

Hopeful Resistance

*An enquiry into contemplative spirituality, justice and
social activism*

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We live in an extraordinary and unprecedented time of history. It is the first time when human beings have held such a comprehensive monopoly, mastery and dominance of the planet. Sometimes referred to as the 'anthropocene' geological era, our impact on climate and the environment, our penchant for violence and weaponry, our global inability to respond and manage poverty and injustice, are to some, pessimistic signs that we live on the threshold of our own self-inflicted demise.

While such an outlook appears bleak, our future is far from decided or settled. Some observers speak of this time as a hopeful but precarious liminal period known as 'the great transition' or 'great turning.'¹ A period where choices made now can alter our destructive course and steer humanity toward a more compassionate, sustainable and just future. As I read these observer / prophets, both religious and secular, I note that they reflect that the heart of our problem is spiritual, and for that reason a spiritual response is required.

From this more positive vantage point, it is important to acknowledge that there is a growing global movement of people who are alert and engaged through political involvement, emerging civil society groups, environmental action, peace groups and faith based movements for social justice making personal decisions and commitment toward a more just and sustainable world. ✓ A question I want to raise and explore here concerns whether spirituality, and in particular contemplative practice is part of a legitimate response to our current challenges, or is it instead a self-centred interiority with a privatised 'head in the sky' neutrality that when considered carefully is really part of the problem?

In his book, *Dispirited: How Contemporary Spirituality Makes Us Stupid, Selfish and Unhappy*, David Webster takes the position I hear often from political colleagues and social activist friends, that spirituality detaches and marginalises a person, preoccupying their attention. It removes their energy and contribution, while ceding responsibility for social and environmental justice. Webster writes, "Fleeing down the avenue of detachment we are in danger of leaving political and social justice behind . . . and with it reason." This is not an entirely ill-informed perspective. We all know of Christians who would repeat without much critical thought the statement of Jesus that his Kingdom is not of this world, interpreting that as a word of caution leaving any substantive or meaningful responsibility for structural change and justice to others with the exception of an occasional mission or charitable contribution.

My response to Webster's argument however is firmly against this simplistic assessment and would suggest that the spiritual journey – and by that I am speaking of the contemplative venture - is by its very nature, radical, resistant to domestication, robustly democratic and when examined carefully, found to be subversive in character.

How is this response justified?

Contemplative practice whether explicitly recognised or not is a courageous personal decision and witness of an allegiance to something other than the demands of the world and dominant culture. It is what I would call a hopeful resistance. It is a position of Faith that affirms the possibility of another

¹ Macy, J. & Johnston, C. *Active Hope*. New World, Novato, California. 2012

order and a deeper and more substantive Truth. St John expresses this thought clearly when he penned, “this is the victory (νικε) that overcomes the world, your Faith.”²

What exactly then does contemplation resist, particularly in terms of the social and political sphere and the hegemony of the world?

While the theological use of the term ‘world’ denotes the sphere of human activity, its transient existence is fluid in expression throughout history presenting itself in each generation uniquely. I would suggest that in part it manifests itself today as a dangerously distracting and global consumer society that elevates the cult of individuality that replaces being with having. To quote the ontological sarcasm of artist Barbara Kruger “I shop therefore I am.”³

How did this arise?

In the early 1950’s concerns were raised in the ground-breaking book ‘The Hidden Persuaders’ by Vance Packard. Packard identified the use of sophisticated and emergent social psychology by business and political propagandists to shape our world view as consumers of products, services and political or public ideas. This strategy, initially a first world phenomenon but spreading globally, focused on appealing to what psychologist (Winnicott, Lowen, Kohut and others) term the ‘false self’ or in biblical language *the flesh*; a defensive façade concerned with its own survival and the preservation of a questionable identity⁴. By creating and exploiting imagined fears, false needs, sense of lack, status anxiety, apprehension of the future a consumer demand could be manipulated and driven. It also endorsed a powerful aversion to personal discomfort and matched it to a pre-occupying and self-soothing addiction to entertainment, hyper-sexuality and celebrity. Thomas Merton pulling no punches wrote; “The whole mechanism of modern life is geared for a flight from God and from the spirit into the wilderness of neurosis.”⁵ The result of this colonisation of the human spirit has resulted in the monopolisation of our attention and thereby domesticating and circumscribing our wonder, amazement, empathy, meaningful indignation at injustice and our political and social sensibilities with cheap approximations.

