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**Contemplation—A Way of Perceiving Life** Views from the Real World Thursday, March 22, 2001 7:30 p.m. Church Adult Formation/Spiritual Life

Tonight's presentation I've never given before—honestly—anyway, the way I'm giving it tonight. On the other hand, I have said all of this before; and it could be considered nothing more than a reflection on the meaning of Baptism. Or it could be called a reflection on the meaning of the Mass. Or it could be called a reflection on the meaning of the parables. Or it could be called a reflection on the meaning of the Letter to the Romans or the Letter to the Corinthians. In other words, this is a distillation of the basic message of the New Testament and the teachings of Christ.

However, we rarely allow the message of the Christ to impact our minds with full force. And this is probably for a very good reason. Normally when we learn things we learn them in little bits and pieces, so **our whole learning experience is a matter of progressive accumulation of knowledge**. However, when we try to progressively accumulate knowledge about God or about the gospel, it doesn't quite work. And Jesus knew this and that's why he had that enigmatic statement: "No one puts new wine into old skins." Of course that's exactly what we do! We take the new wine of the word of God and we put it into the old skins of the way we've always thought about things, the way we've always felt, taking a little bit here and a little bit there, and somehow trying to incorporate it into our lives. In other words, we deal with the gospel the way we deal with every other subject. But when we do that, we're not recognizing that it's new wine. And **new wine requires new skins, but we don't have new skins!**

So we are in a sort of dilemma. We are in a **dilemma** because we are being presented with a message the full impact of which **we can't understand all at once**. And by understanding a little bit of it at a time **we dilute it**. Now we don't have to feel bad about this, but gradually we have to recognize that it is so: that we tend to dilute the force of the gospel by taking it a little bit at a time. The alternate might be, however, that we would be driven into madness if we were to all of a sudden understand the whole thing all at once—we may not be able to take it!

That's where contemplation comes in. **Contemplation has to do with a very peaceful, restful openness that allows the gospel message, that allows the action of the sacraments, that allows the meaning of the parables, to enter into us.**

Christianity and contemplation are very similar in this sense: that it is really easy to talk about, but you have to do it! I'm not here tonight to discuss methods of contemplation, but more where contemplation will take us.

Now one of the first and most primary issues that Jesus himself brings up in his authentic message of Christ is the idea of "**metanoia**," a Greek word meaning a change of mind. But metanoia, change of mind, often translated "repentance," often translated "conversion"—this sort of change of mind is a **radical revision and transformation of our whole mental process**. For just a moment think about where does our mind come from? We're not born with a mind; we're merely born with a capacity to form a mind.

St. Thomas Aquinas says that we're born with a "tabula rasa," a blank tablet. That blank tablet gets filled up with experiences—better stated, with our memory and interpretation of our experiences. So we really never remember exactly what happened to us, but we do remember something, we interpret something. There is some meaning, some remembrance. That becomes our mind. But what the New Testament is trying to say, is that the way in which we have organized our understanding of life and ourselves has got to be radically changed. Why? Because the way we grow up we individually—each of us individually—each is the center of one's own experience, of everything: of ourselves, of life, of God. **Everything is centered on ourselves, and everything begins with the senses that are located in our bodies**, so that our basic sense of who we are is identified primarily with our physical makeup, our physical presence, its history, its feelings, and so on. But what metanoia, this change of mind that Jesus preaches—that is he says, "Change your mind, and believe the kingdom of God is at hand—Repent and believe, the kingdom of God is at hand." **That change of mind is something whereby God takes center place in our consciousness, in our awareness, and in our minds.**

Now St. Paul, speaking of Baptism, said, "Do you not realize that we who were baptized were baptized into his death? We were buried together with him so that we might rise to new life." Now that **new life** does refer to some mysterious participation in God's eternal life after we pass away—it does to some degree—but not exclusively. It really refers in the immediate, in the here and in the now, to a new kind of way of perceiving everything, therefore a **new mind**, a new life in God, centered in God. And St. Paul does spend some time in his various letters explaining what he means by this. St. Paul was a very contemplative person. He thought deeply and peacefully and quietly about the mysteries of God who had come to us in Christ. And if we're to follow St. Paul, or for that matter John the Evangelist, or Teresa of Avila, or any of the other contemplatives of our tradition, **we need also to have this sense of quiet reflection**—not constant agitation, analysis, questioning. Not that there's anything necessarily wrong with questioning, but it's not going to lead to a deep, contemplative understanding. In Ephesians St. Paul says, "In God we move and have our being." Well, that's a very nice phrase, but the question is do we really? **Do we really move and have our being in God?** Is it just a nice statement? Is it a statement that describes something that we never are in touch with, that we can't feel, that we can't know, but merely assent to—take someone else's word for it, in other words? That's not what he meant.

