

Rev. Paul A. Hottinger

The Underbelly of the Obvious—Views from the Real World Theology on Tap
Sunday, July 8, 2001 6:30 p.m. St. Joseph, Downers Grove Church Hall

Need for Pondering these Ideas

The talk I am sharing with you tonight I gave before, and because in this parish we have such wonderful, active parishioners, the first talk was transcribed and put on paper; and on the way out you can pick up a copy for yourself. When you first hear some of these ideas I am going to share with you tonight they may seem difficult, but they really are not. They're very simple really. But I do admit that it took me years and years of studying and thinking to put together a talk like this. So it's a product of many years of study, so therefore to absorb all of it within one hour would be pretty unusual—remarkable! So that's why it's good if you take a paper copy home and look at it.

Being Present to Being

When I think about the role of contemplation in the life of a believer, these talks are all addressing believers or people who are interested in the meaning of faith. And one of the aspects of believing is that it brings perspective that is very different from the perspective with which we conduct our ordinary lives. By “ordinary” I mean our work-a-day lives. And one of the most important aspects of a religious faith-life is the ability to reflect upon its meaning and allow that meaning to change us. This is done through the practice of contemplation. In a very simple sense contemplation means nothing more than being present to life or being present to being.

Our Old Skins Can't Hold New Wine

Now Jesus himself talked about pouring new wine into old skins. He said, “No one pours new wine into old skins.” Of course, that is a parable; that means it's an exaggeration. The truth is everyone does that! We're always pouring new wine into old skins. What is new wine? New wine is a peak experience. It's a moment of experiencing something other than the ordinary in our lives. It's a moment of recognition that God is with us. It's a moment of overwhelming gratitude. It's some sort of spiritual experience. That's new wine. But we pour it into old skins; and the old skins are who we are, who we have become. We're now all “old skins.” No matter how young you think you are, you are an “old skin” already. And when you pour wine into old skins the new wine leaks out. That's the point. And if you've ever had a religious experience, and I imagine many of you have, you will have realized by now that experience does not last very long; it tends to pass away. It's very similar to and in some respects very much like the experience of falling in love. You can fall in love all right, but that experience will not stay with you. It will leak out just as new wine will leak out of old skins. That's the issue now.

Need for Conversion

If we want to grow, we need to find a way to develop new skins, which is another way of saying we have to find a way to contain and to hold—in a dynamic way, not a static way, but to hold dynamically—our experiences, especially our peak experiences, our experiences of God, our experiences of life, as presence. Now if we are really to go

about this, then we have to follow the regimen that Jesus already set forth in his early preaching. And we don't know a lot about what Jesus really preached. But one thing we know he did, he preached the need for conversion. Now conversion in Greek is "metanoia." Jesus probably didn't use that word because he probably didn't speak Greek. He may have understood some Greek; but he usually spoke, we believe, in Aramaic. But the word "metanoia" is found in the New Testament. And it's very close to the authentic message that Jesus himself preached.

Metanoia

And what is "metanoia"? Unfortunately in English there's not one word that translates it very well. We could say repentance," but that doesn't catch the meaning of "metanoia." "Metanoia" literally means "beyond the mind." So it's an idea of stretching or pushing beyond the boundaries with which we normally think and feel. So we go back to the original message of Jesus, and it starts out something like this: "Repent," that's the English word, "metanoia, push beyond the boundaries and believe, for the kingdom of God is at hand." Now when we push beyond the boundaries what we're doing is we're allowing God really to take an active role in our formation. Now you might say, "Well, that would be natural anyway." No, it isn't. That is not a natural condition of life because of what in our tradition we call "original sin." Original sin really has to do with how at a very early stage in human development we pushed God out of the picture. So as human life has evolved, as social life has evolved, as civilization has evolved, God has not really been part of it except in rather artificial and often in a self-serving way—self-serving to the people in power. But God as the reality, the substance in whom we live and move, that God has not been included.

Meaning of Baptism

St. Paul, in reflecting on the meaning of Baptism, said, "Do you not realize that we, that you, who have been baptized have died and you live now a new life?" Now the word "you" in the Greek is a plural. "You live a new life." "Life" is in the singular. And what he is trying to say is that in our natural state we are all living our own individual lives self-centered on our needs, our desires and our projects. But Baptism is the sign of the metanoia, the conversion, God is trying to create in our lives whereby we let go of our individual lives and allow God to reestablish our consciousness centered on God, who is the origin and source of everything, all being. This, of course, requires that we let go of our egocentric consciousness, which is rather difficult to do; in fact, we cannot do it because that's all we have, but God gradually does replace our egocentric consciousness with his divine consciousness. And this is what St. Paul is talking about. This is the meaning of Baptism. This is what Baptism is all about.

A Shared Illusion

Now again, St. Paul in Ephesians says, "In God we move and live and have our being." But again, we do not have an awareness of this. So we live and move and have our being in God unawares and it seems as if we are all on our own. It seems as if everything depends upon ourselves. This indeed is an illusion, but it is an illusion that is almost necessary to live in life as we know it, because that is the illusion that we all share. It's a shared illusion. It's not like the illusions that come from pathologies where

they are very particular and individual. This is a collective illusion. It's a mass form of psychosis, you could say. And we all share it. And that's how we operate our societies and our businesses and, in general, our lives.

