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Lehigh County Conference of Churches Campbell Lectures, March 25, 2010

Spiritual and Religious: Human Spirit and Holy Spirit in the 21st Century

Lecture 2: The Refining and Healing Power of the Spirit in Church and Culture

The Holy Spirit, the Human Person and the Church

Prior to the Second Vatican Council, there was little extended discussion of the Holy Spirit in Roman Catholic theology. What discussion there was centered on the individual and on the hierarchy and was divorced from deeper considerations of ecclesiology. Yves Congar saw that in Pauline theology there was no divorce between the individual and the church. “Each needs the other and in them both the Holy Spirit is the principle of life.”

Congar developed a “pneumatological anthropology” that was inseparable from a “pneumatological ecclesiology” His anthropology, influenced by his study of the ancient church, held that the human person is made for relationships and finds fulfillment only in communion with others. The person is active. He or she has room for true relationships of mutuality and communion, relationships of active invitation to others and active receptivity to God. The human person is deeply in need of healing—Word and Spirit bring healing. Congar believed that the “Holy Spirit who anointed Jesus in the waters of the Jordan sanctifies and deifies us.”¹

Congar’s ecclesiology held that personal sanctification is inseparable from the mystery of the church. Human fulfillment can only be found in communion with God and others. The whole life of the church is a calling down of the Spirit. All we do as a community must be rooted in the Spirit. In particular, all have gifts from the Spirit, which are for the common good—not just for individual spiritual advancement. Even the special role of the hierarchy in the church must be seen in light of the guidance of the Spirit. All the gifts are to work together. Lutheran spirituality is not just for Lutherans.

Congar noted that of all the figures of the Catholic Reformation, St. Francis de Sales [patron of this University] with his emphasis on gentleness, humility and love would be a good candidate to speak at a service for Christian unity.² Salesian spirituality is not just for Catholics. For Saint Francis de Sales the Spirit is the source of inspirations in believers and nonbelievers alike. The

¹ See my ‘The Holy Spirit: Ecumenical Reflections’ in *Seminary Ridge Review* (Autumn 2006):5-11. Also see Elizabeth Teresa Groppe, *Yves Congar’s Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

² Yves M.-J. Congar, O.P. “St. Francis de Sales Today,” *Salesian Studies* 3/1 (Winter 1966):9.

rays of the Spirits' light touch all people. If we follow these inspirations we will become holy. The Spirit enables us to love God and Neighbor.³

For me the Spirit speaks through Word and Sacrament. I sometimes am particularly struck by a particular Scripture Passage; occasionally I feel Christ's presence at the Eucharist intensely. The Spirit often speaks through others. Spiritual friends speak God's word to me. These have been Episcopalian and Lutheran and Catholic friends—to name a few.

The Importance of Dialogue

For a century now the Christian Churches have been engaged in dialogue.⁴ In many ways this has led to outstanding results—the *Joint Declaration on Justification* comes to mind.⁵

Recently, there has been, at least in this country, a turn inward. The Christian traditions, now experiencing a serious decline in membership, have been looking to their own identity. Overall this can be quite beneficial. We cannot continue to have fruitful dialogue unless we are clear about our identity.

On the other hand, in this process of seeking identity there can be a tendency to ignore the great gifts given to us by our fellow Christians. I contend that

Christian identity needs to be understood more broadly than in the past. Our “lines” need to be drawn not quite so narrowly but more comprehensively.

Younger people know this; they've grown up in religiously diverse communities. Our efforts will not be sufficient—effective—until they present the fullness of the Gospel message with humility and love. Humility calls us to admit our inadequacies and learn from others. Love calls us to share the fullness of the gifts that God has given us...⁶

³ See Lewis S. Fiorelli, OSFS, “The Holy Spirit in the Thought of St. Francis de Sales: Introductory Thoughts,” in *Salesian Reflections*, ed. William J. Ruhl, OSFS (Washington, DC: DeSales School of Theology, December 8, 1989), 90-113.

⁴ See *A Century of Prayer for Christian Unity*, ed. Catherine Clifford (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) and David Carter, “The Edinburgh Missionary Conference Centenary,” *Ecumenical Trends* 39/3 (March 2010); 33-37, 46.

⁵ The Lutheran World Federation and The Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁶ See my “Christian Identities: Necessary but not Sufficient,” *Ecumenical Trends* 38/2 (February 2009): 30.

