

Discourse nine:

Communal Religious Practice

Though it is true that each of us is alone in a manner that cannot be overcome, it is equally true that we are communal beings. In the history of our species, communal religious practice probably preceded solitary religious practice. Communal religious practice certainly preceded writing, and it may have preceded sophisticated art and language as well. Simple rituals related to deaths and births and other key events may be the very earliest of all uses of our symbol-using intelligence.

The “We” of Religious Practice

Even in its solitary practices, religion is a communal reality. If we practice religion at all, we employ some particular lineage of communal religious symbols--perhaps a particular Christian lineage, a particular Jewish lineage, a particular Buddhist lineage, a particular Hindu lineage, a particular Islamic lineage, a particular Native American tribal lineage, or some other particular lineage. Religion never appears in a social vacuum. Even when we think we are making up our own religion, we are doing so in some social environment for the purpose of living in that social environment. So we are always borrowing from the religious treasury of the past. Creating a new religion is like creating a new polity or a new economy or a new culture. The entire past of being human informs and shapes each new creation. In each new creation particular parts of the vast past are emphasized.

Persons who say, “I don’t want to be a Christian or a Buddhist or any other religious tradition,” are fooling themselves. It is like saying, “I don’t want to be a European or an Asian or an African or an American or any other geographical grouping.” There is no escape from being a sociological being in some particular manner. Similarly, we cannot make a practical commitment to every religious practice, we must do something specific. We can be open to the wisdom of all religious heritages without perpetually shopping for a religious practice that suits us. The realistic person must at some point stop shopping and buy something. And when we actually buy with our time and energy a particular religious practice, we find ourselves joined with others in a sociological religious lineage.

Not only is every religion a sociological reality, but also every healthy human society includes some sort of healthy religion. A strictly secular society is a sick society; it is a society without a Spirit foundation, a society without a means of nurturing its relationship with the Infinite Ground of Being. Such a society is adrift in human-made finite relationships that are disconnected from all Eternal anchoring. By “Eternal anchoring” I do not mean an anchor around our necks but a touch-stone with Reality. Even our own solitary liberty is lost if we lose touch with the encompassing Reality in relation to which such liberty takes place. **Since humanity is constituted as a capacity for Infinite relatedness, every healthy society must include healthy religious practices. And since humanity is both solitary and communal, every healthy religious practice is both solitary and communal.**

Even unhealthy societies can be viewed as religious. The super-secularity of modern society might be viewed as a sick religion--a willful escape from dealing with ultimate matters and an enthrallment with finite processes. At the same time, secularity can be viewed as a wholesome “religious” correction to those religious societies which tend to demean finite processes and thereby escape from the actual Infinite Ground of Being into dream worlds that do not contain the tragedy and glory of our life-and-death processes. **Sick societies are religiously sick, and healthy societies are religiously healthy: religion and society are inseparable dynamics.**

Good religion entails both a disengagement from the existing society and a contributing to that same society. I am going to use Christian monasticism as my metaphor. A prospective monk or nun leaves society and joins an alien type of community, one that is significantly different from the general society. Then from this grounding in an alien social form, monks and nuns make contributions to the society they have left. These contributions may be simple services that are being neglected by the society at large. Or these contributions may be stern challenges to the general society--perhaps to be more mature in Spirit; perhaps to be more just in political, economic, or cultural practices; perhaps to avoid the crisis of ecological doom and love the whole of our living planet. **Good religion serves the whole society, yet it can do so only because it is also a departure from the whole society.**

In the best of Christian monasticism, positive communal practice was described with these three strange and often offensive categories: **poverty, obedience, and chastity.** I want to look beyond the surface meanings of these categories. I want to explore those deeper meanings that tell us what any effective religious communal practice is about. In order to do this, I will focus on the following clarifying phrases: Poverty means an **economy of non-clinging.** Obedience means a **polity of engagement.** And chastity means a **culture of willing one thing.**

The Economy of Non-clinging

“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Spirit inheritance.”¹

No word in the modern English language is more distasteful to the common mind of industrialized humanity than the word “poverty.” With that word are associated other words like “lazy,” “dirty,” “despicable,” “unfortunate,” “disadvantaged,” and “failure.” Successful living, in the mindset of modern society, begins with getting out of poverty and on the road toward “making something of yourself.” The very thought of giving up all one’s worldly goods and worldly ambitions and joining a fringe group of simple-living nobodies is appalling to most people today. Yet this is precisely what the traditional Christian monastic did.

But the external trappings of a simplified economic life-style is not the essence of what classical monastic poverty was all about. The Spirit meaning of “poverty” is an interior **non-clinging** to all the passing items of human life. “Monastic poverty” in its Spirit essence is similar to the experience of a Buddhist meditator who sits and witnesses that all things--including all bodily sensations, all emotions, all thoughts, and all ego constructions--are passing away. All things come, and all things go. No thing is permanent. Death takes everything. This awareness is “poverty” in the Spirit sense.

