

Religious activity can be a barrier to intimacy with God

In my more reflective moments, I am sometimes forced to ask myself: Am I really interested in God or am I only interested in things about God? Am I more interested in teaching, speaking and writing about God than I am in actually meeting God, one to one, in prayer and silence?

Am I more interested in dealing with things about God and religion than I am in being hidden and silent in God's presence?

The answers to those questions should be easier and more obvious than they are. On the surface, clearly, it would seem that I am interested in God: I try to pray regularly. I'm a priest who celebrates the Eucharist daily. I'm a theologian and writer who speaks and writes about God all the time.

My entire life is spent dealing with the things of God; but all of that notwithstanding, God isn't necessarily the actual focus of these activities. The focus can easily be elsewhere.

We might all ask ourselves this question: In our explicit religious activities are we really interested in having a relationship with God and with Jesus, or, if we are honest, are we more interested in good liturgy, good theology, good spirituality, good religious experience, good prayer-quests, good pastoral practices, successful Church programs, important moral causes, vital justice issues and in helping to facilitate religious practice?

INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

It's not that these things aren't good; they are, but paradoxically they can be the means by which we avoid having to face the deeper call for an intimate personal relationship with God.

C.S. Lewis is fond of describing our struggle here and he names it for what it often is, idolatry – a giving of ourselves over to something that is merely godly as opposed to a giving of ourselves over to God himself. Here's how he describes this:

In his book, *The Great Divorce*, Lewis imagines 10 scenes within which someone who has died is met on the other side by an "angel" who tries to coax the newly deceased person to let himself or herself be taken by the hand and led into heaven. The condition for entry into heaven in every instance is singular and simple: You simply have to trust the angel and let yourself be led.

In one of these scenes, Lewis pictures a conversation between one of these angels and a famous artist who has just died. The angel tries to convince the

artist to come to heaven, describing to him the stunning beauty of heaven.

Initially the artist is excited and eager, contemplating the great paintings he will be able to make, but he grows resistant and angry when he learns that there will be no need for him to paint this beauty once he is in heaven. Instead he will be meant simply to be inside of it and enjoy it.

So he refuses to go to heaven, opting instead to remain where he can paint heaven rather than be inside it. He objects to the angel, protesting that, as an artist, art itself is an end, "paint for its own sake."

THE ANGEL SPEAKS

The angel replies: Ink and catgut and paint were necessary down there (during your earthly life), but they are also dangerous stimulants. Every poet and musician and artist, but for the grace of God, is drawn away from love of the thing he tells, to love of telling till, down in Deep Hell, they cannot be interested in God at all but only in what they say about him.

And . . . it doesn't stop at being interested in paint, you know. They sink lower – become interested in their own personalities and then nothing but their own reputations.

What this angel says about poets and musicians and artists needs also to be said about theologians, spiritual writers, priests, bishops, ministers, deacons, liturgists, pastoral workers, social justice advocates, moral protesters of all kinds, retreat directors, spiritual directors, prayer group leaders and even about those who are actively and eagerly seeking depth of experience in prayer.

The danger is always that, like the artist who prefers and needs to paint beauty rather than simply become one with it, we too will make the religious activity we are doing an end in itself rather than keeping our real interest and focus on God.

The irony is that religious activity, like art, can constitute one of the greater dangers for this kind of idolatry. It's the gifted preacher, the great theologian, the brilliant liturgist, the hugely popular minister and the marvellously skilled bishop or administrator who will have the biggest struggle.

As Lewis puts it: It's not out of bad mice or bad fleas you make demons, but out of bad archangels. The false religion of lust is baser than the false religion of mother-love or patriotism or art; but lust is less likely to be made into religion.

Every time we go to pray, go to minister, or go do to anything religious, it's good to ask ourselves: Who and what, really, is this about?