

MINISTRY FOR TEACHER 1991

HOLINESS: PATTERN OR JOURNEY?

Introduction

Once, when I was working with a group of lay people on a parish council, I asked them if they could associate the word "holiness" with themselves. They all replied that they could not, and that they associated the word with religious and clergy. It is interesting that such a basic word, such a basic concept, should be considered not applicable to, or out of the reach of, the vast numbers of lay people in the Church. It set me thinking on how Christian realities come to be expressed in certain words, and how those words come to have particular meanings, and how those meanings can in the long run confine rather than open up the original reality to which they referred. It highlights the need to continually reflect on the words which embody Christian truths, and the need to re-express those truths in other words, when traditional language has hardened in a way which obscures the fundamental reality, or at least to give a more accurate meaning to the traditional words.

In our own century, the universality of the call to holiness has been an important proclamation within the Church. However, what has not been as widely discussed or proclaimed is the meaning of holiness. As has been suggested above, its traditional understanding has often been linked with clergy and religious, and, even as it has been extended to others, the basic meaning attached to it has not always been clearly expressed; or perhaps better, we have not re-thought the reality to see what it means when applied to a much wider group, i.e. an accepted meaning has just been extended without re-thinking it. For example, practices of the religious or clerical life have simply been extended to lay people, rather than the truth they contain being explored to find new expressions for it in the lives of lay people, or better to recognize that such expressions are already there and not recognised because those associated with religious life and clergy have become the standard, or even the reality for holiness itself.

In this article, I would like to reflect on how holiness has been approached in the past, and to show how we can enrich the word according to its best meaning by considering it within a framework which more clearly reveals some of its most fundamental elements. In our immediate past, holiness has often been seen in terms of conforming to a pattern. I would like to suggest that such a framework offers a limited understanding of holiness, and that an alternative framework, that of journey, would bring out more clearly the true Christian meaning of holiness, and highlight the application it has in the life of every Christian believer. These two terms, pattern and journey need to be explained.

Pattern

Spirituality as pattern emerges from a particular use of our spiritual tradition. Throughout the centuries, Christian writers have examined the lives of the great saints, and particularly those who have left records of their spiritual journey, with a view to drawing out the essential values of the Christian journey to God. Such an enterprise is one of the most important tasks of the Christian community; to reflect on its experience, and particularly that of its authentically holy people, in order to come to an understanding of the real meaning of holiness. This is surely an important methodological approach to holiness. However, at times, what has emerged is a pattern or chart of what the believer should be, almost an ideal model, which shows clearly that Christian perfection or holiness consists in a clearly defined group of virtues, attitudes and practices which need to be imitated in order that the believer be conformed to them and thus be holy.

This builds up a certain approach to holiness, which comes to be enshrined in particular practices and ways of living, to which believers must conform if they are to come to holiness. An example of this would be the way religious life, or seminary life, offered in the past a whole way of life which was meant to lead to holiness, and which consisted largely in conforming to tried and trusted practices passed down in the tradition. The religious, or seminarian, needed to fit into this framework and holiness would result. However, many of the particular practices involved had come to be out of touch with their original meanings, and the overall way of life as it was lived has been called into question as a means of leading people to holiness. Religious communities have recognized this and sought new

approaches to the spiritual formation of their members. The point being made here is not that individual things that were done were in themselves wrong, or did not at one time have a good application, but that rather a package had emerged, these things had come to be related in such a way that that structure had come to be seen as more important than the individual. This solidification of elements of the spiritual tradition into a set form, which becomes an absolute and to which believers are expected to conform, is what I mean by pattern. This set form or shape becomes holiness. It comes to be preached and taught, and becomes the absolute standard of what holiness is.

This attitude of fitting into the a pre-existing framework, or conforming to this set of practices and way of life which has been culled from the spiritual tradition, overflowed into the spirituality of all Christian believers. Their life was to be one of conformity to this received package, and they were to shape their lives within it. Spirituality was seen as the objective reality to which the individual must conform, rather than as a body of wisdom that needed to be applied appropriately to the individual situation of each believer. This sort of approach came to be so ingrained that it was difficult to conceive of another, with the result that it became an absolute; what it offered came to be holiness, and only those who followed it could be considered holy.