Poverty is also a manifestation of Spirit **freedom.** Christopher Fry in his play *The Sleep of Prisoners* had his actors pronounce the word freedom as “Free Doom.” This is a brilliant insight into the true nature of Spirit freedom. Freedom is a doom to all those factors that hold us prisoner. Freedom is the doom of childhood. Freedom is the doom of human culture. Freedom is the doom of all lazy drift with the course of history or with the propensities of your or my particular psyche. Freedom emerges in human experience with the doom of the childhood ego, the doom of the first adult ego, the doom of every ego we have or will ever construct. Freedom emerges with the arrival of a full experience of **death.** Freedom emerges when we experience what the best of Christian monastic heritage has been pointing to with the word “poverty.” Poverty is the economics of non-clinging.

This inward non-clinging from all things is a much sterner demand than simply giving away worldly goods or joining a group of persons who are living simply. Joining a monastic group

¹ Luke 6:20

seldom if ever meant becoming completely destitute in the external sense. Food and lodging and time for Spirit endeavor are luxuries that the destitute do not have. Actually there is no virtue in volunteering to be destitute. Poverty in the external sense of being completely helpless, of being totally insecure about even the very next meal, is not something for which anyone rationally volunteers. Such external poverty is not ennobling; it is not freedom, it is not Spirit. Internal poverty is Spirit. Internal poverty is freedom. Only internal poverty is the entry into the ennobling riches of our humanity.

Such a definition of “poverty” means that one might be externally wealthy and still be poor in the Spirit sense. Let us not forget, however, that Jesus taught that it is harder for a rich person to enter the Spirit life than for a camel to crawl through the eye of a needle. Why? Because the more you have the more you have to not cling to, and thus the more temptation you have to cling. So if you wish to imagine yourself as both rich and non-clinging, then you will at least have to set aside a modest amount of your wealth for your own personal needs and cultural enrichment and then use the rest of your wealth in a creative fashion--serving in a thoughtful way the dire needs of the times in which you live. In such a case, you might be manifesting non-clinging. But if you are merely investing your first million in order to make a second million with the aim of moving on into greater and greater economic security and power, you can be sure that you are clinging.

And Spirit poverty is more than non-clinging to money and possessions. It also includes non-clinging to status, to human relationships, to good or horrible feelings, and even to our own thoughts.

When I was in college, a series of events startled me into an awareness of the importance of the inward journey. I had encounters with religious speakers who affected me deeply. I also was affected by reading the Gospel of Matthew, by a personal struggle with pacifism and the Korean War, by a horror over the potentialities of the nuclear bomb, by a reading of Einsteinian physics, by an exploration of hypnotism, and by challenges involving the sharing of my inner life in speeches. It does not matter, I suppose, what these occasions were or how they worked together to call me from my rather standard life. I was finishing a degree in mathematics and physics and planning to get a doctorate and be a university math professor. But suddenly that entire dream became suffocating. I disappointed my parents, breaking with their hopes and dreams for me. I shocked many of my friends. I left a very promising career. I took up a career I knew almost nothing about and in which I was clearly inept. I managed to take my love of physics, math, and science with me, but I took these treasures on a new journey. And this journey was something more than the fact that I went to a Methodist seminary, became a local church pastor, entered the army as a chaplain, joined an order of Christian families, and became a teacher of Christian renewal. These various steps were outcomes of my initial moves toward non-clinging to mainstream society. This journey continues.

Yet, inwardly releasing worldly status, money, and possessions is not the hardest part of the Spirit journey of poverty. Much harder for most of us is releasing our ideas, our philosophies of life, our religious beliefs. These intellectual things are also finite. These intellectual things also pass away. Intellectual things can also be bondages that rob us of our freedom. Spirit is not an idea. Spirit is not a philosophy of life. Spirit is the freedom we experience when we realize that all our wisdom is fragile and surrounded by Mystery. Compared to a full understanding of the Wholeness of Reality, all our scientific knowledge, all our existential wisdom, all our social and technological skills, are simply ignorance. We are ignorant, however wise we may be. In fact, a firm knowledge of our ignorance is our very greatest wisdom. The wise person knows that we can nothing know. The wise scientist knows that the more we know the more we know that we don't know. Poverty in the intellectual realm means not clinging to the present state of our

knowing and thus being open to learning something new we have never even thought about before.

We can also cling to our feelings. Feelings, like thoughts, come and go. All feelings are finite states that pass away. If we are clinging to some particular way of feeling good, we will be disappointed with our lives on those days when this “feeling good” has passed away and feeling “not so good” fills the cavity of our feeling awareness. Poverty as non-clinging is an openness to feel whatever we are feeling plus an openness to experience these feelings pass away and be replaced by different feelings. Poverty means living beyond attachment or aversion to any feeling we might be feeling. Feelings are signals to us about our environment and about our relationships with that environment. The pain of touching a hot stove signals us to remove our hand before it burns up. The grief over a lost loved one signals us that we have valued that person. The fear of an onrushing truck signals us that we value our lives and need to use this emotional energy to move our body out of the way. Every feeling is a gift, a useful signal which our awake consciousness can be aware of and can use wisely. Non-clinging means open-hearted attention to our actual feelings moment by moment, rather than clinging to the illusion that some pleasant feeling is not passing away or clinging to the illusion that some tough feeling is not part of our lives.

