

## Lenten Reflection

The Soul's Objective Union with God, by Richard Rohr

"Let us create humanity in our own image, in the likeness of ourselves" Genesis 1:26"

The Genesis story of the Judeo-Christian tradition is really quite extraordinary. It says that we were created in the very "image and likeness" of God, proceeding from free and overflowing love. This flow will be rediscovered and re-experienced by various imperfect people throughout the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. This sets us on a positive and hopeful foundation, which cannot be overstated. Yet we must also say that it never gained full traction in the life of many believers, either Jewish or Christian. Such utter gratuity was just too good to be true. Further, we could not control or manipulate this love; and anything humans cannot control, we do not engage with or enjoy. The Bible as a whole illustrates through various stories humanity's *objective unity with God, the total gratuity of that love, and unfortunately, our resistance to such an "impossibility."*

I find that many Christians still have no knowledge of *the soul's objective union with God* (e.g., 1 John 3:2, 2 Peter 1:4), which all mystics rejoice in or they would not be mystics. Even ministers often fight me on this, quoting Augustine's "original sin," Calvin's "total depravity," or dear Luther's "humans are like piles of manure, covered over by Christ." I am sure they all meant well, but they also dug a pit so deep that many could never climb out or allow themselves to be lifted out. What a shame, literally! Such a negative starting point will not be very effective in creating loving or responsive people.

How do you ever undo such foundational damnation? Grace can only be trusted by an equally graceful human nature. Our work is merely to till the fertile soil, knowing that the Indwelling Spirit has already been planted within, and She is the One who "teaches you all things and reminds you of all things" (John 14:26). Many Christians have tried to pile a positive theology of salvation on top of a very negative anthropology of the human person, and it just does not work. Such traditions produce few mystics and universal lovers. The human self-image is too damaged and distorted from the beginning.

The word sin has so many unhelpful connotations that it's very problematic today. For most of us "sin" does not connote what it really is: the illusion of separateness from God and from our original identity, our True Self. Most people think of sin as little naughty behaviors or any personal moral "stain" we suffer by reason of our bad thoughts, words, or deeds. Paul makes clear that sin is mostly a state, a corporate "principality" and "power," an entrapment, or what many would now call an addiction. Jesus seems to primarily see it as a blindness that traps us in self-destructive behaviors and hard-heartedness. Thus he is always healing blind people and challenging people who see themselves as superior to others.

What we call sins are usually more *symptoms* of sin and not an inner negativity itself. What we call sins often have more to do with stupidity and ignorance than actual malice. Disconnected people *will* surely do stupid things and even become malicious, but they did not start there. They began in union, but disunion became their experienced lie and defense. This sounds terrible but it will help you get the point: most people are just stupid more than formally sinful. Anything that is cut off festers and fumes and attacks, while often hoping to regain acceptance. The primary meaning of sin is to live outside "the garden," or in the

smoldering garbage dump of Gehenna, below and outside the city walls of Jerusalem--the standing Biblical images of hell or separation from God's reality (Genesis 3:23-24, Isaiah 66:24, Mark 9:47-48). Sin is primarily living outside of union; it is a state of separation, when the part poses as the Whole. It's the loss of any inner experience of who you are in God.

You can't accomplish or work up to union with God, because you've already got it. "Before the world began you were chosen, chosen in Christ to live through love in his presence" (Ephesians 1:4). You cannot ever become worthy by yourself; you can only reconnect to your Infinite Source. The biblical revelation is about awakening, not accomplishing. It is about realization, not performance. *You cannot get there, you can only be there.* That foundational Being-in-God is for some reason too hard to believe, too good to be true. Only the humble can receive it and surrender to it, because it affirms much more about God than it does about us. And we foolishly believe it should be "all about me"!

### **Gateway to Silence**

"The physical structure of the universe is love." --Teilhard de Chardin

Adapted from Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Franciscan Media: 1999), 27-30.