

THAT ALL MAY BE ONE

In the mythological story of the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve eat from the tree of knowledge. At that moment, they become aware of the duality of life, of good and evil, birth and death, love and fear. Having gained this knowledge, they experience the 'Fall' or the loss of innocence in that they now see themselves as separated from God, outside of the divine union which they had enjoyed. They move into the field of time and space where life is scattered and fragmented and where they struggle with duality and a sense of separateness from God. All of their central relationships become fragmented – their relationship with God, with themselves, with each other and with nature. At this point, the centre no longer holds.

Against this background of the Jewish faith, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the creation of a new union between God and man - the mending of the wound of Judaism. His death, which was marked upon the Cross or meeting point, can be seen as the moment when all things are drawn back together as one and the creation of a new centre which holds between God and man. Just as eating from the tree of knowledge marks the beginning of disintegration, the raising of Jesus on the cross marks the crux for the re-integration of all of life, drawn magnetically to the love of God, revealed in this Easter event.

The centrality of Jesus Christ is that His being, or more particularly, the love from His being, re-integrates or brings together that which has been disintegrated at the 'Fall'. He gathers together all that has been scattered. His being 'lifted up' on the cross, which we remember at each Eucharist, draws us like a magnetic force to the centre, where we become aware of the full extent of the love which He reveals.

And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.

(Jn. 12 : 32.)

This theme of Jesus drawing all things together again, by attracting them to himself, runs through St. John's Gospel. It is a restoration of unity and harmony, which fulfils a God-inspired dream had by the Prophets. This dream was that the Messiah would re-establish the order which there was between the different parts of creation at the beginning. Just as the bronze serpent which Moses lifted up before the people healed them, so too the lifting of the body and blood of Jesus Christ draws us to His healing love.

And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up : That whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son.

(John 3 : 14 – 16.)

When the love of God, made visible in the cross, ceases to be the centre of our lives, what binds us together loses its hold and we disintegrate or fall apart. In this era, we have also eaten from the tree of knowledge. We live in the information age, a time of enormous technological advancement and innovation. Yet, as with each stage of progression, there is also a new level of complexity to the problems which this advancement entails. The contemporary problem is the fragmentation or

disintegration of central relationships that are essential for human happiness and spiritual growth.

Even fragmentation at the most superficial level gives rise to profound problems. This is found in the breakdown of the relationship between each of us and the central institutions of society. Public cynicism with the social institutions of the legal system, “the Church” and the political system is a daily theme in the discourse of Western society. The complaint made against all three institutions is essentially the same - a loss of belief in their integrity and a loss of trust in their concern for the common good and the public interest.

While this problem is of great magnitude, it belies a deeper fragmentation in our relationships. For beneath the loss of connection to our social institutions, there is a loss of our sense of community. We no longer enjoy the same bonds of communality of previous generations, but are far more isolated and atomised in how we live together. The bonds of marriage, family and community have withered as we increasingly see our lives as exercises in individualistic pursuits.

Once again, the loss of community finds its roots in the severance of a deeper relationship, namely the relationship with one’s own life, one’s own deepest desires, one’s own vocation or calling. As each of us becomes seduced by the pressures of materialism and the expectation to be seen as wealthy, strong and prolific, we neglect the bonds of family and community and the deepest longings of our own hearts, which are the cornerstones of a life that is joyful. Once we are seduced from the search for our deepest dream, we no longer live our lives from a centre of inspiration,

direction and purpose. Rather, we go on but not knowing why, with lives devoid of meaning, reference or connection.

The dis-integration of these relationships finds its genesis in the severance of our most profound relationship, being our relationship with God, with the One who holds us together in balance. For this is the loss of the relationship with the centre in each one of us and in the whole of creation. Once this relationship is neglected, we have no source, no reference point, no basis to protect us from the erosion of anxiety. At this point, we have lost the sense of the centre, where we can find the One who inspires us, cares for us and protects us from being scattered. Through this deterioration, we can see that this era of fragmentation marks the disintegration of four relationships, which form the cornerstone of human happiness and fulfilment.

