



THE CALL TO SANCTIFICATION: REFLECTION ON THE JOURNEY OF A METHODIST-BENEDICTINE PILGRIM

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The theme of this conference, sanctification in the Methodist and Benedictine traditions, has a profoundly personal quality for me. Having been born and raised in the Holiness movement of American Methodism, and formed in the Benedictine tradition as a young adult, the call to sanctification has been, and remains, of central importance in my life. Yet I am no longer an active member of either of these traditions. Given the seriousness of my pursuit of holiness in childhood, adolescence, and early manhood, I have struggled to understand the impact of these traditions on my life. My hope is that this reflection on the spiritual journey of a Methodist/Benedictine pilgrim will be a useful case study, highlighting concerns that these movements should consider as you ponder their missions in the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions.

There is a growing trend among academics to use their own autobiographical reflections as texts to be probed and analyzed. This mode of inquiry enables the writer to bring to her audience rare personal experiences, and to provide a critical evaluation of that life journey. Autobiographical reflections are not a foreign genre to the Benedictine and Methodist traditions. Indeed, over the centuries Methodists and Benedictines have found confirmation of the call to sanctification in the life stories of women and men who have recorded their response to God's call to live holy lives.

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This presentation draws on both autobiographical traditions, using autobiographical reflections as a text to be analyzed, and personal experiences of God's call to sanctification as an additional witness to the believer's mission to grow into perfect love of God and humanity. To accomplish this task, Friedrich von Huegel's three elements of religion will be introduced as an analytical tool, followed by a study of experiences in the Holiness tradition of the American South and in the Benedictine tradition of the United States. The concluding assessment may offer insights into issues that confront Benedictines and Methodists, as they witness to the importance of sanctification in the lives of all Christians.

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Baron Friedrich von Huegel, a German nobleman who was born in Florence in 1852 and lived most of his life in England, was deeply interested in what he called the mystical element of religion. He recognized that religion was neither simple, "in the sense of being a monotone, a mere oneness, a whole without parts," nor was it a "mere multiplicity, a mere congeries of parts without a whole."¹ He sought to understand the complex nature of the faith experience, and develop a means of evaluating how this complexity is best harmonized.

These studies led the Baron to conclude that there are three basic elements to religious experience. These are not discrete stages, but aspects of personal faith that are always present to a greater or lesser degree. The first of these is sense and memory, or "the child's means of apprehending religion." This aspect of religion relies on external stimuli and authorities in one's life. The symbols and rituals of religious practice excite the imagination. The religious instruction received from parents, clergy, and others in dominant roles have a profound influence on early understandings of religious faith. Within this element, religion is "a Fact and Thing."²

The second element is "question and argument," or "the youth's mode of approaching religion." The Baron observes that as a human grows, the wonder and awe that external religion inspires also stimulates curiosity and questions, especially as the youth encounters conflicting ideas and assertions about religion. As Friedrich von Huegel explained,

The old impressions get now more and more consciously sought out, and selected from among other conflicting ones, the facts seem to clamour for reasons to back them, against the other hostile facts and appearances, or at least against those men in books, if not in life, who dare to question and reject them.

It is at this point that the rational, disputatious, and abstractive aspect of human nature plays a role. In this second element, religion is "Thought, System, a Philosophy."³

The Baron's third element of religion is "intuition, feeling, and volitional requirements and evidences" or the ethico-mystical dimension of faith. This is the most difficult to define, and yet is the most essential for a complete and full religious experience. This element comes to the fore as,

Certain interior experiences, certain deep-seated spiritual pleasures and pains,

weaknesses and powers, helps and hindrances, are increasingly known and felt in and through interior and exterior action, and interior suffering, effort, and growth.

Friedrich von Huelgel explained that in this element a human's emotional, volitional, ethical, and spiritual powers are in ever-increasing motion. He observed that in this aspect of the faith experience, "religion is rather felt than seen or reasoned about, is loved and lived rather than analyzed, is action and power, rather than either external fact or intellectual verification."⁴ In this element a human reaches the most mature experience of religion; for the principles and teachings of the faith are not simply a fact taken on the authority of an external source, or a system of thought that merits intellectual assent, but a lived reality that permeates the interior reflections and external actions of the believer.

