

What is Apostolic Spirituality?

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I. Christian Spirituality: A Basic View

The fundamental imperatives of the Christian vocation are two in number: love God with all your heart and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. The two-fold commandment involves loving in three distinct directions: love of God, love of neighbor and love of self. Any Christian spirituality must be concerned with these three vectors. This may seem self-evident, but it has not been so for large swatches of church history when self-love held purely negative connotations. This, despite the second commandment's injunction to make the quality of one's self-love the norm for the quality of one's love of neighbor (according to one interpretation of the second commandment).

Christian spirituality in its most fundamental meaning refers to thinking, imagining, feeling, desiring, choosing and acting under the influence of the Holy Spirit of the Risen Jesus both as individuals and communities, or, if this sounds too ideal, then striving to do all those activities under the sway of Jesus' Spirit. If one so strives, then one is striving to live, act, die and be raised in the pattern of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, because the Spirit of Jesus is the divine power within us that can conform us to the pattern of Jesus' mystery while respecting totally the uniqueness of our own life and identity.

II. Christian Spirituality that is Apostolically Oriented

A spirituality is apostolic when it gives pride of place to the experience of being sent forth (*apostello*) by God to act and, at times, to suffer on behalf of the neighbor in witness to the Gospel and in imitation of the pattern of Jesus' ministerial life. To put my whole presentation into a sentence: apostolic spirituality considers healthily self-giving love in service of the neighbor to be the sum and substance of the Christian life. (I say healthily self-giving love because feminism has taught me that we need to be discerning people about the quality of our self-giving, our self-donation. Not every form of self-giving is inspired by the Spirit of Jesus.)

An apostolic spirituality differs somewhat from a contemplative spirituality whose central image or metaphor at times is spousal union. In such a spirituality, the union between God and the person that occurs in profound prayer *is* the point. Love of God, neighbor and self occur here in the surrender to the mystery of God through Christ in the Spirit in contemplative prayer. Apostolic spirituality views prayer (not prayerfulness, but prayer at particular times and places) as a means, an instrument (the musician's not the carpenter's!) to enable the individual to more

discerningly and fully serve the neighbor.

I'm not interested here in playing off apostolic spirituality and spousal or unitive spirituality. The fundamental imperatives of the Christian vocation express themselves in both. But there are differences of nuance that are important, and these differences bear witness to the Spirit's action in the church, action which brings about a variety of gifts and charisms.

A famous story about Ignatius makes the point about apostolic spirituality. Some Jesuit came up to him one day and starting talking in a very laudatory fashion about a third Jesuit. He told Ignatius that this individual prayed many hours a day and seemed to be graced in prayer in some striking ways. Ignatius patiently heard him out and then, looking very unimpressed, simply asked his interlocutor, "And how mortified is Father X?" Not, how "embarrassed unto death" is Father X, as we moderns would understand the word, but rather, how free is Father X from his false self, how free is he from disordered attachment to self, because only such freedom will allow him to be available to be sent to any part of the world at any time when service of the neighbor requires.

In this little incident we can find some of the principal features of an apostolic spirituality: prayers and "mortification" (taking measures, with God's grace, to die to one's false self) are instrumental, a means to something else: love of the neighbor is where it all comes together, and freedom to be sent, freedom to be available to the neighbor in need, is the fundamental disposition of this spiritual path.

Let me put this in a slightly different way. In an apostolic spirituality all the particular spiritual practices I engage in are for the sake of uniting me to God as the One who is engaged in a tremendous project in our world. The God I seek to be united with, by grace, is the God who is laboring in the world on behalf of the world, the God who is bent on the world, leaning into the world, laboring that it be transformed and brought to final union with God. All the projects and practices of an apostolic person, of a person seeking to live out an apostolically oriented spirituality, are projects and practices that seek to unite the person to God's project, the kingdom of God, the reign of God, which is the profound dream and desire God bears for the world, and which God yearns to realize in the world, but not without our creative cooperation.

III. The Three-Fold Dynamic of an Apostolic Spirituality

Apostolic spirituality is a dynamic process with distinct but interrelated phases which indwell each other as well. We who have just recently celebrated the Easter season can turn to the appearances of Jesus to glean something about the dynamics of Christian apostolic spirituality. There are three phases to the process, I would suggest: first Jesus shows himself to his disciples as forgiveness in person, then he renews his friendship with them, and, thirdly, he sends them on mission, which expresses itself in various ministries.

