

The Real Presence: Integrating the Sacred and the Secular

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May 07, 2011

Atlanta, Georgia

When I was invited to speak to you today, I asked a couple of you what I should say. One of you said, "Tell us a story." Another said, "Tell us what you **really think** of us." So I will try to respond to both requests.

On December 10, 1941, about 40 miles south southeast of Louisville, Kentucky,¹ a 26 year old young man entered the gates of the Abbey of Gethsemani, the oldest monastery in the United States. The Guest Master at that time was a young priest named Father Joachim², who recalled that the young novitiate spent his free time writing poetry. Father Joachim (d. 2000) would leave Gethsemani in three years to become one of the founders of a new monastery. Thomas Merton (1915–1968)³ would remain there to become the author of over 2,000 poems, a countless number of essays, and more than 50 published books.

Fifty years later, in 1991, in my first night on my first retreat to the monastery that was founded by Gethsemani, I was reading one of Merton's poems⁴ that had been placed on my desk before I had arrived. **Suddenly**, an old priest in his 80s burst unexpectedly into my room. No longer a young Guest Master, Father Joachim was one of 20 monks who had left Gethsemani in 1944 to found a new monastery in Georgia--about 40 miles east of Atlanta.

Calling me by name, which he had apparently learned from my father, the old priest asked, "Aren't you the preacher's son?" I confessed that I was guilty. Almost bursting with a sense of urgency, he boldly exclaimed, "You need to experience the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist." Taken back, I replied somewhat defensively, "I'm not even **Catholic**. I don't even **believe** in transubstantiation." "Oh, no," said the priest, "I'm not talking about that book stuff."

Ten years later, in 2001, while having dinner with the Abbot of this monastery, I shared with him my story. "Oh, no, Billy," said the Abbot, "Father Joachim wasn't talking about transubstantiation. He was inviting you to share **communion** with us. He wasn't telling you to **understand** the Real Presence; he was inviting you to **experience** it."

Ten years later, in 2011, I can tell you that I **have** experienced the Real Presence of Christ--**among you**--the Richmond Class of 2011. It's not only what I **think** of you; it's what I've **experienced** with you.

Sometimes, I feel like if the only thing I knew about the Christian faith was what I have learned from you, then I would know all I really need to know. If the only image I ever saw of the Body of Christ was what I have seen in you, then I have experienced the Real Presence of Christ among you. **I'm not talking about that book stuff**. I'm talking about the communion that I--and others here--have experienced **with you**.

Those of us who have been your teachers have seen the transformations in your lives. We've seen the way you balance your commitments to your studies and to your work, to your homes and your houses of worship, to your husbands and wives, and to your ongoing clinical training. We've also seen the way that you **sacrifice** yourselves for others. We've seen the times when you've felt like you've had **nothing left** to give, and you have given **yourself**.

I've trained dozens of Emory doctors and hundreds of Georgia psychologists, but the most important training I've done was in the **time I spent with you**. The quality of your training experiences at Richmond reflects more about **you** than it does those of us who have been your partners in education.

You are not only *professional* counselors; you are the *state of the art* in professional counseling. You are not only *Christian* counselors; you are the *standard of excellence* in Christian counseling. You have earned Masters' degrees in *both* counseling psychology *and* Christian theology---integrating the sacred and the secular.

You are professional counselors. You have learned your books and theories well, and now it is time to put them aside when you touch the miracle of living souls (Carl Jung, 1953, p. 4).⁵

I'm not talking about that book stuff. I'm talking about the necessary and sufficient conditions for positive therapeutic change.⁶ *Fifty years* of psychotherapy research---as well as 40 years of my own study of psychology---have revealed three things that the Master counselor taught us 2,000 years ago: *empathy, authenticity, and unconditionality*.⁷

1st **Empathy** is the ability to feel, understand, and respond to the suffering of others. It is the prerequisite of *compassion*, more active and vigorous than empathy, which allows you to enter into and maintain a relationship of caring. Although you will *listen and learn* a lot from the people you serve, you will discover that they will not *care* how much you *know* so much as they will *know* how much you *care*.

2nd **Authenticity** is also known as genuineness or congruence. It refers to your being a fully integrated person. It is the opposite of wearing a mask, or maintaining a façade, or being a Sunday morning Christian. Not just talking the talk, but walking the walk. It is the consistency between what you believe and how you behave, what you think and how you act, who you are and what you do. In the Bible, it is what is sometimes described as *wholeness*.

3rd **Unconditionality** is described in the psychology journals as unconditional positive regard. Unconditionality involves radical acceptance, which, for lack of a better word, we call *love*. It is the secular version of that which in our faith tradition we call *agape*—a caring for the other that is greater than one's care for

oneself. Of course, your caring for others must be balanced with care for yourself. In the words of St. Augustine, "Fill yourselves first, for only then will you **be able** to fill others." Remember, loving your neighbor as you love yourself requires that you first be able to love yourself so that you **can** love others.

"The beginning of love... [says Thomas Merton] ...is to let those we love be *perfectly themselves*, and not twist them to fit our own image. Otherwise, we love only the *reflection* of ourselves that we see in them."⁸

Empathy, authenticity, and unconditionality are the foundations of professional counseling.

