

## The Little Way

There is a great *60 Minutes* documentary about Mount Athos in Greece, one of the largest collections of monks and monasteries in the world. The secular journalists, with the best of intentions, were interested in understanding the life of the island, and what the monks there did – you know, growing food, saying prayers, enjoying the tranquility. So in one scene the reporter asks a monk what it is they do there, to which he replies, casually and as if it should be obvious to everybody, “We fight the demons.” The reporter is understandably dumbfounded.

I often recall this because it reminds me that Christianity has always taught that there is a lot more going on in the world than meets the eye. The world is a scene of invisible but real cosmic struggle, including human beings, but also those strange beings tradition calls angels and demons, those intelligent spirits who are either the servants of the Church or in rebellion against it. Satan is the leader of the rebels, whom Saint Paul calls “the god of this world.”

Our visible scene – the sensible, physical, material world – is not separate from this invisible world or its battle. It is all a part of *one world*, and linked together in mysterious ways that revelation only occasionally gives us glimpses of. This unity makes everything that happens, even mundane things, full of meaning. Our actions always involve us much more broadly than they seem, because all visible things are outward tokens or symbols of a much larger spiritual, but really real, intelligent and personal universe. We are always connected to this world, so that our movements in space and time are movements on a cosmic game board.

And here is another strange thing. Also at the heart of our tradition – a basic assumption of fathers of the Church like Augustine and Aquinas – is that these spiritual beings are somehow “in charge” of the material, physical world. You might say they are its administrators. Saint Augustine says, in an initially odd phrase, that the material creation is the “realm of signs”. What could that mean? That every piece of furniture in the universe, from the sun to humans to seemingly trivial things like rocks, are signs hooked to much bigger realities. These signs are meant to lead us ultimately to God, and God made the angels to somehow “help” with that. But, since the signs are sometimes “tended” by evil angels who have rebelled against God, they can manifest and glorify evil as well. This is a strange way to think about the world, but it makes a certain amount of sense of our experience. Think of the difference between a mountain sunrise and the devastation of an atomic bomb. Beauty is not always in the eye of the beholder – it’s somehow objective, and this is why. The whole material world is not only symbolic, but also intelligent and alive. There are invisible presences that somehow attach themselves to our actions. It’s as if the natural order is a sort of book we read, and that the spirits are in part in charge of writing that book, so that now it says one thing, now another. The good angels, of course, write one sort of thing, and the bad another.

Now, think back to the isolating World we talked about in chapter two. We might now be able to see that, in light the spiritual and symbolic nature of the world, all those isolating practices make up something of their own *liturgy*. We have seen that all of the Christian life should have a certain “liturgical” character to it, but the World Order that isolates us is also a certain kind of worship. Liturgies are rituals of worship, or repeated actions that are done with a certain reverence. This reverence comes from a sense that in these actions we affirm something bigger than ourselves, and we trust it to give us our identity. That’s kind of abstract, but it’s not hard to see that we do it all the time. In church, of course, we do it; but think, also, of a Fourth of

July parade – that’s another kind of liturgy. So, in another way, is Black Friday shopping, or maybe even going to the Voting Booth. They define who we are, and, just like in church, they say volumes about what we really believe in. They are professions of faith.

But I think the real American Liturgy goes deeper than the Fourth of July and the Voting Booth. That liturgy – all those practices of isolation we pointed to above – is more subtle as well as more pervasive, than things we do once a year. Technology is somewhere near its heart, because technology is for us something like a sacrament. In using it, we give ourselves the sense that we are in control of our lives, which otherwise would be out of control. By it we tap into a power that’s outside of ourselves. It’s our hope for the future. We’ve also already mentioned the priests in this liturgy: the experts who dispense and control the technology: doctors, scientists, therapists, even bureaucrats and some teachers can be kinds of technocrats, when they direct the application of professional manipulation to our lives.

And so, out of this matrix of institutions arise our society’s common religious rituals. Our obsessive phone checking, our expenditure of vast amounts of money on needless medicine, our submission to medical and professional authority, our blind faith in the market, the regular showcasing of military muscles, our comfort that our well-being is safe in the hands of endless insurance policies. In these rituals lie our real liturgical formation, the place where we really express what we believe in, our real hope. So it’s not just in the big yearly events that we are performing another liturgy, but in all these little actions that isolate us. You may have noticed that when you perform these actions (and we all do them) they have, you might say, a “weight” to them – they are not just natural attendants to life, they are socially significant, whether or not we like doing them. And you know that it’s a liturgy because when you perform its rites you’ll get a sense of affirmation from others (even if those others are just the media) that you are an upstanding, reasonable citizen, and that you are doing “the right thing”. You’ll also know it’s a liturgy because when you refuse its rites, you’ll be shamed by others as backwards or even dangerous.

Okay, why all of this? What I have been trying to do is to help us see the world the way the Catholic Worker does. That comprehensive vision ties together the visible world, the invisible world, the world of angels and demons, religious rites and everyday life, and insists on trying to see the cosmic significance of everything we do. These are things we usually separate, but keeping them together is absolutely central to what Peter Maurin was about, as perhaps we have already glimpsed in his attitude towards work. There is a cosmic dimension of all our actions. It is all liturgy, and it is all warfare.