The truth is that as adults **we have experienced arrested development**. And for this reason Jesus says, "If you want to enter the kingdom of God, you must **become like a child**. Unless you become like a child, you cannot enter into the kingdom of God." Now some people interpret this in a very cute way, but it isn't meant in a cute way. It's meant that we have to **go back to where we left off in our true spiritual growth, because there is a point in our childhood where we have left behind our true inner growth**. While we have become very adapted to the world, very educated in a worldly sense, and rightly so for we need a worldly education for getting along in the world, for our jobs, our livelihoods, and so on—that's all important; it's not that it is bad—however, it's not the same thing as growing essentially, inwardly, spiritually, in terms of the growth of our

souls. So we have to go back to the point where we left off and start growing, or else the kingdom of God and all that it is about won't mean anything to us!

Now Jesus put it this way, "If you want to be my disciple, you must deny your very self, take up your cross." First of all, "deny your very self"—"self" in this kind of context, this religious context, this spiritual context, is not the same thing as the word "self" or "ego" found in psychology. Here we're not interested in what is talked about in psychology necessarily. In psychology "self" or "ego" means the center core of our mind, the part that is aware. And of course, it's the goal of psychology as a therapeutic art or science to help people develop a healthy ego. That's not Jesus' interests when he says, "If you want to be my disciple, you must deny your very self, **and take up your cross.**" Do not forget **the cross is an instrument of death.** It does not mean now you have to bear with your arthritis, or you have to bear with poverty, or you have to bear with some other pain or discomfort. No, **it means you must allow the self to die!** And we have to get into the religious, biblical meaning of this word "self," if we're ever to understand what development and growth means in a spiritual sense! What is self if it's not simply the core of our being? We'll think about that for a minute.

Anyway, **the resuming of our development is actually the fundamental purpose of the second half of our lives.** So some people think they look forward to, for example, their retirement. Well, that's very good, but don't think because you retire from your job, that now you're going to retire from life! Quite the opposite, you're going to be all the more challenged to grow. And in fact this growth can't wait for retirement since people don't retire until they're 65 or 70. And this really has to start earlier—perhaps in your fifties—a **real thought about what needs to happen so that my life really can be life in abundance: the mystery of God unfolding life within us.**

Now one of the most fundamental insights that **contemplative people** have happens to correspond also to the discovery of **modern science.** And that is that **our ordinary perceptions are quite wrong, although useful.** Can we now come to realize something: that we can have very wrong ideas, very wrong perceptions, that are nonetheless useful? What I'm speaking of, very simply, is our common everyday perception that there are solid objects in our world. For example, we perceive this podium as a solid object; we perceive the floor as a solid object. You perceive the benches you are sitting on as solid objects; you perceive your bodies as solid objects, but both contemplatives and scientists agree they are not. In fact **there are no separate objects at all,** but we have this idea that we have formed in our minds. **Our minds have made up this idea of solid objects.** Where does it come from? Well, our senses feed us a certain amount of data; and we try to make sense out of it, but we don't have all the data, so **we make up for what the gaps are in the data.** For example, take solidity. Science tells us that all these material things are basically space, that they're made up of molecules, which are made up of atoms; and the atoms are basically space, that there's tiny little material particles: electrons and protons and sometimes neutrons that make up various atoms, and then these are put together with other molecules, but always mostly space. Well, why do we have the image of solidity? Because, according to scientists, there's a magnetic field in this object that meets a magnetic field in my body giving us the sensation of solidness. But I don't

see the magnetic field. I don't hear it, taste it. I do touch it in a sense, or at least experience its reality through touch. If there were no magnetic field in my body, I could walk through a door, a brick wall, anything—supposedly—I have not tried it. I don't know how to get rid of the magnetic field. We don't have to worry about that. **That's simply an example of how practical, everyday common sense is actually not true.**

