

*The Resources of Christian Spirituality in Responding to HIV/AIDS:
A Theological Reflection*

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I want to highlight certain characteristics of HIV/AIDS that all of you will be familiar with, but that I wish to flag as a context for my remarks today. HIV/AIDS has effects that extend far beyond its medical consequences into social, economic, cultural, political and religious dimensions of life. It either brings marginalization in its wake, or augments existing marginalization, oppression, and stigma. It leaves the body defenseless and broken, and increases the loss of control over life that already plagues women, gay men, sex workers and drug users around the world. But even more than the broken bodies of those living and dying with HIV and AIDS, the disease exposes our social and cultural limitations and weaknesses and failings: it exposes the broken body-politic; as Christians, we must also acknowledge that it exposes the brokenness of Christ's body, whether we speak of our inability to embrace the other as the Gospel calls us to do, or whether we speak of the way in which our differences as churches prevent a unified and common response to AIDS.

I want to speak today from the perspective of what I will call the common tradition (CT), and I want to do this for a few reasons:

1. The tradition of theological reflection until the late middle ages is a common heritage for us all, and can form a common starting point for our own reflection on HIV/AIDS
2. The CT, coming before the modern body-mind split, is able to think the spiritual, the social and the intellectual together, something we have lost and need to retrieve
3. The CT looks first to what God is doing in the world and thinks in terms of imitation of and participation in God's labours in the world; it holds the active within the contemplative, promoting:

- (a) our own ongoing conversion, decentering our own solutions and relativizing

our concerns;

(b) an embrace of the whole person in her or his concrete reality, in imitation of God's self giving love entering history;

(c) the holding together of concerns for justice, forgiveness and healing in the concrete.

My last preliminary remark is to stress that the CT does not think in terms of proposing universal rules universally applicable with all situations. It thinks in terms of analogy and resemblance, participation and imitation. It proposes principles of discernment rather than universal rules, a strength we also need to recover if we are to meet our brothers and sisters in their concrete and local realities. realities that are so different across the globe.

Begin, then, with the CT's understanding of "person," which is rooted in reflection on the identity of the God who intervenes in history as Son and Spirit.

The CT, as it prays about and reflects on who God is, realizes that the God it has come to know

in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit,

is a communion of persons-in-relation,

that the life of our God is a Trinitarian communion of self-giving love:

the divine persons are who they are only in the full complexity of their dynamic relation of love to the other two persons.

This is what the Eastern Christian tradition

has emphasized so well in its notion of perichoresis,

of mutual indwelling of the persons in God.

When the Son and the Spirit enter history,

their mission is precisely the extension of this self-giving love to us,

enabling us to enter into this communion of self-giving love as empowered participants.

Here I must insert a note of caution,

because of the cultural reality faced by so many women in our world:

in many cultures, women are presented with an ideal of self-giving that threatens their personal survival.

Many women are socialized into a notion of self-giving that leads to a complete loss of themselves, a complete merging of their identity into the husbands or their children.

The self-giving love that is the life of our God, and the self-giving love that is extended to us in the missions of the Son and the Spirit, does not entail loss of self:

the persons of the Trinity DO NOT merge into each other, or lose their identity in mutually indwelling each other.

Perhaps here, the emphasis of the Western tradition on the identity and eternal constitution of the persons can provide a salutary corrective

that helps us encourage women to resist loss of self even as we work from the perspective of self-giving love.

This cautions flags for us in a very concrete way the fact that the CT recognizes that God's loving gift of self to humankind occurs in a world of violence and suffering, a world of enmity and injustice.

There is no easy, one-to-one mapping of the communion of love which is the life of the Trinity onto human actions and human community.

In such a world, the action of the Son and the Spirit is expressed as forgiveness, reconciliation and healing: divine love entering history moves through the Cross.

I want to make four points about the CT's understanding of the Cross, four points that I believe help us understand how our own participation and imitation of God's self-giving love

ought to be shaped and discerned:

1. the cross as solidarity with the suffering: St Ignatius of Loyola's meditation on three kinds of humility captures this very well, presenting Jesus who has chosen to enter into the most profound reality of human suffering and who evokes in us a desire to join him there.
2. the cross as a condemnation and exposing of power-games and violence, and as a loving resistance to evil: Saint Augustine's account of the cross in the *De Trinitate* – the cross restores us to God by justice rather than by power games, as God's decision to overcome the unjust power-games of the devil that exposes the injustice and violence and attracts us by humble love.
3. the cross as the embrace of the other in love, even as they are other: Creator embraces creature, Holy One embraces sinners – the patristic figure of the arms of Christ on the cross as a gesture of embrace of the whole creation in its concrete reality.
4. the cross as the extension of forgiveness and healing to us, and our graced empowering to participate in our own salvation: here I think of Saint John linking the giving of the Holy Spirit, not to Pentecost, but to the moment where Jesus says “into your hands I release my Spirit,” and to the birth of the Church in the water and blood that flow from the side of the crucified. God's loving solution to evil and suffering is to create a community that can participate in the salvation of all. Emphasizes God's respect for our dignity and calling us to embrace the other in love as God does.

I want to finish with the story of the community I have been involved with for over ten years now....