



Monastic Musings

Spring 2014

Let's Challenge Ourselves!

By: Right Rev. Barb Martzall



Before you read any further in this newsletter, do us a favor and put all of your preconceived ideas of God in the trash can below.



We would like you to read this newsletter with an open mind in order to challenge everything you think you know about God. But be mindful that we all are human and do not know everything there is to know about God.

Every faith/religious tradition in this world has "painted a picture" of God (no matter what name He is called by) that they feel represents the God you are to worship. And yes, if you look very closely, there are many ideas/characteristics that are the same from one faith to another while there are also many differences. With this newsletter we will try to help you see the many different "faces" of God. We have elected to use our personal spiritual walks to show how you can take the theology/faith teaching of different churches and find common ground to build your spirituality on. It can also lead you to develop a stronger understanding of the church you belong to as you start asking questions of your faith. Every church tries to teach who they think God is. But let us to truly honest with ourselves, do the churches really know who God is? If you look at the different churches, they teach of a different God in each Church. No wonder Christianity is so messed up! It is also no wonder the world is so messed up since we are constantly fighting

one another over religion! We do not have any physical picture of God to be our reference. What we have instead is the world around us that teaches us who God is.

I hope that this exploration will help bring you closer to your faith and in the process an understanding of other people and their faiths.

The Face of God

By: Rev. Myrella LeClair

What do you understand the phrase “The Face of God” to mean? Do you understand that phrase literally? Perhaps, like me, you understand that phrase to mean what your basic/core beliefs about God are. Is God a male or female persona and/or neither? Is God light, energy, spirit? In other words, what is your image of God? How you see God and who or what you believe God is affects not only how you relate to God but also how you treat every one of God’s creatures. How we see the Face of God is primarily based on what religious tradition we adhere to and consequently, what we believe and practice as a result of those beliefs.



Growing up in a Roman Catholic French Canadian family, I learned very little about God the Father and God the Holy “Ghost”. However, I learned much about Christ’s mother Mary and his grandmother, St. Anne, but not much about Jesus Christ. He seemed secondary to His mother since although He was the Son of God, He obeyed his human mother. Many of us who attended Roman Catholic elementary schools in the 50s and early 60s were led to believe that Mary was of greater importance than her Son. The nuns taught us our theological beliefs and prayers from the Baltimore Catechism. Our main prayer was the Hail Mary, and prayers were always intercessory and always to Mary. It was no wonder that as children we believed that Mary was of greater importance than her son Jesus.

The religious beliefs we were taught were also in contradiction to how we practiced our religion: “God made us to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him, and to be forever happy with Him in heaven.” Yet, we could have no personal relationship with God. How could we love someone who was portrayed as a petty god who we had to fear and who was totally unforgiving? In essence, we learned that we could have no relationship with God. However, we could have a relationship with Christ’s mother, who would intercede on our behalf. The nuns also taught us about the lives of the saints (basically all martyrs), who were supposed to be our role models in relating to God. Again, as children, many of us believed that we could never have a relationship with God unless we suffered pain and/or martyrdom in God’s name. God the harsh Judge – why even bother being good or even trying to have a relationship with Him?

Now then we were also taught that we could placate God somewhat by saying certain prayers for a specific numbers of days (Novenas). All of these prayers would somehow guarantee that our time in Purgatory would be shortened because praying these prayers would grant us the grace of dying in a State of Grace. Still, we feared this God who would throw us into Hell for eating meat on Friday or for failing to attend Mass on a Sunday or Holy Day. Certainly, this was not the Creator who loved us.

When I was a teenager, I began to question even more what I had been taught about being made in the image and likeness of God. If that was so, then why could I not serve God at the altar? Was God rejecting me just because I had a female body? If God is Love, how could that

be so? It was then that I realized that was the Face of God that the Roman Catholic Church portrayed but that it was not the truth about God.