Deep as this is, non-clinging to our thoughts and feelings is not the most profound aspect of Spirit poverty. A still deeper experience has to do with non-clinging to the passing ego. To understand this, we need to examine again what is indicated by this word “ego.” These three dynamics are aspects of one and the same process: having a human personality, having an ego-awareness, and having a sense of reality. Let us picture our sense of reality as an eggshell that surrounds our ego which is living inside that shell. Spirit in this picture begins as a crack in the eggshell.

Our sense of reality is always smaller than the Fullness of Reality. So the crack in our eggshell is caused by that Fullness. The ego is also like a projector which is projecting the eggshell onto the screen of outward “reality.” So when the eggshell is cracked the ego is also fractured.

We cannot live without a personality, an ego, and a sense of reality. So the cracking of our sense of reality and the fracturing of our ego are serious matters. Such events usually get our attention. And that awareness might be acted out in one of these three directions: (1) ending our own lives because we cannot stand to live without a particular ego or a particular sense of reality that we are used to having; (2) denying the crack in our sense of reality and the accompanying fracture in our ego and thus continuing forward in an active pretense that nothing has happened; or (3) accepting the challenge to become detached from our current sense of reality and our current ego and moving ahead--forging a way to live in the chaos of this disturbance of our previous lives and in this challenge to build our lives anew.

This choice to forge ahead entails participation in two processes: (1) choosing to live within the dreadful trauma and/or wondrous fascination of this Greater Reality that has crashed into us and cracked our eggshell and (2) taking up the task of reconstructing our ego and our sense of reality so that our ego's sense of reality fits better with the Reality that has crashed into us. We cannot live without a sense of reality and without the centered ego-awareness that accompanies our sense of reality. It is appropriate for the ego to preserve its sense of reality rather than be a mere nothing driven by every wind of experience that comes by. Nevertheless, being fully open to Greater Reality does mean becoming an ego-less nothing. Yet our Spirit story does not end there. Becoming an ego-less nothing moves on into the experience of integrating into a new ego-awareness the notion that my ego is finite and continually vulnerable to further fracturing.

Such fracturing is present whenever we are aware of these painfully urgent questions: “Who am I?” “What do I?” and “How be I?” Yet when we surrender to asking and answering these primal questions, crisis and pain need not be the final outcome. Spirit aliveness can be joy as well as pain. Spirit is fascination as well as dread. Spirit can be tranquility in the midst of infinitely searing demands for courageous intensity.

But the initial experience of Spirit remains a taste of death and a courageous movement toward non-clinging to the passing aspects of our living. Spirit is born with the death of the ego, with non-clinging to the present ego and from every future ego I hope to have. Such ego-death is the beginning of the Spirit journey in human living. Such ego-death walks with us every step of the way on our continuance of the Spirit journey. And such ego-death was given the name “poverty” in the heritage of Christian monasticism.

We cannot always tell from outward appearances whether or not a person is living in a state of non-clinging to all things, but non-clinging does make a difference in all aspects of our living. It can mean a the lack of panic over both success or failure, a lack of panic over having little or having plenty, a lack of panic over winning or losing, living or dying.

Jesus told a parable in which he indicated that the Spirit life was like the man who dug up a treasure in a field. He reburied this treasure and then sold **everything he had** to buy that field. Poverty or non-clinging means selling everything we have to buy a Spirit life. Non-clinging is the first step. Without this step, we do not have a Spirit life. Our Spirit life is only a hidden potential that we have not yet realized.

Thus it is necessary to maintain that the **economy of non-clinging** is a foundational dynamic for any vital religious community .

“Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the Spirit inheritance.”

The Polity of Engagement

“Learn to obey. Only he who obeys a rhythm superior to his own is free.”²

As poverty, Spirit freedom means non-clinging to all one’s finite relationships. Spirit freedom also means engagement in creating one’s specific relationships with everything and hence creating one’s next specific ego-centeredness. Such engagement can be called “**obedience**” to the Infinite, for the Ground of our Being requires of us active participation in the construction of our specific lives. “Obedience” is another offensive word in our contemporary culture. We correctly reject slavish knuckling under to social authority. At the same time, most members of our culture are attached to an illusory individualism that fosters rebellion against the inescapable actualities of our social existence. We do not live our lives alone, and we do not live our lives under conditions of our own choosing. Each of us must obey or disobey living the life that is being given to us.

