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Shame and the Signs of Hope

Encyclical as Examen

By Mike Murphy

In the concluding lines of “In California: Morning, Evening, Late January” from 1989, the poet (and practitioner of Ignatian spirituality) Denise Levertov holds together an unexpected unity of opposites: “Who can utter / the praise of such generosity / or the shame?” That one can express gratitude to God for the generous gift of creation while at the same time expressing proper shame for treating the gift so poorly is to stand on the crux of a paradox, the kind of which fires the theological imagination.

Levertov’s collective *mea culpa* of authentic shame, written in the face of the growing ecological crisis, not only illuminates the urgency of her pointed, discriminating diction, but also encourages, implicitly and profoundly, the “faith that does justice” that resides at the heart of Ignatian spirituality. St. Ignatius’s own discernments about the complexities of generosity and culpability – about gratitude and sin – are likewise bundled in paradox; and his insights about how acts of conscience first flow from and are ever ordered to “gratitude for the gift” is a distillation of the dynamic relationship between contemplation and action, a paradoxical orientation of the pilgrim person in the world. It is the turn to God – the grace of interior conversion – that informs and precedes any “faith that does justice” and serves as lasting strength for the journey.

Pope Francis appropriates this powerful dynamic and employs it as the cornerstone of “Laudato Si’.” In both the formal structure and rhetorical arc of his landmark encyclical, the document reads like a sustained, corporate examen, an exercise in Ignatian spirituality doubling as a papal encyclical. In this sense – and in an expansive way –

“Laudato Si’” is a call to radical conversion through the sacramental lens of an integral ecology. In calling to mind the figure of St. Francis of Assisi, as Pope Francis writes late in the letter, “We come to realize that a healthy relationship with creation is one dimension of overall personal conversion, which entails the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change.” Personal conversion emerges as key in “Laudato Si’” – not the Pelagian, by-our-own-boot-straps kind of conversion that so many of us in the West mistake for authentic change of heart but the kind that knocks you off your donkey. Lest we make the error of reducing Ignatian spirituality to some esoteric personal growth seminar, we must remember that St. Ignatius was, in his core, a mystic who encountered the living God first in the context of crisis. His prayer then became on-going event that re-ordered everything and the lens through which all subsequent experience was filtered.

As St. Ignatius also modeled, the Christian experience of prayer is no private, disincarnate transmission from Planet God. It is precisely incarnational and holistic, an integral experience which, in turn, becomes the sustaining message of “Laudato Si’.” The “gaze of Jesus,” as Pope Francis suggests early in the text, initiates an all-encompassing relationship. “The Lord was able to invite others to be attentive to the beauty that there is in the world,” Francis meditates, “because he himself was in constant touch with nature.” Such a gaze draws us nearer to Jesus, so much so that we “put on Christ” and begin to see the world through a transformed vision, one that retrieves unity and “invites

us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.” As Pope Francis further ponders, Jesus “was far removed from philosophies which despised the body, matter and the things of the world,” for such “unhealthy dualisms left a mark on certain Christian thinkers in the course of history and disfigured the Gospel.”

In this way, the Ignatian vision outlined in “*Laudato Si*” transcends the often narrow and individualist boundaries of contemporary Christian spirituality (not to mention consumerist/materialist economic systems), in order to include a relationship with all created things. “Our hearts are authentically open to universal communion” Pope Francis declares, excluding “nothing and no one” because “everything is related, and we human beings are united as brothers and sisters on a wonderful pilgrimage, woven together by the love God has for each of his creatures.” It is holistic integration – not gnostic division – that best characterizes Pope Francis’ eco-theological concern; it is a vision that is both religiously incarnational and morally communitarian – so much so that it stretches out to include the entire community of the cosmos.

Speaking in such demanding slogans as “a faith that does justice,” then, is less possible and less credible without the fruits of prayer to undergird and sustain it. I think this is why Pope Francis’ document and his papacy are having a profound effect on audiences who would otherwise discount or ignore him. For many in the modern environmental movement, conscious as they are of the scientific veracity and political urgency of climate change, the task has been to create the psychological and sociological conditions needed for radical behavioral change. Still, for anybody who has ever been to a climate conference, the mood is always understandably dark and dour. Something is missing. For Pope Francis, it is right relationship that is missing – a collective spiritual amnesia that impedes the movement of justice in the world and “has much to do with an ethical and cultural de-

cline which has accompanied the deterioration of the environment.” The modern environmental community speaks in terms of problem-solving and human potential; Pope Francis speaks in terms of theological mystery and human virtue. The integral ecology he proposes replies to the darkness of personal shame and human complicity in climate change; but it also recovers the internal order and enduring harmony of all of these approaches, recasting and renewing them in terms of gratitude and praise.

In this way, shame can be a powerful sign of hope. Honest acknowledgement of legitimate shame about our part in anthropogenic climate change, about what Levertov called “globicidal insanity,” is a first-fruit of an alert examination of conscience. Alert consciences pray for mercy; alert consciences are moved to proper action and restorative justice. The final word here, then, must be mercy – the need for which, as Pope Francis has so eloquently shown, is perhaps greater today than ever before. To show mercy to the earth and to the disproportionate number of the poor affected by ecological crisis is to amplify the dynamic relationship between mercy and justice. To commit to the complicated political action needed is to atone in justice, as a human family, for abusing the marvelous gift so freely given to us all. An integral ecological vision, focused as it is on prayer and contemplation, becomes a most exemplary “faith that does justice.”

So then, we join with Pope Francis when he prays: “Triune Lord, wondrous community of infinite love / Awaken our praise and thankfulness / for every being that you have made. / Give us the grace to feel profoundly joined / to everything that is.” And we commit ourselves to the acts of justice and mercy that our prayer will engender and sustain.

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