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Ego and Our Perceptions

Two points we have to keep in mind: we as Christian believers, disagree with all the Orientals who say there is no value to the self. Now we say there is a true self; however, this is hidden in the mind of God and within ourselves, but is unknown in the ordinary passage of time. This true self is hidden in the mind of God; it is with God from the beginning. God said to Jeremiah, “Before you were begotten, I knew you.” So we do have a true identity; we have an identity in God, and we have an individuality in God. However, that being the case, we still live and move daily in a false self, which is derivative from our experience. So this comes from our experience which is a hodge podge of impressions we gather from the world around us.

Now depending upon the family we come from, this false self may be more or less true. In other words, if you grow up with basically Christian people and you’re taught basically the truths of the gospel, well, then there is a lot of truth in what you have been taught and your impressions; but there is still something false because of original sin, which is a factor that cannot be avoided. So there is something false in every person however well they are brought up, no matter how well they are cared for and educated in the Christian truths, because of sin. So we don’t avoid this. The only exception would be the Blessed Mother. So in our experience we are to some degree divided.

Now in terms of the word “ego,” this is the problem. I want to acknowledge that these words like “self” and “ego” can be used differently by different authors. Okay? Now normally the word “ego” is equivalent to “false self,” and in the world of psychology it’s used in a value-free sense. We don’t use it that way here, but in psychology they just talk about the ego or the self whatever it is, whatever you’re feeling, whatever you experience: that’s your ego, that’s yourself; and they put no value on it.

In religious language, all religious language, ego has fundamentally negative evaluation; and that’s why we use the word “false,” which is the particular term picked by Thomas Merton; but there are other ways of talking about it. But ego tends to be rather negative, including in the biblical tradition, where Christ says, “Unless you pick up your cross and deny yourself”—so there is something that has to be denied. St. Paul talks about the “old self being crucified.” So there is a rather negative element because of the sin element, because original sin affects our consciousness; therefore, the self contains that negative element, which needs to be dealt with, crucified, if you will; however you want to talk about it, it has to die. Okay. So ego usually in religious language then has a negative view.

But there are some Catholic authors who use the word “Ego” in a more positive way; and that’s because they think about the ego as a feeling of “I”, the very subjective feeling of “I” as Ego. And it’s usually capitalized—it’s the Greek word for “I”; it’s a Latin word

too. Then, of course, you're thinking about the image of God. You know, we're made in the image and likeness of God; and God is "I AM who AM," so therefore, if that's what you mean, then of course it has a more positive viewpoint.

But usually it's taken in the subjective sense of being influenced by sin. Then we have to realize that this ego or false self then actually constitutes a kind of a filter that is going to spoil, to some degree, our ability to experience life cleanly, purely, and directly. So that's something we have to become aware of, how this is going to filter our ability to experience life in God.

So I mentioned yesterday we have to acknowledge that our development was arrested. We have an arrested development. And the arresting of the development really is due to original sin; it's not due merely to our own personal choices. But all human beings, save for the Blessed Mother, did engage in, do engage in, agreeing with original sin. In other words, we affirm sin within ourselves, and that affirmation of sin within ourselves makes us then self-centered. And a way to think about self-centeredness is that self-centeredness is eccentric because we're not created to be self-centered! We're created to be God-centered, so if we're self-centered we're out of kilter. And insofar as we start making choices and affirm perceptions that are self-centered, then we fall into this kind of warp; and this kind of warp then is with us. And not everyone is the same in this regard. That's why there are different capital sins, different types of warp, which I'll talk about later this afternoon.

Anyway, as I mentioned yesterday then in my closing remarks, the second half of life is a time of growing out of this self-centeredness in a conscious and deliberate way. Actually we're being drawn out of it as soon as we're baptized, but because of the needs of life we're not able to live out our Baptism in this direct, conscious way. We get waylaid through the education process and adapted to the world. But it should not be a surprise to you that being adapted to the world and living out our Baptism are not the same thing, and yet rarely can we do both at once—and most don't.

Christ, of course, lived out a rather unusual life; and of course, when he got lost in the temple—you remember—his parents came after him and his mother said, "Why did you do this to us? Don't you know that we were seeking you sorrowing?" And he said, "Well, why were you looking for me?" See, he was already on a different level doing something else. And even she couldn't comprehend what it was. So living out our Baptism isn't so easy. We wouldn't fit in. He didn't hardly fit in with her, much less can we fit into the world!

So we have to adapt to the world, and so we have to recognize that this adaptation takes place—and necessarily so; but it is not the same thing as growing. So we have to admit that a lot of our adaptations to life, and a lot of our education is actually worthless from the standpoint of our relating to God. So we come to that realization in our adulthood, and I mentioned since you are going to become ordained presbyters, you have to become an adult early—adult in this sense—an elder adult. The second half of life is

allowing the ego then to be dethroned, meaning allowing the self-centeredness to be moved, displaced.

And this, of course, really is not our work. It's the work of God, but we have to let it happen! And don't forget that Jesus then prayed: "Father, I praise you for having revealed to the merest children what you've hidden from the learned and the clever." And again, "Unless you become like a child, you shall not enter the kingdom." So this process I'm speaking of, is a process that God does in us. But for us to be open to it we have to regain a sort of childlike simplicity and openness and humility to let God then take this initiative, which is then equivalent to surrendering our own self-centeredness to God.