Friedrich von Huelgel stressed that these are not isolated developments, but are elements of the whole experience of religion. He argued that when these are cultivated and permitted to function in harmony, they create for the believer, "indubitable sensation, clear thought, [and] warm faith in and through action."⁵ In evaluating his own religious experience, he observed, "I believe because I am told, because it is true, because it answers to my deepest interior experiences and needs."⁶ It is within this triad that a healthy and life-giving faith grows and matures.

In looking at the history of Christianity, the Baron concluded that this balance is rare. He observed that the tendency in religious movements is to disparage or discard one or two elements in favor of another; rather than permitting the others to supplement, stimulate, and purify the preferred element of religion that gave focus and vitality to the movement.⁷ Although his study does not discuss Methodism and only mentions Benedictines in passing, I have found his three elements of religion powerful analytical tools as I have sought to understand my experiences and response to the Methodist and Benedictine calls to sanctification. What follows is not a theological explication of sanctification; it is a description of the lived experience of one who found the call to sanctification a compelling force in his life.

I was born in Elkin, N.C., in 1954. It was a small town located in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains, dominated by a textile mill on the Yadkin River. My father, Clyde Parker, was the pastor of a small Pilgrim Holiness congregation, part of a denomination that drew inspiration from the Methodist and Quaker traditions, and was created in the 1920s out of a collection of holiness churches, prayer unions, and missionary societies.⁸ Starting with a tiny congregation of no more than forty, my father built a church of over 250 members, largely from among the poorest and most neglected people of that very religious Southern town. We were a congregation of working-class people, whose lives had been radically changed by the faith preached by my father.

My earliest memories are infused with religious significance—three church services each week, evening prayers by my bed, and Mother's determined efforts to help my older brother and I memorize the scriptures. It was also clear from my earliest forma-

tion that we were different from others who called themselves Christian. We took the faith seriously, lived it more conscientiously, and believed more correctly than those who lived around us. This meant that we dressed differently, spoke differently, and behaved differently. We were a people set apart.

When I was barely three years old these lessons had made a deep impression on my imagination. I knew that everyone comes into the world with a serious problem called sin, and because of this we do things that hurt God and other people. God had to punish these bad actions, because he loves good and hates evil. People who died and were not sorry for their sins were sent to a terrible place called hell, where they burned forever in a fire that never went out. But Jesus came into the world to help us change, and become like him—a child of God. This was the way we were saved: by being sorry for our sins and asking Jesus to come into our hearts and help us change. I wanted to be a child of God, so I prayed and asked God to forgive me for all the bad things I had done. I did not want to go to hell.

Sunday was the busiest day of the week. The morning was always a blur of activity, with music to be practiced and members of the congregation coming to the parsonage to ask questions and offer assistance with the church's many projects. Dad was usually in his bedroom, half whispering, half speaking his sermon, searching for the right emphasis or place for a dramatic pause.

I always sat on the front pew, where Mother joined me after she had finished playing the organ. The architecture of our sanctuary was dominated by a large wooden pulpit, which stood at the center of the platform. Behind the pulpit were oversized wooden chairs where my father and the song director sat. A piano and electric organ flanked the pulpit, and the entire platform was bordered by a carpeted step and railing. We called this the altar, or "mourners' bench," for it was here that sinners came and knelt to give their souls to God and ask forgiveness for their sins.

The services followed a set pattern: opening prayer, two hymns, announcements, pastoral prayer, collection of tithes and offerings, special music, sermon, an altar call, and the closing prayer. There was never any hint of formalism in our worship. Often hymns and sermons were punctuated by the cries and shouts of one of the saints of the church; and frequently after Dad's pastoral prayer someone would stand up and tell of a great work that God had done in their life. There were often tears of joy and heart-rending sobs. It was not uncommon for one of the faithful to walk the aisles of the church, waving a handkerchief and shouting "Glory!" and "Praise Jesus!" We were not Pentecostalists and condemned the use of "unknown tongues"; but religion was very emotional for us and we were encouraged to express it.

