

# HOLINESS



*William J. O'Malley*



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# Catholic Spirituality for Adults

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## The Beyond in Our Midst

*Where shall I go from your Spirit  
Or where shall I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there!  
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me.*

—Psalm 139:7–10

**S**INCE THE EARLIEST human days, when our most remote relatives prowled the prairies and forests in search of sustenance, they were apparently aware they were not alone. We know from their burial customs that death held a fearsome sacredness, and they saw death not as an end but a transition to some other unseen dimension of being real, hidden from them here but a reality in which they lived every day. They were, in a real sense, embedded in enchantment. As one Roman poet put it, peering into a darkened grove: “This place is filled with gods!”

Certain places and actions radiated a “specialness” beyond the meaning of the people’s humdrum days, and certain

occasions — like birth, marriage, and death — held a holy significance. Easy enough to argue that such gullibility arose from primitive lack of sophistication. And yet today even those without religion still find an inner need to express such moments *ritually*, sacramentally, despite their more usual disdain for anything “superstitious.” A child’s new life, embarking on a precarious future as husband and wife, the emptiness left by a lost parent — such occasions are far too filled with meaning and an elevated sense of importance to be celebrated in some government office or merely with some printed certificate.

Today too even the most urbane of us occasionally are ambushed with our guards down by an onrush of awareness — a sense of being caught up in an occasion “too big to grab hold of”: a star-strewn sky, the rhythm of the rain, the har-rumph of waves, an infant’s fingers, falling in love — and we find ourselves helplessly muttering, “Oh, my God!” Escaping an accident, hearing the “All clear,” leaving the hospital where they were sure you would die. Each of those moments has an ecstatic quality wherein we “stand outside” ourselves for a while. We feel, at one and the same time, exhilarated and abased, in reaction to what Rudolf Otto in his masterwork, *The Idea of the Holy*, called “the numinous” — contact with a reality we have not created ourselves, which is actually present to us. Otto names that presence “the *Mysterium Tremendum*”: an unknown entity, real and outside the self, which evokes helpless awe in the beholder. It requires an openness to the awesome and by that very fact a wordless admission of inferiority before it.

That awe is not simply an emotion but an intuitional insight into the depth and fullness of our context. Our awareness is not delivered to us through the five practical senses, nor is it the result of logical reasoning. It is more an “intimation,” like the sudden flash of certainty one will surely die. We are caught by surprise in such instants because, at least for a brief time, we are “off guard,” our regular defenses down. No one can force these intimations to happen; we can only be *open* to them. You are more the victim of this presence than its creator (Carl Jung). Gerald May calls such times of attentive consciousness “unitive experiences”; Heidegger called them *dasein*: really “being there” when you gain authentic elevation as a human being. And unlike momentary highs from LSD or grass, you don’t feel let down afterward.

Psychologist William James writes:

It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of a reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call “something there,” more deep and more general than any of the special and particular senses.

The poet James Russell Lowell put it more accessibly:

I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of the two worlds, the inner and the outer. . . . I could not any more have doubted that *He* was there than that I was. Indeed, I felt myself to be, if possible, the less real of the two.

Morton Kelsey sees an affinity between those moments of wonder and the playfulness of children — until formal schooling too often withers their openness and imagination. Indeed, that susceptibility and curiosity accentuate the difference between mere schooling and genuine education, which scoots off in every fascinating direction, like Alice into her wonder-full rabbit hole. It is that quality that enables us to become like children in order to find the Kingdom of God. It is also the quality that raises scientific genius above “mere” technical expertise into the wonderland of scientific discovery: Albert Einstein, Werner Heisenberg, Madame Curie, Carl Jung.

This mystery, which feels more eerie than dangerous, implies three qualities about its numinous, otherworldly cause: first, its elusiveness, that is, its resistance to capture; second, its radiant and humbling purity; and third, its exuberant energy. Those qualities automatically make the beholder feel smaller, inadequate, awed. This is definitely *not* a result of moral guilt for being a sinner, but a “piercing acuteness,” Otto writes, “of self-depreciation, a judgment passed, not upon his character . . . but upon his very existence as a *creature*.” It would be at least remotely similar to being invited to play eighteen holes with the winner of the Masters or to dance with the Rockettes. It is almost as if one’s own unworthiness would soil the numinous presence.

This indefinable sense of unworthiness *and* connection to the otherworldly is the very essence of religion. Without it, one may claim regularity of religious practice, but the very

root of the word, *re-ligare*, means “to bind securely, to connect” with a reality transcending the here-and-now. In a word, to *holiness*. Although painstaking research and reasoning can definitely bring us closer to God, only the subjective experience of person-to-Person encounter will allow God to “prove” himself, just as any other friend does.

What is contemplative prayer? St. Teresa answers: “Contemplative prayer in my opinion is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.”