Let's look at these three phases of Christian discipleship, of apostolic spirituality.

The dynamic of forgiveness, of hospitality, of freedom, comes first. It is crucially important that

Jesus manifested himself to the disciples as acceptance and forgiveness. They had betrayed their discipleship relationship with him in varying degrees. They had not only felt fear and anxiety (that's only human) but they had allowed their feelings of fear and anxiety to become the principle, the basis of their actions, rather than making their relationship with God and with Jesus that principle. Jesus manifests himself to them and says, simply "Shalom." He doesn't chastise them, he doesn't admonish them or shake his finger at them, no, he wishes them deep peace, wholeness, well-being in relationship with him. In the beginning of Christian discipleship, again and again and again, is the experience of God's and Jesus' unconditional love, in the form of acceptance, affirmation, forgiveness, reconciliation. We are loved and forgiven sinners, again and again and again. This is the beginning of it all, a beginning that marks the entirety of the relationship with God and with Jesus in the Spirit.

This dynamic of acceptance and forgiveness makes possible the next phase, that of friendship and intimacy and community. The risen Jesus connects with his disciples in conversation and shared ritual (supping with them), renewing his friendship with them. He doesn't deal with them as slaves—to fear and anxiety—but as friends, and they taste an intimacy with Jesus similar to the intimacy that the younger, prodigal brother experienced when his father forgave him after his time in self-chosen exile.

And then the risen Jesus sends them on mission, a mission that expresses itself in various ministries of witness, reconciliation and service. He sends forgiven sinners, who are once more his friends, out on mission, and the quality of that mission will depend to a great extent on how deeply they allow themselves to be sinners who have been forgiven and have once again become his friends.

Forgiveness, friendship, and mission; I suggest that these are the three phases of Christian vocation, the three dynamics of the Christian spiritual life, and, dare I say, the three dynamics, structured in four weeks, of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola.

Now let me put together what I said earlier about the centrality of healthy love of the neighbor in apostolic spirituality with the three dynamics or phases of Christian discipleship.

IV. Apostolic Spirituality and the Interplay of Community and Ministry

In an apostolic spirituality, forgiveness and friendship are for the sake of service (mission) even though they possess great significance in themselves. Reconciliation and forgiveness are not the end-all and be-all of the Christian life as we are meant to live it out on earth; nor is community, friendship, intimacy among apostles an end or final point, for such friendship and community are meant to open up into loving service of the neighbor.

But, having said that, loving service of the neighbor, all action on behalf of God's reign, is for the sake of what God finally wants to bring about in history and indeed beyond history, when history becomes consummated in the full occurrence of God's rule (heaven). And what God wants, finally, to bring about is total communion between God and God's creation and of all

creatures with each other in God. In the end there will be not particular deeds of loving service for the neighbor but community, communion, friendship, intimacy.

The practical conclusion I would draw from these last two paragraphs is that as active and other-oriented as apostolic folks need to be, we will not be authentic or even healthy in our ministry if we are so intent on serving the neighbor that we never allow ourselves to taste, to experience, the communion that is the ultimate goal of all ministry, indeed of all living. Perhaps I don't need to say this to you. Perhaps I'm projecting on to you a struggle some of us Jesuits experience. But the balance between community and apostolate, family and ministry is essential. If those who seek to serve others and to help them come to what God wants for them find time and energy devoted to community a distraction or impediment to the ministry, then they are in the strange situation of offering to others what they themselves do not value!! Gandhi taught that our means must participate in, show signs of, the end we are seeking to accomplish. And if communion with God and each other in God is the end, the goal of living, that means we need to "waste time" with each other if our witness is going to be honest, and consistent.

