

Wisdom

Epiphany and Enlightenment

Session 6: Seeing Through Wisdom
The Rev. John Elliott Lein — February 16, 2020

Wisdom in Review

Wisdom is “*a precise and comprehensive science of spiritual transformation that has existed since the headwaters of the great world religions and is in fact their common ground.*”
—The Rev. Cynthia Bourgeault¹

Wisdom is found in a balance of three centers of knowing: mind (understanding), heart (reconciling), and body (instinct, senses). To be identified solely with the rational mind (ala Descartes) is called “being asleep.”

Wisdom is a **way** not an object; “how you get there is where you’ll arrive.” This way may include sudden epiphanies but usually after many years of disciplined **practice**.

There are many scriptures and practices in the Christian wisdom stream (in addition to other traditions) that can give us the foundation for this work. Some include:

- *Centering Prayer*: resting in the presence of God
- *Lectio Divina*: transformation through sacred reading
- *Chanting Psalms*: vibration and harmony in song
- *Icons*: visual contemplation as a portal to God
- *Eucharist*: sacrament as spiritual discipline

Training our sight

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

- Developing wisdom can also be understood as “learning to see with the eyes of the heart.”
- The *imaginal* is the realm where we start to experience the divine; through universal patterns, dreams, and symbols.
- The heart is an integrated instrument (not “just emotions”) of perception; intuition, symbolic-sensing, creative, extra-sensory awareness; an act of love.
- To “be original” is not capitalist individuation but rather “being connected to the origin.”
- “Polishing the mirror of awareness” is to free ourselves from the domination of the ego-self.
- “Objective seeing” is not about empiricism but about gazing until the subject dissolves and all is one with the seeing.
- In this training we must bring the imagination/fantasy under discipline, to stay in the present, to live in unitive vision through *lectio divina*, icons, chanting, etc.

Theology of Icons

“Christ flees when we try to embrace him with the intellect.”
—St. Bonaventure

- In Roman culture, the portrait of the emperor was considered an extension of his real presence. The tradition says that St. Luke the Gospeller was the first iconographer, creating an icon of the Virgin and Child.
- Iconography developed in the Byzantine Christian tradition and came into its own in the 5th century (the Byzantine Empire fell in 1453).
- Iconoclasm emerged in the mid-8th c. with a denial of Christ’s humanity, and Imperial forces led destruction of icons and iconographers until resolution in mid-9th c.
- The center of icons shifted to Russia in the second millennium, but they also continued in unique ways in Coptic (Egyptian) and Ethiopian traditions.

“Beauty will save the world.”

—Dostoevsky

- The beauty of icons is not understood primarily in their rendering, but in the harmony of the whole as transmitted through color, symbols, design, and proportions set in sacred tradition.
- The iconographer “writes” (not paints) icons according to strict canons. There is no role for individual expression in their creation, as it is taught that their compositions come down from the Holy Fathers.
- Any expression of the iconographer is in prayer and devotion, not in artistic flourishes.
- Icons are not “religious art.” They are a “sacrament,” a visible expression of the invisible: they are means to lead us into the very presence of that which they point.
- It is not their outward surface that excites the eye, but their inner truth that reveals itself through prayer and the heart.

Venerating Icons: Practice

“The pictures are not there just to be looked at as though the worshipers were in an art museum; they are designed to be doors between this world and another world, between people and the Incarnate God, his Mother, or his friends, the saints.”
—Linette Martin, *Iconographer*

To **venerate** is not to worship (reserved for God alone) but to recognize that one is in the presence of the holy people or acts that are depicted in an icon.

- **Using the body in deference and affection:** bowing, crossing, kissing.
- **Light candles and incense:** fill the senses, make visual markers of prayers, remind us of the light of Christ.
- **Gazing into heaven:** take time to be present, allow heaven to come.
- **Recognize features:** icons are symbolic, not “realistic.”

Learn the language:

- **Perspective:** reverse perspective brings all into eternity.
- **Landscapes:** symbol, not natural.
- **Faces:** not “real” but reflecting inner tranquility of soul.
- **Eyes:** lamp of the body.
- **Glowing:** the face glows inwardly, lit by gold.
- **Details:** may symbolize events and features.

Notes

1. Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing*, p. xvi.

Keep Reading:

- *Behold the Beauty of the Lord* by Henri J.M. Nouwen
- *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom* by Michel Quenot
- *Chanting the Psalms* by Cynthia Bourgeault
- *Becoming Wise: An Inquiry into the Mystery and Art of Living* by Krista Tippet
- *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind—A New Perspective on Christ and His Message* by Cynthia Bourgeault
- *The Wisdom Way of Knowing: Reclaiming an Ancient Tradition to Awaken the Heart* by Cynthia Bourgeault