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### **Signs of Hope, Signs of Despair**

[With apologies for this less-than-polished post, a consequence of house-moving chaos and fast-approaching closing date.]

The controversy over the election of Thew Forrester as bishop of Northern Michigan is a sign of the times, a sign of the great danger that Western Christianity, particularly Christianity in America, particularly The Episcopal Church finds itself.

Forrester is a sign of hope: he understands, along with the earliest and greatest writers on Christianity such as Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Confessor, that realizing our union with God is the heart of Christianity. He understands with them that salvation comes through the encounter with God in the depths of the soul. God offers us the free choice to turn away from confusion and pain to explore the prayer of silence in its infinite depths. (For an excellent and readable history of union with God in Christianity, see "Becoming God: The Doctrine of Theosis in Nicholas of Cusa" by Nancy J. Hudson). It is the loss of this understanding that salvation comes through seeking the vision of God, from which everything else in our lives must issue, that has led to the flattening of contemporary Christianity in every sense.

Gregory, for example, explicitly states what is understood and implicit, that "salvation [is] the purification and illumination of the mind." [Hudson, p. 23]. This is not "platonism;" these early writers are actively anti-Platonist. The body and the created world are integral and inseparable, "the union of the mental with the bodily presents a connection unspeakable and inconceivable." (Hudson p. 19) "Its created being itself makes a true theosis possible." (Ibid. p. 22) Nicholas of Cusa says very plainly that the image of God in us is the mind's ability to transcend itself [by grace].

Much of the New Testament speaks of this union: Jesus' continual reference to the Father is a familiar metaphor and the heart of his prayer, particularly in the Gospel of John (14-17). The great kenotic hymn (Phil. 2-5-11) which lies at the heart of the liturgy for Holy Week and Easter, is a way of speaking about the laying-aside of our pretensions so that we may realize the divinization that is inherent in, even the purpose of, our creation.

These early writers do not speak of "original sin" or an inherited flaw in human nature. They understand that our difficulties arise from yielding to the "flesh" or "passions," that is, our

believing that the appetites and distortions that flood into our perceptions are real and then yielding to them, their noise, their distraction. As Pascal puts it, all of our troubles arise from our inability to remain alone in a room. What we need to be saved from is this unreality in ourselves, the noise and chaos of our own minds that trap us in destructive behaviors and attitudes such as anxiety, greed, and dispersal. If it is our minds that trap us, then it is by turning our minds into the silence of God that frees us.

The earliest baptismal traditions do not speak of dying and rising (see Ephrem, for example), or, when they do, the dying is used as a metaphor for the changing of perceptions that is part of the catechetical process (see the writings of Cyril of Jerusalem.) The notion of the human person in this theology of union is exalted, and its aspiration at once humble and positive. But religious institutions do not like its constituents to think too much, or to be too whole. Therefore these fundamental insights about silence and union were suppressed to serve institutional consolidation of power.

The practices of 1400 years were abandoned, and the institutional focus changed from "putting on the mind of Christ," which focuses us on God in the infinite silence of the mind-in-the-heart, to "imitation," which locks us into narcissistic stereotypes at the most superficial level of our minds, stereotypes which are easily controlled by institutions.

But this policy has backfired. People are rediscovering the depths for themselves. But when they go to church to seek support for their prayer they encounter only banality, trendiness and a lot of noisy performance art. In consequence, they leave. They have discovered that the institution has cheated them of their spiritual birthright, and are turning to ancient and medieval sources for the support the churches can no longer (and will not) give them.

They reject denigration of the creation God has called good, the Creation God draws ever onward to realize its divinity. Julian of Norwich sums up the entire tradition. She repeatedly asks Christ, "what is sin?" But Christ tells her that he cannot even see sin; he can only see what is like himself, which is us, and all that is needed is to "seek into the beholding."

It is significant that modern translations of the bible no longer use the word "behold." This word is arguably its most important word in both Hebrew Scripture and the New Testament. Each time it is used it signals an annunciation, the essential choice of turning away from our own skewed perceptions to be drawn into the light and life of God so that we may be transfigured. "Look" or "see," the words which have been substituted by translators for "behold" by contrast are analytical, and self-reflexive, while "behold" gives us a moment of being "lost in wonder love and praise."

Forrester understands that if the church is to survive it must return to the practices from which the richness and depth of Christianity sprang and by which it was nurtured for more than a thousand years.