After leaving the Roman Catholic Church and despite all of what I had been taught, I loved God and would pray to Him in my own words and began to hear that quiet voice of the Holy Spirit. I hungered to know that loving God; yet, I was unwilling to join another Church. For a long period of time, I was involved in what can be best described as “New Thought” beliefs and spiritual practices. For quite a few years, I “prayed” the affirmations, relishing the principle that we were all one in God – Atonement understood as “at-one-moment”. Still, this “Face of God” was missing the Christ as well as the Body of Christ in my view. So, I continued my journey along the Way by participating in worship services of various Christian denominations, but I found that many of those churches were rooted in the angry and judgmental God of the Old Testament. Also, some of the congregations were not affirming of all God’s children, and in fact the theology put forth was that God hated certain sons and daughters.

By this time, I was reading and studying the Gospels as a spiritual practice. I finally found the God that I had been searching for: the loving, merciful Christ who admonished us to forgive 70 times seven, to be merciful as the Father is merciful, and to love one another. My spiritual journey took a bizarre twist when sitting and meditating in solitude in a chapel, I heard the call of the Holy Spirit saying “Be my priest.” Eventually, I answered that call and was accepted as a seminarian within an independent charismatic catholic church. I later transferred as a seminarian to an independent orthodox old catholic church, in which I was ordained into the priesthood. At that point, I was beginning to see God as ineffable, the unknowing, the “bright darkness”.

I was truly blessed to have a Bishop and priest/seminary director who taught me about Orthodoxy and its mystical theology. They both believed in allowing for the exploration of various spiritual traditions and practices so long as I remained rooted in Christ. That was when I truly began my own “Way of the Pilgrim”, which is the practice of “unceasing prayer” – of being in constant communion with God.

Along the way, I have joined other independent orthodox catholic churches and continued to study the monastic teachings and mystical traditions of the Orthodox Church as well as the traditions and spirituality practiced by other Christian and non-Christian faiths. In those studies, I have encountered religious traditions that see God as Light, Energy, Compassion, and Enlightenment and have learned that all of those views of God are true. I now truly understand that God’s Face is the reflection of the Love and the likeness that we see with our physical and spiritual eyes whenever we look upon each part of God’s Creation – that is, when look at all of



creation through Christ’s eyes. It is when we see, acknowledge, and accept the Christ in ourselves and one another. It is then that we see not the physical manifestation of God’s creation but behold the light and energy emanating from their spirit and their compassion and enlightenment reflecting back toward us. At that holy instant, we understand that we have seen the loving, merciful, forgiving Face of God.

Namaste!

Everything that lives and breathes is sacred and beautiful in the eyes of God. The whole world is a sacrament. The entire created cosmos is a burning bush of God’s uncreated energies. And humankind stands as a priest before the altar of creation, as

microcosm and mediator. Such is the true nature of things; or, as an Orthodox hymn describes it, "the truth of things," if only we have the eyes of faith to see it.

-- Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I

God is Life. God is all that IS

By Fr. Ron Lahti

The search for God usually begins in childhood with religious instruction by one's parents. In my case, my family was not religious and my parents did not offer my brother and me formal religious instruction, or so they thought. In reality they initiated in me a search that has lasted all of my 57 years. As a youth in northern Minnesota, I was surrounded by deep forests and scores of lakes and rivers. My family are immigrants from Finland who arrived in the USA just about 100 years ago. My grandparents were hardworking, simple people. My brother and I were taught from a very early age to cherish and respect the natural world around us. When I would ask my father why we didn't go to church like other kids I knew, he told me "we have the forest and lakes, that's better than any church". My grandparents taught us how to "tell the trees your problems" and, more importantly, how to "hear" their answer. When it would storm, we were told the thunder was the sound of "God" hammering, with the lightning being the sparks from "God's" hammer. I was in my twenties before I realized other people didn't know this explanation, and that the "God" I was being told about was *Ukko*, the Thunderer, kind of the Finnish version of the Germanic/Norse God Thor. We took for granted that my brother had a gift for "talking with animals" which he exhibited on a number of occasions. "Knowing things" by dream or inner sense was taken for granted. No one questioned why my maternal grandmother could calm the pain and uncontrollable movement caused by Restless Leg Syndrome in my young legs simply by stroking them and singing under her breath. I'm quite sure neither my parents nor grandparents thought of this as religious instruction, even though they were instilling in us a love, respect and joy – and a sense of oneness – with the natural world. The natural world became the icon, the face of God – not as a particular being, but as Life itself. Each tree, river, stone seemed to have a spiritual presence, with Life Itself tying all of us together.



