**Eglise francaise du Saint Esprit**

*Spirituality Course April 22, 2020*

**Devotio Moderna**

**What was it?** A revival of Christian piety and devotion – not necessarily the foundation of a new religious order, more like an interior reformation and a new style of Christian commitment.

**When and where did it happen?** In the Netherlands between the 1370’s and the 1430’s.

**Who were the main people in the movement?**

Geert Groote (1340 – 1384) Thomas à Kempis (1380 – 1471) Florens Radewyns (1350 – 1400)

**What were the conditions in the church and in society that led to the movement**?

**Papal move to Avignon**: A conflict arose between the Papacy and the French kings which led to seven successive popes living in Avignon in France rather than in Rome between 1309 and 1377. All these popes were French, and each one of them refused to move from Avignon to the Vatican. The French essentially objected to the fact that the papacy had become captive to certain Italian families. The papacy in Avignon increasingly took on the pomp, luxury and political machinations of the secular authorities of the time. At the end of this period there were several years in which two popes ruled: one pope in the Vatican and the other (“The Antipope”) in Avignon.

**Corruption of the clergy**: Given their control over the wealth-producing sectors of the economy, clergy had become increasingly corrupt as the middle ages wore on. Key offices were often sold or given to close relatives (simony). The ban on priestly marriages was only made official in 1123, partly as a result of priests carving up church land between their surviving children. This did not stop many of them from having concubines. Drinking and gambling were endemic. High officials of the church could also be military leaders, especially during the times of the crusades.

**Satire against the church:** Because of its corruption and ubiquity in Medieval life, the church was easy prey for the satirists of the time. The Goliards (Carmina Burana) were a group of clergy who used satire to lampoon the excesses of the church – the Donkey Mass, the Drinking Mass, the Procession of the Herrings. Chaucer’s Friars Tale is another example of satire against the church at the time. The Friar tells the story of the Summoner – a medieval priest’s office with responsibility for pursuing legal cases in church courts. The Friar (probably a Franciscan) describes the work of a summoner involving bribery, corruption, extortion and an extensive network of pimps and prostitutes as informers. The church looked like it was running a protection racket.

**Stratification of society:** Society in the l3 and 1400s was stratified into Laity/Clergy/Monks; with the monks being seen as holding the chief position at the top of the religious totem pole. Everyone else was thought of as a ‘lesser’ Christian.

**Abstract mysticism and speculative scholastic theology:** With the rise of the medieval universities throughout Europe, the discipline of theology and spirituality had become increasingly specialized and divorced from the common people. Scholasticism was a method of disputation that sought to reconcile Christian teachings with classical philosophy and the work of other university schools. It was rarely concerned with a ‘practicum’; a method of teaching theology or dogma that made it accessible to ordinary people. It had become locked in a cultural time and place (the university) which had little to do with society outside its walls.

**Rise of Humanism**: The thirteen hundreds in Italy was a time of intellectual change. People were beginning to seek ways out of what they saw to be the narrow pedantry of medieval scholasticism. They found it in a return to the person-centered humanism of the Greek and Latin philosophers. The humanists wanted to educate a people who could draw on their own experience and become well-educated, self-aware citizens and leaders in the civic life of their communities. They took as models the Athenian city state and the Roman classical authors.

**Geert Groote (1340 – 1384)** Born near Utrecht in an emerging ‘upper middle class’ family. Went to the University of Paris aged 15. Studied theology, philosophy, canon law, medicine, magic and Hebrew. He took on a teaching position in Cologne. He came to enjoy the corrupt privileges of the professors of the time, until he was overtaken by a serious illness. He underwent a conversion experience in 1374 which led him to convert his family home into a shelter for poor women and move in as a guest in a Carthusian monastery. He refused ordination as a priest, but accepted ordination as a deacon. He became a popular wandering preacher throughout Holland; preaching against clergy concubinage, heresy, simony, avarice and impurity. He died of the plague in 1384, which he contracted while nursing the sick.

**The main features of Geert Groote’s thought:**

**Democratization of the monastic ideal:** Groote took the monastic way of life and made it available to a much broader audience. He thought that the techniques that had been the province of expert mystics or athletes of asceticism should be accessible to the laity.

**Interiority**: Groote placed emphasis on the interior dimension of the religious life instead of the external marks that characterized later Medieval Christianity – things like pilgrimage, attendance at mass, ritual fasting, worship of and devotion to particular saints.

**Unity of thinking and living**: He was concerned to shape the life, not just the thought of the ordinary Christian. The active was always allied with the contemplative, and the practical was always allied with the theoretical. He preached a realistic version of the spiritual life; focused on what is ‘useful’ or ‘fruitful’.