Our experience of the breakdown of these relationships has the potential to humble us and bring us to a new awareness that we are out of touch with the centre of our lives. When we experience the pain of loneliness, meaninglessness and anxiety as commonplace in our lives, we must come to a realisation that our perception of reality and of what makes life worthwhile is profoundly distorted. Essentially, we are not in touch with *the* centre which holds our lives together and which gives everything a sense of reference, meaning and purpose. When a potter uses the wheel, the starting point is the correct placement of the clay in the centre of the wheel. Throughout the creation of the piece, the centre must be constantly honoured as the wheel revolves or else the piece loses its shape and finally disintegrates. We are now at that stage of disintegration and the clay that is our lives must be fixed again upon the centre.

In response to this condition, the contemporary challenge for the Christian faith is to articulate a vision and practice, centred upon the love of Jesus Christ, which responds to the fragmentation of these relationships. The Christian message is simply not connecting at this time because it is not being conveyed through images, concepts and symbols, which resonate with the unconscious distress in us arising from the fragmentation of these relationships. We need to re-discover the meaning and significance of the Christian vision as the way towards a new integrity that restores :-

- (a) the relationship of the individual to his or her Creator;

- (b) the relationship of the individual to the divine calling or vocation in his or her life;

- (c) the relationship of the individual to others in the intimacy of marriage, family and community;

- (d) the relationship of the individual to society and to creation itself, as governed by the central institutions of law, religion and politics.

This essay is based upon the personal conviction that the integrity of the Christian faith is *the* response to the fragmentation of these relationships and that their re-integration is the need of our time.

The essence of this approach in the Christian faith is the arousal of the interior and dormant attraction within the human person to Jesus Christ. As one enters into a

growing attraction to Him, one's life becomes more integrated and these central relationships become reconciled at a deeper and more profound level. So many of us are scattered by constant anxieties each day. As one begins to find the steadfast, eternal presence of the love of Jesus Christ within oneself, one becomes more concentrated and gathered together in one's daily life. This phenomenon is analogous to what occurs when one places a magnet beneath a page of scattered iron filings. Before positioning the magnet, the filings are scattered, disjointed and eccentric. When the magnet is placed in the centre, beneath the surface, they are effortlessly re-ordered in concentric circles in their attraction to this centre.

Recently, I visited Newgrange with two close friends. I was struck by how important the symbol of the spiral was to our ancestors. Over three thousand years before the incarnation of Christ, the people of this era used the stone carving of the spiral as their most sacred symbol. In each spiral, it may be that they recognised the source of life as emanating from a centre, from which all things emerge and from which all things find meaning. Perhaps their wisdom remain rooted in the depths of our unconscious, calling us to remember that our lives need reference to a divine centre.

The heart of the Christian message is that we need the centrality of Jesus Christ in order to bring shape and integrity to our own lives. His loving presence, in the centre of the human heart, is the magnetic attraction that leads to the reconciliation and at-one-ment of all relationships. If we forget this, as we have now done, these central relationships weaken and ultimately fragment. Given this contemporary context, the question now for the Christian faith is simply this : how can we develop a vision and

practice of the Christian faith which re-connects us to His loving presence and in turn to our own deepest self, each other and creation itself?

In my own continuing search for an answer to this question, the most insightful writing which I have found is that of the American integral philosopher, Ken Wilber. There are two central, recurring themes in his writings. It is suggested that they could form the bedrock for a vision and practice of the Christian faith, which connects with the unconscious need of so many people for a spiritual basis to their lives, which they are not finding in the established religious practices of the Christian churches.

