

Dear People Whom God Loves,

**LOVE MUST  
BE PRIMARY**

“As Christians we believe with the first letter of John, that God is love. I think that we believe it only superficially. I say that because it doesn’t seem to affect our lives. Belief is not of much value if we don’t follow it.

Also since the book of Genesis says that we are made in the image of God: when we don’t act from love we are not being true to who we are. To me that means that our actions, even with good intentions, will be flawed. Genesis also says that we are made in the likeness of God. That tells me that the road to live out that image is long, rocky and confusing.

In our church we certainly have different poles of thought. Because we are not loving the ones holding the other pole of thought we don’t listen to them very well. That not only hinders our spiritual growth but also confines us to the narrow vision of our own group.

Interestingly, our discussion is seldom about matters of faith (the creeds). We just act as if it were a faith matter. Even when it is close to faith matters, it is about what is the best way to point to the mystery in which we believe – a mystery that is always beyond our feeble words. God is much too big for us to capture the reality of God in our words. Our words do count, however. Some point us in the right direction better than others. Indeed some point us away from that reality.

Generally speaking we are for the most part divided into the two groups that have been called Culture I Catholicism and Culture II Catholicism. Obviously there are variations within each group. But almost all of us grow into one or the other group that corresponds to our world view. Culture I and Culture II are two different but not necessarily irreconcilable ways at looking at church. Look at the graph that outlines the differences on page 6.

The tragic thing is that we tend to get stuck in one culture or the other. Why is this tragic? In my view it is because when we are stuck in the narrowness of

Culture I or Culture II we are likely to resist being drawn into deeper spirituality that Love (God) wants us to enjoy. Love is always inviting and enticing us to surrender to Love, but our narrowness and fear keep us from letting go.

A confession. My own narrowness and fear are big problems for me.

I will share with you my imperfect vision of what this spirituality looks like. I don't live it very well and my vision is cloudy but this is what I see.

There is this infinite Love and Goodness (God). Trinity is the name we give to this circulating, dancing Love and Goodness. This dance is the total giving and sharing among the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This dancing Love and Goodness is a billion times more than we can think or imagine. But the little we know and hopefully experience can be enough to encourage us to let go enough to enter into a deeper experience. And God will even help us let go. That is why we call it grace. It is all God's gift but mysteriously we have a part to play.

This Love and Goodness gives birth to the universe (all the beings that have been, are now, and ever will be). Everything comes from the same infinite source. That means that everything is connected. We humans are all connected to everything. We humans are sisters and brothers at a deeper level than we are to our blood sisters and brothers. God is not the universe, but God is in the universe. We are not God but God is in us. The presence of Love and Goodness came into matter with the Big Bang. God was in the universe before the arrival of humans and before the arrival of religion. Religion, in my view, at times tends to make God too small.

The authors of the book of Genesis were writing from the ancient cosmology. They were writing, however, with the mystical eyes of faith seeing behind the cosmology to seeing the same mystery of God behind it all. The Genesis expression is "In the beginning the spirit of God hovered over the waters." We move on to the deeper withinness of God in creation. God is beyond creation and at the same time intimately within it.

This is the move to Jesus. We Christians believe that Jesus was (and is) a full human being. At the same time the fullness of God is within Jesus. One way that this is expressed is – Jesus is fully human and fully divine. Remember these are

good but feeble pointers to the mystery. What we want is for the mystery to transform us.

Love and Goodness come into humanity in a deeper way than we can imagine. Can we start to see the mysterious value of ourselves and other humans. This is a reminder that the spiritual journey is the growth of the whole human. That is body and soul united as one. It is not good to think of them as two separate entities. We must befriend our whole self.

Believing, seeing and living out this mystery of the divine within us is, to my way of thinking, entering the reign of God. Jesus in his humanity was living out the reign of God that shows us the path. His humanity tells me that he grew deeper into that reign as he lived. The three temptations at the beginning of his public life tell us this; also his cry to his father in the garden. It seems to me that Jesus, in his humanity, fully entered the reign of God when he was raised from the dead. Resurrection did something.

Living out this reign of God was, in my opinion, the center and the driving force of his life. This I believe is what he meant by telling us to repent and believe the good news, and what he meant when he told his disciples to make disciples of all nations.

What are some examples of Jesus' inclusiveness. His desire to invite everyone into the reign of God. I think that he could see that divine presence in every one. By the way, including those who were excluded by his society and religion.

