



Embodiment of Faith Notes and Questions

Loss of Transcendence

Dr. James Houston

Lesson 13

Being in love with God gives birth to desire to experience love's touch (Song of Songs 1:2). You want to caress and feel caressed from the experience of loving God. You desire intimacy. Touch makes love so tangible. The early Fathers longed for ways to embody the feeling of love that sustained their faith. One way to express love's tangibility was through martyrdom. In the absence of the beloved's touch, suffering from longing for the beloved's return is better than experiencing the absence of the beloved's proximity. When persecution against Christians ceased, the early Fathers found alternate ways to experience the tangibility of their love of God. They chose the ascetic discipline on the body. It was no longer red martyrdom, but replaced instead with grey or white martyrdom. You martyr the body to embody your love for the beloved (S. of S. 5:6-7). They practiced love's embodiment within communities and their relational structures, which grew into the monastic life. Alternatively, they chose the solitary life like St. Anthony (251-356 A.D.), the prototype of the Desert Fathers who lived alone in the desert to feel closer to God.

Session 13, Question 1: What have you done to feel the tangibility of your faith?

Living the solitary life has its risk like any institutionalized choice that compensates for the absence of God's presence. The risk is the failure to adhere to Divine love's warning: "*Do not arouse or awaken love until it so desires* (S. of S. 2:7, 3:5, 8:4)." To be caught in the rapture of God's love has an intensity of feeling that subsides. Humility and patience are required to wait upon the beloved's return who triggers such feelings, so that the joy of being reunited can authentically occur when He returns. Love cannot be forced upon the will or the will of the other. The transcendent memory of the beloved's proximity requires time for the mind to internalize (S. of S. 5:6). The bridegroom initiates His absence from the heart, so that upon His return He may find newly formed pearls of knowledge of Himself (Matthew 13:45-46) and of our true self as seen by our Father before the Fall.

Like the infant who clings to a stuffed animal to substitute for the mother's presence when she is absent, the temptation occurs to cling to alternative representations of the bridegroom when He withdraws. During His proximity the heart is overwhelmed by the exhilarating feeling of Divine love. During His absence grief and longing for His return is what fills the faithful heart. Without retaining a living memory of the soul's true affections for the beloved's proximity, the heart slides into impatience from the lack of object constancy of the beloved's true presence. [1] Narcissistic compensations take over that seek satisfaction in the heart from false representations in the mind's thinking. The effects are recognized from idolatrous misconceptions of God that substitute for the touch of His real presence. When this happens, it is the heart that is the obstacle because it is narcissistically using the mind to block true empathic affections for who God is.

The Holy Spirit will not be imprisoned in our mental boxes to meet our self-deceived demands. The Spirit stays away until our heart is ripe to deliver the fruit of our next stage of spiritual development. Scripture reminds us of the Spirit's ways: "*The wind blows where it wills* (John 3:8)." The humble heart waits upon the Lord's return to plant and cultivate what needs to grow in our heart. He knows when to sow His seeds so they may grow into the knowledge of His Father, Himself, and our true self before the Fall.

Experiencing the foretaste of divine love's presence inflames the heart's infinite desires. The transcendent memories of Divine love surge through emotions that overwhelm the heart. These empathic emotions need to be integrated into the mind from communion with the Son (Exodus 33:20, Job 9:33-34, 1 Timothy 2:5, Rev. 1:17). It is a communion with His presence that can be found in spiritual friendships. Friendship with the Son mediates integration of the soul with the soul's image seen by the Father before the Fall. Shared empathic affections for who God is with spiritual friends can expose narcissistic compensations that replace God's presence. Such affections act like a plumb line that expose the dissonance from temptations acted upon and internalized by the mind. The Holy Spirit stirs up these empathic affections. They pierce and purge the heart, so that the heart can experience the compunction that comes from the gift of tears. A reorientation follows toward the real object desired. Rejection of the mind's compensations from the lustful nature is what then follows.