**Use of the Bible:** Prior to Groote’s period, the chief Medieval way of reading the Bible devotionally was the Scholastic method of disputation and the application of logic to ‘prove’ the Christian faith and its relationship to past philosophies. Groote replaced this with a simpler devotional use of the scriptures. The scriptures were material for meditation and rumination on Christian living. If those ruminations didn’t lead to love of God and love of neighbor, they were simply vain speculations. “Whatever does not make you a better Christian is harmful”. You could call it ‘scriptural piety’: the Bible as an experienced reality.

**The Early Church fathers and mothers**: Groote believed in reading the scriptures through the eyes of everyone who had experienced them and read them before. He wanted to develop a hermeneutic that synthesized the Bible with early readings of it. He loved books, and worked hard to develop a full library through the use of copying and the newly-invented printing press.

**Sacraments and liturgy:** Groote went to mass every day and actually received the Eucharist: unlike many laity of the day who had become passive witnesses to the priest’s actions, retreating into private devotions while the mass was celebrated.

**Re-definition of the word ‘religious’**: For Groote, serving God in the privacy of your own home is just as religious as serving God in a church, a monastery or convent. “To love God and worship him is religion, not just the taking of special vows.” Frequent resolutions were more important than lifelong vows. He was criticized by the Dominicans for appropriating the word ‘religious’ in this way. He replied that hidden ‘intention’ was more important than the visible approval and sanction of the Church. Resolutions and intentions were the lay equivalent of monastic vows. This empowerment of the laity laid the ground for the Protestant Reformation.

**Living in the world**: Groote preached and taught in the midst of a secular society. He took on the Benedictine ideal of *Ora et Labora:* pray and work. “Labor is necessary for the well-being of humankind”.

**Christian life as a journey**: Groote believed that the Christian life is a methodical and gradual journey which is summed up as a slow yielding to the work of grace in the life of a believer. He believed that priests acted as guideposts on the way: “The cure of souls is the highest of all arts.” Humility was a key to the work of grace, because ‘Man proposes, but God disposes.”

**Imitation of the humanity of Christ:** in this, Groote was inspired by the ascetics of the desert. He had a functional Christology: begin by meditating on the humanity of Christ, then on his divinity and only then on our unity with God.

**Thomas a Kempis and *The Imitation of Christ***

The Augustinian Canons played a great part in the Devotio Moderna movement. Groote was particularly close to this order, and founded The Brothers of the Common Life under their tutelage. They were later to influence the Reformers – particularly Martin Luther. In the 1430’s, Thomas a Kempis wrote and published his famous work *The Imitation of Christ* – a classic of devotionalist piety.

Some quotations from the book:

 “Deep inquisitive reasoning does not make a man holy or righteous, but a good life makes him beloved by God. I would rather feel compunction of heart for my sins than merely to know the definition of the word.” The book concentrates on what is beneficial for devotion and what builds up the individual Christian and the church. “It is better to have little learning with great humility than great learning with great pleasure in it; it is better to have a little learning with grace than much learning of which you are proud. On the Day of Judgment, we will not be asked what we have read, but what we have done.”

“There is a great difference between the wisdom of a devout man enlightened by grace, and the learning of a subtle and studious scholar; that learning which comes by the influence and the gracious gift of God is much more noble and worthy that that learning which is gained by human labor and study.”

Theology is thought of as a living science, not a dry scholastic subject.

“If we place the end and perfection of our religion in outward observances, our devotion will soon be at an end.” Integration of the inner life and the outer life is key to the devotio moderna. “The life of a good religious man should shine in all virtue and be inwardly as it appears outwardly” Rightly ordered devotion becomes the true source of outward acts of charity. Spirituality is not the province of the exceptional but of the ordinary. It doesn’t concern isolated experiences of a distant mystic, but normal routines that everyone faces.

The period saw a renewal of interest in the suffering and the humanity of Christ. The Stations of the Cross were written out and first practiced – especially among Franciscans. The mystery plays also flourished as an expression of communal piety. The example of Christ’s humanity was used as a means to focus people on a proper mode of living rather than a proper mode of believing or thinking (dogma). Orthodoxy versus orthopraxy. Imitation of Christ is the human response to God’s expression of love in the Incarnation and Christ’s suffering.

“Jesus has many lovers of his kingdom of heaven, but he has few bearers of his cross.”

“If you would suffer no adversity, how can you be the friend of Christ?”

“O Lord Jesus, make possible to me by grace what is impossible by nature.”

As we can see, this was not a movement that set out to re-organize or re-structure the church. It was a movement that sought to reform the person. It concentrated on an inner life that would flower into acts of charity and manifest itself in stable and anchored forms of communal life.

* The integration of intellect and heart
* The integration of theology (Christian thought) and way of life
* The integration of the Clerical class and the laity living together in common life

They never sought to break with the institutional church; and they never saw themselves as separatists or revolutionaries – though they were considered a threat by the mendicant orders.

