

SPIRITUALITY, COMMUNITY AND AN INDIVIDUALIST CULTURE

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THE INDIAN JESUIT, ANTHONY DE MELLO, used to say that in order to get married to another you must first get divorced from yourself – letting go in order to receive. This is true in all sorts of ways. It applies to entering marriage and having a family, as it does also to being committed to the common life of a religious community or to shared corporate involvement in Church and society. Even in seeking to be at one with creation, there is the need to let go of certain things in our lives and life-styles in order to be able both to delight in and to respect creation in a mutuality of relationship and exchange. To relate, for instance, to the community of earth and sea and sky is to take time to notice and to be alert to its beauty and mystery of strength and change, as with the ancient custom in the Scottish Western Isles, lost only last century, of the women bowing with respect to the new moon and the men taking off their caps to greet the morning sun.¹ To enter into relationship with the larger sphere of community, something of the smaller boundary of one's own life and routine must be relaxed or opened. A largeness of spirit is this opening more and more to the life of spheres that are deeper and broader and higher than our own.

Anyone who has made the transition into intentional community living will know that it calls for sacrifice, to being divorced from some of the time and energy and freedom that before we considered our own, to do with pretty much as we pleased. We all know the demands of living faithfully together, whether individually or collectively. In its origin the word sacrifice means 'to make holy'. In what sense can the sacrifices that are called for in community make one more holy? Or, to put it another way, in what sense does the lack of call for self-sacrifice in an individualist culture make one less holy?

It needs to be said, of course, that almost the opposite of Anthony de Mello's advice is also true; and that is that in order to get married to another we must first be married to ourselves, that is, we need to accept and love our true selves unconditionally. If we do not, what sort of love

will we have for the other, and for our neighbours, especially the ones we do not particularly like? If we do not believe that we have within us the beauty of the image of God, each one a unique reflection of the Self who is within all selves, what will be the depth and sustainability of our love for others in the communities to which we belong? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer emphasized in *Life together*, people should not enter community because they are running away from themselves, for seeking the company of others will merely be a diversion from learning to delight in themselves. Bonhoeffer cautions those who cannot be alone to beware of why they are seeking community, but he does so in the context of stating clearly that it is to community that we are called as human beings, and that it is in community that we may come to the true love of self and of the other.²

How do we find the balance between losing self and loving self? And, related to this, how do we find the balance between the busyness of giving and receiving in community on the one hand and the necessary times of solitude on the other, when we simply need to rest from relationship as well as to gain a perspective on ourselves and our lives which it is impossible to do in the midst of activity? And what are the settings in which we can best learn, as well as teach, spirituality?

On Iona, in the Western Isles, each week there is a pilgrimage around the island, parts of which are done in silence and prayer. The emphasis is on being able to walk together and yet to have quiet and space for reflecting on the journey of our lives, as well as the common journey of our communities and world. The pilgrimage, thus, is not only an important reflective experience in and by itself but is like a paradigm for being together in a way that gives room both to the individual and to the corporate dimension of life. It is a way of looking within while not losing sight of one another. This is always what should be happening in meditation, including times of solitary meditation. The deeper we move into our inner heart, the closer we come to the hidden inner place of all people and all creation. In contemplation we enter a common holy ground, from which all life grows. In praying in places and times set apart, we are not stepping aside from life and its communities, but stepping more deeply into an awareness of the One who is life's source and who holds all things together. Perhaps the most well-known modern example of this is the contemplative prayer of someone like Thomas Merton, which not only was not divorced from life but which led to a deeper sensitivity and awareness of the life of the world, even in the context of monastic separation from it. But while this is characteristic of all true contemplation, that it should take us not

away from one another but into a closer and sharper awareness of the cohesion of all life in God, there is much to be said for actually meditating in physical proximity to one another. The Iona pilgrimage, in this sense, is like the practice of many religious communities during the periods of common meditation before shared worship and the study and work of the day.

Four stations of the Iona pilgrimage provide strong images of the interwoven strands of the individual and community in relation to prayer and spirituality. The first is the practice of gathering around the highstanding cross of St Martin in front of the Abbey Church, and being reminded that the custom of the ancient Celtic Church in Scotland and Ireland was often to pray not in tightly bounded places like church sanctuaries, with their enclosing four walls and ceilings, but rather out in the great temple of creation itself. Standing together at the foot of St Martin's Cross, I was always reminded that the prayer and worship we offer is not separate from the great hymn of the universe but joins that ongoing hymn, whether it is in the rising of the morning sun, in the wind blowing over the sea or in the voice of every living creature. Spirituality should be a joining of our awareness to all that is vibrant with life, like the four living creatures of St John the Divine's vision, full of consciousness and prayerfully aware day and night in the temple of heaven and earth.

