

## THE PERSON AS THE IMAGE OF GOD

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George Washington Carver was a scientist who found a lot of uses, both medical and industrial, for the lowly peanut, and was renowned for his scientific discoveries. He was also a black man, living in the southern U.S. when prejudice against blacks was rampant. He used to tell the members of the black community not to let themselves be defined by those who are prejudiced against them.

It happened that Carver was brought to Washington to explain his work with the peanut before the Senate Ways and Means Committee in January of 1921. He expected such a high-level committee to handle the business at hand with dignity and proper decorum. He was shocked when speakers who got up ahead of him to make their presentations were treated in a very demeaning manner and harassed.

As a black man, he was last on the list and so, after three days, he finally walked up the aisle to speak. On the way up he heard one of the committee members say – and quite loudly for all to hear – “I suppose you have plenty of peanuts and watermelon to keep you happy!” He ignored the remark as an ignorant slur, though it stung him. He was further hurt on seeing another committee member sitting there with his hat on and his feet on the table. When the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee told the member to take off his hat, he said out loud, “Down where I come from we don’t accept any nigger’s testimony, and I don’t see what this fellow can say that has any bearing on this committee.”

At this point George Washington Carver was ready to turn around and go back home, but as he wrote in his autobiography, “Whatever they said of me, I knew that I was a child of God, and so I said to myself inwardly, ‘Almighty God, let me carry out your will.’” He got to the podium and was told that he had twenty minutes to speak. Carver opened up his display case and began to explain his project.

Well, so engaging was his discussion that those twenty minutes went all too quickly. The chairman rose and asked for an extension so Carver could continue his presentation, which he did for an hour and three-quarters. They voted him four more extensions, so he spoke for several hours. At the end of his talk they all stood up and gave him a long round of applause. And all this because he refused to be defined by the labels of his culture. (Taken from William Bausch, A World of Stories for Preachers and Teachers, Twenty-Third Publications, Mystic, CT., 1998.)

In the light of this story, and of the difficulty that Carver faced in being convinced of his own dignity as a person, it becomes somewhat clearer why the Person was one of the topics of the Conversations of Cala Figuera, and why Eduardo Bonnín insisted on the connection between a healthy concept of the dignity of the person and the charisma of

Cursillo. Every person everywhere is looking for the same thing, to be valued and respected as a person. Cursillo and Cursillistas must realize that the person who stands in front of them is more important than any task, any goal we might have. People have to come to an acceptance of themselves as they are (as did Carver) and only then can they reach out to others.

The constitutions of most supposedly democratic countries will normally include a clause stating that all people are created equal, or something to that effect, touting the ideal of equality as one of the foundations of a true democracy. It may be coupled with other phrases or clauses stating similar ideals, such as freedom, the right to happiness, and so on. Seldom is there any accompanying statement indicating the basis on which such equality or freedom or right to happiness stands, and even less often is it said that the true basis of these ideals is the will of God Who created us in God's own image.

Indeed, equality of persons has become a slogan in our society, often promoted without any conscious effort to define its true meaning. It is easy to say that equality does not mean sameness, but in fact it does. But sameness in what? Equality between the sexes does not mean the sameness in physical or emotional characteristics of men and women. Equality does not even mean the sameness of rights; I may have the right to own something that another person doesn't have the right to own, and vice-versa, although the right to property is not the most fundamental right. When it comes to the most fundamental of rights, we are indeed the same and equal. But we must be careful of those who would always see equality as sameness in everything, or at least act as if the two could be equated.

The most fundamental quality in which all persons are equal is our dignity as persons created in the image of God. I expect that all of us here would agree with that statement, but I believe it is important to be able not only to defend that position, but actively to promote it. To do so, one must really understand what it means. That is why it is one of the ten topics of the Conversations. It is fundamental to Cursillo because it is fundamental in the Gospel. The Person is Jesus' business.

Sometimes the best way to approach the understanding of a concept is to say what it does not mean. Let's see what this would mean for our understanding of the person as the image of God.

First of all, it is obvious that we don't "look" like God, since God is spirit. The image of God has nothing to do with our physical characteristics. Even if we talk about those human attributes that are spiritual rather than physical, we cannot say that in any way we look like God, Who is infinite. Secondly, there is nothing gender-specific about our being the image of God; men don't reflect the image of God any more like God than women do, despite views to the contrary that have at times characterized our culture. Nor do racial or ethnic features enter into the image of God that we reflect. As St. Paul said, "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female ....."

