear. I am still working at it – being the kind of person God calls me to be – wills me to be.

As we need to keep fresh our relationship with our spouse, so also our relationship to God by constantly addressing it and livening it. The daily offices, private prayer, meditation, retreats, quiet days, continuing reading and study, sabbaticals, etc. If we are to become the person God wills us to be, then we need to be focused – as the reader or deacon in the Orthodox Liturgy says before sharing a scriptural passage “attend” or focus, pay attention.

So this morning I am going to share with you the only area in which I have expertise – my own experience.

I grew up in the church in a small Ontario town in a low/middle of the road parish. The holiness of our parish priest was a significant element in God making clear His call to me to ordination. When I went to university (University of Toronto) I lived at Wycliffe College. Although only a “pre-theolog” Wycliffe emphasized the need for one’s spiritual growth and formation. I was expected to attend daily Morning and Evening Prayer, and to be involved in one of the prayer groups. I was assigned to a parish (the Church of the Messiah) and had one of the faculty as a priest mentor. Above all the college emphasized the centrality of our living relationship to our Lord.

My family in the meantime moved from Ontario to Montreal and I transferred to McGill University. I became a server at our local parish, but also at St. John the Evangelist (the St. James of Montreal.) I had friends at Montreal Diocesan College and was often there for Evensong and dinner.

During that time in Montreal I felt that I should attend a monastic seminary – of which there were two main ones in our church – one, part of the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham, and one, part of the Community of the Resurrection in Yorkshire, where I went.

A central reality of the College of the Resurrection was one needed to be a Christian – spiritual formation. Many students already had a degree in theology and ministerial skills were more thoroughly addressed in your first curacy, called “serving your title.”

Life at the College went like this. From the last service the night before (compline) until after breakfast in the morning we were in greater silence (no talking of any kind apart from the actual church services. We were to be focused on, and listening to, God. There was Morning

Prayer and Eucharist each morning, followed by a silent breakfast. Apart from those two services we were expected to spend 20 minutes in private meditation each day. After breakfast we went from greater silence to lesser silence (one could attend lectures in a lecture hall, see your tutor in his office, discuss work with a fellow student in your room. All other areas of the college were silent.) At one p.m. we shared the mid-day office with the monks. Lesser silence ended and lunch was a talking meal. From then until four p.m. you could study or have free time. During that 'free' afternoon, on a regular basis, you were part of a team that cleaned the college chapel and oratories. Once a week, again during that free time, you worked in the garden with others – a spiritual exercise.

At four (this was England) we had afternoon tea and at 4:30 went back into lesser silence. After a couple of hours, we prayed Evensong, had dinner (a talking meal) and coffee. At compline we went back into greater silence. There was a lead meditation weekly, a quiet day monthly, and a 4 day retreat every semester. Once during your time at Mirfield, you would take part in a parish mission.

For us as Anglicans the Scriptures are not primarily a source of proof texts for particular doctrines, as it may be for some of our Christian brothers and sisters. We pray the Bible; we sing the Bible. Almost all our worship is directly from the Scriptures. Morning and Evening Prayer, which we pray twice daily, are from the Bible. We could, for example, pray or sing the Song of Mary (*Magnificat*) as we do every day without the words written in front of us. It forms us. In the BCP pattern we pray the psalms through every month, read the Bible through annually. Many times a day our spiritual exercises re-focus our attentions and thoughts on God, our Creator and Sustainer, whose servants we are. If we are faithful in this spiritual discipline we cannot escape God because we are constantly confronted by God by the offices, the Eucharist, the silence, the prayers. I recall a priest in the 1950's making the point of the importance of all this by reminding us that the daily praying of the offices is mandated by canon law, that all clergy were required in his diocese to make a commitment to the bishop in regard to their discipline about meditation and private prayer, and they were so desirous of being fed by the Bread of Life that no regulation was required.

