

PASTOR'S CORNER

Plague Journal

From day to day, as the Spirit moves me, I will share with you certain theological reflections concerning the liturgy and its relation to the times we're in.

The Easter Octave; April 13-18: Some thoughts on the Black Death and its connection to spirituality and interiority. The following is from a blog-article by Dale M. Coulter on April 14, 2020 entitled *COVID-19 and the Spiritual Life* (again from the First Things website):

The coronavirus is altering social existence in ways that we can and cannot yet perceive. Even after a vaccine finally defangs the virus, society will feel the impact of COVID-19 for decades, if not longer. The same was true of the Black Death that first hit Europe in the mid-fourteenth century.

One of the Black Death's most significant effects was its acceleration of certain spiritual trends that had already been steadily growing. During and after this period, Christianity saw the blossoming of an interior spirituality that had been forged in the reforms of the twelfth century. In the words of the great historian of mysticism, Bernard McGinn, the flowering of mysticism (1200–1350) produced a late medieval harvest for the spiritual life.

The loss of church leaders and the constant “scandals” of the institutional church in the late Middle Ages meant it was ill-equipped to deal with the challenges posed by the plague. What took its place was a spirituality centered in religious orders and lay religious life. With many rural villages devastated and clergy migrating to major cities like London, this spirituality was fostered in monasteries or even normal homes rather than local parishes. Espoused by men and women, it sustained the faithful even as it further called into question institutional order. Its key themes were a focus on the humanity of Christ, a program of meditation and contemplation, and a return to the simplicity of being a Christ follower. These themes can also provide us spiritual comfort in the battle against COVID-19.

The ravages of the Black Death led many to warn that medieval Europe stood under the judgment of God. Plays depicted hell's torments and preachers unleashed fiery rhetoric. With more than 30 percent of the total population succumbing to the illness (in some places more than 50 percent), it was easy to reach this conclusion. As a counter to these pronouncements, spiritual writers picked up on the Franciscan turn to the humanity of Jesus, especially his crucifixion. In the crucified Christ, medieval writers saw God's entrance into the suffering of humanity in order to redeem.

Julian of Norwich went so far as to claim that Christ's emaciated and bloody body “resembled our foul, black death, which our fair, bright, blessed Lord bore for our sins.” In becoming the plague victim, Jesus conquered sin and death and revealed that there is no anger in God. To be sure, Julian saw wrath woven into the structures of creation as they meted out sickness and death and the pain of sin that wounds the soul. But the crucified Christ, she said, pointed toward a conquering love that takes suffering and redeems it to bring humanity into union with the triune God.

Pain and suffering do not have the final say over human existence. Instead, they become a means by which God redeems souls who, through prayer, follow the footsteps of the crucified. In her response to the plague, Catherine of Siena made it clear that suffering on its own only destroys. Yet even the pain of illness can be converted to life, if the ravaged soul turns it into a means of clinging to the crucified one in prayer. This is the path to union with Christ. The point for Catherine was not to assert the necessity of suffering but to offer those caught up in the pain of life a way to utilize that pain for the soul's final end, namely, its return to the creator from whom it came. Christ's own suffering showed the way.

Both Catherine and Julian were gesturing toward a pedagogical purpose for pain and suffering grounded in the crucifixion. Not only did the ravages of life humble the soul, they forced the person to enter into its inner depths to find answers. This required a turn to the interior life. Quoting Scripture, Thomas à Kempis told his readers, “The kingdom of God is within you. Turn with all of your heart to the Lord and forsake this miserable world. . . . Learn to despise outward things and to give yourself to things inward, and you shall see the kingdom of God come within. For the kingdom of God is peace and joy in the Holy Ghost.” Pain and suffering cast human frailty into relief, thereby compelling the person to gaze into her own soul, which is to do nothing less than peer at the mirror of God.

Medieval writers premised the turn to the interior life on a rejection of the external world. This did not mean denying the goodness of creation, but rather recognizing that the goods of creation pointed back toward the goodness of the Creator. As long as humans fixated on created goods, they would not make the ascent back to their true home. Even more to the point, a constant outward gaze was simply a failure to reckon with who we are and where we are going.

The most intense Germanic traditions of the late Middle Ages saw this path as involving radical detachment, an emptying of created things to make room for divine things. In England, the anonymous author of [*The Cloud of Unknowing*](#) referred to the turn to the interior as moving through a cloud of forgetfulness in which the person lost sight of the goods of creation. The vicissitudes of temporal existence destabilize the soul both because nothing temporary can provide a permanent foundation and because the constant changes of the impermanent constantly change the person.

Accompanying this turn to the interior life was a spiritual program that moved from meditation on the self to meditation on Christ and finally to meditation on the God revealed in Christ. The final movement into God was a contemplative elevation, an ecstatic uplift that grace alone could bring about.

The late medieval antidote to the Black Death was not a reassertion of the institutional order of the church. Instead, it was an invitation to turn within and find Christ, something anyone could do in his or her home. With so many churches temporarily closed around the globe, pastors and priests need to become spiritual directors, guiding their flocks as they turn within and find the crucified God.

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