Now one of the things we can notice is that modern science has backed up a lot of the claims of mystics. Mystics have come to believe that we are quite deluded about life, that our experience really serves as a filter to block life rather than reveal it. Well, science can help us in some few areas. For example, we have a belief, our belief system, our ordinary, common belief system is that there are solid objects in this room, for example, this podium and the table and your chairs and the floor and so on. Well, actually that's false. Physics assures us that there are no such things as solid objects, that this is made up of molecules, which are made up of atoms, which are basically space. Same with the floor. Same with the table. Well, why do we experience it as solid? Because of magnetic fields. Really what stops my hand from going through the podium is a magnetic field here in my hand and in the podium. But I don't see the field, and we cannot perceive the field. But we do perceive certain percepts, certain sense data; we perceive sense data. Light reflected on various atoms and molecules reflects in our eyes. Then out of all this and out of the nature of the magnetic fields we create an image of a solid object, but that's our invention. There isn't such a thing. Science affirms this.

And in a similar way, from the beginning when we're born we're always mixing our imagination with a little bit of data we're getting from the world, partly through our senses, partly through our feelings, because our feelings are contact points with other people; and then we start to imagine all kinds of things about ourselves, about life, about everything, about God. And it is really a hodge podge, a highly imaginary hodge podge, and not really truly objective.

So I recommend to you a few books, if you're interested. *The Private Life of the Brain* is one book. Another book is called *The Universe of Consciousness*, and a third book is called *What Makes You Tick?* And those three books go into neuroscience and what is being learned. And I think they are a very good support to what we're talking about here in terms of spiritual psychology.

Contemplation

Now contemplation is really about living in a world where we allow reality to impinge upon our minds, and where we start to live out of that and not out of all the hodge podge of data that's coming in from our senses—not that we exclude it totally, but we do partly

exclude it. By that I mean this: you cannot live in a contemplative life if you're going to be constantly listening to the radio or constantly listening to television or constantly talking. These activities, if you actually look at them, are all invasive. If you're going to let God take over, if you are going to surrender yourself to God, well, then you have to give God room! And God can do anything, but God will not take over what you haven't given him. Now when you're filling your mind with radio, television, or talk, you're not giving any room. So don't expect God to invade your place and say I'm taking over! No, God won't do that and never has. So contemplation is a matter of letting go. It requires a certain amount of quiet, however not in any particular way. And I'm not promoting it as to method, but you do have to have quiet in your life, and quiet inside as well.

Again, we are incarnationalists; we believe in the incarnation. We do not think the world is vacuous. Buddhists believe the world is vacuous. Buddhists would see no value at all in talk as such, as far as I can tell, words, and even thought—inner thinking. I don't think they see any value in it. Basically, they believe it all should stop. We don't believe that. Why? We believe that the human intellect is a created mirror, representation, of the divine and that through word, through the Word of God and through the word, actually human words too, there is possible real communication; and that therefore this can be a substantial information that is superior to the data coming in from our senses. But that doesn't mean that every use of our voice and every use of our ears is therefore beneficial. It might be absolutely nothing but chatter, so there's need for some discrimination.

Also in the practice of Christian monasticism, work is not against contemplation. It's not like, well, we do prayer and then we do contemplation. No. We do prayer and then we do work. No. All of it is contemplation, or could be! You can work quietly in a contemplative way. So contemplation does not exclude work either. It does not exclude study. It does not exclude learning or reading or even some forms of speech, provided you are actually in a certain conscious place. It does exclude meaningless chatter and that sort of thing.

There are two different kinds of contemplation: infused and acquired. Now acquired contemplation refers to what you do, how you quiet down, how you open yourself to God, how you pray and the sense of unity that follows. That's acquired contemplation. And what's referred to when the authors talk about it is actually a state of presence, a state of soul, whereby one has attained some kind of inner peace and sense of unity. And what then Zen Buddhists call "satori"—it's also called "samadhi" over in India. So there is some acquired state of peacefulness, restfulness, serenity. Okay.

But there is something else Catholic authors call "infused contemplation." Infused contemplation is a supernatural grace. Now we cannot exclude it from non-Christians and say God doesn't give it to them. God can do whatever God wants to do. But supernatural contemplation, infused contemplation, is a grace that has come in the experience of the graced one. It comes as a surprise. It's not the product of one's effort. It comes even uninvited, although there must be certainly an openness. Again, the idea in the Christian Church is that if St. Teresa of Avila has received infused contemplation, she

can share the fruit of that with us; and we have to some degree a right to it in Christ because all gifts are given for the body. They are given to the Church, and as members of the body we have a right to gain from them. So we don't have to wait around for God to give us infused contemplation. We can learn from Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, and others. And that's the spirit in which I'm offering some of these points.

Again, yesterday I used the image of the vine and the branches. In a sense the vine refers to the entire creation. It isn't simply the Church, but it's the whole of creation. The whole creation is a vine and all the parts are mere branches. Now a branch by itself has no value. That's the point of the image. In our self-centered consciousness however, we imagine our own branches as having some sort of independent value. That is part of a delusion that is coming from original sin. Our individual branches have no particular value, just as if a branch is cut off, it's good for nothing and withers and dies. And that's why Jesus used that image. And St. Paul used the image of the mystical body. We are all individually members of the body. The body also refers to the entire creation. The entire creation is a body that is all unified in God, and modern science is seeing how everything is connected more and more everyday. The entire universe all emerged at one distinct moment. It has evolved all together in a harmonious way that is beyond explanation. Life itself emerges. All life is connected. Every organism is connected to every organism. We're connected to the environment. Now the environmentalist today and the ecologists are telling us all about how we have to be more concerned about the environment, and they're right because it's all connected! But in our self-centeredness we think we can exist independently. That is all from sin. That is not true. We cannot exist independently. So we have to become more aware of our interdependence.