All these spiritual disciplines issue in a preferential option for the poor and disadvantaged, very evident at the Community and College of the Resurrection. It was one of the first theological colleges to provide training for working class postulants. It was at the forefront of the struggle for justice, equality and racial harmony in Africa. This was formational for us students and brought to us a strong awareness of our Lord's words that we would be judged, whether we were God's people or not, on the basis of our care for the hungry, the naked, the sick, the prisoners, etc.

Obviously this Mirfield pattern is not a pattern everyone can, or should, follow. It does make clear, however, that the key element in being a deacon, priest, or bishop (or indeed, a Christian) is the quality of our life with God – how we reflect God’s love and presence in our world – whether others see God in us because we do know God and that relationship with God is evident in us.

While these discipline are not optional, how they fit into our life will vary depending upon our own personality and the circumstances of our own life. Many times a day they draw our attention, our focus, back to the God who created us, who loves us, who calls us to be His/her presence in the world. Our corporate prayer, our private prayer, our spiritual reading, our study, our silences, our retreats and quiet days, our sabbaticals, are all meant to give glory to God, the Author of our existence, to become better the person God calls us to be, the Body of Christ in which we are incorporated, the sign of Her/his presence that comes from being Her/his person, both individually and corporately.

These elements of the spiritual life and discipline become a permanent part of our ongoing life with God. Each one of us, perhaps with the help of our spiritual director, needs to work on how this plays out for us in our unique circumstances. But it is not an option to ignore these elements that give life to our being a child of God, a member of Christ, an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven and a faithful servant of the God whose light we are to reflect.

These realities of our spiritual formation are not just part of our formation at seminary, but must be integral and constant to our ongoing life. I was sent to a parish in the diocese of Birmingham “to serve my title.” I was one of 7 clergy in a parish that had more Anglicans than the diocese of New Westminster. We were expected to keep our relationship with God strong – both for our own sakes in our life-giving relationship with God and in our ministry to others in His/her Name. We gathered twice a day to pray the offices together and again to worship and be fed in the Eucharist. We had both the support and friendship of our fellow clergy. Once a month we went away together for a quiet day of spiritual focus and renewal. The norm for us in the parish was a retreat at least annually. Our ministry (perhaps 15 funerals a week, 3-4 weddings every week, baptisms every Sunday, 150 confirmations a year) all were informed and infused by our constant turning to God in prayer, meditation, Eucharist, quiet, confession and service.

A vivid example of how this formation issued in holiness and closeness to God struck me in my next parish. I went to the Diocese of Caledonia to the Mission to the Hart Highway, a multi-point parish which stretched 250 miles by 100 or more in northern British Columbia. A Montreal archdeacon interviewed me and as a result I was appointed to that mission. I was in the parish about four months and had met only two clergy – one of which became your bishop. Douglas Hambidge. A clergy conference was called at the church camp 500 miles away. I pulled up in my car and before I go out an old geezer, the camp caretaker, came up and started to talk with me. I don't remember the conversation, but I do recall, like it was yesterday, an overwhelming sense that this man, who I had never seen before, loved me. After he left me I went over to Canon Hambidge and asked who that old geezer was. Canon Hambidge said that is your bishop. For Bishop Munn the spiritual life we have been talking about was an integral part of who he was and caused the love of God to radiate out of him in a way that just overwhelmed me.

I would end my reflections by a brief word about my time on the Naas River with the Nisga'a of the diocese. 50 years ago now I was adopted into the Nisga'a Nation, into the wolf crest and the House of Kwasuh. I discovered that they, and other first nation people, constantly refer to, and pray to, God many times a day in all kinds of ways that our society no longer does. Nothing is done without reference to God from eating food, to building a sewer system, to meeting with the provincial or federal government. They are constantly remembering that they belong to God and God loves and cares for them. Our spiritual disciplines that we have been talking about and are a crucial part of our life as God's people--they are both what gives us joy and identity as God's servants and strength and effectiveness in God's service. IT IS NOT AN OPTION!