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Reflection: Theology

Hierarchy of holiness

Westerners distrust hierarchy. But Eastern Orthodoxy shows that distinguishing one person as higher than another does not have to be a game of "king of the hill," says Jason Byassee.

by Jason Byassee

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One of the greatest gifts of the modern West is our insistence on the equal dignity of all human beings. Yet every gift has a concomitant challenge: We find it enormously difficult to justify distinguishing one person as higher than another.

It's true that all too often, hierarchy is simply about the exercise of domination. Like a game of "king of the hill," the strongest hurls the others off the peak until shoved off by someone even stronger.

Yet it is difficult to get rid of hierarchies and get people to accomplish anything. So we continue to institute them, even while those not at the top grumble and those who are at the top watch for challenges to their reign.

Is there any other way?

I think of the line from "Ye Watchers and Ye Holy Ones": "Higher than the cherubim and more glorious by far than the seraphim." This line does not appear in many Protestant hymnals. That's

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because it is about Mary, mother of Jesus, toward whom we Protestants tend to blow cold. But think with our Catholic and Orthodox brethren for a moment: If there is a hierarchy of holiness in the world, Mary is at the top. And not because she has hurled anyone else down. It's because she is holding out a way for all others to climb up.

Given our contemporary, Western difficulty in thinking well of hierarchy I went looking in Orthodoxy for some help. Eastern Orthodox Christianity's gift is that it claims to steward the treasures of ancient theology unchanged from their origins to today. And I found it in the work of Vladimir Lossky, one of the great generation of Russian émigré theologians who fled the Bolsheviks (another group who was against hierarchy in principle and yet was maniacally hierarchical in practice).

Lossky writes of the way the Holy Spirit is present to all people. Quoting from the 6th century church father Maximus the Confessor, Lossky writes the Spirit is even more "particularly present in all those who have the law," meaning among the Jews, who received God's revelation at Sinai. And, naturally, the Spirit is present in Christians, whom God draws into union as sons and daughters.

It's (unfortunately) not surprising that Maximus draws distinctions with Christians at the top. But he goes on: all baptized people may have a portion of the Spirit, but not everyone has the gift of wisdom. "Only in those who have understanding," who by "struggles and labors" have that additional gift. And yet another distinction crops up: the saints, who have the deepest gift of understanding so as to enter into full union with God.

Lossky comments, "In relation to union with God, the universe is arranged in concentric circles." Or, he might have said, in hierarchies.

It is true that many of our worst moments in history as Christians have come when we have identified ourselves as better than others, as Maximus does here. Yet what impresses me about Maximus is the concentric circle at the innermost point: the saints. The ultimate grace-filled hierarchy is one of holiness. And most of us who look in the mirror, spiritually speaking, are aware that we belong nowhere near the top of that.

But some do. Think of the holiest person you've known. One to whom you could sit and listen all day. One who breathed in and exhaled a grace that made you want to stand closer. And one whose presence showed you that God regards you as more precious than you ever thought. Such a person is like Mary, extending down to you the grace given to her.

I witnessed that in Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, who visited Duke Divinity School last year. L'Arche is a series of small intentional communities where able-bodied people live in community with adults with disabilities. Vanier is in the winter of his life, and rarely leaves the house he started in France in 1964.

When it was time for Vanier to go to the airport, Stanley Hauerwas, my teacher whom Vanier came to see and argue against and write with, leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. For me, it was a glimpse of the meeting of theology (Hauerwas) and practice (Vanier), of dialectical rigor and holiness, of a white-hot intellect and a blazing fire of grace. I felt like I should take off my shoes -- that's what you do when "Righteousness and peace kiss," as the psalmist says. (Psalms 85:10)

Each man has used his position of authority in a hierarchy, one as founder of an institution, the other as a university professor. They have reached down from their place to pull others up. Vanier has made space for the disabled to live with dignity and the able-bodied to learn their fear in the face of weakness. Hauerwas has introduced students to the joyful discipline of academic theology. Both delight in having helped others be better than they were. They are not at the top to fling others down, but to fling them up.

If you asked them where that holiness came from they'd likely deny it, or turn attention back to you, or to God. That's holiness -- fascinated with God and the other; uninterested in the self. That's the center of the concentric circles of grace in Maximus' and Lossky's thought.

And that's hierarchy, of a sort. Not bishops or rectors or presidents at the top, though each has their place. In this life we cannot regularize holiness, and someone has to take the lead in running an organization. But such people do not rule, ultimately. Only saints do.

It is good news that Mary is not only higher than the cherubim, but more glorious "by far" than the

seraphim. She's working to pull them, and all of us, up to where she is and all of us long to be: with God.