

**The Anthropological and Christological Foundations of Baptismal Formation**

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## **A Brief Outline**

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“Jesus is the light of the world, a light stronger than death. Baptism is the gift of the light and life of Christ, offered through the Holy Spirit. Through the liturgical signs of light, water, oils, and gesture Jesus remains with us and continues to lead us into the fullness of life.”

These are the words of the “Doctrinal Content” component of my album page (a kind of lesson plan) for a Baptism presentation shared with children as young as three in the experience known as the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd.<sup>1</sup> The words of the Doctrinal Content are not spoken to the child. What is offered, rather, is a recalling of their earlier work with a prophecy from Isaiah and the Good Shepherd parable, woven together with new words and actions as children and catechist gather with model articles of baptism (a font, a Paschal candle, small candles, and a Bible):

Long before Jesus was born in Bethlehem people were waiting; the prophet Isaiah told them a “great light” was coming and when Jesus was born - a great light come into the world. (A model Paschal candle is lit.) The light held such beauty; people wanted to look at it and be close to it. We know the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep; Jesus was crucified... and died on the cross. (Extinguish the candle.) It must have seemed as though the great light had gone out, but this light is stronger than death. In the resurrection, Jesus rose from the dead. (Relight the candle.) The light was stronger and brighter than ever and can never be put out. Jesus came to share this light with us. Baptism is a moment when we receive his light in a most particular way; on that day our name is called and our baptismal candle is lit from the Paschal candle. (Each child is helped to light a candle from the model Paschal candle, one by one, and to place it nearby.)

In quietude the catechists and children enjoy the light together and perhaps sing a song or offer words to Jesus (the children often express gratitude for the light). In later moments on other days, the children will return to the baptism area in the atrium to experience new layers of the

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1. Catechesis of the Good Shepherd is a children’s formation experience rooted in the philosophy of Montessori and grounded in the work of Sofia Cavalletti and Giana Gobbi. It offers children ages 3-12 developmentally sensitive experiences with scripture and liturgy. For a more detailed description of this approach see Gianna Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children: The Method Applied to the Catechesis of Children*, ed. and trans. Rebekah Rojcewics (Loveland, OH: Treehaus Communications, Inc., 1998).

work -- the water and Word, the holy oils, the gestures of epiclesis, pouring, and sign of the cross. Many children choose to return again and again to the baptism corner to continue their own pondering, as though they are turning over a mystery inside themselves, exploring it from many angles. Some repeat the movement of pouring water from a shell, some carefully smell the fragrant oil, some trace picture cards that show the articles and gestures. What is happening in the child? What is it about this baptism work that draws her in and invites her attention, her careful movement, her observed ease and even joy? Indeed, what is it about the Sacrament of Baptism that captivates us enough to continue its celebration these 2000 years, inviting our attention and careful movement, bringing the rite into our worship, evoking our sense of mystery and joy? To consider these questions, I will explore how gifts of grace and experiences of holiness move through the human person, what it means to be transformed in God, and why the person of Jesus is so central to the Christian journey toward “the fullness of life.”

In baptism, we gather in community to celebrate that Jesus, in dying and rising, frees us from all our useless fears. We celebrate that in receiving all that God poured out for him, Jesus becomes the fullness of life, human and divine, matter and spirit operating together, a complete human dwelling place for God (Col 1:18). And in baptism, Jesus shares with us this radical stance of openness to God, of union with God. We might say that in baptism we receive the posture of receiving, a posture that allows us to recognize the outpouring of gift from the Triune God and to drink of it with reverence and gratitude so that we are held and transformed into the human person in communion with the divine.

This transformation speaks to a kind of becoming, a potentiality that is present in us, as a seed contains all that it might become. Life rests on this potential, this point of contact with the divine force that sources every living thing with generative and sustaining energy. In the human

experience, this force might be described as the chemical, electrical, magnetic and loving energy of God that animates our being from our cellular beginnings to our cellular death. It flows into and from the apex, the inmost center of our soul, permeating our organism and its systems, our psyche's energy field, emotions and imagery, and our spirit's intelligence with all that we need to have life. Yet Jesus tells us we are invited into the fullness of life, and God has more at the ready, offered to us without reserve but with patient regard for the freedom we have been given to accept or not: an outpouring of transformative grace. Do we receive this gift tentatively or confidently? Do we turn from this gift in shame or hubris? Our human response to the gift of transcendence is the story of our learning to enter into the fullness of life.