Arrested Development

Now Jesus said, "If you want to be my disciple, you must deny your very self and follow me." Now "deny your very self" is referring to this self which is an independent being, independent and self-dependent, which shares in the collective illusion. And to deny that is to say that is not really real, but reality is something different. Now when Jesus said that, he was really talking about a possibility that has rarely occurred to most people: that we can resume our development. We're all born into this world actually as rather remarkable little creatures, and we grow and develop at different stages and different rates. But at some particular point we stop developing as a full human being. At a certain stage our development becomes arrested, and we can trace that arresting of our development to the growth of our reasoning, because our reasoning is based on the egocentric consciousness, illusory consciousness, that we all share as human beings. So from that moment on we no longer grow in a unified way, but we grow in a lopsided way. That is, we can develop extremely good skills and great knowledge which can stand us in good stead when it come to living in the world and holding down a job and making money, for example. But it does not stand us in good stead with God at all, because it tells us nothing about God. It's a purely earth-centered sort of adaptation to life. So in many ways a person twenty years old is not more developed than a seven-year-old when it comes to the total consciousness of who God is. In some respects we may even have gone back a little bit. And for this reason Christ says, "Unless you become like a child, you'll not enter into the kingdom of God." The kingdom of God, of course, is his word for this dimension where all life is abundant and in which men and women live in communion with God and in which all of their potential can be realized, or at least enough potential so they will be fully realized beings. So becoming a child means returning to the point of our arrested development and growing again now in a balanced way.

An Adult Life

We might believe and we might say and I think it's a good thing to say that this is the actual purpose of the second half of life. Now when does the second half of life start? We used to say twenty, but now people live longer. It still can start at twenty, that is, becoming an adult in the true sense of the word, not simply an adult as adapted to life, but an adult who now knows God as Father, and who can grow and develop spontaneously.

Surrender the Ego

We, of course, are talking about the mystery of God's grace in us, but we're also talking about our allowing the grace of God to work. And if we allow the grace of God to work, then that means the ego, that is, our self-centeredness, has to be dethroned. And this, of course, is something that we ordinarily do not want to do or allow to happen because it signifies a loss of control. So it requires a great deal of confidence and trust in order to do this, and that's really what faith is about.

Modern Science and the Mystics

Now when we look to the writings of the mystics, those who have practiced contemplation, we find that some of their conclusions happen to merge rather well with the conclusions of certain modern scientists. Not that modern scientists necessarily like religion or mysticism, in many cases they're almost hostile toward it. And yet, what they say is perfectly compatible with true mysticism. For example, we believe the illusion that this table is a solid object, that the floor is a solid object, that this lectern is a solid object, that you are sitting on solid chairs, that you are a solid being. Well, even modern science agrees that this is not true. We're not solid beings because atoms and molecules are mostly made up of space, and no matter how many you put together, they are still space until you start really compacting it as in black holes. But this is no black hole. We're mostly space. We have this sense that this is solid because of the magnetic field, which is itself invisible and does not impinge at all on our senses. The magnetic field in my hand meets the magnetic field in the table and presents the sense of solidity, which is good that we have that sense of solidity otherwise we would be running into tables all the time. So our illusions are somehow useful and practical. So we shouldn't dismiss them as if they really were insane. They're not really insane, but they're not the whole truth.

Contemplation—Acquired or Infused

Now the world of contemplation has, you might say, two parts. Acquired contemplation means that sort of sense of life that I can gain through my own power. And there are various methods of contemplative prayer. You can study them by going to a bookstore and getting a book on it, or better yet taking a class somewhere where someone who has practiced contemplation teaches you his or her method. The only problem with this is what suits one person doesn't necessarily suit another. But there is another kind of contemplation which is even more important. It's called "infused contemplation," and this is a pure gift. And people like St. John of the Cross and St. Teresa of Avila, for example, experienced this gift of infused contemplation. But one of the points the Church has always said about all of the gifts of God is that they are meant for everybody. So instead of dismissing mystics as unusual people or peculiar people that we really can't be like, what I think we should do is borrow, take, everything they offer to us and utilize it for ourselves. That's the idea of a gift. Let them be a gift to us.

The Sacramental System

Now everything I am going to say this evening is actually all locked into the sacramental system of the Church. It's locked into the meaning of Baptism. It's locked into the meaning of Eucharist. It's locked into the meaning of the parables and of all the sayings of the New Testament. However, we allow most of these to pass over us as if they were just quaint metaphors or, even worse, things we've heard before—cliches. Well, they really are not.

The Vine and Branches

For example, we find in the fourth gospel the mention of the vine and the branches. The vine and the branches are really a description of reality. We are each a branch. A branch has no total reality in itself. So we are not total beings by ourselves. We only find totality when we are connected to the vine. The vine is the whole. Sometimes the

vine is an image of Church, but it is even more an image of the creation itself. We—each individual person relates to creation as a branch relates to a vine. If we were ever to be cut off from that vine we would be actually nothing. We'd be withered and lifeless. The horror of immoral and criminal behavior is that's exactly what it does. It cuts people off from the creation. It creates an independence in the volition, in the will, of people so that their actions do not correspond at all to their reality. This is a profound spiritual sickness akin to cancer in the physical world, and it can only result in utter death if it's not reversed.

