

WILLIAM OF ST. THIERRY: CONVERSATION WITH TRINITY
(A Kind of Sermon-Prayer to God in the Christian Mystical Tradition)
March 21, 2010
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United Church of Christ, Colorado Springs

Scripture

Song of Songs 1 & 2, *passim* (“His” and “Her” longing love for each other in union)
Matthew 28:16-20 (Jesus commissions his disciples to baptize in the name of the Trinity)

Introduction. In 1969 I went to Washington, DC to be part of lobbying effort and rally of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. Among the speakers that weekend at the National Cathedral were Father Theodore Hesburgh (President of Notre Dame), The Reverend William Sloan Coffin (Senior Pastor of Riverside Church in New York), and Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (Professor of Ethics and Mysticism at the Jewish Theological Seminary). I’ll never forget Rabbi Heschel’s talk to us which was not so much to us but was a *meditative conversation with Yahweh* which we were privileged to overhear.

Such a prayer-sermon I would offer today to God whom we Christians conceive of as the Holy Trinity. I am prompted to do so having become familiar with the mystic William of St. Thierry who is written about in Bernard McGinn’s *Early Christian Mystics* and his anthology book, *Christian Mysticism*. In my book, *Christianity 101: Tracing Basic Beliefs*, part 4 on “Holy Spirit-uality,” I did not even mention this important 12th century mystic. My mistake. I should have.

William was abbot of a Benedictine monastery in Thierry which is a suburb that overlooks the City of Reims in northern France. William became close friends with another mystic and abbot, Bernard of Clairvaux, who founded the Cistercians, the rigorous white-robed, often-silent order of monks, then in central France. Both William and Bernard agreed that romantic love and longing as spoken of in the poetry of “Song of Songs” is the way God and humans should relate to one another. William offers great insight into the heart of God whom he knows and loves as Triune, One God in three Persons.

To speak of the Trinity, however, is audacious and an ever-in-error business. The story is told that Augustine, the famous 5th century theologian and Bishop of Hippo in North Africa was once walking along a beach meditating on the Trinity. He came on a child who had dug a hole in the sand and was running back and forth to the sea with a bucket bringing water to pour water in this hole. Augustine asked the child what he was about, and the lad replied, “I am going to pour the whole ocean into this hole.”

“That is impossible. The whole ocean will not fit in the hole you have made,” said St. Augustine.

The boy replied, “And you cannot fit the Trinity in your tiny little brain.”

The story concludes with the boy vanishing, as St. Augustine had been talking to an angel!

Audaciously we, 1500 years after Augustine of Hippo and 800 years after William of Thierry engage in prayer with the Great Christian Mystery. Eyes wide open, we pray looking, if anywhere, upon Andrei Rublev's famous 14th century Orthodox icon.

Let us pray...

Holy God, Divine Trinity, thou whose face is ever-hidden yet always sought. You are the one made known only in the mystical "cloud of unknowing." So many of your followers through the millennia say you are three-in-one. Is that true?

I affirm so. I know that whenever I think I might be called to preach unexpectedly, I say to myself, "Self, preach about the insight you had so many years ago about the natural human experience of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." It was an interpretation made by theologian Paul Tillich that my friend John Bash in the Philosophy Department at Colorado State University offered. It is...that you are intimated to us in three experiential ways: as ABOVE, BESIDE, WITHIN.

Every single person here who has been baptized, God, has been baptized with a Trinitarian formula. The priest/the pastor in water said over them, "I baptize you in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit." Maybe the metaphors for these were made "PC," so clergy like me would say, "I baptize you in the name of God your Creator, Christ your brother, and the Spirit within you, one God, Mother of us all." You've got to cut me a little slack with my verbiage, God, for you are the best thing—which can't be spoken of, yet are spoken of in words always misunderstood, by people like me who spend most of my time talking about stuff not worth talking about—I mean basketball stuff, travel stuff, twitter stuff, coffee clique stuff—the stuff that stuffs our minds and mouths. Blah, blah, blah.

Anyway, by whatever imperfect formula we were baptized into you, we have been told one thing ever since: REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM... REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM... REMEMBER YOUR BAPTISM. Remember whose you are. We are yours.

