



Encountering the Stranger: Multiculturality and Spirituality at a Crossroad

ABSTRACT

Given the reality of multiculturalism in our world due to increasing international migration, the Church is confronted with both a task and an opportunity. First, multiculturalism implicates the Church's missionary thrust to be relevant and credible in its task of evangelization. Second, it ushers us to recognize the "other face of God" in the "culturally other" with new eyes grounded on the spirituality of encounter. Framing the discourse using the threefold structure of See-Judge-Act and re-affirming biblical and pastoral underpinnings on encountering the culturally other, I conclude that God who is greater than our thoughts and imaginations, that God through the Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ, who is "totally Other" is best revealed and discovered in the face and reality of the "culturally other" in our midst.

Keywords: Multiculturality; Spirituality; Stranger; Other Face of God; Totally Other; Culturally Other; Encounter; Galilee Principle



INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of “international migration”, the massive movement of people around the world, characterizes our contemporary world. Such migration contributes to the formation of societies constituted by culturally diverse groups of peoples. In this paper, I designate the term, “multiculturality”, to embody such growing cultural diversity among peoples in different societies of the world. At closer scrutiny, multiculturalism signals the advent of the “stranger” or “foreigner” – the “culturally other”. What does multiculturalism mean for the Church and her mission? How do we relate with the “culturally other”? What is the spirituality that empowers us to engage with the “stranger”?

In this paper, I intend to give an exposition into two parts: first, an exposition on Multiculturalism, which follows the three-fold structure of See-Judge-Act: SEEING (the phenomenon of multiculturalism), JUDGING (the theological significance of multiculturalism), and ACTING (mission in an age of multiculturalism); second, a reflection on the required spirituality required for, or even the spirituality which emerges out of our engagement with the stranger.

THE REALITY OF MULTICULTURALITY

SEE: The Phenomenon of Multiculturalism

A major factor behind the phenomenon of the growing multiculturalism of our world is “international migration” or the massive movement of people around the world. At the turn of the millennium (2000), it was estimated that there were 150 million international migrants worldwide (this was one out of 50 persons).¹ Similarly, it was estimated that there were 50 million refugees or forced migrants around the world (and that was one out of 120 persons).² Today, the number of people on the move has increased

¹ Cf. IOM (International Organization for Migration), “Global Migration Trends: An Era of International Migration” IOM Publications, Geneva. <http://www.iom.int>. (accessed January 15, 2013).

² Cf. Michael Blume, “*Il Fenomeno Globale Dell’immigrazione*”, *Pontificio Consiglio della Pastorale dei Migranti e degli Itineranti, Città del Vaticano*, 29 maggio 2000.

to about 214 million people, which is one out of every 33 persons.³ While migration is an age-old phenomenon, the global nature of migration in our age is what gives it particular prominence. More people today choose or are forced to migrate than ever before, and they are travelling to an increasing number of countries. International migrants come from all over the world and travel to all parts of the world. As a result, people from different cultures not only are in much closer contact today; oftentimes, they are forced to live alongside one another. Many of the world's cities today are inhabited by widely diverse cultural groups. This massive movement of people is radically changing the face of our cities. A few examples will suffice.

- in 1980, when I first came to Davao to teach at the Regional Major Seminary (REMASE), there were only a few foreigners living in Davao. Most of them were Indonesians due to the regular weekly flights between Davao and Manado. Now, we see all kinds of foreigners in the city: Koreans, Vietnamese, Malaysians, Indians, Africans;
- in Oceania, Australia and New Zealand are the principal destinations for migrants. In 1996, the Australian Bureau of Statistics confirmed that nearly 25 per cent of the population was foreign-born, i.e., one out of four Australians was not born in Australia.⁴
- In Southeast Asia, economic factors determine three persistent, long-term migration subsystems formed by the attraction of labour across international borders to Singapore and Peninsular Malaysia, East Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam, and Thailand. In the first two instances, Indonesia and the Philippines constitute the main source of labour flows; in the third, various

³Cf. Daniel G. Groody, "The Church on the Move: Mission in an Age of Migration" in *Mission Studies* 30 (2013), 27.