Full Spirit realization is both freedom and obedience. If we are not being obedient to The-Way-Life-Is, we are not free. And if we are not being our freedom, we are not being obedient to The-Way-Life-Is, for freedom itself is part of The-Way-Life-Is. We are free when we have been liberated from our attachments and aversions to passing realities. And these “passing realities” include all the “selves” we have ever been or ever will become. Spirit obedience is not becoming re-enthralled with the passing things of our lives or becoming reinvested in being a particular ego. Spirit obedience means becoming engaged within the specific actualities of our passing

² Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God* (Simon and Schuster, New York: 1960) page 68

situation while remaining non-clinging to those same passing actualities.

Let me illustrate this “obedience” in a very simple way. I am now 68 years old. Disobedience would be in operation if I pretended that I was 52. And disobedience would also be in operation if I pretended that I was 92 and thus had very little strength or time left to live. Obedience means hitting the nail of actuality on the head with the hammer of my action. Such action is properly called “obedience” because I am not myself choosing the actualities of my life; I am responding to situations that are not of my own making.

We sometimes hear popular life-teachers challenging us to “create our own reality.” But such talk is at best a half-truth. Here is the true half of what they are saying: human imagination shapes everything it observes; so, in that sense, we do create the reality we see. It is also true that the choices we make affect the way our lives work out. Our lives are not predetermined: we are not discs of recorded music just playing themselves out. But the actuality of human choice and creativity is only half the truth. However determinative our choices may be, we do not constitute the basic foundations of our existence nor do we control the specific consequences of our own actions. We never know precisely how our actions will turn out in specific results. Being fully obedient means leaving the results of our actions to the actual Mysterious Determiner of what happens. By “Mysterious Determiner” I do not mean a Big Person living in the “top story” of the cosmos interfering with things down here below. I mean that actual Mystery-of-it-All which enigmatically, irresistibly determines the outcomes of all our living.

Here is a paradoxical truth: the Determiner of our lives has determined that we are to be freedom and thus share in determining outcomes. This freedom includes creating our sense of reality, but this sense of reality is never complete and is often dead wrong. The Fullness of Reality is larger than any sense of reality we have created. So we, in our freedom, are in perpetual dialogue with Reality for our always-limited senses of reality. As freedom, we participate in determining our destiny, but even our freedom is part of what Reality is determining for us to be. If we refuse to be our freedom, we are using our freedom to rebel against Reality.

If our essential freedom has been lost in some sort of bondage, the first step toward restoring our freedom is admitting our bondage. Admitting our bondage is an act of freedom. Admitting how we are stuck confronts the actual possibilities of being released. The Infinite Determiner is always at work to set us fully free. Obedience means going along with that program for our lives. Obedience means affirming that our freedom is good for us. And obedience means affirming those specific outward and inward conditions within which freedom must perform.

In classical Christian theology, this inescapable and all-powerful Determiner of our daily destiny is named “God.” The word “God” implies devotion, respect, loyalty, and the source of meaning for our lives. To use the word “God,” meaningfully, therefore, implies rendering obedience to this Determiner, this Ground of our being, this Mystery which we confront continually.

Christian monasticism also used the word “obedience” for their relationship with monastic rules. But monastic obedience always meant something far more profound than obedience to a set of rules or to the rulings of a specific prior. All these lesser obediences had validity only insofar as they were set within the context of being obedient to God--that is, obedient to the actual Determiner of destiny in a particular hour of history. Anthony, one of the earliest Christian monastics, understood his flight to the desert as obedience to God because God, Anthony intuited, required this response to counter the trends toward religious superficiality in Anthony’s society. Benedict and his monks (and later nuns) also understood their construction

of stable, hard-laboring cells of civilization-building contemplatives as obedience to the Sovereign God of history. The obedience each monk or nun rendered to his or her prior or to the rule of his or her order were merely specifics within their larger obedience to the God of history. This larger obedience, when an order was being faithful to it, shaped what the rules of that order were chosen to be and also who were chosen to be its priors and how these priors applied the rules.

When we are clear about this master context, we can see that a truly sincere monk or nun was making an act of freedom as well as an act of obedience to God by leaving the social herd, joining the monastery, and thereby doing the specific deeds this particular group of monastic actors saw being required of them by the actual life situations that were confronting them. Only when we see Christian monastic obedience in the context of obedience to God, do we see truly what monastic obedience to rules and priors was all about.

“Spirit obedience” emphasizes **action**. All Spirit living is action; without the action of our Spirit freedom, Spirit is not realized. Even poverty (non-clinging) is an active surrender of whatever state of life we are in. This surrender is made meaningful by the fact that all things are passing. So this surrender may seem at first like something passive. But the surrender to non-clinging is a very bold and active step. Obedience (engagement) is a still more active step than the surrender to non-clinging (poverty). Obedience is the active dealing with the real limitations and real possibilities of our actual situations. Obedience is the freedom of adapting to limitations and moving into specific possibilities in a creative and forceful fashion. Nikos Kazantzakis expresses the feel of obedient action in this bit of poetry:

Action is the widest gate of deliverance. It alone can answer the questionings of the heart. Amid the labyrinthine complexities of the mind it finds the shortest route. No, it does not “find”--it creates its way, hewing to right and left through resistances of logic and matter.³

Such action cannot be reduced to being obedient to a set of rules or to the rulings of a religious community. Such action means being obedient to the times in which we live. It means being obedient to the life situation in which we are fated. It means being obedient to our own freedom to create and forge a relevant life in our actual circumstances. If the rules of some religious community have indeed been constructed to assist us to do such Spirit obedience, then Spirit obedience can include obedience to the rules of a religious community.