The Mystical Body

St. Paul does not use that image of the vine and branches. St. Paul uses another word: the "mystical body," but it's the same idea. Each of us is a member of the body of Christ. What good would it be, for example, to have an eye with no body to put it in? What value is an ear if it's not connected to a brain that interprets all the data coming in from the ear? So what good is any individual, if that individual doesn't find his or her place in the whole? That's really what St. Paul is talking about.

The Feeling of "I"

Now when we go to the Old Testament we see God introduces himself to Moses as "I AM who AM." This is a very significant phrase, perhaps the most philosophical in the whole Old Testament. We see in this case God is identifying himself not only as the source of being, but he is identifying himself as the source of feeling, especially the feeling of "I." "I AM who AM." That's how God describes himself. And we all have the feeling of "I," otherwise we would not be healthy and fully human beings. That feeling of "I" is a reflection of God. However if you notice, we never have the sense that we are simply being. We never have an experience of simple and pure "I am." We're always "I am something." I am hot. I am cold. I am hungry. I am thirsty. I am tired. I am angry. I am something. We're always predicating something of ourselves; and this, of course, is very typical of human consciousness. And this somehow detracts from the simplicity of the source of our consciousness and creates again barriers to understand who we really are in simplicity.

Surrender to God

The very possibility that we can actually grow and develop comes really from God and is the purpose of God's grace and God's will in each person's life. The easiest way for us to follow God's plan for our own unfolding and development is to totally surrender our wills to God and to recognize that God's will is benevolent, that means good willing for us. And this is basically what all religions teach. In this regard Christianity is no different from Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism. They all teach that one same thing: that if we want to be as healthy and positive and human as possible, we need to surrender ourselves to God. We need to give up our own personal, private "I" and feeling of independence and self-dependence and isolation, and become part of the creation which we already are.

Pride

Christ also says, “Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees.” Well, the leaven of the Pharisees has to do with this sense of pride. In a sense every sin accentuates our separation and our independence, our isolation from others. But in a sense the chief sin of all is the sin of pride, the leaven of the Pharisees. Leaven, of course is yeast. Yeast makes bread rise. And pride can rise within us and make us full of something that is simply an obstacle to truth, to reality.

Self-knowledge

St. Teresa of Avila says, “If we want to grow in knowledge of God, we have to grow in knowledge of ourselves.” This makes sense because each of us is the closest contact we have with God. Where are we going to contact God but within ourselves? We are made in his image and likeness. Now that likeness may have been distorted and our minds surely have been distorted insofar as we think we’re independent and act that way. But nonetheless, God’s creative work is more powerful than our work and so we are still basically God’s children. Unfortunately, as we look at ourselves we find that our own individual growth has been overshadowed by this very delusion of which I have already spoken: that we are separate beings and we are capable of hiding from God.

The Fall

Now again, we read about that in the Book of Genesis when Adam and Eve decided not to simply be creatures, decided they wanted to be equal to God, because the serpent had said to them, “You know, if you do as you please, if you decide for yourselves what’s right, what’s wrong, then you will be equal to God knowing good and evil.” And they fell for that! And when they fell for that they experienced something, their own vulnerability, which they had not experienced prior to this. God comes to them and says, “Adam, where were you?” And he says, “I was hiding.” God says, “Why were you hiding?” “Well, because we were naked.” And God says to him, “Who told you you were naked?” He doesn’t say, “Well, it’s about time you noticed!”—because it’s not a matter of noticing. It’s not a matter of seeing. It’s a matter of believing. And he says, “Who told you? Whom are you listening to?”

How Our Brains Work

We believe that we are learning all about life by seeing, listening, touching and feeling, and all the other things we do. We think that data is coming to us and informing us of what life is about. That’s totally false. Data doesn’t really come to us like that. Data comes to us, light comes to us for example, but our minds have to create the images we actually see as we see them. For example, I think there are only three different color cones in the eye, but we see all kinds of colors. Where do we get the variations? From our brains. They create the difference. With sound, for example, we get all kinds of sound waves reflecting on our eardrums, vibrating the eardrums; then those waves are basically translated into music or speech if they can be, otherwise they just appear as noise. Now for example, you have listened to children play. Did you ever say that’s music? Well, probably not! But that’s because your brain doesn’t hear it that way. So in a true sense—and science agrees with this, in fact, science discovered all of this—actually we create our perceptions from the little data we really get. But it’s incremental.

Every day we add a little more to this little cloak that we're creating, which is our view of life. People's opinions are very important to us, especially the people we hang with. That's why people can have such various opinions about all kinds of issues. Where do they come from? Those are all things you need to think about and start recognizing in yourself. We do form opinions based on what our friends think. Of course, we choose our friends, so they are really all our decisions sooner or later. It all goes back to ourselves. We create our values, our perceptions, everything.

A New Patch on an Old Cloak

Now the question is are we going to recognize our utter subjectivity and start looking for something more solid, truly objective? That's where the Bible comes in. That's where Christ's message comes in for metanoia. **Metanoia is a new openness to what is truly objective, beyond ourselves, our view of life, how we put the data together.** And Jesus said of this process, "No one puts a new patch on an old cloak." But, of course, we do! We do it every day! We get new information; we put it on that old cloak that we've already made. Jesus' point is that's really not a good way, especially when you're going to talk about God because actually you haven't learned anything yet about God. Not to say God hasn't been in your life, not to say that God hasn't touched you, guarded you and guided you through your parents, through angels, through others, whatever; but you really don't know anything about the mystery of God. And if you want to enter into the mystery of God, you can't just sew some information on the old cloak. **You have to let go of the old cloak.** You can keep it around for your daily work, going to work, doing your job, but don't think that is what reality really is. Reality is something that vastly transcends the cloak that we call our perception of the world.

