

# *It's about God* (Reflections by Fr. Ken Bartsch, OFM Conv.)

When Isaiah saw God enthroned in all majesty upon clouds of temple incense, surrounded by angels shouting, “*Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of Host. All the earth is filled with his glory;*” when he felt the earth quaking under his feet, saw the pillars of the temple totter, and the room filled with smoke, he trembled with fear. (Isaiah 6)

Isaiah’s vision saturates the entire bible, especially the gospels, and continues to shape the Catholic experience of God. We think of God as beautiful, desirable, awesome, and majestic. He is terrifying yet gracious; stern yet compassionate; concerned with humankind yet supremely greater than anything human. Like Isaiah, we shudder with the knowledge of guilt even as we delight in the vision of God.

No matter how simple, quiet, or routine our liturgy might be; no matter how listless, bored, or distracted we might feel during our prayers; we sense God’s majesty hovering over us. Even during those sinful moments of life – perhaps particularly during those sinful moments – we feel the commanding presence of God: “I am the Lord, there is no other!”

## *It's not about me*

A persistent culture wants to tell us otherwise. Mired as we are in Sin, we are easily seduced. The weakness of the flesh conspires with the seductive world to say, “It’s all about me. I need. I want. I must have. I cannot live without. I dare not live without. How dare you suggest that I should do without?”

One philosopher has described Americans as *utopian individualists*. We believe when every person takes what she needs and gives what she can afford – and no more – the economies of daily life will be perfectly balanced. Everyone will be happy. Our *service will be at an end; our guilt, expiated*. When we think that thought aloud, it’s obviously ludicrous; but it persists.

Utopian Individuals band together to promote their *values*, vying for power against other *values*. Each lobby believes that it has a right to be heard and is morally entitled to satisfaction. If our political system once represented regions, religions, and nationalities with their interests and needs, it now represents *values* which are deemed inalienable. But always, beneath those claims, one suspects self-interest. Few speak for the common good.

But God will not be frustrated; God’s Spirit cannot be suppressed, “*If anyone wishes to be first, she must be the last of all and the servant of all.*” There is simply no other road to satisfaction.

A retreat offers the rare opportunity to stop and listen. A bolt of grace – such as Isaiah felt in the temple – will sometimes reveal a most generous act as profoundly self-centered. Although I honestly believe that I mean only good, I often act from fear, pride, or some other vice. While I seem to be greatly concerned about my child’s behavior, I am really concerned about what people might say, or how God will judge my parenting. Sometime my love of others is *all about me*.

If a retreat challenges me with grace, it also reassures me. If I feel awful about my sin – guilty, humiliated and foolish -- I also realize that God has known me all along, has no regrets whatever, and is still charmed by the affection Jesus has for me.

We’ll offer the Sacrament of Reconciliation during your retreat. Here is an opportunity to repent of those times when I have thought, “It’s all about me.”

## *It's about Liturgy*

- Christian worship must take me out of myself and into the mystery of God.
- Christian worship must transcend life and death, the present, past, and future, the here and there. It must be grounded in the infinite time and spacious emptiness of God.
- In worship, we must find ourselves surrounded by angels, saints, and sinners of the past, present, and future.
- Christian worship must cast down the mighty from their thrones and raise up the lowly. We are never alone in prayer, though we might prefer to be. We may sometimes feel uncomfortable as prayer binds us to certain *undesirables*. Worship must afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted.
- Christian worship must create a single congregation from an assortment of individuals, as each member brings her own fears, failings, sins, hopes, longings, gifts, beauty, and willingness.
- Christian worship is built on a paradox. No one comes without acknowledging her unworthiness to be in this assembly. *Then I said, "Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!"* (Isaiah 6:5) No one stays without a willing, generous spirit. *"Here I am. Send me!"* (Isaiah 6:7)

Liturgy is at the heart of Franciscan Spirituality. Saint Francis was neither loafing under a tree nor tanning on a beach when God spoke to him. He was at mass when the priest proclaimed the Gospel and Francis suddenly burst out, *"This is what I want with all my heart."*

Likewise, when Saint Clare enjoyed a spectacular vision on Christmas Eve, she did not find herself chatting with The Lord, nor sitting at the Virgin's feet. She saw and heard the mass sung in nearby Assisi.

The liturgy is where we meet Jesus. There we hear the Law, the Prophets, Psalms and Gospels; there we share the Eucharist of our fellowship. While there are certainly other ways to meet the Lord, they lead directly back to liturgy.

## *It's about Jesus*

In every religion, human beings model themselves on the god whom they worship. Warriors worship a warrior god; shepherds, a pastoral god; and the selfish, an avaricious god. Their religions celebrate violence, fecundity, or greed – according to their beliefs.

But Jesus is a self-sacrificing God. He insists, *"The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."* (Mark 10: 45) Although we rightly worship Jesus as the Son of God who is worthy of all love and devotion, his example teaches us to give our lives in service to God and others.

*So when he had washed their feet (and) put his garments back on and reclined at table again, he said to them, "Do you realize what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'master,' and rightly so, for indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another's feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do. (John 13)*

Our Church worships a God who serves others. Saint Francis reminded the Church of the littleness of God who was gentle, humble, vulnerable, poor, and naked – even as he saw the Majesty of Isaiah’s vision.

*Let the whole of humanity tremble, the whole world shake, and the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest. O admirable heights and sublime lowliness! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! That the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under the little form of bread! Look at the humility of God and pour out your hearts before Him! Humble yourselves, as well, that you may be exalted by Him. Therefore, hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, so that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally." (from Francis' Letter to the Faithful.)*

### *It's about Surrender*

Surrender, commonly, means *to quit fighting*. When do I give up? When do I let go and let God?

To be human we must surrender occasionally. We surrender to sleep; to pleasure; to a majority vote; to persuasion, logic, and truth. We surrender to remorse and regret; to sorrow and grief; to the inevitable; to sickness, health care and aging; and, finally, to death. Sometimes we surrender to worry, shame, guilt -- and prayer.

Saint Francis surrendered daily to prayer, and there he found direction. We remember him as the saint of divine *impulses*. He had no plan, no ideological blueprint -- but to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

Learning from the story of Saint Francis, we realize Jesus also had no plan. He surrendered to his own humanity and prayed daily for guidance.

He renounced every temptation to be God, preferring his human nature; and sanctified human life by this choice. Because human beings are social creatures and subject to authority, Jesus obeyed his parents as a child, and, as an adult, other legitimate authorities. He surrendered to the impulse of compassion for the sick and the suffering, even on the Sabbath. He surrendered to daily prayer, and to the direction which led inevitably from Galilee to Jerusalem.

Finally, he gave himself to death; and we thank God for his surrender. Following in the footprints of Jesus we surrender to his way.

*Though he was in the form of God, he did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness.... (Philippians 2)*

*During this retreat, we will let our lives be “about God.”*