The community I belonged to was heavily Jewish, enhanced by my mother working as a buyer for a women's clothing store owned and run by Jewish folk. In fact, up to the time I was about 10 or 11, I thought we were Jewish since 1) all my friends, neighbors etc. were Jews and 2) they didn't really go to "church" either, just like my family. While a few of the Jewish people I knew would sometimes attend synagogue, mostly my experience of Judaism was family oriented, and usually involved large quantities of really great food. My mother, supported by the Jewish culture surrounding us, instilled in my brother and me a respect for and responsibility to "*tikkun olam*" repairing the world – adding our efforts to making the world a more just, peaceful, healthful and beautiful place. I gained a sense of God as a Being, somewhere out there, who could hear our prayer, but our real experience of God was in our everyday life. In doing good deeds, avoiding bad deeds, participating in family/community, I found that actions themselves (*mitzvaim*) were the channels that God's Life came to me, and I could connect with God.

As is often the case, teenage years bring new questions and stressors, leading one to turn to religion for answers. After finding out we were not Jews, I asked “Well then, who am I? And what is our religion?” One of my close friends during my teen years was a woman who introduced me to Christianity. Hers was Christianity of the Pentecostal/Charismatic type, with a small group of young-ish folk trying to realize/recreate the Christian faith of the first century. Those familiar with this Evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity will know that these traditions believe in literal interpretation of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, an approach to the faith which encompasses all areas of life (not just Sunday mornings), and a dogmatic belief structure with little room for questions or ambiguity. In Charismatic Christianity I gained a sense of God as intensely personal, a Someone who loves me and cares about my little life. The “face of God” became Jesus who is called the “Image (Icon) of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). I devoured the scriptures because I felt they were God’s personal word to me – Jesus talked to me in the parables, in the Sermon on the Mount. For the first time in my life, I also experienced God intervening in my life through my prayer, changing circumstances in sometimes dramatic ways – God answered me!

In the early 1980’s I was introduced to the Apostolic Faith through the auspices of the Old Catholic churches and have been associated with various incarnations of them ever since. After a few years of reading for orders, I was ordained presbyter in 1982 in Boston, Massachusetts. The rituals of the Western and Eastern churches were beautiful, and when approached in a sacred manner, led me to experience God – still personally, but now with a greater sense of God in Community. I started to gain an appreciation of the Church as the Body of Christ – the corporate Icon of God – bringing life and love to the world. I felt I had found my home, my people, and the religious expression God intended for my people. God was ours, and He (sic) blessed us, because we believed the right things, followed the correct rituals and uttered the right prayers. It seemed a comfortable, secure place to be.

My safe, snugly, understanding of God and spirituality was shaken up dramatically when I was exposed to a great variety of thoughts about God and religious expressions while an undergraduate student in Boston University and especially while doing my graduate work at Harvard Divinity School – known for its emphasis on intercultural spirituality. Here I met, learned from, and prayed with, Jewish, Buddhist, Neo-Pagan/Indigenous, Moslem, Baha’i, Shinto, Sikh followers in addition to adherents of a great variety of Christian traditions. The experience of so many diverse spiritual paths awed me, confused me, scared me and eventually led me to a new sense of God – “the Great Bigness” of God. God wasn’t just with the Orthodox Christians, or even only with Christians at all. I met people who experienced that close, personal touch of love and Presence through their own, and often very different, spiritual paths, just like me. The particular externals of the spiritual life – the rituals, devotions, actions -- were apparently not essential to finding and experiencing God. I came full circle to see God less as the Supreme Being (One who is appeased, satisfied, coerced through rituals, prayers, offerings, etc.), and I saw God more as **Absolute Beingness**. Less a Noun and more a Verb – just as Moshe Avinu (Moses) was told at the burning bush when he asked God’s name – “I Am-ing That Which I Am-ing” literally. The many “Gods” that people embrace became less foreign and threatening, and I found I could embrace them as the masks, icons, that Beingness uses to express Itself to us. I realized my Orthodox Christian understanding of God was also one these icons, or masks, of Beingness.