**Preparing to pray**

**Time**

* Speaking to directees in the middle of all of this – and thinking about where I am too; I’m struck by how I’ve often thought that I ‘lack the time’ to devote myself to certain spiritual exercises. But when suddenly time becomes available (not that I’m finding much of it at the moment) people sometimes discover that it’s not the time that’s missing, but the motivation. We might be ‘at home’, but it’s harder to be ‘at home’ with ourselves. Commitment to any sort of spiritual exercise – including prayer – asks for some of our time.
* Do we spend time more or less carefully than we spend money?
* There are always things that can get in the way: we overslept, or didn’t sleep very well. We don’t feel too good today. We were distracted by a disturbance in our routine. But prayer isn’t about how we may or may not feel at the time. So, it’s more about habit or a regimen than a feeling. Half an hour per day is a pretty good aim: including reading, prayer, meditating or following the daily office etc.
* When should we pray? Mornings are generally considered to be best. Mostly because time is outside our control once we begin the ordinary business of the day. The clue though, is to dedicate some segment of the day to God, in spite of the lack of immediate gratification or of ‘getting something out of it’.
* We don’t just pray *for ourselves* – we pray for God. We pray in order to fall more in love with God.
* What do we do with distractions? (the laundry, the phone etc) We’re tempted to think that once a distraction has been dealt with, we’ll be able to concentrate better; but in fact, one distraction leads to another.

**Place**

* This varies from person to person. Prayers are just as good in bed as they are kneeling down beside it, so in some ways the place doesn’t matter so much.
* Think of the sort of person you are. Do you like to have your mind focused by an object, like an icon or a cross, or a card or a candle? In which case, make little space for yourself where you can go and be comfortable and let those things focus your mind.
* Are you easily distracted by things around you? Books, a computer, the cellphone (unless you’re using it for prayers!), what the neighbors are up to? Find somewhere where these distractions aren’t so evident.
* A consistent place can be helpful in making a habit. Think of your morning routine for brushing teeth or something. Sometimes you can do it half awake, because it’s become a habit. The same thing can happen with prayer.

**Posture**

Should we sit, kneel or stand (or lie down?) All sorts of different postures have been traditional in prayer. Kneeling can express adoration or penitence. Sitting can symbolize meditation or receptivity to God’s word. Standing can symbolize intercession, adoration or redemption and resurrection.

With some practice, a particular posture can facilitate (or even induce) a certain prayer mood: silent adoration, intense intercession, or simple meditation. The body and spirit work in tandem, supporting each other. If you’re too tired, too uninspired, too hurt or depressed to pray, let your body do it for you for a moment. Try prostration – lying face down on the ground with your forehead on folded arms. Or try the yoga position of ‘the corpse’ – lying face up with palms turned upwards by your side. Signing oneself with the sign of the cross can also help at the start and end of prayer.

Some of these things might make us feel awkward or self-conscious at first; but developing a relationship with God is going to require the same sort of risk that any relationship entails. It involves giving up on our comfortable sense of ourselves as self-contained and dignified adults. A bit of courage, and a bit of trial and error are well worth the effort!

**Self-denial**

* How about fasting? Early Christians expressed two reasons for fasting: 1. To prepare for prayer, just like Jesus. 2. To identify with the poor and hungry.
* Fasting can help to gain a perspective on the relationship between material food and spiritual nourishment. Hunger pangs help us to both appreciate the value and importance of food, and to remind us of our hunger for God. Our hunger also makes us irritable. It gives us a good chance to practice patience and cheerfulness!
* Abstaining from a particular food for a while – or on a certain day – is also a form of asceticism. It helps us to see the patterns of gratification that might be dominating us and cluttering our lives with imaginary need. Just as in our discussion on poverty, we’re not ‘giving something up’ – we’re freeing ourselves to experience another sort of good. Our priorities can be thrown into relief, and the empty space that is left can be filled with God and a new sensitivity to the needs of our neighbors.
* Discomfort or self restraint (or self-denial) doesn’t’ mean negating our essential self – the self that’s known and loved by God. It means examining the priority we place on physical and emotional comfort in our lives. Heat, cold, the quality of our sheets or clothing etc can become obsessive priorities. Accepting an uncomfortable situation and seeing how it makes us feel can show up how much of our lives we spend in moaning and complaining, or using all our energies to look for the most comfortable room, or bed or enjoyable situation. A small act of self-restraint can be a real tool in developing a more spiritual hardiness.
* Think of all the traditional antidotes our society has offered us if we’re experiencing a ‘down day’: all the ‘self-care’ we’re conned into believing. A little shopping spree. A pamper-day at a spa. Redecorate a room and give it a fresh new look! Lay plans for a special weekend away! Try a new restaurant! All of these are virtually impossible to do just at the moment. The lack of some of the traditional ways in which we console ourselves might give us an opportunity to find relief and consolation in turning to God instead, asking for courage and deliverance, instead of immediate relief. Suddenly we can see that God is our only refuge in any kind of crisis or time of sorrow.