Dad's preaching had a sing-song quality in my early childhood, and as he proceeded from point to point and approached the climax of his message, his voice would become raspy and beseeching. The peril of sin was great and the need to repent urgent. If I understood nothing else of what he said, that was always clear. The recurring themes of his preaching were salvation and sanctification—the two pillars of the American Holiness tradition.

Even as a small child, I knew from Dad's sermons that to go to heaven I had to pass through "two crisis experiences." The first crisis was a recognition that I was a sin-

ner, who desired to repent and seek God's forgiveness. This act of repentance could be made anywhere, not simply at the altar in church, and with it came salvation. But this was just the beginning. As one grew in the Christian life the presence of the "old man of sin" would become increasingly apparent, for like Saint Paul the newly-saved found that he continued in sin, even as he tried to resist it (Rom. 7:14-20). This realization led to the "second crisis experience," when the saved person sought the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the removal of all sinful desires from his life. From this point forward the sanctified believer would be guided by the Holy Spirit and avoid sin. This second work of grace infused in the believer a state of sinless perfection. Empowered by God's grace, the sanctified believer could accomplish great things and endure with gladness the sacrifice of cherished goals and aspirations to further the cause of the gospel.

But there was a terrifying caveat to this message. It was always possible to return to the old ways and fall from grace. This was called back-sliding. If this occurred, the believer had to begin the process anew. God was endlessly patient in this lifetime, but if one died with the smallest stain of sin, God's justice required the severe penalty of eternal punishment in hell.

Dad's sermons were always followed by an altar call. Mother would quietly go to the organ and play an appropriate hymn. One of these is still among my favorites:

Just as I am without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bidd'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come! I come!⁹

Dad's sermons were very effective; for even at the tender age of four and five I thought a great deal about the terrible consequences of neglecting God's call to live a sanctified life. For this reason my earliest memories include frequent trips to the altar, Mother's gentle supplications for my soul, and the happiness and encouraging smiles that greeted me when I rose from "the mourners' bench."

But what was this sanctified state—this holy life? In my childhood that state was understood as a series of clear injunctions and prohibitions: regular attendance at church, tithing faithfully, keeping Sunday holy, and dressing modestly. We were forbidden to curse or swear, drink alcoholic beverages, smoke tobacco, play card games, dance, or go to movies. We were to love those who treated us badly, and show kindness when others were cruel to us. For a religiously minded boy with a tender conscience, these were demanding standards that were frequently broken. Back-sliding was a daily ritual, as were my prayers for salvation and sanctification. God was loving but just. I feared God's justice.

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As childhood gave way to adolescence, the religious reality in which I lived began to fracture. Travels to other countries opened my eyes to new cultures and customs. Books that were read suggested other ways of viewing the world and life. I encoun-

tered people who did not share my vision of Christianity, but spoke seriously about the Christian life. Even more troubling, I came to know people who rejected religious belief, and yet were kind, generous, and wise. My questions and search for explanations about our doctrines and practice rarely resulted in serious dialogue, but frequently with cautions about over-intellectualizing the faith. I came to question the prohibitions that set me apart from my peers; and began to secretly break the old taboos of movie-going, drinking, and smoking. By the second year of undergraduate studies, my Holiness faith was shattered. I hated the god of my childhood and would rather suffer an eternity in hell than live the tenuous existence my childhood faith seemed to require.