⁴Cf. IOM (International Organization for Migration), "Global Migration Trends: An Era of International Migration" IOM Publications, Geneva., <http://www.iom.int>. (accessed January 15, 2013).

nations in Indochina represent the main sources of migration;⁵

- In 2012, I made a trip to Angola in Africa. On the plane from Addis Abeba (the capital of Ethiopia) to Luanda (the capital of Angola), there were some 200 Chinese passengers. I was probably the only non-Chinese on board. At that time, it was said that there were about 40,000 Chinese construction workers in Angola. This is the result of an agreement between China and Angola. Angola would export its oil to China, and China would send construction workers to Angola. That year, when the bishops of Angola came to Rome for their “Ad Limina” visit, they all came to our Generalate to ask for SVD Chinese missionaries for Angola. Only a few of the Chinese in Angola are Catholics, but some of them were marrying Angolan women, many of whom are Catholics and who would agree to marry the Chinese only if their prospective husbands would become Catholics; thus, the need for catechetical instruction in Chinese in Angola. A BBC documentary says that today there are about a million Chinese in all of Africa.

As multiculturalism becomes more and more an ordinary phenomenon, it begins to refer no longer just to whole societies or entire groups of people, but also to individuals. Thus, one begins to hear such words as “Hybridity”, “Mestizaje”, “Nepantla”, “Metaxy” – words referring to the state of being a hybrid of two or more cultures, or of being in the in-between space or the middle space: Mexican-American, Venezuelan-Spanish, Indonesian-Dutch, Turkish-German, Moroccan-French, Chinese-Filipino, etc. Soon the people we will be dealing with in our ministries will no longer be pure Filipinos or pure Chinese or pure Malay but hybrids who have different needs and present different challenges to evangelization.

⁵ *Ibid.*

JUDGE: The Theological Significance of Multiculturality

So, how should we regard the phenomenon of the growing multiculturalism of the world? Is it a threat or a danger to be feared, or is it a challenge and an opportunity to be welcomed?

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis dedicates numbers 71–75 to this phenomenon of the growing multiculturalism of the world. For him, the growing multiculturalism of our cities is:

...a privileged locus of the new evangelization. This challenges us to imagine innovative spaces and possibilities for prayer and communion which are more attractive and meaningful for city dwellers (EG 73). What is called for is an evangelization capable of shedding light on these new ways of relating to God, to others and to the world around us, and inspiring essential values. It must reach the places where new narratives and paradigms are being formed, bringing the word of Jesus to the inmost souls of our cities (EG 74).

For Pope Francis, then, the growing multiculturalism of our world is a challenge and an opportunity. Indeed, our multicultural world today can be seen as the “new Galilee.”⁶ This biblical parallel constitutes a basis for the theological significance of the multiculturalism of our world today.⁷ During the time of Jesus, Galilee was a Jewish enclave in a sea of unfriendly gentiles. Galilee was located in the far north of Palestine, bordering on the non-Jewish populations of Syria, Philippi, and the Decapolis. While the bulk of the Galilean population were non-Judean Jews, many of those living in Galilee were ethnically and culturally non-Israelites. Thus, within the same village, Israelites

⁶Cf. Roberto S. Goizueta, “‘There You will See Him’: Christianity Beyond the Frontier Myth” in *The Church as Counterculture*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Robert W. Brimlow (New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), 180–184.

⁷For a fuller treatment of the topic of the theological significance of multiculturalism, see Antonio Pernia, “The Theological Significance of Multiculturalism” in *Missio Inter Gentes*, Vol 2, No. 2 (July 2016), Tagaytay City: Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, pp. 1–18. Also in *Religious Life Asia*, Vol. XVIII, No. 3 (July–September 2016), Quezon City: Institute for Consecrated Life in Asia, 13–28.

and Gentiles lived in adjacent houses or shared the same courtyard, and even a house or oven. Because of its distance from Jerusalem, its history as a borderland, and, consequently, its culturally diverse population, Galilee gave birth to popular religious practices that reflected these realities. Not surprisingly, then, regional cults existed, especially along the borders, which reflected the influence of Hellenistic religions.