Recognizing Vulnerability

So Adam and Eve then sewed fig leaves, which are indicative of the separation now between them and God and the creation and the garden and everything. And we live in those fig leaves: that is inheriting original sin! We live in that sense of separation, and only the grace of God can bring us out of it. However, the grace of God will not do so if we cling to our fig leaves. And don't forget, why did Adam and Eve sew the fig leaves in the first place? Because they recognized their nakedness, their vulnerability. **Until we're willing to be vulnerable no real change will take place within us.** You see, everything created really is vulnerable; it's its very nature. And the whole idea that God had in sending Christ is that "Son though he was Jesus did not deem equality with God something to be grasped at." In other words, he accepted vulnerability with utter confidence because he was living the life of metanoia, that is, a life based on utter faith and confidence in God and the power of God to overcome all evil. Well, if God can overcome all evil, why not be vulnerable, especially if that's the way God created us?

The Resurrection an Affirmation

Now it's in the context of that we have to understand the experience of Christ's resurrection. Christ's resurrection is God's affirmation that Jesus' confidence was indeed well-founded. It just wasn't a P.S. It didn't just come at the end of his life as, oh, and also, this! It's actually the affirmation of Jesus' confidence in faith in the goodness of all

creation. That goodness, however, is something we don't always quite believe—and probably for good reasons.

Woundedness

If we go to the life of a child, for example, we see that a child is obviously born into the world—we brought one here tonight to show you what a child looks like; right Lori? Children are born with all kinds of needs. They are vulnerable. A baby is the perfect image of vulnerability, and a baby comes into the world needing everything and in a good family the baby gets most of what he or she needs; but in a bad family she or he doesn't. There are families where children are just left; they're not even picked up. And those children will never develop a sense of trust. So we have to recognize that our ability to trust and have confidence in the goodness of creation is to some degree limited by our experience of family life and has been to some degree wounded. Even in the best of families, all of our parents are mortal creatures with flaws. And even if they want to give their children absolutely everything they need, they actually don't know what it is. And even if they knew what it was, they wouldn't be able to do it anyway because they have their own needs. So in this condition of life everyone becomes wounded, which is again back to the idea of original sin. We inherit this woundedness. So that anyway is a challenge that is an obstacle to this sense of trust and willingness to be utterly vulnerable.

“Grace Perfects Nature”

However, if we look at a child who has been well brought up, we can say, “Well, at least this child has a human possibility, a natural possibility, to trust, trust in his or her parents and then in life itself.” This basic trust will later be the basis for an explicit faith in God. Now barring unusual miracles, which do take place, a person who has not received proper nurturing probably won't come to make a true heartfelt act of faith in God, although God can do anything, but in the course of nature grace basically perfects nature. That's a general principle of Catholic theology—“Grace perfects nature.” If nature is seriously deficient, then grace is going to have all its work to do to make up for that deficiency. It will have a very hard time building a supernatural edifice of virtue. And faith is actually a supernatural virtue. So we have to recognize that to some degree we're all disadvantaged and we all have a wound—some more than others—and so we have to be aware of that as we proceed.

Jesus' Holding Environment

When we talk about the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Mother we're talking about the fact that Jesus' holding environment was without any limitations. He grew up in a family—really it was a one-parent family! And in this one parent family there was nothing holding him back from understanding the goodness of life. His mother was not wounded in the way that we are.

A Life of Virtue

Now if we had this sense of a basic trust in life, then we can go on to build a life of virtue. A life of virtue is basically what I am saying today is a life of faith, hope, and love. That's what St. Paul says are the three most important gifts: faith, hope, and love. And he says, “Of those three the most important is love.”

Love

Now what is love? Well, that's a good question, and most of us would answer in a very subjective way. And that's what we do with everything. We think about life through our subjective filters. So if we ask what is love, we think about when we experience love. Well, that's not what love is about! Love is not about when we experience love! Love is an objective reality; in fact, love is God. Love is the eternal. Love is the source of all being. Without love there is nothing: there never was anything, and there never will be anything. This is objective love. Love reveals itself to us in Christ and in the Holy Spirit.

All Creation Lovable

Now God, who is a mystery, of course, the mystery of God, the mystery of love, the mystery of the eternal, has created everything to love. Nothing God creates is bad or unlovable. It says in the Book of Genesis that "God saw everything created and it was good." That means that there is really nothing evil that God created; there is nothing bad God created. Of course, everything is good for something specific. And that we have to learn. We can only learn about it from God because God is the one who created it. The whole idea of being equal to God is deciding for ourselves what things will be for. But everything is good in itself. And because everything is good in itself we have to recognize that the whole universe is good, and a lot more than good—splendid and blessed and also blessing—because the universe is created to be a blessing to itself, each part blessing the rest of it.

