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INNER VIEWS
ECONOMIC CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

The Mandarin word for "crisis" is also the word for "opportunity." We are all feeling the repercussions of the economic crisis. I've been thinking about how the spiritual dimension of our faith can help us be aware of the embedded opportunity.

A guiding principle of spirituality is that we must do everything possible to look at the wholeness of the situation. This means that we try to avoid reducing it to an either/or and simplistic set of judgments. These usually lay the blame somewhere and create an adversarial stance towards one another. This is certainly in vogue today.

To step beyond our ego centered vision we need the experience and wisdom of a community and variety of people who can share insights gained from their experience. In our present polarized and adversarial environment this is very difficult. Gaining perspective and finding balance is not just about replacing the way we live with a different way of living. It is about allowing God to guide us from that peaceful center within and develop a wholesome way of life. Changes do not necessarily bring improvements. Improvement comes from transformation, from connecting to the presence of God. As far as I am concerned this is the opportunity within the present economic crisis.

I certainly don't believe that this crisis is God's way of punishing us. If it is that would mean that God is putting the burden on the poorest among us. Our scriptures tell us the exact opposite - God responds to those in need. The God of punishment and reward is a projection of our ego which perceives all reality in adversarial and literal terms.

In the Gospel of Mark (3:20-32) we read about an "intervention" done on Jesus by his family. "He's crazy" they said. He was going against the prevailing culture which claimed that people are rich and healthy because of God's favor; while those who are poor, or infirmed, are in God's disfavor. Jesus taught that the Father sends his rain and sun on the rich and poor alike, but his family thought this was heresy.

This gospel passage got me wondering: How would Jesus upset our culture? I think he would try to turn around three basic principals of the present market driven culture: Greed is good; It's all about me; and I expect it now! These very clearly contradict Jesus' basic commandment "Love God with your whole heart, soul and mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

This is where spirituality has something to offer. Loving God and our neighbor is not a rule that we can simply apply to our life. We must look for the foundation that can make this not only a principal (in our mind) but also a possibility (gracious gift in our heart). We must try to see through Jesus' eyes and tune into his motivation. Correct action is hollow until it flows from a motivation that is tapped into God's love. Our Father's unconditional love is the possibility of our love not only on a psychological level but also as the energy that graces our living.

To find God loving in our lives we need to engage in a process that will help us learn to live the wisdom that lets God be the center of our lives.. We need a communal conversation in which we

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share our experience, insight and difficulties. We don't need answers, we need the wisdom that comes from a community that is disciplined enough to look at the wholeness of our reality from a center of inner peacefulness. Our present crisis was caught from each other to the extent that we are caught up in the consumer driven market culture. Wisdom is also caught from living in a wisdom culture.

So here is an opportunity embedded in this crisis. This could be a time of finding a balance and depth of perception in our faithful living. It's not about throwing the baby (market economy) out with the bathwater. Its about reorienting our lives so that our economy no longer drives our values but serves our common good.

St. Clement of Alexandria, one of the church fathers (successors of the apostles) said that in the teachings of Jesus he found, "Not a command to fling away the substance that belongs to him and to part with his riches, but to banish from the soul its opinions about riches, its attachment to them, its excessive desire, its morbid excitement over them its anxious cares, the thorns of our earthly existence which choke the seed of the true life."

The "seeds of true life" have been choked by the greed, self-centered and immediate expectations of a culture where the market has been given divine attributes. And yet in this time when the market is in a crisis and no longer seems all-powerful we may be learning from experience that less money for consumption gives us more time for family and friends. Have the worries about our future awakened us to the reality of God's presence? Does the necessity of a simpler life allow for the possibility of a fuller life? Does the fear driven nature of a market driven culture make us more susceptible to greed, self-interest and a "need" for immediate gratification? Are there limits to the market and what it can do? Is it worthy of godlike status? Are there some areas of life where market values should not determine what is most important - personal and family relationships, ethics and faith. Should every good be considered a commodity? Does the market doctrine that the market is the primary instrument for achieving the common good play out in real life? What things are degraded when market norms are allowed to be the ultimate measure? Do we want the ethics and values we see in advertising and media to share the spirituality of our children? How much of our reality do we want to be shaped by market values?