William of St. Thierry, the Augustinian psychologist of the 12th century, insightfully said, "*it is where we sin that we find our way back to God*". William sees sin as a compensatory substitute for unmet needs of the Father's love. The soul lives with the need for self-integrity. Having been loved before by the Father presses upon it with unconscious longings for its lost integrity. By rejoicing in spiritual friendships shared

with the Father's Son, the soul finds its integrity mediated and renewed. So when the desert Fathers longed for something missing in the distractions of the city, they fled into the desert to pay more attention to what was missing in their lives. In the desert they found an intensified consciousness of how their temptations prevented the embodiment of their faith. It would spur them to ask for the Lord's help to identify them and fight them off. It is this struggle in the desert that would define their culture.

Session 13, Question 2: How have you identified and sought deliverance from your temptations that substitute for the joy of God's real presence?

In the struggle with temptations, the desert Fathers discovered that you do not despise the body to esteem the soul. Depriving the body of sleep in the desert weakens the ability to resist evil, like drunkenness and drugs in our modern-day culture. John Cassian (AD 360-435), a desert Father and Christian monk who influenced the monastic communities, promoted a more moderate way to embody and cultivate the soul.

Now Dr. Houston claims Cassian has an Old Testament sense that the issue is not so much about cultivating the soul as it is about cultivating the heart. He says the anthropology of the heart is an Old Testament understanding and is much more realistic for cultivating the soul. I disagree. Dr. Houston is introducing a dichotomy between the Old and New Testament concerning the heart versus the soul. Perhaps Cassian's understanding of the embodiment of God's presence in the soul could simply be said to be more heart focused and mature (1 Cor. 3:2). The word soul appears 755 times in the Old Testament versus 725 for the heart. The heart, soul, and mind are all equally realistic to each other both in the New and Old Testament. They belong to who we are as persons (Matthew 22:37). Talking about the one does not mean to diminish the other. It is the order of procession of the Holy Trinity that must be understood correctly, rather than how many times we talk about the one or the other.

For the Old and New Testament writers, Greek philosophers, and early Christian Fathers, the soul is the self. The heart is the locus of desires, attachments, and motivations. The mind is the self-awareness of understanding our desires, attachments, and motivations. When you observe the Classical World through the eyes of a Christian anthropologist like Augustine, versus the eyes of secular scholasticism, you realize ancient Greek culture struggled to understand both the heart

and the soul. The most knowledgeable of them in late Greek antiquity was the philosopher Plotinus. He made profound efforts to embody understanding of the heart's motivations and desires.

Should Dr. Houston suggest a dichotomy exists between Greek soul keeping and Hebrew heart keeping, it does not facilitate deeper empathic affections for our ancient Greek neighbor, who struggled to discover the personal sense of what it means to be in Christ. Paul and the Greek poets both recognized that *"in Him we live and move and have our being"* (Acts 17:28). We all live in the light of the three persons of the Holy Trinity who seek to restore us to their image and likeness. As the second Adam (Rom. 5:19) in the flesh, Jesus had to mature and grow in wisdom (Luke 2:52). We too must mature and grow in wisdom the more we recognize Him as the true image bearer and first-born son (Rom. 8:29). We follow Him in Holy communion with all three persons of the Holy Trinity to find our way back to the Father. There is no procession between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is more realistic than the other, or as understood by Augustine, more realistic than the other in the correct order in which the Holy Trinity proceeds differently from the one in the other within the human heart, soul, and mind. They are one in the diversity of their processions. [2]

Session 13, Question 3: How do you understand what it means to be human and to be in Christ?

Dr. Houston applies what appears as his unintended Greek heart and soul dichotomy to Augustine's understanding of memory. He claims, *"For Augustine it is not so much the exploration of the soul that matters: it is the exploration of what he calls memory."* For Augustine however the soul matters as much as memory. He does not exclude or subordinate exploration of the soul to memory. Like the unity of the Holy Trinity that is one God, for Augustine the soul is constituted of memory that comes from being created in the image of God. Exploring one's memory is to explore what the soul forgot of the Father's love prior to birth, which Augustine sees represented by the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32). Likewise, to explore the soul is to explore memory of the homeland from where it came before the Fall. The extent this memory has come to consciousness is the extent of the soul's self-knowledge, which is the extent it has been restored to its original likeness to the image of God. The Father originated the soul and gave it memory of Himself. The Holy Spirit's empathic love in

the soul differentiates the soul's real self from its false self, and the Son mediates the integration into the soul's mind the consciousness of its true self.