Archbishop Rowan Williams mentions the possible danger: “Each of us stands in a condition of separateness, clinging to our markers of identity; and these markers of identity readily become defenses and barriers against each other.”⁷

Archbishop Williams goes on to say that while we maintain our basic character and identity, we must grow spiritually. Dialogue

...does involve stripping away those habits that allow me to anchor my security in what sets me apart from others. Only so do I become reliant on God alone, and become the agent of his love, not my own good will, moral energy or spiritual resourcefulness. In this way only do I share in Christ’s act—Christ making himself one with humanity, in a process that culminates in his dereliction on the cross and his cry of forsakenness.⁸

Chiara Lubich, foundress of the Focolare Movement, offers some profound and practical reflections on dialogue in her little book *Living Dialogue*. Members of the Movement, now international in scope, dedicate themselves to a spirituality of unity.⁹ The Movement is completely within the Catholic Church and completely ecumenical.¹⁰ I will note a few important points on this spirit of dialogue made by Chiara Lubich and offer a few comments.¹¹

- “...we are so divided that many do not see us, nor do they see Jesus through us.” [41] Thus the problem identified at foundation of the ecumenical movement in Edinburgh 100 years ago is still with us.
- “We feel that it is absolutely necessary that the Word of God become our way of life.” [73] The Word is alive in the group of believers.” “We eat his flesh and drink his blood in the divine Eucharist, but also in the reading of the Scriptures’ said St. Jerome.” [74]
- “The things of God usually grow in silence” [21] Thus the need for contemplation mentioned in the earlier lecture.
- “If they are the effect of the Spirit...then unity is not only a dream or a utopia; it is a real possibility.” [21] I see in this writing and others that the Focolare spirituality is eminently practical.
- “Obviously, those who have not experienced this spiritual presence of Jesus in the midst of those who love one another cannot fully understand what it is. Above all, they cannot appreciate what an ‘ecumenical resource’ (if I may use this expression) it represents.”

⁷ In “Introduction” to Chiara Lubich, *Living Dialogue: Steps on the Way to Communion among Christians* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009), 11.

⁸ 12.

⁹ See “Unity, a divine word: Reflections the Focolare founder” in *Living City* (February 2010): 13.

¹⁰ Brother Roger of Taizé is considered by some to be a Reformed-Catholic. To me, it seems that saints transcend the normal boundaries.

¹¹ Chiara Lubich, *Living Dialogue: Steps on the Way to Communion among Christians* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2009). Pages numbers are in brackets.

[29] The experience of an ecumenically oriented community dedicated to loving God speaks to people more than agreed statements. We need more such communities. Some Protestant congregations are de facto ecumenical.

- “The Gospel covers you with love, but it also demands everything of you. The Lord permits trials which can, at times, take your breath away. But only by accepting and overcoming them is life fruitful.” (See Jn 12:24), [31]. Trials are part of the movement toward unity—but they often result in unexpected most positive results.
- Jesus forsaken is the one who is lonely, the derelict....He appears useless, cast aside, in shock...And in all of these sufferings, which we can experience personally, and we can recognize him. But we can see him also in every brother and sister who suffers.” [55] Chiara Lubich recognizes Jesus forsaken even “in the lack of full communion among our churches.” [57]
- “Obviously, the full and visible communion among our Churches still needs to be achieved, but we can already live this reality.” [60] We can already engage in a ‘dialogue of life’ based in the many elements we already share (Baptism, Scripture, Creeds....) which can empower the other dialogues—of charity, service, prayer, and theology.

The reflections of Chiara Lubich put the personal dialogues into a prayerful and powerful context. This gentle spirituality is having a wide impact. Recently the noted ecumenist Michael Root asked “Can the ecumenical logjam be broken?”¹² The answer of the Focolare Movement is **yes**.

Mission and Healing

Monsignor John Rodano put it well when he says “The Challenge now is to *appreciate* and *receive* what has been achieved and to allow our churches and communities to be shaped by what has been achieved.”¹³

He also notes that a healing of bitter memories may be necessary for us to receive the gifts the other communities are offering us. I think that this can be difficult and is an ongoing process. Much work is being done today on process of reconciliation and peace-building.¹⁴ It involves:

- A search for the truth of the past—moving beyond histories written from a single point of view

¹² In tough straits, *Christian Century* (December 29, 2009):10-11.

¹³ “The Future of Our Journey: Issues Facing Ecumenism,” *Ecumenical Trends* 37/5 (May 2008):71.

¹⁴ See William Bole, Drew Christiansen, SJ and Robert T. Hennemeyer, *Forgiveness in International Politics: An Alternative Road to Peace* (Washington, DC: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops 2004).