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2709)*

The specialness of this union is clearer if you study more frequent events that are only approximations of “the real thing,” as in the overpowering experience in a spectacular rock concert or the moment when Rocky Balboa mounts that sweeping stairway of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the music surges, and the whole audience wants to cheer! On July Fourth, the Boston Pops playing *The 1812 Overture* with real cannons thundering over the Charles River. It is still difficult not to be caught up in the energy of a vast Nazi Nuremberg rally or the exhilaration at a bullfight, even if you despise what they embody. The whole experience is orchestrated so participants *feel* “outside” the confines of everyday time. One could even include a dazzling performance of the liturgy, surrounded by brilliant stained glass and statuary, swelled with gorgeous chorales — a truly moving experience, but *not* religion without that *connection*.

### God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;

And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;

And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;

And though the last lights off the black West went

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

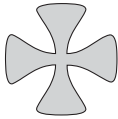
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

(Gerard Manley Hopkins)

In Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, Shug Avery, a Depression saloon singer, expresses almost the same insight as Hopkins, a highly educated Jesuit of the staid Victorian era:

I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it. . . . People think pleasing God is all God care about. But any fool living in the world can see it always trying to please us back. . . . It always making little surprises and springing them on us when we least expect. . . . Everything want to be loved. Us sing and dance, make faces and give flower bouquets, trying to be loved. You ever notice

that trees do everything to git attention we do, except walk? . . . Man corrupt everything. He on your box of grits, in your head, and all over the radio. He try to make you think he everywhere. Soon as you think he everywhere, you think he God. But he ain't. Whenever you try to pray, and man plop himself on the other end of it, tell him to git lost. Conjure up flowers, wind, water, a big rock.



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*Walking down a corridor at the office or school, pushing through the crowd on a street, we armor ourselves from seeing or hearing — except perhaps the pounding of the iPod.*

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Our primitive forebears found the earth more enlivened than we are able to. They had no need for formal study of ecology (*oikos*, our home). They knew instinctively that everything around them was “full of gods,” enlivened by a divine spirit: the *Anima Mundi* (Earth Soul). They accepted the truth that we share life with everything on the planet. Native Americans felt that connection profoundly. In 1852, when the U.S. government wrote Chief Seattle offering to buy Indian land, he wrote back:

The earth does not belong to man, man belongs to the earth. All things are connected like the blood that unites us all. Man did not weave the web of life, he is merely

a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself. . . . Your destiny is a mystery to us. What will happen when the buffalo are all slaughtered? The wild horses tamed? What will happen when the secret corners of the forest are heavy with the scent of many people and the view of the ripe hills is blotted by talking wires? . . . The end of living and the beginning of survival.

Chief Seattle was a prophet. Now that the wild horses are broken and cellphone towers poke out of every forest, we have become numbed, insulated from our true context. Just so, monkeys raised away from their mothers become sullen and irritable, lost. As early as first grade, school stops being an exploration and becomes the serious business of preparing for college and a high-paying job, which becomes the only operative motive for engaging in the journey of discovery for which God made us. Walking down a corridor at the office or school, pushing through the crowd on a street, we armor ourselves from seeing or hearing — except perhaps the pounding of the iPod. Sometime make up your mind really to *focus* on the faces you walk past day after day and count how many you have never seen before, how much of life you have been missing.

Science says there can be no entity faster than light. And yet science delights in playing, “What If?” What if there *were* an Entity faster than light? It would be moving so unrestrainedly that it would be everywhere at once. Like God. It would be so hyper-energized that it would be at rest. Like God. Some scientists claim that if they finally crack open the tiniest

component of matter, what they'll discover is nonextended energy. Like God.  $E = mc^2$  means that matter is nothing more than a super-active form of energy!

Couple that with the insight of Exodus (3:14). When Moses asked God his name, he was asking not just for a label but for an explanation of God's role, like the words "baker" or "carpenter." God answered, "I am who am." I am the pool of existence out of whom everything that *is* takes its 'is.' It begins to appear that science and the Bible are in cahoots! "The world is *charged* with the grandeur of God!"

### The *Shekinah*

*Shekinah* (dwelling, presence) is used in the Targum (Aramaic translation of the Hebrew scriptures) and elsewhere to indicate the presence of God's glory among people. The Hebrew word *shakan* simply means to take up residence for a long period in a neighborhood (Gen. 9:27, Ps. 37:3, Jer. 33:16). It appears as well in the sabbath prayer: "May He who causes His name to dwell [*shochan*] in this House, cause to dwell among you love and brotherliness, peace and friendship." The Talmud asserts that *Shekinah* moves prophets to prophesy and poets to sing psalms. "It" is a wellspring of joy, creativity, and wisdom. The word is a feminine noun and, in the same way that many modern theologians deal with the Holy Spirit, prophets like Isaiah treat the *Shekinah* as a manifestation of the "feminine" in God (Isa. 51:9–10; Wisd. passim). Again, the fruits St. Paul associates with the Holy Spirit are all "feminine," in that Jungian sense of the term: "love, joy,

peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22).

