

COVID-19 - HOLY WEEK - AND THE LIMINAL TRIDUUM

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This Covid-19 pandemic is laying bare what the church has long confessed: all people are inextricably connected, like branches on a vine. In light of the mutual vulnerability our interconnection creates, many Christians are making difficult choices about how to be the body of Christ in the world.

It would be a mistake to accept this time as a vacation period for religion. It remains the church's work to nurture human connection with God and with others – even in times of physical separation.

That truth acknowledged, a few weeks ago, we approached Maundy Thursday and the Triduum – the three holy days of the paschal mystery, the death and resurrection mystery. As such, we entered **liminal space**, a concept refined by Victor Turner in his classic initiation and ritual. Many, if not most, people are not acquainted with this concept unless they have been introduced to it through a spiritual director. The Latin word “**limen**” means “threshold.” **Liminality** is an inner state and sometimes an outer situation where people can begin to think and act in genuinely new ways. It is when we are betwixt and between, have left one room, but have not yet entered the next room, any hiatus between stages of life, stages of faith, jobs, loves, or relationships. It is that graced time when we are not certain or in control, when something genuinely new can happen. We are empty, receptive, an erased tablet waiting for new words.

Nothing fresh or creative will normally happen when we are inside our self-constructed comfort zones, only more of the same. Nothing original emerges from business as usual. It seems we need some antistructure to give direction, depth, and purpose to our regular structure. Otherwise, structure, which is needed in the first half of life, tends to become a prison as we grow older.

Much of the work of the biblical God and human destiny itself is to get people into liminal space and keep them there long enough to learn something essential and genuinely new. It is the ultimate teaching space. In some sense, it is the only teachable space. So much so that many spiritual giants try to live their lives in permanent liminality. They live their lives on the margins and on the periphery of the system so they will not get sucked into the generally accepted illusions and payoffs. They know it is the only position that ensures continued wisdom, ever broader perspective, and even deeper compassion. Some now call it “the preferential option for the position of the poor.” It can take the form of monks, nuns, hermits, Amish withdrawal, and dropouts of various persuasions, but softer forms too, like people who do not watch TV, people who live under the level of a taxable income, people who make prayer a major part of their day, people who deliberately place themselves in risky situations for the sake of others, which is to displace oneself.

Most people don't naturally seek liminality, but often find partial liminality in things like pilgrimages, silent retreats, periods of fasting, desert solitudes and sacred times or seasons like

Lent. Once a week church services don't normally come close to creating liminal space.

It takes that long for you just to stop wondering whether you turned off the stove and begin to get the kids – or your errant emotions – under control. There has to be something longer, different, even nonsensical, to break our comfortable sleepwalk and compulsive trance in life.

Suffering and disease have this effect. Life and death situations offer this possibility if we enter some kind of a vacuum or genuine detachment from our regular conveyor belt of life. Remember, it is the things that we cannot do anything about, the fateful things, and the things we cannot do anything with, the useless things, that invariably do something to us. These are the only times when we are not at the steering wheel and someone else can teach us and lead us.

In liminal space we choose the chaos of the unconscious over the control of explanations and answers. Thus, the language of darkness (not light), desert (not garden), silence (not words) is more prominent. People have to be taught and guided how to live in such an uneasy place. Without the food of spiritual direction, we will run from these places. Without deliberate practice and training over time, people will not know how to face loneliness, themselves, hurts, wounds, personality conflict(s), one's own inner demons, and patterns.

Liminal space is always Holy Ground, but as Moses realized, it takes awhile to get those shoes off! This global pandemic is presently us with the opportunity to enter liminal space. As we simultaneously enter(ed) the "triduum," Good Friday's crucifixion, Holy Saturday's entombment, and the following Sunday at the tomb-grave, which we refer to as Easter, but rightly claim as the Resurrection; it was only because the women and the disciples went through liminal space. We enter(ed) Holy Saturday in a time of plague and a time when we cannot gather as usual at the church. It can be a liminal space for us, but God has to teach us how to go there.

The most common substitute for liminal space is "**liminoid**" space. It superficially looks like liminal space, but it isn't. Nothing new happens here, only a confirmation of the old. We may be experts in offering people liminoid as a **counterfeit** form of the liminal. We see entertainment serve as worship; religious consumerism replaces any training in the practice of spiritual disciplines such as almsgiving and prayer; loud music and big crowds substitute for depth and breadth; spectacle substitutes for true catharsis. The liminoid may feel like the real thing, momentarily renewing, but it is a diversion and actually reaffirms our ego, our persona, and our capacity for denial. It is not a threshold at all, only more of the same.

At the very least, entering counseling/therapy contains the possibility of, or invitation to, liminality. Since most people enter the therapeutic relationship to deal with an issue, problem, pain, or crisis that confronts them with the fateful – difficult challenge(s) of life, liminality becomes almost inherent. Where people find themselves betwixt and between or facing those existential loss, grief, job, love, relational crises, growth challenges - a skilled counselor/therapist can help intervene and guide in ways that facilitate spiritually empowered wholeness. Specifically in regard to times or situations involving liminality, a trained-skilled

pastoral counselor/therapist has a specific understanding of the efficacy of what pastoral theology would refer to as “the key role of salugenic religion in self-actualization.”

None of us like to live in insecurity and waiting without clear direction, meaning or closure. Most people, understandably, want this time of pandemic waiting over. But true faith is about learning how to wait and to teach us what we are waiting for. True faith, therefore, will always be a minority position. Again, God has to teach you how to go there, to trust the emptiness, and to stay there until you are led back out. The truest word for that is “suffering.” Yet, this is the place where the great mystery happens. We cannot force it or make it happen. It is what God is always doing – bringing life out of suffering and death.

As the wise spiritual teacher-director, Richard Rohr, wrote in a recent meditation:

“I believe that the cross is an image for our own time, and every time: we are invited to gaze upon the image of the crucified Jesus to soften our hearts toward all suffering. Amidst the devastating spread of COVID-19, the cross beckons us to what we would call “grief work,” holding the mystery of pain, looking right at it, and learning from it. With softened hearts, God leads us to an uncanny and newfound compassion and understanding.” (Richard Rohr, Daily Meditations: Friday, April 10, 2020, Lesson Five: Nothing Can Come Between Us).

Facing personal and societal liminal situations and circumstances like this COVID-19 global pandemic can feel threatening and overwhelming for all of us, but the lives of saints still serve as living reminders to us. One of the best-known lines of Julian of Norwich’s “Revelations” is this: **“But all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”** But my equally favorite verse occurs several chapters later, when the Lord says, **“You shall not be overcome.”**

Remember, Easter comes no matter what we do!

Christ Is Risen!

Christ Is Risen, Indeed!

Pax Christi,

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We at Pastoral Counseling of Northern Virginia stand ready to offer a path to healing and wholeness on this issue and a wide variety of other issues. To contact one of our counselors you may visit our website at www.PastoralCounselingNV.com or call 703.335.6172.

References: My own thoughts-experiences and various reflections of writer, spiritual director, theologian, Richard Rohr, including Adam’s Return, as well as the Writings of Julian of Norwich.

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