The second pilgrimage image is of visiting the ruins of the ancient hermit's cell in a not easily accessible part of the island. Situated amidst numerous little hills and across boggy terrain, many pilgrims have not been able to locate it, just as many of us have had difficulty in finding the place and the time of inner quiet and prayer in our lives. What often lies in ruins for us in the Church today is not the times of corporate worship and liturgy but the practice of contemplation and silence. There are many tales on Iona of St Columba regularly withdrawing to the hermitage to pray, and of how delighted he was to have nothing but a little pool of water to wash in, and the lark above him singing. Do we not all know the importance for our spirituality of such times of solitude, whether it is actually retreating or simply finding a quiet corner or moment of stillness, in order to sustain the life in community to which we are called?

The third image is of ascending the highest point on the island, Dun I, which simply means the Hill of I, or the Hill of Iona. Because of its spelling, many visitors, especially those from across the Atlantic, tended to refer to it as Dun One, which made it sound more like a lunar landing station than a hill on a Hebridean island. But, in a sense, it was

that sort of perspective that we were seeking. Remember the view of earth that first became ours twenty-five years or so ago after the first moon landing. We should often gaze at that photograph of the sea-blue earth to regain our perspective. It is akin to the common biblical practice of prophets, including Jesus, going to high and remote places to be renewed in their vision. From the top of Dun I we were usually able to see the whole of the island and its surrounding sea, and the Hebrides stretching north to the Isle of Skye. But also from Dun I it is possible to see the White Strand of the Monks at the north of the island, where in the ninth century the abbot and fifteen monks were martyred, blood spilt on the pure white sands of Iona. Our times of withdrawal, whether it is physically to a mountain or simply to an uncluttered space, within or without, where we may see with clarity, are essential to the well-being both of our inner life and of our shared common life. And in the set apart places, it is not just to the beautiful landscape of life that we are to be looking, but to the painful and broken places as well, for it will usually be to something of the latter that we are called to return in our descent from the mountain place, or our time of interior renewal. Our spirituality, if it is to be true to life, needs to include a gazing out on the world, on both the goodness and the evil that we see in it, and to be conscious that the good and evil are also within our own souls.

The fourth image is that of the Reilig Oran, the Iona graveyard where Scottish kings and Lords of the Isles are said to be buried. There the emphasis is to reflect not only on the themes of death and resurrection, of new beginnings coming out of endings in our lives and world, but on being part of those who have gone before us, who, having died, are separated from us, as George MacLeod used to say, only by a veil thin as gossamer.³ Part of a true spirituality is the awareness of heaven's company of light surrounding us in both the light and the darkness of earth. The ladder that connects heaven and earth, and thus the company of heaven with earth's people, is within us, and provides the flow of movement from above and below. The individualist culture of the western world has often gone hand in hand with a materialism which denies that matter is shot through with spirit, and that earth's people are enfolded by the saints and angels of heaven. Rather it sees matter and the things of earth as entirely separate from spirit and the things of heaven, if indeed it even recognizes that there is a spiritual realm. On Iona there are stories of Columba and angels of light ascending and descending on him in time of prayer. This is an image of our inner life being hid with Christ in God, enfolded in the host of light,

an intimation that even in death we are not separated from one another and the saints before us.

In these images of spirituality and the relationship between the individual and community, the emphasis is not on being *either* more separate or more involved, but on being *both* more separate and more involved. In our times of withdrawal and individual retreat, it is a matter of being more deeply involved in the inner heart of all humanity. In our times of involvement and individual participation in the communities to which we belong, it is a matter of retaining a perspective as from above or separate from the flow of life's outward activity. In all of this we may know that we are both individually distinct and at the same time deeply related to one another and to all things, that we are knit together, body and spirit, in the interwovenness of the whole world and of all people. What is most debilitating for spirituality is to think that somehow God is on one side and our lives and the life of the world are on the other, rather than seeing that in every moment and every place we may look more deeply into life in order more clearly to see God.

Precisely because God is present in the whole of life, community can be the place of God's deepest and sometimes most painful revelations to us. Left to ourselves, we may well get the impression that we are generally forgiving and patient and kind and gentle, generous people. It is in the community of family life and communal religious living, as it is in a committed involvement in the larger communities of our societies and nations, that we will discover the anger and intolerance that are still within us, needing to be redeemed, and the harshness and smallness of spirit that need still to be transfigured and expanded. Left to ourselves we may well be impervious to some of the deepest truths that God has to reveal to us about ourselves. In community life and the facing of our failures and weaknesses we may become more aware of our constant need for grace and the forgiveness that will enable us to grow into a fuller stature of spirit. And often it will be through another, maybe through the very one whom we have wronged in community, that we will receive the mercy and forgiveness of Christ and begin afresh. It is in community that our notions of what are good and true will be tested, and sometimes found to be mirages that do not stand the test of love in action, the love that is to upbuild us together as a body. It is in community that we will most likely discover the weaknesses in us through which we may be made strong with a strength that will last, and come to a recognition of the foolishness in us that is the starting place for a new and lasting wisdom.