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - STILLPOINT / PATHWAYS

INNER VIEWS

It's beginning to look a lot like Christianity

"There is no question that there is an unseen world. The problem is how far is it from midtown, and how late it's open." Woody Allen – Feathers

We intuit and yearn for a transcendence that we cannot see or grasp. We might experience it as a dissatisfaction in our lives or as a calling to something far more satisfying than anything we've found in our lives so far. No matter how we feel about it, sense its possibility, or imagine it, we have been seduced onto a spiritual path.

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This path holds out the hope of meeting our transcendence in the form of the God who loves us onto our path. Many of us come to feel like we are wandering aimlessly. We feel like we're spinning our wheels, stuck in a muck of mediocrity.

Take heart. This is a necessary quality of the path. It is a way that we learn to let go and love our life as it is. It is a way of awakening to our life, in all its blandness and ordinariness, as the place of Divine presence.

We are about to enter the church season of Advent. We'll hear the call to "awake" throughout this season. It is Jesus pointing us into the mystery of our deep identity as a Beloved child of God. The official word for this mystery is "Incarnation." It is the revelation that is central to Christianity, God became a body, a human being, God became flesh as John's Gospel says (John 1:14).

For us material reality is both the hiding place and the revelatory place of God; where God is both hidden and revealed. The material is spiritual. The unlimited Creator of the universe is present in the limits and ordinariness of our world. The all knowing God, who is beyond our knowing, is known in flesh and blood. The God who cannot be confined by words has become the Word made flesh and dwelling among us. Throughout Christian history we have often been scandalized by this reality and tried to push God back into a purely spiritual and distant heaven. When this happens Jesus is considered a divine know-it-all who played a human role. This is not the Jesus of revelation or the gospels.

The season of Advent is meant to awaken us in wonder and awe to the divine beauty of flesh and blood, ordinary life. This mystery takes on its fulfillment and meaning by expanding our identity, our way of perceiving our self and our shared selves. Here is the meaning of the incarnation of divinity in humanity that we share with Jesus (quoted from *Why God Loves us...no matter what*). It is based on who we are because of God's generosity and love.

Who are we?

We are the ones who must learn to live a double destiny, human and divine. And who must learn to love all of who we are. This is the only way that we can truly effect the quality of our living and loving.

We are the Beloved children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus. We are the ones to whom our silent Father has spoken his Word to awaken us to the immediate, sustaining, embracing and inclusive intimacy of his love.

We are humans, limited by time and space, wounded by fear, anger and defensive judgments, who Jesus seeks to heal, and the Spirit seeks to transform into a fully free and creative response to Divine love.

We are the Beloved children, the love of the Trinity bursting forth into time and space, who come to know the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, our brother, as the meaning and healing of our own lives.

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We are the ones who, freed by humility, are willing to let go of our ego and mind as the arbiter of value and the locus of control, and thus able to find the spaciousness to let the divine/ human mystery of Jesus illuminate our identity.

We are the children with beginner's mind who respond to the human, vulnerable and divine child in the crib. This vulnerability frees our own vulnerability so that we can respond from our true self.

We are the ones who are so loved by the Creator of the Universe that the Creator becomes one of us, and saves us by the intimacy of being with us as our eternal Source.

We are the ones whose desires drive us into a consumer stampede every Christmas until we succumb to exhaustion and begin to feel our deepest desire which, joy of joys, is just the mirror image of God's desire for us.

This coming Advent season is meant to lift us up and awaken us to the wonder and awe of who we are because of who God is. It's meant to stretch our way of perceiving ourselves and open our soul to receive God's love as the source of our loving.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - PATHWAYS / Stillpoint

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Fr. Eddie Day, C.Ss.R. taught us church history. Although he was a scholar he was also, in the Redemptorists tradition, a pastoral minister. He looked to the meaning of history as it influenced our lived spirituality. I vividly remember his comments on the conversion of Constantine the Emperor in the year 333 – probably because I disagreed at the time. It's taken me this long to understand his wisdom.

When Constantine converted to Catholicism he declared an end to the persecution of Catholics and declared that everyone in his kingdom must now be baptized a Catholic. I thought that was great. It instantly swelled the ranks of Catholics. But Eddie thought it was a disaster that still adversely affects the church. The problem is that it changed the following of Jesus from a transformative spirituality into a club to which we must belong if we want to get along in our Western culture.