For example, the practice of Buddhist meditation requires discipline and this discipline has been expressed in rules. The practice of a Christian monastic life has also required discipline and rules. Any practice of Spirit living requires discipline, hence rules of some sort. (Avoid x, do y every day, do z every week.) Spirit maturation requires persisting day after day in some sort of ordered fashion. This is why “obedience” is a better term for Spirit-engagement than “spontaneity.” Spontaneity can be understood as a good quality if “spontaneity” means the freedom to trust your intuitions and feelings readily. “Spontaneity” can also be a synonym for “Spirit freedom.” But “spontaneity” as an ethical category can be misleading. Spirit freedom is not merely emotional spontaneity, because Spirit freedom often acts over against customary feelings and makes room for the emergence of new feelings perhaps never felt before. Feelings, in addition to being felt and acknowledged, must also be managed by that deeper spontaneity we are calling “Spirit freedom.” A merely emotional spontaneity can be inconsistent with obeying a set of rules, but Spirit freedom is not inconsistent with obeying a properly conceived set of rules. One can even do such obedience spontaneously. The action of being obedient to a religious discipline can widen freedom and train us to be creative and constructive and inspired in our whole living including our openness to our own emotional spontaneity.

³ Kazantzakis, *Ibid* page 99

Dietrich Bonhoeffer pictures our obligation to God as the responsibility of disciplined freedom. Disciplined freedom is contrasted with both undisciplined freedom (license) and unfree discipline (duty). Obedience to God is a free venture; it is thoughtful and flexible rather than a dutiful discipline of rigid moralism, opinionated certainty, or self-righteous correctness. Such dutiful discipline is simply a form of self-justifying pride. On the other hand, obedience to God is disciplined living as opposed to sloth, greed, lust, jealousy, envy, or rage. All these “deadly sins” are forms of self-indulgent undiscipline. Rage, for example, is more than having feelings of anger; it is an undisciplined flying off the handle into some self-indulgent or thoughtless acting out of our angry feelings. Obedience to God means both the affirmation of all our feelings and not clinging to any of our feelings. Obedience to God means freely being our feelings, but also managing our feelings. We can be our feelings, express and use our feelings, and, at the same time, refrain from acting out our feelings in an unintentional manner.

The dreadful depth of the challenge of Spirit obedience is well expressed by Nikos Kazantzakis when he describes Spirit as a harsh interior cry, a Commander crying out to the resistant human ego:

“Learn to obey. Only he who obeys a rhythm superior to his own is free.

“Learn to command. Only he who can give commands may represent me here on earth.

“Love responsibility. Say: ‘It is my duty, and mine alone, to save the earth. If it is not saved, then I alone am to blame.’ . . . ”⁴

This dreadful cry from the depths of our Spirit being rips away every excuse for not living a committed, effective, and even heroic life. We cannot blame our parents. We cannot blame the politicians. We cannot blame the general circumstances. We cannot blame anything anymore. “I alone am to blame.” This statement is not a denial of the responsibility held by others. It is not an exaggeration of my gifts and powers. It is a simple affirmation that Spirit is a call to actively be our essential freedom and thus to see our ever-present ability to respond. Since I am **able to respond** to everything, I am **responsible** for everything.

Since I am “**response--able**” to respond to all the issues that threaten this planet, I am **responsible** for this entire planet. Spirit, if I choose to be Spirit, elects me president of the planet. No one else is more to blame than I. I take on the entire guilt of humanity’s failure to live appropriately. I, on behalf of all humanity, take the next step in humanity’s repentance from sloth, illusion, hatred, and despair. Yes, living my Spirit life means loving responsibility. My entire life becomes obedience to the total needs of my era. This cry rips through my guts and sends me on a journey my cowardly ego would never have selected: “I and I alone am to blame.”

This cry, paradoxical as it may seem, propels each of us to join or organize communities of people who will join us in hearing this cry, “We and we alone are to blame.” And the task of these communities of Spirit obedience is to awaken all humanity to this same cry, “We and we alone are to blame.” This commission to assume the blame and to invite all humanity to join us in assuming the blame is the bottom line of the “calling” to Spirit obedience.

A wholesome Spirit community constructs its rules and its decision-making processes within this context Spirit obedience to the times in which we live. Therefore, the polity of a healthy Spirit community is the polity of engagement; it is the polity of obedience to the actual challenges of our lives.

“Learn to obey. Only he who obeys a rhythm superior to his own is free.”