A Buddhist monk, who I was honored to call friend, shook my world with his “atheistic” view of the universe. I learned that Buddha taught that the idea of One Supreme Being who controls the universe and can be swayed by sacrifices/rituals is an illusion. The goal of spiritual practice is to identify with a state of Being, indeed our original state of Being, the nature of which is absolute, encompassing Love. God was no longer Someone “out there” who it was my work to

find. I started to turn my focus inward to realize God as the Source, the Essence of me. As Jesus said "I and my Father are One" showing us this experience of God as our very Life.

But moving into an encompassing (theologically termed Unitive) experience of God involves tearing down the idols we've created of our understandings of God. I began a process of asking "Does this ritual/ devotion/ prayer/ understanding of God really lead me to Unity?" "Does my understanding of God allow for Unity?" This process continues for me as I tear down barriers that might block my realization of God-Unity. As Lao Tsu put it in the Dao De Jing – "The Dao that can be named is not the Dao". In the Hindu traditions when one encounters a vision of Deity as separate from oneself, one's mantra becomes "*neti, neti*", "not that, not that". And the journey and search goes on until one realizes "*tat tvam asi*" "thou art That" and experiences one's true identity as one with One. The sense of the oneness of the Life-Bigger-Than-Me I first experienced as a child in the forests of Northern Minnesota is again a center of my life. Only now I am experiencing a greater sense of my own belongingness in that Life. Behind Life, I can see and feel the Love that is God, and that creates and upholds Life.



Who God is has become a mute question for me. God is Life. God is all that IS. The appropriate questions are: "What am I missing of God's Being?" "Where am I still blinded by my idols/preconceived ideas/doctrines/rituals from recognizing God as All?" "How am I blocking myself from God-Life Who is always giving of Itself to me?"

Am I a Christian? Am I a Jew? Am I a Buddhist? Does the label matter? I feel I have walked a great circle.

Coming to a place where I am called to review and meditate on all the various spiritual expressions I've encountered and see them as helps on my journey. All of the practices and beliefs were essential to bringing me to the present understanding. Some remain strong supports, others fall away as they are no longer needed. Some practices I continue to use as a means of interacting with the world around me. They serve as channels of the Great Life, through me communicating Love/Life to other beings. But they are never to be set up as idols to be served and bowed to. As the Buddhist masters would say regarding doctrines/rituals/images/concepts: "They are fingers pointing at the Moon. But don't mistake the pointing finger for the Moon".

My Father, who is a God of Love *By: Right Rev. Barb Martzall*

Ever since I was a little girl, I was attending some Protestant church or another. Finally when I was about 12, my family seemed to find a Lutheran church that my mother was comfortable in attending. When I asked her what the problem was with the other churches, she told me that she was tired of being judged by what she wore to church, how she spoke and acted. To her that was not what church was all about.

Well, to be honest, her words have stuck in my mind all of these years. I too had found myself searching for a church that I could feel a part of. Growing up I found the Protestant church music was so beautiful but really hated the sermons the Pastors gave. My problem was that the churches were teaching that God was a very vengeful God who would punish you at a drop of the hat if you made a mistake. If this was the case, I would think to myself, why would I want to call God "father" and why would I want to know Him. Is not a Father to be someone who loves you even if you make a mistake? Not that he is to ignore the mistake, but shouldn't he help you



learn not to make the mistake again? Is not a Father to be someone you can turn to when you need some help? If this is what God is to be, then why are the pastors always teaching “hell and damnation” from the pulpit? Where is God’s love in all of this? So as you can see, I was a bit confused by what the churches were teaching and who I thought in my heart God is.