I rejected Christianity as I understood it, but soon realized that I could not live without religious faith. I sought another way. This process began with a rereading of the Bible, and a rediscovery of the consolation, comfort, and joy that was to be found in those texts. The search continued as I began to explore other Christian traditions, and found in the Anglican and Roman Catholic communions forms of Christianity that were to change my vision of the faith. In the Book of Common Prayer, I discovered theological concepts that were foreign to my childhood faith—the most important of these being that Christians sin and regularly seek God's forgiveness without fear of rejection or damnation. Another factor was more profound, and has remained a guiding force in my life—mystical, healing encounters with Christ in the Eucharist. Having devoted the last year of my undergraduate studies to ecclesiastical history and polity, I decided to pursue graduate studies in Medieval and Reformation theology.

As I began the study of historical theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in California, I longed to gain a better understanding of the Roman Catholic tradition. My desire was soon satisfied by friendship with one of the few Roman Catholics on campus, a Benedictine monk. His community was located in the Mojave desert, only an hour from the seminary. I became a frequent visitor. As my studies at Fuller progressed, I found myself increasingly drawn to the way of life at Saint Andrew's Abbey. It became clear that if the holiness faith of my family represented one pole of my religious life, this Benedictine community represented the other pole of my faith experience. During the second year of my studies, the community generously invited me to live with them as a Protestant observer. It was a turning point in my life.

While they were faithful to the historic faith shared by all Roman Catholics, they were different. They dressed differently, spoke differently, and behaved differently. We were a people set apart. Their lives were committed to a regular regime of prayer and meditation on the scriptures. They renounced marriage and lived without personal property. They lived in obedience to a superior. Those who came as visitors and retreatants were visibly moved by this radical witness to the truth that life is about more than money, sex, and power. Because I lived in the community for a time, I was aware of the failings and weaknesses of the brethren. Yet this only strengthened the appeal, for here were broken men, in need of healing, who had nevertheless answered the call to grow into holy and sanctified ways of living.

I was deeply attracted to this way of life, but academic goals proved more compelling. I decided to complete my graduate work, and was accepted for doctoral stud-

ies at the University of Cambridge. During my third year in England, after great personal turmoil and resistance from my family, I became a Roman Catholic. Though I had no intention at that time of becoming a monk, the magnetic pull of that pole of my life proved too strong. Three years later, after finishing the doctorate and teaching at a university for a year, I decided to enter monastic life. I arrived at Saint Andrew's Abbey in October 1985.

The summer before entering Saint Andrew's, a wise old monk in Belgium warned that one did not truly understand the demands of monastic life until it was lived. His words proved to be true. It was not simply adjusting to a new daily rhythm or the brethren in the monastery. I felt parts of me dying—and that was frightening.

For more than a decade I had grown accustomed to almost complete freedom in ordering my day. Though well-disciplined and hard-working as a student and scholar, my schedule revolved around my interests and desires. At Saint Andrew's each day was structured around five liturgical services and two periods of *lectio divina*. There were two work periods and classes each weekday, as well as kitchen duties for each meal. My primary work tasks were sweeping, mopping, dusting, and cleaning toilets and showers. The only time that was free of responsibilities was an hour and a half each afternoon.

Having moved to new locations seven times in thirteen years, ways of dealing with new places, people, and circumstances had developed. However, Saint Andrew's Abbey thwarted all of these coping mechanisms. The most profound difference was that unlike other living situations, the abbey was a place to which I was committed—not a temporary stop on the way to something better. I had to learn to live with the men around me, not simply cope with them for a time. It became obvious that this ideal was fraught with difficulties, created by others and myself.

I was also jolted by the realization that while the brethren valued my past accomplishments, these made little difference in the role I played in community. While the solemnly professed monks discussed community matters in chapter, I was assigned to clean toilets. When Protestants arrived to talk about the Catholic experience, I served coffee and then swept and mopped the kitchen floor.

This is not to say that I did not comply. Indeed, I sought to excel in living within the new restrictions, feeling very keenly my "virtue" in so doing. As I sweated, mopping the kitchen and refectory floors, I reflected on the marvel that a "Cambridge Ph.D." should do such work. While wiping scum off neglected toilets, I meditated on this great sacrifice of time that could be devoted to teaching and writing. With self-satisfaction, I took pleasure in publicly asking permissions—demonstrating my obedience to those in authority over me.

