

The Fleeting Nature of Transcendence

When Pope Francis came on the scene in 2013, he was received with great enthusiasm by just about everybody. He didn't seem inclined to travel much but preferred staying in Rome doing simple but meaningful pastoral work. Also he didn't compose in-depth theological treatises even those his writing thus far addressed issues of concern to him in a direct, refreshing manner with emphasis upon joy. In a short period of time Francis even seems to be eclipsing Pope John Paul II, this despite his impending canonization and admiration by people throughout the world. His popularity points to something very important: more than anything else people crave simple, human contact without fear of being judged. You can only do this if you're comfortable in your own skin which Francis certainly seems to be. This ease enables you to accomplish little things in a big way, and most likely that will be the legacy of this pope. Some of this admiration is a form of adoration or hero worship, but most of it is a genuine human response to someone who is showing love in a straight-forward, unfeigned manner.¹

All those who love Pope Francis are concerned about his age (seventy-six when elected) and health (one functioning lung). When you have someone so beloved in a position of authority—he's reminiscent of Pope John XXIII by reason of being comfortable with himself and hence other persons—you wish he could hang around for a long time. His other predecessors seemed conscious of a role they were playing, certainly not their fault but part of the job and identity they inherited. Thus they gave the impression of straining themselves in the sense of being on a mission. That may be admirable in its own way though it's somewhat remote from the experience of the common man. And so we come to a conclusion. Unfortunately people like Pope Francis tend not to be with us for a long time, so we shouldn't be surprised if his papacy is relatively short. Most of us can recall people in Francis' mold who have impacted us in a special way and who were snatched away, apparently before they had completed their roles in life. We feel left holding the bag, keenly aware of the time between now and the day of our death which in many ways we long for because it promises satisfaction. We don't know the details of that satisfaction, but it's certainly familiar enough.

So let's take a closer look at this phenomenon. The profound impact of Pope Francis in a short period of time makes you wonder if some little understood but important dynamic is at work ('is' because of this writing, he is alive...gratefully). That is to say, Francis may be part of a larger scheme of things to which we're not tuned in. Chances are even he isn't aware of it either. If we caught a glimpse into this supposed undisclosed reality, we would be in a better position to see if we're being taught a lesson about life that we miss habitually. In fact, we just don't get what's going on for a number of reasons that will be spelled out later. And this habitual missing of a crucial teaching moment is symptomatic of our times, a sign of what ails us. To put it in more familiar terms, we are too busy and caught up with ourselves. That's why we marvel at a person who prefers a simpler, slower pace of life so as not to miss opportunities for showing love to those around him. So instead of focusing upon Pope Francis, we can use his fine example as a point of departure into inquiring why good persons generally do not remain with us for an extended period of time.

Why do we wish to cling to such a person? Most likely because he is a sign of what we want desperately in ourselves and haven't been able to lay claim to it as our own. A common denominator of these

¹Some may claim that President John F. Kennedy fits this bill, a secular saint of sorts by reason of his assassination at a young age.

people is their short span of life.² If we understood this phenomenon, we'd be in a much better state. There comes to mind words from the Wisdom of Solomon: "and their departure was thought to be an affliction, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace."³ Such is a common view held among many Catholics with regard to holy men and women. Examples of saints who died young often have special veneration. While this may seem a bit pious, it contains a kernel of truth, that growth in the Christian life isn't measured by years but by faith and virtue. In other words, these younger people live on a different time table...or perhaps a different time altogether.

So the people whom we consider outstanding by the way they comport themselves point to a broader issue suggested by this essay's title. What intrigues us is that they have come into contact with a reality we seem to miss or if we're lucky, catch just the slightest glimpse, one that is fleeting, almost a wil-o'-the-wisp. Traditionally this reality is called transcendence, a realm that lies beyond the way we conduct ourselves in daily life while at the same time permeating it. The evanescent nature of transcendence (more accurately, our transitory perception of it) can lead us into denying its existence...a product of our imagination...yet it abides through all times, places and cultures. No body seems able to get rid of it. One physical example is bound to come to mind, albeit inaccurate, those sub-atomic particles that come into existence for an infinitesimally brief time and vanish. However, they do leave behind a trace of their presence which leads us to posit their existence. The value of such experimentation for our purposes here may be questioned just like any inquiry into the nature of transcendence. Still, one can't but help make the comparison.

Let's consider some biblical examples of this contact with transcendent or divine reality, all of which are fleeting, from the human point of view. It can be argued that even Jesus' life was such, three years of public ministry preceded by thirty years of obscurity.⁴ Then we might be in a better position to see the lesson all have in common and the impact memory of them had among the persons involved, not just them but for generations afterwards. In other words, focus shifts to our memory or recollective faculty as a conveyor of these fleeting contacts, preserving that which will sustain us through those time when we have difficulty recalling contacts with the divine. The ancient Greeks had a name for this recollective faculty, not just memory as commonly understood, and called it *anamnesis*.⁵

²Sticking with papal examples, Pope John XXIII was in office for a short term. John Paul I was in office so briefly that he doesn't count. It would be too much attempting to read into that situation.