Yet the election of Forrester is being opposed by a number of bishops. Their writings reveal a shocking lack of knowledge—or a refusal to communicate—the history of Christian doctrine. The bishop of Southern Ohio insists on atonement theology, a theology that comes very late in

Christian history and first gets toe-hold as part of a campaign to justify Charlemagne's bloody slaughter and forced conversion of the Saxons (see "Saving Paradise" by Brock and Parker for an extremely readable account of this history). Atonement theology was developed as a means to control, to exploit people's guilt, and it is one of the major sources of our cultural depression and negative aspiration today.

The Bishop of Southern Ohio objects to a revision of the baptismal service that Forrester wrote "in which references to salvation are replaced with references to union with God." If salvation is not union with God, then what is it? What does the Bishop of Southern Ohio think salvation is?

The bishop of Southern Ohio further writes that he opposes Forrester because "...our (unrevised) Baptismal liturgy (Book of Common Prayer, beginning at p. 299) is extremely clear about what it means to be a follower of Jesus: we are to turn to him - the same Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified and rose again and continues to invite us into a personal relationship with him - and accept him as Savior." What does he mean by "savior?" How more personal a relationship can there be than to realize union with God through Christ indwelling?

What does this bishop think "turning to Christ" means in a practical day-to-day practice? It means this silent prayer, this beholding in which the humble God, the creator of all, allows us to hold divinity within us, even as we the creatures are held and sustained by that divinity. It means that all our obsessive thoughts and ways, our favorite idols of doctrinal declaration are left behind.

The Bishop of Southern Ohio appears to be hung up on slogans without any understanding of what they mean in practice. Turning to Christ means putting on the mind of Christ and gazing always on the Father. It is by this means that we realize that we are heirs with him and are saved from our pathological narcissism.

Like many of us, Forrester has turned to meditation to deepen his prayer. He is an active member of a Buddhist community. The bishops who object to his election show their ignorance of this tradition by citing his commitment to the community with whom he meditates as a barrier to his confirmation as bishop.

But Buddhism is not, strictly speaking, a religion: it does not worship a god or gods, but teaches detachment from mental idols. It is an acutely observed philosophical psychology that uses an elaborate metaphorical system to illustrate how the mind works and while engaging the emotions and the whole person, bringing all to a single focus. While some practitioners may literalize these metaphors and use them superstitiously, this is clearly not Forrester's practice, nor is there any conflict in his practice with Christianity. In fact, many contemplative Christian monasteries encourage the practice of sitting Zen style and actively use Zen texts.

There is also no comparison of Forrester's situation with the recent de-frocking of Ann Redding, who claims to be both Muslim and Christian. By contrast with Buddhism, Islam is most assuredly a theistic religion and the use of the word "Allah" is vexed. While some might say that Christians and Muslims worship the same God under separate names and that all are children of Abraham, Christians in Malaysia, for example, cannot use the word "Allah" (the only word in

Malay for "God") for fear of offending Muslims.

Furthermore, Islam is rigidly hierarchical, while Buddhism and, in theory—in spite of the institutional church's opportunistic adoption of the very hierarchical system that Jesus spent his life opposing—Christianity, are radically dedicated to the sanctity of every human person and to more lateral ways of conducting human affairs, as we recently have heard again from the Dalai Lama.

The link with hierarchy, of course, is key. As long as bishops insist on the slogans of atonement, implicitly undermining the aspirations of their congregations, they hold them in thrall by exploiting their guilt. The self-help industry operates in the same way: its message is that there is always something more wrong with you that needs to be fixed and only another self-help book can tell you how. Institutional Christianity in the West latched on to this idea of exploiting guilt in the Middle Ages to increase its power and wealth, and even changed the Eucharist from a celebration of thanksgiving for our theosis to the notion of sacrifice and atonement. (See the excellent discussion in "Saving Paradise.")

In short, the Episcopal Church is at a crossroads: if Forrester is not confirmed by the House of Bishops, then it will have taken another step along the road to extinction. To return to the essential truth that Christianity is about union with God and that everything else—prayer, interpretation, liturgy, ethics, solitude and community—should flow from that yearning and encounter is institutional Christianity's only hope.

To truly convert the church would require radical re-education of clergy and laity alike, but particularly of clergy. This re-education would include a re-evaluation of what power in the church means, and it would be based on the recovery of the silence tradition, taught and practiced individually and collectively by laity and clergy alike as the starting place.

As a bishop-elect, Thew Forrester is the first sign of hope that in fact this conversion might be possible. The ignorance displayed by the bishops who oppose him—out of envy, perhaps (for envy they crucified him)—is cause for despair.