When the emphasis is on transformation we look to the depths of our spirit, to the soul dimension of our life. It is, as Jesus lived and taught through his life, a dying to our ego in order to allow God to awaken us to our spiritual reality, sharing in Jesus' human and divine reality as a Beloved Child of the Father.

The difference between the two approaches is profound. The club to which we must belong mentality puts all the emphasis on externals. It's all about following the external authority of the

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one in power, whether that be the Emperor, the Pope of our political party, our national identity or family. The point is that we are meant to do what we're told.

There is value in this. At a certain time in life we need to learn that our role is to contribute to the common good. We need to learn that there are boundaries to life, even more important, there are boundaries to our life. We need the support of belonging to a group that is bigger than ourselves. This need is structured into our spiritual nature. When it is not met we are left to our own devices, feel isolated and uncertain. Religion as a belonging system teaches us how to live in this way and supports us in our development.

And yet, if we want to mature as religious and faithfully spiritual people we must die to this form of living in order to rise to a more mature and inclusive relationship to God and one another. This is why Jesus is so contentious in his dealings with the religious authorities of his time. They continue to stress external obedience and ritual action instead of leading the people to a deepening and maturing relationship with God.

When religion is approached only as a system of belonging the emphasis is on learning the beliefs and following the rituals that prove our belonging. We find ourselves in a reward / punishment system, which misses the point of Jesus' revelation that we are meant to be loved and to fall in love with the Father. Instead we are pressed to conform through threat, shame and fear disguised in religious language.

I believe that one of the reasons that Jesus stood out in the historical situation of his time is that he offered so much more than conformity. Conformity, as a way of structuring our faith, leads to converting or fighting those who don't conform. And historically this has led to war – in the name of God. If you are not part of “our group” then you must be an “outsider” or worse, “the enemy,” or worse of all “Satan.”

The Gospels tell us over and over that Jesus ate with sinners, the outsiders. He invited them into sharing a meal as the way of living in the Kingdom of God. He was able to make room in this soul for what seems to be contradictions in our beliefs. He was able to see others as more than mere “outsiders.” He was able to invite all people into the divine heart of his Father and feed them with healing mercy. The religion of Jesus transformed the system of belonging to something far greater, the Kingdom of God. God's Kingdom had room for us and was able to open us to the depths of our soul, to that place where God is alive gracefully bringing us to the fullness of our super nature, our divinely empowered self.

Unfortunately we have gotten stalled into belonging to the club. Actually this has happened because of historical situations. Our history has been one of incredible stress, often because of low level religious development but also because of external factors. There have been nonstop wars, barbarian invasions, the Black Plague, famine and political oppression for the last 2,000 years. And when Constantine made Christianity the established political entity he created a system of conformity and authority that allowed little room for anything more. Instead of being a transformative yeast in our civilization religion emphasized good citizens who followed the authority of the Emperor and Pope. Authority became identified with the ruling class and could no longer feel the rejection and helplessness that Jesus structurally put himself into by being poor

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in an occupied country. We had changed the point of view by which we experienced ourself. We no longer saw from the bottom up, as Jesus did, but from the top down. The emphasis was on being in control and exerting power. And it has blossomed into our sense of self as individuals, who are nothing until we are perfect, and who become better only by demanding more of ourselves. In this viewpoint, this frame of reference, there is no room to rely on God as the true and gracious Source of our existence.

This season of Advent is meant to take us into surrender, encounter and mutuality as the necessary underpinning of our lives. It is about so much more than welcoming a sweet baby into our lives. It is about welcoming the Divine to give birth to our lives

Jesus came to announce the presence of "the kingdom of God." He kept saying "it is like" or "it may be compared to" (Matthew 13), and he used stories, parables, and metaphors to invite us to see what was so obvious to him. Religion uses metaphors as its basic language because it is meant to point to things larger than our mind can grasp, to the transcendent mystery of Trinity's presence as the Source of all this is. When, however, we take those metaphors literally we allow them to be reduced to the smallness of our ego mind, which always turns to control, imposition and competition as its way of structuring our reality. None of these are big enough for the kingdom into which Jesus is inviting us.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - Stillpoint / PATHWAYS

Inner Views

Angry Birds. Have you ever played it?

It's a computer game where you use a slingshot to shoot birds at structures in which pigs are hiding. You shoot the birds at the structures like torpedoes. They break through the walls of the structures and destroy the pigs. It doesn't make a lot of sense but it's sort of fascinating. I played it for 45 minutes before I realized "I'm wasting my time."