God now, however, is independent of the creation; but the creation is not independent of God. That is an absolutely essential insight. You have to understand what Christian mysticism believes, because otherwise you end up with what is called "pantheism." If you see God and the universe as more or less the same thing, you have pantheism. And that's simply a misunderstanding of mysticism. What the mystics see is that God permeates absolutely everything and that absolutely nothing can exist without God. That does not make God dependent, however, on the branch, as a vine does not depend on its branches. But God is not actually the vine; but God permeates the vine, permeates every branch. God permeates the body and every member, but is independent of it—but not totally independent since the incarnation, so St. Paul used the example of Christ as the head.

Christ is God. Christ is the head of the body. Well, the head of the body is a pretty important part of the whole body. So there is a great interdependence. But it is not God who is dependent upon us or on any part of the body, but every part is totally dependent upon God. And then God, in Christ, takes on the role of head. See? So God enters into the creation. God enters into the created part—in Christ. So it's Christ incarnate who is the head of the body, not just the Word of God, but Christ incarnate is head of the body.

Now in the book of Exodus God reveals himself to Moses as "I AM who AM." Now that again is at the mystery of who we are since in Genesis it says, "God created man in

his image and likeness.” Well, an image and likeness to what? Guess what? That’s really interesting too that it says that God creates man in his image and likeness, and doesn’t say anything about what that is! What is the image of God? Well, man is. Well, what part of man? His two feet? The hair on his head? Well, actually some people are so stupid they probably think it is! But no, later on then the nature of God is gradually disclosed. Then in the burning bush God says, “I AM who AM.” So the feeling of “I” then is very central, and that’s why some authors use this word with the higher meaning. Why? Because the feeling of “I” is really central to who God is, and it’s central to who we are and it’s our connection, our mirror image of God. God mirrors himself in us, and therefore we have this ability to also feel this sense of “I am,” this “I am-ness,” if you want to say that.

Now the problem is that we do share in this, but when we have this sense of “I am,” when we have this feeling of “I,” that usually does not reflect the unity of creation because, again, of original sin. And therefore what happens is we start to add things to our simplicity. All right? We say, “I am thirsty. I am tired. I am male. I am bored. I am confused.” We predicate to ourselves various qualities. And that’s really now mixing up what is originally simple. The “I AM-ness” of God is simple. There’s no predicate. “I AM who AM.” There’s no predicate. There’s nothing more to say. It’s utterly simple. And we are only the image of God in our utter simplicity, but we don’t keep ourselves simple. We are constantly confusing this simplicity with all kinds of qualities, predicates, feelings, attributes, and beliefs. And therefore, we miss then the unity that exists actually within us and within all creation, and cannot feel that we are living and moving and having our being in God, that we are indeed grounded in God; we don’t feel it because we’ve already confused ourselves.

So the very possibility of our growth and transformation in God proceeds from God himself and is the purpose of God’s creation and the purpose of God’s grace. And the easiest way we have of following along with God’s purpose is surrender. But it is not the strategy most of us choose; in fact, none of us choose it early! Again, because of original sin we follow a different path; we follow a path of self-development. Recognizing as we surrender to God—of course we don’t surrender to God, and wouldn’t unless we were completely convinced that to do so is beneficial. In other words, we have to have a deep trust in God’s benevolence. Even when discussing a vocation, some people are afraid God is going to ask them to do something that is too difficult. Well, what God asks of us may be difficult; but if God asks, it won’t be too difficult of its very nature. Whatever God asks us, he has to give us the power to do. So a real yes to a vocation stems from this utter trust that God only wants our best and that God’s will for us is far superior to anything we could will for ourselves. But this sort of trust is not exactly common. And it’s not common because, again, our idea of who we are and everything else is coming from the world outside; it’s not really coming from God. And this is where we get then to the idea—which we already brought up yesterday, metanoia—the idea of the need for conversion. And this is then recognizing that we don’t know, truthfully don’t know, God—and truthfully don’t feel ourselves as God intends us to. And then the acknowledgement that God can and will transform our self-centeredness into a God-hidden identity, an identity hidden in God.

Now at the same time we have to be aware of the leaven of the Pharisees. Jesus said that very often. He spoke very roughly to no group more often than the Pharisees. And you need to read the gospels very clearly and find out who Jesus' enemies were and why. "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees." He called them "hypocrites." He said the leaven is hypocrisy. What does hypocrisy mean? What does the word "hypocrite" mean in Greek? Anybody know? "Hupokrites." It means actor—an actor. Okay? What's he saying? Well, he says, "They love phylacteries. They love signs of honor. They love to sit in the front seats of synagogues. They love to blow a trumpet in front of themselves." Okay? And these are all forms of acting, acting out a role. See, the leaven of the Pharisees is taking spiritual doctrines or spiritual truths and acting them out in the stage of the false self, putting on roles like an actor. An actor reads roles. When you go to see a play you don't imagine for one minute that is really Hamlet! No, it's somebody playing the role of Hamlet. So the leaven of the Pharisees is putting on roles in regard to our relation with God, trying to act out in this area what really should be happening here [true self]—which is pretense. It's a pretense. It's an act, and it can be done. And all formal religions have found ways to do this. That's the leaven of the Pharisees in every form of religion, ways of pretending and acting out the transformation, while not allowing it to happen at all. It is a very dangerous thing.

