

A HERITAGE OF MARIST SPIRITUALITY:

Growth in the Practice of the Presence of God

Paper given at the Marist Family Institute of Spirituality

Marist College, Poughkeepsie, New York

July 10, 2004

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Very recently in the spring issue of the Boston College quarterly magazine I read an article entitled "Pilgrims: ... Journey of American Catholics." I was struck by one paragraph; I thought it would fit very well some place within what I wanted to say today. I decided, finally, to place the paragraph not within but at the beginning of what I had prepared.

The paragraph reads: "A pilgrimage ... has certain distinguishing features. The pilgrim sets out on a path that others have taken, hoping to witness what others have seen – to see it with his or her own eyes. Pilgrims travel in company, but each must encounter the holy site personally. Finally, the pilgrims, on their return, tell others what they have seen and heard, so that others might be moved to set out on pilgrimage themselves."

The theme for this weekend is stated as "Rekindling Marist Spirituality." I hope the weekend turns out not only to be a rekindling but also a growing in Marist spirituality.

The founder of the Marist Brothers of the Schools, St. Marcellin Champagnat, our Father Champagnat, had no small part in developing Marist spirituality. He lived it and he shared it with us. We are fortunate to be so imbued with it that it stays with us still. We are on a Marist pilgrimage. Because of it we have grown in intimacy with our Blessed Mother. We even hear that some humility, simplicity, and modesty show in us. And, most important, we have been introduced to a practice of the Presence of God that might lead us further into union and cooperation with God.

It has taken so very long for me to understand properly and to practice that aspect of Marist spirituality and, incidentally, to see it as holding together the "crib, the cross, and the altar." I hope I am now getting closer to it. Further in my talk I want to come to some thought-provoking insights regarding the abiding presence of Jesus Himself.

Although among us there may be a variety of fields of interest and activity, different life styles, even differing devotional lives, all of us are meant to have a dynamic personal relationship with God, a spirituality that grows, evolves, and tends toward completion, "tends toward perfection."

Attendance at these July weekend encounters has been a wonderful opportunity for us to grow spiritually. I have profited by attending. In fact, I am grateful to have been eager to grow spiritually all my life. Judy and I always have spiritual books in progress,

and we share ideas on them. In Florida I participate in ecumenical scripture study in our retirement park. It is very interesting and helpful to know how others understand and live their Christianity. I miss the weekly Morrie talks with Gus Nolan; yet Gus and I do occasionally send one another Morrie e-notes. I am always eager for opportunities to share insights that help to integrate and deepen consciousness of God's love for all of us. It is good also to be convinced that it needn't be boring to hear important thoughts twice, even many times. Being regularly receptive can serve to anchor our love of God.

The essence of Christianity is, first of all, to be aware of God's love for us (yes, to allow ourselves to be loved!) and then to cooperate with God in loving, loving especially and first of all the needy around us. We do that best in the name of and in union with Jesus. The trick is to recognize the need around us and to recognize what we have available to be helpful. It is frustrating not to be able to help and even more discouraging not to be recognized as having useful help. I think it is unfortunate that more of our friends have not taken advantage of these weekends; we are no doubt poorer for it. Still I realize that all of us must grow apace according to our own individuality and personality and according to God's providence and calling.

Allow me to share with you a short presentation that I gave at a scripture study session in our Florida retirement park. It was prepared in reaction to the main thrust of the previous week's discussion. It will lead me to get back to the point about the abiding presence of Jesus. I now quote ... speaking to the ecumenical group in Florida.

"As a follow up to last week's meeting, I would like to share a few thoughts with you about a flood of ideas that came rushing into my head about "giving reasons for the hope that is in you" taken from the passage in scripture we were then dealing with ...

"To have occasion to give reasons for the hope that is in us the assumption is that there be an occasion to share faith, speaking of matters of faith hopefully less by way of the rote we have learned ... and more as we have absorbed them and grown to possess them.