But you are not only professional counselors; you are Christian counselors. So learn to speak in silence--the favorite language of God. Let God use your *words* to speak to others. But *more importantly*, let God use your *ears* to *listen* to others---because it is in the silent, sacred space of your listening that *healing* occurs.⁹ As healers, what better example do you have than the Great Physician¹⁰ (Matthew 9:12) who **listened** to the lives of others? As the one who completely integrated the sacred and the secular, your Master *listened* to the pleas of the lepers, and the outcasts, and the condemned. In our world of 2011, these would be those suffering from AIDS, those dying homeless on the streets, and those living lonely in prisons. *These* are the ones you are called to serve.

What better example do you have than the Wonderful Counselor¹¹ (Isaiah 9: 6) who taught us how to meet others *exactly where they are*--such as the Centurion soldier¹² who was worried about his servant but who humbly said that he was not worthy to receive (Matthew 8: 8). Such as the rich young ruler who scrupulously followed the *Torah* but who could not let go of his great wealth (Mark 10: 22), or the prostitute who was being dragged to her death---by those who had defiled her (John 8: 11), or the blind man who lived in the dark world of a crowded, noisy street (John 9:8). In our world of 2011, these would be those who are corporate executives, those living in secrets of shame, and

those working in the glass towers from which they cannot see the suffering of those around them. *These* are the ones you are called to serve.

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Ethics Professor
May 08, 2011

In closing, let me remind you of the good news--and the bad news: The bad news is that you will be called to sacrifice; the good news is that you only have to do it one day at a time. *Some of you* may be called to die for your faith, but *all of you* are called to live your faith--each day, day by day, as your days turn into months, and your months turn into years--just like the lives of Thomas Merton and Father Joachim, and all the Saints who have gone before you. As you leave this unique training institution, I challenge you to be *living legacies* to the faith that brought you here in the first place. As you leave your houses of worship each week, I challenge you to be *living testaments* to the faith that will take you beyond any horizon that you can see tomorrow.

Note to the Reader: The bolded text shows words or phrases that were spoken with more emphasis during the address.

In my final charge to you, **professional counselors**, I encourage you to be more empathic, more authentic, and more unconditional in your love--your radical acceptance--of others. In my final charge, **Christian counselors**, let me tell you what I really think of you. I challenge you to be what you **already are**:

1st I first challenge you to be *visionaries*, as you see in your clients the unlimited potential that they do not see in themselves.

2nd I then challenge you to be *role models*, as your clients progress beyond any vision that they can see when they first begin their journeys with you.

3rd I also challenge you to be *witnesses*, as your clients' images of themselves as broken beings are transformed into visions of whom they were created to be.

Finally--and most importantly--I challenge you to let others **experience** in you what I have experienced in you--the **Real Presence** of Christ within you.

Notes

1. Bardstown, Kentucky is now known as the Bourbon Capital of the World®, a term trademarked by the promoters of the Kentucky Bourbon Festival. <http://www.visitbardstown.com/tourism/>
2. Father John “Joachim” Tierney (d. May 20, 1999) mentioned on page 373 in Merton, T. (1951). *The seven story mountain*. Garden City: NY: Garden City Books, by special arrangement with Harcourt, Brace & Company.
3. Thomas Merton died 27 years to the day after his entrance to the Monastery at Gethsemani.
4. “My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”
5. Jung, Carl G. (1953). *Psychological Reflections*. New York: Pantheon Books. Page 4. “Learn your theories as well as you can, but put them aside when you touch the miracle of the living soul. Not theories but your own creative individuality alone must decide.”
6. Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin.
7. Rogers, C. R. (1957). The necessary and sufficient conditions of therapeutic personality change. *Journal of Consulting Psychology*, 21, 95–102.
8. Merton, T. (1955). *No man is an island*. London: Hollis & Carter, London. “The beginning of this love is the will to let those we love be perfectly themselves, the resolution not to twist them to fit our own image. If in loving them we do not love what they are, but only their potential likeness to ourselves, then we do not love them: we love only the reflection of ourselves we find in them. Can this be charity?” Page 168.
9. Plouffe, Mary (Clinical Psychologist in South Freeport, Maine). (2011). In silence there is healing. This I believe: A public dialogue about belief—one essay at a time. As heard on *The Bob Edwards Show*. April 8, 2011. <http://thisibelieve.org/essay/28381/>
10. Jesus referred to himself as physician twice: Luke 4:23: “And He said to them, “No doubt you will quote this proverb to Me, ‘Physician, heal yourself!’” Matthew 9: 12-13: “But when He heard this, He said, “It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick. But go and learn what this means, I desire compassion, and not sacrifice, for I did not come to call the righteous but sinners.” The word used for physician in Greek was *iatros*, derived from *iaomai*, which refers to spiritual as well as physical healing (similar to the Hebrew concept of *shalom* or *rapha*). Jesus was undoubtedly using the word “physician” to refer both to the spiritual and physical aspects of healing that He commanded.
11. Isaiah 9:6 (NIV): “For unto as a child is born, to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders, And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”
12. This statement is a paraphrase of Matthew 8:8: “Lord I am not worthy to have you enter my house, but only say the word and my servant shall be healed.”

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