

SPIRITUALITY

- Topic: Contemporary Models of Sanctity
 Convener: Peter Feldmeier, University of St. Thomas
 Presenters: Daniel Olsen, Loyola University, Chicago
 Michon Matthiesen, Providence College
 Respondent: Thomas McElligott, St. Mary's College of California

Daniel Olsen began the session with a paper designed to advance the pursuit of holiness in marriage in light of the challenges of mainstream culture, a culture that has infiltrated even Christians' assumptions regarding the very nature of marriage. Olsen raised central concerns regarding cultural forces that can compromise authentic Christian pursuit of holiness. These included consumerism, general sloth, and even frenetic life-styles that keep us disengaged from the real work of interior transformation. In short, these cultural patterns undermine real *eros*, that transformative drive toward deep union. Olsen argued that authentic *eros* implicates the core of the soul and requires its full engagement.

Olsen's fundamental argument is that the principal vice hindering culture's flourishing is the same one threatening marriage, that is, *acedia*. *Acedia* effectively thwarts the desire needed to move the will to find spiritual meaning in a consumerist society. Rather than follow the ancient focus on demons as the source of *acedia*, Olsen located its root in the competing norms and ideals of marriage found in secular and Christian culture respectively. Olsen also suggested remedies to address *acedia's* regular temptation. His emphasis was on consciousness raising based in the local church.

Matthiesen's paper also drew on traditional material to address modern holiness. In this case, she revisited the spirituality of Jean-Pierre de Caussade's *L'abandon à la divine providence*. Caussade's principles, especially self-emptiness and radical trust, she argued, hardly represent a fossilized spirituality of the eighteenth century French School. Rather, collectively they provide a timely, democratic, *catholic* path to sanctity; indeed one particularly important as an effective counter to a self-willed, anxiety-ridden culture.

The point of abandonment to divine providence, Matthiesen argued, is not passivity or quietism, but union with God, whereby the human will becomes one with God's will, one's affective desire interpenetrates God's desire for us. This traditional path challenges the soul to empty all self-will and allow herself to be led and formed by the will of the Divine Artist. Such emptiness can be painful, since Caussade emphasizes accepting one's experiences and lot in life, even persecutions, as all part of God's reforming the soul. Such a spirituality does not imagine there is no real evil or sin in the world, nor that one ought necessarily to acquiesce to moral evil. Indeed, such an abandonment centers the soul in God in such a way that one is particularly attentive to God's guidance, and this may include prophetic objection to evil. Here one can find peace and joy even in the midst of a sinful world. Additionally, one finds that God's core interest is the ongoing recreation of the soul and paradoxically, in the end, it is God who is giving himself over to the soul.

As responder, Thomas McElligott praised both papers in their pursuit of uniting core values, practices, and perspectives from the Christian spiritual tradition with contemporary culture. He particularly praised Olsen's uniting *eros* as a longing for one's spouse as a vehicle and mediation for pursuing *eros* with God. Further, he found the angle of *acedia* quite useful, given today's culture. Regarding Matthiesen's resurrection of Caussade's spirituality, he found the issues posed regarding how one might find union in this self-emptiness in the context of distractions, sufferings, and overwhelming injustices of contemporary life provocative and important.

McElligott also challenged both papers, and on the same score. He reminded the session members that the academic discipline of Christian spirituality addresses the issues of life in the spirit through the lens of the twenty-first century secular age. The *subject* as understood psychologically, anthropologically, socio-culturally, and spirituality, must be so located that whatever issue is discussed, from the rich history of spirituality or from contemporary life, can engage with and speak to the secular age. Neither paper located their subject in these terms. Both papers, he challenged, considered their subjects as needing to be separate from the world in which they experience *acedia* or longing for union with the will of God.

McElliott also had some specific questions that helped generate discussion. These included challenging Olsen to distinguish aspects of culture from each other and be more accountable to different forms of marriage. He also asked Matthiesen how one might know when to act against injustice and when one might consider unjust suffering part of God's providential remolding or recreation of the soul.

Because the presenters and respondents gratefully kept themselves disciplined to their time restrictions, there was ample time for questions and discussion. Questions came to Olsen about how some of his more abstract remedies to *acedia* would work in real life. This allowed him to expand on his ideas and further explain how a local church and couple could advance a more profound spiritual *eros*. Much of the discussion focused on Matthiesen's abandonment in light of injustice. This included returning to Caussade's sources and context, particularly Carmelite and Salesian. Such discussion likewise allowed Matthiesen to clarify what she believes is a more universal spiritual agenda. The success of the papers was particularly evidenced by the number of questions and comments, and the many who wanted to speak but were unable to due to the session's ending.

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