**Eglise Française du Saint Esprit**

***Spirituality Course April 15, 2020***

**Mendicant Spirituality**

The mendicant orders (like the Franciscans, Augustinians, the Dominicans or the Carmelites) owe their name to the Latin word mendicus = ‘a beggar’. These mendicant friars are not just found in Christianity, they can be found in other religions too: from - the Pagan Cynics like Diogenes who influenced early Christianity; to the Buddhist monks, Hindu holy men and certain orders of Islamic Sufis and Dervishes.

The mendicant movement took place primarily in the 13th century in Western Europe. As we saw last week, before that period, most of the monks of Europe worked at some sort of trade in their monasteries. They renounced personal property and held everything they owned in common, after the model of the early disciples in the Acts of the apostles. But as the years went by, monasteries began to build up vast holdings in farmland, property and riches. Their wealth began to sit less and less easily with the idea that Christ was incarnate as a poor carpenter's son in a backwater of the Roman empire. Surely the true church should be a church of the poor? You can see the germ of this idea in the founding of the Cistercian order: a group of Benedictines who were suspicious of the ease of the great Benedictine houses. They take their name from the village of Citeaux near Dijon. Robert of Molesme, Alberic of Citeaux and the English monk Stephen Harding were the first abbots. They devoted themselves to hard labor and a very literal and fundamental reading of the Benedictine rule of life; and they were responsible for great advances in architecture, metallurgy and farming techniques.

The Franciscan and Dominican orders emerged as the champions of the view that a monk’s vow of poverty and the rejection of material things should go even further. The leading figures were Francis of Assisi (c. 1181 - 1226) and Dominic Guzman (c. 1170 - 1221). The orders spread rapidly in Italy and in France, and then through many poor cities in other Western European countries.

In understanding mendicant spirituality, it is helpful to know what sort of social context gave rise to it. It is easy to think of it in terms of 'renouncing worldly wealth' and 'embracing the beauty of nature', without understanding that it was not just a creative or relational spirituality; it was the spirituality of the religio-social activists of their day. They were sometimes violently repressed by the religious authorities - especially by Pope Gregory X (Second Council of Lyon in 1274). The Mendicant friars renounced property ownership and traveled the world to preach. They paid no taxes and no tithes - a massive inconvenience to the Pope who was trying to fund yet another crusade. Gregory attempted to reform the orders to that they were obliged to contribute funds or men to support the war effort against the Muslim east.

**The High Middle Ages**

From the 1100s through the 1200's, Medieval Europe was at its apogee. Several factors were at work:

* The breakdown of the feudal system (king/nobles/knights/serfs)
* The development of cities from market towns to international trading centers with specialized trades.
* The emergence of the medieval corporations and guilds, and their accompanying technical skills.
* The organization of the great European universities such as the Sorbonne, Oxford and Cambridge.
* The birth of the Gothic sensibility.
* The birth of the western concept of 'the individual'. The Cistercian emphasis on discipline and strict silence led to a search for inner space in which the individual can contact the divine. Especially Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 - 1153). The Carthusians and the Cistercians.

These changes were accompanied by social upheaval and turbulence. The preceding period had been marked by parochialism - narrow boundaries both physical and psychological. Villages and hamlets jealously guarded their spheres. Crime was a social evil. There was no privacy as we understand it. the average person was trapped in a tiny but a very public world. Mendicant spirituality offered a way out of this constricted environment. Mobile friars, moving from place to place to beg for lodgings or food were able to launch out and discover the world beyond their borders.

By the end of the twelfth century there was a widespread disillusionment over the abuse of power, the conspicuous consumption of the wealthy and the loss of spiritual vitality in the church.