Our View Distorted

Now we do not, however, experience everything as love. We do not experience everything as lovable. We tend to see that some things are lovable and other things are not. That is actually part of our own subjective way of looking at life, and it's even part of our sin. It's part of our being independent. We localize love. We say, "This person is lovable. That person is not lovable. This experience is desirable. This experience is not desirable." We prefer pleasure and we hate pain. But the idea of love is everything is good and everything has purpose. The only thing we should not want is disorder, things in the wrong relationship. However, as it is we are full of comparisons and judgments, which are subjective and which cloud our relationship to the creation, and therefore cloud also our relationship to the Creator because, of course, the Creator relates to us through the creation. If we cannot see clearly what the creation is like, then we don't know its maker either. Again, original sin is a claiming for each of us the power to decide what is good and evil, right and wrong. And this eliminates the original unity that is in the creation.

Life Affected by Belief and Disbelief

Now our quality of life really depends upon how we look at life; the way we think and believe determines what we can experience. For example, there is the story of Captain Cook, who visited down in the land of Tierra del Fuego in South America. And he arrived, of course, in this little boat which was like a rowboat—the ship was offshore—and the natives started more or less worshipping him. And through sign language he asked why they thought he should be worshipped. And they said, "Well, you must be a mighty

superman or mighty god to come over the great water in this little boat.” He said, “Oh, we didn’t come over in this little boat. We came over in that ship out there.” Well, of course, these people could see that ship, but they didn’t know what it was, so it didn’t mean anything to them. And there are many things in life like that with ourselves. We see something, but we really don’t see it; that is, it doesn’t partake in our own perceptions because it’s not part of what we find meaningful. So it’s very important that we look at our own beliefs because our beliefs determine what we see and what we can experience.

That is true for our perceptions of the physical world. It is even more true when we consider our perception of the whole of being, which of course exceeds the physical realm. What we don’t perceive cannot be part of who we are. In this way we make our lives very small by cutting down what we believe in. Further, I cannot stress enough that our beliefs in general and especially our beliefs about reality are choices; we have a right to believe and a right not to believe. We can see that even in Scripture it says in a couple of places that “Jesus could work no miracle in that place so much did he marvel at their disbelief.” In other words, Jesus’ ability even to work the signs which communicated power from the kingdom and for which he was sent, even that was obstructed by people’s decision not to believe in him, their unwillingness to see it.

The Way We Look at Life

Now we have to admit then that much of the pain we experience in life is actually derived from ourselves and our own narrow and petty way of taking life. Usually when people have serious problems, they have to go through a period of reassessing all of the ways they look at life. I would suggest that everybody needs to do that, not just people with alcohol problems, not just people who have gone through divorce; but everybody should reassess how you look at everything and how you take everything.

No Objective Evil

So there is no real evil-in-itself in the world, but we can talk about a privation of good. According to that, an eye that doesn’t see is deprived of the good it is created to have. So there is that sort of evil, but there is no objective evil. There is no objective evil in the world. Likewise our moral actions can lack the appropriate goodness or grace.

Judgmentalism

However, as long as we are localizing love and seeing love here and not there, we tend to deprive ourselves of the fullness of our own affirmation. If we hold the world up to a false standard, sooner or later we will fall under that same false standard. It’s inevitable. Christ said, “Whatever you measure out will be measured back to you.” He said that, and he said, “Judge not lest you be judged.” But the very nature of human consciousness as we know it is itself judgmental. And so we measure back to ourselves this judgmentalism. And eventually we end up feeling, at least at times, under our own judgment, worthless or inferior, low in spirit or bored; and we might even reach the view that there is something fundamentally wrong, and it must be with me! Eventually this leads to our falling asleep. And by eventually I don’t mean eventually after age 20 or 30, I mean eventually after age 7 or 8. We fall asleep in terms of being really aware of the world and of the whole of our environment, and we enter into a sort of dull heaviness

within our own souls. And this heaviness can actually prohibit our growth and development and perhaps even the development of our nervous systems, so it's something dangerous. People who have sought to develop themselves spiritually have found the need to do all kinds of exercises that develop their nervous system, to stay fit, to eat right, to fast, but also to develop perceptions, to develop an ability to think quietly and to sit in quiet, to enjoy solitude. This actually helps our organs develop better.

Sloth—Accidia¹

We have a word in our theology called “sloth.” It's a rather dumb word. There's a better word in Latin; it's called, “accidia.” It means indifference to love. If we live in a judgmental sense, which we all do, and everybody is really guilty of this judgment, we take on a mechanical way of living. By mechanical I mean we just react to everything around us, and then we become indifferent to love in the sense I originally described it. We're not indifferent to the subjective experience of love, but we're indifferent to the reality of love. And this is called “sloth.” It's a capital sin, “accidia,” in Latin. It comes from the Greek word “a-chedia,” which means “no concern.” And to some extent we have become numb to love and to its requirements as well as to its presence in our lives. That would be the absence of love; it would be accidia. So that's the concept of the virtue and the idea of love as a source of metanoia, of a true perception of life.

Faith²

The second is holy faith. Now you've heard of faith, faith, hope, and love; it's usually faith, hope, and love. I did love, faith, and hope. Faith is another very important idea and virtue. It builds on the basic trust I mentioned at the beginning. If we have a basic trust in life, now faith will come and strengthen that and then we'll grow into something more, a power to meet the challenges of life and endure all problems. Christ said, “Fear is useless. What is needed is trust.” But fear is very common. It's one of the more common emotions: anger, fear, and anxiety.

