

Dear People Whom God Loves,

ONE CHRISTIAN'S STORY

Everything starts and ends with God. The way that we image God has a profound influence on the way we live. My image of God has changed through the years. Our images of God all fall far short of what God is, but some images are more helpful than others.

Jesus called God *Abba*. This reminds us that Jesus knew God loved him as a good mommy or daddy loves a little child. He taught his followers to pray saying "Our Abba". This tells me that Jesus believed that God was Abba...not just for him but for everyone. The scriptures echo this by saying "God is love". This is more than saying that God loves us. I understand this to mean that to be God means to be love. That is why I like to use the word *Love* to refer to God.

This is how my journey has changed through the years. When I was young, I thought of God as a great super being far off in heaven which was up there beyond the sky. From talking to people, I realize that that image is rather common for a start.

I also thought that God was a stern and strict judge. God knew everything that I did and even everything that I thought. God would punish me for every bad action and every bad thought. If I was good enough, I would go to heaven when I died and would be happy forever. If I was not good enough, I would go to hell when I died and would suffer the torture of flames forever and ever. There would be no end to the punishment.

As I look back, I was motivated to be good, not because it was virtuous, but because I was scared not to. Love has little chance to grow in such a situation. Fortunately, I did experience love, but it did not come from religion and church.

Somewhere along the way, I gradually came to believe that God loves all of us. There was no specific moment. I can't pinpoint anything. It was a gradual evolution. This made a great and positive

difference in my life. At the same time, God was, in my belief, a powerful being somewhere out there. Still distant. God (distant) loves us.

The next shift took place about 1971. I was reading the book ***Man Becoming*** by Gregory Baum. I realized that even though I believed that God loves us, I was still imaging God as a great powerful human-like being. I began to realize that God was not a being, that all of these "being" images were not very helpful. It was a very fuzzy notion in my mind, but it was striking. It shifted the way I was believing.

About ten years later, I was saying night prayers from a little prayer book that I would use. At the beginning was the phrase: "God is light". As I said that phrase, I entered into an altered state of consciousness. No words. A way of knowing that did not involve thinking. I pursued that. I didn't realize it at the time, but I had stumbled into centering prayer. That is the way that life usually is with me. I just seem to bumble along.

Next, I remembered that Scripture says, "God is Love". I had always thought that that meant God loves us. I then realized that that was a superficial understanding. I realized that it was saying that to be God meant to be Love... to be infinite, mysterious, compassionate, understanding, merciful, forgiving healing love. Love is not a being. Yet it is real. Love is spirit, not something. This love is not someone like we are someone. This spirit is knowledge and love. This spirit is so much more than someone. This Love is not a person, but is personal. The word *personal* points to a reality that is so much more than a person.

Remember that all the words we use can only point to what God is. They cannot plumb what God is. The traditional way of understanding this applies to all of our words. To use the word *love*. God is like human love. God is not like human love. God is far more than human love.

Love (God) is not a being. Love (God) is the source of all beings. Sometimes the phrase used to express this mystery is *pregnant void*. God is *no kind of thing*. Pregnant. This *no kind of thing* is infinite fullness from which all kinds of beings come. Perhaps a curious phrase, but I find it helpful.

This reminds us that God is not the universe and that the universe is not God. Also, it reminds us that Love is sustaining the universe at every moment. So we might say that while God is not the universe, God is intimate to the universe. When we speak of Love as the source of the universe, we call God *Father*.

Also, remembering Love (God) as source reminds us that we are dependent and can't control everything. Furthermore, if Love is the source of who we are, becoming love must be what we are meant to be.

A word of caution. When we speak about the Trinity, one God in three divine persons. I find it almost impossible to speak well about this. My words will be either to speak about the one God in a way that doesn't distinguish among the three divine Persons, or to speak about the three divine Persons in a way that says there are three Gods. Our doctrine of the Blessed Trinity is the formulation we use to point to this mystery that we cannot plumb. I find the words of the great theologian, Karl Rahner, helpful. This is a paraphrase. We cannot know the inner life of God. However, because the one God is experienced by us in these three ways, it must resemble what God is.

We must always remember how limited our human reason is and expect that we can't contain God in our words.