Native American activist John Trudell, taking an indigenous perspective points out, just as any economy needs the extraction of resources to create and deliver a product or service, the unique mark of this historical neo-Capitalist period is the extraction of the human spirit. Trudell explained this was accomplished through the very real and intentional ‘mining’ of human frailties as an indispensable fuel and element, or in Marxist terms a ‘commodity fetish’ for driving questionable demand and shaping a false consciousness⁶. As with any physical extraction process there exists waste and here too there are psychic toxic by-products of competition, conflict, stress, alienation, affluenza, self-loathing, crime and social dislocation linked to same relentless pursuit of unsustainable and unrealistic lifestyles. While there are certainly perverse or mercenary intentions at work within quarters of neo-capitalism it is here noted that marketers, advertising propogandists and the consumer public share these irrational goals and subtly disguised impulses, thus keeping

² 1 Jn 5.4 It is worth remembering here that the Greek νικε (transliterated nike) is never passive and is used to convey the essential ingredients of resistance.

³ <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/64897>

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_self_and_false_self

⁵ Merton, Thomas. No Man is an Island. Shamballa, Boston, 2006. 114

⁶ False consciousness is a term used by sociologists and expounded by some Marxists for the way in which material, ideological, and institutional processes in capitalist society mislead its members. These processes are thought to hide the true relations between classes and the real state of affairs regarding the impact of disguised exploitation.

the machine well-oiled where both suffer undermining consequences for their well-being and humanity.

If we are satisfied with the simple definition that colonisation is the appropriation of a place or domain for one's own use, then in truth, this is much more than a metaphorical colonisation and is a new and pervasive and especially oppressive form.⁷ This colonisation is a colonisation of the mind and at a level where a spiritual resistance is the most effective means of regaining dignity and freedom.

The words of thirteenth century Sufi mystic and poet Rumi are especially important today;

Sit up!

Listen!

You are very drunk

*And we are on the edge of the roof.*⁸

On the edge of the roof indeed! And this is where the contemplative can become the resister who wakes up, responds and passes a fire for others kindled from their own spiritual depth⁹. As Teilhard de Chardin said so truthfully and plainly, we must “see or perish.”

At this point I'd prefer use the more radical and uncomfortable term 'mystic,' rather than the term contemplative. For it is the mystic who has the most subversive experience of spiritual awakening; one that returns to our lives a deep sense of amazement, connection and Love. Mystics know the resurrection of the spirit and are affronted by injustice and delight in a renewed grasp of creation's vast sacredness. Karl Rahner, perhaps the most influential Catholic theologian and thinker of the twentieth century remarked that “the Christian of the future will be a mystic or not exist at all.”¹⁰

In defining mysticism we are on somewhat slippery ground with a multitude of definitions both positive as well as negative. Anglo-Catholic and pacifist Evelyn Underhill described mysticism as the “encounter with reality.” Later Church historian Bernard McGinn who wrote extensively on Christian mystical traditions defined mysticism as “the preparation for, the consciousness of and the reaction to the presence of God.”¹¹ Holding these two together and allowing them to inform each other is the meaning I take forward into this essay.

Throughout history mystics have met with vigorous opposition and persecution and usually only ratified institutionally after long and bureaucratic investigation.¹² Much of the church – and certainly the conservative protestant church - considers mysticism as suspect and even deviant for its claimed immediacy of experience rather than reliance on scripture as the plain expression of God's truth.

⁷ A careful and close reading of Rev 18.11-13 with its list of cargo would suggest this. While the NIV interprets the final commodity with the chilling climax of “human beings sold as slaves,” I believe the RSV with its’ “and slaves, that is, human souls” is more accurate. Cf και ψυχας ανθρωπωνη

⁸ Taken from Rumi's poem the Edge of the Roof. The Rumi Collection, ed Helminski, K. Shamballa, Boston , 2005

⁹ Eph 5.14

¹⁰ <https://www.scross.co.za/2013/06/the-christian-of-the-future/>

¹¹ Ruffing 6.

