



***Desire:  
The Heart of Christian Spirituality***

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RELI 573: Contemporary Spirituality  
Date: 4/3/2008**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION**

Perhaps the third and fourth words that we get to say to our parents as babies is “I want,” and it makes so much sense because as human being we are insufficient in ourselves; especially as babies we are totally dependent; we have “want”; we have “need” that we cannot be fulfilled for ourselves. I think “desire” begins there. We get to begin to ask for what we need and what we want. Desire is such an important part of life. I found it was interesting about Mel Gibson and his passion. He had a passion for his movie; he had a real desire, and a drive to produce his movie. And it was not only wanting to show Jesus to the world, but it was also his motivation to show how far our God is willing to go to prove His love for us, not only His incarnation, but the way of the Cross and how He dies. Gibson wanted so much for this project that he had a passion for “the passion of Christ.” He was driven to this and invested 30 million dollars. He had a real desire to show forth Christ to the world. I hope it has been a blessing but whether it is for God or of God or not, whether it is for God’s glory or Mel’s glory, he has a passion about the Lord. What is your passion? What drives you? What do you desire? What gets you up in the morning? What do you love?

Though desire and spirituality in Christian tradition is a topic of great breadth, this paper shall attempt to link these questions with Christian spirituality by exploration of what desires are, where they originate and their power. The study also presents the theme of desires in the Biblical tradition and describes how they are connected with prayers.

## **II. DESIRES: THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

### **a. WHAT ARE DESIRES?**

Desires are “not some kind of impersonal power ‘out there’ that controls us whether we like it or not. Desires are best understood as our most honest experiences of ourselves, in all our complexity and depth, as we relate to people and things around us. Desires undoubtedly overlap with our needs and neediness.”<sup>1</sup> Desires are part of us yearning for a completion. We are like a vessel that needs to be filled. Our eyes need sights; our ears need sound; our mouth needs food; we are a complete receptacle and so we yearn for completion. Part of our desires is some of these natural things. “Because desire has a grounded quality, it is inevitably linked to our physical senses, which in turn connect us to the world of time and space. In a way, all desire is sensual, that is, associated with our senses.”<sup>2</sup>

I came across a great quote while driving and listening to Catholic radio: “God gives us friends in life for a season, for a reason and some for a life time,” and I think we could apply that to our desires. Some of our desires are for a season; some are for a reason; and some are for a lifetime. God hooks me with something. He gave me a season, a reason and a dream. He got

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Sheldrake, S.J., *Befriending Our Desires*, (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1994), 12.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

me into the diaconate formation and my goal is to be a deacon someday. That is what I want; that is my drive; and that is my passion. What would happen, if I died before I was ordained, would my life be a waste? What would happen if God changed my desire? My desire changes from becoming a deacon to a loving human being as I can be. Whether I become a deacon or not if I die today, my desire is still fulfilled. Sometimes our dreams are transformed. Like Samuel (1 Samuel 3:10), we hear when God speaks to us. Our desires are transformed. They go to another level. Desire is the heart of Christian spirituality. Only with the heart do we see clearly and so we get into the desire and passion. We stress the love of God. We believe from all eternity. God knew he is going to be incarnated to join us, to be one of us because he loves us. He did not need the sins of Adam or our sins to show us how much he loves us.

## **b. SOURCE OF DESIRES**

God plants desires in our hearts as St. Augustine puts it: "You made us for yourself; oh Lord our hearts are restless until they rest in you,"<sup>3</sup> or in the words of Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth-century English mystic: "I am He Who makes you to long; I am He, the endless fulfilling of all true desires."<sup>4</sup> We live in the world and the culture where there are so many answers to fill up that longing that we are born with. I believe each and every one of us has a sign and a special place in our heart that said "reserve for God alone." We are, however, trying to fill up that emptiness, that poverty, that longing, that seeking by eating more, drinking more, buying more, and thinking that it will make us more. Until the Lord is in the right place in our hearts, nothing else will be in its right place. We have many strange gods in our culture that offer us solutions to fill up the emptiness. In other words, God makes each of us with a God-shaped hole in our hearts, but we try to fill it with non-God shaped things. There is nothing wrong with money, nothing wrong with fame, nothing wrong with power, nothing wrong with knowledge, but unless the Lord is in the right place in our lives, none of these things will satisfy our desire. It is the place that only the Lord can fill up in each of us. It belongs to him. All of the yearning of our life, all of the longing, all of the other desires that we have are only signs to us of our ultimate desire, and that is our life long desire for the mystical union with the Lord who made us. In the beauty of this longing that the Lord engraves in our hearts, the Holy Spirit draws us to God because we desire God and God desires us. As we seek God, He is seeking us just like that Hound of Heaven - the classic poem by Francis Thompson which talks about the Lord chasing a person through life; they keep trying to fill up the empty spaces with everything else and the hound finally catches and says: "Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest, I am He Whom thou seekest! Thou