"At the end of the Bible in the last verse or two in Revelation is the line, "Come Lord Jesus." It appears in connection with the Lord's final coming. No doubt you have seen or heard of it being used during the season of Advent. Of course, it can also be used in daily prayer and is so used when we get beyond prayers of petition for the multiplicity of our needs and for the needs of our friends.

"Come Lord Jesus. I use this prayer every morning. However, I submit that in one way we do not really need to ask the Lord Jesus to come to us, for in fact the Lord Jesus is always present, eager and pressing to be part of our daily lives. What the prayer "Come Lord Jesus" or something similar to it really does, though, is to open the depth of our own being so that we are more disposed to relate to the him and to receive his influence in our lives and allow it to take root in us.

"The Lord is with us. In fact, Jesus is not only in our midst; he is with each of us, with you and with me, as he is now, risen and transformed. We possess not only the Spirit of Jesus, not only the divinity of Jesus, but also the humanity of Jesus, Jesus as he is now, risen and transformed! Divinity and humanity unified in one person. I have no idea what Jesus, risen and transformed, is like, but I firmly believe that in my openness to the risen and transformed Jesus, his humanity is, in fact, with me as is his divine Spirit. We have available to us not only the Spirit of Jesus but also the influence and impact of

the very best of humanity ... and that humanity of Jesus is not without risen and transformed Body.

"Now I know that Jesus ascended into heaven and he sits at the right hand of the Father, and I know that from there he sent the Spirit, but I also know that Jesus said, "I am with you all times, even to the end of the world." I'm sure that scholars and theologians are capable of reconciling those two thoughts for us. I do not wait for their work. My faith perceives a reality.

"What a wonder you and I are! Paul said, 'I live, now not I, but Christ lives in me.' We live, now not we alone, but Christ lives in us. The generously self-giving, sacrificing life and love of Jesus abides in us; through that presence we are better able to die to self and to love genuinely. Our better actions, our best actions, yes, even our plain, ordinary daily good actions are complemented by the Lord Jesus. Truly, we have reason to pray, Come Lord Jesus!"

That was a tentative ending of my speaking to the ecumenical group in Florida. However, after a brief pause, I continued with this postscript:

"I should leave my thoughts there. However, there is another idea that wants out. A person who understands the point I want to share with you about the abiding presence of the human/divine Jesus may have a better idea of what we Catholics understand about receiving the Body and Blood, soul and divinity of Jesus in Communion at the Eucharistic celebration."

I could have added that we Catholics might better understand that anyone who prays "Come Lord Jesus" communicates with the very same risen/transformed Lord, transformed Body and Soul, as we do through the precious visible reality of the Sacrament which has been given to us not only for intimacy and practical love but also so that we remember, that we be conscious.

As novices we studied the life of Father Champagnat and were led into the Marist spirit. We were introduced to and encouraged to practice the Presence of God. I tried mightily to be attentive. I tried imaging. I tired myself to the verge of I know not what. Finally, I think I implicitly abandoned concentrated effort.

In teaching in Tyngsboro I don't think I promoted a special practice as such. I know I did not issue little booklets with pencils to keep track of how many times! It seems to me that although methods and practices -- and imaging -- may have their place and be somewhat helpful, mechanics do not get us into a relationship.

My own greatest progress has come slowly mainly in retirement years, greatly helped by the divine presence himself, of course, and occasioned by a practice of "centering prayer," somewhat lukewarm, but consistent.

As sacred and awesome, loving and not-to-be-neglected as is communing at Eucharist, I have come to the conviction that any time in our daily lives it is possible to communicate with the same risen and transformed Lord with just as much reality and intimacy. For me that is much more than the vague, wishful "spiritual communion" that was encouraged in our earlier years.

Although it is only as we are led through life by a loving God that we grow in the spirituality of union with him, there is no doubt that we ourselves can do something to help remember Our Lord, to develop and maintain at least an implicit awareness of his presence, his acceptance of us, and his support as we go about devoting ourselves to important human and social concerns that we may be called to. Marist spirituality has given us a foundation to build on.

Thank you.

posted: 25 October 2004