The Call to Holy Rest

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I once read a mystery novel where the main character, an author by profession, always finished one of his books by lighting a candle, uncorking a bottle of champagne, and toasting himself for a job well done.[1] It was his way of celebrating the outpouring of his creative juices. It brought closure to his work, a festive spirit to his life, and release to pent-up tensions. The ritual became so much a part of his work that the two could hardly be separated. His creativity was sparked by the thought of the celebration to come; the celebration, in turn, derived its significance from the many hours of labour dedicated to the writing process. These two very different activities were closely related. Neither made any sense without the other.

God's Holy Rest

This simple example from the world of fiction has led me to think of God's "rest" from his creative action in a similar way. The Book of Genesis reminds us that, after six days, God *completed* the work of creation by resting, blessing, and making holy the seventh day (Gn. 2:1–3).[2] To say that God "finished" or "completed" his work on the seventh day implies that the very activity of "rest" is itself part of the creative process. Without it, something would be missing; the creative act itself would not be complete; a new creative act could not begin.

This insight has special significance for Christians. For them, God's "holy rest" is necessary for both the creation and re-creation of the world; it lies at the very heart of the economic activity of the Trinity, i.e., creation, redemption, and sanctification. God's creative and re-creative activity, in other words, begins, ends, and continues in the context of the seventh-day dispensation. This rest, however, is not a cessation of activity, but a celebration of what has been, is being, and will be accomplished by the Godhead.

Unlike the author toasting himself in solitude with a glass of champagne, the celebration of God's "holy rest" is an eminently social activity. Father, Son, and Spirit, celebrate both each other and the work they have accomplished together. They dance together in perfect harmony in both their internal self-relations and their external economic activity in the cosmos. In this way, God's being and action are distinct from one another, yet also intimately related. The divine being expresses itself in divine action;

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divine action, in turn, is revelatory of divine being. Both, moreover, flow from and into the peace of God's "holy rest."

The account from Genesis also teaches us that God's "holy rest" knows no bounds. While the first six days of the creation story come and go with the passage of evening and morning (cf Gn 1: 5, 8, 13, 19, 23, 31), there is no reference to these times for the seventh day (cf. Gn 2:1–3).[3] Given the carefully crafted style of this biblical account, the explicit omission of temporal boundaries in this instance implies that God's festive celebration of his creative activity is ongoing.

In his book, *The Third Peacock,* Robert Farrar Capon offers a very entertaining description of this divine celebration. After putting on an extraordinary show of created being, the Three Persons of the Trinity sit back and enjoy themselves as they marvel at what they have done. They laughed and laughed "...[a]nd forever and ever they told old jokes, and the Father and Son drank their wine *in unitate Spiritus Sancti,* and they all threw ripe olives and pickled mushrooms at each other *per omnia saecula saeculorum. Amen.*"[4]

Although it may seem a bit crass, this description conveys a deep sense of the kind of rejoicing that goes on in the "holy rest" of the Lord's eternal Sabbath. It resembles the spontaneous play of close friends or intimate family members and reminds us of how free and relaxed we can be when we are in the presence of those we truly care for. It also gives us new insight into the biblical passage that "God is Love" (1 Jn 4:8). The celebration of "holy rest" is not peripheral to, but lies at the centre of God's intimate life. From all eternity, divinity rests in divinity; all of God's creative action flows from it and will one day return to it. From there, too, God extends to each of us a hearty invitation to join the party. The only ones excluded from this festive celebration are those who, for whatever reason, simply refuse to take part in it. Even so, the invitation remains an open one.

Vestige, Image, Likeness

All of us are called to join in the celebration of God's "holy rest." The basis for this call comes from our being created in the "image and likeness" of God (Gn 1:26) and the accompanying responsibility to act accordingly. To understand fully the nature of this call, we need to reflect more deeply on what these words might mean for us today.

Based on their reflections on the first account of creation in the book of Genesis, medieval theologians like St. Bonaventure (c. 1217–74) drew distinctions between the "vestige of God," the "image of God," and the "likeness of God." For him, the first embraces all creatures by virtue of their being created by God in oneness, truth, and goodness. The second is limited to those endowed by God with memory, intelligence, and will. The third

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refers those who love God through faith, hope, and love.[5] Each of these comes with a specific way of knowing, what Hugh of St. Victor (c. 1085–c. 1148) refers to as "the triple eye of flesh, reason, and contemplation." This threefold way of knowing corresponds to the sensible, the rational, and the spiritual spheres of existence. The first sees the world and its visible contents; the second, the human soul and its intellectual powers; the third, the essence of God and the Trinitarian relations of love.[6] Human beings are created with each of these capacities and were thus able to possess an intimate of the world, themselves, and God.

