

Participating in the Divine

With God on a picket line

Ada María Isasi-Díaz

THE SHINING SUN DID NOT WARM ME. My heavy coat, gloves and hat seemed to do little to protect me against the chilly wind. It was a winter day in Washington, DC, and I was one of about fifty persons walking a picket line outside the South African embassy, protesting against apartheid. I remember that the sign I was carrying, not of my own making, said something regarding children in South Africa. As we circled around behind the police barrier, I kept thinking about the effectiveness of our action. Economic sanctions seemed to be taking a toll, but we did not really think that the end of apartheid was anywhere near.

Adamantly, I kept chanting and walking, chanting and walking, lowering my head to protect my face against the cutting air. Little by little I began to realize that a sense of immense peace was coming over me. I felt myself to be where I was and in many other places at the same time. I felt I was in some way being cared for by God, that the divine was with me and in me in ways beyond the ones I often believe. This sense of the divine in me and myself in the divine was a body experience: I could feel it, sense it; I could touch it and could wrap my arms around the divine in a real sense. It did not last long, this feeling, this sense of participation in the divine. But it left me with an immense sense of joy that I knew I could not will.

Verbal descriptions and explanations have never been able to convey the experience I had that day. In many ways what happened to me was beyond human words. Such experiences have often been called ‘mystical’ experiences, moments in which one knows that what is happening is taking place in a realm other than the natural one, beyond the reality one experiences day in and day out. Years later a dear friend who is a committed woman activist said that she prays best with a picket sign in her hands. I smiled when she said it, remembering my experience in Washington, DC, thinking, ‘I have mystical experiences with picket signs in my hands!’

Desire for holiness

Throughout my life I have harboured a deep desire to be holy, a word I began to use when I was about seven years old and preparing for my first Holy Communion. Of course the meaning of 'holy' has varied as the years have gone by, as circumstances in my life have changed. Initially I equated being holy with being good and being good at age seven had to do with pleasing those who loved me. Soon after that, by the time I was thirteen, I began to feel very much that I wanted to do something for others, and that was what holy came to mean. I wanted to help the poor and I wanted to tell them about Jesus and his love for them.

Avidly I searched for ways of working for others. In no way was this limited to what might be considered only religious. My understanding of helping others always extended beyond the religious field and did not necessarily revolve strictly speaking only or even mainly around God. What I find most interesting in thinking back to my teenage years is how I always thought that what satisfied me was the same as what God wanted of me. I can say that from very early on I did not see self-denial as an element of following what later I would call 'my vocation', or of 'God's will' for me.

Never being one to embrace easily what others say without thinking it through for myself, I have always resisted the 'usual' talk about spirituality that seems to exalt certain religious practices as superior to others, certain people who follow certain religious practices as more holy than others. Moreover, I have not ever bought into the false notion that the soul is a separate entity, that one can counterpose body and spirit as if the human person could be split in two. The mystical experience while walking the picket line seemed to confirm the hunches and understandings that had guided me from the age of seven when I boldly told my brothers and sisters that I wanted to be holy. To be holy is to be fully immersed in the work for justice; to be holy is to embrace the sense of self that we have to struggle to comprehend, knowing that we are a gift from God; to be holy is to embrace God who is love in such a way that we can be God's sacrament in the world.

Spirituality of love and justice

Indeed, I have no problems in talking about holiness, though I continue to have problems in speaking about spirituality. Today, on top of whatever other issues I might have with the use of the word 'spirituality', there is the fact that, rightly or wrongly, the general public, at least in the USA, tends to associate 'spirituality' with New

Age spirituality. New Age spirituality seems to be centred on spiritual practices that are not linked to a way of life; they seem to be practices that are not related to the injunction to 'love your neighbour as yourself' that is one of the cornerstones of the gospel message; they seem to be spiritual practices that do not result in a social consciousness that takes the marginalized in society into consideration. Not wanting to dismiss anything that might be worthwhile exploring, I have for years engaged practitioners of New Age spirituality – defined thus by themselves – in a discussion of the social and political implications of their practices. I remember years ago asking a friend in California how I might present New Age spiritual practices to Latina women in East Harlem who struggle to make ends meet. How could these practices help them in their daily struggle for survival? My friend looked at me squarely and said, 'Well, maybe you are right; maybe these kinds of religious practices have nothing to offer the Latinas in East Harlem'. Convinced that, like love, justice is an intrinsic element of the gospel message, I immediately thought, 'If these practices are not worthwhile for Latinas, are they really worthwhile for anyone else?'

No matter what I am engaged in, whatever the circumstances I am facing in my life, I know myself as a person who has a deep relationship with the divine even when, as it happens at present, I am 'at odds' with God. My relationship with the divine finds expression in walking picket lines more than in kneeling; in seeking ways to be involved in the work of reconciliation among those divided by hatred and misunderstandings more than in fasting and mortifying the flesh; in striving to be passionately involved with others more than in seeking to be detached from human love. As if detachment could make room for love of God – what an aberration! I believe my relationship with God demands that I be faithful to who I am and to what I believe God wants of me rather than asking me to follow prescriptions for holiness that insist on self-negation.