Self-knowledge

Self-knowledge. So if there is danger in the leaven of the Pharisees, then what we have to do is we have to know who we are. And we have to know our capacity to fool ourselves. St. Teresa of Avila says, "One cannot grow in knowledge of God without growing in knowledge of self." This is so very true. If there is one thing—it seems to me—that is a marked quality of the Pharisees, it's their absolute refusal to know themselves; it's an absolute refusal to have any insights about who they are; it's their insistence on living out their entire life on stage, the religious stage of religion!

Now the growth of our individual selves and our identities can be and is often overshadowed by the delusion that we are separate. So part of this self-centeredness is also the experience of being separate. This is all connected to original sin. Self-centeredness and separation all go hand in hand, of course—that is, in the way it seems in experience, although in Yoga they do talk about a sort of loss of separation, but they don't talk about loss of self-centeredness. What they talk about is a sort of monad. A monad is a single isolated being that has nothing to do with any other being. And that's kind of their idea, like a candle burning all by itself. That's their idea of some sort of eternal, monadic, non-communicating existence. To me it's so terribly undesirable. It is not the Christian view, as you know. The Christian view is communion, communion among the saints and communion with God.

Now where does this separation come from? Well, it comes from the fall. Now if you remember the story of Adam and Eve—what was that all about? God created man in his own image and likeness and gave him a feeling of "I," a capacity for reflection and judgment. And God placed Adam and Eve in the garden—by garden we mean a nice place of growth where things grow well, but have to be tended to. Now in the garden the

serpent approached Eve and said, “Eve, why don’t you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil?” And Eve said, “Oh, well, no, that’s one thing we can’t do. God said, ‘Do not eat from the fruit of the tree of knowledge.’” Now get this: it’s an image of a garden, but this is a tree of knowledge; it’s not a tree of apples. It’s not a tree of figs; it’s a tree of knowledge—and it’s the knowledge of good and evil. And what the serpent says to Eve is so very important for us to understand ourselves. He says, “If you ignore God, you will be equal to God. If you ignore God, you will be equal to God knowing good and evil.” What does he mean by that? If you ignore God and choose good and evil for yourself, you decide what’s good. What’s good for you is good; what’s bad for you is bad—then you are God! That’s what it means. So the original temptation is really to become God, which is really the basis for this self-centeredness; it’s really making ourselves God. It’s excluding God’s wisdom and God’s power and even God’s being from our own lives.

Now what was the result of this? The result of this was that when God came looking for Adam in this metaphor of the garden, Adam hid. And God said, “Where are you? Where were you?” Adam said, “Well, I hid.” Why? Well, because once we try to be equal to God, once we try to place ourselves at the center of life, then that cuts us off, that creates this sense of separation. See? And what does God say to Adam when he says, “Well, I hid”? God said, “Why did you hide?” And Adam said, “Well, because we were naked.” And what does God say? What did God say when he said, “We were naked”? “Who told you?” Don’t forget that. “Who told you?” In other words, he is not saying, oh, you finally noticed. See, he said, “Who told you?” So nakedness is not a matter of observation. It’s not like he learned this from experience. No, but rather he accepted a different source of truth! That’s what this is about. And sin and self-centeredness and separation and our false self and our egos are really about accepting a wrong source of truth. That’s the origin of the whole thing. The origin of human history all starts here in this accepting of the wrong source. So God says, “Who told you?”

Now what do Adam and Eve do then? The next thing they do is sew fig leaves to hide. See? They separate themselves physically even from others. So this whole sense of separation, this sense of privacy, this sense of something that is cut off from others, grows directly resulting from the fall.

Now as long as we cling to this delusion that we are actually separate beings, as long as we cling to the delusion that we can by ourselves direct our own lives and end up with any kind of health, wholeness, or prosperity, then we will not proceed at all in spiritual growth. It will be totally impossible. Self-knowledge requires some understanding both of our personal history and of the general needs that every child has as he or she grows up. So in other words, general history, the Bible tells us that. That’s really the point of the Book of Genesis. It’s to lay the basis of, well, this is how things got all goofed up. God created everything, and it was good; and then come human beings who cannot cooperate with God!

Now given that that’s how everything started to get goofed up, we have to look now at the redemption of our world. And God has always been involved in the redemption also;

from the very beginning God promised salvation. And you can believe that God's grace was immediately available, but that doesn't mean that it was accepted.

Now we look to a child, as a child grows up. What does a child need? Well, a lot of things. But the most important thing is what? What is the most important thing for a child growing up in the world? Love, and what would love look like? Well, it comes through parents, but what would it look like? A holding, a trustworthy holding environment, on a whole. Why? Because the point of life is not just that we live, not just that we exist, but we have to learn how to trust. I'm talking from a religious point of view, a spiritual point of view, a biblical point of view. From a biblical point of view, there's nothing more important than a trusting, holding environment, so that a child will trust. And the belief is that the parents reflect God to the child. And the child needs to trust his or her parents—true, but only so that eventually God and all of life will be seen as trustworthy. See, because, again, we're not separate; and we can't say, well, my family is okay, but then outside of my family I can't trust anybody, or, well, my town is okay, but outside my town I can't trust anything. That's obviously wrong.

