



RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

MAKING COMMITMENTS

September 20, 2010

Within the next few weeks, we shall participate in an increasingly rare event in our time: a perpetual profession of religious vows. So rare has this act become, in fact, that it is impossible to avoid the question of whether or not such a public commitment remains meaningful in our age. The question is not confined to religious commitment. Despite all the attention and controversy in our time to the vows of marriage, the truth is that more than half of all marriages end in divorce. When we step aside from the issues surrounding who has or has not the right to be legally married and enjoy its social benefits, we are left with a deeper question: What is the meaning of the life-long vow of responsibility and commitment to the other person?



I take you for my lawful husband/wife, to have and to hold, from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, until death do us part.

Does committing oneself to another or to a group “until death” continue to have meaning for us today?

Despite our cultural difficulties with commitment, it appears that most can recognize the value in temporary commitments. It is with the notion of a life-long commitment that we tend to have difficulty. Conventional wisdom sees perpetual commitments as an anachronism, as related to the somewhat primitive anthropology of a bygone era. Our view of human personality is that of something that is constantly developing and changing. From this perspective, how can it be possible to make a promise to another or to others when both we and they will be very different people with very different perspectives in the future? While this person or this way of life may be a “good match” at the present time, how can I be expected to know whether or not we shall remain compatible in the future?

These questions about the value of perpetual commitments arise so strongly for us because our shared culture, even in its religious manifestations, lives out a repression of the transcendent dimension of human life. To understand that what makes us distinctively human is the fact that we are spirit at the core of our being, a spirit that is a unique participant in the life of God, a unique image of God to be manifested in the course of our lifetime, is to recognize that, in the words of Adrian van Kaam “[we] are called to become what [we are] not yet.” Van Kaam writes:

Human life is always in ongoing formation. This unique life-form involves a precommitment to form reception and donation, which has to be translated into concrete commitment dispositions to be disclosed and deepened during our formation history. In short, the human form is basically never a finished structure but always a dynamic formation project. As such it is called to become what it is not yet. It is precisely the intrasphere that enables people to give many possible formative meanings and directions inwardly to the people, events, and things that coform their successive life situations. Such inner directives may grow to be inner commitments that are to be embodied in turn in effective dispositions and actions. (Adrian van Kaam, *Formation of the Human Heart*, pp. 159-60)

Our responsibility for our life formation requires that we commit ourselves to our Divine direction as it emerges from the calls and directives of our life situations and the persons, events, and things that constitute

them. This primordial and central human responsibility for the unique life-form we have been given must take the form of concrete commitment dispositions as incarnated in specific and life-long commitments. Of course we are never fully aware of the meaning, significance and requirements of our commitments at the time they are made. As Fr. van Kaam writes, our intrasphere enables us to give many possible formative meanings and directions to the people, events, and things that constitute the situations of our lives. It is precisely because we give these multiple meanings and directions to others and to our life situation that our inner commitments to them must be embodied through a promise of fidelity.

If we live merely by our likes and dislikes, by affinities and aversions, we will never come to know the deeper transcendent dimension of our lives. In his *Precautions* St. John of the Cross writes:

You should never give up your works because of a want of satisfaction and delight in them, if they are fitting for the service of God. Neither should you carry out these works merely because of the satisfaction or delight they accord you, but you should do them just as you would the disagreeable ones. Otherwise it will be impossible for you to gain constancy and conquer your weakness. (#16)

St. John tells us what life eventually teaches us, that we shall never know the true possibilities of life as well as our own deepest capacities until we offer ourselves to others and to a work that demands of us a stretching beyond our “comfort zone” and a death to our own willfulness. According to van Kaam, Awe is the primordial human disposition, the disposition that springs from the spiritual core of our being. Awe springs not from self-satisfaction but from recognition of the value of another which I serve at the cost of my very life. It is a promise to love the other not merely in that which I already recognize in them as gratifying to me, but in the mystery of their otherness which will show itself to me in satisfying and unsatisfying ways.

The only true commitment is, thus, a perpetual one. A temporary commitment is provisional, which makes it not really a commitment at all. The question thus arises: Can we become distinctively human without unre-served and awe-inspired commitment to another/Other whose mysterious being will continue to call us through the unknown circumstances of life to what we are not yet? We are not fully or distinctively human until we can make a promise from that place in us that lives in communion with Love itself, a promise that although we may live it much more in the breach than in the observance, is the way, through love of another, to the life that is the truth of our own being.

In an essay entitled “Standing by Words,” Wendell Berry writes:

I come to the difference between “projecting” the future and making a promise. The “projecting” of [the future] uses the future as the safest possible context for whatever is desired; it binds one only to selfish interest. But making a promise binds one to someone else’s future. If the promise is serious enough, one is brought to it by love, and in awe and fear. Fear, awe, and love bind us to no selfish aims, but to each other. . . . For when we promise in love and awe and fear there is a certain kind of mobility that we give up. We give up the romanticism of progress, that is always shifting its terms to fit its occasions. We are speaking where we stand, and we shall stand afterwards in the presence of what we have said.