Such an approach highlights the failures of believers in relationship to the pattern offered. Confronted with such an approach, believers can feel overcome, recognizing how lacking they are before such an ideal. They can become discouraged, disillusioned, feel inadequate and inferior, be lacking in confidence in their own personal spiritual journey, and even experience guilt. This is heightened all the more when holiness is associated with, or even defined in terms of, certain particular practices which may not be available or possible in the lives of some people. Such an approach could introduce stress into the lives of good, really holy people, who in the light of this approach failed to recognize the real holiness that was already present in their life.

The pattern model lends itself to an inadequate approach to morality. It can simply be an identification of spirituality and morality. Commandments are seen as things one must conform to, and the person who conforms to them is considered to be holy. It fails to see that morality, and for that matter spirituality, is more than just conforming to commandments. It is the attitude behind the conforming that is the more important thing. The parables of the Pharisee and Publican and the Prodigal Son show that rules and commandments have a place, but that the underlying attitude to them is more important.

It can happen that some people, by age, disposition, and education, seem to live a good Christian lives. As we look at them they seem to do all the things that one would expect of a follower of Jesus. However, they may have stopped journeying. They measure up well to the pattern, but are they going on, giving themselves more and more to God in their heart. It is what is taking place in the heart that is the key, and it is possible to appear to be doing well as a believer, but not to be addressing the real issues of the heart.

The approach adopted here is not an attack on structure or particular ways of living within the Church. Rather it highlights a greater emphasis on the individual which demands that the structure be seen in terms of the individual, rather than the individual in terms of the structure. It emphasises that structures and ways of life are in the service of the people, and cannot be seen to be above them or more important than them. It is a question of emphasis. Spirituality, which is reflection on holiness and the effort to live it, can become an esoteric reality in itself, and not be recognised as a reality that only exists in people. It can become something one studies in the classroom, without realising that the reality of it is more present in the students who study than in the literature that is studied. What I mean is that in the literature we have a description of, or a reflection on, a past personal experience: in the students, we have that experience as a vital, dynamic, present reality.

This approach is not an attack on the spiritual wisdom of the Christian community, but an attempt to show that wisdom can be used and abused. The important issue is that the wisdom of the spiritual tradition, and the practises that emerge from it, are to be put at the service of the individual believer; they are not to be hardened into a particular way of life, or ways of life, to which believers must conform. It is never a question of just teaching a way to God, it is rather a question of ways to God. Even better, one could say that the wisdom of the tradition teaches us how to travel rather than ways, so that we can recognise in each way of life the things that will lead us to God.

Journey

Christian holiness is not a pattern to which one must conform but a journey on which one must embark. The central question is not have you conformed perfectly to the pattern, but are you engaged in the journey; not have you arrived, but are you travelling? The essence of the journey concept is that the important thing is not so much reaching the final goal, as being on the way to it. It captures the point that life is a journey, it is a movement towards the final reality of being with God. However, that reality is already a present one, and the journey is the deepening of that present reality until we come to its final fulfilment in heaven. The important thing to look for in this concept is not where one is on the journey, but rather that one is journeying.

The heart of the journey is the desire for God, the longing which is really a self-giving in love. The author of the Cloud of Unknowing defines the journey to God in terms of desire: "It is not what you are or have been that God looks at with his merciful eyes but what you would be.....St. Augustine is speaking of this holy desire when he says that 'the life of a good Christian consists of nothing else but holy desire.'" (1) The Abbe de Tourville puts it well

"I wish so much that you could get hold of the idea of what perfection in this world consists of. It is not like going up a great hill from which we see an ever-widening landscape, a greater horizon, a plain receding further and further into the distance. It is more like an overgrown path which we cannot find; we grope about; we are caught up by brambles; we lose all sense of the distance covered; we do not know whether we are going around and around or whether we are advancing. We are certain only of one thing; that we desire to go on even though we are worn out and tired. That is your life and you should rejoice greatly because of it, for it is a true life, serious and real, on which God opens his eyes and his heart." (2)

The desire to go on is the motivating force of the journey, and if it is present, the people will face up to the real issues and keep on giving themselves in self-less love.

Christian holiness is not so much determined by the acts that we perform as by the attitude of heart with which we perform them. Not great acts, but great love is the sign of the Christian believer. The essence of holiness is love. It is by love that we should live, and it is on love that we will be judged. Love is surrender, self-giving, making every act of our life an expression of our love for God. Positively and courageously living the values of the Christian faith in our ordinary situation is journeying to God. A life which stems from love grows in love, and is constantly able to enter more fully in the total self-giving of Jesus, which is the model of all holiness. This Christian holiness can be lived to the full in each and every situation of life. Life is the place where this journey takes place, and the quality of one's life is indicative of the intensity of one's journeying.