¹² At this point I would like to acknowledge the dark even violent side of some mystics and their expression of mysticism. Some Serbian and radical Jihadist mysticism comes to mind. For a thorough discussion on this subject see: Appleby, R S. *The Ambivalence of the Sacred*. Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, Maryland.2000. See also *Buddhist Warfare* Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmyer, Oxford Press, Oxford. 2010

There is an uncomfortable anarchy about mysticism. One doesn't get a degree or study for a qualification in it. Mysticism emerges as gift from a deeper logic.

Surely, from the secular point of view, looking in from the outside, Webster's depiction of spirituality as a "Fleeing down the avenue of detachment. . ." could not find a better example than that of the mystics so often popularised as hermits and recluses living without a care for the world in walled monasteries, deep within the forest, in a cave or on a mountain top harmlessly self-absorbed and socially useless. However, enquire further and we find quite the opposite. Even a cursory glance at the lives of the great mystics will show that a strong and spiritually vibrant interior life is linked with a compassionate commitment to justice and a solidarity with the poor. In his book 'The Third Desert', Fabrice Blee maintains that in the search for inter-faith dialogue the surest avenue maybe through the shared monastic experience of the numinous and the equally shared responsive concern for compassion and justice.¹³

Certainly, the Old Testament 'Nabi' or prophets evidence this as any reading of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos or Micah demonstrate. Isaiah, touched by seraphim's fire is the same prophet who pleads 'Seek justice and encourage the oppressed.' Luke portrays the inauguration of Jesus' ministry as a sermon in a synagogue where Christ proclaims a new and just Kingdom proclaiming "set at liberty those that are oppressed." (4.18)

Considering Christian history, we find the reclusive mystic Anthony leaving his desert hermitage to protest to the Roman authorities about mistreatment of Christians. St Francis and Clare insist that

"... the body might preach without speaking, and in walking around, it might make visible what lies within."¹⁴ There is the service mysticism of Ignatius, in which the intimate love relation with God was expressed in action obliging him to work for the common good serving poor women and prostitutes, breaking racial and blood barriers in recruitment and establishing education and health care (as did Benedict two centuries before). Perhaps the greatest social justice movement up to its time were the Quakers, with their insistence on silent reflection and the 'inner light' that provoked their keen and robust passion for penal reform, anti-slavery, employment and care for the orphans and the destitute. In our own times, it is the Judaeo-Catholic mystic Simone Weil who turned Descartes on his head and wrote "I can therefore I am," or the renowned work of Theresa in the streets of Calcutta. Other engaged mystics of our own time like Teilhard d' Chardin, Thomas Merton, Dorothy Day, Matthew Fox have clear and resounding concern for justice. Outside the church; Thich Nhat Hanh and the engaged Buddhist movement all come to mind.¹⁵

What then provokes this critical consciousness of the mystic and contemplative minded? For Spiritual direction, both as directee and director there are weighty implications in this question to consider and reflect upon.

I think it is reasonable to begin by suggesting that spiritual practice is concerned with three great themes or mysteries; who is God, who am I, and what is the relationship between them?

While God cannot be examined in the way that the created order can, for God is *other than*, God's own self-revealing suggests characteristics best described as relational and with some care

¹³ Blee, F. *The Third desert*. trans. W. Skudlarek, M. Grady, Liturgical Press, Minnesota. 2011.

¹⁴ Certeau, M *The Mystic Fable*. Trans Michael Smith, Chicago University Press. 1986, 88

¹⁵ King,S. *Socially Engaged Buddhism*. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu, 2009

expressed as ‘person.’ Common threads of witness and experience from scripture point to the presence of God revealing compassion, mercy, peace, love and justice; or said another way, a comprehensive *shalom*.

“Who executes justice for the oppressed; Who gives food to the hungry The LORD sets the prisoners free. The LORD opens the eyes of the blind; The LORD raises up those who are bowed down; The LORD loves the righteous; The LORD protects the strangers; He supports the fatherless and the widow, But He thwarts the way of the wicked”. (Psa 146.7-9.)

