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CATHOLIC PRAYER AND DEVOTION: A MULTIMODAL APPROACH TO HEALING OF GENDER IDENTITY

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Introduction

For people with SSA, healing of one's image of fathers and mothers is particularly important. Men with SSA will tend to see fathers as detached, unreliable, intimidating, abandoning, passive, or even abusive. They will tend to see mothers as overwhelming, intrusive, or needy.

Women with SSA will tend to have an image of fathers as emotionally absent, unpredictable, or angry, if not abusive; and mothers as needy, emotionally unavailable, abandoning, or incompetent. I need to emphasize that these images are a matter of perception and consequent emotional experience: their parents were not necessarily any of these things.

The key issue for people with SSA is the sense of a lack of "attunement" with both parents. The sense is that each parent is wrapped up in his/her own needs or issues, and fails to see, appreciate, and address the child's unique needs and personality. The child learns instead to adjust his/her needs and identity to what s/he perceives the parent wants. But with the parent of the same gender, the child eventually gives up trying to please and "defensively detaches" from that parent: "I give up; you won't accept me, so I will reject you."

(After defensive detachment, the SSA person experiences him/herself as "different" from the same-sex parent and "like" the opposite-sex parent. This leads to a second issue of feeling "different" from and unaccepted by same-sex peers. Because of time constraints, the present talk will focus less on healing the "same-sex peer wound" and more on healing the "parent wound".)

Healing, then, of the parent wound comes through the reparative experience of connection with, attachment to, a Father and a Mother absolutely attuned to my needs: who know me completely, are always and everywhere emotionally present, and have the capacity to meet my needs, however deep. Catholic prayer practices are uniquely suited to bring about this healing encounter with God our Father and Mary our Mother. The need for a sense of belonging to and acceptance by my same-sex peer group can be ministered to by Jesus and male saints, for men; and by female saints, for women.

Attachment happens on the sense level: the sound of my mother's voice, the taste of her milk or of the food she or my father give me, the smell of her perfume; or the feel of my father's beard, the sound of his voice, etc. Catholic prayer practices uniquely and fully involve the senses: the taste and feel of the consecrated bread and wine; the visual images of icons, holy cards, and pictures; the sound and feel of the Rosary prayers and beads; the sound of sacred music; relics and statues that we can touch; the smell of incense; the touch of blessed oil and holy water; sacred spaces we can walk in, see, hear, and breathe in.

The rest of my talk has the following structure: I'll talk about a Catholic prayer approach, illustrating the method, how it relates to SSA, and give some examples of how the prayer approach has affected SSA men I've worked with. I apologize for not having examples re: SSA women – I've done only a little work with women with SSA, and those women have been Protestant. Yet I'm confident that the following practices will greatly benefit them as well.

PRAYER METHODS

I'll offer three prayer methods: lectio divina; EA/CP; and acts of consecration. Because Scripture is so much more focused on the Trinity, and our relationship with the members of the Trinity, lectio divina lends itself especially to healing of wounds related to the father (for men and women), and to brothers and same-sex peers (for men). Although applied somewhat differently, Scriptures related to God as the passionate and pursuing spouse (from the Song of Solomon as well as the prophets) can also be very healing for both men and women with SSA, since both have a deep need to be sought out, pursued, and uniquely and specially loved.

Similarly, Eucharistic adoration is necessarily directed toward Jesus, and so is helpful particularly for healing of the brother/same-sex peer wound for men with SSA. However, Jesus as Lover and Spouse, or as a respectful, affirming male peer, present in the Eucharist can be very healing for women with SSA. Contemplative prayer may be directed to the Trinity as a whole or to Father, Son, or Holy Spirit separately.

The Scriptures regarding the Blessed Mother are powerful, but there are relatively few of them. Therefore, healing of the mother and female-peer wound is dealt with mostly in the section on acts of consecration.

Lectio Divina ("Chewing on Scripture")*:

Lectio divina means slowly, prayerfully, deeply meditating on a word, verse, or passage of Scripture – sucking the marrow out of it. The SSA person particularly needs to know that his/her needs are valid; that his/her uniqueness is respected and precious; and that God knows just what s/he needs, and will speak through His Word to just what the person needs. That's why it's crucial to go with what particularly grabs you, and trust that God is working through that for the healing you need.

What images of God most grab you – God as Father? Guardian or Shepherd? Jesus as Brother, Friend, Spouse? As Bread of Life, Water? The Holy Spirit as Advocate, Fire, Mighty Wind, the One Who makes you His temple? God/Jesus as Lord, King? Rescuer/Redeemer? What Scripture stories or passages speak to you most about who God is and who you are?

