

Inner Stillness & The Liturgy

Lent II, March 17, 2019

Have you ever been sitting in church when someone is speaking into a microphone, and, suddenly, something electrical happens and the sound coming from the microphone gets full of **static**. It's an unnerving, grating sound. It's often very loud. Sometimes it sounds like metal gears grinding. Sometimes, it lets out an unbearably high-pitched squealing sound. And the universal response to this kind of **static** seems to be *upset* -- grimacing, cupping your hands over your ears -- and desperately praying for it to just **go away**.

I've experienced this kind of static in a number of churches, and there's nothing quite like it for disturbing the flow, and the beauty, of The Liturgy. And if, God forbid, whoever is at the microphone tries to talk **through** the static, it's even worse. When that happens, if you're up here on the chancel, you see expressions on people's faces that -- if I had to put them into words, would say something like -- "*You might be saying something important, but frankly, I don't even care at the moment, because this bloody static is driving me up the wall!*"

Technically, static is noise produced by electricity in the air. But that doesn't do justice to the emotional toll it takes on us. And it takes this toll, because it is, *literally*, painful to our ears. Our minds can't take in other -- even beautiful, meaningful sounds -- when we're struggling against the painful noise of static. Our minds don't work well without some degree of stillness. We can't hear ourselves think. We can't clearly feel what we are feeling. We just want out!

You have probably guessed that I've talked about physical static this morning ... because I want to use it as a spiritual analogy for us.

Even more disturbing for our lives than **physical** static, is the kind of "**inner** static" that so easily and regularly builds up within our hearts & minds.

By "inner static", I mean the kind of "noise" that is often silently blaring away within us, no matter how still & peaceful we may outwardly appear. By "inner static" I mean that **barrage** of inner thoughts & feelings which **yanks** our attention away from what matters most in our lives. This "inner static" may at times be *entertaining*. It may at times be *agitating*. Or it may be somewhere in between. But whatever form it takes, it always seems to lead our hearts & minds away from our deepest values, away from the reality of the Divine Presence in our lives. It is perhaps our most basic temptation.

Over time, as spiritual communities become more institutionalized, they have a strong tendency to become **numb** to the presence of this "inner static" in the lives of their leaders and their members. In their life together, they become so **accustomed** to the clamouring of this inner noise that it just becomes normal to them. It comes to be the normal state of their hearts & minds. And when that happens, the sacred liturgies of the community -- awesome & powerful as they may be in themselves -- grow dull & lifeless in people's hearing. The words & symbols of The Liturgy can no longer enter people's hearts & minds in a meaningful way; their following of its sacred rituals & repetitions become merely a monotonous "*going through the motions*" that produces no real life-giving effects in them. They don't grow. And then, quite naturally, they succumb to that quiet predator that always stalks spiritual communities -- **BOREDOM**.

This is what had happened to many people in the highly institutionalized religion of Jesus' day. They had become terminally bored. Their sacred liturgy -- **wonderful as it was** -- had lost its life-giving, transforming power in the experience of many people. The driving force of their community had become the mindless force of their own "inner static." And with that critical shift, their spiritual

community as a whole was becoming, at best, like a kind of "club," -- and at worse, like a kind of "mob."

So, you see what Jesus was up against. The people he was facing believed that they were doing all the "right" things, going through all the "right" motions. And, superficially, they were. But, in truth, "they knew not what they were doing." This problem is at the heart of the great lament in this morning's gospel text, where Jesus says:

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing...

As we know, this kind of "going through the motions" but not receiving any real benefits -- this kind of terminal boredom in The Liturgy -- is not just a Jewish problem. It happens to us all.

One Sunday a mother shook her son awake, telling him it was time to go to church. No effect. Ten minutes later she was back: 'Get out of bed immediately and go to church.' He moaned, 'Mother, I don't want to. It's so boring! Why should I bother?' Mother replied: 'For two reasons: You know you must go to church on a Sunday, and secondly, you are the Bishop of the Diocese.'