In a study of how this gift is received in the human person, Streeter suggests a charting of human consciousness through interiority analysis.<sup>2</sup> In this model, the human person has dimension as organism, psyche and spirit. In the spirit dwells the cognitive functions of awareness of experience which can be understood, evaluated and acted upon. As the ever-present Holy enters into consciousness, the human person becomes aware of God's invitation into relationship through the emotion of hope which is now focused on the desire for the Divine, this "hiddenness of God from which the longing springs"<sup>3</sup> and conversion is underway. This conversion may heal the psyche of trauma, egoism and bias and allow the presence of the Holy to enter more deeply into the soul.<sup>4</sup> We become not only aware, but aware of our awareness in the cognitive functions of the spirit where, through conversion, our experiences, understandings, judgments and decisions take on divine flavor. By tending to awareness and the potential for

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2. Carla Mae Streeter, *Foundations of Spirituality The Human and the Holy: A Systematic Approach* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 48-95.

3. Streeter, introduction xx.

4. See Streeter, 58-59 for a more detailed account of the impact of psychic scarring and healing on the human spirit.

intentional action, human desire transforms into the theological virtue of divine Hope, human understanding connects with divine Faith, and human will bonds with divine Charity. These conversions allow the human person to continue to orient toward holiness. Virtue, as expressed in fortitude of courage, tempered desire, prudent judgment and just decisions support this orientation, as do the gifts of the Holy Spirit. In evidence of the conversion underway, the human person blossoms, bears spiritual fruit, lives in forgiveness, and exudes the beauty of a being in communion with God. The human person thus transformed has a real presence in the world -- that is, a compelling authenticity, an awareness of self in proper proportion with God, a life infused with the fragrance of the holy. The human person reverently proceeds in life under the loving influence of the God, who continually births our spirits, our human consciousness, into fullness.

Intentionality described in this way offers a powerful model of the way our human consciousness can companion with God to lead the human person into a kind of real and holy presence in the world that might heal our relationship with ourselves, with one another and with nature. With this model we have a picture of the human and the divine in active pursuit of a world in constant joyful motion, moving ever toward the agape love that is our destiny. In this essay, I want to also consider the aspects of human experience that are perhaps silently situated within this model -- the phases and circumstances of human life that are not easily characterized by the cognitive operations of the spirit. As I consider my own circle of community, many people in these life phases and circumstances come to mind (their names are changed to protect confidentiality). I think of Jamie, a relative's newborn son, and Luis, a friend's father who has been in a coma for ten weeks, and Martin, a young adult parishioner without mobility or speech. I think of Janice, whose dementia makes it so difficult to communicate, and of Raymond, whose

mental illness seems to impact every decision he makes. I think of Lori, a teen who does not speak but comes into the atrium to feel the water of the small font and to smell the chrism oil. To be able to talk about this diverse group of people and to consider whether they might be more actively present in the spiritual dimension of a model of human spirituality is difficult without relying on language that keeps this group at a distance. They are people who by their life phase or neurological circumstance cannot themselves express a presence or absence of self-awareness within a framework of more typical adult neurology. I want to try on more neutral terms to explore the relationship between those whose neurology allows them to define and express self-awareness, that is, they put voice to a “smaller circle” of human experience, (where small implies a part or portion within a whole), and those whose neurology does not allow -- or does not yet allow, or no longer allows -- expression of self-awareness as defined by the smaller circle, that is, they imply the “larger circle” of human experience (where large is inclusive of small).<sup>5</sup>



As a member of the smaller circle, I ponder how to make sense of the larger circle’s presence in a model of human anthropology -- specifically in the dimension of spirituality. If spirituality is defined by operations and behaviors only the smaller circle can express, what can I know of how people in the larger circle come to fullness of life? Are people within this larger circle experiencing operations of the spirit, something akin to or very different from the cognitive operations that have the potential to bring those in the smaller circle to real presence? Or is the