Obviously, the ultimate goal of salvation and life is that everything is seen as good because that's how it all started, and that separation is not God's idea at all, and that we have to find life to be trustworthy. And we know very well that there are a lot of untrustworthy elements in it. But to be able to actually grow up spiritually in this world, we have to have this sense that in spite of danger, in spite of crime, in spite of all kinds of problems, life itself can be trusted, because you see, you can't just say only God can be trusted because then you're separating God from life. Then you are creating a false world for God. We will run to church and we will be very happy with God in church; but when we go outside, then we can't trust anybody. No, see, that's not an incarnational idea of salvation! We are called on to live in a universe and creation that God formed and the whole thing has to reflect God, and we have to be engaged in the whole thing. And whatever we do, whatever people do, has to become wholly and holy—holy—h-o-l-y—and sanctified and wholly connected to God, to the creation, to what God wants, because it all belongs to God. And we cannot accept any kind of compartmentalizing. When we are compartmentalizing we're playing along with the strategies of the ego, and we can't accept it—it's not acceptable. You might say, yeah, but the world is dangerous. Yes, it is. Eventually though we have to see that if we really believe in life, and if we really believe in Baptism, that even death itself can't hold us back in fear. So we have to start thinking about all those things, those naturally occurring emotional reactions, and we have to see that there is something fundamentally not right about them, however normal they are.

Now there are an infinite number of degrees of trustworthiness. Now if you think about, for example, if a child grows up in a family where the mother—let's say the mother is on coke, crack, or whatever, and then her boyfriend is some sort of beast or some sort of brute, well, that kind of child could never grow up with a sense of trust! We're not in any way limiting what God can do, but that child cannot grow up with a sense of trust—and shouldn't—in a sense that trust would be irrational! So we see the importance of our own actions in rearing children, and what a grievous mess our culture

is making of life in the sense that we are bringing children into the world in a way that they cannot ever grow into trust; that is, it would be irrational if they did! So there are many degrees of trustworthiness. Anything that blocks a child's growth is bad, because basic trust needs to be broad and wide.

But even in the best of families there is going to be something wrong. Why? Because of sin. No family completely excludes sin. So it is this basic trust that will later be the basis for explicit trust in God and a conviction in God's trustworthiness. So things grow from small to big. So the seeds of faith actually are planted in a child very early in a trusting environment.

Now this does not mean that a child will be forced to believe in God later on; it means that the child will be able to. You know what Augustine says about Baptism: he doesn't say Baptism makes us holy; he said that it does give us the grace of sanctification, but he said that it actually makes us able to sin, but also able not to sin. But he says before Baptism "Non posse non peccare." We're not able not to sin. We're compulsive sinners before Baptism. In Baptism we gain the possibility of sinning or not. That is another way of saying we gain freedom. A trusting environment affords children freedom to trust; it doesn't mean they will, but without it they don't even have the freedom—barring the miraculous intervention of God, which we don't want to foreswear and say it can't happen; but let's say, as we observe life, it often doesn't.

Eventually faith, the virtue of faith—and faith is a virtue, but it's a lot of other things too—it begins with basic trust and becomes more explicit. The virtue of faith in the early Church—what did it mean? What was faith in the early Church? Before Constantine? The virtue of faith—"virtus fidei"—before the time of Constantine, what did that mean? What was the virtue of faith? What does "virtue" mean—"virtus"—what does the word mean? Anybody know? Yes, it can be—before it's a habit though? "Virtus" in the older Latin means strength, strength or power. Okay, so what's the strength of faith, the power of faith? It is the power to die for Christ. That's originally what the virtue of faith meant; it meant the strength or the courage to die for Christ. What is that based on? Ultimately, this total trust in the goodness of life. You can only die willingly when you totally believe in life. That's the virtue of faith.

Therefore all of us are disadvantaged insofar as there is any lack of trustworthiness in our holding environment. And there is always some defect. I mean, you should not ever think that you come from a perfect family because there weren't any, other than Christ's perhaps. In fact, that's really what the Immaculate Conception was. The Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Blessed Mother, means that Jesus' holding environment had no defect because there had never been any lack of trust in her experience. She had never validated original sin; it had never touched her, so there were no defects in the holding environment of Jesus growing up, unless it came from Joseph. But in a sense Joseph didn't have much to say about it; really, Jesus grew up in a one-parent family. Joseph was some sort of guardian, but doesn't have too much to do with it—died early.

Now I don't want to encourage the idea that resuming one's development is really easy, but I don't want to say it's hard either. The reason I don't want to say it's easy is that then you might take it lightly, but I don't want to say it's hard either because then you might not do it at all. Let's put it this way, it's something that requires patience and time. So if you expect a lot of results real fast, then you'll be disappointed. What the mystics all show us is that they suffer tremendously for years before they actually experience any true irreversible growth. They experience growth that is reversible at first. They have consolations and they have all kinds of wonderful experiences, and then they all go away and it's like worse than never having had them. Almost all of them say the same thing. Now one man wrote it this way: "Deep commitment, total dedication, and ever expanding openness to what is possible are some of the necessary ingredients if one's path is going to lead to transformation."¹ That man is Mr. A.H. Almaas. Okay.

Virtues: Love, Faith, Hope

Now St. Paul says that there are three great things that exist: faith, hope and love, and the greatest of these is love." The trouble is that our idea of love itself has already been filtered by this experience of separation. We always talk about faith first; we should talk about love first. Whatever we think we know about love has all been filtered through our egos. And what we know about love may be valid or may not be valid, so we don't want to dismiss it as totally irrelevant. It might have some validity, but it might not. Ultimately, what John says is "God is love." And when we say "God is love" we mean that God is the wholly, totally objective, fundamental basis for everything. Just think about that.

