

Daily Meditation 08-04-25

More Saints I Have Known and Worked With

Good morning.

Today, once again, in our meditations, we read the subject of saints or holiness, whom we have known, and intersected with our lives. I wrote about this last week, and I'm writing about it in today's (Monday's) DM too, and tomorrow's.

But I'd like to talk today about the more general issue of holiness itself. And I'd like to begin with a commentary, if you will, by Ernest Becker, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his book, *Denial of Death*. And it is in his last book, which was called *Escape from Evil*, that talks about what healthy religion needs today is the possibility of a "new heroism, the heroism of sainthood. This meant living in primary awe of the miracle of the created object, including oneself, in one's own godliness," he says.

Remember the awesome fascination of St Francis: St Francis and the revelations of the everyday world, a bird, a flower. It also meant unafraidness of one's own death. Cause with the incomparable majesty and power of God.

He says, *If we were not fear-stricken animals who repressed awareness of ourselves in our world, then we would live in peace and unafraid of death, trusting to the Creator God and celebrating His/Her creation. The idea of religious sainthood, he writes, like that of psychoanalysis, is thus the opening up of perception. This is where religion and science meet. So how do we perceive the world? How do we perceive our place in the world? And what do we give back?*

The fact that he sees science and religion meeting around this topic is, I think, very interesting, and it brings up the whole subject of the new cosmology and the new creation story and the new awe from science, from the Webb telescope and so forth, that is bringing home to us the great wonders of the universe, great wonders that have brought our species here after 13 8 billion years. And he says this:

Religion is not putting forth an ideal of sainthood today, In a perverse way, the churches have turned their backs on the miraculousness of creation, and on the need to do something heroic in this world. The early promise of Christianity was to bring about, once and for all, the social justice that the ancient world was crying for. Christianity

never fulfilled this promise, and is as far away from it today as ever. No wonder it has trouble being taken seriously as a hero system.

Now I'd like to invoke the thinking of Père Chenu, a great historian and theologian, my mentor, who named the creation spirituality tradition for me when I studied with him in Paris, and I studied with him in his last class he ever taught. He retired at 76, right after teaching our class in the spring of 1968. Because Chenu, as an historian, loved to write about the 12th century and early 13th century, which he considered the one renaissance that worked in the West, because it was from the grassroots. The 16th-century Renaissance was top down: Popes hired Michelangelo.

But the grassroots Renaissance of the 12th century was different: it involved the serfs. And serfs were freed in the 12th century, many of them, because the feudal system could not sustain them, didn't have work for them. A whole new architecture was invented, moving from the Romanesque of the Middle Ages, to the Gothic, which opened things up so much, and allowed so much light in and so much color. And the whole technology, the new technology of stained glass, just blossomed. And the Divine Feminine was so prominent in that time. And towns turned to cities practically overnight, when these young people fled the countryside and gathered in towns, and they flourished. And education fled the monastic system in the countryside. Again, monasticism was rural. It moved to the cities, and universities were invented at the end of the 12th century. That was a tremendous revolution in itself.

But Chenu talks about how part of the revolution was a reinvention of holiness, new meanings to holiness. But Chenu, being an historian as well as a theologian, emphasized how in the 12th-century Renaissance, a new ideal of sanctity was born. And it was a communal thing, not an individualistic thing.

For him, the church's effort to sanctify the individual without sanctifying the social structures of existence, was useless, and contrary to the reality of the Incarnation, of God becoming one of us. The church falls into a disincarnate state, he says. And this denial comes in the form of an emphasis on the individual person, and the individual quest for perfection and holiness.

He says that Christians need to wake up about the reality of social class, for example, and that so often Christianity lacks boldness or courage. Boldness and courage are words that come up frequently in Chenu's vocabulary. He says, it's kind of a Pharisaical fear among many Christians, and a false and empty sanctity. A false and empty sanctity. And there's such things as mystical evasions outside society. So mysticism becomes an excuse not to be socially involved, and be involved with compassion and social justice. He says,

This false and empty sanctity refuses to recognize the fundamental conditions of human nature. But an authentic Christian does recognize him, not by confession, but because he knows that his God-Christ become man, accepted them and consecrated them. Not merely the fact of the Incarnation, but in the restored order, the order of the Mystical Body, which is the Incarnation, continued.

So he found this playing out in the 1930s with the Catholic Action Movement, where reforms are not just moral purifications, but a return to the Gospel, like Francis of Assisi did, and Dominic did, in the 12th and 13th century. So he says, *In this new Christendom that arose at that time, a new exemplar of sanctity occurred, a new ideal of sanctity. The goal of holiness is not the individual, but the larger community. You might say holiness is a community project, and that true saints and leaders appear only in a setting which their minds can find sustenance. So you create a milieu in which people are searching together to build community, to heal community, to work for community, which means to work for justice and compassion.*

And he talks about joyful sanctity, versus a false sanctity. He says, “A joyful face is a visible effect of nobility of soul and of divine grace.” And in this way, he’s echoing Rabbi Heschel, who says, “God is not only Creator of earth and heaven. God is also the one who created delight and joy, even though merriment has its ultimate origin in holiness. The fire of evil,” Heschel says, “can better be fought with flames of ecstasy, than through fasting and mortification.”

And that was clearly Chenu’s reality as well. He himself was very joyful person, even though he underwent a great deal of struggle and condemnation and expulsion and rupture in his own life, in his own battle to be true to what he saw as the truth of Christianity in an improved form.

So I share this with you, so that when you read about these various holy people that I’m talking about today, and I asked the question about your experience with different kinds of saints today: that we realize that this really is a common project, that the values that saints stand for and even die for, that these evolve in time and culture and history. And so it’s very exciting to look, go hunting and gathering for new versions of holiness and sanctity around us and in our own lives.

Thank you. See you next week.