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5. I borrow from a movement among disability advocates who speak of the neurodiversity of the human experience. Some people experience neuro-typicality and some experience neuro-divergence; diversity in neurology is viewed as a natural range regardless of expression as typical or divergent. For more details see Nick Walker, “Neurodiversity: Some Basic Terms and Definitions.” Accessed August 14, 2016. <http://neurocosmopolitanism.com/neurodiversity-some-basic-terms-definitions/>.

larger circle a place of complete mystery for those in the smaller circle? I explored several authors who enter into these questions either directly or indirectly. Sofia Cavalletti, who collaborated with others for many years to develop the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd asks, “does there exist in the child a mysterious reality of union with God?”<sup>6</sup> She describes several accounts of children under the age of six who demonstrate “metaphysical intuition” such as the very young child who exclaimed, after following a butterfly in flight and feeling everything “open” around her, “Mommy, I know God.”<sup>7</sup> Cavalletti suggests that these ephemeral moments are “like a flash of light that shines vibrantly and then fades away... they let us glimpse in some way the mysterious reality present within the child; they manifest a child’s potentiality and richness, the nature of which we are not successful in defining clearly.”<sup>8</sup> This sense of mystery, a knowing that does not fully know, could be described as the journey from the larger circle into the smaller one, from budding consciousness to deeper awareness.

In contrast, Swinton describes another journey among people with dementia, one that might be described as moving from the smaller out into the larger circle. He quotes a woman with early dementia,

Is cognition the only measure of our presence amongst you as spiritual beings?  
Certainly my capacity for accurate communication of thought is diminishing daily... I  
can seek an identity by simply being me, a person created in the image of God. My  
spiritual self is reflected in the divine and given meaning as a transcendent being.<sup>9</sup>

These words offer another glimpse into the experience of one on the boundary, journeying from cognitive competence to the bigger circle of experience. The woman speaks to the certainty of

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6. Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, trans. Patricia M. Coulter and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 32.

7. Cavalletti, 36.

8. Cavalletti, 37.

9. John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company 2012), 192-193.

both her diminishing capacities and her undiminishing sense of continued transformation as a real, transcendent presence.

These glimpses offer some hints about the relationship between smaller and bigger circles: there is movement into and out of the smaller circle, the movement can be described by personal account and by careful observation, and the cognitive capacities we think of as constituting the spiritual dimension may not describe the only path by which the human person comes to union with the Holy. In a detailed exploration of the implications of severe and profound disability on the human experience, Reinders develops a theological anthropology that suggests that it is the ability to receive rather than the ability to give (to “act”) that transforms the human. He shares accounts of relationships with people in what I call the bigger circle, people who have limited language and cognitive development, perhaps no discernible response or volition at all. Reinders is careful not to ascribe any particular experiences to those who are unable to communicate in traditional ways, except to posit that,

They cannot help but depend on others for assistance in what they cannot do for themselves. In this sense, they necessarily depend on “receiving.” I will argue that in this particular way they are close to God...our being, at every moment of existence, originates from the gift of God’s friendship, which makes “receiving” the gift of God a task that is central to both the life of the church and our moral lives as Christians.<sup>10</sup>

In relationship with people with disabilities, Reinders argues that we (in the smaller circle) are confronted with our own self-images that want desperately to rely on our capabilities, to give with a sense of agency, to hide our vulnerabilities behind our ability to enact. When these self-images encounter the reality of limit that the disabled person embodies, the result is either a

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10. Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing company, 2009), Kindle version location 3690.

strengthening of defenses that serves to distance us, or a disarming kind of self-knowledge that forms us into friendships.