- An acknowledgement of past wrongs—and an abandonment of the contention that “we were always right”
- A search for mutual forgiveness
- A resolve to move into the future.

The “apologies” of Pope John Paul II for past sins by Catholics against fellow Christians opened the door for such reconciliation. A complementary aspect of Pope John Paul II’s ministry was the recognition of the Orthodox and Protestant saints.¹⁵ These men and women can provide positive direction for the common future.

The healing of the past will enable us to preach more effectively in the present. In preaching the message of Christ, those of us with an academic orientation tend to think that clear logical explanations will convince people. For most, however, conversion comes from the heart.

St. Francis de Sales reminds us that a spoonful of honey is more attractive than a barrel of vinegar. The goodness and beauty of Christian living—seen in the love of Christians for others—is compelling. The communities of love that Chiara Lubich speaks of must become more of a reality. Good example, hospitality and solid friendships win hearts. For most people an affective conversion to Christ leads to a thirst for knowledge.

How might we communicate with those who are seeking a deeper spiritual life? How might we be in touch with others?

I think David Gortner is correct when he argues that Evangelism is a spiritual practice and that our sharing with others flows out of our gratitude to God. “True Evangelism emerges only out of your own transformation.”¹⁶

He goes on to note that gratitude “propels us out to others to share our good news” or I might say to invite them into the world of transcendence that they have been seeking.

For Gortner, “Evangelism is a willful, joyful spiritual discipline of seeing and naming the Holy Spirit at work in ourselves and those we encounter....”¹⁷

We invite people to join with us in a community that is ‘on the way’ and ‘always reforming’ and always seeking growth in the Spirit. This community is essentially a local church linked by bonds of love and structure—bonds of koinonia—with our fellow Christians throughout the world.

¹⁵ See *Ut Unum Sint* #84-85.

¹⁶ *Transforming Evangelism* (New York: Church Publishing, 2008), 2

¹⁷ Gortner, 32.

Evangelization involves dialogue—and especially listening. The Spirit is at work in the other. Our evangelization is grounded in the Spirit. And the Spirit works in the hearts of all. All of creation is affected by the Resurrection of Christ.

In this dialogue we have the greatest respect for human freedom—especially freedom of religion. We believe that in Christ we are most truly free.¹⁸

In the dialogue we may have to attend to the preconceptions that people bring with them.

Now after several generations of progressive attrition, more and more people have grown up with no religious affiliation and no connection with the central sacred stories and ideas that form Christian religious consciousness.¹⁹

Thus we cannot presume knowledge. We also might find “that a significant percentage of Christian young people share the negative perceptions of Christianity held by their non-Christian fellows.”²⁰ Our dialogue might involve clearing up misconceptions of what Christianity is and is not.

Ecumenical Marriages

A significant practical place where Christians meet each other and the wider culture is in “Ecumenical Marriages.” Forty percent or more of Catholics are marrying fellow Christians; the figure is much higher for Protestants marrying out of their tradition. From what I can see, many Catholic priests and Protestant ministers hope that the ‘non’ partner will become ‘one of us’. For Catholics, this happens with less than half the couples.

We often do not know what to do with the couples who, in good conscience, decide to remain interchurch. Our systems are set up to deal with members of our own church. In Sunday preaching, for example we presume we are preaching to all Catholics or Lutherans.... There can be little thought that some members of the congregation might be from another tradition.

Though we cannot help noticing the decline in religious practice, we might not be as aware that we are discouraging a large number of ecumenical couples from a deeper faith commitment. We are not encouraging them to pray together with the person God has called them to marry.

¹⁸ See Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, #8-11.

¹⁹ Gortner, 10

²⁰ Father DiNoia, OP “Clearing Away the Barriers: Preaching to Young Adults today,” *Origins* 38/31(January 15, 2009). In this lecture DiNoia argues for an apologetic element in preaching that will not ‘fudge’ on important questions but rather will communicate forthrightly the truth and beauty of the message of Jesus Christ. He advocates giving lucid explanations on issues such as the unique role of Jesus, our authentic humanity, and the moral life which are in contrast with secular trends.... This approach might be subsequent to or concomitant with the personal witness I advocate above.

In 2002 the Catholic/Reformed Dialogue in the United States noted

Interchurch families are a gift both for our churches and for the whole Church of Jesus Christ. The creativity and longing for a unity that can be visibly manifest often expressed by members of such families, can serve as a witness to the whole Church.²¹

I believe that 'ecumenical marriages' are becoming more and more the norm. I believe that these couples can grow together spiritually. And they can bring their experiences to the ongoing search for Christian unity.²² Communion among the Christian churches will not grow by pretending differences don't exist. It will grow by serious dialogue which explores these differences forthrightly. Interchurch couples can provide valued insights into this process.