St. Bernard and the founders of the Cistercian order produced a spiritual literature that spread across Europe. It was a new sort of spirituality that was more private and personal. It was far more emotional than the sort of communal and politically well organized spirituality of the Benedictine orders. It emphasized self-knowledge and the interior life of a committed individual, and it focused on the soul’s thirst to find God. These writers emphasized a sort of ecstatic union with God – who had clothed himself in our humanity in order to “Draw the affections of carnal men, who could only love carnally to bring them to a salutary love of Christ’s flesh, and then on to a spiritual love.” Suddenly, the emphasis was far more on the humanity of God, rather than on God’s magnificence and splendor beloved of the builders of the early medieval cathedrals. The liturgies that were enacted in them emphasized the mighty Lord of the Universe, the terrifying judge, a royal Christ reigning in glory who is the heavenly analog of the splendor of earthly kings. The God who now came to be emphasized was the God-made-man who endured helplessness, suffering and death that are the result of our mortality. There was a huge shift in religious iconography too. The representations of Christ on the cross as triumphant king, which had been dominant in earlier centuries, were now edged to one side by crucifixes or crucifixion scenes that dwelt on the humanity, pain and suffering of the dying savior. A parallel change took place in Marian iconography. Along with the tender and compassionate devotion to the human life and suffering of Christ there had developed also a similar devotion to his earthly mother, apprehended now not so much in her remote majesty as Mother of God, but in her humility and vulnerability as Blessed Virgin."

**The main themes of Mendicant Spirituality:**

* Devotion to the humanity of Christ
* Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary
* Devotion to saints and angels
* The cult of the blessed sacrament

The driving force behind these major themes was the desire to live the Apostolic Life. What does Christian perfection look like? The key text here is Luke 10. "After this the Lord appointed seventy-two others and sent them two by two ahead of him to every town and place where he was about to go.  He told them, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field. Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves.   Do not take a purse or bag or sandals; and do not greet anyone on the road." To imitate Christ, one must become a poor itinerant preacher.

This thirst for holiness wasn't restricted to an educated elite. Small bands of itinerant preachers living a common life of poverty sprang up over France and Italy - often characterized by disorganization and confusion. It did not begin as a formal 'movement'. They were spontaneous and founded on an informal and charismatic basis, well outside the purview of ecclesiastical approval. The Franciscans and the Dominicans are just two of those groups that have survived into modern times. Membership in those orders wasn't just open to ordained clerics or people who wanted to be lay brothers and nuns, but also to the laity.

St. Francis and the Friars Minor (1181 - 1226)

Son of a middle-class dyer. Captured as a soldier prisoner at the age of 20, and shaped by his time in prison and the subsequent illness he suffered. In 1206 he had a conversion experience in the ruined church of San Damiano, he gave up his riches and with a band of laymen gave himself up to Lady Poverty and went about serving the needs of the poor. The friars minor owned nothing, and they refused to use money or material goods as security against the future. Instead they looked for the joy and pleasure to be found in creation - Brother Sun and Sister Moon. To own nothing was to have everything at your disposal. Central tenets: The Incarnate Jesus, Jesus' model of poverty to be imitated / the 'downward flow' of God's love in all creation (sometimes called Minority) / humility / fraternity / penance as an on-going and continuous conversion / the perfection of love.

Francis called people to forsake goods and ambition in order to become one with creation. The movement spread rapidly amongst lay and cleric. Certain spiritual 'tools' were introduced by them, including the Christmas crèche, the Stations of the Cross and the systematic meditation of the passion of Christ. The Inward Life as the goal of spirituality.

**St. Dominic and the Order of Preachers**

Dominic de Guzman (1170 - 1221) Born in Spain (legend of his mother: domini canis), moved to the South of France. He trained in theology, lectio divina and prayer. He was concerned to bring together two things: the practice of virtue through asceticism and the preaching to and salvation of souls. He was profoundly affected by his encounter with Catharism in the south of France. He founded his order in Toulouse in 1216, and appointed preachers to go to reason with the extremist Cathars. He thought that the best way to combat their extremism was to live a life of exemplary Christian discipline and zeal. The only vow required was one of obedience. He intended this to place the emphasis on generosity of interpretation, the power of reason and the compelling nature of argumentation of a cause. Dominic placed great emphasis on study. Contemplation became one with action in the Dominican model.

1.--He organized the Order of Preachers, (an apostolic function), into a Religious Order.

2.--He separated the work of the apostolate from direct responsibility for souls. Hitherto it had been understood that a pastor's chief duty was to guide and, by means of the sacraments, to sanctify a definite portion of the faithful. The itinerant preachers of the twelfth century had at times separated preaching from pastoral duties and

the Dominicans made this a rule of their order

3.--Saint Dominic integrated "the assiduous study of divine truths" with monastic observances, substituting study for manual labor.

4.--He made dispensations from the Rule in order to make the order more supple and able to cope in a variety of different situations. It became possible to 'parachute' a Dominican brother into a situation in which monastic life would seem to be impossible - that's why so many priest-workers are Dominicans.