- Jesus told the chief priests and elders that the tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the reign of God ahead of them.
- When he was challenged by the scribes and Pharisees who were on the way to stone to death the woman caught in the act of adultery, he loved the scribes and Pharisees by looking at them and inviting them to look inside of themselves and see their own sins. He did this by saying "let the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her". He was inviting them to enter the reign of God.
- The woman caught in the act of adultery was a sinner and an outcast as defined in Jesus' religious society. She was a throw-away. Jesus saw in her the same presence of God that he saw in the scribes and Pharisees. His love for her was the same as it was for her accusers. But his love took a

different approach. She was a frightened and shamed woman. She didn't have the righteous hard shell of her accusers. She didn't have that shell that needed to be cracked open. So when she and Jesus were left alone, Jesus asked "is there no one left to condemn you". She said, "no one". Jesus said "neither do I condemn you, but from now on avoid this sin". Jesus gave her understanding and compassion. He was helping her to see the goodness and worth inside of her. This would give her the ability to change her life. He was inviting her to enter the reign of God.

We move from the presence of God in Jesus to the presence of God in all of us humans. To be clear, we believe as Christians that the presence of God in Jesus is special and beyond that presence in us. The name we have traditionally given to this presence is the indwelling for the Holy Spirit.

Do we really know who we are? I think that we build up some egocentric notion of who we are. Aren't we inclined to look at ourselves like that? I am a woman. I am a man. I am wealthy. I am poor. I am very talented. I am not talented. I am good looking. I am homely. I am socially acceptable. I am an outcast to society.

Perhaps we do it by the roles that we play. I am a priest. I am an athlete. I am a banker. I am a truck driver. You can think of many more.

The way I see it is this. We are the spark of the Infinite Fire. We are the indwelling presence of Infinite Love and Goodness. We are worth so much more than all these things we imagine we are. This is so much deeper than self-esteem. This is self-love. This is other love. This is love of God. It is all connected. Jesus told us to love God with our whole mind, heart and strength. And to love our neighbor as our self. In the first letter of John we are told that if we say we love God and hate our brother (or sister) we are liars.

I see that as we are graced to allow this belief to enter into us and graced to become slowly and imperfectly living it we are drawn into the reign of God.

Earlier I wrote about the imperfect groupings of Catholics into Culture I and Culture II Catholicism. I think that when we identify with either group and believe that we are the only way to be a good Catholic, we continue to be split and polarized. The only way that I see out of the angry and sometimes hateful

division is to be drawn into the deeper vision of the reign of God. We can be drawn into that reign whether we are mainly in Culture I or Culture II.

From that deeper place we are able to see the value of the other culture and find things that will deepen our spiritual growth. We will learn that we have, unfortunately, identified our partial vision with the total vision. We will still have differences but we will be able to love equally both those who are more like us and those who are less like us.

Whenever we are not loving our sister or brother something is wrong. And we are not loving God.

I don't do this very well. I think that I have lots of company. We need to pray for the grace to be willing to let the Holy Spirit transform us.

Smile, God Loves You,  
Father Clay

Below is an excerpt about Culture I and Culture II Catholicism. It is taken from the book "Repair My House" by Michael Crosby, pg. 37.

In the graph he uses the term "flat earth". I would use the term non-evolutionary.

Many of us will not fit fully into this graph. I do think that it can be helpful to see trends of the way we see our world and church.

When we are Culture I Catholics we give primary emphasis to Mt. 16. When we are Culture II we give primary emphasis to Mt. 18.

## TWO POLES ON THE CONTINUUM OF HOW CATHOLICS VIEW CHURCH

### CULTURE I

#### The Church of Matthew 16

Scriptural stress on highlighting male authorities: Matt 16:17-19; 10:1-4; 28:16-20

The Roman Catholic Church established as an organization established by Jesus Christ

Popular notion of the church as a “what” that can result in an “us” and “them” way of thinking

Institutional model of church highlighted: “the church’s children” under the pope (and Vatican), bishops, and priests. Ordination dominates

Structures linked to “flat-earth” understanding of the universe: stress on hierarchy that is patriarchal

Magisterium identified primarily with papal pronouncements; secondarily with episcopal statements

Obedience as submission of mind and intellect to what the above magisterium says

Eucharist primarily identified with the action of the clerically ordained who determine how lay people will participate

### CULTURE II

#### The Church of Matthew 18

Scriptural stress on highlighting Holy Spirit: Luke 4:18-19; Acts 2:1-4, 17-21; Rom. 12:3-8; Cor. 12

The Roman Catholic Church as part of the wider organism called the Mystical Body of Christ

Popular notion of the church as a “we” that views all as equal members

Community –of-disciple’s model of church highlighted: the baptized and their leader as co-responsible. Baptism dominates

Structures link to evolutionary view of universe: stress on Hierarchy at service of holyarchy <sup>18</sup>

Magisterium identified with collegiality wherein unanimity exists among hierarchy, the people, and theologians

Obedience as respectful service of all to the common good

Eucharist as source and summit of the life of the whole church being celebrated, with the priests presiding, by the whole people

Some concluding thoughts. They are taken from the two quotations from Matthew's Gospel and John's Gospel.