³From the opening verses of Chapter Three as pertaining to the "souls of the righteous" who are not necessarily young, middle age or old.

⁴Even during his short ministry Jesus preferred going off on his own. In fact, he prefaced his ministry, if you will, by forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, this after the briefest exposure to the public on the banks of the Jordan River where John baptized him. In his post-resurrection appearances shortly before ascending into heaven Jesus bade Mary not to cling to him. All in all, a fairly substantial amount of instances where Jesus withdrew from human contact.

⁵Here are five examples of anamnesis from the **Phaedo** by Plato and lifted from another document on this home page:

Such also is the case if that theory is true that you are accustomed to mention frequently, that for us learning is no other than recollection. According to this, we must at some previous time have learned what we now recollect. This is possible only if our soul existed somewhere before it took on this human shape. So according to this theory too, the soul is likely to be something immortal. 72.e

We can start off with the first recorded contact between God and human beings in the Bible, the Garden of Eden, when there were but two persons, a man and a woman. Both persons embody archetypes everything that belongs to us all, if you will. For six days God had labored bringing the world (what we'd call universe today) into existence, going into considerable detail as to their creation. The so-called second account in Chapter Two has the formation of the garden after which God put man into it. Shortly afterwards the Lord realized something was missing, hence the creation of woman. From that point everything seemed to go along well although there's no sense of history relative to Eden, just one blissful day after another. Then one day the serpent came along and tempted the man, thereby bringing about his demise through the woman. Chapter Three offers some detail about this where we have the first real contact between the Lord, the man and his wife. We could say that introduction of the serpent is the foundation of history...not history as we know it today but seminally. To a certain extent the garden is outside it, that is, outside space and time. Before the serpent came on the scene there was nothing to record that was worthwhile, if we may put it like that, all very boring. We don't get the sense that the man and woman were in contact with God; they were more preoccupied with caring for the garden and were supposed to be content with that as immortal beings, not especially a bright prospect. Nothing too is said about the prospect of bringing children into existence, of populating Eden. We can read into that blissful period anything we wish about the union with the divine, of being made in God's image and likeness. However, in the end come up short of evidence, even when it's inferred.

Finally after serpent's seduction we have not so much the Lord God himself in the Garden of Eden but his "sound" or *qol* which fundamentally means voice. You can take this *qol* in two ways, equally valid, either as part of a daily evening stroll or when the Lord came out, knowing something wasn't quite right. Actually it was the best time of day, the cool of the evening (*ruach* is the word for 'cool' but actually pertains to wind...spirit). This *qol* appears somewhat independent of the Lord though the ensuing dialogue suggests one-on-one communication. Perhaps at this very juncture when the Lord, the man and his wife intuited the situation there was a separation or distance between the human and divine. It happened so quickly that nothing had to be communicated verbally. All that remained was

Do we also agree that when knowledge comes to mind in this way, it is recollection? What way do I mean? Like this: when a man sees or hears or in some other way perceives one thing and not only knows that thing but also thinks of another thing of which the knowledge is not the same but different, are we not right to say that he recollects the second thing that comes into his mind? 73.c

In all these cases the recollection can be occasioned by things that are similar, but it can also be occasioned by things that are dissimilar? It can. When the recollection is caused by similar things, must one not of necessity also experience this: to consider whether the similarity to that which one recollects is deficient in any respect or complete? One must. 74a

It was seen to be possible for someone to see or hear or other wise perceive something, and by this to be put in mind of something else which he had forgotten and which is related to it by similarity or difference. One of two things follows as I say: either we were born with the knowledge of it, and all of us know it throughout life, or those who later, we say, are learning, are only recollecting, and learning would be recollection. 76a

The theory of recollection and learning, however, was based on an assumption worthy of acceptance, for our soul was said to exist also before it came into the body, just as the reality does that is of the kind that we qualify by the words 'which truly is,' and I convinced myself that I was quite correct to accept it. 92d

for it to be acted out. We could say that introduction of the *qol* early on set the stage for a distinction that would become permanent outside the Garden of Eden. That is to say, the Lord remains transcendent but having his presence among us as *qol*. Later on, however, the *qol* will become the *Logos* or Jesus Christ incarnate when it will have been uttered fully or exhaustively. So the man and woman thought that not only would the vegetation provide concealment, the dim twilight of evening would enhance it. However, the divine *qol* doesn't go by sight but by scent and listening. Thus easily it could ferret out the two regardless of how clever they disguised themselves.