Well, in a now similar way there are many things about our practical everyday common sense world that are not true spiritually either—and particularly in regard to our sense of being separated from others as discrete, individual, independent beings. And if you think about that, a discrete, separated, independent being, you have, I think, a pretty good idea of what Jesus meant when he said, “Unless you deny your very self”—unless you deny your very discrete independence, **unless you deny your own utter isolation from others, life, God—“you cannot be my disciple,”** because the spiritual insight that Jesus had, and St. Paul and St. John, all had to do with this **fundamental unity**. St. Paul talks about the body of Christ. And do we really ever think that this is more than just a metaphor? I think it's more than a metaphor. When he talks about “We are all members of a single body with Christ as the head,” and don't forget Christ is God, which brings about a tremendous sense of the unity of even God with the creation. This is not a unity where the two are the same thing. God and creation are not the same thing. **God does not depend upon the creation, yet is intimately united to it as a head is united to a body, and this is through the headship of Christ himself, the incarnate Word of God.** This is our faith, and you recognize it right away. You know you've heard that before.

And we hear all these articles of faith, but we leave them as individual articles because **the whole unity of our faith is never really perceived in our ordinary daily life—not until we spend some time learning how to practice contemplation** of which there are two kinds. “**Acquired contemplation**” means the contemplative state of mind that I can acquire simply by being quiet and disciplined and focused, using various methods. The second more important is “**infused contemplation,**” meaning the kind of contemplation that God himself delivers or gives to the minds of chosen ones. But we have to keep in mind that **all gifts are really given for the benefit of the entire body**. So if we get into this original sense of the unity of everything, we realize that the contemplative infused gifts given to St. Teresa of Avila were given to her for us, for all of us to share.

And so it is **with all of the spiritual gifts; they're given to the body for the whole body insofar as we're able to participate in them**. And of course, within the body there is **diversity**. An eye is not an ear; an ear cannot see and an eye cannot hear. And so we do have different gifts—that there's no doubt about it! But individually we make no sense. An eye apart from a body would be worthless. An arm apart from a body would be worthless. We are worthless also apart from the body which we belong to, which can be thought of both as the **body of the Church**, and also can be thought of as the **body of creation** itself—both. St. John uses the image of the **vine and the branches**. Again, this is not simply a nice poetic metaphor, but rather a description of the real situation. There is a vine, one single vine with one single life; and we are nothing but branches. And do we in our daily, ordinary experience realize that a branch is absolutely

worthless separated from the vine? That is why Jesus says, “Unless you deny this sense of being separated, you cannot enjoy the life.” It isn’t that life won’t be given, but you won’t be experiencing it.

**Contemplation is ultimately experiencing the very realities and mysteries, which we all believe in.** There’s no new faith, no new articles of faith, but a deeper experience of what we already believe and know to be true. And you’ve heard all of these things before. Our real task the second half of life is to let them really become something we experience; and when we allow this to take place, it provides such freedom and such light and such peace, we’ll wonder why we didn’t want to do it before.

In the Book of Exodus **God presents himself as “I AM who AM,”** a very key concept for the whole development of a contemplative point of view. God is the **origin** of all created reality, and all possibilities have their origin in the mind of God; and God reveals himself as this **self-conscious awareness** who can call himself “I AM who AM.” And **man and woman** are made in the image and likeness of God also with a created **awareness of “I,”** a feeling of “I,” a capacity to say, “I am” as well. But rarely do we really allow our own feeling of awareness, our own sense of presence to **reflect this subtle and simple unity that is our very origin.** And we start to apply certain what I might call “predicates, adjectives or nouns” to the I am. I am this or I am that, and thereby start to limit what is in itself not meant to limit.