The presence of faults is not a sign of the absence of love, no more than the presence of sin is a sign that faith has been lost. Faith is not lost by sin, nor is love lost by failure. The real sign of love is when one endeavours to go on despite sin and failure. It is here that one measures the value of one's relationship to God. Traditionally we have often looked only at the faults, and how much we lack. As a result, we have felt guilty and dispirited. However, if we look at what makes us go on, we will realize that there is real love there, and that this love, this wanting to go on, is the key to Christian perfection. Baron Friedrich von Hugel puts it well: "Holiness consists primarily not in the absence of faults, but in the presence of love, in love triumphant, love creative. The soul become fire not snow, and dwelling on what to do, give and be rather than on what to shun."

The concept of journey suggests that one always needs to be growing, and one will only grow by facing up to the real issues of one's life in the present time. Spirituality must always address the real current issues of one's life. Perhaps an example will illustrate this point. In the relationship of a young married couple, there will be many things that they need to address. However, if there is real love there, one will presume that they will look at these things, and be ready to do what is necessary to address them. Only then will their love grow, matured by facing the real issues of their relationship. Living out roles of husband and wife will not necessarily mature their love, even though the relationship may appear to be going well because they act according to accepted roles. This could be said of some religious in the past who did all the things that one required of them in the rule, but failed miserably in their relationship with God. It could be said of some lay people who fulfilled the commandments of the Church, but failed to integrate their faith into their life.

It can be easy to go on fulfilling certain duties, without actually facing up to what one should face up to in life. Sometimes, fulfilling duties enables us to let more important issues lie unattended. The issues which keep us from God are usually things which have been in our lives for some time. They are probably things that are ingrained in us. There are often just a few things we need to face up to, but we put it off, we procrastinate, we come to live comfortably with these issues, and don't really address them. To be journeying means facing up to such things. It demands that we seek out such issues and make them the focus of our spiritual effort. The image of the Brownie offered by Evelyn Underhill illustrates the point well.

" I read the other day the story of a Brownie who lived in a wood. He had a little wheelbarrow, and passed his time in a very moral and useful manner picking up slugs and snails. Yet there was something lacking in his life. The King of the World passed through that wood very early every morning, and made all things beautiful and new, but the Brownie had never seen him. He longed to, but something prevented it. He had one cherished possession, a lovely little green blanket which had fallen out of the fairy queen's chariot and which he had not been able to help keeping for himself. It was very cold in the wood at night but the blanket kept him so warm and cosy that he never woke up to see the King of the World. And one day there came to him a Shepherd who looked deep into the soul of the Brownie and said to him, 'Haven't you seen the King of the World?' And the Brownie said, " No, I do so want to, but somehow I can't manage it.' Then the Shepherd replied: ' But I seem to see something in your soul that keeps you from the vision; something that looks rather like a blanket.' And at that a terrible fight began in the heart of the Brownie, a battle between wanting to go on being warm and comfortable in his blanket and longing to see the King of the World. Perhaps the ultimate choice which lies before us may turn out to be the Brownie's choice between the Heavenly Vision and the blanket. " (3)

Love is commitment to go on, to journey, despite the cost. It is not living in a rut, being comfortable where one is, clinging to one's green blanket. It is courageously going on, being willing to pay the cost, no matter what it is. Antony of Egypt used the maxim: " Always be a beginner" (4). He had in mind that as the beginner sets out zealously, courageously, and lovingly, so each day, each moment, we should have this attitude in our heart.

Spiritually, many believers have been "ugly ducklings". Like the ugly duckling, they have felt different and inadequate within a spirituality defined according to a particular interpretation of the spiritual tradition. However, again like the ugly duckling, they now find that they have been trying to be something that is not them, and they realize that there are others ways to God for them; that they are beautiful swans, not ugly ducklings. Holiness has often been defined in terms of religious life and clerical life. The things that priests and religious have done are the means to holiness, and without them there can be no real holiness. With this as the standard, lay people would always seem to be lacking, for they could not possibly include many of these things in their life. The very point of reference destines them to mediocrity, to be amateurs in the spiritual life. However, when spirituality is seen in terms of love, of self-giving to God in one's life situation, then here is a point of reference that allows them to be holy in the fullest possible sense.