After the Lord discovers the transgression there follows a lengthy, painful discourse as to the consequences of eating the forbidden fruit. Except right at the beginning neither the man nor the woman respond. While all this was going on we don't have any description of the Lord himself...what he looked like or the rest. Just his *qol* gives hint of his presence with the two persons (after all, it does all the talking). So after the consequences of the "fall" have been laid out, the man is expelled from Eden while no mention of the woman's expulsion is made. All this must have been very trying for the Lord. The next day he would go out for his evening stroll and not encounter the two together. Furthermore, the man's expulsion must have taken place early in the morning, the furthest point away from the evening hour. Perhaps that's the reason why the text specifically mentions "the east of the garden." At least the man would have the rest of the day to get acclimated to his new surroundings well before the evening hour when he first heard the Lord's *qol*. Later on he would not associate the dawn with the time of his downfall, evening. That would be too hard to bear as well as for later generations.

The point in describing this first encounter between the Lord God and our "first parents" is to keep an eye on the two natures involved. Obviously we have the familiar human one and then the less familiar, even problematic one, which is divine. Despite the apparently face-to-face contact immediately after the man and woman were caught—this being the first dialogue between the two parties—it's all negative. Neither does it intimate a more desirable form of communication in the garden before the "fall." Thus the present account is the only evidence we have to deal with. Everything about the communication has a certain remoteness about it, even when read in light of the famously put being made in the divine image and likeness. Presumably the man and woman had that to the full in happier days, but we don't get any hint of it in actuality. Paying attention to all these elements is very helpful to get a handle on the fleeting nature of divine transcendence. The essential ingredients are present and will repeat themselves later in both the Old and New Testaments.

The next major contact of the divine with our human sphere is the call of Abraham.⁶ Chapter Twelve begins with another instance of *qol* though not explicitly mentioned but certainly operative: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." This summons came out of the clear blue, Abram (as he was then known) not knowing who or what was addressing him. Just like in the Garden of Eden, we have no description of the Lord which seems to be irrelevant. His *qol* does all the work, if you will. The immediacy and haste contained within the command is striking: *lek-leka* which reads literally "go to you." Abram isn't given a chance to reflect on these words, just do them. Furthermore, he left his native Haran for a place not yet disclosed. Then

⁶By "next contact" I mean a major one of historical proportions, although certainly there are communications between the Garden of Eden story and Abraham. Most are (predictably) brief, and unfortunately we lack both room and time to examine them all. As for the flood of Noah, important as it is, it remains a kind of backdrop or introduction to the call of Abram.

typically (as will we'll find out later), the Lord has no communication with Abram. The picture we have of him is an obedient, unquestioning servant. Only on occasion does the Lord intervene and speak with Abram as promising him the land of Canaan as his inheritance and so forth. Most of these contacts are, as expected, brief and sometimes painful. At the same time the memory of each encounter sustained Abram which means that his faculty of *anamnesis* was being developed without his knowing it in full. Actually we have a fairly extended string of divine encounters, memory of which might be considered as his true journey.

Joseph comes along towards the end of the Book of Genesis and got into trouble with his brothers due to his dreams (actually they were jealous of him). They decided to sell him into slavery, and many years later Joseph ended up as ruler of Egypt. Finally Joseph's brothers moved to Egypt and took up residence there, their clans remaining far longer than intended, some four hundred years. Despite the generosity of that land, Joseph insisted that his bones be taken to the land sworn to Abraham, hence the connection between the two. The force with which he made this request must have been impressive, for even after four centuries the Israelites recalled it and brought along his bones when leaving Egypt. During their forty year wandering in the Sinai wilderness we have no mention of these bones. The Lord bids Moses to fashion a tent of meeting replete with liturgical items and rituals, becoming the center of Israel's contact with the Lord, though the mysterious presence of Joseph's bones must have been venerated. After all, the vast majority of people were descendants of the eleven brothers...tribes...who had betrayed Joseph. Perhaps his skeletal presence among them was an embarrassing reminder of this betrayal.

Due to the hidden yet important presence of Joseph during Israel's wandering Moses must have received just as much inspiration from them as from his dealings with the Lord although that is not mentioned. Joseph had plenty of experience governing the largest country at the time, Egypt. Surely Moses realized this, knew he was Joseph's successor, and asked his intercession for guiding Israel not just in the desert but throughout the long years of gaining control over Canaan. Of course, Moses is famous for his connection with Mount Sinai where he had remained several times over an extended period. Also the Lord "used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend" [33.11]. This is the first and only account of a sustained human contact with the divine. Mention of "friend" is important because the conversation was between equals, unlike those dealings the Lord had with humans recorded thus far. You don't even pick this up in Eden. These conversations took place within a tent, and given the close proximity of one to another, some people must have been tempted to listen in on the conversation. As with all encounters, we don't have a description of the Lord. This is indicative of a need we moderns read into the story which didn't cross the minds of the ancient authors. They knew that the *qol* or voice which started off as central to dialogue in the Garden of Eden would be the guiding principle of future encounters. Besides, it fits in well with the peculiarities of the Hebrew language.

