

Chapter Fourteen

Identity

Purpose: The main purpose of this teaching is to help the students in their search for authenticity and maturity but to do so in a fully Christian framework. A central theme is that each person has to receive their identity from God the Creator and to see the falsity in the view that we have to create our own identities.

Presentation: This teaching always arouses great interest, as it touches directly on something central to the life and spiritual health of each person. It needs to be very practical with examples given of how people struggle with their family relationships, and with the differences here between young men and young women. This teaching needs to be planned at a time when it can be followed the same day by a time of prayer-ministry for healing. Experience shows that this is a time of major healing for many. It is best to have it 2 or 3 Days before the end of the week/course, as those who experience a degree of healing will receive much more from the teachings after than before.

The Importance of Personal Identity

Identity is a critical issue for every human being. Our identity is **who we are**, my identity is **who I am**. Each person has to discover his/her own identity. This discovery is inseparable from knowing our worth, our dignity before God and before others.

In the Christian understanding, our identity is fundamentally a **gift of God**. We receive an identity when we are conceived and when we are born. Our identity is expressed in the **name** we are given. So when God calls us by name, God is recognizing us by our identity, the identity He has given us. That we receive our identity from God is part of the doctrine of creation, that all we have and are that is good comes from God.

First and Fundamental Level: Our Human Identity

Each person has a human identity. This identity reflects how God has created us as men and women. This identity has a social element, for each person belongs to a family, a clan or tribe, a people or nation with its own culture and language. But at the same time each person has a

uniqueness, which means has their own particular identity, which cannot be reduced to being part of a clan-tribe or part of a people-nation. See Vatican Two, *Gaudium et Spes*, para. 12 and following.

Different philosophies and ideologies have over-emphasized either the social or the personal element to produce really distorted views of man and society. Collectivist ideologies have so exalted the collective, often the people or nation, that they totally subordinate the individual person: as with Nazism and their vision of the pure race, of the *Deutsches Volk* and with Soviet Communism in favour of the proletariat and the elimination of all aristocracy, all middle class, etc. At the other extreme are forms of existentialist philosophy that so emphasized the unique of each individual who often has to assert himself/herself against others in order to be totally unique and non-conforming. This found its extreme expression in Jean-Paul Sartre's famous comment, "Hell is other people." In a secularized society, that does not give any place or thought to God, there is a widespread view that we have to create our own identities. So we decide what kind of person we want to be. So insofar as is possible we try to create ourselves. This is an atheistic vor totally agnostic view.

That we receive our basic human identity from God is expressed in the fact that we received life from our parents, and it is our parents who give us the name by which we are known. We do not choose our own parents, and neither do we choose our natural brothers and sisters. These are fundamental facts about our human existence and identity that we have to accept if we are to become mature and healthy human beings. So in the Ten Commandments the first commandment concerning our relationships, the 4th Commandment reads:

"Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you." (Ex. 20: 12; see also slightly longer version in Deut. 5: 16). Proper respect and love for our parents is essential for human wholeness. There is a connection between honouring parents and long life. The reference to the land brings in the element of **place**: I was born into a family in a particular place and (normally) have a natural bond with the place where I was born, my home territory.

Being born into a family also involves having grand-parents, ancestors, uncles and aunts, cousins and more distant clan. We have to receive all this as a gift of God, as part of whom I am. We cannot flourish as human beings when we are rejecting our roots, not accepting our parents, refusing this God-given identity. When we have had parents who have mistreated us, or parents have divorced and the children have divided loyalties, healing is needed so that we can accept who we are and love our parents despite their sins and failings. This healing requires a **repentance** for the element of sin in my reaction to my parents, for the ways in which I have refused to love them, for all anger and resentment against them that I have allowed to develop in me. Ask yourself: Do I honour my father and my mother? Am I glad to have them as parents?

Here we have to reject every desire to wish to be someone else. This is because I am dissatisfied with who I am. Do we try and imitate other people whom I admire? Jesus says the second commandment that is like the first is: “Love your neighbour as yourself.” (Matt. 22: 39). There is a right love of ourselves, which is precisely to accept myself in the identity that God has given me, that includes my love of parents, my love of my people and nation. Thank the Lord for who you are, for your parents, your tribe, your people: “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself.” (Lev. 19: 18).