A few weeks ago we celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. The parish where I worship in East Harlem has only a handful of parishioners from Mexico but that did not keep us from celebrating Guadalupe's feast with splendour and gusto. I walked into the church to find dozens of roses everywhere. I spent the time in church allowing my lack of faith to be strengthened by the faith of that community for whom religion is central to sustaining their daily struggles for survival. I watched the faces of women and men as they knelt, prayed, sang to Guadalupe. We sang, 'Ven con nosotros a caminar, Santa María, ven' – 'Come walk with us, Holy Mary, come'. We believe she walks with us

and that is what is important. She who is mother of God, she who is fully human as we are, she walks with us. I relish the kind of spirituality I saw that day in my parish. Here were people who are considered to have little or no importance by the powerful of this world, by those who set the standards, by those who govern us and decide what is important for society. Their religious practices, however, allow them to counter the way they are made to feel by society. Here they were, expressing their deep love and admiration of Mary, for they know that they are loved and admired by her. They are special to her. They were there not to ask for anything except for love, except for being thought of as relevant, except for the strength to carry on.

Spirituality for me is a matter of who we are and how we live, aware of the fact that we neither exist nor act apart from the divine, aware of the fact that our relationship with God is not at all separate from our relationship with each other. As Madeleine L'Engle's poem 'Epiphany' says, we must unclench our fists, we must hold out our hands, we must take each other's hands – that is the way that God is manifested in our world. And if our human relationships manifest God, then our relationship with God depends on our love and care, our concern and struggles for each other. Our relationships with each other are, for me, the road to God, the way we relate to God. And our relationships with each other are not separate from who we are; they affect us deeply, they call us to be our best selves or they hurt us and divert us from what we know God wants of us.

Spirituality, our relationship with the divine that is not separate from our relationship with each other, has to centre on who we are as much as on what we do, for these aspects of our lives are intrinsically intertwined and cannot be separated. Who we are revolves around personal qualities or traits. Who we are has to do with our motives, our dispositions and attitudes, our intentions and even our perceptions. But none of this is separate from what we do. What we do has to do with the concrete choices we make in given circumstances, with the deeds in which we are involved. More and more we have come to realize that who we are and what we do is rooted in the sociality of human beings and that, therefore, we have to take responsibility for the social arrangements in which we live, for the communities and societies in which our lives unfold and upon which our lives impact.

Participating in the divine life

This whole aspect of the sociality of our spirituality was brought home to me in a very special way by a group of men – fathers, sons,

brothers, cousins, grandfathers, husbands and boyfriends – who are incarcerated. I spent an evening with them as part of a study programme in which they are involved. Each and every one of the men in the group spoke of the need they have to prepare themselves so that when they return to their communities they can contribute to repairing the damage they have done. Each and every one of them realizes that he must struggle to change the circumstances in which his community lives if he is to have a better future, if there is to be a better future for his sons and daughters, his younger sisters and brothers. Without at all shrinking from the responsibility for whatever they have done in their lives, these men are keenly aware that they are social beings and that they cannot change without a radical change in their communities.

One of the oldest prayers in the official liturgy of the Roman Catholic Church is the one the priest says when he adds a few drops of water to the chalice with the wine: ‘. . . may we become participants in your divinity, you who became participant in our humanity’. In my struggle to find an adequate way of seeing and expressing spirituality as an element of who I am and what I do instead of as a collection of religious practices, this prayer has always been of importance to me. This concept of participation in the divine is based on 2 Peter 1:4 that talks about our being ‘sharers in the divine nature’. As Mark O’Keefe explains in his book, *Becoming good, becoming holy* (Paulist Press, 1995), this is a concept of great currency in the Eastern Christian tradition. To share in the divine nature is understood as what happens to us Christians, beginning with the fact that we are created in God’s image and leading to our final union with God. Since all of our lives require that we be intentional about becoming participants in the divine, the moral and the spiritual life are intrinsically connected. This view is not so different from Aquinas’ concept of attaining the beatific vision or union with God. However, it seems to me that the notion of our being sharers in the divine invites us to an understanding of ourselves as intrinsically linked to God, self and others in a way that is not present in Aquinas’ theology.

Imaging God’s love

There seem to be two important elements in this understanding of life as participation in the divine. The first element is that we are called to be and to become the best selves we can be. Understanding ourselves as images of God requires deep respect for who we are and how we are, realizing that, as social beings, the essence of our humanity is linked to the humanity of others. In many ways, then, our lives are a search for

self-fulfilment, a personal self-fulfilment rather than an individualistic self-fulfilment. Individualistic self-fulfilment is laced with egoism and the aberrations of self-aggrandizement that make us become exploiters of others in so many different ways. But personal self-fulfilment is the recognition of the work of God in us. This is why the gospel makes 'love of self' the measure against which to judge our love of neighbour (Luke 10:25–28). The love of self in the gospel is contrary to an individualistic love of self that searches for self-fulfilment at the expense of others. Such individualistic self-fulfilment is not based on a belief that we are created because God is love and God's nature is to be self-giving. Indeed, individualistic self-fulfilment at the expense of others is rooted in the absence of true love.