Once Israel got established in Canaan and just before establishment of her line of kings, we have the prophet Samuel. But before he had grown up and when a child, the author of First Samuel says that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision" [3.1]. *Yaqar* is the adjective for "rare" which means to be highly esteemed. While not precluding any and all divine revelation, it was in effect non-existence, the judges and priests having taken over as mediators in an official (liturgical) context. That may be part of the reason, but something else seems to have been at work. The threefold calling of Samuel in the temple of Shiloh testifies to rarity of divine intervention, the

elderly priest Eli being in a good a position as anyone to know about the paucity of communication from the Lord. One wonders how this state of affairs came to be. For an answer, we can go back to the last historical link, namely, the conclusion of Judges. The Book of Ruth is excepted because it deals with a domestic situation, perhaps providentially, because it takes the edge off the political situation of the time. We have a nice interlude of sorts before returning to the nitty-gritty of politics. Judges ends with “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.” This unfortunate state of affairs situates Samuel in between that period of every man for himself and the emergence of Saul as king of Israel. We don’t have evidence that people were looking for a king during this interim period. Judges were in place who went round the land acting as an arbiter of sorts while the priests fulfilled their function in the temple as at Shiloh. So the threefold summons of Samuel heralded a new phase in Israel’s history, and Eli knew he was the first witness to it.⁷ Not only that, it takes place at night within the confines of the temple away from everyone except the elderly Eli. Shortly afterwards Eli must have reflected that this may have been the only real contact with the Lord he had experienced in some ninety years of his life despite his position of religious authority.

After the tragic episode of Israel’s first king, Saul (his primary contact with the divine was through a medium who summoned the spirit of Samuel, this the night before his death in battle), we have David. His contacts with the Lord were typically intermittent but enough to establish the kingdom and hand it off to Solomon who had the same intermittent contacts. Then we have the prophet Elijah and his successor, Elisha, both characterized by somewhat dramatic divine interventions. Then things fizzle out, if you will, with a lengthy list of kings, some good and some bad. It’s as though this period paralleled the increasing distance between the Lord and humanity after the man’s exile from the Garden of Eden. Early on we get a hint that this will end up as a dead end, and something new has to take its place. That’s where the prophets come in to lead the way though for the most part their advice is neglected.

If we stick with the line of prophets and examine the very last verse of the very last prophet (Malachi) as we did with Chronicles, we get a sense of this dead end but one marked with hope: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes” [4.5]. No small wonder than in the time that followed, right up to and including the Roman occupation, Elijah figured prominently in the religious imagination of the Jews. Of all periods in Israel’s history the current one was to date a carrying on of sacrifices in the Jerusalem temple which became the center of common worship. Putting all their eggs in that one basket was risky over the long haul, a further sign that something ominous was bound to happen. If the Jews had diversified their religious worship, if you will, the disaster of the temple’s destruction might have been averted and Judaism may have taken a different route. Regardless of one’s view of history and events, we see a process at work behind the scene, of increasing rarity of divine intervention with a concentrated sense of worship (Jerusalem temple) with emphasis upon externals. This process takes place in centuries afterwards when Christianity became the dominant religion and has given us a number of ups and downs as far as divine intervention is concerned.

The concluding verse of Malachi just cited gives way to the birth of Jesus Christ. The bulk of his life (generally accepted to be approximately thirty-three years in duration) was spent in obscurity, three of which were devoted to ministry, not very impressive. If we take Jesus as Son of God, that means he as

⁷Surely Samuel’s mother, Hannah, knew the destiny of her child which is why she presented him to Eli in the Shiloh temple as an offering. Eli must have regretted not having appreciated her foresight.

God made very brief contact with the human race...even more so if we take into consideration the limited area where he functioned. The problem is that we've become so inured to hearing about Jesus that if we accept the reality of God (infinite, wholly other and all that) and Jesus-as-man being on this same level (it's never really clear if this is so), we come up with something quite preposterous. And things get really strange when we throw in the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity. While Jesus lived a relatively short life and even shorter ministry, it's amazing to stand back and consider how much theology had been heaped upon him in subsequent centuries.

As we know, the New Testament opens with four Gospels followed by the Epistles of St. Paul plus documents by a few other major disciples. It's capped off with the dramatic, non-stop action story of the Apocalypse (almost impossible to make into a movie, CGI and all that). The synoptic Gospels start off with the familiar birth of Jesus which revolves around the angel Gabriel coming to the Virgin Mary. He doesn't ask permission to become pregnant but comes off with a *fait accompli*: "you will conceive in your womb and bear a son" [Lk 1.31]. After the expected surprise, questioning and acceptance by Mary we have "And the angel departed from her" [vs. 38]. Thus Mary is left trying to come to grasp with all this not just during her pregnancy but during the thirty-some years of living with Jesus and her husband, Joseph. It's all a blank, and not even tradition came up with stories about this period. In other words, the silence is quite amazing.