Spiritual Maturity

We do well to listen to the wisdom of interchurch couples—and of others whom we meet. Sometimes I wonder if I have enough spiritual maturity to learn from others—and for full communion. Am I willing to go deeper?

Those of us who have been on the spiritual journey of life for awhile—some of us even have gray hair—occasionally reach a plateau. This is the time of 'dryness in prayer' spoken of by the saints. This may be a time of 'boredom.' I realize that a pattern of boredom (especially a complaint of the young), or dryness or sameness is a call to go deeper. I find it easier to see this pattern in others who come for spiritual direction than in myself.

The call is often to let go of something that I am valuing too much. It is a call to bring my life more into balance. It is a call of let go of something—that I often don't want to let go of. It is also a call to embrace something new, something I might not have thought of—perhaps a new ministry, perhaps a new way of looking at things.

I am stoutly resistant to this process in myself. Even though I know that

Lest we fear too much,, this is what Christ promises: if we say yes to this most personal of invitations, he will bless whatever suffering follows, infuse us with the power of his grace and fill our cup to overflowing. Streams of living water will begin to flow from within us, and then—miracle of miracles—he will send us forth to bear fruit.²³

²¹ "Interchurch Families: Resources for Ecumenical Hope," ed. John C. Bush & Patrick R. Cooney (Washington, DC/Louisville: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops/Westminster John Knox Press, 2002): 1.

²² It is often remarked in articles on interchurch couples that the couples are dealing with these issues because the churches cannot come to that unity that Jesus spoke of at the Last Supper [Jn 17: 18-21].

²³ Paula Huston, "Wake-up call: A midlife spiritual challenge," *Christian Century* (January 26, 2010):33.

The goal is holiness. This is not perfection, for perfection in the details of life is impossible. We are to set no artificial, self-protecting bounds to our love. The key to spiritual development is growth in love in relationship with God and others.

This growth in love is a pure gift. God's overflowing generosity touches our lives. We refer to its effects by many names: Growth in the Spirit, Grace from God, Living in Charity....

Our response to the gift is to give thanks. Holiness is not an achievement. **It is a gift.** The key to moving deeper is to ask for divine help—for the guidance of the Spirit of Love.

Sometimes the obstacles are past incidents or hurts—at other times ways of thinking or acting. Once I get around to asking for the grace of the Holy Spirit—after a few months or years-- it comes rather surprisingly.

Our response to the gift is to give thanks. We have been greatly blessed.

I give special thanks at the Eucharist—or the Lord's Supper. [I regularly attend Protestant services.] In praying together-- even in our state of imperfect communion-- we share a little foretaste of heaven. Here on earth we have the prelude, in heaven we will have the full symphony of love.²⁴

Fortunately we have the saint to guide us. In particular, I have the spirituality of Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal to encourage me when I get 'off track'.

The role of the saints is most important. I think that at this moment of the ecumenical movement we need saints to guide us.

This includes the holy ones of the past. At the millennium, Pope John Paul II made an ecumenical effort to list some of these outstanding figures. My contention is that we have a lot to learn from them. This is not just in how to live personally. But also their theology might have things to teach us as we move toward the more controverted areas of disagreement.

One way to begin to consider the moral issues that confound us might be to look at the teachings and actions of these holy people. We tend to start with positions drawn from systematic theology—and this is a good thing. Yet different starting points can lead to different nuances in our conclusions—and so we might begin with the saints.

²⁴ Some of the ideas in these paragraphs appeared originally in an article I wrote for Catholic News Service. Implied here is my embrace of Eucharistic ecclesiology, a form of communion ecclesiology. The implications of this point of view are spelled out in four agreed statements of the International Orthodox-Roman Catholic Dialogue. The statements build on one another. The most recent is the Ravenna Agreed Statement of 2007. The current topic for the Dialogue is the role of the *protos* in the first millennium.

This is not to ignore our own call to holiness. Each of us has a special call from God. Each can make a contribution to the search for Christian Unity. Let us not resist this call. In following Christ more faithfully under the guidance of the Spirit we can make our own contributions to the search for Christian Unity.

A few years ago, I, by default, came to be in charge of the grass and garden in our community. This has given me more insight into the image St. Francis de Sales offers at the beginning of his *Introduction*. What I have been doing today is rearranging the flowers of the Christian spiritual traditions. Hopefully this will be of help for all our spiritual lives.