Jesus

The model of all Christian spirituality must be Jesus himself. How one views the spiritual journey will be influenced by how one approaches the mystery of Jesus, i.e. the personal spiritual journey of Jesus himself. In the past, we have often had an approach to Jesus which was based on the perfection of his human nature. In an effort to explain how this man could be God, we exalted his human nature, attributing to it all of the attributes which theologians had attributed to humanity before the Fall. This meant that there was no interior conflict in Jesus, no emotional conflict. Because Jesus was God, this was carried further to suggest that Jesus lived with the final vision of God proper to heaven, and possessed all the virtues and gifts of the Spirit to the utmost degree. This means that the heart of Jesus was not at all troubled, as is ours. Confronted with this perfect humanity, spirituality came to be seen at times as endeavouring to imitate it, to conform to the perfect pattern of human existence found in Jesus, and seen in terms of having the control of one's heart and emotional life as did Jesus. Compared with the faultless Jesus, believers were made aware of their faults, and the journey was linked very much to overcoming them.

More recently, theologians have approached Jesus differently. In an effort to explain the mystery of how God could be human, emphasis has been placed on the fact that to be human like us in all things but sin, Jesus needed to undergo the struggles that we experience, and to know the personal conflicts that we have. Our human existence is one in which we walk by faith, and to imitate it without walking by faith is not to imitate it at all. The New Testament writers could present Jesus as struggling with the issues of his life. This means that the key to understanding Jesus lies not in his knowledge of all things, his vision of God, but rather in his faith, i.e his trust and confidence in his Father, lived out in each moment of his life, and especially in the final moments on Calvary. Indeed, the mystery of Calvary reveals very well to us the attitude of heart that characterised Jesus' whole life.

The key to Calvary is not what they did to Jesus but what Jesus did; it is not the externals, the cross, the soldiers etc., but what took place in the heart of Jesus which reveals the true meaning of Calvary. The New Testament writers offer some insight into the interior disposition of Jesus on the cross. All the Synoptic writers record the struggle of Jesus in the Garden, as he wrestles with what is about to unfold. The issue is presented in terms of his faithfulness to his Father, which has been the key to his whole life and mission. The event of Calvary is presented in terms of this surrender to his Father: " Father, into your hands I commend my spirit." (Lk 23:46) Jesus's final moments sum his whole life: a journey to the Father, in which, at every turn, in every moment, he surrenders himself, no matter what the cost. This continuous, selfless self-giving in each moment is what it means to journey to God. It is the way of faith, not knowing what is ahead, but being willing to surrender oneself in trust and confidence to the Father.

Conclusions

Finally, I would like to offer some attitudes or approaches for those involved in fostering the spiritual journey in other people.

Always begin with the existing faith life that is there, rather than with a particular spirituality you might have. The existing faith life of the believer must be the starting point for all growth in the spiritual journey. It is a question of starting point. Don't begin with the tradition, begin with the individual person, and then apply the wisdom of the tradition. The wisdom of the tradition can be right in itself, but wrong in a particular application. Appropriate wisdom can only be applied if one is aware of, and respects the existing faith life of the person.

Elicit from them their spiritual experience, rather than try to get them to conform to some established pattern of life. Eliciting their personal faith life becomes the basis of our approach to them. It helps them to be more aware of what is taking place in their life, to be in touch with their spiritual journey. This can help them to have confidence in their personal journey. So often in the past, people have lacked confidence in their own journey. They have felt they could not do much personally, but needed to conform to the patterns offered by certain authorities.

Help them to articulate their journey. This enables them to share and proclaim their personal faith. It is this personal articulation of faith which must underpin all mission and proclamation in the Christian community. In articulating their faith, they can learn from it. Just as people learn about marriage by being married, and learn about their job by practising it, so one can learn about the spiritual journey by one's own experience of it. This, however, demands the confidence in it mentioned above.

Encourage them to be creative in shaping their journey, rather than simply conforming to an existing pattern. Be optimistic about their potential to travel this journey and to express it creatively. Remember it is the Spirit of God who is at work in them, and what the Spirit is doing we should respect and trust. The journey model suggests that individuals need to be working with their own journey, within the framework of their own personal life situations. Creativity is called for here, the construction of a way of life which meets one's personal needs. It is not just a conforming to a role, but the positive creation of a personal way of going to God. Again the marriage example illustrates the point. For all the knowledge that we have about marriage, we must admit that each individual relationship is unique and is the personal creation of the two people involved. With all our knowledge we could probably outline a profile of the role of husband and wife. But merely conforming to the profiles will not necessarily create a unique common life. This will only happen if the two people

appropriate these profiles into their own life and creatively integrate them into their unique personalities and personal aspirations.