Mt. 23, 27-28

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones and every kind of filth. Even so on the outside you appear righteous, but inside you are filled with hypocrisy and evil doing."

Jesus speaks to the chief priests and elders.

Mt. 21, 31b

"Amen I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the reign of God before you."

JOHN, CHAPTER 8, The Adulteress

Then each went off to his own house, while Jesus went out to the Mount of Olives. At daybreak he reappeared in the temple area; and when the people started coming to him, he sat down and began to teach them. The scribes and Pharisees led a woman forward. They made her stand there in front of everyone. "Teacher," they said to him "this woman has been caught in the act of adultery. In the law, Moses ordered such women to be stoned. What do you have to say about the case?" (They were posing this question to trap him, so that they could have something to accuse him of.) Jesus bent down and started tracing on the ground with his finger. When they persisted in their questioning, he straightened up and said to them, "Let the man among you who has no sin be the first to cast a stone at her." A second time he bent down and wrote on the ground. Then the audience drifted away one by one, beginning with the elders. This left him alone with the woman, who continued to stand there before him. Jesus finally straightened up and said to her, "woman, where did they all disappear to? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she answered. Jesus said, "Nor do I condemn you. You may go. But from now on, avoid this sin."

These passages say to me that Jesus was primarily interested in the internal transformation of people. We need to remember that outward religious behavior cannot take the place of our being transformed into hearts that are softened into

compassion, understanding, mercy and forgiveness. That doesn't mean that we don't have principles and beliefs. It does mean to me that our actions will be deeply influenced by our softened hearts.

I don't think that the scribes and Pharisees, chief priests and elders, were necessarily bad people. I do think that they did good religious things, but their hearts were not softened. For me that means that they were not entering the reign of God, while sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes were entering the reign of God.

I think of entering the reign of God as the slow painful process of allowing the great Love that Jesus named Abba to soften our hearts and transform us. I don't think that this can come about by our will power. We can, however, be willing to let Abba transform us. That transformation is difficult because we cling in unhealthy ways to various drives and needs within us.

We can also learn from Jesus' contact with the woman caught in the act of adultery. By not condemning her, by accepting her, Jesus helped her to see her goodness inside that would allow her to change her life. In my opinion, only love can draw people into love.

If I am close to correct in understanding what Jesus meant by the reign of God, this is the mission that Jesus gave his disciples. Spread the good news to all nations. Tell them by example and word that Abba wants them to know of his love, mercy and forgiveness that embraces everyone and all of us are called to allow Abba's image in us to grow and transform our hearts. How can we help draw people into the reign of God, if we are not entering it ourselves?

I now want to apply this to the polarization in our church that exists, in my opinion, in the tension between Culture I and Culture II Catholicism. This is not to deny other tensions.

I know that it is difficult for me and many others to be willing to listen and learn from people who think differently and have beliefs that are different from our own. We easily have the belief that the way that we see it is right and the whole truth. Then we don't listen very well. We allow into our minds thinking that



conforms to our own thoughts and we dismiss ideas contrary to our own. I believe that this is quite common to us humans.

The result usually is that we don't learn anything. We just get stronger and louder as we cling to our partial truths. Only God sees the whole picture.

We can enter the reign of God (that is, having hearts of compassion, mercy, understanding and forgiveness) whether we are in Culture I or Culture II or some mixture of both. What stops us is our belief that we can enter the reign of God only from our Culture.

One of the signs that helps me to believe that we are at least on the road to entering the reign of God is a willingness to listen to, learn from and respect people who are coming from a different place than ourselves.

If I am going to be a good leader of St. Stan's, it is essential that I grow into a deeper perspective than either Culture I or Culture II.

If I minister to our parish only out of one or the other culture, I will not be a priest for all of you. I also then will not be entering the reign of God.

This journey into the reign of God is beyond the power of anyone of us. The love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness and love that we call (with Jesus) Abba is the power that will draw us into the reign of God if we are at least a little willing to let Abba transform us.

Smile, God Loves You,  
Father Clay