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Session 2009 - Theology Of Spirituality - Principles of Research

Documents - Eymard Writings
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I - Introduction

First of all, I thank the organizers of this meeting for inviting me. This allows me to put order into a few thoughts that have been bothering me for a while.

We want to benefit from the Eymard Web-site and its extensive documentation. It is a real challenge for those who want to do serious research, and a bit baffling for those who simply want to amuse themselves in this paternal heritage – enjoy one treasured insight today and another tomorrow! The material presented in these sessions can, without doubt, help both of these groups.

I'm not very familiar with this new tool now presented to us with its vast possibilities. I don't pretend to be an expert in this area of research, except in so far as having given the best of several years exploring this paternal heritage, benefiting from one treasure after another. Therefore, it is from my own experience that I will share the orientations that helped me most.

A Method to organize a spirituality

For the past 50 years, we've experienced a split between devotion and theology, or between the heart and the head, a fact that indicates the urgency for us to have a systematic approach to spirituality. Early in my religious life, I was blessed with two excellent articles on the methods of exploring spirituality, and deepening of charisms. They helped me and I used them often. Therefore, I want to share with you the major thrusts of these teachings.

In 1981, Fr. Edward Kinerck, SJ, presented the problem of methodology in analyzing spiritualities in his post-doctoral work at the University of St. Louis in the US. I limit myself to summarize his main points.

"Spirituality enjoys many resources, but it has hardly any tools to organize them. History and theology have their own methodology. Unlike other academic disciplines, the organization of spirituality has no precise definition of its content, no method proper of its own. We would like to analyze the existing spiritualities, interpret them in their historical or cultural context, compare them to one another, and develop guidelines for critique and evaluation. But the tools for this type of reflection are not generally available as much as they are in other domains, including theology.

"The difficulty comes partly from the very nature of spirituality. Spirituality touches the heart and tends more directly to the pastoral aspect. We apply it more often to the formation of spiritual guides, or to preachers of retreats. But, this will also involve risks, if we don't find the means to pinpoint the key questions, and the general direction in which we try to organize what we find and what we feel. Spirituality must first define itself and find the tools for a self-analysis, and define some criteria of evaluation.

"The questions we might ask ourselves to analyze a spirituality are meant to help us put order in what we find. They must also be broad enough to apply to any spirituality."

The author I quoted above presented certain questions and distinctions to establish such a method.

Definition

First of all, we need to define what is a spirituality. How do we do this?

- Is it a life-style? The way in which a person lives harmoniously his basic values?
- Is it a question of habitual reactions, perceptions, decisions, choices?
- Is it only a question of ideas, or can we also include images, symbols, art, music, architecture? Do we agree that words cannot cover all realities, but that actions, choices, and symbols are part of formulating and expressing a spirituality? Are these even a part of its essence?
- What importance do we give to the aspect of personal development? What makes one human is precisely the ability to grow and develop oneself. Because of this, spirituality is linked spontaneously to psychology – is it possible to avoid confusing the two?
- Finally, what words or concepts could help us specify the content of a spirituality?

Categorizing a spirituality

Specifying a spirituality will also give it a particular color. Our aim here is not to compare spiritualities to decide on their relative value, but to better understand the base from which they come.

The author proposes 4 categories of spirituality, according to their view of time and space, and according to their relationship with the world and history. These would be ("apophatique") **God-centered, apostolic, prophetic, and City of God.** He also acknowledges that some spiritualities are not so easily categorized.

He came to these categories by criteria of comparison and contrast according to cosmological perspectives that are presented. In other words, the concept given to space and time influences the way of understanding self, as well as our relationship with the world and with God:

Space: Where is Christ in this spirituality? In heaven, on earth, in the world, within self?
Time: When will Christ return? For example, think of the difference between St. Paul and Teilhard de Chardin.

These perspectives are not theological positions. They are descriptions of a view of the world. We must admit that there is a wide spread of spiritualities in the Church. We do not need to classify them too strictly, but to understand them in their relation to each other.

- If they reject the world and history, they are **God-centered**. Example: John of the Cross. He rejects all images in his approach to God, by setting aside the imagination.
- Ignatius, on the contrary, sees images and the use of the imagination as a positive tool to approach God in love. This spirituality that embraces the world and history would be **apostolic**.
- A spirituality that rejects the world, but not history, would be **prophetic**, such as St. Francis of Assisi. It finds its expression of authenticity in history, or in time.
- The last category that embraces the world, but not history, is called a spirituality of the **City of God**. He gives the example of St. Benedict.

These different roads all have the same purpose: union with God.

In general, we cannot differentiate these categories so clearly. Several spiritualities are a combination of all 4, with one dominant aspect. Where would you place Fr. Eymard, and why?

Authentic and not-authentic:

Once we have clearly categorized a spirituality, we look for the principal key to its teaching:

- What expresses the authentic and the not-authentic in this spirituality?
- What is the wisdom of this spirituality?

The heart of a spirituality is found in the particular way that it expresses the authentic and the not-authentic, the images and formulas that give its unity and its expression of wisdom. What does this spirituality accept, or reject?