If you really look at what the church, and I really don’t care what church it is, teaches, you will soon see that no one really knows who God is even though they want you to think they do. That is what happens when you try to put a physical body/personality to something/someone that is not of this spiritual realm!

Let’s take an example of what I am trying to say about the confusion we teach in our churches about God. In many Sunday Schools, the little children are taught a little song: “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so...” But you go to the worship service and you hear the pastor preaching about how bad we are and that we are going to be thrown into hell to burn in the fires of damnation. But then in the Bible we read: “If you knew me, you would know my Father also.” So if Jesus is love, per our little song, then God must be love! So how can we be thrown into hell? And we wonder why so many people are turned off from the churches!

Slowly over my many years of searching, I have come to the realization that God is my Father and that He is so full of love. I can see a forgiving God who will stand by me when I make a mistake in life. But what brought me to this point in my life given what I learned as a child or even a teenager? Well, I had to walk away from all formal churches to start with. And this was not an easy thing to do as a teenager since you are expected to do as your parents direct. Fortunately my parents were not hung up on attending worship service every Sunday but attended when it seemed to move them to do so. I realized that I had to get in touch with who I am as a human being. That meant lots of time spent alone in mother nature just trying to understand my feelings of what I was seeing and how that melded with what I felt internally...the walking through the woods around my home, the walking in the creek that flowed in the woods and watching and observing the many different creatures in the woods. At the moment, I was in the temple of God, learning that everything around me had a spirit and that we really are all tied together in this life on earth. What one creature (man or animal) does affects what happens to those around him (man or animal). I was learning there must be harmony to bring forth what is needed in life. Yes, my Native American spirituality (I am part Native American) was starting to come forth through the fact that I was allowing myself to be in touch with the spirits of everything around me. What I knew is that finally I was finding a life where everything affects everything else and that for good to occur as an outcome, good must be put into the mix. I was not seeing a world of hatred or anger when I was in the woods. I learned very quickly that God was more than the mean old man that the church was trying to portray him to be. As I looked about me, I could see such beauty and love. Knowing that God made all of this, then God must be beautiful and loving!

While I was in college, I continued the “practice” of escaping into nature to find peace and God’s face. At that time I would take a long walk from my dorm to the distant tip of the Presque Isle State Park in Erie, Pa. And yes, my feet would have major blisters on them for a week, but the peace and renewed spirit that I came back with were really worth the blisters! I could see so much of God’s love in the nature that I saw during my long walks.

What so many people do not understand is that Native Americans do not regard their spiritual beliefs and practices as a “religion” in the way in which many Christians do. Their beliefs and practices form an integral and seamless part of their very being and thus of their life. Their

whole culture and social structure was and still is infused with a spirituality that cannot be separated from the rest of the community's life at any point. Native American ceremonial life and all of Indian existence are rooted in a profound notion of space and place. The spatial layout for any ceremony takes on paramount importance. Each Tribe has its own set of ceremonies or rituals that are important to them and would not be understood outside of the Tribe. There is not just one type of Native American spirituality unless you say it is one of respect for all of God's creatures!

For me, being one with nature, that is, respecting mother earth and all of the creatures has always been very strong within me. If I find myself falling into a dark area (the dark night of the soul type feeling), I seek to push myself more to get out into nature so that I can find a balance in my spiritual space. I find that I am once more in touch with God and his love at that moment. It is that feeling that I can then bring home with me and let it nurture within me.

I did spend a period of time as a member of the Roman Catholic Church. But I learned over a few years that my spirituality was once again stifled and was being forced once again to see God as a vengeful Father which I knew was not true. So once again I was without an "official church" home. But it did not really bother me since I continued my "communing with nature" which brought me so much peace and love internally.