Beware of letting your use of the spiritual tradition become a package which becomes an absolute. It is always the danger of creating particular spiritualities that they can become too rigid, too absolute, and take on a reality of their own to which believers must conform. This is as much a danger in the present and the future as it has been in the past. People to-day can create new vital ways of going to God, but let them solidify in the way described above. Perhaps this is an in-built hazard in spirituality, that one can easily identify a particular form of holiness with holiness itself

Apply the wisdom of the spiritual tradition in a particular way rather than in a general way. Each person's journey is unique and special and needs to be taken into account when the spiritual tradition is applied. When reading the accounts of the Desert Fathers in Egypt, one finds stories in which a monk will come along to a particular spiritual father with a problem, and the spiritual father will offer some advice. As one reads on, another monk comes to the same spiritual father with the same problem, but receives different advice: same spiritual father, same problem, but a different monk, therefore different advice. There needs to be an individual application of spiritual wisdom. This does not take away from the importance of tried and true methods of the past, but it does suggest that because a thing is tried and true in the past, it doesn't mean that it will achieve what it did in the past in this present situation. If one is aware of the personal situation of the believer, one will make an appropriate, particular application of the spiritual wisdom to this situation.

Encourage people to do what they can do, what is meaningful to them, the things in which they can find God, rather than imitate things because they have been enshrined in a particular form. There is an image from Walter Hilton which adds an insight here (5). He speaks of two hounds running in a hunt: one runs because the other hounds are running, the other because it can see the fox. The former will get tired and go home, but the latter will be there at the kill. He likens the hound which runs because the other hounds are running to those who, in the spiritual life, follow practices which everyone else is doing. With all good will, he will tire and fall away from them. He likens the hound who sees the fox to those who find God in what they do. These will continue to do it and will grow from there. So often, the approach described above has made us like the first hound, doing things because they have come down from the past, and often failing miserably, and being dispondent about it. However, if we are advised of what is individually appropriate to us, and which we can do, and in which we find God, then we will be like the second hound, and be able to run on to be with the Lord because we are finding him in the things we are doing.

Remember that the quality of life and holiness is determined by what is in the heart, not by the actions one performs. Particular acts must be seen within the context of the relationship within which they take place. The issue here is the contrast between act and relationship. One can at times seem to do the acts required, without them being an expression of a deep relationship. We are not always what we seem to be in our actions. Only by probing the heart can we determine the true quality of our holiness.

Stress that ordinary, everyday life is the arena of spiritual living. Holiness does not just belong within the monastery, the convent or the presbytery. It is for all. Holiness is the responsibility which flows from our baptismal involvement with Jesus, and is, therefore, open to all. It is in the normal everyday things of life that we best express the love which motivates our journey to God. Life is not only the place where we love; it is the school in which we learn to love. The demands of everyday life are able to form us in the selflessness required for love. It is not necessary to look far afield, to believe that we must constantly be escaping from our life situation to find such an education in love. It is in life that the education of our heart can, and does, take place. Our life may seem rather simple and dull. However, it is an expression of what we are, and what we believe. It is the principle embodiment of our love. In life, we express our love; for our friends, for our family, and for our heavenly Father. Unless our love is manifest here, it is hardly a real love at all. Unless our journey is clear here, it is doubtful if we are journeying at all. Life can be the continuous, total, self-surrender that the spiritual journey is for all who imitate and follow Jesus.

Footnotes

- (1) The Cloud of Unknowing ch 75, in " The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works", translated by Clifton Wolters, Penquin Books, 1978 p.152
- (2) Abbe de Tourville, "Letters of Direction" Westminster, Dacre Press, 1972, p 59
- (3) Cropper, Margaret, " Life of Evelyn Underhill ", New Your, Harper and Bros., 1958, p. 121-122
- (4) St. Athanasius, " Life of Antony ", par 7, 16, 91, in The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers (Second series) Vol 1V, Eerdmans, Michigan, 1978, pp 198, 200, 220.
- (5) Hilton, Walter, " The Scale of Perfection, " Book 1, ch. 41, London, Burns Oates, 1953, pp 59-60