So the very possibility of our **growth and transformation in God** proceeds from God and is the very purpose of God’s grace and revelation in each person’s life, but God **works through the formation of community** as we see in the gathering of a people he calls his own, the formation of covenant and so on. So God calls all of creation really to some kind of agreement, some kind of cooperation with his will, which remains however obscure to us. And even for the greatest prophets there was never any explanation of the whole thing. And I might say Jesus himself in his human nature maybe did not understand that much about all that was being unfolded—I couldn’t say. It does seem that he shared in limitations in his human nature. So although, on the one hand, he clearly has a unique awareness of God the Father and doubtlessly a deep intimate relationship with God in his human nature, that doesn’t necessarily include knowledge of everything we might be able to think about or ask questions about. Indeed speculations don’t seem to be too important to Jesus in his teaching or what he handed onto the apostles. And maybe that’s a clue for us that speculations about the real purpose aren’t that important—the more **we’re supposed to see the unity of everything and realize that the only way to participate in God’s plan is to surrender our own freedom.**

Now we see that in this story of Genesis from the very beginning man and woman were not willing to do this. Rather they chose to seek equality with God. And that really is what sin is; it’s seeking equality with God—not to say attaining equality with God, but seeking it! And we see that in the seeking of equality with God there is this idea of knowing good and evil. And that I’ll come back to in a few minutes. Nonetheless, all religions and specifically the Bible have this idea that we need to open ourselves freely to the will and the purpose of God, and that this is not something that human beings do

naturally. Now whether it could have been different is a matter of speculation, but it is not the way we actually have developed, and we call this “original sin.”

Now St. Teresa of Avila said that **we cannot actually learn anything about God unless we learn something about ourselves.** The knowledge of God can only grow with knowledge of self. The growth of our knowledge of self involves, however, that we have some sort of understanding of what has gone on. That’s why the sacred author wrote the Book of Genesis. It talks about how in the life of the human family at a very early stage **the possibility of growth was overshadowed by this desire to be equal to God, knowing good and evil,** which was then accompanied by or created in its wake, you might say, this **delusion that we are separate individuals.** You see the image of Adam and Eve hiding from God. Of course it’s actually impossible, we might think about this, it’s impossible that anything could be hidden from God. But the delusion is that we do and can hide from God and have a private, independent life. **And that delusion overshadows all history and our own personal history.**

And in a sense the whole idea of swallowing a lie needs to be applied to every human being, except the Blessed Mother, because we have all entered into the same mentality that is described in the fall, the story of the fall. We have all tried to live our own personal, private lives by ourselves under our own guidance, under our own strength, under our own power; and in this condition we cannot grow spiritually. It’s not possible. And therefore the retardation or the arresting of our development begins whenever it was that we became this independent, self-centered, self-willed organism. And for some it begins very early, for others later; and there are many variations. And it’s not too important that we try to figure about this except simply be in touch with that it happened. That’s part of our history. That’s part of our self-knowledge.

Now self-knowledge also requires that we have some understanding of not only our personal history but also the general needs that belong to us as creatures, the needs a child has. Since a child is created in the image and likeness of God, a child needs certain things. One of the things that **every child of God has is an insatiable need for love—**and I stress insatiable! That means that only God ultimately, who is infinite, can fulfill the basic needs of any and every human person.

Paramount in all the needs of a child is the **need for a trustworthy holding environment.** This is a natural need. Now of course, there are many different degrees of trustworthiness. If we can imagine—and we can because today we’ve seen it; we’ve seen examples of children who are brought into the world with no holding environment, or very little of a trustworthy holding environment, we can see that such children will have, naturally speaking, an almost impossible time trusting. Trusting is a learned behavior. Basic trust then is learned very early in one’s home life; and if one’s home life isn’t trustworthy, it probably won’t be learned—I could say naturally speaking it won’t be learned. We can never say what God can or cannot do, what God can or cannot provide or teach, but ordinarily it’s not possible. So basic trust then means not simply a trust of someone called “God.” In fact, “God,” the name or word “God” doesn’t even have to come in here. But there has to be a trust in life, in life itself as a reality, as an experience.

**Life has to be seen and felt as trustworthy.** This is the basic trust that is the seed for, later on, salvific faith, which is more an explicit faith in God, a conviction that God is trustworthy, that God's word can be believed, and so on, and later the virtue of faith. Do you know what the virtue of faith is? **The virtue of faith includes the courage to die in order to live.** In the early Church, and I think I'll mention this later on, in the early Church it was primarily the courage to die that was the virtue of faith. It had nothing to do with expressing beliefs. I'll return to that a little later too.