We also believe as Christians that Jesus is a full human being just like us, and at the same time that the fullness of God is in Jesus. So we speak of Jesus as fully human and fully divine. It is helpful to me to remember that, with these mysteries, it is good to hold together two poles that appear contradictory. We embrace the truth in each one,

even though our human reason can't reconcile them. There is truth that is beyond what human reason can tell us. Again, we must admit that human understanding is good but limited.

This part of the doctrine tells us that Love not only wanted to bring forth creation, including us humans but, in some mysterious way, to live in humanity. Love is self-emptying and chooses to live mysteriously in our human condition. If we want to know how God wants us humans to live, we look to how Jesus lived. Jesus was a healer of wounds: physical, mental, and spiritual. He embraced the outcasts of his society and religion (which were intertwined). He helped them to believe that they were Love's beloved. Speaking to the chief priests and elders, he said, "The tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the reign of God ahead of you". They, rather than the former, got what Jesus was all about. They were following him.

Following Jesus, from my experience, means desiring and allowing Love to transform us inside so that we come closer to seeing things as Love sees them and to live in a way that conforms to that transformation. I see prayer as mostly meaning that we are not telling God what to do, not trying to convince God to help us, but that we surrender to Love so Love can change us into what Love wants us to be.

When we speak of Love in this way, we call God, *Son*. Remember my caution about the limitations of our words.

The great Love goes further. Love also lives in us. Remember as Christians we believe that the presence of Love in us is real but not the same as in Jesus. This presence in us is a compassionate and healing presence. This presence is always working in us to help us lose unhealthy self-centeredness and grow more deeply in love. Our task is to desire that and to be willing to allow Love to transform us. Amazingly, Love even helps us to do our part. We are free, but as St. Thomas Aquinas says, "God moves us freely". God is able to move us in a way that allows us to be free. My experience is that

Love often does this through our trials and tragedies, through our relationships, through our mistakes and sins. In my life, my sins and depressions have been my greatest blessings. I see this only in hindsight.

Love is so great and deep that Love finds all kinds of ways to draw us into Love.

When we speak of Love in this way, we call God *Holy Spirit*. At one time I thought of the Blessed Trinity just as a doctrine to be believed. I now see it as the center of life as a Christian. This doctrine began with the deep spiritual experience which the early followers of Jesus had with the risen Jesus.

We believe that Love is saving (healing) us through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. That is why we call Jesus "Savior". This saving did not end with Jesus' resurrection. It continues with Love as Holy Spirit. Jesus said that he would send the Advocate (Holy Spirit).

When we speak of Jesus' resurrection, we don't mean that he came back to life. We mean that he was changed and transformed to the new and glorious life with his Father. In this resurrected state, he was like he was before, but he was also different. The disciples had trouble recognizing him as Jesus, but eventually they did.

Take the example of Mary of Magdala. She knew Jesus very well, but when she found the tomb empty and was crying, she turned around and saw Jesus...but she did not recognize him. She thought that he must be the gardener. Jesus said to her "Mary", and she realized that it was Jesus. This indicates to me that it was Jesus and that he was the same as he had always been. At the same time, he was different. Jesus appeared to other disciples; some of them doubted. In the end, they realized that it was Jesus.

This says to me that when we are resurrected, we will still be ourselves and be the same...and different.

Finally, in his resurrected state, Jesus tells his disciples to go into the whole world and make disciples of all nations. In other words, let them know the "Good News" that Jesus brought. That is: the infinite Love is for everyone and that that Love can transform us to follow Jesus and his embracing love, not only for the "righteous", but for the outcasts of his religious society. Remember, that in Jesus' culture, religion and society were intertwined.

This was the beginning of the Jesus movement. When the Holy Spirit descended on the 120 gathered together in one place, it was the beginning of the community that became the church.

What is the mission of this church? I think that it is more helpful to say that the mission has a church than to say the church has a mission. I say this because the mission came from Jesus before there was a church.

That mission is for us as individuals and as a community to live in our lives the embracing, compassionate love of Jesus. Our living the good news is much more important than speaking the good news. We humans, of course, will always do this imperfectly. But if we keep it as our north star, we are more likely to recognize when we are off track.

