

WHEN EXPERIENCE IS LIFTED TO THE LEVEL OF DEVOTION

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It is interesting to reflect on the fact that this is the first time that this particular group of persons has come together in this particular place. There will be other times when we come together here, but this is the first time. It is as though we are saying, "We would lift to the level of devotion the meanings, hopes, the anxieties, the questions, the expectations we are now experiencing in this new chapter of life." And it *is* a new chapter of life for all of us. Whatever is going on within us and among us needs to be put in context, and we would have that be the context of devotion and worship.

This meditation is entitled, "When Experience Is Lifted To The Level Of Devotion." Sometimes we assume that only certain aspects of experience can be placed in the context of devotion. But now I should like to suggest that experience is the raw material of worship. We can bring it *all*. It is God in whom we live and move and have our being—*all* our being.

Some of us who have been here for a period of time have associations of deep meaning in this particular place, this chapel. Here there have been shared times of worship, services of marriage, memorial services, celebrations. There have been times of solitude when we have come here alone, experiencing soul-searching pain, joy, confusion, reaching out. For some, then, this place is a reminder that all experience can be lifted to the level of devotion.

One of the classics of Christian devotion is Augustine's *Confessions*. In this remarkable work Augustine lays bare his inner life, including his intellectual, moral and spiritual struggles. This in itself is remarkable. but more remarkable is the fact that all this is *addressed to God*. "O God, thou hast made us for thyself, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee." Then come writings which in effect say, "Here I am, all of me, what I have been, what I am."

What does all of this have to do with being in seminary? Seminary is a place, a time, a network of relationships in which we think, ask questions, feel, make decisions and commitments, experience joy and sorrow, frustration and fulfillment, discouragement and hope. Perhaps we need to hear at this point that it is God in whom we live and move and have all our being. All this can be lifted to the level of devotion. The very integrity with which we live through (experience) the disciplines of study, human relationships, the dramas of the inner life, can be profoundly devotional. Perhaps this place can be a continu-

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ing symbol of that truth.

Now I should like to identify three experiences which almost certainly will be ours in the days ahead. At first it might seem that these experiences get in the way of our relationship with God and the life of the spirit. However, I would invite you to reflect on the possibility that the divine, the sacred, the holy, God may be implicated in the very processes of living through these experiences. Would it not be wonderful if we could discern sanctity in the various dimensions of our seminary life—if we could move through the sense of duty in what we do here, to a heightened sense of curiosity and wonder, to more reverential living? That, indeed, would be experience lifted to the level of devotion.

I

The first experience to which I would call attention is *the experience of imagining—imagining ministry*. We are here to prepare for some form of ministry. But what is ministry?

Probably in the days ahead we shall be doing much imagining, trying out various images of ministry. Images help us see things in various ways, to get different perspectives on things, to discern varied dimensions of a reality. Our images of what it is we are preparing for will give direction and perhaps motivation to our work. This business of trying out images of ministry can be exciting; it can be painful; it can be stretching.

I should like to share with you one image of ministry which I have been trying out. I have others, but this one has been growing in meaning for me. It is the image of *the minister as an artist-interpreter*. This image presupposes that we are called to be human, to fulfill the human role, to become more fully human. All valid images of ministry presuppose the deeply human quality of Christian ministry. So it is with the image of the minister as artist-interpreter.

As some of you know, Iliff sponsors several one-week seminars each summer at Aspen. They are inter-disciplinary in character, drawing on persons from the various cultural centers in Aspen. A year or two ago one of our guests was Ray Mase, trumpet player with the American Brass Quintet. Ray Mase is surely one of the great trumpet players.

I remember talking with him one day about his schedule. He talked about the number of hours he practices daily, the disciplines to which he subjects himself. As we parted he smiled and said, "I've never worked a day in my life." He meant it. He is really "turned on" being a trumpet player.

On the day he visited our seminar he said that an artist must bring two things to a performance. First, technical competence. The artist must have done his or her homework. There must be knowledge of what one is about, the music to be played. The artist must pay the price involved in achieving mastery of the musical instrument. Then, he said, there is a second thing involved in being an artist—interpretation. The artist must bring his or her distinctive in-

terpretation to the composition being played.

He said, "I will illustrate what I mean." Taking his trumpet he said, "I will now play a composition in a technically correct manner." He did, and it was impressive. Then, he said, "Now I will play it as I would play it in a concert, bringing my interpretation to it." There was warmth, movement, aliveness. We all came alive experiencing this.

Only a week or two ago I heard from a minister who was present when Ray Mase said these things. The minister wrote, "Hearing Ray Mase has made me want to be a better preacher." A great artist communicates commitment to standards of excellence.