This was the cultural milieu in which Jesus grew up and exercised his ministry. “Galilee of the Gentiles” (Mt 4:15), is how Matthew, quoting Isaiah, identifies the location of the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry. At the time of Jesus, Galilee, especially its villages (such as Nazareth), symbolized backwardness, ignorance, poverty, discontent, rebellion, and, above all, religious and racial-cultural impurity. Galilee was rejected and despised by the Judean Jews because of the racial mixture of the area and its distance from the temple in Jerusalem. For the Jews of Jerusalem, “Galilean” was almost synonymous with “fool”! “Could anything good come out of Nazareth?” (Jn 1:46).

Indeed, Galilee, lying along the border, was identified with rejection insofar as those who live in borderlands assimilate a multiplicity of racial, cultural, and religious influences from “across the border”. Consequently, the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem could not conceive that God’s word could be revealed in such a region: “Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee” (Jn 7:52). This Galilee was the historical reality that would then take on theological significance in the Gospels. As Virgilio Elizondo, the Mexican-American theologian, put it:

The overwhelming originality of Christianity is the basic belief of our faith that not only did the Son of God become a human being, but he became Jesus of Nazareth ... Jesus was not simply a Jew, he was a Galilean Jew; throughout his life he and his disciples were identified as Galileans.⁸

⁸Virgilio Elizondo, *Galilean Journey: The Mexican-American Promise* (New York: Orbis, 1983), 49 as cited by Roberto S. Goizueta, “‘There You will See Him’: Christianity Beyond the Frontier Myth”, 183.

The theological significance of Galilee lies in what Elizondo calls the “Galilee Principle,” that is, God chooses “what is low and despised in the world” (1 Cor 1:28).

The apparent non-importance and rejection of Galilee are the very bases for its all-important role in the historic eruption God's saving plan for humanity. The human scandal of God's way does not begin with the cross, but with the historico-cultural incarnation of his Son in Galilee That God [chose] to become a Galilean underscores the great paradox of the incarnation, in which God becomes the despised and lowly of the world. In becoming a Galilean, God becomes the fool of the world for the sake of the world's salvation. What the world rejects, God chooses as his very own.⁹

Such divine paradox underscores the scandal of Christianity – the Galilee that was deemed insignificant and impure became the witness of God’s greatness in love through Jesus’ resurrection: “he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him” (Mt 28:7). Jesus’ ministry will end where it began; it is in Galilee that his disciples will see the resurrected Jesus. The chosen place of God’s self-revelation is there where Israelites and Gentiles live side-by-side, where Jewish religious practices incorporate Hellenistic influences, where popular Judaism remains outside the control of Jerusalem’s “official” religion. The multiculturalism of the borderland is the privileged locus of God’s self-revelation. During the time of Jesus, a new humanity was being born, not in the centers of religious and political power, but at the margins; not among the culturally and religiously pure but among the culturally and religiously impure; not in Jerusalem but in Galilee.

⁹Ibid., 184.

So, our multicultural world today could be considered as the new Galilee. As such, it is a privileged locus of God's continuing self-revelation, or, as Pope Francis put it, "a privileged locus of the new evangelization" (EG 73).

ACT: Mission in an Age of Multiculturality

Today, the Church is called in a special way to respond to the missionary challenge of an increasingly multicultural world. In this context, I believe a principal goal of mission should be the promotion of a truly multicultural Church.

But aside from being a response to the challenge of multiculturalism, the promotion of a "multicultural Church" is also a need in view of the perennial temptation toward centralization in the Church. Talk about the "Universal Church" is sometimes based, consciously or unconsciously, on an interpretation of unity as uniformity, where the various cultures of people are subsumed into the dominant culture which informs the "Universal Church". On the other hand, a multicultural Church is premised on the understanding of unity as "unity in diversity", allowing the variety of cultures of the world to have a place in the Church as they are.

Incidentally, Pope Francis seems to have the same vision of the Church. In his general audience on October 9, 2013 which focused on his catechesis on the "Church as Catholic", he said: "We are not all the same, and we should not all be the same. We are all diverse, different. Each has their qualities, and this is the beautiful thing about the Church. Each one contributes what God gave them to enrich all others". Further, he emphasized: "Uniformity kills life. And when we try to force this uniformity on everyone, we kill the gifts of the Holy Spirit." He repeats the same idea in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "... whenever we attempt to create unity on the basis of our human calculations, we end up imposing a monolithic uniformity. That is not helpful for the Church's mission" (EG 131).