After Jesus' birth we have his baptism by John which usually is taken as the commencement of his public ministry. Interesting to see how the Gospels go from accounts of his birth to this event some thirty years later, almost as though there was little or no time gap between the two events. The actual baptism and what the two main characters (Jesus and John) had said must have taken place in an hour at most. Then Jesus heads off into the desert for forty days and forty nights, symbolic of a special preparation. The people standing at the Jordan barely knew what was going on. They had become familiar with John's preaching and later saw him hold a conversation with Jesus who appears out of nowhere. Then this Jesus vanishes as quickly as he arrived at the river to be baptized. After the forty days and nights in the wilderness, Jesus returns and he begins his actual ministry which is punctuated by frequent times spent alone. Then at his Resurrection Jesus says to Mary Magdalene, "Do not hold me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" [Jn 20.17]. If we skip to the Epistles of St. Paul, clearly his inspiration sprang from the encounter he had with Jesus on the road to Damascus, again seemingly brief but sufficient to change his life forever. Should we wish to continue into later Christian centuries, early on it became part of tradition to consider those who have died young (especially through martyrdom) as singled out by God. This has remained part and parcel of popular Catholic piety to the present.

Of course, all this is a sketchy outline but enough to demonstrate the theme of this essay, that any contact between transcendent reality and the human sphere is quite fleeting. Mixing the two is like trying to combine oil and water; as soon as the two are brought together they separate. That means both are comprised of very different substances. Biblically speaking the latter came into existence at the beginning of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." Only with the descent of the heavenly Jerusalem along with the river and tree of life, do we have a bridging of that gap which doesn't mean the created becomes God nor does God become the created; rather the two are united in the original way God had intended.

So if this relationship had been put in place since time immemorial, does it have practical application

for today's modern world? Let's take for granted the pervasive influence of secularity and marginalization of religion, so no need to get into that. At the same time the Judeo-Christian religious heritage has been influential until quite recently. Despite its absence in many quarters, such a long tradition can't help but stick around in our collective unconsciousness providing images and contexts by which we express ourselves even if we don't subscribe to the reality they represent. So we find ourselves cast adrift in an environment where not just the word of God is rare as with young Samuel but with something worse than denial of this word, indifference. In sum, the famous "so what?" Even if the divine decided to change tactics and not be as fleeting as in the past but do something more spectacular and lasting, again, so what? That attitude makes you wonder if any inquiry as with this essay is a waste of time. The temptation is to cave in, but chances are we won't because we can foresee the consequences of being swallowed up into unending blandness.

Despite the so-called evidence against divine intervention, quite a few people continue to be intrigued by this phenomenon. It doesn't go away quietly but persists which makes you wonder if we're the ones at fault for not tying into this reality, of not understanding it properly. One of the best ways to put this to the test is to go into some type of isolation. Solitude would be a better word for it. An offshoot of modern society is that it does afford plenty of opportunities for solitude whose form differs from the type people had sought in past ages. Now it's something often imposed from without as opposed to a life style assumed voluntarily. Solitude is literally everywhere though the background against which it stands creates much noise and commotion making it more difficult to appreciate. When we do hit upon solitude, we have to protect it and see if we can learn anything from the experience. For Christians, the above mentioned forty days and forty nights Jesus spent in the wilderness is an archetype of this. The only difference between his experience and people who had sought out solitude is that we have to be more creative about the project. In the past there was a tacit approval and support of this way of life which exists no longer.

If we withdraw ourselves from the pressures of society—the time frame can vary for a day all the way up to one's entire life—we get a better grasp of the environment we had just left. While there are many facets to explore here, let's center upon the theme at hand, namely, the fleeting nature of transcendent reality. At first it may not be at top of the list when getting acclimatized to this withdrawal but later becomes central to our world view. The length of time required for this varies from person to person; much depends upon how much "baggage" one brings to the task at hand and how long it takes to "unload" it. That process may never cease but becomes less of a problem the more time passes. The less we tend to fidget the more open we are to other dimensions.

The common denominator which brings people into voluntary solitude is that they have encountered something worth exploring which doesn't fit into normal everyday life. Those who have this solitude imposed upon them involuntarily (prison, sickness or the like) may have the same experience although it takes longer for them to see its value since they haven't opted for the condition in which they find themselves. Not unlike the biblical examples given, running into transcendent reality is quite brief. We can call it such because nothing...absolutely nothing...in our lives compares to it. Even if we manage to establish a more stable relationship, it requires constant maintenance. Here's where a lot of literature about the spiritual life goes into temptations, distractions and discouragement. However, some of it takes a pious view and gets hung up there. No problem there, but the task at hand is to look at our situation square in the face. Generally speaking, most modern people can't identify with these older, more traditional ways of stating the relationship with the divine which doesn't mean they aren't

interested. People require a different vocabulary to start off with.