"With a combined 500 million downloads across all platforms and including both regular and special editions,^[5] the game has been called 'one of the most mainstream games out right now',^[6] 'one of the great runaway hits of 2010',^[7] and 'the largest mobile app success the world has seen so far'.^[8] So says wikipedia.

Part of the fascination for me was watching the structures crumble when they are hit by the birds. This image was on my mind and in my imagination when I walked down the North corridor of the rectory. It was night time and as I looked at the clock tower looming in the distance it began to rain and lightning lashed out at the tower. Unlike the structures in which the pigs were hiding the tower did not crumble from this onslaught. It stood solid and majestic. But my imagination was still in the mode of the crumbling pig hideouts and I sort of expected the clock tower to react the same way. Its strange how our imaginations can affect our reality.

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And just as strange was the lightening and rain happening in Chicago. On a January night. That's not supposed to happen at this time of year. My mind believes that but beliefs cede to fact. It was January. It was Chicago. And it was raining no matter what I believed.

I'm sure a meteorologist could explain how this happened. But I don't need explanations, I know it happened. And I trust my experience over my beliefs.

Many of our judgments, our analyses of other people, come from our beliefs. But with judgments our experience does not override our beliefs. Our beliefs color our experience and create our judgments about these people. The goal of the spiritual path is to change this dynamic, to learn to be present to people as they are and not as our mind portrays them according to our beliefs. This is especially true of the way we imagine God.

In "A Lever and a Place to Stand" Richard Rohr puts this image before us:

If any of you were going to create a religion, who of you would think of creating as your religious image a naked, bleeding, wounded man? It is the most unlikely image for God, the most illogical image for Omnipotence. None of us in our wildest imaginations would have come up with it.

So true. This image of God stares us in the face with every crucifix. It is the beginning of the end of the greatest story ever told. It is the experience of Jesus' followers. And yet, if it would have ended there we would never have heard of Jesus, the man whose death profoundly changes our lives. The stark and startling image is the disciples' experience that stripped away all their hopes about God and God's messiah. And when those were sufficiently stripped away the Gospels tell us that the "veil in the Temple was torn in two."

This is another way of talking through our imagination. The veil in the Temple stood between the people and God. But now that it is torn in two it no longer stands between us and God. We are reconnected to God. The divine Son rises as an image of new life within all of us. Nothing stands between us and God. All the images and beliefs that stood between ourselves and God are stripped away in Jesus. When we let go of them completely we can come to know God and the Son as our divine foundation.

I think I can tell you how to awaken to the presence of God as the source of our life. we awaken to the reality of god in our lives by expanding our thinking to accommodate reality in all its breadth, complexity and delicate beauty. This means tearing apart the veil of our thoughts about who we want God to be. When we let go of our judgments and expectations about God we open space in our hearts to let God be our God. Spirituality talks about this as growing in detachment and trust.

These are all ways of saying the same thing but they have value only when you make sense of them in your experience. I can tell you how I've come to unravel my experience of God but you have to find a way to untangle your thoughts so that they no longer create a veil between you and God's presence in your life. It's a process of coming to know how your mind works in creating your beliefs about God. And it starts with a relentless and gentle dedication to know reality as it is.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. - Stillpoint / PATHWAYS

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There are times when I've crossed the path of people who got under my skin. The ways this has happened are varied. Sometimes it was over sensitivity on my part. Sometimes a misunderstanding; and sometimes it was just my reaction to meanness or negative judgments.

Most often it meant that my ego felt attached and I ended up hurt and angry. Sometimes I could let it go and forget about it, but not often. I'd wake up in the middle of the night feeling hurt and angry – I couldn't get it out of my mind..

I've tried many different ways to drive this out my mind. Of course I tried to continue the argument in my head, but this time I came up with clever put downs. I guess you know how that worked out – it just got me more agitated.

For years I've tried to understand them and what drives them. That didn't do much good. I've also tried to summon a sense of compassion, a realization of our shared and wounded humanness. That helped a little bit but they still showed up in the middle of the night. Then I tried to simply pay attention to the turmoil caused by the fear and anger broiling inside of me. I thought I'd get tired of carrying that around and that would help me let go. But that wasn't enough to make it go away.