Authentic: What constitutes a total self-forgetfulness out of love?

Not-authentic: What constitutes a returning on oneself, a lack of love?

Example: In the *Imitation of Jesus Christ*, compunction would be an expression of the authentic, while vane knowledge would be an expression of the not-authentic.

What is wisdom according to this spirituality?

The wisdom found at the heart of a spirituality refers to the personal experience of those who have lived it.

Suppose we take personal development as a starting point, and we ask ourselves: What is the expression of wisdom in this spirituality? What insights, what means, and what lived experience can we gather under the words "wisdom"? How is it expressed? In order to answer this question we must ask ourselves: How does this spirituality intend to find God, and what experience flows from this encounter with God?

Let's return to our 2 examples:

The spirituality of St. Anthony of the desert flows from solitude.

St. Ignatius finds wisdom in his rules of reflection in union with the Church, for example, his rule for eating, or discerning, etc., his rules for the discernment of spirits. The main image of the spirituality of Ignatius would be that of the two standards: to serve the Kingdom of Christ, or to serve the Kingdom of Satan.

What images, phrases, or formulas do we find in Eymard's teaching to distinguish the authentic from the not-authentic, the true from the false, or the road of wisdom...

Do these questions give you the desire to make deeper reflections on the Founder? It seems to me that orientation points such as these, guide us well in our research according to availability of the sources, and the time and interest that we want to consecrate to this topic.

Reviewing the personal experience of the Founder

Now, I'm leaving the perspective of Fr. Kinerck to look at other questions proposed by Fr. Norbert Brockman, SM. Here again, it is no recent article, but a text that guided and greatly influenced my research. Fr. Brockman wrote his article at a time when the Exercises of St. Ignatius were regaining all their popularity, dressed in their new clothes after Vatican II. He was complaining that we were all becoming Jesuits, without giving sufficient attention to our proper charisms. He argued in this way: the success of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius comes from the fact that the retreatant of the 30-day retreat relived the spiritual experience of St. Ignatius. Couldn't it be possible, he reasoned, to go deeper into the charism of foundation and in some way retrace the same spiritual journey of our own Founders? In this way, couldn't we catch the charism from within by a personal spiritual experience?

To organize such a retreat, he also proposes a few questions for research. These plunge us into theological, biblical, and ascetic aspects:

- Who is God in this spirituality?
- Who is Jesus?
- Who is the Spirit?
- What are the means of sanctification being proposed?
- What model of prayer is taught here?
- What forms of asceticism are proposed?
- What key scriptural texts keep recurring here?

A serious reflection on these questions gives us the elements for a retreat that allows us to relive the fundamental experience of the Founder's charism. This is a challenge that I always wanted to take up, but that I never realized to my satisfaction. It seems that from the Retreat of Rome, we could do this, and a few Servants have already begun to reflect in this direction.

II - Which outline do we use to analyze, or summarize our search?

In everything that I've said so far, it is evident that my main thesis is this: all research must begin by asking the right question. What am I really looking for? What are (is) my main personal question(s)? These questions become the guiding thread, the doorway into the world of Eymard, so vast, so rich, so complex, but at the same time so simple and constant.

Global or specific

Concerning the writings of St. Peter Julian Eymard we can ask some global questions. Are we looking first of all for an overall view to summarize, clarify, reformulate, or understand his journey? On the other hand, if we prefer to deepen our knowledge on a specific point we can ask:

Do his Eucharistic expressions or this specific text reflect especially St. John, St. Paul, the Fathers of the Church, the Council of Trent, or the biography of some saint? Or, what influence did the writings of St. Paul have on the life of Fr. Eymard?

Our method of research will vary depending on whether we are doing global or specific research. There is always the danger of emphasizing a single quotation without putting it into context, and without putting it in parallel with other quotations that complete it, or even contradict it...

For example: If we look at the quote: "A purely contemplative life cannot be fully Eucharistic. The hearth has a flame" (to de Cuers, May 1, 1861), what do we say of the many texts on the importance of the hidden life, and prayer as our unique mission?

The results will also be different if we start with a predetermined outline.

For example, the doctrinal statements of the Council of Trent were used as the outline to gather Eymard's texts in the Study on Spirituality by Frs. Nuñez and Bérubé sss. Couldn't a free research of these same documents be used to support another outline of Fr. Eymard's thoughts? This seems possible to me, especially regarding the Fathers of the Church and perhaps even some major Eucharistic themes after Vatican II.

III - To know and identify Eymard's personal question(s)

I will give you quickly a few personal questions that I've used in my talk on Eymard. I'm not familiar with all Eymard's writings. My knowledge is limited to the following: his letters, his instructions given to the Servants, the Constitutions of the Servants, and the Big Retreat of Rome.

His Instructions to the Servants

I applied the questions of Frs. Brockman and Kinerck especially to Eymard's Instructions to the Servants. Because these instructions were so numerous, it was difficult to give a workable form to them, since they are both so different and so similar. I wanted to present an over-all view, point out the themes that returned most often, give them an internal logic, identify the gospel text that unites them, discover the expression of what is authentic, indicate the ascetical and spiritual means that are presented, discover the recurring images, the biblical texts that return most often, and, if possible, come to a paradigm for today.