⁴ Kazantzakis Ibid. page 68

The Culture of Willing One Thing

“Purity of heart is to will one thing.”⁵

“Willing one thing” will be our primary image for exploring the deep meaning of Christian monastic chastity. Chastity is not primarily about sex. Celibacy and marriage may be symbols for the Spirit essence of chastity, but sexual covenants are not chastity itself. Chastity is the decision to be a Spirit being as the one thing that one’s whole life is all about. Chastity is singularity of will. Chastity is willing one thing. Chastity is purity of heart.

We often pine to get our lives put together. Chastity is getting your life put together, but not in the sense usually meant. Finding chastity does not mean that we have finally arrived at an absolute theology, the final philosophy of life, the full knowledge of good and evil, the ethical morality for which there are no exceptions, the habits that we can guiltlessly practice forever, the vocation that will never change, the stability that will never again be upset. Rather, chastity is the coming together of one’s commitment to live the Spirit life--a life in which all these types of finite change remain.

The “togetherness” of chastity is accomplished by making our relationship with the Infinite central in our lives. Such commitment to being a Spirit person can sustain us and clarify one’s identity even though all aspects of one’s finite lives are in total upheaval. For example, I can be undergoing a huge change in my philosophy of life or in my basic theology. I can be undergoing a change in vocation, in family life, in location, in life style. But none of these arduous changes can fundamentally shake me if I am centered in the foundational commitment to being a Spirit being. This unshakability is present because none of the changes in the finite conditions of my life can alter the fact that I am a relationship with the Infinite.

Chastity also implies trusting the Infinite. If I am a chaste person, I believe that I am welcomed home to the actuality of my Infinite relatedness in spite of all the efforts I have made to flee and rebel against that relatedness. Chastity rests in the trust that I am accepted just as I am, a finite being, fragile, vulnerable, guilty of flight and rebellion, inclined to flight and rebellion, experiencing despair over my inability to escape the limiting and challenging power of the Infinite. Chastity rests in the trust that my external life situation is appropriate for me, however challenging. In this sense, my external situation is wholly good. Chastity rests in the trust that my past, whatever it has been, is over and forgiven. Chastity rests in the trust that my future, whatever it will be, is an opportunity for full Spirit aliveness. Chastity rests in the trust that I, whoever I am in my current journey toward Spirit fulfillment, am accepted, am welcomed home to the Spirit journey by the Infinite Trustworthiness.

When such chastity is our life experience, then our lives have indeed come together in an enduring manner. Chastity, so understood, is a singularity of heart--that is, loving God. Chastity is discovering a way to will one thing--that is, loving God. If we attempt to make some finite relationship into our singularity, that relationship will be fraught with duplicity. Our play cannot be the only thing our life is about. Our work cannot be the only thing our life is about. Our marriage cannot be the only thing our life is about. Our parenthood cannot be the only thing our life is about. Our security cannot be the only thing our life is about. Our pleasure cannot be the only thing our life is about. Our loving and being loved cannot be the only thing our life is about. Our knowledge cannot be the only thing our life is about. Our ethical righteousness cannot be the only thing our life is about. Each of these quests for more alive living competes with all our other finite quests. Work competes with family. Pleasure competes with righteousness. And so on. Each of these finite quests is simply one part of the manyness of our lives. If we attempt to make any one of these parts into the whole, we do not succeed, we

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing* (book title)

merely destroy or pervert all the parts of our lives. Chastity, being a relationship with the Infinite, is the only way that life can actually come together into a singularity of living.

The singularity of chastity includes non-clinging to all the finite parts of our lives. The singularity of chastity also includes engagement in all those same finite parts of our lives. And such engagement does not undo the non-clinging. Chastity means willing the one thing of being non-clinging-engagement in the central core of our lives.

Here is a second major image for understanding chastity. Chastity means being **“in-but-not-of the finite world.”** Chastity may include playing wholeheartedly and yet being aware that play is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include working wholeheartedly and yet being aware that work is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include being married wholeheartedly and yet being aware that marriage is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include parenting wholeheartedly and yet being aware that parenthood is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include wholeheartedly making our lives secure and yet being aware that security is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include wholeheartedly finding pleasure and yet being aware that pleasure is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include wholeheartedly loving someone and being loved by someone, and yet loving and being loved is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include wholeheartedly seeking knowledge and yet being aware that knowledge is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include wholeheartedly seeking to be ethically righteous and yet being aware that righteousness is not our singular happiness. Chastity may include being wholeheartedly alive and yet being aware that mere survival is not our singular happiness. Chastity means being **in-but-not-of** the finite world. Chastity means a lifetime commitment to non-clinging and, as a non-clinging person, to being engaged in the destiny of my own life and thus in the destiny of my own era.