Now all of us are disadvantaged in terms of a holding environment because we were brought up by mortal, fallible, wounded human beings. **Everyone therefore has a wound,** but some people have much deeper wounds than others. The doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Mother is a doctrine that directly applies to the absence of any defect in the holding environment of Jesus. Jesus, the incarnate Word of God, was reared in an environment, a single parent family, although Joseph was called the "foster father," we don't really know what his role was. **But in this unusual family that Jesus grew up in he was free of the defects of a defective holding environment.** His mother was born without wound: that's what that means, the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

Now I do not want to encourage the idea that resuming our development is easy. Nor do I want to encourage the idea that it's difficult. But it is not something to be undertaken lightly! And if we do undertake it lightly, we'll definitely be disappointed because the results will not be very quick or forthcoming. There is a quote I would read from Mr. Almaas: "Deep commitment, total dedication and ever-expanding openness to what is possible are some necessary ingredients if one's path is to lead to transformation."<sup>1</sup> And by transformation we mean an experience of what we believe, what we believe on an experiential level.

Now in this next section I would like to talk about three basic virtues: love, faith, and hope, from the standpoint of this basic unity that we have. St. Paul says there are three things that last: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love." We'll start with that. But what is love? Usually when the word comes up, we immediately interpret it in terms of our own personal, subjective experience, which is really forcing it through a filter because our personal, subjective experience is determined by the very self that Jesus said we must deny if we are going to follow him. So you see the dilemma. In a sense it's a dilemma! **We want to learn, we want to follow, but our own makeup has got a problem.** It's filtering out huge amounts of data, huge amounts of information.

Now love is, of course, another way of referring to God. **Objective love is God.** It's divine. Subjectively, we can talk about different kinds of love. We can talk about romantic love; we can talk about friendship. But objectively, love is this reality that is more real than we are. It is truly eternal, upon which we depend but does not depend upon us. In this way it is unconditioned. But we have to be convinced that whatever we talk about in regard to love or anything else is always being talked about through our own personal experience and sometimes our personal experience is purely imaginary. Sometimes our personal experience is merely our own projections. Sometimes our own

personal experience is also a sharing in the objective life of God. **So when we think now about God we want to start thinking about something we don't know—not projecting onto God our images or experiences at all**, but thinking about this most fundamental reality and mystery: the reason for everything, the origin of the whole of creation, the origin of the laws of creation. Everything is embraced and made alive by this mystery, the mystery of holy love. This mystery transcends our ability to touch it or to research it or to know it, but it comes to us in various ways; and therefore we're not completely unaware. We have intimations and clues and a sense of something very real that draws us.

Our faith tells us, the Scriptures tell us, that God has created everything to love, and nothing that God has created is unlovable. When God created in the Book of Genesis it says, **“And he saw everything he created, and it was good.”** There was nothing bad. If it's good, it's lovable. There is no objective evil. When we see ourselves or other people as unlovable, as outside of love or unworthy of love, we are entering into something unreal—a personal, subjective unreality! And Jesus says, “Judge not lest you be judged, for whatever you measure out will be measured back to you.”

Getting back to the Garden of Eden and the knowledge of good and evil, this desire to be equal to God was a desire to decide for ourselves what is really good and what is really bad, meaning what is good for me, what is bad for me, rather than relying on the purpose of God in creating it, where everything is good for something, whatever it is God created it for. And this desire to be equal to God is exactly what Jesus did not grasp at when he came into human life. “Son though he was, Jesus did not deem equality with God something to grasped at, but rather emptied himself.” **It is this emptying of himself that made him, in his humanity, utterly capable of loving all and everyone because he didn't decide for himself who was worthy and who wasn't.** He wouldn't take it upon himself to do that. He was letting the Father lead him.

So we have to be aware of our own unreality and how we create it. **We block ourselves because we do not empty ourselves.** We do not take up the form of a slave, a servant, but we rather pretend to be God placing ourselves at the center of our own experience and thereby block ourselves from experiencing holy love by all kinds of comparisons and judgments. This is good. That is bad. This person is lovable. This person is not lovable. But Jesus said, “What you measure out will be measured back to you.” Pretty soon you must judge yourself not lovable. It's inevitable that if you're going to be judging, you'll eventually judge yourself not lovable because there's no way that anyone can completely succeed or achieve according to any particular criteria. **Therefore by becoming judging people we judge ourselves and therefore block out what is itself unconditioned approval and love.** We call some things good, some things bad. We desire what we call pleasurable; we reject what we call painful. This is not what Jesus revealed in his own humanity.