There is then, no neutral zone. This is important to get straight, because we comfortable folk tend to think of much of life as existing in some sort of impartial peacetime sphere. Our political arrangements in America make this false view seem like common sense. We are invited to see civil society and the State, as well as most of our institutions, commerce, and technology, and public life in general, as not taking any ultimate sides. This is what is sometimes called “secular”. In this realm, we imagine, we are free to touch, pick up or put down, examine or forget “religion” as we prefer. For religion belongs in the private realm. But, of course, if we live in a world where “we fight the demons”, there is no neutral.

Put differently, all action is moral action. Sometimes we talk about “moral issues” such as abortion, or just war, or sexuality, or whatever. But talking about “issues” in this way can suggest

that only in a few small areas of life are we dealing with anything of much consequence, much less cosmic significance. In a world of a few scattered “hot button issues,” *most* of what we touch, see and deal with in our day is just indifferent, or non-moral. It underwrites the status quo, because we can simply assume our institutions and ways of life are good or at least harmless, unless proven otherwise by some sort of obvious defect or blatant crime. But if there are ultimately only two ways of life, only two cosmic liturgies, this cannot be true.

Let me give just one example. I was once complaining to a friend about the constant noise, dirt, vibration, and distraction coming from a construction site across the street from my apartment. It was one of those new cookie-cutter luxury apartment buildings. And my friend said, “You know, that’s not just noise, that’s the preaching of the realm of signs.” He meant just what we’ve been talking about here. All that noise was in a way the construction site saying, “Look at me, look at all my power; aren’t you impressed with this, and don’t you love the kind of life all this represents? And if you don’t, then too bad, we’ll shout you down and run you over with a bull dozer. Get out of the way!” It sounds strange, but that is more or less what a construction site says. And of course, what we are called to love, or to get out of the way of, you might put different ways, but it’s all there to see: the power of machines, of industry, of massive amounts of wealth, of technical knowhow, of the destruction of the old houses and up with the shiny and comfortable. And indeed, if you’ve ever watched one of those things go up, it’s all very impressive. That’s the point. What I was complaining about was not just incidental noise, but a sermon. It was somehow meant either to *persuade* me or *subdue* me. That’s how the Liturgy of the World works.

This liturgical imagination is why the Catholic Worker cares about everything. While Catholics are often times identified by which items of the buffet of “issues” they are concerned with – abortion or the poor, sex or the environment, Dorothy and Peter baffled many by making just about everything in American life a moral issue. Dorothy spoke against abortion and for women’s suffrage, she refused money earned from lending on interest, she boycotted cigarettes or at times even electricity because both were tied to demoralizing and destructive working conditions. Peter was a pacifist, and so refused to drive a car, because demand for oil drove the engines of war. His call for a return to the land was born of an analysis that industrial production was harmful at just about every level. He sent back large donations of food quelled from the subsidized over-production of mechanized farming. The list could go on. But the point is that for Dorothy and Peter these were not so much “social justice” or “environmental” “issues,” but primarily religious and spiritual practices. Matter matters because it is caught up in cosmic liturgies.

This concern with the small and seemingly trivial is what Catholic Workers, following St. Therese of Lisieux, call “the Little Way.” Therese was a 19<sup>th</sup> century Carmelite nun who died of tuberculosis at age 23. As the Saint herself recounts it in her autobiography, she struggled with how to reconcile her desire to be a hero for Christ and to accomplish great acts – to be a martyr, a missionary, a priest, a great teacher of the faith, out there in the wide world converting the nations – with her desire to spend her life at prayer in the monastery. She found the solution precisely in the “little way of great love” that she was able to exercise in every moment of her day, to make sacrifices for the weaker sisters, to forgive, to smile at those she was angry with, to bear her sufferings cheerfully, and to do battle with the devil in the round of liturgy. She knew

there was nothing neutral, that everything was connected, and so by these small actions she could *be* the hero she longed to be, fighting, evangelizing, teaching, right where she was. Actions might be small, but the effects were no less.

Out of this little way, from a small person of no account, virtually unknown outside the monastery when she died, ironically came one of the greatest and best loved saints of our time. She would become one of the 38 “Doctors” of the Church, and Dorothy would eventually write her own book about her. Along with St Benedict and St Francis, Therese gives to the Worker one key part of the spirituality that animates it. But it is a spirituality that makes no sense unless the Catholic faith is true. For Peter *did* want to call people to join a movement that would change the world, and yet, puzzlingly to many if not most, he didn’t think this required violence, and he didn’t want to get involved in politics. He didn’t even like going to strikes (that was more Dorothy’s thing). He thought the way to change the world was all those small, usually unrecognized acts of non-participation and of the works of mercy and of prayer and of fasting. Why these things and not power politics? Because Peter was a Catholic, and so he had a different view of the way the world ultimately works. And if you have a different view of the way the world works, what you think is *effective* will be different as well.

If you are a materialist, or if your daily habits make you think that God is far away and detached from the world, then of course it will be likely that the conventional means of changing the world – politics, technology, war – will be the means that are most effective. And the Liturgy of Isolation is exactly designed to shape your habits, by disciplining your body, so that this is exactly what you think. But if you have the kind of liturgical imagination that Peter and St Theresa had, the world in fact does not run mainly by the collision of atoms or the decisions of presidents or the results of elections. The world is vastly more complicated than that, as we have seen. It is a moral world, through and through, and so it can be changed by small acts of great love that may be all the more powerful because they don’t seem to change the world at all. The reason the Catholic Worker has usually literally and metaphorically disavowed using the weapons of this world is therefore not because those weapons are too strong, but because they are too weak. The little way is little, because it is the way of the cross, that tiny, insignificant piece of history.