[singing]

*Your holy people, standing, washed in love
Spirit-filled yet hungry we await your food
We are poor but we've brought ourselves the best we can
We are yours. We are yours*

I

We are yours, Father/Creator/Author/Source/Architect/First Cause/Ancient of Days/Source of all goodness/our father-mother who art in heaven. And you intimate yourself in the excellences of the world. That beautiful sunset over the water, that piece played of Bach (right on today for this his birthday), that icon by Rublev, that touching poetry of Gibran...are you in them? When I remember my baptism, I can sometimes say, "Yes, Yes, there you are ABOVE me, BEFORE I ever was, BELOW me as the Ground of All Being."

II

We are yours, Son of the Father, Jesus the Christ/Messiah/Emanuel/Brother/Friend/Cosmic Lover/fully human one. You intimate yourself to us especially in "the other," the other: the baby with whom we share a smile, the one with whom we eat popsicles, take a walk down a road, sing a song in company, and share the bedroom. I

do feel sorry, God, for atheists who, when they have an orgasm, don't have anybody to cry out to. It is indeed in the love of friends and significant others that you can come to us, especially if I remember my baptism. You are there **BESIDE** me, companion in among pilgrims of the journey. As Martin Buber says, between every 'I' and 'thou,' You are.

III

We are yours, Holy Spirit/Holy Ghost/Comforter/Counselor/Paraclete/Ruah/breathe of life/ Wind for our sails/the one "who proceeds from the father and the son," the guy on the right in the icon. You intimate yourself with the "still small voice," in the wee hours of the morning, in the stirrings of good conscience, in grand and deep silences, when the all-but dead coals of our heart are blown upon and begin to glow. Maybe it is not you within, O God, but just neurological firings and overactive imagining. In faith, though, I say it is you, O Spirit within, implanted before baptism, affirmed in baptism...there, when I remember.

William of St. Thierry says that we humans are, first of all, **made in your image**, O Triune God. He believes we bear within us the Trinity. You may be hidden, he says, and repressed-in-us-by-us but still you are there. It's your way of coming toward humankind, your way of loving us, by being there always, even if not recognized. The deep essence of me is not chopped liver. It the opposite as in the cartoon of a precious, chubby baby and he/she is saying, "God don't make no junk." We are imago dei. Your triune self is implanted within.

We Protestants, O Lord, may have gotten it wrong, been misdirected in our concerns. Martin Luther put us to asking "What must I do to be saved?" And so we've gone around wondering, "Am I saved? Was my father/is my child saved? How about the dying patient? Etcetera, etcetera. Could be it's the wrong concern. It is not the concern of the writers of the Bible, especially the Psalms. It is not the concern of the desert mothers and fathers, nor of the medieval mystics. Nor is it the question of most Catholic and Orthodox believers historically. No. Their concern, their passion has always been, "Show me your face, God...take me be into your presence...reveal yourself to me."

In such concern we begin to encounter **LONGING**, longing for you as a lover longs for his or her beloved, just as in the Song of Songs. We understand through that love poetry, though, that you long for us too. You search and you rejoice when we turn toward you in love. Your image long implanted within as Trinity wants to "**attain to you**"—that's what William of St. Thierry says we need to be about: reforming ourselves into the Trinity, making ourselves receptive to the lost likeness of the Trinity, coming to resemble You once again within the self.

The right note for this reformation is struck in the very prayer with which this service began. Let the people turn to the **OPENING PRAYER** of this bulletin, line 6. There William of Thierry prays to you, "May your Bride, our soul, come to understand herself in Your Love." God, here, now are these 300+ people, let them repeat that prayer together: "**May your Bride, our soul, come to understand herself in Your Love.**" This soul, this bride which I am is called to become Trinity - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Mother-Friend-and Lover, Creator-Christ-and Comforter. Four weeks ago, when Patti and I were in Wellington, New Zealand, Lord, you let us hear a Presbyterian pastor preach. He said that C.S. Lewis was asked once if there was anything unique about Christianity. Lewis said, "Let me get back to you on that."

Next day he came saying, “Yes, there is something unique to Christian faith: it is Grace.”

“And we,” the Presbyterian preacher said, “are called to be grace.”

The same may be said about Trinity, God. That’s what we’re called to be, for that is how we were born and baptized—and that is how I want to die. Help us, Loving Creator-Redeemer-Sustainer, to REMEMBER OUR BAPTISM, (1) imaging and (2) attaining to You.

Let the people say, “Amen!”

jww, 03/21/10

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