Original sin is claiming the power of knowing what is good and evil as a right. And you will remember that the result of this is that Adam and Eve then knew they were naked, that means vulnerable, and then they went to sew themselves clothes, again a

perfect image of the separation that such judgment creates between ourselves and God, and therefore the rest of reality. And God said to Adam, “Who told you you were naked?” It’s not a matter of seeing anything. It’s a matter of being told by someone. So whom do we believe? Are we believing the word of God or of someone else? We’re believing someone else if we live in isolation, if we live in independence, if we live for self. And we can call this the “self” or the “ego” that does this. This is the ego, the self, that has to die in order for us to follow Christ.

Now our quality of life depends on what we experience, and what we experience depends on what we believe. Jesus, for example—it says in a couple of different places—“could work no miracle” in a certain place “so much did he marvel at their disbelief.” Marveling usually in the New Testament means that someone can’t believe something. It’s incredible! It’s unbelievable! Jesus found the disbelief, the refusal to believe, of certain people to be unbelievable in itself; but because of it he could work no miracle! So what we believe has a lot to do with what we can experience. Much of the pain we experience in life comes from within us, and therefore from our beliefs, from our perceptions and attitudes. Again, I repeat, according to God’s plan and will, there is no objective evil. We can talk about evil in terms of a privation of good. We can talk about evil on different levels; but evil is not something God created, nor is love limited or localized.

This is one of the great delusions that we labor under: that love is here and not there. When we labor under this delusion, we can experience—and some of us experience this from time to time, and some of us experience this almost consistently, and I could say even characteristically—we can experience inferiority; we can experience worthlessness; we can experience being low in spirit, bored. We experience that there is something fundamentally wrong and it must be me—something defective, something deficient!

Now since no one wants to become keenly aware of what is defective or inferior or worthless, this leads to what is called in spiritual psychology or spiritual theology—it leads to the state of sleep! If you will recall there are various references in the New Testament to awakening and staying awake. It has nothing to do with physical sleep, but this **lack of awareness of self**, which then accompanies a lack of awareness of others and leads to a dullness of soul and a heaviness, and even can affect the development of our nervous systems, especially when it becomes a characteristic of our lives. Now we’re speaking here about the vice of sloth, in Latin, “accidia.” “Sloth” is actually a stupid word; it doesn’t say much. It’s really just a slow animal. “Accidia” in Latin is better translated “indifference.” And it’s indifference to the love which is universal, which is not localized, which is not conditioned. As with all vices and virtues some people have more than others, and probably each of us has some characteristic vice. For those of us whose characteristic vice is indifference to love, this gives us a very slothful, bored, and sleepy spiritual existence.

Now you might ask yourself, well, why are some people beset with this terrible problem? If love is the greatest virtue, and we know it is, then to have this almost indifference to love seems to be the worse curse you could have. But I believe that we

have to look at virtues and vices, blessings and curses, as more or less the other side of the same thing. And there are those who believe—I don't think it can be proved, but I think it's a decent belief—that those people who have this tendency from birth have this tendency from birth because they're actually called to a very sensitive and profound appreciation of love—more than ordinary people—but in their woundedness, until such time as they are addressed by the word of God and they respond to the word of God and they find healing and so on, their woundedness in that particular, sensitive area just causes them to shut down, because in a sense it's simply too painful to stay awake! People with less sensitivity in this particular area do not have the same problem—but they will have others, of course.

The second theological virtue—often is called the first, but really the way I do it it's the second—holy faith builds on the basic trust that I already talked about. Trust is the beginning of all true growth in the natural order and also in the supernatural order. The virtue of faith grows from the seed of basic trust. Jesus said, "Fear is useless. What is needed is trust." In the early Church the virtue of faith meant the power to counterbalance all the untoward events of life with strength and courage even unto death—thus the cult of the martyrs. And this is something modern Christians find hard to realize or believe, but in the early Church there was a tremendous desire of people to be martyred and a tremendous respect for those who were martyred and a tremendous reluctance to be baptized by those who weren't full of this courageous spirit. So we find it not uncommon for people to wait until they were dying to be baptized! At a later date, after you might say the political climate cooled, it was no longer politically incorrect to be Christian, the whole idea of courage as the virtue of faith tended to die down. I think perhaps unfortunately. I think we have to see faith as courage—as the virtue of faith. Of course faith has many degrees, many different sides to it.