V. Apostolic Spirituality as a Strategy of Discernment

An apostolically oriented spirituality has everything to do with making choices, often complex choices, to act certain ways in the world. The God we are seeking to cooperate with is a God who is involved in every nook and cranny of the world, in its hell-holes and its mini-paradises, where there is abuse, and hatred, and victimization, and where people of conscience struggle for human rights, or a mother tends a dying child, or a family is enjoying a wonderful picnic by the river. Where do I choose to give my time and my attention and my energy—what I would call my life's currency? And from what do I choose to withdraw or diminish my time and attention and energy? Am I able to discern the difference between challenges my organization is facing that are technical in nature, that is to say, issues that can be met by my present level of competence or that of my organization and challenges that are of another sort, challenges that, to be met adequately, call for responses that go beyond my present competence and that of my group, challenges that call for a change of attitudes, values or behaviors, changes that will produce anxiety and distress? No one likes to feel incompetent, but sometimes that's the truth of the situation and we may need to decide to stay in that place for a while, as uncomfortable as it may be.

In Ignatian terms, an apostolically oriented spirituality demands that I learn how to live and act as a discerner of spirits and as a seeker of God's desire for me and my ministerial team.

Discernment of spirits is a growing skill and gift of the Spirit that (1) allows me to notice the interior movements within for what they are and (2) allows me to distinguish those interior movements which positively reinforce my deepest desires and my orientation to God and Jesus and the values of the Kingdom from those which tend to lead me away from connection with my deepest desires and my trust in the Lord's love for me.

As a seeker of God's will, God's desire for me, I strive to learn how to use the data my experience provides and work with it in order to find out how I can better serve the reign of God.

The data may be an experience of intuitive certainty, or movements of spiritual consolation and desolation, or a time of tranquility when, truly desirous of discovering God's desire for me, I use my God-given practical intelligence to find the course of action more conducive to God's greater glory. As Ignatius uses the phrase, God's greater glory is not God's glory in the sense of God's divine being but rather God's "external" glory, which can keep on increasing, because that glory is identical with the flourishing of God's good creation, especially humankind.

Why engage in spiritual discernment and decision-making, when there are so many useful guides to good decision-making available? After all, spiritual discernment does not generate data or produce "homework" beyond what is given to me by careful attention to my interior movements and from the information I glean about the context of the decision. What spiritual discernment does provide me with is a focus on my relationship with God, a deepening of my desire to participate more fully in God's project in the world, an increase of my desire to allow the Holy Spirit to guide my memory, understanding and will. Spiritual discernment also allows me to exercise my grace-given trust that God will bring me to what God wants for me, for us, provided I do all that is in my power to choose wisely within the constraints of the time available to me.

In the last analysis, growing as an apostolically oriented spiritual person means growing as a contemplative in action, growing as a person who more and more joins with God ("contemplative") as God labors in the world and does that "joining" precisely by healthily loving the neighbor ("in action").

VI. Twelve Practices of a Contemplative in Action

At this point I would like to get very practical. I would like to suggest twelve practices of an apostolic spirituality: twelve practices which can help us to continue to grow as contemplatives in action.

1. Growing in one's knowledge of Sacred Scripture (Word) and actively participating in the church's sacramental life (Worship)
2. "Wasting time" with God through the discipline of dedicating definite periods of time to God, praying in whatever way works: for example, imaginative prayer, affective prayer, meditative prayer (i.e., pondering holy texts), praying before icons or holy pictures, engaging in centering prayer or Zen sitting.
3. Making the examination of consciousness daily.
4. Spontaneously and briefly turning to God, to Jesus, to the Spirit, to Mary or one of the saints, during the course of the day.
5. Seeking to live and act in the here-and-now.
6. Becoming more and more detached from my ego-centered thinking and feeling.
7. Recalling where my identity comes from as I act in my varied roles and need to deal with

criticism that comes to me in my roles.

8. Developing a contemplative attitude, i.e., attending to the other (whether it be a rose, a sunset, or a person) as other and letting the other affect me, move me, on its terms.

9. Moving back and forth from the dance floor of direct engagement to the balcony view of the system as system, asking what God is trying to do on each level.

10. Deepening, and asking the Spirit to help me deepen, my gratitude as a fundamental virtue.

11. Learning how to discern spirits, moods, and feelings, as they affect my outlook, attitude and choices.

12. Making the effort, with increasing frequency, to choose what is more to God's greater (external) glory and more congruent with my deepest desires at significant junctures in my life.