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<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine, "A Theology of Desire," <http://theologyofdesire.blogspot.com/2009/01/you-made-us-for-yourself.html> (accessed March 4, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Susan Neunzig Cahill, *Wise Women: Over Two Thousand Years of Spiritual Writing by Women*, (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 171.

dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.”<sup>5</sup> Our desires sometime get so scattered. We do not have that simplicity in our longing. There is so much distraction in our life and so many false gods competing for our attention in our world. It is hard! I do not always seek the Lord but I believe the words of St. John of the Cross. He said: “the desire for union with God is already the beginning”<sup>6</sup> because as written by the author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*: “it is not what you are nor what you have been that God looks at with his merciful eyes, but what you desire to be.”<sup>7</sup>

### c. DESIRES IN BIBLICAL TRADITION

The themes of desires, yearning and longing have been widely reflected in the Sacred Scripture and the mystical tradition. The Psalmist portrays his desires for God “as a deer yearns for running streams... thirst for God” (Psalm 42:1-2). Psalm 119 echoes this notion of longing: “I opened my mouth wide and panted, for I longed for Your commandments” (Psalm 119:131). The Psalmist articulated the themes of desires throughout his writing including Ps 63:1; 84:2; and 143:6.

Our yearning for God is the reciprocal of God’s love as God also desires us; God in His parental bond with His people also yearns for us: “When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; yet it is I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them in My arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them ... with bonds of love, and...lift the yoke from their jaws; and I bent down and fed them... How can I give you up, O Ephraim? How can I surrender you, O Israel?” (Hosea 11:1-8). In this heartbreaking description of God’s parental love, yearning for Israel to return, Hosea presents the most inspirational teachings about the steadfast nature of God’s love. The passage draws from the intuitive desire deep within the heart of God, like an island whose roots extend beneath the river currents.

The themes of yearning and longing are also presented in Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). The father knew the risks of parenting, as he allowed his son to face the appropriate consequences and set off on his own. It is unimaginable that the father yearning and longing for the return of his prodigal son who was squandering his inheritance and wasting his money with prostitutes. But that father’s love, his yearning and longing would not let his rebelling son go. When the father saw the son in the distance one day, he ran down the road to meet him, embrace him, and would soon throw a homecoming party. God’s parental love reminds us that the history of God’s grace is one that extends back to Egypt in the childhood of our faith story. It is both reassuring and humbling to recognize that from the beginning of our story as the people of God, we have been dependent on the graceful love of God that perseveres in spite of our sin and God’s desire enables our homecoming no matter how distant we have wandered away.

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<sup>5</sup> Francis Thompson, “The Hound of Heaven,” <http://www.bartleby.com/236/239.html> (accessed March 4, 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Daniel A. Dombrowski, *St. John of the Cross: An Appreciation*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992), 26.

<sup>7</sup> Anonymous Author, “Chapter LXXIV,” in *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh, S.J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), 265.

#### **d. THE POWER OF DESIRES**

Desires are powerful energies in us as Pedro Arrupe, the twenty-eighth Superior General of the Society of Jesus wrote: “What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, what you know that breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything”<sup>8</sup> “for where your treasure is, there your heart will also be” (Matthew 6:21). “Desires can range from faint wishes to powerful passions that drive us in particular directions and govern our thoughts and actions... they give energy and direction to our psyche.”<sup>9</sup> Desire can go either way just like dream. When we dream at night, we do not control our dream. That is a purpose of our dream. It helps to ventilate our anxiety, our fear and so on. But there are other kinds of dream in life that focus us. They are very close to desire. What we really desire, what we dream about, and what we are passion about, they can go either way, virtue or vice.