So what *do* we mean when we say the person is made in the image of God? As a start in answering that question, let's see what the Scriptures say:

Genesis 1:24 - "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness....."

John 8:1-11 - the story of the woman caught in adultery. Jesus treated both the accusers and the accused with dignity. The former he invited to look inward to see their own sinfulness, the latter he refused to condemn but rather forgave.

Psalms 8 - "...what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them? You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honour."

Psalms 139 - God's intimate knowledge and care for each of His human creatures.

I Cor. 12: "Now you are the Body of Christ, and individually members of it."

What is most essential about God is that God is Three-in-One and the Persons of the Trinity love one another with an infinite love. So for a person to be the image of God must mean that she/he reflects in some finite way this essential characteristic, that is, the power to love. It is, indeed, our human experience that we can love, and that it is when we love that we seem to be most human.

But to love requires freedom - no one is forced to love; the very notion is self-contradictory. So we can say that God created us free so that we could love, and reflect divine love. Our misunderstanding of this fact shows up when we so often ask, "Why did God allow (this suffering)?" when the cause of the suffering is directly or indirectly rooted in human freedom. An example of this can be seen when we lament the early death of a person struck down by lung cancer. We know that lung cancer is to a large extent preventable, but it requires that we freely choose to avoid things like smoking and occasions where we might inhale noxious or toxic gases from the environment, substances that are freely placed there by other humans. So it is true that humans can be accused of indirectly causing lung cancer. This is only a small example of the point to be made, and other instances might be much more complicated to analyze, but it is nevertheless true that so many of the traumas that we think of as being caused or permitted by God are in fact caused by humans.

So to be free means that we can choose to do right or wrong, good or evil (although some will argue that moral freedom gives us only the right to choose good.). To do evil is to fail to love. To do good is to love, since you can't "do good" without involving other persons either directly or indirectly. However, because humans are limited in both intelligence and freedom, one might mistakenly choose to love in a way that does not result in doing good, but one cannot deliberately choose to do evil and claim that one loves, or to do harm to another and say that one is loving that other. For example, one cannot deliberately use another person for sexual pleasure alone and claim that this is an act of love. It is true, though, that sometimes we have to choose to do something that is physically or emotionally hurtful to another for a greater good, as in doing surgery to bring about healing.

You may be reminded here of what we find in the introductory pages of the Pilgrim's Guide, and I quote: "One can only be fully alive if he or she has discovered the meaning

of life. The way to find this meaning of life is in accepting yourself for who you are, living today to the full, after you have entrusted your past to the Almighty by the acceptance of Grace, without being consumed by what you have done nor distracted by what you have not done. It is completely assuming the dynamics of life itself; it is the balance and the peace of knowing yourself as a person, much more attainable than the balance between your qualities and your known defects. Knowing that you can be better is the conviction that, by using the means at your disposal (acts of the will), you have the opportunity of achieving your maximum potential in being a person and helping others do the same. Travelling the road in company is insurance to help you persevere. The one who goes through life alone (by preference, by choice, or through their own fault), has lost the joy of friendship." (P.G., p. 9-10)

To paraphrase this quotation, it is -- the acceptance of oneself as a person created in God's image that opens the door to positive choices in life, while also allowing one to forgive oneself for failures, because of God's grace. It is in the strength gathered from others with whom one journeys, who share one's goals, that the journey becomes easier and the goal becomes more attainable. One can see here the method of Cursillo, to know oneself, to know Christ, and to know others, and to consolidate that knowledge through friendship and partnership with Christ in serving others, all of which is facilitated through Group Reunion and Ultreya.

We frequently hear the phrase, "he (or she) is a 'person of dignity.'" People sometimes confuse dignity with prestige. But prestige is a measure of the respect others have for a person; it is not inherent to the person, and may even be accorded for reasons contrary to the true dignity of the person. It may result from wealth, power, good position in society, or other realities external to the person. Our dignity as persons is based on the fact that we are made in the image of God, which is inherent to the human person, belongs to each and every one, and cannot be destroyed. Anything that would deface that image is an insult to our dignity and worth and an offense to God. What led to our downfall in the story of our first parents was their refusal to see their dignity and freedom as bestowed by God, thinking rather that it was theirs by right. It does not lessen our dignity to acknowledge that it lies in our being God's beloved creatures.