Over time, I was introduced to the Eastern Orthodox Church through some priest friends. I attended a few worship services and found a "connection" with their services and teachings. For the first time I heard a church teach about God through the idea of what we don't know about God (apophatic theology). In Eastern Orthodoxy, apophatic theology is based on the assumption that God's essence is unknowable or ineffable and on the recognition of the inadequacy of human language to describe God. The apophatic tradition in Orthodoxy is often balanced with cataphatic theology—or *positive theology*—and belief in the incarnation, through which God has revealed himself in the person of Jesus Christ. So finally I could say that maybe I found a church home. Well, let me be honest, I did not find a church home within the Eastern Orthodox Church, but with the introduction of their theology, I was able to move into a small independent Old Catholic Church that my priest friends were part of and which held to the Eastern Orthodox theology within their independent Old Catholic Church.

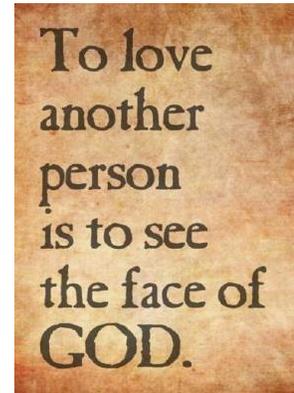
My thinking about God became strengthened when I began my studies of Eastern Orthodox theology. It was in these studies that I learned that your personal relationship with God is what is so important and that God is a God of Love! God is a God of Forgiveness! And yes, God does get upset with you when you make a mistake, but He still does not turn his back on you. God waits patiently for you to turn to him for help. He never pushes himself on you but is there as a Father is there for you when you need him. God is not the one who puts you into hell and damnation, but you put yourself there by the way you live your life. God is there to pull you out of the horrible place if that is what you desire. But, it must be your own choice. The Eastern Orthodox Church encourages you to see the spirit within everything you come into contact with. They teach that their worship service is but a moment within heaven! It is a time when time just stands still and you rejoice with those who have gone before us along with those in the room with us. We are all talking and teaching about a loving God.

Yes, we need to learn not to be making mistakes but to live our lives as God directs us – to treat one another as we would want to be treated. If we can truly reach the point of treating EVERYONE with whom we come into contact as we want to be treated, then we shall have seen the face of God! Remember, we were made in the image of God, his spiritual face! I can truly say today with great certainty that God in my Father and I am His child who is still learning what it means to be made in the spirit/image of God. But I do know that I am more at peace with myself and I feel the love of God very strongly within my heart. I am not always successful at

seeing God in everyone I come into contact with, but I am growing stronger in that area. I do not fear my death and what will happen to me but embrace the idea that one day I will join the rest of God's children and celebrate together the joy, love, and peace that comes to this earth from God! God is Love and He loves me for being me!!!

Do I have a physical face in my mind of God? No, since I see God in everything around me, I cannot put a human face on God. God is a spiritual being living in everything in this world!

Today as I am a bishop within my church home, I am constantly reminded that I must always teach that God is love and to never teach people that God is vengeful. Yes, it goes so much against what other churches teach, but God does not want us to do things just because we react from fear. God wants us to do things because we love what we are doing and because we are helping others reach their potential as a child of God. For me, I love to teach people to see God in everything that they see in this world. God is unknowing in so many ways, but if we keep our minds/hearts open, we will know God through the response of the world around us. That little kitten sitting on your porch is there looking at you with such love – that kitten just showed you God's face and love. The flower blooms so wonderfully – you just saw God's face and love. I can honestly say to you, open your heart and eyes, for what is before you is God!



If Jesus is the face of God, and the light of His love, then God is not someone to fear, for He is always on our side, and the foundation of our being. -- Robert Ricciardelli

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Holy Theotokos of Mercy Community

All writings are the views of the author(s) on a particular subject and are meant to challenge your thinking so as to help you grow in your spiritual walk with God.

Contact: archimandritebarb@ohioocc.org