(From *Why Go To Church? The Drama of the Eucharist* by Fr. Timothy Radcliffe)

It happens to us all. The Liturgy -- the great **service** of the people -- can lose its transforming power in our experience. Now it is true that this can happen for different reasons -- like, for example, a lack of proper education on the **meaning** of The Liturgy. But the more subtle & far more insidious cause of The Liturgy losing its power in our lives is when it just has **too much competition** for our attention from what I am calling our "**inner static**." When there are too many inner distractions, we simply cannot be fully present to what is happening in The Liturgy. It begins to seem inert & lifeless to us. Just a bunch of religious chatter. And we quickly become bored.

What can we do as individuals and as a community to prevent this problem from happening to us? Is there an antidote for our "inner static" that would allow us to experience the power of The Liturgy more fully?

One of my favourite spiritual authors -- the Italian priest, Romano Guardini -- writes extensively on how to overcome this difficult problem in a wonderful little book called *Meditations Before Mass*. He writes that there is "**a quiet area of attentiveness in which the beautiful and truly important reign.**" He calls this quiet area "**stillness**". And he explains that by "**stillness**" he does not mean a merely superficial thing, like the absence of speaking or squirming. He describes stillness as a place where **all of our thoughts & our feelings find repose**. "Stillness," he writes, "is the tranquility of the inner life; the quiet at the depths of its hidden stream. It is a collected, total presence, a being 'all there', receptive, alert, ready." When asked what the liturgical life of a community **begins** with, he replies, "*It begins with learning stillness. Without stillness, everything in the liturgy remains superficial and vain.*" And we get bored.

So how do we "learn" this inner stillness, which is the antidote for our "inner static," which prepares us for a fuller, richer participation in the Sunday liturgy? We can only learn it, Guardini says, **by practice**.

Here are a few simple suggestions for how we might begin to practice it together:

First, we need to begin our preparation for the Sunday liturgy on Saturday evening. We do this, in the privacy of our own homes, by

- sitting down in a quiet, comfortable place, where others will not disturb us....
- We close our eyes....
- Then, we **firmly ground** our motivation by consciously & seriously **desiring** to be blessed by this gift of inner stillness...
- And then, we choose a single sacred word -- like "Jesus," or "Love" -- that will become the single object of our attention.
- And we begin silently, slowly, reverently repeating this sacred word to ourselves, again and again.
- As we do this, it won't take long before we notice the **noise** of our "inner static" creeping in -- distracting thoughts or feelings that seem to just **yank** our attention away from focusing on our sacred word. Don't worry -- this is to be expected.
 - Whenever it happens, we just **gently** but **firmly** bring our attention back to our sacred word, slowly repeating it to ourselves, again and again.
 - And as we bring our attention back, we inwardly surrender all of the "inner static" -- whatever it may be -- to our sacred word. We surrender it to Jesus, or we surrender it to Love.

And that is essentially the whole practice: Reverently repeating the sacred word, and whenever the "inner static" of stray thoughts & feelings arises, gently but firmly bringing our attention back. We just keep practicing that over & over again for 15 minutes or so -- (longer if we need it.) And, gradually, we discover an **inner stillness** arising in us which very effectively neutralizes the noise of our "inner static." So try this on Saturday nights. This is the first step.

The next step we take on Sunday morning, when we are on our way to church. Whether you are driving or walking, the idea is to use the time it takes you to get to church to deepen your composure, by practicing **this same practice** for inner stillness that you used on Saturday night. One caution: especially if you are driving to church -- **don't close your eyes like you did on Saturday evening.** The practice will still work with your eyes open.

And, finally, **the last step** we take when we actually arrive at church -- after we've gotten our coats off, greeted people, and settled into our seats in the pew. Then, while we are just sitting, waiting for The Liturgy to begin, we close our eyes and repeat again this same simple practice for inner tranquility that we used on Saturday night and on our way to church. That's it.

If you have small children in your home, this is an opportunity for them to learn that Mom & Dad have needs for this kind of spiritual down-time, needs which need to be respected. In time, the kids can join you, and it can become a family routine for developing inner peace.

Do experiment with this simple practice. And let me know how it goes, and how it affects your worship experience. If you would like a copy of this sermon to help you remember the steps, just let me know after the service.

Thanks be to God

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