A truly multicultural Church is one which is characterized by three things, namely, (1) the church as a home for people of different cultures, (2) the church as an instrument of intercultural dialogue in society, and (3) the church as a sign of the all-inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God. A word on each of these characteristics.

Home for people of different cultures

A multicultural Church will be seen by strangers and foreigners not just as a more tolerant but also a more welcoming Church. And for the Church to be more welcoming, three elements are essential, namely, that it be a Church that fosters the recognition of other cultures (i.e., allows the culture of migrants, strangers or foreigners to be visible in the community), encourages respect for cultural difference (i.e., avoids any attempt to level off cultural differences by subsuming the minority cultures into the dominant culture), and promotes a healthy interaction between cultures (i.e., creates a climate whereby each culture allows itself to be transformed or enriched by the other). With these characteristics, a multicultural Church will be a community where people of various cultures will feel they belong.

Instrument of intercultural dialogue

A truly multicultural Church, however, cannot limit itself to just caring for those who belong to its community, i.e., strangers and foreigners who are Christians or Catholics. A truly multicultural Church must also look beyond itself and minister to non-Christian migrants, refugees and other displaced people by being an instrument of intercultural dialogue in the larger society. It must work towards creating in the larger human community the conditions whereby the three elements mentioned above can be realized, i.e., recognition of other cultures, respect for cultural difference, and healthy interaction between cultures. This will mean promoting genuine dialogue among people of various cultures.

Sign of the all-inclusiveness of God's Kingdom

Fostering genuine interculturality within itself (“ad intra”) and promoting intercultural dialogue outside itself (“ad extra”), a multicultural Church truly makes a credible sign of the all-inclusiveness of the Kingdom of God. It witnesses to the genuine universality and openness to diversity of God’s Kingdom. It embodies the proclamation that the Kingdom includes everyone and excludes no one; that there are no strangers or foreigners but only brothers and sisters. It will be an image of the universal gathering in the end-time “of people of every nation, race, tribe and language ... standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands” (Rev 7:9).

SPIRITUALITY AND MULTICULTURALITY

Let me now pass on to the question of spirituality in the context of multiculturality.

In EG 78, Pope Francis laments the fact that the spiritual life, for many Christians, has come to be “identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelization”. The Pope, therefore, encourages a spirituality of encounter with the “other” – the “economically other,” the “socially other,” the “culturally other,” the “religiously other”. In other words, an encounter with the poor, the stranger, the foreigner, the refugee, the migrant, the sick, trafficked women, the unwed mother, the street children, the non-Christian, the faith-seeker, and the unbeliever.

Scriptural Considerations

In the Old Testament, along with the widow and the orphan, the stranger is a special category that is the object of God’s special favor. The stranger is to be accorded a status practically equal with the native Jew in the community of the chosen people

of God. He or she is included in the covenant that God establishes with his people. From the Book of Leviticus, we read:

When an alien resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God (Lev 19:33).

From the Book of Deuteronomy, we gain a similar affirmation:

You stand assembled today...before the Lord your God – the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials, all the men of Israel, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp...to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God... in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God (Deut 29:10-13).

Also in Deuteronomy 31:12, the consistent treatment accorded to the stranger remains:

Assemble the people – men, women, and children, as well as the aliens residing in your towns – so that they may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God and to observe diligently all the words of this law (Deut 31:12).

The reason for this special favor given to the stranger is twofold: first, because the Hebrews should know the heart of the stranger for they were themselves strangers in the land of Egypt; second, because Yahweh is a God who loves the stranger.

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe, who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing. You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deut 10:17-19).

It would even seem that God shows a certain preference for the stranger over the native Jew, as Exodus 22:21 seems to suggest:

You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. You shall not abuse any widow or orphan. If you do abuse them, when they cry out to me, I will surely heed their cry; my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children orphans (Ex 22:21; cf. 23:9).¹⁰

In the light of all these, what emerges is the notion of the stranger as a sacrament of God's revelation. Because of God's special favor for the stranger, an encounter with the stranger is an encounter with God. As the Letter to the Hebrews puts it: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Heb 13:2).