The universe is one enormous—not infinite but enormous—loving reality rooted in the infinite love which is God. That means that nothing that is created is unlovable, which is already reflected in Genesis when God saw what he created was good, meaning it was lovable. But we do not experience everything as lovable. We experience love as localized. We say, "This person is lovable. This person is not lovable." Or we think about ourselves: well, I am sometimes lovable and sometimes not lovable; or I have a lovable family or a not lovable family; or part of my family is lovable and part of it is not; and I have these friends and these enemies. We localize love in our experience. This is part of the falseness of our experience. And we have to see that when we are experiencing that, we are experiencing a subjective reality, not an objective reality. We block ourselves from experiencing holy love by, for example, comparisons. I like her, but not her. Judgments—we call some things good and some things bad, and we therefore continue the knowledge of good and evil, which is really an attempt at becoming equal to God, which is only continuing our separation from God. Original sin is claiming this power of knowing good and evil as a right, and we affirm that for ourselves. And the clothes that Adam and Eve sewed together, the fig leaves, can represent the blinders that we have on our eyes and senses, cutting us off from the true nature that God has created.

Our quality of life depends upon how we experience life, the way we think, and what we believe. And in many ways what we believe determines what we experience. It says

in Scripture in a few places that “Jesus worked no miracle in that place”—like Capernaum—“because he marveled at their disbelief.” Later on I will explain that I believe there is an eighth capital sin—it’s disbelief. Disbelief made it impossible for Jesus to work a miracle. Why? Because miracles are communications, and disbelief is a refusal to be communicated with.

And likewise in ourselves much of the pain we experience in life comes from within ourselves, from our beliefs and perceptions and attitudes about who we are, or about who other people are, which are actually illusions. They are things we have dreamt up; they’re not actually objectively true.

According to Scripture there is no objective evil. Augustine says evil is simply a “privatio boni,” a privation of good; but it doesn’t exist. Now this is very difficult for people to believe. And in the history of the world, in philosophy, there has been the question: How do you explain evil? Well, we explain it: it doesn’t exist! Evil is part of our delusory way of thinking. And then when we act out our delusions, we create a privation of good; so that’s moral evil. So in that sense it’s real, but it’s only real insofar as we are deluded. Actually everything is love, everything comes from love; and everything is totally affirmed by God.

Love here, but not there—that’s our basic experience. And when we do that, this eventually comes back on ourselves. When we believe this person is lovable and that person is not lovable, sooner or later we become subject to our own judgments. And we become to feel in some way or another inferior to others. And even if someone has a great many successes—you know, even a gold medal from the Olympics does not eliminate inferiority. And I know that absolutely for a fact; and I’ve dealt with many people who have made great achievements in life, and they feel deeply inferior. Inferiority doesn’t come from a lack of success. Inferiority comes from a sense of being separated from others and from God—worthlessness as well. Lowness in spirit and boredom are all psychological results of being separated. The feeling of somehow there’s something wrong with me: this all comes from this sense of separation.

Now some people are more prone to this than others. In other words, as a character grows up in life we all make choices, which are more or less in one category or another of capital sin. Okay? Well, some people’s choice is more to negate love than others; and therefore, they will be more prone to feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, boredom, lowness, and so on. But to some degree everyone is affected by it, but some much more so; it’s more pronounced, more a defect in their character. But to some degree we all experience this alienation from love, and therefore a sort of mental or spiritual sleepiness whereby we’re not aware, we’re not connected—a dull heaviness of soul. And this may even affect our evolution; and some believe it has, that human beings could have actually evolved with a much more highly developed nervous system if it hadn’t been for the fact that we have lived as warriors and haters and desponders of self. Ultimately, we reach into the capital sin of what is called “sloth,” which is a very poor term. It really is “accidia” in Latin, and what it means is “indifference to love.” And in one sense—there are three different ways of saying this—in one sense it’s the greatest capital sin,

indifference to love. Another way of thinking what is the greatest capital sin is pride, and another one you could say is disbelief. So we'll take each one of them in turn, but in one sense we could say that each one is the greatest.

Now over here we have faith. Faith is one of the great infused virtues like love; it's one of the three greatest things St. Paul talks about. If basic trust is the beginning of all true growth, then faith grows out of that seed; but in a sense it's already present. So we can say that in basic trust there is already a baptism of desire. Jesus says, "Fear is useless. What is needed is trust." In the early Church the virtue of faith meant the power to counterbalance all untoward events with strength and courage unto death. As we notice in the history of the Church, eventually this was replaced by mental conviction. That's a rather anemic form of faith—mental conviction. It's really courage to die, or at least to oppose all untoward events. Faith as a virtue leads on to the idea of the faith that perceives all things as working out for those who love God. St. Paul explicitly said this. In other words, the perception that love is the foundation, the beginning and the end of all things and that everything fits together according to the design of love, and therefore there is nothing to fear—that we actually perceive this, not just say it. That's living in the contemplative vision of faith. This trust or faith must have a cognitive component; we personally have to see it. It can't just be an expression of our Creed. And it has to affect our entire outlook on life.

Now this excludes what? Just as this [love] excluded indifference, this [faith] excluded every kind of cowardliness and cynicism. Do we see that cynicism itself is actually an affront against the holy vision of faith? Cynics don't believe there's anything good in people or in the world. And unfortunately, you'll meet cynics in the priesthood. And that is a kind of loss of faith, if you understand what I am saying. Or it's putting faith in the closet and not allowing it to affect anything else. It's surely not living in the vision.