In the following hours I thought a good deal about what Ray Mase had said concerning technical competence, paying the price, seeking standards of excellence, the capacity for interpretation. The next day I went to a concert. The Aspen Festival Orchestra was playing, with Maureen Forrester as soloist. Surely she is one of the world's great contraltos, a woman of maturity, dignity, and warmth. When she walks on the stage there is an excitement in the audience in the sense that something important is about to happen.

She was at her best that day. As she sang I recalled what Ray Mase had said about technical competence and interpretation. But now I realized that there is one thing more—*presence*. She was there, completely there. All her past life, all her years of training, all her humanness came to focus in that situation. And we were all gathered together in a moving, powerful aesthetic experience.

Ministry is more than a performing art. Yet, I am convinced that where there is excellence in ministry there is the technical competence which comes from disciplined study; the price has been paid. There is interpretation. And there is presence. We are called to know and interpret the materials with which we work, the symbols of faith. But ultimately it is life itself which we are called to interpret. We are called to interpret meaning in the life/death cycle in the light of the reality of God. That is what ministry is all about. We are called to be humanly present with persons, often in difficult settings. No one else in our society is called to this important role. The minister is human artist-interpreter.

So, in our seminary days we shall be reflecting on ministry. We shall be trying out images of ministry. Perhaps in this process we will come to feel that we are part of something much bigger than ourselves. There is that to which we must be true. And experiencing that, we may wish sometimes to come to this place, or some place, that helps us lift our experience of imagining to the level of devotion.

II

There is a second experience which almost certainly will be ours in these seminary days, that of *probing and wrestling with our personal faith*. There

may be those who feel they have it all figured out, that they have no serious questions, but I think that is not the way it is with most of us.

In studying the faith-journeys of many persons one comes to discern two kinds of faith: simple faith and struggling faith. Often there is a mixture of the two. Probably all of us have known persons of simple faith. They were able to move in the quiet trust that God is good, and that is all they needed to know. They asked no painful theological questions. They never struggled with the problem of evil.

There are other persons for whom the life of faith does not come easily. There are intellectual questions and doubts. There are troublesome tides of the spirit—"My God, why hast thou forsaken me?" There are ethical questions: what is the right and appropriate thing to do in a given situation? Paul and Augustine and Luther and Wesley all knew something about struggling faith. At times they seemed to be saying, "I believe, help thou mine unbelief."

Perhaps there are elements of both simple and struggling faith in many of us. I would like to suggest that the experience of struggling in and with one's personal faith can be lifted to the level of devotion. To search and struggle *with integrity*, to seek the truth when truth seems elusive, is to affirm our commitment to the God of truth. It is to act with sincerity and devotion.

There may be times when God seems far away, when our reach exceeds our grasp, or when in the midst of our struggling there is some sort of breakthrough (an "a-ha!" experience) that it will be given us to know that devotion is in seeking as well as in finding, in honest doubting as well as in believing, in struggling as well as in having arrived. It may be given us to know that *these* experiences can be lifted to the level of devotion. God is in them.

III

There is a third experience which almost certainly will be ours in these seminary days—*the experience of questioning our motives*. Why are we here? What keeps us going?

Outside my office door are some bulletin boards covered with cartoons. One of them pictures Dennis the Menace saying goodbye to his father who is leaving for work. Dennis says, "Dad, I hope your rat wins the race." Some persons do indeed live out of a rat race image of life. Their guiding principles seem to be drive until you drop, take all that you can get, be the biggest rat in the race, control, manipulate, use. It is the image of being driven, being forced. It is rather a de-humanizing image. Yet there are driven persons, and there are driven ministers driving for something which is perceived to be the great good: power, position, possessions.

There are other more fortunate persons who are *not so much driven as drawn, not so much coerced as called*. Blessed are those persons whose life is a response to some great good which gets to them, calls to them saying, "Here is real life." One is called into response. Paul spoke of "the upward call of God

in Christ.” Here we have the image of the God who calls forward into a larger world of feeling, meaning, service. Life is now perceived as vocation.

Yes, seminary is a time and place for soul-searching and some of that has to do with what keeps us going. Insofar as we bring integrity to this soul-searching there is devotion in it. Sometimes we experience the wonder and joy of being used for something bigger than self and life becomes vocation. In that image one becomes alive in a new way.

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The late Willard Sperry, dean of the Harvard Divinity School, once said, “The chief purpose of the church is to make God real to persons.” I have always believed that or something very much like it.

Sometimes in seminary the reality of God breaks in upon us when we least expect it. We catch the vision of sanctity in the raw materials of our experience. Sometimes in deeply personal ways we can understand what it is for experience to be lifted to the level of devotion. Let us be open to that possibility.

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