Terence Sweeney says that in interpreting Augustine *"we should not merely think of the self as a specimen that is better understood by knowing the genus, or that knowing the specimen will give greater data about the genus."* Augustine's self-knowledge is not the abstract knowledge of scholasticism and science that would deconstruct, subdivide, and dichotomize the self. Sweeney reminds us that for Augustine, *"To question the nature of the soul is to inquire about one's very self. The question and the possible answers impact the person asking."* Desire to know God interpenetrates the soul asking the question. Ask and you shall receive Jesus tells us (Matt.7:7). An examined life in the presence of memory of the Father, no matter how small the memory, has a therapeutic effect on the soul. [3] This is not the abstract knowledge produce from the data of scholastic inquiry. For Augustine both memory and soul matter equally because exploring both of them lead to the same destination, which is to see God as He is (Exodus 3:14) and our soul as it is in His presence.

Session 13, Question 4: How do you know who you are in relationship to who God is?

Dr. Houston however acknowledges Augustine is not talking about a good memory of past events. He explains Augustine's *memoria* is the recollection of the very depth of the soul. The soul holds the treasure of not only consciousness of itself, but consciousness of the presence of God. Memory is a vast courtyard of infinite and boundless interiority. It provides awareness of the soul's identity when it was made in the image and likeness of God. *Memoria* is where communion with God the Father is celebrated. To exercise memory of God is what it means to be Christian. We cannot separate this memory from who we are as persons, a memory that unfolds uniquely to each of us. When we exercise it, we practice our faith towards the journey of knowing ourselves from knowing God through His presence. The influence of this double knowledge extends throughout Christian history and reaches its climax with John Calvin, who began his Institutes with the statement that knowledge of God and of self progress together. We find this memory of the Father in Ezekiel 3:3 and in the Book of Revelation 10:9-11 as eating a book sweet as honey. The book means the content of the memory of who we are as seen by God. David's Psalm 139:16 speaks of this memory as, *"Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."* The memory gives joy and moral

health to the soul. Dr. Houston then refers back to the relevance of his previous lecture at the end of session 8 on Origen's Lectio Divina, which is the practice of recollection and rumination of this memory through four levels of meaning to understand scripture.

Session 13, Question 5: When did you experience a deeper level of knowing God and how did this help you understand yourself?

Notes:

[1] Object constancy is a term developed by Winnicott for Object Relations theory on the development of the infant's self. The infant's mind must learn not to persist in clinging to transitional objects (like a stuffed animal) to compensate for the mother's absence. Otherwise a false self will solidify in the mind to form a dysfunctional identification with the mother's true presence. Object constancy of the real presence must be retained by the infant to differentiate and integrate its real self from the memory retained of the authentic relationship. This psychoanalytic developmental phenomenon observed in clinical practice coincides with the Biblical understanding of how the soul develops. When the soul chooses to identify with created things rather than with its maker, relational dysfunctions form into what our Judeo-Christian ancestors called the consequences of idolatry. In its fallen state the soul identifies with substitutes to the real object it desires. Following birth, the infant is quick to manifest congenital expectations that the parental caregiver manifest empathic love in an omniscience and omnipotent way needed for life. The empathic response to these expectations is fundamental to its development. However, no caregiver can live up to these congenital expectations for long when the infant matures and becomes more discerning of its environment. The parental caregivers must help the infant's transition to see themselves as transitional objects that guide the infant into seeing the deeper transcendent object it desires, which is to find itself in the loving presence of God who alone can ultimately fulfill all of its congenital expectations.

[2] God "proceeds" from God. For Webster's Dictionary to proceed means: 1. to come forth from a source: issue, 2. (a) to continue after a pause or interruption (b) to go on in an orderly regulated way 3. (a) to begin and carry on an action, process, or movement (b) to be in the process of being accomplished 4. to move along a course: advance.

[3] For Augustine Socrates must have been influenced by the Holy Spirit when he said, "*The unexamined life is not worth living.*"