So faith then is realized and experienced as a certitude including the basic sense that truth as well as love does not depend on our acceptance of it. It's not just personal. We over-personalize everything in our culture: whatever you think is true for you, that's true! No, truth is independent of me and my acceptance of it, as love is independent of the entire creation and its acceptance of it. And this forms really the basis for the true self. So it's actually this substance which is greater than we are that forms the basis of our true self and our souls.

For this reason much modern thought is hopelessly deluded because it has no sense of soul, and it has no sense of anything beyond oneself—the subjective. Thus all modern art—look at it! It's simply all a projection of a personal viewpoint. It is not reflecting anything greater. Religious art of the past is different. The cathedrals of Europe reflected a reality bigger than the people who built them. Picasso does not. Picasso and Miro and all the moderns simply reflect themselves, their own personal, little perspective.

So you see how faith as a holy idea has been lost to our culture, as love as a holy idea is lost to our culture. Love is just personal now, just personal; it's what I feel. Faith

engenders feelings of being supported, confidence, relaxation, and courage. The absence of faith engenders suspicion. And you will meet people who think they have faith, but they are suspicious people. Well, then they don't have the vision of faith. They have some subjective idea of faith, some subjective experience of faith, but not holy faith, not objective faith, because objective faith allows for no suspicion—no hopelessness or despair or frustration or insecurity.

So eventually if this is an objective reality, if this is the basis of our souls, then it has to eventually push its way into our awareness—and this with our own permission. The point is that faith must become an existential feeling and experience that counterbalances these other experiences that might well find themselves in our lives, like hopelessness. Well, we might actually feel hopelessness about something or another. Well, it is not to just stay there unremedied. The remedy for it is the actual power and virtue of faith.

Now faith and hope and love exist and live instinctively in our lives. The Vatican Council talked about faith being a kind of supernatural instinct. But they're also supernatural ideas and they're also supernatural emotions. So we have supernatural ideas, emotions and instincts that are the basis for our transformation into Christ.

Questions

- ◆ Question: In seminary formation one of the levels of formation is human formation, and then Christian formation, and then priestly formation. But one of the elements of human formation is to come to what I think they would call a “healthy sense of self.” And so maybe recognizing the fact that in a sense we delude ourselves to think that we're going to get to the true self, but yet is there a practical aspect of formation that identifies what a healthy sense of self is? That's one question I have, and then another observation I want to make is with regard to the ego because in the *Priest Perceiver*, which is one of the interviews that we do, one of the themes of priesthood is called “ego awareness”; and we see that as a positive thing. Can you respond to the elements of human formation when we talk about coming to a healthy sense of oneself? How that might relate to some of the things that you have been addressing? Well, of course, if you take a Christian humanistic viewpoint that everything is good—so a healthy sense of self would be a true sense of self, but not one separated from others. So when you talk about what is negative, when you talk about denying your very self or taking up your cross, after all, the cross is a form of execution. It's not talking about bearing with troubles, you know, it's talking about dying! Okay? But it's talking about dying to something which is keeping you from life. So that's the paradox of the cross, the Paschal mystery. So everything is good in that sense, that our talents and our enjoyments and everything about our bodies and our minds and so on, that's all good and beneficial and we should appreciate it; but that's not the self in the religious sense of the word. See, the self in a psychological sense is again value-free. And because it's value-free it can be positive. And that's what they are talking about in the *Priest Perceiver*. They're talking about just in the normal, everyday sense of the word “self” being positive and not thinking you're a low character and you have low self-esteem. What this study really shows though is that many people's problems really come from holding onto the

sense of separation. If you let go of that, that itself is positive. And then you actually do flourish and enjoy life and enjoy yourself and enjoy others, because you are in the right relationship with them. So that would be positive. The question would be whether that can be done in a step before religious conversion? I don't know that that's possible. I mean some people think in that way, and they think of the supernatural as coming on top of the natural. But actually the supernatural has to transform the natural and turn it around.

◆ Question: Does it presuppose the natural though, because grace builds on nature? Yes, of course it does

◆ Comment: I think that's why they speak of the different levels of formation to say that the most fundamental aspect of formation is the human formation. What does it mean to be a human person? What does it mean to be in relationship? What does it mean to be a man?

This actually speaks to that because it's really about putting all that in right order. See? So it's not like the supernatural comes in later on when we're done with the natural, but rather the supernatural is working to transform the natural. So those are different steps only in terms of—on paper; in fact they're all going on simultaneously. I don't think you can actually develop separately, one step and later on another—that's my view anyway.

◆ Question: How do you quantify or measure or know or objectify the sense of separation? How do I see where I am at?

Well, let's presume that we have it. All right? That has to be our assumption. We are separated. We do have that sense, and then when we recognize that we have it, we have to actually find moments in our lives when we are reacting out of that sense of separation, and then bring to that moment a higher sense, a sense of unity, if you want to call it that.

◆ Question: After the reaction, or during the reaction?

During, the most desirable is during. Now maybe at first you don't notice it right away. That's why a lot of people recommend writing journals. All right? You write journals, you can go back and read them. Of course it's not too helpful if you never bother reading what you wrote. But if you go back and say, "Oh, this is what I did, and now I see that I allowed my own insecurities to dictate my decision. That was dumb! Now next time I experience I'm insecure and I feel like doing this—but I'm learning now, and that was false. I was acting out of insecurities." And you see the trouble is that our faults—you go back to this first one, you know, this level of reaction, that is the level of passion. And passions are powerful energies. So sometimes we are actually helpless in their power. Someone once used the example that it is like having a downpour—you have to go somewhere; it's pouring rain, so you wait at the door hoping it's going to stop. And sometimes with our passions, with our reactions, that's the way it is. We have to just try to wait for them to stop; we actually can't control them. And that's what Aquinas called, "concupiscentia antecedens," that means antecedent concupiscence. It's something that's more powerful than we are; it's there before we are; it's acting before

we are! But in time we do grow out of that, through prayer and through the sacraments, and we become more conscious.