Reinders shares the story of a woman who joined the first L'Arche community, an intentional living community of people with and without intellectual disabilities. She explained that discovering how difficult it is to be with one another in a stance of listening rather than domination “implies a real stripping. The handicapped person has already lived through this stripping. If we cannot accept our fragilities and handicaps as they are revealed to us, then we will probably not be able to live very long in community with our handicapped brothers and sisters.”<sup>11</sup> The difficulty arises out of a belief that having something to offer is what counts. Instead, Reinders suggests, “learning what it takes ‘to be with’... requires abandoning that assumption...because it assumes that giving is prior to receiving.”<sup>12</sup>

This is an echo of the rhythm of gift and response reflected in the model that Streeter offers where the human person is sustained through connection to the life force that is God and where the movement toward real presence occurs when that link remains open to receiving grace. It is only in receiving that we have any response at all, even if the response is a mystery. In the story of the bigger and smaller circles, perhaps it is the lived experience of the posture of receiving - a posture born of the cognitive ability to reason toward this stance and/or born of an intimate relationship with limit inherent in disability -- through which God transforms and by which Jesus leads into the fullness of life. In other words, human freedom is, more than the freedom to act, the freedom to remain open, to receive. I think of it like this -- when life phase or neurological circumstance embodies cognitive limitation, as the larger circle implies, the posture of receiving is very active and poised for graced transformation. When life phase or neurological

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11. Reinders location 3786.

12. Reinders, location 3812.

circumstance embodies intelligent awareness, the posture of receiving is seeded at least partially in ability, and can be nurtured through the action of grace on the operations of human consciousness. If we consider that the posture itself, in its action to receive, resides in the spirit, we can then say that the spirit of those in both circles is alive and active, through the intelligence of limit and the intelligence of awareness, joining with God toward real presence. And if this is so, we have a way to soften the line that distinguishes the smaller circle from the larger, since the realm of the human spirit becomes fully represented in the larger form. Reinders offers a parallel to this idea of “softening” the line of distinction in his speaking of God’s friendship which transforms not just person by person, but in the relational space among the human family. He says of Kelly, a young woman with profound disability,

We receive the gift of her presence, not the gift of her response... God is with her, even if explaining how this affects Kelly’s soul is beyond our comprehension. Faith in God’s unconditional love for Kelly is a gift of the Spirit, if anything is. Where this gift is received, a transforming love is set free that enables us to welcome her presence in our lives. That is how Kelly reveals the work of God... there may be some sort of “plan” between them, but we can’t possibly know it. That is why the mystery of her as a profoundly disabled human being must be the last word.<sup>13</sup>

While it remains true that those in the smaller circle cannot know the experience of those in the larger circle -- this remains a mystery -- it is every human person’s capacity to receive the grace of God that transforms the human family into one that is present in the world with the fullness of life, the human and the divine operating together.

Ultimately, the birth and life, death and resurrection of Jesus is a profound model of this joining, this unitive companioning with God. In his life, Jesus embodied the posture of receiving from the very beginning of his incarnation. As O’Donnell Gandolfo reminds us, Jesus entered the world as a baby, dependent in every way:

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13. Reinders, location 4282.

“the Incarnation reconciles the invulnerability of Being with the vulnerability of human beings. The ‘Prince of Peace’ (Isa 9:6), who was laid in a cold manger and cried out for succor, is for Christians the one who grants the power to make peace with the vulnerable nature of our lives...human beings are united with the loving God in and through their union with the lovable God -- the creatable, cradled presence of God in the vulnerable world.”<sup>14</sup>

She refers to sacramental imagination of the Christian tradition that allows us to believe that God “becomes vulnerable flesh in all children everywhere... the coincidence of opposites takes place in every nativity.”<sup>15</sup> In the gift of baptism, this reality is remembered and brought into the present moment. We are captivated by the light that reflects our freedom in limitation, we are washed in the waters of the Holy Spirit and given a new life in the Risen Christ. We are blessed with the strength of salvation and the fragrance of goodness, we hear the Word that proclaims the source of light and life, and we are marked with the sign of the resurrection that comes with dying to our fears. Whether we exist in the smaller circle or the bigger one, these realities of sight, sound, smell and touch permeate our vulnerabilities and remind us that we are made for union with God. In our baptism we are held. We receive the beautiful posture of receiving through which our humanity might become, like Christ, our full Humanity.

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14. Elizabeth O’Donnell Gandolfo, “A Truly Human Incarnation: Recovering a Place for Nativity in Contemporary Christology,” *Theology Today* 79, no. 4 (2013): 392, accessed August 4, 2016, ATLA Religion Database, DOI 10.1177/004057361306734.

15. O’Donnell Gandolfo, 392.

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