Anger

Anger is probably really the absence of love, or it's the absence of the experience of love or the knowledge of love. And that means anger is really what is talked about in that story of the Prodigal Son. The son took off and left. Well, he must not have felt his father's love. Now of course, he was also wasteful, lustful, you would say. He wasted all his money. But that's really all part of this anger. So he comes home eventually. As you know the story, the father accepts him back. And then the elder brother has a different kind of anger—resentment. He had always been with the father, but he didn't know his father's love either. So lust and resentment are really ways of being angry. And anger comes from the lack of contact with objective love.

Virtue of Faith

Well, in a similar way, faith is another power in life like love. When we have no faith we are cynical; we're suspicious. We have no strength to endure life. Life is just too much for us. Jesus says, “Fear is useless. What is needed is trust.” In the early Church the virtue of faith actually meant that we would endure death for Christ. And actually it was almost desired—I would say not almost—it was actually desired because in the early

Church it was believed that a total transformation of soul could take place if a person were martyred. So people actually wanted to be martyred, otherwise they thought it was a long arduous process. So the virtue of faith was the virtue to have the strength and courage to undergo martyrdom. As time went on and the Church was no longer persecuted, unfortunately the idea of faith was somewhat diluted. It became often associated with believing specific things. But actually the virtue of faith is a **strength**. The very word “virtue” is “strength,” so the strength of faith—the virtue of faith—is really a power to endure.

Nothing to Fear

Faith as a virtue leads on to the idea that perceives “all things as working out for those who love God.” That’s what St. Paul says: “All things work out for those who love God.” To perceive this and to recognize this is to be living in this virtue and this idea of faith, and it changes the way we see things. We see things working out. It doesn’t mean the present moment is not difficult, but it means that present-day difficulties will not derail those who really trust in God. So in other words, it is 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.

Cynicism vs. Faith

Now this trust has to have a cognitive component because it has to do with our mental outlook on life. In that sense trust is mental, whereas love is more instinctive or more related to our root being. We need to have a mental outlook that is compatible with the truth. And that’s what faith is. Now what we call the “articles of faith” are simply different limbs of a whole tree of expression of who God is and what God has done for us. But having faith excludes the possibility of being cynical. Cynicism is actually a choice, a judgment, that life isn’t worth it. Cynicism does not really believe in people. Cynicism is a **choice not to believe** that there are good possibilities in life. And we need to see it as a true poison. Faith has to realize also and experience as a certitude the basic sense that truth as well as love does not depend upon our acceptance or understanding, otherwise they could not be supernatural virtues. So we have our own personal understanding of faith, but the faith does not depend upon us. And sometimes you meet people who act like they are very strong in faith, and they are always telling everybody off and they are always defending their point of view. That isn’t faith. Faith has an utter openness to the truth. And a person with true faith isn’t worried about someone not believing and what he or she believes. That’s actually a lack of faith in the sense of the virtue of faith. That’s faith as opinion, belief as opinion. And that’s “mine,” and that’s self-centered. Faith as gift is not like that.

Now if you start to realize this and you recognize it as true, then you realize that much modern thinking is very diluted and very hopeless. If you read modern philosophy and modern authors, they are cynical. They are hard. They really don’t believe that life has meaning. They talk about the earth as some sort of a—well, it just kind of evolved from nothing and it will return to nothing. They don’t see any purpose to it. This is not to live in faith. Faith engenders feelings of being supported and confident, relaxed and courageous. The absence of faith engenders suspicion, hopelessness, despair, frustration,

insecurity.³ Now these, of course, are existential feelings and experiences. And anybody can have them at any time, but we have to be aware of when our mental outlook is actually creating them in us, as it often can do. The point is that faith must become an existential feeling as well, overcoming the defective feelings and experiences which are a result of the humanity we're living in as we recognize that we need salvation. And that's why God has come to us in Christ. So faith and love and hope exist instinctively, emotionally, and intellectually in ourselves; and we need to let them grow in each of those places.

Hope

And finally hope. Hope is the virtue that is least spoken of. You hear a lot of homilies on faith and a lot of homilies on love. You probably rarely hear one on hope. That's because nobody knows what it is. It's related to the Holy Spirit; no one knows who the Holy Spirit is. It's a serious problem. St. Paul says, "Hope is the first fruit given to those who believe." He also says, "The Holy Spirit is the first fruit given to those who believe." So in his mind he associates hope and the Holy Spirit, and they are indeed connected. In a sense hope has the same origin as love and faith, namely, the total goodness and rightness of creation and its perfection and harmony. Hope specifically looks toward the unfoldment of the dynamic purpose of creation itself, and in oneself, and in itself. And this is what St. Paul is talking about when he says, "Until God is all in all." Now when we say that the universe and creation is perfect, it doesn't mean it doesn't need change. But this perfection lies in the fact that it is changeable, it is growing, and that we are called to participate in its change in a particular direction since human beings influence the world they live in. But for that influence to be positive, benevolent, it has to be in harmony with the Holy Spirit, recognizing that it is truly the Holy Spirit who is carrying us.

Martha and Anxiety

Now you remember the story of Martha in the gospel. Martha was all upset because her sister, Mary, wasn't helping her with the housework and the requirements of hospitality. And she comes to Jesus and says, "Jesus, I want you to tell Mary to help me." Well, what does that tell you about Martha? Number one, she thought it was her business to tell Jesus what to do. She thought it was her business to tell Mary what to do. What is that? That's anxiety. If anger is somehow the absence of love, and if fear is somehow the absence of trust and faith, then anxiety is the absence of hope. It's not seeing the bigger picture. As a lack of faith cuts a person off from the vision of confident victory over evil, anxiety—a lack of hope—cuts a person off from the picture of the Holy Spirit creating harmony out of all the diverse parts of the creation, thus constantly bringing it into perfection. This is what Martha lacked. And Jesus said, "Martha, Martha, you're worried about many things, but only one thing matters, and Mary has chosen the better part." Which does not mean the better part was letting Martha do all the work. It means the better part was recognizing the unity symbolized by her sitting at Christ's feet.