All of this is not to say that community is our salvation, for communities too, like individuals, can have tightly closed boundaries

that are fixed shut to repentance and enlargement of spirit. Communities too can have the desire to reduce everyone to a common level of baseness and selfishness, of bitterness or indifference. And often what a closed community undermines is a healthy sense of individuality and freedom. We have all witnessed in our world, and experienced to varying degrees in the smaller communities to which we belong, the momentum towards destructiveness that can take over the soul of a community. It is as exposed to the demonic as is the individual. Whether it is alone or together, the spirituality that leads to life is a way of seeing which discovers the goodness of God within us, individually and collectively, and which prays for the grace that will liberate that goodness from the bondage of dark powers which occupy the originally sinless territory of our souls.

Often in the biblical tradition it is through individuals, through prophets who are in ways separate from their community, that a wind of change blows from the desert into the city, and opens a community to new life. And so, in being critical of an individualism that divorces people from a sense of community, it is important not to confuse this with the strength of individuality that often is used for the healing and inspiration of community. The challenge is to find ways of cultivating and sustaining both individuality and community so that in both realms we may be alive to the presence of God within, and alert to the interflow and mutual influence between the one and the many.

Religious community will often be the context for the teaching of spirituality, and can provide a blend of the individual and the collective in both the setting and content of instruction. Certainly this was the case on Iona, where the great weight of emphasis was on the corporate, sometimes, of course, at the expense of the individual. The first discipline of the Iona Community, however, is that of personal prayer and study of the Scriptures each day, and the accountability rule of the Community is designed to help its members support one another's individual discipline of prayer. The whole shape of a week's teaching of spirituality at the Abbey is corporate, so that individual commitment to prayer and interior reflection on the Scriptures is to happen in the context of outward community focus. On the Monday, for instance, there is usually instruction and discussion on themes that relate to justice and peace concerns in the world. George MacLeod, the founder of the Community, always emphasized that prayer and politics were to be held together and that spirituality involved getting one's teeth more deeply into the material concerns of humanity. On Tuesdays the teaching usually touches on the theme of healing, both individual and

corporate, physical and spiritual, and interior as well as exterior. On a Wednesday, especially in the context of the pilgrimage, there is a focus on creation and the imperative of caring for the earth. On Thursdays the teaching theme is that of commitment, both to a love of God at the centre of life and to a love of neighbour as oneself. Again, even in this area of personal commitment to God, the emphasis is on the teaching of a spirituality that incorporates an outward concern for others that is inseparably related to the spiritual love of God. And on Friday, the theme that is picked up on, both in teaching and discussion, as also in the prayer and worship of the community, is that of communion, the community of heaven as inextricably linked to the community of earth, and of our part in the one great communion of saints and angels.

The advantage of this almost overwhelming emphasis on the corporate in the teaching of spirituality is that it can produce an outward movement into the life and concerns of society and the world, and a sharp sense of our interrelatedness and co-responsibility with the life of creation and of all people. The disadvantage can be a lack of close enough attention to the individual interior realm and the darknesses and confusions that haunt our inner selves as much as they do the outer world, and of knowing how to transform these. Sometimes it is a fear of the inner that leads to such an exclusively outward focus. If the teaching of spirituality does not encourage and provide the techniques and tools for interior reflection and individual knowledge of the self, it can too easily topple into a spirituality of political activism that may be both frenetic and self-righteous in relation to the wrongs of the corporate, as well as neglectful of our own personal sanctity.

Another method of teaching that has been used on Iona, which provides a greater balance between the interior and individual on the one hand and the exterior and corporate on the other, is that employed especially during Holy Week. The method of reflection is to look in turn at the major events of Jesus' last days, and to allow these to form the basis of discussion and individual reflection on the themes, for instance, of betrayal and death, and of waiting and new beginnings both in the world and in our own lives. On Maundy Thursday, then, the focus is to meditate initially on the story of Jesus' betrayal, and to move from that into reflection on betrayals of people in our world today and experiences of betrayal in our own lives and histories, i.e. both of betraying and being betrayed. This allows the story of the passion to become our story and the world's story, and prepares the way for a new perspective and hope in relation to the suffering and mistakes and endings of our lives.

We need to recover models for living and praying and learning in relation to one another, in which we may cherish and guard the individual, like Jesus, as the place of God's dwelling, and, at the same time, the community, even the community of creation, as the realm of God's life and activity. Without the conviction of the individual as the eternal dwelling of God, which Christ as Son of Man represented, and without a reverencing of the inner heart as sacred place, any notion of community will be lacking, and its life will be distorted and narrowed. If we are able to glimpse, as Julian of Norwich was able to see, that the soul is as large as an eternal world, and that at the centre of each soul is seated the Prince of Peace, and that in us Christ is completely at home,⁴ then we will be inspired to approach one another in community with a sense of the holy among us. Then we will know that the height and the depth, the length and the breadth of God's mystery are within us and within all life, and we may be freed from the limited boundaries of a closed individualism into the open and unbounded field of God's life and community both within and without us.

NOTES

¹ Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica* (Edinburgh, 1976), pp 274–275.

² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life together* (London, 1972), pp 57–61.

³ George MacLeod, *The whole earth shall cry glory* (Glasgow, 1985), p 60.

⁴ Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of divine love*, ch 67.