The courage of **faith** is based upon the same vision of wholeness and unity that the vision of love is based on: that **God is working through every event**, that there is nothing God cannot do. Now of course that's not in our sense of "do." There are things God cannot do in our sense of do, because it goes against the whole idea of the creation. But to have courage to endure all things is connected to a fundamental vision of God's power and God's trustworthiness and God's loyalty to his own purpose. It cannot be reduced to simply holding on to certain beliefs. That is not the virtue of faith. That would be the result of faith, not the substance of faith. **The substance of faith is strength to live.** Faith as a virtue leads on to the holy idea of faith that perceives all things as working out for those who love God, in other words, the perception that love is the foundation, the beginning, the end of everything and that everything fits together according to the design of love, and therefore **there's nothing to fear**. This trust must have a cognitive component, not simply in the expression of a Creed, but primarily in the expression of a positive outlook on life and its possibilities, in other words, **believing in the creation**.

This excludes cynicism. From this point of view we can see that **cynicism is a poisonous attitude toward creation**. It's a failure to see the positive value which all life has, because it's based on love in an objective sense. Cynicism can also team up with

**suspicion and other forms of fear.** But Jesus said, “Fear is worthless. What is needed is trust.” And really all this suspicion and doubt and cynicism is all a lack of courage. And therefore the virtue of faith is necessary for the healing of the human spirit and the spirit of a society as well. Thus faith has to be realized and experienced as a certitude including the basic sense that truth as well as love does not depend upon our acceptance of it. If we think about, for example, the Inquisition, we realize there were people who were willing to kill in order to defend the faith as if truth depended upon our acceptance of it. That we can see is weak faith or no faith—not real faith.

And this reality of truth, this reality of love, is the basic reality that has also fashioned our own souls. For this reason we can see why much modern philosophy and much of the thought of modern culture is so hopelessly deluded. Faith engenders feelings of being supported, confidence, and relaxation, as well as courage. The absence of faith engenders suspicion, hopelessness, despair, frustration, and insecurity; and of course, these are existential feelings and experiences. **The point is that faith must become also an existential feeling and experience overcoming the poisonous effects aforementioned.** Faith and love and hope exist instinctively, emotionally, and then intellectually as vision for life.

And lastly, holy hope. “There are three things that last: faith, hope, and love.” Hope is the one most neglected. St. Paul refers to hope as “the first fruits given to those who believe.” In a sense hope has the same origin as love and faith, namely, the total goodness and rightness of creation as perfection and harmony. Now the perfection and the harmony of creation does not mean that there isn’t still work needed to be done in the creation, for that’s part of its perfection. We are created in the image and the likeness of God to be able to participate with God in bringing all of creation into perfection. So its problem is part of its being perfect. Its problems give us mission, if you want to put it that way. Its problems do not deprive it of harmony, however. Its harmony is not static; it’s dynamic. Hope specifically looks for the total unfoldment, an unfoldment of the dynamic purpose of the creation itself in oneself and in everything, so that in St. Paul’s words, “God becomes all in all.”

Again, love and faith and hope refer to an actual transformation of the soul, an experience of the soul that allows the soul to rest in the nonaction or the nondoing that is totally free of ego and personal agenda, but which can be totally effective and efficacious according to God’s will and plan. We see this in the life of the mystics. Toward the end of their lives, after spending an enormous amount of time in solitude and prayer, in a short span of time they effectively produce incredible accomplishments. That is because they are ready to do God’s will and they’re prepared. They’re not floundering around with their own agenda. In a sense a soul transformed by hope ceases to strive, from the point of view of ego anyway, but cooperates perfectly with God, within whom we abide and have our being. This nondoing is not passive or inert, but centered on God and completely responsive to God. Again, this hope is a vision of all reality as connected and harmonious. In such a vision one’s own plans and doing are really not only irrelevant but actually disruptive. Hope looks to the continued growth of oneself and the world, and thus prevents fixations and bad habits from waylaying growth and inhibiting

development. Objectively, hope is the harmony and purpose of God at work. **The virtue of hope is the result of this work realized in our souls.** Like love, hope embraces all circumstances, realizing that everything will turn out for the best. And the judgments about what is good or bad are merely shortsighted workings of our own egos and have zero credibility. Of course, the perfection and loveliness of all creation does not imply that, as I mentioned before, reality is static. It always must continue to grow, to evolve, to develop. And its ever present capacity to grow and unfold, the potential that is rooted in the divine, creative mind—as Jesus said, “With God are all possibilities”—is part of the perfection and loveliness of creation.