The medieval distinction between a "vestige," an "image," and a "likeness" of God has great relevance for our understanding of our capacity to share in the Lord's "holy rest." Because we are creatures endowed with physical senses, we are able to come to the knowledge of the "vestiges" of God in the world around us. Because we are created in God's "image," we can exercise memory, intention, and will in order to come to an in-depth knowledge of ourselves. Because we are created in God's "likeness," we are able to receive God's grace and contemplate the mystery of the Trinity itself. This last activity gives us an intimate (albeit by no means exhaustive) knowledge of God in both his internal self-relations and in his external relations with the world. In this way, our contemplation of God provides us with an intimate knowledge of both God and his economic activity in the world. The latter part of this twofold knowledge, while not contradicting the insights of eyes of reason and the flesh, necessarily implies new and deeper insights into ourselves and of the world around us. Through God's grace, we are able not only to contemplate God, but also to see how God ponders us and acts toward us. However imperfect it may be, our holy day of Sabbath rest is meant to be a participation in this divine perspective. It is an invitation for us to behold the mystery of God and to see creation (ourselves included) the way he sees it. Both facets of this contemplative activity are integral to the Christian understanding of the *visio Dei*.[7]

Leisure, Festivity, Worship

As a contemplative activity, "holy rest" enables us to join in God's celebration of himself, his creative action, and the whole of his creation. It confirms rather than denies our other modes of human experience by defining their limits and revealing the proper boundaries within which they function. It also reminds us that we were made by God and for the glory of God, an insight that has profound relevance for the development of our own self-understanding.

Contemplation and celebration are thus closely connected with the experience of "holy rest." The day of Sabbath rest retains this power only when it is rooted in the tranquil contemplation of God and his mysterious

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presence in the world. This "holy" or "sanctified leisure," *(otium sanctum)* as Augustine calls it,[8] is rooted in the love of truth and contemplative search for God's presence in the world.

Josef Pieper affirms this insight in his discussion of the origins of leisure. In his mind, this important quality of human culture flows from festivity, the main characteristics of which are "the union of tranquility, contemplation, and intensity of life."[9] Like contemplation, he considers leisure to be "... of a higher order than the *vita activa*."[10] He also underscores the intimate ties between leisure and divine worship. In his opinion, the latter does for time what the place of worship itself does for space. Just as the temple reserves a specific plot of ground to be the domain of the Gods, divine worship sets aside specific hours and days for communion with them: "Every seventh day is such a period of time. It is a 'festival time,' and it arises in this way and no other."[11]

When separated from divine worship, leisure loses its power to refresh and to rejuvenate. Our sense of the sacred becomes dulled and the spiritual dimension of human existence left unnourished. When our spiritual hungers are ignored, we gradually lose touch with the ground of our existence. Contemplation takes a back seat to more practical, utilitarian concerns: "Cut off from the worship of the divine, leisure becomes laziness and work inhuman."[12] Work *without* "holy rest" ultimately becomes enslaving; it uses up people by relating to them as things or as economic commodities. Work *with* "holy rest" gives glory and honour to God, respects the dignity of the human person, reverences the world we live in.

Fostering a Contemplative Attitude toward Life

For Christians, the Sabbath rest is meant to be a time of festivity and "holy leisure." On that day, we are called to put aside our work and to turn our attention toward the Lord of Life. Doing so helps us to put our lives in perspective. By taking time out to contemplate the mystery of God and to see the world around through the divine perspective, we gain a deeper insight into our own problems and the inherent difficulties of the world in which we live. The call to "holy rest" represents the need in all of us to foster a contemplative attitude life. Because that call is open-ended, what takes place on Sunday should in some way spill over into the rest of our lives.

Our celebration of "holy rest" has special relevance for our growth in the spiritual life. If we do not exercise our spiritual capabilities, we will eventually become numb to them. They, in turn, will gradually wither and become atrophied. The metaphor of the "triple eye" is particularly relevant in this regard. Just as the muscles in the eye or our rational powers of mind become weak and difficult to focus through lack of use, so too will our

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contemplative eye grow faint if it is not permitted to ponder the mysteries of the Godhead in the light of divine grace. If we do not exercise and train our spiritual organs, they will simply shrink and deteriorate from lack of use. When this happens, we ourselves become enfeebled: a process of spiritual devolution gradually sets in; we go backward rather than forward in our spiritual journey; we fail to develop our deepest potential.