Because desires are such powerful energies in us, they are associated with risks. “Some desires may enslave us, others dissipate our energies.” Desires, however, can “generate power and stimulate our spirituality.” We frequently do not endure risk-taking, and “so often lack a lively spirituality has close connections with the frequent absence of the Holy Spirit.” The Spirit “blows wherever it pleases” (John 3:8); “it invites us to seek a risky freedom and blows ourselves out into situations, commitments and relationships. The Spirit is both vulnerable and powerful.” To permit ourselves to actively desire is also to be vulnerable as Jesus' way to the Cross. “The Spirit is also the indwelling power of God in the heart of each of us and sustaining us.”<sup>10</sup>

#### **e. DESIRES AND PRAYERS**

We grow up with the mentality of being a center of the universe. Our earliest prayer life to the Lord is “give me, give me, I want, I want, fix this, help that and so on.” Our prayer is so self-centered many times. We treat the Lord like a vending machine. We grow up spiritually when we move beyond self-centeredness to self-giving, when we say “what do you want Lord? What can I do for you, Lord?” Wouldn't it be wonderful if we get up in the morning and take that as our prayer instead? Just like our children when they are matured, when they are not a center of the Universe, they stop treating us like a check book, a car key, their maid or their cook. They say mom, dad what can I do for you. That is when we know we did a good job. That is when they grow up. Our desires are wonderful. They motivate us but we realize there is an ultimate other who is our God. How can we please the ultimate other when our will cannot be united with the will of the Lord? That is why the prayer

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<sup>8</sup> Ruth Haley Barton and R. Ruth Barton, *Sacred Rhythms: Arranging Our Lives for Spiritual Transformation*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 127.

<sup>9</sup> Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

Jesus taught us is the longing for the ultimate union of the will of Christ to the will of the Father. When we love somebody, we want their name be famous, we want to tell everybody our Father in heaven, hallow be thy name. That is my desire; Jesus is saying; your kingdom comes; I want what you want; "Father...not My will, but Yours be done" (Luke 22:41-43). When we pray the Lord's Prayer, we pray that the God who we love, who created us and redeemed us that we want His way; we want His kingdom not our kingdom. Jesus' desires "are not narrowly concerned with" Himself "but with the growth of the Kingdom of God. They reflect God's own desires, God's longing for the world" and each human person particularly. "In this sense, authentic desires have a social or collective dimension."<sup>11</sup> I sometime wonder whether I am doing God's will, and the prayer of Thomas Merton helps me overcome this anxiety: "Lord! I believe the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. And I hope that I never do anything apart from that desire."<sup>12</sup> Julian of Norwich desires and prays to receive three wounds in her life, that is, "the wound of true contrition, the wound of loving compassion and the wound of longing with my will for God."<sup>13</sup>

"True prayer is a matter both of the heart and the head. It is a unity of love and knowledge, and its dynamism is our desire... Love includes the knowledge of the beloved. But it is not the knowledge of analysis and calculating manipulation. It is participating knowledge which changes both the knower and the known in the very act of knowledge. Participating knowledge is a reasonably good description of desire in relation to prayer." For as the great teacher of spiritual desire, St. Ignatius Loyola, reminds us, 'what fills and satisfies the soul consists, not in knowing much, but in our understanding the realities profoundly and savoring them interiorly' (Spiritual Exercises, no. 2). Participating knowledge is what matters. Attending to desire, both our own and, through it, God's desiring in us, is the way to the kind of knowledge that can transform our lives."<sup>14</sup> St. Ignatius of Loyola invites people who attend his retreat to "ask God our Lord for what I want and desire" at the commencement of every period of prayer.<sup>15</sup> Asking for what we want may well become openness to what God desires for us and in us. Our openness invites God to touch our center where our deepest desires dwell in order to unlock the potential energies in us.<sup>16</sup> Julian of Norwich's "treatment of desire, or longing, in relationship to prayer is more comprehensive, basic and dynamic than many other spiritual writers. Her understanding of desire seems to have expanded in the course of her experiences, and so she

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy*, (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1998), 61.