We Christians are quick to say that the primary commandments are to love God and to love one's neighbour. We are sometimes slow to say what that means in practice. And we are slower yet to recognize the connection between love of neighbour and justice, particularly social justice. Let me tell you a story that illustrates the point. You may have heard this before, as it is told in one form or another in several sources.

The story goes like this. There was a village situated on the bank of a river, just around a rather sharp bend in the river. One day the villagers were astounded to see three bodies floating down the river. One was that of an old man who was dead; the second was of a younger man who was living but very weak; the third was that of a child, still in good health. The villagers retrieved the bodies. They buried the old man tenderly. They looked after the sick man and restored him to health. And they provided a family

for the child, who came to love his new parents and siblings. The next week the same thing happened; three more bodies came floating down the river, of the same age and condition as the first three. The villagers responded as they had the first time. This was repeated week after week, until the villagers came to expect it and were always prepared to care for these afflicted persons. Yet, no one had thought to go around the bend of the river to discover why these bodies kept coming to them. The villagers were happy to care for the dead, the sick and the orphaned, but did not seek to know the causes of death, sickness or abandonment of those for whom they cared. (Rolheiser, Ron, *The Human Longing*)

One of our rollos is entitled *Christianity in Action*. Christianity in Action is not simply waiting for the opportunity to do acts of charity; it is being proactive – going out to look for opportunities not only to be charitable, but to re-establish justice where injustice exists, to promote reconciliation where division exists, to seek ways of promoting growth where stagnation exists. It is not enough to meet regularly in Group Reunion to be concerned about one's piety and study; we must plan action and practice action and review our actions so that when the opportunities for action that is not planned arise, we will spontaneously respond.

In the light of the above story, and of what had been said earlier, let me make the following statements:

- To say that every person is made in the image of God is to acknowledge that all are of equal dignity and all have the same basic rights.
- If I have the right to food, clothing, shelter and safety as the elements of a reasonable standard of living, so do all other humans.
- As long as there are people in this world who do not enjoy this minimum standard, then injustice exists, which means that the dignity and rights of the person are being ignored or insufficiently attended to.

Most often this injustice is rooted in *systems* – economic, political, military systems – rather than in the malice of one particular individual

If we do not know the root causes of injustice, we are like the villagers in the story I related a few moments ago. We think that our acts of charity are sufficient witness to our recognition of the dignity of others, but fail to realize that if we practised justice, those acts of charity would not be necessary, and a lot of suffering would be removed from our world.

We say that Cursillo exists primarily to reach out to the faraway, by whom we mean those who are unaware of, alienated from or otherwise distanced from Christ. But the major reason for this distancing is the injustice that exists in our world, which is basically a refusal to recognize and be influenced by a sense of the dignity of the person as the image of God, and the rights that follow on that. Tragically, such injustice is sometimes perpetrated by the Church itself, or by individual Christians, which then drives others away from Christ rather than attracting them to Him. And it is not our preaching that will attract the faraway, but the witness of our manner of life, so that they

will wonder why we act as we do and conclude that we must be what we say we are – Christians who truly believe in Christ.

I said that one of the aspects of a minimum standard of living is safety. The opposite is fear of violence. Our world is full of violence – not only physical violence, but emotional and spiritual violence as well. We are witnessing a society in which our young are sometimes attracted to rather than repelled by images of violence, and this is reflected in their own behaviour – witness the outbreak of violent crime by youth in Halifax recently, as just one example.

This notion of the person as the image of God must not remain an abstract concept for us. If it does, we will remain attracted only to persons we ‘like.’ We must find all persons attractive, not because of their external qualities but because they are made in God’s image, however unlikable they may be from a purely human perspective. Remember the story of the Sister of Charity (Mother Theresa’s community) who was seen by a passer-by caring for a man who was close to death, lying in the gutter, who said to her, “Sister, I wouldn’t do that for a million dollars.” “Neither would I,” said the Sister.

How, then can we make this concept concrete in our lives?

- First, we need to reflect on what justice, particularly social justice, really means.
- Second, we must see clearly the instances of injustice around us not only individual injustice, but social, systemic injustice
- Third, we must understand the contradiction between this injustice and gospel values
  - Fourth, we must translate our understanding into action.
  - Fifth, we must look again and see the consequences of our action, and correct the instances where we may have failed.