William of St. Thierry (c. 1085–c. 1148), a representative author of medieval Cistercian spirituality, capitalizes on the metaphor of our carnal, rational, and spiritual capacities. For him, growth in the spiritual life consists in a movement from the animal state (where a person is concerned with the discipline of the body) to the rational state (where the person concentrates on the discipline of the mind and the acquisition of virtue)[13] to the spiritual state (where one contemplates and achieves union with God). Movement along this spectrum of animal-rational-spiritual existence can go either forward or backwards.

A person, in his mind, never sits still in the spiritual life. He or she can lead a life more and more dedicated solely to carnal pleasure, to the development of one's natural, rational powers, or to the intimate knowledge of God. One's destiny along this spectrum ultimately has to do with the choices one makes, especially with regard to one's response to God's grace. The lowest rung in this process of spiritual devolution has been memorialized in the *Ysengrimus*, an anonymous twelfth-century Latin satire that has a ravenous wolf-monk of dubious intelligence and unruly gastric and sexual appetites as its main character. One of the main points of this poem is that even those who follow the monastic way of life, the so-called *vita angelica*,[14] can become numb to their higher rational and spiritual powers and wallow in a state governed by nothing but pure sensuality. This wolf-monk is the example par excellence of someone whose "contemplative eye" has become completely blinded and who has lost touch with the spiritual power to ponder the divine mysteries. The poem gives us an instruction by way of negative example. It warns us that we too will share a similar fate, if we fail to respond adequately to the call to "holy rest."

Conclusion

The correlation between the use of our carnal, rational, and spiritual faculties and growth in the spiritual life provides an important point of reference for our understanding of the call to "holy rest." To see this connection, however, it is essential that we view these three dimensions of human existence not in isolation from each other, as if the rational was a denial of the carnal or the spiritual of the rational, but in an integral, holistic way.

When seen in this light, the call to Sabbath rest represents an invitation

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for us to lay bare the various dimensions of our existence to the contemplative gaze of the divine. In doing so, we ourselves become more contemplative in our outlook on life and, interestingly enough, more responsive to the needs of those around us. Sharing in God's "holy rest" has a transforming effect on our relationships with ourselves, others, the world, and God. When partaking in it, we celebrate life in the context of divine worship and allow our "contemplative eye" to ponder the meaning of existence and the ground that sustains it.

Embracing the divine in the leisurely and loving act of contemplation enables us to delight in life and to be delighted in by God. It encourages us to get in touch with every dimension of our existence and to foster in our hearts an intimate relationship with the Lord of Life. To rest in the "holy rest" of God gives us perspective and helps us to experience life in an entirely different way. Of all the things we do in life, few are more important. Those who fail to remember the Lord in this way ultimately do damage to themselves and to the world in which they are living. They have no idea what they are missing.

1 Stephen King, *Misery* (1987).
2 The Masoretic (Hebrew) text has God finishing the work of creation on the seventh day; the Septuagint (Greek) text has it on the sixth. See *The Jerome Biblical Commentary,* eds Raymond B. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 11.
3 *The Jerome Biblical Commentary,* 11.
4 Robert Farrar Capon, *The Third Peacock: A Book about God and the Problem of Evil* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1971), 12.
5 Bonaventure, *Breviloquium,* 2.12 [*Opera omnia* (Quaracchi, 1891), 5:230].
6 Hugh of St. Victor, *De* sacramentis, 1.10.2 [PL 176. 327–311. See also Bonaventure, *Breviloquium,* 2.12 [*Opera omnia (Quaracchi,* 1891), 5:230].
7 The Latin phrase, *visio Dei,* can be taken as an objective or a possessive genitive. The former refers to our vision of God; the latter, to God's vision of us. Both elements are integral parts of the beatific vision.
8 Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei,* 19.19 [CSEL 40.2.407]
9 Josef Pieper, *Leisure: The Basis of Culture,* trans. Alexander Dru, with a Foreword by T. S. Eliot (New York/Toronto: Random House, 1963), 43 [Pieper is here citing Karl Kerényi, *Die antike Religion* (1940), 66].
10 Pieper, *Leisure,* 43.
11 Ibid., 58.
12 Ibid., *59.*
13 William of St. Thierry, *Epistola aurea,* 1.12 *[Sources chrétiennes,* 223.176-81].
14 For a treatment of monasticism and the *vita angelica,* see John Bugge, *Virginitas: An Essay in the History of a Medieval Ideal* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 30–35.

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