As Ronald Rolheiser put it:

In Scripture, God's promise, revelation, and new truth are most often brought not through what's familiar or through those whom we know and who are like us, but through a stranger or an angel (an angel being even more foreign than a stranger).

For instance, we see Sarah and Abraham receive the promise of a son not from a family member, a neighbor or the local doctor, but from a stranger who has wandered into their camp at night and to whom they have shown hospitality. Jacob meets God by wrestling with a stranger. Christ is visited in the crib not by the Jewish rulers but by the Magi, strange foreign kings. In

¹⁰Cf. further Jeremiah 7:5-7 – "For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever." And Jeremiah 22:3 – "Thus says the Lord: Act with justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor anyone who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place."

the parable of the Good Samaritan, the wounded man is helped not by his own kinsfolk and those who were of his own religion, but by a Samaritan, a stranger. With the stranger lies surprise, new possibility, contact with that part of God and reality that we have never experienced before.¹¹

An Invitation to Seek the “Other Face” of God

It is in the above context that we can speak of the encounter with the stranger as an invitation to seek the “other face” of God.¹²

It is an ancient biblical belief, which the Hebrew people constantly recalled, that God is not like us. God is always more than our God, more than what we make of him. God is always more than our thought of God. Again and again the prophets reminded the people that God is not an idol, the work of our hands and imaginations. God is always stranger and less familiar than we think. God is the totally Other. In other words, God always has “another face”. This “other face” of God is revealed to us when we are “faced” by the one who is different from us, by the one who is other than us – the one culturally different from us, that is, the STRANGER and the FOREIGNER. It is when we come “face-to-face” with the Stranger, or the “culturally other,” that we get a glimpse of the other face of God. This other face of God summons us to newness. As St. Augustine once wrote: “God is nearer to me than I am to myself but different enough to make me more than myself”. This is precisely the challenge to the Church of today – the challenge to become more than herself. Thus, it is the challenge to promote an attitude of reflecting on the mystery that draws us from the familiar face of God to the other face of God which summons us to become more than ourselves. It is the challenge that

¹¹ Ronald Rolheiser, “Strangers Can Bring God’s Revelation”. <http://ronrolheiser.com/strangers-can-bring-gods-revelation/#.V2wiKo55BE4Facebookwww.facebook.com/ronrolheiser> (accessed January 15, 2013).

¹² Cf. Mary Jo Leddy, *The Other Face of God: When the Stranger Calls us Home* (New York: Orbis, 2011).

leads us to the mystery that moves us from our customary experience of God to an encounter with God who is different enough to call us to a different way of being, the mystery of how the Stranger, if we stay with them long enough, can lead us to a new sense of the nearness to God. This capacity to see the other face of God is a particular need in today's world where the general tendency is to enfold what is different into what is familiar. The temptation is to create an image of God who is friendly and familiar, a God who is like us. This becomes a domesticated and manageable God, one who can be called upon for all kinds of personal and political solace. Such a God is thoroughly predictable and totally lacking in surprises, a God who can be called upon to guard us from those who are not like us, to protect us from strangers. Indeed, we live in a world where we fear strangers. Strangers are a threat to us. Strangers are a danger to our security.

Thus, we build a society where we live side-by-side, and not face-to-face. In many ways our society is structured to prevent us from seeing each other face-to-face. It becomes possible to live in a neighborhood composed entirely of people like us, in a gated community or a ghetto of some sort, in an enclave of middle class religious, rich businessmen and women, and comfortable professionals. It is possible to drive to work with people like ourselves and never meet the people who are bundled together in buses, jeepneys and tricycles. We never really see the persons we have categorized out of our lives. Or we see, but do not really see. The stranger often remains a category in our discourse, a news item in our papers, a report in our television programs, a social problem for our government, an object of evangelization for our Church, a file in our offices, a case to be handled, a situation to be addressed – a number, a statistic, a cypher. The stranger remains faceless.

Unless we allow them to face us, we will never realize that often they are terribly “defaced” – physically and psychologically, emotionally and spiritually. Unless we allow ourselves to be faced by them, we will never see the other face of God. Unless we come

face-to-face with them, we will never experience the “about-face” so necessary for us to hear God’s call to a different way of being and His summons to become more than ourselves. Perhaps a biblical story can help illustrate this - the story of “the Stranger on the road to Emmaus” (Lk 24:13-34).