In what sense does the life-style of chastity have something to do with sex? The Spirit conception of chastity does not have anything to do with sex directly. Chastity is a “mystic marriage” to the Infinite. Becoming sexually celibate has been used as a symbol for this marriage to the Infinite. The sexual covenant of loyalty to a spouse (marriage) has also been used as a symbol for this same marriage to the Infinite. But the sexual symbol is not the same as the Spirit reality. The symbol, if authentically used, can point to the Spirit reality of chastity. But every symbol is a finite reality: chastity is a relationship with the Infinite.

This understanding of Spirit chastity means that a celibate person may renounce a celibate vow and marry a sexual partner without thereby becoming unchaste. Chastity might even require that. And a sexually married person might work through a divorce and still be a chaste person. Chastity is a deeper reality than the sexual symbolism that has been used to express chastity. Even if a person remains celibate for an entire lifetime, that person is only chaste if he or she is “in-but-not-of” that very celibacy. And if a person is married and remains sexually loyal to that spouse for an entire lifetime, that person is only chaste if he or she is “in-but-not-of” that finite marriage. The Spirit reality of chastity is not synonymous with the particulars of its finite symbolisms. Chastity, properly understood, is not sexual morality, nor is it an indulgence in libidinal license. Chastity is a singular Spirit commitment to live “in-but-not-of” one’s entire maze of finite relationships.

“In-but-not-of” means the chaste person does not fit in and does not try to fit in anyplace. The chaste person knows that he or she will never fit in--not in this present world, not in some future world. The chaste person is a perpetual misfit. The chaste person is free to be loyal to the values of the established world to the extent that those values support an authentic response to the Infinite. And the chaste person is free to be loyal to the values of the disestablishment to the extent that those values support the same Spirit life. The Spirit life has become the singular loyalty that protects the chaste person from all fanaticisms--either unambiguously protecting the status quo or unambiguously creating a new status quo. The chaste person may play the role of

a loyal citizen within the established order. The chaste person may also play the role of an equally loyal member of a revolutionary movement. But in neither role does the chaste person find absolute correctness, for the chaste person knows that there is no absolute correctness either in protecting the establishment or in building a new establishment. Both pro-establishment forces and disestablishment forces are subject to severe criticisms from the perspective of living the Spirit life. And this is what chastity is: **singularity** in living the Spirit life, of being **in-but-not-of** the finite world.

Such chastity gives the chaste person an ethical foundation upon which to make every choice including the choices to be or not be the pro-establishment and to be or not to be the disestablishment. The chaste person can assist the pro-establishment to conserve what needs to be conserved and assist the disestablishment to oppose what needs to be deconstructed and share in the creative labor of constructing the new forms that need to be constructed. The chaste person knows that every social vision is finite, that no revolutionary movement will completely succeed nor last forever, that every establishment of society is both somewhat relevant and somewhat obsolete. The chaste person is in-but-not-of every finite set of social conditions because the chaste person lives in lucid relatedness to the Infinite.

Nevertheless, this strange Spirit relatedness to the Infinite provides insight into the possibilities within every finite social process. In times of inflexible stodginess, chastity inclines one to be a radical. In times of social fragmentation and chaos, chastity inclines one to conserve the basic elements of order and to support those old tested values which might provide a consensus for creative social solutions.

Chastity means willing this one thing: being a Spirit being. And “being a Spirit being” means being a relationship with that Infinite Silence which is the Source of all our finite relationships as well as their eternal Tomb.

“Purity of heart is to will one thing.”

The Whole Picture of Communal Practice

“Poverty,” “obedience,” and “chastity” are words drawn from the heritage of Christian monasticism, but the Spirit dynamics described in the above paragraphs are not Christian only; they are present in all vital religious communities. Even people with no religious affiliation whatsoever can see the validity of these dynamics. Every genuine Spirit person is by virtue of that Spirit dedication a member of the economy of non-clinging, the polity of engagement, and the culture of willing one thing.

Once we have seen the universality of these three Spirit dynamics, a fresh question is raised for us: how can these dynamics be most adequately manifest in the times in which we are now living? In the Middle Ages, these dynamics were manifest in celibate religious orders which were renewal forces within Christendom. That society no longer exists. We now have a world-wide, secular, cultural canopy within which many religious communities are functioning. Some religious groups still attempt to reverse this secular state of affairs and force the establishment of a religious civilization: Islamic, Hindu, Jewish, Roman Catholic Christian, or even Protestant Christian. But these efforts only create resentments and further social chaos.

So what do those of us who sense ourselves to be the living descendants of Christian monasticism do with these wondrous dynamics of poverty, obedience and chastity? For fourteen years of my life I participated in an ecumenical Christian order of families. We found these fresh understandings of poverty, obedience and chastity meaningful dynamics for undergirding that experiment in Christian community. However, that community understood

itself to be a renewal force within our ecumenical association of Christian denominations. I now see the futility of being a religious order designed to renew these unrenovable fragments of Christian civilization. Humanity, not Christian civilization, is the society I wish to renew. I want to continue being a Christian. I want to continue being a manifestation of poverty, obedience and chastity. I see myself as some sort of Christian monastic. I see myself and others giving new sociological shape to Christian community within the context of contemporary history.