Consider the lasting influence of this contact: so brief yet having such a lasting impact which makes a person change his life style completely. The brevity is a constant factor meaning that a person may not have a repeat experience for the rest of his life, not uncommon. This phenomenon brings up the question of memory. This might sound strange at first because we normally consider memory as the recall of past images from time to time and nothing more. However, we're more concerned with memory as *anamnesis*. The examples from Plato's **Phaedo** cited in a footnote above but can be misinterpreted as a form of reincarnation although that term isn't specifically mentioned. One way of trying out this *anamnesis* in the concrete is to see "what happens" when you're by yourself. Also, let's assume that what brought you to this state is a contact with the divine that most likely won't be repeated. While it's a temptation to wish this to happen again (and again), that isn't the point. You've been inserted into a process of learning how to situate that past experience on the same plane as in the present moment. That doesn't mean you're trying to recreate it, an important distinction. Instinctively we know the difference, but it takes some time to actualize the distinction.

While engaged in sorting this out our recollective faculty...our *anamnesis*...all the while has a living contact with the original life-changing event and the present. In other words, we've begun to bridge the temporal gap and learn in the process how time-bound we've always been. Throughout all this we have access to those biblical examples starting with the Garden of Eden and working up through Christ's Resurrection. Their importance lies in the fact that they have had a profound impact on the memories of persons involved. In fact, the first man underwent a weakening of his *anamnesis* with respect to being in Eden mirrored by the decreasing life span of his descendants which originally started out in the hundreds of years. Even with the flood and repopulation of the earth by Noah and his family the same process of decline began anew. It was only with the advent of Jesus Christ that this not only familiar, repeated story comes to a halt, but that a new era superceding the Garden of Eden had begun. This is true even with the appalling examples of human behavior since Christ's birth, far more than anything that came before. No new genuine story had emerged that can replace the Christian one.

The emergence of the story of Jesus Christ brings to maturity the ancient Greek insight of *anamnesis*, that is, in the fullest religious sense. This faculty remains within people despite the lack of knowing when and how to access it, a fact which is both encouraging and appalling: encouraging in that we can recover it and appalling in that we can allow it rust over with so much useless thoughts and emotions. What's interesting about the coming of Christ is that it builds on the Genesis concept of being created in the divine image and likeness which has come down to us as the best of both the Jewish and Christian traditions. The practical problem, however, is lining up this ontological character of our nature with our recollective faculty, easier said than done. And that doesn't mean having pleasant memories nor being wistful for something irretrievable. If we formulated being made in the divine image and likeness in terms of memories, we'd end up like those old folks who dwell in the past without being attentive to the present. Another way of putting it is that we'd become perpetual daydreamers.

Our examination of a few biblical instances where the divine has encountered the human has revealed the brevity of the contact. However, memory of these contacts have inserted themselves into the collective memory of many people and has influenced the practice of religion and formation of culture

for subsequent generations. Thus in our recollective faculty or *anamnesis* lie the roots of what's best the human race has to offer. This has to be sustained from time to time. Like the generations after the first man's expulsion from Eden when the common physical life span gradually became shorter, so can we peter out, if you will, unless some one or some group has encountered anew the divine. From the Christian perspective, that's where the birth of Jesus plays a pivotal role. He puts a definitive halt to that downward slide of humanity as well as the boring repetitive cycles of recovery. These cycles are abortive attempts to recover life within the Garden of Eden but never quite get there. With the advent of Jesus Christ, desire to return to Eden is supplanted with something far better culminating with the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, traditionally seen as birth of the church. And that church continues throughout time but is not subject to those boring repetitive cycles or rises and falls.

Yet a person can object to this by citing numerous examples of failures. True, but the church itself transcends pigeon-holing or more specifically, any attempt to put a label on it. In an earlier essay this was put as being too hung up on form. While the church may be a prime suspect here, anyone with knowledge of her tradition realizes she has a lot more going for her than that. She is ever moving forward in time, the purpose of which is to erase traces of that physical shortening of the human life span. That's one way of putting her mission while inviting people to hop on board and see if this turns out to be true. So while not causing anything sensational, a person who taps into this accesses the tradition and seeks to incorporate...personalize...it, albeit imperfectly. Yet his faculty of *anamnesis* ties him in with a larger reality that overlooks minor faults and glitches that come along.

So in the concrete, a person trying to accommodate *anamnesis* with transcendence has a life which for all practical purposes is rather dull outwardly and comports himself in a manner that doesn't attract attention. Actually this is preferable, even desirable, for it serves as a perfect disguise, and let's face it, preserves one from being puffed up with pride. At first glance this sounds implausible but remains a real temptation, especially when everyone else is eating drinking, marrying and giving in marriage (to borrow Jesus' words). Like Noah entering the ark, symbolic of this interplay between *anamnesis* and transcendence in the concrete, a person can't help but be struck by this pervasive activity. In order to protect against it and maintain what appears as a sign of divine favor, the activity we're discussing here needs protection. That comes in the form of humiliations, and the most effective ones happen in public. As with Noah, this person is favored by God yet scoffed by his neighbors while constructing the ark. Thus he has to balance the two—public humiliations and divine favor—and get on with the task. Also he had to refrain from jeering those who had ridiculed him, especially as he walks up the ramp and closes the ark of the door for the very last time.