God’s presence went before the Israelites in their desert wanderings (Exod. 14:20; 40:34–38; Lev. 9:23–24; Num. 14:10; 16:19). When they arrived in Canaan and Solomon finally built his Temple, that presence was so overpowering in the Holy of Holies “that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 8:10–13). Matthew’s Gospel, written after the destruction of the Temple in 70 C.E., quotes Jesus: “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets, and stone them which are sent to you, how often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is left to you desolate” (23:37–38). And later, at the instant of Jesus’ death, “the veil of the Temple was torn in two from the top to the bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks rent” (27:51) as the Presence escaped out into the whole world. Finally, in the book of Revelation: “I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God (his *Shekinah*) gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp” (21:22–23).

Angels too need not to be taken literally when they appear either in the Hebrew or the Christian scriptures. From what we know of the cosmos now, we understand that Gabriel could scarcely use the huge feathery wings he carries in paintings in order to get him from “way out there” beyond the universe, where heaven is, to Nazareth. That is not to deny

the existence of angels, only the adequacy of the symbols we use (no matter how ancient and revered) to visualize messages from a God who can communicate faster than light. Nor does questioning the symbols negate the reality, any more than losing an engagement ring means loss of the love it embodies. God can invent anything he chooses, even though we might see no necessity for it, as witness the giraffe, the emu, and the hairy-nosed wombat.

The existence of the spiritual, non-corporeal beings that Sacred Scripture usually calls “angels” is a truth of faith. The witness of Scripture is as clear as the unanimity of Tradition. . . . St. Augustine says: “ ‘If you seek the name of their nature, it is ‘spirit’; if you seek the name of their office, it is ‘angel.’ ”

*(Catechism of the Catholic Church, 328–29)*

Thus we obviate what become trivial difficulties in scripture like the conflict in the Gospels over the witnesses at Jesus’ empty tomb. Matthew has one angel, John has two. Mark has one young man in startling white, Luke has two. Which was it? It hardly matters. A “young man in blazing white” in scripture always meant the same thing: the glorious presence of God. The witnesses were doubled to underline their credibility, as in Hebrew Law.

When the scripture says “an angel of the Lord came,” it quite likely meant “when the person encountered the presence of God.” In the episode where Moses encounters the burning bush, the book of Exodus clearly identifies the “angel” and God:

There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, “I will go over and see this strange sight why the bush does not burn up.” When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, “Moses! Moses!” (3:3–4)

Just as it was Yahweh himself who sat with Abraham in the heat of the day, it was he who presented himself to Hagar as she fled the camp (Gen. 16), held back Abraham’s dagger over Isaac (Gen. 22), wrestled with Jacob and changed his name to Israel (Gen. 32), and an “angel” is identified with the protective pillars of cloud and fire in the wilderness (Exod. 14:19).



*When the scripture says “an angel of the Lord came,” it quite likely meant “when the person encountered the presence of God.”*

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Consider again the insights of modern science. Neutrinos are singularly elusive elementary particles that have no electrical charge and almost no discernible mass. They arise, allegedly, from atomic decay and travel with such bewildering speed that they can rocket through the whole mass of Earth without being perceptibly slowed. Using the same creative imagination that science uses when playing “What If?” we can ask: What if neutrinos had intelligence and free will? They would have all the properties of angels!



Yet when that solely human faculty withers, we are left with the life of Macbeth. Here we stand, hapless, hopeless, hairless apes stranded in a remote corner of a mindless reality

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
 To the last syllable of recorded time;  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
 Signifying nothing.

Or again in the echoes of another modern voice:

Is that all there is?  
 If that's all there is, my friend,  
 Then keep on dancing!  
 Let's break out the booze and have a ball!  
 If that's all  
 There is. (Peggy Lee)

### A Personal Examen

- Am I really too busy, too scheduled, too concerned with making sure my every minute is occupied with something “worthwhile”? Are there too few times in my week when I pull off to the side of the road and ponder how

I *feel* about my living of my one life? Too few moments of ecstasy — “standing outside” myself, stepping into the eternity I at least claim is the true measure of my meaning?

- Can I recall the last time I felt God ambushing my day? What led me to be caught with my resistance down? If I ever felt sold short because God didn't answer my prayers, did I ever suspect God wanted to be present to me, but he simply couldn't get through my defenses against him?
- The Greek root of both “narcissism” and “narcotics” is the same, *narkoun*, “to benumb.” How much of my day is benumbed? The now stale cliché is as true about life as about computers: “Junk in, junk out.”
- Make a list of the people in your office, or class, or block, or apartment building. Then ask: How many have I never said hello to? How many can I even put a name to? Which of them consistently looks too preoccupied, or sad, or cheerless, or angry? How would the quality of my living change if I attempted even a surface overture of concern?
- Where are the places where I'm least able to avoid bumping into the presence of God?
- Again and again in the Gospels Jesus went off by himself to pray. What could the Son of God possibly be praying about? Praying for?