- ◆ Comment: The second question was the observation about the ego awareness on the *Priest Perceiver*. The questions on the *Priest Perceiver* are—if you recall, it's the question about: If there was a contest raising money and it's to sell the most neckties and you sell far more neckties than anybody else, you know, the goal is achieved and no recognition is given to the fact that you sold more neckties than anybody else, how would you feel? And the response that's the code is that you ought to feel somewhat disappointed about that, that you have a sense of what you can contribute. Whether or not that's the right question to ask, I don't know; but that's the question that's on there. But what it gets at is one of the motivating factors for the priest is that he has to have a sense that he can contribute something to the lives of other people, that he has a healthy sense of his significance, that if you have no sense that you can facilitate healing in another person's life, then you won't act in that situation.

Right, well, that's using ego now in the more psychological sense. But here is another thing about it as far as ego awareness. The ego on this [material] level is not aware of itself, but on this [emotional] level it can be aware of this [material], on this [intellectual] level aware of that [material] and that [emotional]. So the only way to become completely aware of yourself is to move up into the inner center. So ego awareness in the psychological sense is very desirable, so it's just a mixture of terms. That's true of a lot of modern psychological work: they mix their terms. That's why I specify we're using the religious term, in which it's pretty negative.

- ◆ Question: You had mentioned that love is not dependent on accepting it. Now that seemed strange to me because grace is out there and you either accept it or not, and I would have thought love would be the same thing?

It is, but grace is not denied by your not accepting it. It doesn't become unreal. You simply harm yourself by rejecting it, but it's still there. So is love. Love is more real than we are.

- ◆ Comment: But it's of no value to me unless I accept it.
That may be true, but it's still real.

- ◆ Comment: So is grace though.
Yes.

- ◆ Question: So grace and love really are very similar in that it's of no value unless I—
True enough. But they are only of no value if you choose to make them of no value for yourself.

- ◆ Comment: Right. Okay.

But you see most people who have this feeling that life is bad, they really don't realize that they're cutting themselves off. They think life is bad. They don't believe in love. They don't believe in faith. They don't believe in these [virtues]—really they don't

believe in God in the true sense. If they believe in a God they have an image that's rather distorted.

- ◆ Question: In following up on that, if you look at athletes, all your Olympic athletes, they use motivators to really do their mind sets, you know, so they can achieve tremendous things here. Some married couples do the same thing getting balance back into their life. So you can achieve great things with your mind set, but they don't do that, I don't believe, with getting to the true self. I'm wondering why that is? A lot of motivators will be talking about the spiritual aspect, but they don't focus on a lot of elements that you would think they would.

Right. They probably lack that perspective. They could include it, and then that would be part of what is called "acquired contemplation"; but they tend not to—they tend not to see it. One thing about faith and about the gospel is it doesn't really help us compete in life. I mean that's not really one of its purposes. And that's why motivators are not—they may talk about faith, but they're talking about something else. They're talking about believing in yourself or self-confidence or something like that. They're not talking about true, holy faith. Holy faith isn't going to help you win anything—except salvation!

Answer to a Question: How can you on a daily basis incorporate these beliefs that we have into life, because we do believe it? Everyone here believes it, but we don't always experience it! How can we translate our beliefs into experience? That is the whole point. How can the seminary do it? I don't know. I mean I've never worked in the seminary on that level. But it's a good question. Maybe you can help each other.

Answer to a Question: Some people are drawn to others compulsively. That's really not being drawn out of themselves, it's just a compulsion of the self. And other people are driven away from others compulsively. The self can really be obsessive or compulsive toward or against or neither. So that's partly what capital sin forms the root of your character formation, or your character defect.

- ◆ Comment: If the process is a graced process, almost entirely a graced process other than our being available to it, then for it to be implicit in our lives throughout our lives, we absolutely must take moments to make it explicit. In other words, for me to be able to live out of a sense of this on a daily level, I have to make a point to be open to that grace at moments during the day. So I have to take time, as you said, to be quiet and to let God transform me whether I don't even quite understand what is going on. And then we are talking about different explicit techniques of contemplative prayer, of becoming quiet and letting God grasp and change me. That's the kind of "what we can do" to then allow that to be worked implicitly through the rest of our day.

Right. And actually every sacrament and every liturgy should do that. I mean if you follow the Liturgy of the Hours—and devoutly—that will give that opportunity. If we celebrate the Eucharist—devoutly—that will give that time and that space.

- ◆ Comment: I was thinking that there is a piece of seminary life that's like monastic life, and that is—especially when I was a Trappist they, you know—you never get away from each other! It was thirty of us living in a house, and the people who were your spiritual directors were the people that you didn't get along with particularly well. I mean they pushed your limits in ways that you never thought would get pushed. You had to do something different in your head and heart to be with that person, and it usually meant getting out of yourself. And I think that must happen in seminary too because you are with them all the time, and it just stretches you so you have to become a little more other-centered.

My view personally is the real goal though is, after being ordained, to put a discipline into your life so that you continue developing. I found the seminary to be very good, but then when you leave the seminary things can fall apart. So we don't need a seminary-centered formation.

Endnote

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