Non-Action Free from Ego

Again, love and faith and hope refer to an actual transformation of soul that allows the soul to rest in non-action that is truly free from ego, from the false self. And Jesus says,

“Take up your cross—deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me,” that cross is an instrument of death. And when that self dies, then we can live in this harmony of non-action, which does not mean the same thing as sitting around and doing nothing. In fact, the mystics who were very much into non-action were able to accomplish a great deal. But they accomplished a great deal as being part of a dynamism much greater than themselves.

Living Out of Hope

This is the living out of hope. So in hope we can become totally effective according to God’s will and action while living in non-action. In a sense the soul transformed by hope ceases to strive, from the point of view of the ego anyway, but cooperates perfectly with God in whom we abide and have our being. Therefore this non-action is not passive or inert in any way, but rather, centered on God and completely responsive to God. Again, hope is a vision of all reality as connected and harmonious. In such a vision one’s own plans and doing really are not only irrelevant, but disruptive. So there is a true surrender not only of oneself, but one’s plans and one’s agenda to God in the gift of hope. 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 that judgments about what is good and bad are merely the short-sighted workings of our own egos and have zero credibility.

The Self

But, of course, perfection and loveliness of all creation does not imply that reality is static. It must continue to grow as we must continue to grow. And this ever-present capacity to grow and unfold the potential that is rooted in the mind of God is part of our own perfection and our lovability. Again, as with hope and trust, the sense of a separate existence inherent in an egocentric view of life cuts a person off from the very wellspring of love, confidence, and harmony. And this can turn the self into, you might say, the problem. And this is associated often with feelings of inadequacy, incompetence, and failure. But of course, in a sense we should feel incompetent and inadequate and failures when we are living in this little self, which is our own creation; so in a sense that self **is** the problem. On the other hand, as we let go of that self, we find a new vista and a new reality to live in. Again, this condition can result from a combination of many different causes. In every case, whenever we talk about any problem, you can always go back to our origin and say, “Well, as we grew up maybe we were not given the right kind of training.” That is possible. But we shouldn’t overuse that explanation to thwart our own growth, but simply to explain it.

Vice Opposite of Virtue

Now some people have a tendency, you might say, to be very slothful. That means to be indifferent to love. Why do they have that particular problem? I don’t know. But look at it this way, every vice is a virtue in reverse. So if a person has a certain indifference to life, then perhaps they are being called to a very special kind of love. Again, some people are more or less cynical by nature. Well, maybe they’re called on to

become people of great faith. And some people are more or less anxiety prone, overactive, overdoing people. Well, maybe they're really called on to become beacons of hope in our world.

Relief from Anxiety

Now 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 sew. But no one is so robed." To see this is to experience hope. And this should bring relief to those of us who are full of anxieties, those of us whose entire lives are focused on doing. However, sometimes we don't want relief. Our lives may be a nightmare, but they're a nightmare that we are controlling. For some, anxiety, frustration and a feeling of inadequacy, all of which results from the separation of the self from the total goodness of the living, conscious universe, creates a nightmare that they can awake from, but they choose not to, because they can continue to be in charge; and in spite of the aforementioned negative experiences, to continue the pretense is actually more comfortable for them, since, after all, to surrender to God requires faith and humility, and to be a doer is often a matter of great pride.

Successes and Disappointments

Of course, no one's life is a total failure. Even people who are totally dedicated to themselves and utterly proud or full of anxiety from time to time must do something right. The question is, will they take credit for this and create some kind of a self-fulfilled illusion about themselves? On the other hand, everyone's life is also full of disappointments. Are we going to let them get us down? Or are we going to see in them the opportunity to let go and find God's will and purpose in our lives? These are questions we have to answer.

Change and Growth

Our Scriptures, beliefs and sacraments point to a reality that is often at odds with what we naturally feel is true about ourselves or our world. Real change is possible when we are open to it. Being aware of our conditions and our illusions may help open the door of our human experience to the power of transformation and transforming grace, which is always at work. Now each of us have our own personal problems and our own personal defects. Some may have weak faith, others weak hope, others weak love. But, in general, we should look upon our woundedness as something God has already healed and is willing to continue healing as we gain the virtues we lack. But those who refuse to be dissuaded either by human weakness or by common consensus of others, and seek without din the truth that makes us free, as those of us who pursue the gospel, we are already rewarded for "eye has not seen nor ear heard nor has the imagination imagined what God has in store for those who love him."

Questions:

Do you have any questions?

◆ **Question** about cynicism and skepticism:

Cynicism is a lack of belief in the goodness of the world, of others. Skepticism is an unwillingness simply to believe everything. Skepticism can be actually positive. Why

should I just believe what everyone tells me? But I could believe in the fundamental goodness of that person who is telling me something; I don't have to believe they're lying to me. To believe everyone is telling me something I don't believe in, that I am skeptical about, is therefore trying to lie to me, is a form of cynicism. Mind you, someone may try to lie to me. It's the prejudice that everyone is trying to lie to me that is cynicism.