Then we start all over again.

All of this must be done in an environment of prayer and worship.

Does this begin to sound like what we try to do through Group Reunion?

I started out talking about the Person as the Image of God and ended up talking about doing justice. If I have done a decent job of speaking of the Person as the Image of God, you will know why I have ended up talking about doing justice; if you don’t see the connection, then I haven’t made myself understood, and I’m sorry for that.

We have come to this Encounter as groups of Cursillistas with different ethnic backgrounds. To some extent we are visibly different; we are also differentiated by our mother tongues; we have different customs in our celebrations and even in our everyday lives; we may have experienced other differences among us. But none of those differences is basic to who we are as persons. We are persons made in God’s image, and just as we have tried during this Encounter to look beyond our differences to what gives each one of us dignity, so we must look beyond whatever superficial differences we find in the people we meet where we live, work or socialize, and recognize the basic importance of the person made in God’s image, free to love but often inhibited by his or

her environment from expressing that love. We must see Christ in others, so that we see the effects of a damaging environment upon them, and want to change that environment. The many injustices in our world must not drive us into cocoons, but rather energize us to bring about change, always in the light of what we know from the Gospel. If Cursillo gives us a method for doing this, let us not forget that the method is not the end, and that it is important only insofar as it helps us achieve the end. Let us not be satisfied with meeting in Group Reunion and Ultreya if we are having no effect on the de-Christianizing nature of our environment

I already quoted from Ron Rolheiser's book, *The Human Longing*. Here is another passage from it, in which he elaborates on the Lord's Prayer in the context of doing justice. It may provide us with some material for reflection and prayer.

*Our Father....* who always stands with the weak, the powerless, the poor, the abandoned, the sick, the aged, the very young, the unborn, and those who, by victim of circumstance, bear the heat of the day.

*Who art in heaven....* where everything will be reversed, where the first will be last and the last will be first, but where all will be well and every manner of being will be well.

*Hallowed be thy name....* may we always acknowledge your holiness, respecting that your ways are not our ways, your standards not our standards. May the reverence we give your name pull us out of the selfishness that prevents us from seeing the suffering of our neighbour.

*Your kingdom come....* help us to create a world where, beyond our own needs and hurts, we will do justice, love tenderly, and walk humbly with you and each other.

*Your will be done....* open our freedom to let you in so that the complete mutuality that characterizes your life might flow through our veins and thus the life that we help generate may radiate your equal love for all and your special love for the poor.

*On earth as in heaven....* may the work of our hands, the temples and structures we build in this world, reflect the temple and structure of your glory so that the joy, graciousness, tenderness and justice of heaven will show forth within all of our structures on earth.

*Give....* life and love to us and help us to see always everything as gift. Help us to know that nothing comes to us by right and that we must give because we have been given to. Help us realize that we must give to the poor, not because they need it, but because our own health depends upon our giving to them.

*Us....* the truly plural us. Give not just to our own but to everyone, including those who are very different than the narrow us. Give your gifts to all of us equally.

*This day....* not tomorrow. Do not let us push things off into some indefinite future so that we can continue to live justified lives in the face of injustice because we can make good excuses for our own inactivity.

*Our daily bread....* so that each person in the world may have enough food, enough clean water, enough clean air, adequate health care, and sufficient access to education so as to have the sustenance for a healthy life. Teach us to give from our sustenance and not just from our surplus.

*And forgive us our trespasses....* forgive us our blindness toward our neighbour, our self-preoccupation, our racism, our sexism, and our incurable propensity to worry about ourselves and our own. Forgive us our capacity to watch the evening news and do nothing about it.

*As we forgive those who trespass against us....* help us to forgive those who victimize us. Help us to mellow out in spirit, to not grow bitter with age, to forgive the imperfect parents and systems that wounded, cursed and ignored us..

*And do not put us to the test....* do not judge us only by whether we have fed the hungry, given clothing to the naked, visited the sick, or tried to mend the systems that victimized the poor. Spare us this test for none of us can stand before your gospel scrutiny. Give us, instead, more days to mend our ways, our selfishness, and our systems.

*But deliver us from evil....* that is, from the blindness that lets us continue to participate in anonymous systems within which we need not see who gets less as we get more.<sup>1</sup>

*Amen.*

De Colores