When Jesus became man, he took on a very specific identity. The first verse of the New Testament tells us: “A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” (Matt. 1: 1). Jesus became a Jew of the house of Judah and an Israelite. He had a particular mother and particular relatives like all of us. It is in this way that he entered human history and acquired a human heritage. All this belongs to him being a **real man**, not a theological concept.

Second Level: Our Christian or Messiah-believing Identity

It is vital that each believer accepts his/her fundamental human identity first. We must not so “spiritualize” our identity that we run away from problems over our human identity by saying the only identity that matters is my faith-identity. This is a form of blindness.

In the Scriptures, we find that many people received a new name when they responded to God's call. So Abram becomes Abraham, Jacob is called Israel, Simon son of Jonah becomes Simon Peter, Saul of Tarsus becomes Paul. So the Christian practice has always been to confer a name at baptism. This is because we have a **new identity in Jesus Christ**. "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." (Gal. 2: 20). Paul also writes: "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come." (2 Cor. 5: 17). What is destroyed, what has to die, is not the human person, but the self-centredness, the ego-centricity that has shaped us in the past. So there is now a new centre to whom I am: I am a son or daughter of God, beloved of the Father.

But just as each human being is born into a family, so in the new birth, we are born into the family of God. We become members of the body of Christ. Within the body, each person has a specific place and distinctive gifts. But we do not just join the body of Christ theoretically, we join a particular body of believers. This brings us to the question of church membership or affiliation. We need to be part of an actual body of believers: there is something unnatural and missing if we are lone believers without any church membership. It is the Christian parallel to being a stateless person without citizenship or passport. We become part of the worldwide body of Christ by becoming part of a church or fellowship that needs to relate to the whole. Sometimes we hear people saying "I'm just a Christian", either meaning that they don't belong anywhere or that everything else is unimportant. Though it is true that being a Christian is more fundamental than being this kind of Christian, this does not mean that our church belonging is unimportant and of no significance to God.

But there is one big difference between our fundamental human identity and our identity as believers in Jesus. We do not choose to become human beings, but we do choose to be believers. Some young people are torn between being Catholics, the faith in which you may have been brought up, and being Evangelical or Pentecostal, where you may have discovered the Lord in a living way. What should we say or think about this? Let's try and set out a few principles:

1. We are free human beings and God gives us the power of choice. We are obliged to follow our consciences. But we are also obliged

to seek out the truth, to make our free decisions based on good and reliable information. The Vatican Council Declaration on Religious Liberty teaches these obligations, but it puts the second in first place. “It is in accordance with their dignity that all men, because they are persons, that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore bearing personal responsibility, are both impelled by their nature and bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth.” (para. 2).

2. To enter a Christian Church is to enter into a community, a people with a heritage, with a distinctive witness and its story of heroes and martyrdom. When we have been formed in one Christian tradition, we have received something of that heritage. This is a major reason why decisions to change church should not be made rapidly or impulsively. Much less should we allow other people to tell us what to do, though we should respect those who have a legitimate authority over us.
3. When we are convinced before the Lord that we should change from one Church tradition to another, we should be on guard against total rejection of what we have decided to leave. Often I find that former Catholics who did leave with a total rejection of everything Catholic are later brought by the Lord to see the Christian values they did receive in their Catholic upbringing. In the same way, Protestants becoming Catholics should understand their change in a way that they honour everything that was of God in their Protestant upbringing and experience. This is another area where some of you may need to repent for bad attitudes and to receive a healing from the Lord. You can never become a servant of reconciliation and unity without being healed of all bad attitudes to other Christian traditions.

Questions for Discussion

1. What is my attitude to my parents? If you have experienced abuse from a parent or have felt unloved and unwanted, can you forgive them?

2. Do I accept who I am, my identity? Or do I try and copy others whom I admire?

3. Am I secure in my faith-affiliation/church belonging?