Likewise, the assurance of scripture is that God’s presence *εἶναι με το Θεό*¹⁶ –is transformational. We are being shaped into and recovering the *imago dei* of the likeness of the character of Christ¹⁷. This is the forming of divine character in the mystic/contemplative that the Orthodox tradition refers to as *Theosis*.¹⁸ The character of Christ, so contra and inimical to the world and yet compassionate for the oppressed is by grace planted in us and glimpsed by degrees of the attentive human spirit.¹⁹ As Merton quips, “The Christ who sleeps like dynamite in the paper self.” This is the same *character of presence* we encounter on the journey and the same spirit that animated the prophets and courageously through the cross and subsequent resurrection Christ disarmed the world and its claims.

But if in the presence of God the world’s claims are challenged and undermined, there is also a corresponding challenge to our notion of the self and its legitimacy and nature. Biblically, this self is considered in terms of the flesh. With the juxtaposition of the old Adam and the new it is an important and expected course of spiritual formation to enquire of and even call into question our rather casual and unexamined acceptance of the self²⁰. Careful and reflective examination of its nature and character will begin the unmasking of its motivations and self-serving strategies. At the heart of this false self is the contingent persona (mask in Latin), in reality a social construct that is highly susceptible to being shaped by and conformed to cultural, familial, historical and societal influences of the world. It is the *me/mine* that stands distinct and defiant from the true self - deep, still and reposing at our centre and loved by God.²¹

Collectively the false self is the world. From its insecurities and irrationality, war, bigotry and oppression flow. From it society is divided into winners and losers. From it empathy is eroded to where the most oppressed are barely humanised in our thoughts and oppression accepted as just the way things are, a situation too complex and one best left to others.

That shaky edifice begins to crumble when the old Adam is recognised for what it is and begins to be deconstructed. This is much more profound than a fix it job - it is in fact a demolition. But this is no easy project, for the fiercely self-protective false self, any insight calling into question its business as usual permanence and substance can be painful and perplexing, and most often provoking an existential crisis. Never the less this insight into the false self, unnerving as it may be, holds the salvific possibility of ending the monopolising distraction and chatter of the false self thereby

¹⁶ Being with God.

¹⁷ 2 Cor 3.18

¹⁸ Theosis or deification is a transformative process whose aim is likeness to or union with God, as taught by the Eastern Orthodox Church and Eastern Catholic Churches. *Θεϊασ κοινωνοι φυσεωσ* (partakers of divine nature) 1 Peter 1.4

¹⁹ Matt 25. 31-46

²⁰ 1 Cor 15.45

²¹ Psa 42.7

permitting an alternative enquiry, the refocusing of our energies on justice and compassion leading to the discovery of the Spirit's presence within us as an empowering solidarity.^{22, 23}

I note Janet Ruffing's irony that the discovery and displacement of the false self can lead to a new integrity "a self that is more self than the self can imagine itself to be and *surely more than society conventionally wants it to be.*"²⁴

OK, let's take a moment to tie some threads found here together. I would assert that the contemplative and mystical journey – the awakening to and reflective investigation God, self and that sacred relationship - far from passivity and detachment gives rise to a consciousness raising, subversive and a provocative animating of our deepest sense of justice, love and mercy.

If I can further expand on this by seven points for the readers consideration.

First, contemplative practice, and mysticism resists domestication. It is not captive of formal institutions. Still needing the Church as much as the Church needs them, mystics are nevertheless free spirits.

Secondly, mystic or contemplative spirituality resists the monopolisation of the world's grip simply by taking time out. We need to remember that passive resistance is not surrender or non-action as the cases of Martin Luther King and Gandhi clearly demonstrated.

Thirdly, mysticism begins to frame the self vis a vis God in a deep sense. This framing points to a transformation more aligned to the character of Jesus Christ; compassion and mercy, peace-making, love and allegiance to the shalom of another kingdom.

Fourth, the entrenched religious moralism and prescriptive dogma that wishes to shape adherents into polite members devoid of spiritual adventuring and curiosity is called sharply and critically into question. Here we could use Deridda's term of *counter-path* (contre-allee), a path that disturbs and haunts the established one. This counter-path is the beginning of the awakening from what Metz terms *bourgeois religion*, which he defines as a religious culture that *endorses the haves, the propertied, those whose seemingly guaranteed future allows them to take life for granted.*²⁵ In other words, the religious expression of the false self and the world.