The first theme is that a vision and practice of the Christian faith, that will connect with the real needs of people, must follow a continuum from matter, to body, to mind, to soul, and ultimately, to Spirit. Each of these spheres in the human person must be honoured so that the Christian faith speaks to the whole human person. The second theme is that the human person has a propensity to develop in four directions. Each of us has an interior and an exterior life. Each of us also has a yearning to be an individual and yet a member of the collective. Accordingly, we yearn to develop in four directions which are :-

- (a) interior and individual ;
- (b) exterior and individual;
- (c) interior and collective;
- (d) exterior and collective.

Similarly, the Christian faith needs to be articulated in a way that gives purpose and meaning to the human person as one evolves in each of these directions. For to be

fully alive, one must honour all of these dimensions and do so in a way that integrates matter, body, mind, soul and Spirit in each of them. If the love of Jesus Christ is to bring integrity to our lives, the Christian faith must be spoken of and practiced so as to enable us to be fully alive in this way.

(a) The interior individual life.

A Christian faith, which honours the interior individual life, must recognise the central importance of individual **prayer**. Prayer is the means of developing an interior relationship and ultimately, the inward, individual experience of the divine. The experience of prayer draws a person back into the centre so that a re-integration begins and leads effortlessly to a new order and coherence.

The practice of prayer within the Christian faith, however, needs to honour the intrinsic progression from matter, to body, to mind, to soul and then, Spirit. The starting point is matter, that is the choice of a suitable place for prayer and the development of that sacred space. If one is involved in the preparation of this space within one's own home or community, it will increase the power of it as a place of prayer. One must then honour the body and the breath. Any strain or discomfort in the body or the breath must be attended to. If not, it will form a constant distraction throughout the period of prayer. In turn, the mind must be quietened or employed in a way that meets its need, so that it enters into silence. A mantra may be used or one may chose to reflect upon scripture.

Once all of these aspects of one's person have been attended to, the soul then comes to prominence. It is at this point that repressed emotions and deep-seated feelings are aroused from the unconscious and cry out to be integrated. Persistent negative thought patterns, distorted imagery and signs of compulsive behaviour are confronted, so that the image of one's life and oneself can be reformed in the vision that one is loved by God. The roots of the distorted vision of oneself, which has led to prolonged feelings of anger or anxiety, are now being cut. At this stage, a spiritual director, that is a person who has personal, profound experience in prayer, is essential in order to guide one through the overwhelming feelings which will inevitably arise.

In time, a new vision can then take hold, a vision of oneself as loved by God and ultimately, as being in God, in Spirit and in truth. This is the final stage of prayer. One does not so much enter into this stage but rather one is drawn or invited into it. This stage is the culmination of all prayer in that it is the entry into the direct, arresting experience of God, as love. In these moments of true contemplative experience, one is held in arrest by the still motion of love. Here, one's whole person is gripped by the beauty of God and by the unfathomable love that is the light in each one of us, the full realisation of the Spirit in the human person.

(b) The exterior individual life.

In order to articulate a Christian vision and practice, which allows for the exterior, individual dimension of human life, we must also recognise the importance of **discernment**. In general, discernment is the means by which we become sensitive to the movement of the Spirit in our lives. It enables us to appreciate experiences in our

lives as moments of profound revelation of the love of God for us. In reflecting upon these experiences, we can discern the message being revealed to each one of us, which is that we are loved by God and loved uniquely.

A more specific understanding of the gift of discernment is that which enables us to see the choices with which we are faced and to see which option leads to happiness. The key to discernment in this sense is that one seeks to make the choice which is grounded in the principle and foundation of the love of God. Discernment calls for reflection on the choices with which one is presented so that one follows what is simply being set before one by God rather than one's own unreal expectations or those of others. The dynamics of discernment, which were articulated by St. Ignatius of Loyola in the *Spiritual Exercises*, are quite simply a fifth gospel and the unexplored treasure of our Christian heritage.