Yet one cannot live forever in a romantic haze; nor will the brethren conspire in its preservation. As one day followed another, I felt very keenly the routine, the unrelenting regularity of the life. While I soon excelled in its simple demands, I found myself judgmental and contemptuous of brethren who could not or would not conform. I discovered in myself a capacity for rage and hatred that had previously been con-

cealed and repressed. Before many months had passed, I felt that I no longer recognized the person I had become.

In Primo Levi's powerful and perceptive reflections on human nature "researched" in the crucible of Auschwitz, he observed,

Imagine now a man who is deprived of everyone he loves, and at the same time of his house, his habits, his clothes, in short, of everything he possesses: he will become a hollow man, reduced to suffering and needs, forgetful of dignity and restraint, for he who loses all often loses himself.¹⁰

What confronted me at Saint Andrew's Abbey was the deconstruction of a carefully cultivated image of myself. There I had to face the fact that I had spent many years hiding behind that image, refusing to face dimensions of myself that did not confirm that I was a good, even holy person. Before life in the monastery, the impulse to strike another person had not occurred; the desire to see someone dead and "out of the way" had not crossed my mind; the cold purity of profound hatred was something I had not known. My first impulse was to blame the monastery for this interior turmoil. The person emerging was not the Kenneth Parker I knew. He was a horrible distortion.

In Benedictine life I found the things that had provided identity and security stripped away: my academic degrees and education were of no value in the work I was doing; I had little time for study, writing, and long, engaging conversations; and I lived without the freedom of movement and access to money that had provided escapes from situations that threatened my sense of well-being. I felt naked and vulnerable.

It was in this crucible of suffering and hollowness that I began to discover deeper dimensions of my faith—and life. The old questions had to be asked again, but in the light of new experiences: with what do I identify; what is important; what is necessary? Am I the degrees that have been earned, the works I publish, the financial security I possess? Do I need freedom of movement and mastery over my time?

While definitive answers to these questions were not found, I discovered a way of approaching the questions. The way was not new or unique; for it was the call that I had heard in childhood, read and studied about in my youth, and found compelling in Benedictine life. It was the call to sanctification: finding God in all that happens each day. It is the simple profundity of this approach that conceals and obscures its value—for it seems too obvious—yet it is not mastered in this lifetime.

As my monastic life progressed, the search for God's presence in each daily action and task became the focus of my reflections and prayer life. Though I remained unable to find God at all times and in all that I experienced, it became possible with the passing of time to live in the knowledge that my life and actions, conversations and prayers, are all experiences of being in the presence of God. Intellectual interests were not dismissed or rejected, but confirmed the value of this way of life. Most remarkable for me was a previously unknown joy in the performance of ordinary tasks, for I found God among the pots and pans, in the mundane tasks of life. I discovered that the Benedictine way to sanctification is attentiveness to God's presence in

the little things in life, growing in holiness through cooperation in God's work in the world.

After my simple profession as a monk, the superior of the monastery sent me to pursue further theological studies at the University of Fribourg. It was a painful transition, for I left the routine of my community with much regret for the academic life that was all too familiar. It was an important and wise test of my vocation to the monastic life; for during this time I came to realize that my reasons for entering the monastery were not sufficient for remaining there. I had discovered the way of sanctification that I had sought, but realized that it did not require that an academic career or marriage be sacrificed. After five years as a monk, I returned to academic life, enriched and nourished by the time spent as a Benedictine.

When Friedrich von Huelgel's three elements of religion are applied to this brief autobiographical reflection, they highlight important issues as one analyzes my response to the call to sanctification in childhood and early adulthood. Perhaps the most striking aspect of this account was my childhood confusion of the first element of religion with the third element. Because of the gap between a childhood understanding of life and the faith I was encouraged to lead, I comprehended only the objectified, external definitions of sin and religious practice. However, the external experience of religion which provided a focus for my Christian world view, also called for interior responses that were only imperfectly understood at that point in my life. This confusion led to much anxiety and fear, and the construction of a self-understanding that denied the reality of sin in my life.