Fifth, at a deeper level we apprehend our sacred connection and even interdependence with broader humanity and creation itself. As such it generates compassion beyond sympathy; a compassion requiring action and outworking.

Sixth, being in a greater awareness of and practice of God's 'presence' there is a growing observation of the mystery of God in our human life, and indeed the life of the earth. Trusting grace, having hope, developing a prayerful disposition; our reverencing of life leads to a wholesome confidence and Faith.

²² This examination of the false self is at the heart of Romans 7. In this chapter, we find the easily glanced over verse where Paul strips back and disassociates the false from his true nature saying "Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it." Ro 7.20

²³ Up to now I have avoided mentioning the chaos of religiously fuelled violence and oppression which is often led by prophets, mystics and seers including religious orders and contemplatives as per Buddhist monks in Sri Lanka. But the scope of that subject is well beyond the space of this short article. Interested readers should refer to Scott Appleby's *The Ambivalence of the Sacred* for a thorough discussion.

²⁴ Ruffing, J (RSM) *Mysticism and Social Transformation*. Syracuse University Press, New York. 2001. 12

²⁵ www.americamagazine.org/issue/571/article/messianic-or-bourgeois

Finally, personal discernment is accentuated. Discernment keeps us alert and invigorates our conscience to the preservation of human integrity while remaining watchful of any 'ism', movement or reductionist explanations that would seek to erode that integrity and dignity. In other words a robust and spiritually and prophetically grounded social analysis.

In summary, as Thomas Merton points out contemplation is like a spring where action is the stream that should it lose touch with its interior source becomes barren, but equally if the source cannot flow out into action it stagnates. Faith without works is indeed dead.

My own experience as a Christian contemplative, political representative and social activist is that in the milieu of activity and practice we often discover and experience the Grace and presence of God. It is not only through private piety we enjoy or discover God's presence, but we also discover in our solidarity with the oppressed a presence of God that can open for us deeper insight and revelation. I recall the hospitality of a widowed Christian woman and her four children in a central African slum. It was a singular moment of such a powerful presence of God that the memory persists and still influences me today. Scripture illustrates this 'presence in solidarity' beautifully when King Josiah discovered and 'knew' YHWH through his pursuit and advocacy of justice. Not dissimilar is the observation of Theresa of Calcutta when she remarked that in holding the dying street beggars and destitute she was in fact holding the body of Christ. It doesn't get more profound.^{26 27 28}

It is important to acknowledge the common experience of Christians involved in the ministry of social justice to eventually encounter dissonance between dogma and experience. The God presented so often in the Church or seminary is rarely ratified so concisely by experience. If this occurs within a too rigid a religious framework, the result is disillusionment, a damaged Faith and commonly a falling away. But, while distressing, it can also be courageously transformational and provide a gateway to a new understanding of God. Said plainly, it dislodges false, incomplete and incompetent Gods. As the Zen proverb goes, "if you see the Buddha on the road, strike him." I'm not suggesting the same for Christ, but striking the refresh button from time to time and rediscovering Christ with a fresh perspective is liberating.

My work at TEAR Fund brought me into challenges of contradiction and the need to recalibrate and adjust my faith and understanding in the face of these new circumstances and realities. I'll share one story in particular.

While visiting an internally displaced persons (IDP) camp in Northern Sri Lanka within a week of the defeat of the insurgent Tamil Tigers, I held in my arms a newly widowed woman who had lost her entire family and livelihood through a bombing. Caught in the military cross fire she had lost everything. She only had a handful of photographs of a once happy life; pictures of a daughter, pictures of two sons, pictures of her wedding day. As she wept convulsively the depth of her grief and the silence of God was unbearable. As she parted from me she turned quickly to another IDP and placed the photographs before them. They waved her away with a look that said "we've all lost so much. Your grief is just another, leave us to our own". I struggled deeply about this injustice and God's apparent impotence. It tormented me over the coming weeks. Was this the tipping point of my Faith after so many contradictory assaults on my faith; the Asian tsunami, the tragedy of

²⁶ He defended the cause of the poor and needy, is this not to know me says the Lord? Jer 22.16

²⁷ "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite" Isa 57.15.