In order to discern the true calling in one's life, it is essential to undergo that process with the assistance of a spiritual director or mentor. In honouring the desire for vocation, one senses a point of departure. At this point, one has to have the courage to look beyond the accepted conditioning of one's peers and truly seek the unique, individual calling for one's own life. As one is then going into uncharted waters, the guidance of a spiritual director or a mentor helps one to detect the movement of the Spirit and to foster the strength and fortitude to follow this calling.

One is then called into a phase of initiation which leads to a point of completely surrendering one's life and actions to a higher purpose, a greater ideal, a cause larger than oneself. Ultimately, one is lead into a spirit of openness and surrender to God.

One surrenders to the quiet unfolding of God's plan amid the limitations of human poverty, so that one is transfigured by the love of God.

The final stage of discernment is the point of return. When one is initiated, one is called to return to the place from which one has left and to bring back to it the vision that was missing and which has been found. When Jesus was transfigured, He faced toward Jerusalem, to the place where He would return to fully reveal His message, the complete and total love of God. True contemplative experience translates into return to the world, contemplation in action, for the real contemplative is not running away from the world but tries to act in the world at a deeper level.

(c) The interior collective life.

The Christian faith has always espoused the general principle that the necessary milieu for prayer and discernment is **community** with others. The interior communal life provides essential support and encouragement in being attentive to one's personal relationship with God and in finding a source of reference for the active discernment of vocation which will ensue. The spiritual journey requires companionship.

What the Christian faith has neglected, however, at an enormous cost, is that true community must be based upon the human desire for intimacy. Where there is no intimacy, there is no community. Where there is no intimacy among people who say they are in a community, people will not join that community and it will wither and die. More significantly, with the primary model for Christian communities being based on celibacy as oppose to marriage, the Christian tradition has tended to

denigrate marriage and family life as a crucible for finding one's own authentic experience of Christ. Yet, the growth of intimacy with a significant person in our lives nurtures the search for Christ in our lives. The development of a loving relationship with that person arouses the dormant conviction in our unconscious of His love. In human intimacy with another, we catch glimpses of the depth of God's love for us.

When the desire for intimacy leads to a conscious commitment between two persons, the most sustainable basis for community takes root and becomes embodied through them. After one makes this commitment to another, the relationship naturally expands to embrace others. The bedrock is in place for familial and communal relationships to develop and thrive. We are now being called to re-appraise Christian community as a natural evolution of marriage and family life. This form of community would evolve from a maturing of relationships based on familial ties to those based on mutual recognition of the inner relationship with Christ.

Such an approach would mark a significant departure from the traditional understanding of Christian community as being a matter for religious orders, based on the practice of celibacy. The understanding of Christian community as the natural progression of marriage and family life, has not found true expression in the structures of "parishes" or "local communities" either. Such communities draw from an identity based on geographical location, economic ties and communal endeavours, rather than a shared spiritual identity. Rather, a true Christian community is marked by a committed relationship between people whose common bond is their inner attraction to the vision of Jesus Christ. The development of communities based on this identity

marks the full flourishing of Christian marriage and family life and remains relatively unexplored.

(d) The exterior collective life.

The true test as to whether a Christian vision and practice of prayer, discernment and community are authentic is whether they lead to **justice** in our society. The term 'justice' is used here to mean the restoration of right relationship. This can take the form of justice in the workings of society, social justice, and also ecological justice, which refers to the restoration of right relationship between the human person and the environment.

The desire for justice in the human person is the hallmark of an inner life which is flourishing. Ultimately, contemplation leads into compassion for others, particularly for those who are un-represented and marginalised by society and a greater sensitivity to nature and creation. In honouring relationships in community, one also becomes conscious of the need to work for the concerns of an ever-widening community. One is propelled into the concerns of social and ecological justice.