Adolescence brought further complications, as the second element of religion became the central focus of my religious experience. As I began to question and seek reasons for beliefs that were cherished, my religious mentors experienced this quest for reasons and explanations as a challenge to their authority. Issues of power and control obscured and detracted from theological and spiritual concerns that were shared and valued. This conflict seemed to jeopardize my integrity as a thinking human being, and I felt compelled to search for a mature understanding of Christianity elsewhere. This search was nourished by academic study and the rediscovery of the Christian sacramental tradition. The decision to become Roman Catholic was the culmination of my adolescent search for a faith experience to which I could respond with heart and intellect.

Yet the Benedictine life proved attractive, in part, because it bore striking similarities to the external religion of my childhood. The distinctiveness of the Benedictine way, manifested in dress, speech, lifestyle, and public and private prayer, were compelling aspects of my childhood understanding of true religious practice. To be Christian in the fullest sense, I desired to identify with a people who were set apart. I also brought into my Benedictine experience the childhood desire to excel in all the external demands made of me, seeking through this discipline to achieve the experience of sanctification that remained my goal in life. Indeed, I found in monastic life the heroic sacrifice of cherished goals and aspirations that my childhood faith stressed.

However, it was that very discipline and sacrifice that tested and purified my conception of the call to sanctification. I was forced to look beyond action and identity, to my interior motivation and response. My childhood understanding of sin had been stylized and objectified, something *out there* that could be shunned and avoided. By confronting and acknowledging the sin that separated me from God and other humans, I discovered the joy of living each day in the presence of God and experiencing God's presence in the ordinary events of life. It was the sanctification of the ordinary, to desire to find God in all people, things, and experiences, that brought into clearer focus the meaning of the call to sanctification — and the joy and peace that can come from responding to that call.

I had entered Benedictine life, responding to a model of Christianity that had been formed in childhood. Ironically, it was through the discipline of the Benedictine life, that I came to realize that an academic career and marriage need not be offered up as a sacrifice to a demanding and exacting God. I understood the truth of Psalm 40 (39),

You do not ask for sacrifice and offerings,
but an open ear.
You do not ask for holocaust and victim.
Instead, here am I.

This brief reflection raises issues that deserve serious discussion. It highlights the need to respect the developmental stages of children as they are formed in the faith, avoiding pressure to respond to religion in ways that is not appropriate at their level of understanding. It illustrates the importance of responding to adolescent questions with clarity and without judgment. Finally, this study emphasizes that childhood models of religious faith and practice are powerful forces in the life of adults. This is especially important to Benedictines, as women and men increasingly enter communities in adulthood. These childhood models must be examined and understood as one seeks to grow into the Benedictine way.

In early childhood, I came to the altar of my father's church seeking the second work of grace which my Holiness faith stressed. Adolescence brought with it a struggle to comprehend this call and give it meaning and structure. In Benedictine life, I came to understand the deeper meaning and value of that ancient call, summarized in the Rule of Saint Benedict: "let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life."¹ It is this call to sanctification that sustains me as a lay Roman Catholic theologian, who values and continues to live in the elements of religion formed in him by the Methodist and Benedictine traditions.

NOTES

1. Friedrich von Huelgel, *The Mystical Element of Religion As Studied in Saint Catherine of Genoa and Her Friends* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1927), p. 50.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 51.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 51-52.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 57.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 60-65.
8. Paul Westphal Thomas and Paul William Thomas. *The Days of Our Pilgrimage* (Marion, Ind.: The Wesley Press, 1976), pp. 1-123.
9. C. Elliott, "Just as I Am," in *Glorious Gospel Hymns*, Haldor Lillenas, ed. (Kansas City, Mo.: Lillenas Publishing Co., 1931), hymn no. 579.
10. Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (London: Sphere Books, 1988), p. 33.
11. *RB 1980: The Rule of Saint Benedict*, Timothy Fry, ed. (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1981), p. 295.