This is so important for us because we can so easily think we are doing God's will and are being loving when, in fact, our righteousness is driving us in ways that distort our loving. This is why I find it essential to invite Love to change and transform my words and actions (especially the ones I think are most virtuous). Why? Because our deep destructive parts can hide so easily in our "virtues".

Turning to church. From a Catholic perspective, this is a simple outline of how I see the mission to be accomplished. Remember again. Living the Gospel is fundamental to preaching the Gospel.

The experience that the early followers of Jesus had of him is found in the books we call the New Testament. These are the books that the early church decided best passed on the experience of what Jesus means. These scriptures are irreplaceable for the church. They present the Gospel message.

The word *Catholic* means universal. This means that the Gospel message can be imbedded in and speak to all cultures. We all speak out of the culture in which we live. We believe that the scriptures (this includes the Hebrew Bible) are the word of God. We also believe that they were written by human beings. We believe that the scriptures are inspired. Although their words are a blessing for everyone and every age, they were written for the people of their time and place. This increases the difficulty for the church to pass on the original experience as the message moves into different cultures.

For example, the doctrines that are the means of protecting and passing on the early experience are couched in Western philosophy and thinking. That is beneficial to us Westerners, but has a hard time resonating with those in the East. They have different philosophies and thinking. The temptation then is that we will not distinguish between the message and the culture through which it is expressed. We want to pass on the message, not the culture used to express it.

This is a difficult challenge for church as we become more catholic. That is, passing on the message in our increasingly diverse cultures. It is a difficulty we are facing at the present time.

We believe in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, I believe that the Spirit calls us to keep our hearts and minds open.

Jesus called his followers in his lifetime—and all of us who profess to follow him—to allow the Spirit to bring us to internal transformation so that our hearts, minds, and lives resemble ever more closely the heart, mind, and life of Jesus.

The church does this in different ways. I will speak first about prayer. By prayer I mean mostly our willingness to surrender to Love so that Love may do the transformation within us. My experience is that this has been extremely difficult for me. I surrender somewhat. But I know that deep down there is always some holding back. I hedge my bets. In my gut there is always—but not if it means this or that. I hope that someday, by the grace of God, I can fully say, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done”.

My experience is that this needs to underlie all the things that we do. I believe that when we have this disposition (even imperfectly) this allows the Spirit to work in us more effectively. The Spirit respects our freedom.

We pray not only as individuals but also as people who come together to pray.

When we are participating in the sacraments, we come together as a community to worship. We also want to go deeper than performing a religious duty or earning good marks. We need to have this disposition and also to realize that we need the Spirit’s help to have this disposition . . . not only to begin it . . . but for it to deepen.

We also need it in our good works of compassion, charity, and justice. This can help keep our tricky ego in its proper place. If we see success, we are grateful. If we see failure, we are grateful. Mother Theresa said, “We are called to be faithful, not successful.”

I am embarrassed to write this. I do surrender so poorly. But it is my vision. This is a bare bones outline of the place I see church in the whole big picture.

And then, of course, we end life as we know it in this world. This is the final earthly surrender. I find our doctrine of Purgatory helpful and comforting. Remember, when we speak of heaven, hell, and purgatory, we are not speaking of places but states of being.

This is the way I imagine purgatory. When I die, I believe that Love will say: *I love you, John.* As I rest in Love, Love will also say: *You have done good things and bad things. You have been virtuous and sinful. You have so much self-centeredness in you that keeps you from being the total lover that I have called you and everyone to be. I'm not going to abandon you now. I am going to help you let go of the selfishness to which you are still clinging.*

This will be painful, but I will be with you and holding you. This clinging is like an addiction. You know how difficult and painful it is to let go of an addiction. What you didn't let go of on earth, I will help you let go of now. This pain will have a certain sweetness because you will be happy about the purification.

When you are totally purified and thus a complete lover, you will be in the state of total love. That is the state we call heaven. That is the state to which I am calling all my daughters and sons that have ever been on earth.

Smile, God Loves You,
Father Clay

P.S. Hell is the state of total absence of love. Karl Rahner said that we have to believe in hell, but we don't have to believe that anyone goes there.

P.P.S. I am not a theologian. I don't expect this to be theologically exact in every detail. It is just my story. I hope that it will be helpful to some of you.