I did finally find something that works. It starts with paying attention to the turmoil that we carry around inside. And then when you're tired of holding onto it you simply pray, "God bless them." I think we have to come to the point of being tired of stirring up the pain and anger and carrying it around with us. This is the best motivation I know of to let go. And that's what the prayer does – it allows me to let it go and let God take care of it. Every time you feel the argument begin, or the anger boil up, simply say "God bless them." You don't need to tell God what to do. That will just get the turmoil broiling again. Everytime you begin to think of them again just simply pray "God bless them." You will have to do this over and over again, but you will finally be relieved of the burden.

Ken Sedlak C.Ss.R. – PATHWAYS / Stillpoint

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I spent a lot of time in the last two weeks watching the political conventions. I can't say that my opinions about either party have changed much. That's not surprising. It's very clear to me that I start with a point of view and I want that point of view affirmed. And it was affirmed far more by one party than the other. Everything they said made sense to me, while the other party left me cold. And yet when I listened to the commentators they said exactly the opposite. The party they favored made sense while the other party only told lies. We all start with a point of view that creates our perceptions. So how do we arrive at "truth?"

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At the same time I was very much aware that my point of view is not “the truth” or “the answer.” I carry this paradox around within me: I am stuck on my point of view and I want you to agree with it, but I don't think that my point of view is the answer. It's just the best I can do at this moment. That doesn't make it correct. And still the other point of view makes no sense. I'd love to be open to it and let it balance my point of view, but when it is presented in conflict with my point of view I respond defensively rather than openly. And so does the person with a contrary point of view.

And here's the thing, I'm very much bothered when people believe that their point of view is “correct” without any doubt. I don't understand how they can be so convinced. Mostly because, the bottom line for me is that there is no simple and correct solution. Life is far too complex to be reduced to “an answer” or “the truth.” I believe that life is lived by engaging in it and reflecting on it with other people.

But when people are totally convinced by their point of view then they can't engage in the complexity of living. There is no chance for wisdom. Living is reduced to moralism and their point of view is at best a half truth, but usually not even that. It often demonizes the opposite point of view and judges it with half-truths.

For most of my priesthood I've had the tremendous good fortune to be with groups of people who can share their opinions without imposing them. As a matter of fact I do my best to avoid people who just get angry and insist on their opinion. I know from experience that there will be no real conversation. I end up reacting, getting angry myself and defensive and often take the opposite point of view in defiance. That does me no good and goes absolutely nowhere.

On the other hand I've come to treasure discussions and the people sharing them, when there's a gentleness and acceptance among the group. A humble gentleness and willingness to explore is essential for a conversation. When this happens there is room for the vulnerability needed to give us a creative and inclusive dialogue. At the end of these kinds of encounters I feel graced and engaged. I feel like I'm a better person just from being with these people.

I believe that this kind of conversation is essential for my spiritual development. Traditionally people have gone to gurus or spiritual directors for the help they need in further development. I hope this doesn't just show my arrogance but in my forty years of being a priest I've run into few people who had answers for me. I believe, and it is my experience, that a group of people who are comfortable enough with themselves and one another to be vulnerable, are my best spiritual advisors. I also believe that this group needs a mix of personalities and the complementarity of female and male participants.

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All of this is a complicated introduction to this simple insight; to live in the graced reality of the present moment needs the support and presences of respectful, humble, explorers. To be in the present moment is all about presence, being present openly and honestly with as little guile as possible, without our egos getting in the way and without condemning them when they do show up. Presence is a basic way of being that allows us to relate to the "truth" of the moment. And it is in the full truth of the moment that we become alert to the reality of our intimacy with God.

Let me return to my opening observations. I believe we have degenerated into a egocentric, radically self-centered and defensive and compulsively aggressive approach that blinds us to the reality of the present moment. This is increasingly clear in our public, political discourse. The calculating mind of the ego reads everything in terms of personal advantage, short-term effort, and "What's in it for me?" And then, to bolster an advantage, it turns the other half of the truth in terms of "wrong" and "the enemy." As far as I can see, and I worry that my seeing is just another half-truth, we don't need different ideas, we need a more spiritual approach to reality. The spiritual mind, built on meditation and prayer, see beyond the ego, to a more inclusive and creatively open ended perspective. It can do this only when it is rooted in the real presence of divinely unconditional love.

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