As the 24th chapter of the Gospel of Luke narrates it, toward the evening of the day of the resurrection, two of the disciples of Jesus were making their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus. They were conversing about the things that had happened the previous days. Disappointment and discouragement were written on their faces. “They looked sad”, the Gospel tells us. Their dreams were shattered, their hopes crushed. Their master died an ignominious death on the cross. Everything failed. It was finished. As the Gospel itself put it:

The things about Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel (Lk 24:19-21).

So, the disciples were going home, turning back to their former way of life. Then, a stranger entered their lives. "Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?" They welcomed the stranger and walked side-by-side with him on the road. They allowed him to explain the scriptures to them. These two Israelites allowed a “stranger in Jerusalem,” probably a non-Jew, to interpret the Hebrew scripture to them. Even then, their hearts began to burn within them. They invited the stranger into their home and shared a meal with him. It was at table, when they were face-to-face with him, that their eyes were opened and that they recognized the master. They saw the “other face” of Christ - not the familiar face of the earthly Jesus but the unfamiliar face of the risen Lord. That was when they made an “about-face”. That same hour, they got up and returned to Jerusalem and rejoined their companions. No, it

had not ended. It was not finished. It had only just begun. A turn-around from home in Emmaus to mission in Jerusalem, and from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. It was all because they allowed themselves to face, and be faced by a stranger. It was all because they accepted to walk side-by-side with the stranger and stayed long enough with him to eventually be face-to-face with a stranger.

CONCLUSION

I believe that it can be said that at the incarnation, the “totally other,” the Son of God, came to live among us. Although he became like us in all things but sin, he never lost his “otherness.” He was the “economically other” – he was born poor in a stable in Bethlehem; a poor itinerant preacher who had nowhere to lay his head on and who lived on the generosity of friends and benefactors. He was the “culturally other” – he was culturally a Jew, but one who welcomed and spoke with Samaritans and Gentiles. He was the “religiously other” – he was Jewish by religion but one who shared meals and kept the company of sinners, prostitutes, and tax collectors. He was the “totally other” – although he had assumed the human nature, he never lost his divine nature which shone through in his life and ministry of service to others.

It was no wonder that he was misunderstood, rejected and killed. And after his resurrection from the dead, he was mistaken as a gardener by the tomb (Jn 20:15), a bystander at the shore of the Sea of Tiberias (Jn 21:4), and a stranger on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:18).

The God he revealed is a God who persistently challenges conventional truth and regularly upsets the world’s way of looking at things. As Palmer Parker puts it:

It is no accident that this God is so often represented by the stranger, for the truth that God speaks in our lives is very strange indeed. Where the world sees impossibility, God sees potential. Where the world sees comfort, God

sees idolatry. Where the world sees insecurity, God sees occasions for faith. Where the world sees death, God proclaims life.

God uses the stranger to shake us from our conventional points of view, to remove the scales of worldly assumptions from our eyes. God is a stranger to us, and it is at the risk of missing God's truth that we domesticate God, reduce God to the role of familiar friend.¹³

I believe that today what the world needs to see is not the familiar and customary face of God, the image of God that is very often created according to our own image, but the unfamiliar and mysterious face of God, the image of God that is beyond our ideas and imaginations. What we need to encounter is not the face of God that makes us complacent and comfortable but the face of God that challenges and disturbs us.

It is through our encounter with the stranger, the “culturally other,” that we get a glimpse of the “other face” of God – the other face of God that summons us to newness and calls us to a new way of being. Indeed, if we surround ourselves only with people like ourselves – middle-class religious, rich business people, comfortable professionals, we will never see the “other face” of God and never hear the summons to become more than ourselves. It is only in becoming more than ourselves that we truly fulfill ourselves, a word of wisdom well-articulated in the thought of Pope Francis in EG 8:

Thanks solely to this encounter – or renewed encounter – with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. We become fully human when we

¹³ As quoted by Ronald Rolheiser from Palmer Parker, *The Company of Strangers*, <http://ronrolheiser.com/strangers-can-bring-godsrevelation/#.V2wiKo55BE4Facebookwww.facebook.com/ronrolheiser> (accessed January 15, 2013).

become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being.

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