So this question remains alive for me: what sort of sociological shape are we moving toward? What sort of new communal life must awake Christians create for themselves and their presence in the world. This is still an unanswered question, but this question can be brought into clearer focus by the above clarifications on poverty, obedience, and chastity.

Poverty, obedience, and chastity have been seen and can still be seen as **vows**, vows made to the Infinite and to one another. Making such vows can provide a basic foundation or constitution for a new viable disciplined community of Christian practice. One of the key maladies of modern life is our scatteredness. We lack central focus. Afraid perhaps that we are going to miss something, we become shoppers for and joiners of a wide range of time-consuming activities. Our economic structures also influence us to earn more and more, have more and more, work more and more, and play more and more until we are less and less able to see any focus to our lives. We brag about our modern advantages, yet most tribes of primitive people had more time for nature quests, dance, music, art, religion, and healing celebrations than we do. With the aid of some meaningful vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, perhaps we will be able to cut through the busy trivialities and oppressive superficialities of modern life and find again our Spirit abundance.

What are vows? In order to get some perspective on this question I want to share a quote from the Zen Buddhist teacher, Kasha Uchiyama, on the bodhisattva vow. If you are a Christian-identified person, you might translate his challenge to be a bodhisattva into the parallel challenge to be “in Christ.”

Ordinary people live thinking only about their own personal, narrow circumstances connected with their desires. In contrast to that, a bodhisattva, though undeniably still an ordinary human being like everyone else, **lives by vow**. Because of that, the significance of his or her life is not the same. For us as bodhisattvas, all aspects of life, including the fate of humanity itself, live within us. It is with this in mind that we work to discover and manifest the most vital and alive posture that we can take in living out our life.⁶

What would it mean for those of us who feel the call to be “in Christ” to **live by vow** rather than by desire?

Suppose we made a **vow of poverty** (that is, a **vow of non-clinging**) that went something like this:

“I vow to dedicate all my resources of money, property, body, and psyche to the causes of love in this moment of history. I vow to establish in my own way a style of voluntary simplicity in which I take good care of my self (survival-wise, health-wise, culture-wise) and then use to that end all the rest of my resources to initiate and support profound social transformation and the growth of a valid form of Christian resurgence.”

Secondly, what might be contained in a vital **vow of obedience**, (that is, **engagement**)?

⁶ Kasha Uchiyama, *Opening the Hand of Thought*, 1993

Such a vow would include choosing our engagements in the light of viable strategies that actually move this historical situation from where we are toward the social future necessary for full justice and ecological wellbeing. This means giving up our desire to be a hermit or a non-controversial person or a busy superficial reformer or a cynical victim who keeps claiming that nothing constructive can be done.

If we choose to be Christian-identified persons, then our vital vow of obedience will also include vowing responsibility for the reinvention of a viable Christian practice. The specifics of such a vow might include promising to participate in (1) an hour of effective solitary time every day, (2) meeting with other resurgent Christians two hours every week, and (3) devoting time and money, thought and energy to giving legs to some viable movement of Christian resurgence that genuinely walks the walk of Christ.

Thirdly, I have attempted to express in the following poem a viable Christian **vow of chastity, a vow of willing one thing.**

The past is past, I vow to let it go.
The future is coming, I vow to open to it.
The present is glorious, I vow to embrace it.
My life is accepted, I vow to accept it.

Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to renounce them.
The deluded are numberless, I vow to liberate them.
Injustices are rampant, I vow to correct them.
Earth restoration is critical, I vow to accomplish it.

Spirit teachings are boundless, I vow to master them.
The Silent Void is devastating, I vow to trust it.
The Boundless Fullness is overwhelming, I vow to love it.
Realistic living is impossible, I vow to vow it.

Though this poem has the form of twelve vows, it is actually vowing one thing: being the relationship with the Infinite that I actually am in the essence of my being. The poem has three stanzas: knowing (stanza one), doing (stanza two), and being (stanza three). In my knowing, doing, and being I am vowing the impossible possibility of fully being my Spirit being.

Such vital vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity might orient the awake and awakening Christian-identified persons of our era toward being the presence of an “in Christ” community. And such community, along with other religious communities, would be an active presence of Spirit energy for meeting our critical needs for social transformation and our critical needs for revitalizing the journey toward Spirit maturity in the life of each and every singular human being.

Poem six: We not I

We not I
will save the planet.
We not I
will give witness to the truth.
We not I
will do the social transformation.
We not I
will provide the exemplary example.

I alone can accomplish little.
Jesus called disciples.
The Buddha trained monks.
No isolated person is even remembered.

I can assist We into being
We can assist I into fuller being
The proper focus
of my attention is
We not I.

We not I
is my gift to history.
We not I
is my identity.
We not I
is my vocation.
We not I
is my style of being.

I
the singular person
am but a bit of bone,
muscle, fat, and ego
through which
some We of Spirit
might
pass.