Again, as with love and trust the sense of a separate existence inherent in an egocentric consciousness itself cuts a person off from the very wellspring of love and confidence and harmony. This can turn against the self as a source of the problem, and in a sense this is a just punishment because in our being separated and our insisting on being separated, we actually make ourselves the problem. Thus eventually we come to think of ourselves as the problem, and that’s true; but we usually don’t know in what way. So our minds become associated with feelings of inadequacy and incompetence and failure. Again, like with other virtues and vices, this is more true of some than others.

Some people are doers in their character. And that means that they are independent doers in their character; it’s like Martha. Jesus said to Martha, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing matters.” The one thing that matters is the sense that God is doing everything, that God is causing the harmony. And of course, we have to do our share. And Martha was right in one sense: we have to work together. But surely **her anxiety and her feeling that she was doing everything was wrong.** And I think all of us, again, have this problem from time to time. And when we find ourselves caught up in our own doing, in our own anxiety, we need to remember that statement: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needful.”

There can be no egocentered solution—there simply cannot be one—to our problems, because the ego is the problem! And the ego is inadequate, and it is incompetent to do the work that only God can do. So insofar as the self or the ego tries to act as an independent doer, when in fact it’s totally dependent on God, this causes, of course, failure. Again, this condition can result from the combination of, then, an inadequate holding environment connected to certain people with this certain gift for performance, for achievement, for success. Thus are born the Martha’s of the world! So Jesus told Martha that “One thing only is needful.” To recognize that God is doing everything “just look at the lilies of the field. They neither reap nor sow, but no one is so beautifully arrayed.” To **see this** is to experience hope.

Now this can either be taken as a relief, or it can become actually another problem. If our entire experience is focused on ourselves and our own doing, then we may take Jesus’ words as taking away who we are. The same could be said of those who fear. The same could be said of those who are indifferent to love, and for that matter for all of us if we address the particular underlying flaw in each of our characters—and the assumption is

each of us has one. Thus to those who are really bent on doing, surrendering everything that seems real can be the cause of further anxiety. For some anxiety, frustration, and the feeling of inadequacy then—all of which results really from the separation of the self from the total goodness of the living universe—creates a nightmare; but they can awake from it. But sometimes they prefer the nightmare because they can continue to be in charge, and in spite of all their negative experiences they can continue the pretense that they are really the center of their own world. And some people are more comfortable with this illusion than with the truth, since the truth requires both faith and humility to admit that one's entire history to some degree has been fabricated.

Of course, no one's life is a total failure, and no one's life is a total disappointment, because God is always at work doing for us. However, if we see God's work as a result of our own activity, then we simply strengthen our own delusions; and Jesus said, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees. They perform works to be seen. When you give alms, do not let your right hand know what your left is doing," because the whole purpose of giving alms is to break the power of our own dominion and control and self-love and self-concern. It's to break that power and to start sharing with others. However, if in doing that we let our right hand know what our left is doing and we then grow in a sense of superiority, we've simply established a new form of separation. And so Jesus says, "They have their reward."

So in conclusion, our Scriptures and beliefs and sacraments point to a reality that is at odds with what we naturally feel is true about ourselves. And so far this evening I have only dealt with three fundamental virtues and their corresponding opposites, but we could go through all the capital sins. And in so doing we would find the core of eventually all of our characters. Real change is possible only when we're open to it. Being aware of our conditions of subjective delusion may help open the door of our human experience to the power of transforming grace, which always is at work. While some particular characters have specific defects that make love or faith or hope particularly problematic, **general human woundedness makes all virtue more or less difficult for everyone**—and unnatural for those of us affected by original sin. But those who refuse to be dissuaded by human weakness or by the common consensus of the world around them and seek without dink the truth that makes us free will be richly rewarded. "Eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has the imagination of man imagined what God has in store for those who love him."

#### Endnote

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<sup>1</sup> For further references on trust, virtues and mystical ideas see A.H. Almaas, *Facets of Unity*. (Diamond Books: Berkeley, CA.) 1998, passim.