- ◆ **Question** about how to have more patience to determine God's time schedule rather than my own? Do I pray for it?

Well, I share your feelings because I remember my dad used to say to me, "Why don't you just be more patient?" And I'd say, "Because I'm not patient!" That is a pretty good example of a virtue. A virtue is a gift. So you pray for the gift. You ask God for the gift of patience. St. Augustine had a lot of problems with sex. So he prayed to God for chastity, but he said, "Chastity, Lord, but not yet." So some gifts you want now, other gifts you want later.

- ◆ The **question** is what about someone who dies very young and doesn't have a chance to grow and develop in this way we're talking about? And you're asking the question as to what do I think about that or what happens to them? Is your concern more for those who are young who die early or is your concern for—

Well, first of all, one thing I would say is I don't know myself much about this. I don't know what happens or how God looks at people who die early, but I mean it's always been the case that people have died early. And in the Bible that was always decried, lamented, as one of the worst things that could happen, and for the people, even the early Christians, they lamented the possibility of dying suddenly. They did not want to die suddenly. They wanted to prepare for the death. So there is something to this issue of process and growth. What about those who are deprived of it? I can't say. I don't know how God deals with that, but I'm sure God can handle it. I don't think there's a human answer that is very satisfactory to offer, even to say, "Well, they're in heaven." Well, what does that mean? How do they grow and develop? I don't know. I don't know. That's a good question. Is there another stage where they'd get the chance? I don't know. Our tradition does not speak of that.

- ◆ She said, **her answer to your question** was that the children who die leave us with dreams, and the elderly who die leave us with memories.

Now of course, we have to understand that in our world there are contingent events that take place. They are not designed, you know. Everything is not determined. There's chance. Chance exists in our world, so you shouldn't always try to look to God for a reason specifically why something turns out the way it does. More the question is why is the world contingent? Well, it's contingent so that we can have freedom, because if it were totally determined, there would be no freedom. So it really gets down to the fact that untoward events happen because they have to be able to happen. If they weren't able to happen, then we would not have any freedom. But that doesn't really answer the question of what happens to children who die early. It still remains a shame I think. That's the answer.

- ◆ **Question** about Scripture passages:

Actually all the Scriptures are talking about faith, hope, and love all the time. They all have to do with the way Christ looks at life and teaches others to look at life. And of course, they're not material things, but they color everything. And I agree with you. Hope is almost the hardest one to come to. You can't come to hope until you have faith. Can you come to love without faith? Probably you can. I think you can experience love. But hope—that's why I put it last. It's the hardest one to talk about. Just, I was talking about a friend of mine, Father Hurley, ran out of gas on Butterfield Road the other day—Friday. And his car was in the middle lane—dead. He couldn't go anywhere. He is about 76, and finds it hard to walk. So he walked across the road. Somebody came by and picked him up—saw him out there and picked him up, took him to a gas station, and then apologized for not being able to stay and take him back to his car. He filled up his gas can, walked across the road again and started up. Someone came and picked him up, took him to his car, and apologized for not being able to stay while he poured the gas in his car, then drove on. Then somebody else, while he was trying to pour the gas in this middle lane, came up to guard him against the traffic. Three strangers who didn't know who he was—these are good people, and this is also part of life. And I think if we see that, we will have confidence. But it is a choice. But we need the confidence first before we can have hope that everything is going to work out. We have to see that there's a fundamental basis for it working out in the first place. And I think actually in our world—see confidence itself is hard because our media, as you mentioned, always talks about everything bad, so that everything is going to hell. Therefore really faith—we need to change the way people think about faith. Faith and salvation as a matter of getting out of the world—that's not Christ! That's not what I presented tonight; it's not about getting out of the world! It's about living in the world in a new way that is totally engaged, but not engaged in a self-centered way—engaged in a way that God can use us!

◆ **Question** about evil:

Well, there are evil forces in the world, but those evil forces are not objectively evil. They're evil because they are distorting the strength, the power, God gave them. That's what I mean. Objective evil would be something God created. No, there is nothing like that.

- ◆ That's a perfectly valid **question**. Did you hear her question? Practically speaking, what's my recommendation when you know you are living in a world that has all these problems, and you have a car full of children and you don't feel comfortable picking a stranger up?

Now here is where hope comes in. You hope someone else picks them up! You don't have to do everything! You see? You do what God asks you to do. And if God asked you to take care of your kids, you take care of your kids. You don't go picking up—in fact, some people are so stupid that's precisely what they do! That's endangering their own children because they want to be good, but actually God didn't ask them to do that! God had someone else in mind. But they want to do it because—that's self-centered! That's not having hope. That's living in anxiety! Some older lady, I heard about her—I actually didn't know her—but this lady I did know told me about this lady who died. And she said, “Oh, she was such a wonderful person. She had so many worries, but she

would always stop worrying about what she was worrying about to worry about what you wanted her to worry about!”

Well, thank you. You were a very good audience.

ENDNOTES

¹ For further references on the vices and passions see Claudio Naranjo, M.D., Ennea-type Structures. (Gateways/IDHHB, Inc.: Nevada City, CA.), 1990-1991.

² For further references on trust, virtues and mystical ideas see A.H. Almaas, Facets of Unity. (Diamond Books: Berkeley, CA.) 1998.

³ Ibid.