²⁸ Matt 25.31-46

Palestine, a child glimpsed in Thailand whisked away for sex with a stranger, the faces of two Burmese children who were the sole survivors of their village following cyclone Nargis, the mother in an Indian slum who begged me to pray for her badly spina bifida infant? All these I had managed with grit to accommodate and avoid more critical reflection. I had held, though barely, my image of a just creator God. But now I couldn't. In truth, the tidy apologetic which served my faith's security was breaking apart. I was absolutely and stoically prepared and ready to walk away from my 30 years of Christian life and ministry.

A few weeks later I attended a missions meeting in Colorado Springs, USA. Amidst endless worship choruses of Hillsong I had had enough and I just got up and left. Outside in fresh air I sensed an impulse to walk up into the Rocky Mountains and go as far away as I could get. There, during a setting sun glowing on red sandstone I felt God's spirit urging me to an honest doubt and a releasing of my tears and frustration. Not audible, but in the poetics of the Psalmist 'deep spoke unto deep' at that moment with a loving assurance to just sit and wait. It wasn't my job to defend God. It wasn't my job to create or stir up Faith. My job was to sit and wait. That was nearly 10 years ago. Walking back down in the darkness I began a journey that stripped bare some long-held assumptions and 'sacred cows.' It was not an easy journey forward with the deconstruction of my faith and cherished idols. The observation of my own character and nature at times was perplexing, painful and even fearful. But somewhere as I began a regular practice of silent open contemplative sitting a slow but relentless reshaping of faith began. What emerged was a faith and sense of presence and connectivity more mysterious but yet more substantive and resilient. To this day, I continue to sit and wait with a God I hadn't previously known on a journey yet complete. Neither I nor God seem to be the same and I am OK with that.²⁹

This brings me to a final point to raise and one which could occupy a much larger piece research, but which I note here in passing. It the question of what is the role of the Spiritual Director or Companion in this?

Taking Pickering's statement that Spiritual Direction supports a directee *to grow in intimacy with God, and to live out the consequences of this relationship*, those consequences that are suggested in this paper have social and political implications. Perhaps more than in times past, the Director needs to be able to link action and reflection that supports an authentic spiritual and sacred praxis. To be clear, I am not implying or suggesting that the director has some responsibility to politicise a directee, but a director should expect and be prepared to support a holy *conscientization*; that is the prophetic animation of social awareness and consciousness, as it naturally arises for the directee in our modern spiritual context. That will mean that Spiritual Directors will need to have some familiarity with issues around social analysis, power, gender, poverty, environment vis a vis the biblical context of social justice and prophetic critique. In truth, the Spiritual Director is a co-conspirator, albeit submitted to the Spirit, in the undermining of the damaging, spiritually limiting and dehumanising claims on the directee of the world and false self.

²⁹ Within the evangelical tradition, I was part of I couldn't find anyone who could teach me the art of contemplative sitting. Committed to finding instruction I turned to the Auckland Zen Centre and came under the respectful guidance of a Zen Sensai from which I learned basic Zazen. I remain deeply grateful for that Buddhist encounter and encouragement.

Dorothee Soelle writes that

“Only through mystical prayer (Christian contemplative and mystical disciplines) can one embrace a life of resistance that declares a radical no to individuals, governments and social systems that oppress and demean others.”³⁰

In this spirituality of resistance, we are opening ourselves to a relationship with Christ that will challenge, disturb and change us. Yet it is also one of stepping into a new state of ‘aliveness.’ *The Great Turning* that Macy speaks of is the Great Spiritual adventure. And, surprisingly, it is not about building a better world as much as about loving the one we have and a compassionate attention to those who inhabit it. It is in a sense about being sacramental activists or even amateur and engaged hesychast. The term I use is *sacravists*, a word synthesis of sacrament and activist. In our actions and life, we are as the old catechism goes “the outward and visible evidence of an inward and invisible Grace.” Strengthened by a sacred praxis, a discipline of action and reflection where closet, cushion, justice and presence meet. Learning to hear the voice of God through contemplative enquiry, we learn to hear better the voice poor and oppressed and perhaps catching the voice again of God’s cry through them. Going beyond the attachments and vacuousness of the false self and the disastrous demands of the world, we move from being merely human to being *really* human, with the capacity to love and serve Christ through serving others.

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