What the idea of humiliations is conventional enough (they're never to the person undergoing them!), they can be supplemented...even surpassed...with a more thorough-going form of humility. Of course, it's not desirable on the natural level but worth looking into. Let's focus on the cultivation of immaturity as a disguise to hide transcendence. Note the word "cultivation," not just plain old immaturity. There's plenty of that around. Because transcendence prefers hiddenness and humiliations are a type of hiddenness, these trying experiences can be put at service of transcendence that it may hang around longer in the open, if you will. In that way it allows for a more sustained contact between heaven and earth. While the more fleeting type of encounters already presented may not fall within our capacity, this one does. However, it comes at a steep price, the loss of one's personal reputation. The problem is you don't find how to implement it as in a manual, let alone in a spiritual

book,⁸ and so you require more creativity to make it a reality.

Before getting into that, let's take a look at some biblical background. "So be as wise as sheep and innocent as doves" [Mt 10.16]⁹ *Phronimos* is the adjective modifying "serpents" which means being prudent and discreet as well as mindful of one's interests. Usually the opposite quality is *moros* (foolish, impious). Note that Jesus speaks of a serpent which automatically brings up the image of the one that had tempted the woman in the Garden of Eden and caused both her downfall and her husband's. If we keep that incident in mind (already it was touched upon above), to be *phronimos* is to be both deceptive and despised as well as ready to seize the opportunity a situation may offer. Such was how people considered those reptiles that crawl on the ground and strike a person without warning. Yet the type of *phronimos* of interest here leans more to taking advantage of a given humiliation (or bunch of them) and run with them, not just sit there and feel sorry for ourselves. If we did that, we'd end up being *moros*, dull and sluggish.

As for being "innocent" as doves, that adjective is *akeraios* which literally means unmixed or inviolate. That quality can apply to our actual comportment under the guise of immaturity in the sense that it unfeigned and not intended to be deceptive as in a harmful sort of way.

So in the real world, you start off pretty much like most people, getting humiliated. There are two general types: the run-of-the-mill where you're slapped down more or less privately or away from public view and the ones that cut more deeply as when many people witness or hear about your personal folly. Often you don't know the identity of these people but feel they're in your general vicinity. That makes the humiliation more difficult to bear, for you know neither the witnesses nor what they're thinking of you. Obviously an incredible amount of energy is expended on trying to figure all this out, but in the end you get nowhere. In the meanwhile you walk around sulking within, keeping an eye on people around you to see if they leave a clue as to being privy to your humiliation. You can spend a whole life time engaged in this fruitless speculation. Then a day comes when you say "enough" and decide to use all this to your advantage. How or when this comes is up to each person. Perhaps intuiting that the negative energy consuming you as essentially the same as positive energy has something to do with it. In other words, both have the same source.

This sound either like a Mother Lode or some grand deception. Being so fantastic, it requires careful sorting out to see if you're on the right track. While we might recount some of what goes into this as a correct perception, the chief quality is peace and joy. It doesn't belong just to yourself but is evident to those around you, even those whom you've suspected about being privy to your humiliation.

But what is this strange perception of sameness relative to both positive and negative experiences? It seems to come about when you wake up one day and are tired of the same repetitious thoughts and emotions that have gripped you. Starting off...and it pays to do so easily and with some delicacy to yourself...you see that both come from the same source within us. If we look at each (or both) at the

⁸There is, however, a venerable tradition in Eastern Orthodox traditions (especially Russian) of the "holy fool." What is proposed here parallels it to some extent yet doesn't deal with any deliberate acts "foolishness."

⁹This is prefaced by "Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves." The context is one of mission, dealing with persons who will connive against the disciples. The second half of vs. 16 is taken in a different context, however, with regard to the subject matter at hand and done so consciously.

point they jump into our field of awareness, they do so in the same manner. At this early stage (and it's very early, nanosecond-like) the two are the same. We get the essence of this insight yet miss the fulness continuously, wondering if we're engaged in some kind of Don Quixote misadventure. With some patience we exclaim yes, both positive and negative thoughts come from the same source and as yet haven't assumed the forms we've been habituated to give them (that is, positive and negative). Then these thoughts vanish off the scene as quickly as they had emerged provided that they...and this is quite important...don't hang around long enough to latch onto our awareness, governing it in the manner which we've known for so long.