This desire for social and ecological justice can only be realised through a new vision of the purpose of the social institutions which form the structure of society. Western society is held together by the institutions of three essential systems, which determine the quality of justice, being the legal, religious and political systems. A Christian vision of our exterior collective life must look to the institutions provided by these systems and stand for an approach rooted in the transcendent in each of them. It is

only when a transcendent vision takes hold of these institutions that justice will flourish in our society.

The first institution which needs to find an anchor in the transcendent, is the legal system, being the place in society to which the individual has initial recourse in relation to an issue of justice in his/her life. It is in the legal system that the divine ideal of justice is meant to be realised. The discovery of a transcendent anchor in the legal system will lead to the fostering to two mutually supporting objectives, namely the development of an ethos of public service among those who practice in the administration of this system and the pursuit of greater access to justice in the workings of the legal system.

It is ironic to suggest that religious institutions need to re-discover a transcendent anchor. The institutions of Christianity have, however, declined greatly by placing a false God, namely the clerical power of these institutions, before the honouring of the movement of the Spirit. Once the centrality of Christ is displaced, fragmentation has occurred in relationships which are critical to a true vision of Christ. The Church must become the place where we find new thinking and a new commitment in the soul of our society to integrity, arising from the recognition of our unity in Christ and our diversity as agents for the kingdom of God. The role of the Church is therefore to draw upon the personal experience of its members and to articulate with humility and yet boldness, the paradiso, the true life, the full flourishing of human goodness and endeavour.

The final stage in the quest for justice is found in a renewal of the political system, being the working out of the vision of the kingdom in the society in which we live. The political system has also suffered greatly because it has not been employed as an agent of a greater vision. Without being a servant of a greater vision, only self-interest and widespread cynicism can prevail. If the political system honours a vision of Christ, which is articulated and protected by the institutions of the Christian faith, it can draw from the soul of society and work out the ideal that we are all members of one body and that one body is uniquely present in each one of us. This is a vision of integrated citizenship. In so doing, the political system will fulfil its potential as the place where the kingdom of God is made real and revealed in all of its glory through compassion and justice.

Integritas

– a centre for the development of an integral approach to the Christian faith.

In a family home in Stoneyford, County Kilkenny, a small experiment entitled “Integritas” is being attempted by a group of people in which the central elements of an integral Christian vision and practice – prayer, discernment, community and justice - are being followed in some simple ways. On the first and third Wednesday evenings of each month, Christian meditation and contemplative prayer is held in a room designed for this practice. Throughout the year, a number of day and evening courses are arranged in the hope that a school in prayer and discernment will emerge. The primary purpose of these courses is to provide spiritual guidance and the enhancement of discernment for those who are present for the evenings of Christian meditation and contemplative prayer.

These two ventures are being undertaken there within the context of a family home. The house was designed to cater for a family and yet also act as a place for prayer. The purpose behind this is to articulate that prayer and reflection can take root within the context of the intimacy of marriage and family life. They are not exclusive of each other but rather mutually supportive.

The ultimate aim of this is the emergence of an integral Christian vision and practice in due time, based upon the experience and consensus of people who come there. The practice of Christian meditation and contemplative prayer and the development of a school in prayer and discernment, within the context of a family home, will hopefully provide the milieu for this vision to be developed, renewed and re-defined.

At the end of each of the evenings there, the prayer recited below is read. It draws together the central conviction that by being committed to the practice of prayer, discernment, community and justice, the Christian faith can lead to the re-integration of the central relationships in our lives. Ultimately, if the love of Jesus Christ is at the centre, a sense of lasting integrity will develop in our lives in which we will become at one with God, with ourselves, with each other and with creation. By abiding in His love for us, we will come to be at One.

*May we enable each other to trust entirely
in the provident love of God;
may we form family, community and a deeper identity
in the gentle attraction of Jesus Christ;*

*may we support one another in responding to the unique call of the Spirit,
and serve as one in realising the dream of the Spirit for all;
so that in this covenant,
may we remain in Christ,
and with Christ in each of us,
may we come to be at One.*