The love of God for me is what urges and inspires me. It is what enables me and fills me with joy. God's love for me is what in religious-theological language we call 'grace'. Grace refers to my participation in the divine, my communing with the love God has for me, which makes me capable of loving others passionately. As a matter of fact, I believe that the love God has for me demands me to love others passionately. There is nothing lukewarm about love. Though the language used by Scripture might not be appealing to many, undoubtedly this is what Revelation 3:15–16 refers to when it says that it is better not to be than to be lukewarm. Love is always passionate. True love always has to find ways of expressing itself tangibly. The love God has for me expresses itself passionately in the way it demands me to love others, and to love in a very special way those who are poor and oppressed. This is why it is precisely in the midst of justice actions – like the picket line in Washington, DC – that I feel and experience the love of God in such a particular way.

The second element in understanding life as participation in the divine is related to this first one. God 'had to' become human. If God is love, then God has to create in order to fulfil God's-self, for there is no love without giving of one's self. Personal self-fulfilment has to do with embracing the love God has for each of us. This is what makes us of infinite value. It is the love of God that makes it possible for each of us to live fruitful lives – lives in which we can become fully ourselves by contributing to the happiness of others and to justice and peace in our world at large. The love of God, like all true love, is reciprocal. All true love requires the give and take of relationships and this is what spirituality is: the give and take of my relationship with God, which has to be something concrete. Once Jesus, Emmanuel – God in our midst – finishes participating in our mortal life, he has to find ways of

remaining concretely with us. Those of us from the Roman Catholic tradition believe that this is precisely what the eucharist is: Jesus remaining with us in a very tangible way. When one loves, all one wants is to be with the beloved. This is precisely what is at play in the eucharist. Jesus loves us and wants to be with us and, being God, Jesus can 'invent' giving of himself in the eucharist. The miracle of the eucharist is the miracle of love and those of us who have loved and have had to depart from the beloved have experienced the urgency Jesus felt, the need he had to remain present with those he loved, to find a way to stay regardless of the fact that he had to depart because his life was coming to an end.

Receiving from God's poor/poverty

The eucharist, however, is not the only way Jesus found of remaining with us. This other way is what is referred to in the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25. Jesus, God present in our midst and through the eucharist present in each of us, chooses to be present in the poor and the oppressed in a very tangible way. It is important to notice in reading Matthew 25 that the language used very directly identifies the naked, the hungry, those who are sick, those who are in prison, with Jesus. The language that is used is not analogical: there is no 'it is as if it were'. When we feed the hungry, we feed Jesus, when we clothe the naked, we clothe Jesus, when we visit those in prison, we visit Jesus.

The men in the prison I visited a few weeks ago understood this very clearly, most probably because they understood it from the underside – from the side of receiving. Though it might sound self-serving, I share this experience because I can think of no better way to explain what I am trying to say here. I was in the prison that evening because the men had been reading an article of mine and wanted the opportunity to dialogue with me. These men were so struck by the fact that I had taken time to be with them. I said to them endlessly that I was the one who was grateful to them for inviting me there. One of the men, who described himself as a Haitian-New Yorkan, wanted to say something to me before posing his question. 'Today, in coming here, you have made a reality what you say in this article about kin-dom of God.' He was referring to the work I have done in re-imaging 'kingdom' in a way that is more relevant to us today and is not sexist or classist. Needless to say, I was deeply taken by what that man said to me. Personally, I received it as the highest praise anyone has ever given me or could ever give me, and for that I will always be grateful to him. What will also remain with me for ever was how clearly this young man understood

Matthew 25. In visiting them in prison I had made present to them the love of God for me and for them. Visiting them was a very concrete way for me to relate to God, to live out my relationship of love with God. It has hardly ever been clearer to me than it was that day when I visited those men in a New York prison that I do participate in the divine!

The sense of self-fulfilment as intrinsic to spirituality – as a key element of participation in the divine – is based on believing that God is love, that God has to create us in order to fulfil the God-self, for there is no love without giving of one's self. Personal self-fulfilment has to do with embracing God's love for each of us, a love that makes each of us infinitely valuable, a love that makes it possible for us to live fruitful lives – lives in which we can become fully ourselves by contributing to the happiness of others and to justice and peace in our world at large. The love of God, like all true love, is reciprocal. All true love requires the give and take of relationships and this is what spirituality is: the give and take of my relationship with God, which has to be something concrete. Such concreteness becomes a reality in our love for one another, an incarnated love that is passionate, that calls us to engage each other, to share ourselves with each other. For me, this is what spirituality is all about.

Ada María Isasi-Díaz is a *mujerista* theologian, committed to making the religious understandings and practices of Latinas living in the USA an intrinsic element of the theological understandings of churches. Born and raised in La Habana, Cuba, she is a professor of Christian Ethics at Drew University in New Jersey and is working on three books: one on corporality, one on justice, and an introduction to Hispanic/Latino theology in the USA.