5.--. A situation may arise in which we must go beyond the dispensations superiors have granted. Everyone must feel free to give priority to charity, when necessary, over observance. Failing to keep the rule isn't failure of the Rule.

6.--Mendicant poverty is more specifically Dominican than Franciscan. According to the thought of Saint Francis recourse to alms should only be made if the fruit of the work of the brethren was not enough for their subsistence. Dominic emphasized the “mystique" of poverty, as absolute, as impassioned, as that of Saint

Francis. They must free themselves still more from anxieties about their livelihood and the charge of souls. If they serve the church, the people of God will take care of their needs.

These mendicants were pioneers in missionary activity, in theological research, pastoral leadership, experimental communities, education and the expression of Christian mysticism. Their foundation of Third Orders made a sort of monastic life available to lay people too. They pioneered what we would probably call a ‘modern spirituality’ that responded to the changing times. This didn’t mean that they lost gospel values or diluted the message of Jesus. They had confidence in the impulses of the Spirit, and were willing to make experimental mistakes in order to fashion a way of living the gospel that truly responded to their times.

Silence Lectio Divina Poverty

Poverty

I don’t think anyone actively wants to be poor. When Jesus said we would always have the poor with us, he wasn’t saying this to ennoble the state of poverty. It’s often harsh, and dehumanizing, and it (of necessity) can lead to crime or despair. And yet some Christians have always aspired to a sort of evangelical poverty. It’s freely chosen rather than something imposed by economic circumstances of life. It is intended to highlight a very particular choice: to focus on the one who is chosen, that is Jesus.

It’s a decision to center your life on the poor Christ of the gospel and live unencumbered by property, attachments, relationships or status. It’s been present in the church from the beginning, when the apostles and early followers of Jesus decided to share their resources for the sake of common needs. They wanted a total freedom for God. These mendicants consciously chose lives of daily insecurity, and depended entirely on the spontaneous generosity of God’s people. Unlike the established orders who had to remain in their monasteries, they embraced an itinerancy that was unencumbered by material possessions. The mendicants reminded the church that we are all pilgrim people – we are all on a journey or a pilgrimage. The absence of ‘things’ prepares a space for God to occupy.

Dominic saw poverty as a means to better preaching. Poverty eliminated distractions and temptations, and added to the credibility of the preacher – the only zeal a preacher has is for the saving of souls, not the accumulation of wealth and objects or the upkeep of a fancy monastery. That’s why it’s called evangelical poverty.

They no longer measured themselves by earthly values: Power, wealth, freedom from depravation, security. These things weren’t considered determinants of any real worth for a follower of Jesus. So poverty doesn’t free us FROM something, it frees us TO something. It leads to greater dependence on God. (think of the Psalms, I am poor and needy; but the Lord takes thought for me. He has pity on the weak and needy, and saves the lives on the needy. It frees people to let go of the created things and instead focus on the creator. We begin to be poor when we realize the givenness of all things – especially the givenness of our very selves. “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.”

It prioritizes Being over Having

Relatedness over Domination

Vulnerability over Security

Its goal is expressed in the beatitude: Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Are you free enough to marvel at the created order and experience in it the presence of God?

Are you able to be interdependent with others on your journey through life?

Do you view your dependence on God as a weakness, or as a source of grace?

Does your need to control people or situations impede your ability to form warm relationships with others or with God?

Are you held captive by your possessions?

Curiously at first: the spiritual life of the mendicant orders is often filled with images. Creche, pictures, paintings, statues etc. Poverty is a world-affirming value. It’s not just a negative renunciation of wealth, power and influence. It opens up a whole new way of seeing things, sharing resources, protecting the environment and seeking to live in harmony with the created order. It focuses our values.

A practical exercise. Identify your most cherished material possession. Place it in front of you, and think about it for a good ten minutes. Then slowly say the Our Father, meditating on each phrase of the prayer. Then re-evaluate the real worth of the possession.

Next time you feel an impulse to buy something you want, picture the object in your mind and repeat the process I just described. What lies behind your impulse to buy it?

A couple of questions to ponder.

What relationship should exist between people who freely embrace poverty and people who are poor because of economic circumstances? Is freely chosen poverty true poverty? Does economic want in itself bring us closer to God?

Pinpoint the values implicit in social customs that are contrary to Gospel poverty. Is gospel poverty by its very nature countercultural?