This practice can take place all day, all night, everywhere and anywhere. And so the next step is to authorize both the positive and negative thoughts, treating them as the same, which earlier in our lives was unheard of. We can take "authorize" in the literal sense as allowing ourselves to become an author or creator of what we wish to write. Such authorization might run something like "I give you permission to continue spewing forth as you've always done without recrimination. I won't stand in your way. Please, go ahead." An astonishing attitude, really, which catches our thought-emotion processes off guard. Nothing from without is imposed on this gesture as a form of discipline. It's something wholly new and radical, welling up from within, all quite simple. Repeating this gesture (it starts off with one here and another a bit later) with discreet gestures at any time or better, when we're conscious which means not when we're asleep. Actually the authorizations at hand are painless yet demanding, the reason why we can understand this practice is not widespread.¹⁰ We don't weary of this which from the outside looking in, seems to go nowhere. However, that misdirected view stems from the fact that the practice at hand falls outside the scope of what we'd label a spiritual discipline. There's no goal which might irk some people. However, our gestures of authorizing both positive and negative thoughts don't function with a goal in mind but lead us to a discovery. And that one day we will have the hope of making a final and definitive authorization to everything that comes our way. This one differs from the multiple gestures already done by reason of coming before them. We get glimpses into this every day but have not yet attained that final gesture nor can we on our own merits. That's where the virtue of hope comes in. We know what we've been doing is the right thing and will impact people positively beyond our personal plans. The day will come...and we can't put our hands on it...when we'll be ensconced firmly in that indefinable "place."

This approach is written with a keen awareness of how many Christian spiritual disciplines are presented. Most have an I-Thou relationship, of shuttling back and forth between the two. A very normal approach to take since it rests upon a normal, expected foundation we take for granted. While that practice has made saints, something says quietly in the background that it has lost its vitality or meaning. People want "something more," if you will, and won't find it here. Obviously this infers a lack on both sides difficult to put into words, but best to leave it as that for now. Even if you've grown accustomed to the I-Thou model, it breaks down because it doesn't quite fit into way of relating to the spiritual. Or it might be better to say that society finds the expression of I-Thou models no longer adequate. Time to move on but always with a keen on tradition to see what we can glean from it.

Getting back to the notion of authorization, practice gives us the insight that to the best of our knowledge, few people seem engaged in it. Perhaps it sounds a bit too willful in that we're the agents doing all the work, leaving too little room open to divine intervention. This Prometheus-like view

¹⁰Actually we don't know if they're doing it nor not, none of our business! But given the general tenor of society, it seems rare yet desired ardently.

comes from the fact that it seems we're the ones giving authorization instead of evoking God. In a sense true, but once done—and it happens in a flash—we've relinquished any and all control. Not just that but somewhat jauntily have tossed this control to the four winds. The best part is that it can be done here and now, repeated indefinitely, and in a sense, easy to do compared with any traditional forms of discipline. This easiness is perhaps what might rub some people the wrong way, understandably. However, the notion of strenuous, military-like discipline is so ingrained in us when it comes to spiritual practices that this position seems absurd. What gives this practice soundness is, as noted above, its rootedness in the proper use of humiliations or we could say more properly, the deceitful cultivation of our humiliations.¹¹

It's one thing to endure humiliations and another to cultivate them, remembering that this is an agricultural verb connoting a certain tender care while a plant is reaching maturity. You can make the most of it while being humiliated which is what most people do. However, this gets to be tedious. However, it opens an opportunity to shift the cultivation of humiliations to one of immaturity. And that often turns out to be a byproduct which we neglect to exploit. Once you've established yourself as immature—easy for it to happen and burdensome to endure but more challenging to take advantage of—you are, to borrow the Hebrew of Psalm 88.5: “set free among the dead.” You've reached the limits of social pariah-ship, so might as well enjoy the freedom it has brought and milk it as much as possible. Now this immaturity born of humiliations allows you to be free of many of society's demands. Suddenly you find yourself with more free time. Instead of squandering the time at your disposal, you can use it for prayer, *lectio divina* and other related practices. All the while it's done out in the open and under the radar. An amazing gift, really, when you ponder it more closely.

With this leisure¹² that has come in an unexpected, indeed unwanted way, you have greater access to the transcendent. Not that it's a trigger mechanism but a precondition, a very concrete one, in fact. A main theme of this article is that any divine contact with our human realm is brief, so fleeting that barely we take notice of it. Often those involved are confused as with meeting an angel, yet the memory of these interchanges remains and has more significant impact in the long run. You get the impression that yes, God has intervened but has withdrawn almost at once, leaving us to hold the proverbial bag. Bridging the gap is the issue, and cultivating a sense of immaturity is a lesser known but effective way because it's so costly to our self-esteem or better, our innate pride. You could call this attitude a general authorization to everything that comes down the road. After agreeing to them, they level out and you take the stance of authorizing them even before they come on the scene. That's the goal, really, and where transcendent reality is always waiting to break in. There's nothing secret nor even holy about it, just acknowledging everything, especially those reminders from people of your immaturity. You cultivate them and in the words of the psalmist, being aware that you are “intricately wrought in the depths of the earth” [Ps 129.15].

¹¹Note “humiliations,” not humility. That's a virtue which can't be feigned for long whereas the other are instances which can be replicated.

¹²The Latin word *otium* is more appropriate, much broader than having free time. It means being set free from manual labor for pursuits of the mind and spirit. Often *otium* was applied to monks and their non-manual activities. The Benedictine monk Jean Leclercq has written a book (in French, untranslated) on the subject, full of references both classical and Christian.