<sup>13</sup> Gillian Ahlgren, "Julian of Norwich's Theology of Eros Spiritus," *Journal of Christian Spirituality - Volume 5*, (2005): 43.

<sup>14</sup> Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 49.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 54.

shares with us her perceptions of what and how we are to desire in order to become one with God. For Julian, our deepest natural desire is to have nothing less than God.”<sup>17</sup>

St. Francis of Assisi does not picture himself alone in loving God; he sees himself as a partner with all the members of the whole Communion of Saints. This is a wholesome way to approach prayer and living the Christian faith. He prays for two things in his life of what he desires and he finds what he long for: 1) that “I may feel the love with which brought you to go all the way to the cross for us; that I may feel that love in my heart and 2) that I might feel in my body as much as I am able the pain that you endured in giving your love to us so deeply.”<sup>18</sup> Be careful what we pray for though! St. Francis got the five wounds but he became an image of God’s love. People say you become what you eat; you become what you love; you become what you worship; you become what you desire. St. Francis becomes an image of the one he loves. He becomes a mirror of Christ. That is the ultimate unity when we are so united with the One we love. That is the mystical communion.

The prayers of Father Mychal Judge who was killed in the attacks tragically on September 11, 2001 really touch me: “Lord takes me where you want me to go, let me meet whom you want me to meet, tell me what you want me to say and keep me out of your way.”<sup>19</sup> He rushed to the World Trade Center upon hearing the attack to serve the 911 victims with their pastoral needs and he was the first one who pronounced death. He loves the Lord so much. He desires to please the Lord. I believe the Lord wants him to go to the WTC, and he went there to be united with the will of God. God is calling him to this and he wanted to please God with his desire. This reminds me another prayer by Cardinal Edward M. Egan: “Lord, please take over. Make my every word only what you would say; my every act only what you would do. Do not let me get in the way. I’m yours, totally yours.”<sup>20</sup> Lastly, this is what Mahatma Gandhi says about desire and prayers: “prayer has saved my life, without it, I would have been a lunatic long ago. I had my share of the bitterest public and private experiences. They throw me in temporary despair. If I was able to get rid of that despair, it was because of prayer...It came out of sheer necessity as I found myself in a plight where I could not be possibly happy without it. And as time went on, my faith in God increased, and I became yearning for God, yearning to be the person God wants me to be.”<sup>21</sup> Though Gandhi is a non-Christian, to him prayers are in praise of God and yearnings of the soul.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>18</sup> Fr. John Sullivan, OFM, “Finding INSPIRATION in the WRITINGS of St. Francis - a Sharing Guide,” <http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&q=Finding+INSPIRATION+in+the+WRITINGS+of+St.+Francis> (accessed March 4, 2016).

<sup>19</sup> R. C. Graham, *I Healed You with My Word*, (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2007), xvii.

<sup>20</sup> The New York Times, “Cardinal Says Bronx Prayer Helped Him At St. Peter’s,” <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res> (accessed March 4, 2016).

<sup>21</sup> Praveen Davar, “Gandhi and Religion,” [http://www.congresssandesh.com/oct\\_2k/religion1.html](http://www.congresssandesh.com/oct_2k/religion1.html) (accessed March 4, 2016).

### III. CONCLUSION

There is still much to learn about desire in Christian tradition, but the scope of this paper leads me to the conclusion at this point. Desire and love are the heart of Christian spirituality; they are inseparable as when we love somebody, we desire to be with them and do what make them happy; we want to please them in order to fulfill our desire. The desire for union with God is the beginning of our love of God. Because God also desires us, the Spirit of God shapes and re-forms our desires; so that we use our wills to cooperate with God's grace and thereby become God's people. Our desire for God encourages and motivates us how we should live our lives. It reminds us the goal and purpose of our lives, and to renew our faith in the Lord's coming again to settle accounts with us. That is what Advent is about; that is what Christian eschatology is about as we wait in joyful hope. We are longing for the coming of the Lord. My God and my All, how I long to love you and give you my heart and give you my soul. Show me the way to love and give up my life to you. Amen.

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