This work of several years was finalized in dialogue with Sr. Valentine Bouchard, sss. Having identified the 14 subjects most often developed by Fr Eymard, we were able to combine some and reduce them to 6, and finally to a single pattern. This is what we call today *The Invitation to the Cenacle*, in other words, a gospel and traditional pattern in which we can make a synthesis of his teaching and replace the paradigm of the King and his Court (which was used during the first century of the Congregation) with the paradigm of the Cenacle, that is equally present in these same teachings. *The Invitation to the Cenacle*, then, offers us a formula in which we have summarized the spirituality of his instructions into 7 points: the Eucharist, the Spirit of love, Community life, the Spirit of sacrifice, the Gift of self, Prayer and recollection, and Mission. We can support these 7 points with texts from the Scriptures referring to these events that took place in the Upper Room. Therefore, this paradigm, that summarizes his teaching to the Servants, is anchored in the Bible.

We can also ask questions of comparison. We could add: What are the most frequent images in his teaching? How does he use the Bible? Which texts return most often? How does he speak about God, prayer, and human relationships? What use does he make of the Ignatian principles, of the Carmelite teaching, of expressions from the French School?

His Letters

It was my initial contact with our novices that led me to understand the importance of the Letters to know and love Father Eymard. Surely, from the historical point of view, his letters are of prime importance, since they come directly from his hand. But they are as equally precious as a nearly autobiographical source and completely personal record. This discovery led me to translate the letters into English, and to put them in chronological order. That's where we can practically follow the life of the Founder, his thoughts, his experiences, his health, his spiritual growth, his friendships, his way of reacting to joyful, sad, or trying events of life. In their chronological order, we can discover the evolution of the foundation, or the events in his life.

On the other hand if we are interested in Fr. Eymard as a spiritual guide, it is more helpful to read them as they are presented in the first French edition, that is, to read all those addressed to one particular person, and so on. We discover, in this way the richness of the personality of Fr. Eymard who adjusts himself to the needs of different temperaments and personalities, and how he accompanies with patience and compassion each one who confides in him. We also notice the different styles he uses with different people. For example, we can be better understand his relations with Fr. De Cuers, the history of the SSS Fathers, or the life of Mother Marguerite who is preparing herself, unknowingly, for the role of Co-founder.

What I noticed in the Letters is that, with a few exceptions, it would be wrong to expect some developed theses on one subject or another. Father doesn't write theses. By enlightening expressions, he touches and inspires us. Yes, even deeply. Whoever reads him, finds personal insights. We could find new insights by carefully reading the index (English edition) or the research tools of the WEB-site, and come to conclusions – and even identify the theology of his spirituality, if we can speak that way. This brings us back to the questions of Fr. Brockman: Who is God? Who is Jesus, and who is the Spirit? What is the Eucharist?

The Constitutions of the Servants

The drafts of the Constitutions of the Servants are the places for simple and direct research. From one text to the other we see the Founder's mind becoming more precise. He becomes more formal, we might say more rigid. The first drafts are simpler and more familiar. Each text has its value, and some numbers should be remembered precisely for a better interpretation of the actual *Rule of Life*. For example, we can take one idea, such as mission, and see its evolution from one text to another with principles that guide it. With the new Web-site, we could find the text of the Directory integrated into numbers of the *Rule*, a document until now not accessible except in the archives.

The Retreat of Rome

It is especially here that my personal questions found their greatest freedom. I took up the Retreat of Rome many times, always with one or two different questions:

- What questions did Father Eymard ask himself? And how did he answer his own questions?
- How often does he speak of the Presence of God?
- What Scriptural text did he refer to, and how often?
- What texts from the *Imitation of Jesus Christ* did he choose? Or skip?
- What formulas of prayer were his own, and which were taken from the *Imitation of Jesus Christ*?
- Or again: what feelings and gestures of prayer does he express?
- How does the Retreat of Rome compare with the meditations in the *Catechism of the Interior Life* by the Sulpician, Fr. Olier?
- And finally, what spiritual movements of soul does he describe in the Retreat of Rome?

Were there 4 retreats in one? Or were there 4 distinct movements?

What is characteristic of each movement? These are all the questions that I asked from the text of the Retreat of Rome, and each time I did so, this Retreat took on a new face.

I enjoyed myself in this research. Finally, this became the topic of a retreat that I was able to give to our Sisters. But I remain challenged by so much that remains still to be discovered.

Those who are familiar with the movements of the Spirit in the Exercises of St. Ignatius could make new discoveries in the spiritual experience of the Retreat of Rome. But the experience proper to Eymard must be respected, without forcing him into a mold that is not his own.

IV - Conclusion

Did I give you the desire to discover your own personal questions? I hope so, and I wish you the joy of discovering the world of Eymard. The research of each one stimulates the discovery of others. Let us pray that we may become a family that continues to explore the face of the Founder, in order to discover his soul and make his spiritual riches accessible in the service of the Eucharist.

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