Are you Lazarus, bound up and needing to be raised from death (Jn 11)? The woman caught in adultery, unexpectedly freed from condemnation (Jn 7:53-8:11)? The paralyzed man, not quite sure if he wants to be healed (John 5:1-15)? The Prodigal Son, unexpectedly welcomed and loved by a Father who waits and hopes for you (Lk 15:11-32)? The dry bones, feeling that your hope is cut off, you're hopelessly damaged or fragmented (Ezekiel 37)? Judith, finding that with God's help, you can win any victory (Judith 12:10-13:20)? The bride in the Song of Songs, on fire with love for God, longing to be embraced by Him? Needing reassurance that with God, you can face any obstacle (Is 43:1-7)? Needing to know God as a devoted Father (Hos 11:1-4)? Needing the fire of the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:1-13)?

What images of the Blessed Mother most grab you?

- Mary as Disciple (Lk 1:26-56; Acts 1:14, 2:1-4)?
- Joyful Mother (Lk 2:1-18, 41-50)?
- Mother of Sorrows (Lk 2: 25-35; Jn 19:25-27)?
- Queen (Rev 12:1-6)? Intercessor (Jn 2:1-12)?

**Please see the Endnotes for a more detailed listing of Scripture passages for Lectio Divina*

Mary Magdalene can be a powerfully healing Scripture figure for both men and women with SSA: specially redeemed from her shame and chosen by Jesus (Jn 7:53-8:11; Jn 20:11-18); and specially affirmed and deeply loved by Jesus (Lk 10:38-42; Jn 12:1-8). What a beautiful passage when Jesus calls her by name - "Mary!" - on Easter morning. How good it is to be seen and called by name by Love Himself!

Process:

- Option 1: Take one of the above passages, or any favorite passage. Read it through several times, slowly. Then “chew” on it: stop at words or phrases that speak to you; be aware of what stirs your heart; dialogue with the Lord about it; take your time, let it soak in.
- Option 2: If it’s a Scripture story, picture the place; involve all the senses (who do you see; what are the surroundings; what does it look/smell/feel/taste/sound like; what character are you in the story (e.g., the Prodigal Son; the older brother; a bystander)? The more vivid, the better; again, attend to what stirs your heart and dialogue with the Lord (F, S, or HS) or the Blessed Virgin Mary about it.

Example: One man I was working with experienced the following. Daily, for several months, he kept going back to passages from Isaiah, chapters 39 through 55. He chewed on them over and over again and found them extraordinarily nourishing and healing. He had found his father intimidating and rejecting. From a large family under great financial stress, he came to feel that he was a burden to the family. Isaiah 43:1-7 really grabbed him (the passage on which the song “Be Not Afraid” is mainly based). It reassured him that God was a protecting father, not a father to be protected from; that he was precious and beloved by God. Other passages from Isaiah 39 through 55 had to do with God calling him for a special purpose and mission; these helped heal his sense of being a burden, as being “in the way”. He was meant to be and it was good that he had been born.

Eucharistic Adoration/Contemplative Prayer:

I place these together because, although not identical, they address very similar needs in the SSA person. Both address the need to experience God’s loving, absolute, uniquely geared (attuned) presence with and attention to me, just as I am.

People with SSA have forsaken their true selves in favor of the self they feel their father or mother wanted them to be. In their perceptions, they have gotten rewarded for acting out of the false self (often, the “good little boy” or the “tough little girl”) and punished for acting out of the true self (the assertive, grounded, centered self). The fear is, “If I am myself, you will abandon or reject me.”

In EA/CP, you will experience that God is intensely interested in you just as you are; that He longs to connect with you; that He delights to gaze on you and enjoy your presence, exactly as you are. Because shame about one’s body and one’s appearance are so common with SSA, it can even be helpful to imagine yourself literally naked before the Lord. You can allow Him to gaze on you exactly as you are, including physically, with pure, complete love and acceptance.

Process: The “method” of EA and CP is very simple, yet challenging:

- 1) If you’re just starting adoration or CP, set aside, at first, 15 minutes, but don’t cut that time short. Gradually increase the time to, e.g., 30 minutes or if possible, an hour.
- 2) Begin by being aware that you’re in God’s presence (either in the Eucharist or His presence within and all around you). With contemplative prayer, it can be helpful to have a religious image – e.g., a picture or a crucifix – to focus on.
- 3) Make an act of faith that simply to sit in His presence is truly prayer, and that God is doing something whether you sense it or not.
- 4) It’s more about Him gazing on you than you gazing on Him
- 5) The prayer is simply sitting in His presence – not petitions, not the Rosary, not journaling, not reading, not even listening for Him to speak. These are all good things, but do those at a different time.
- 6) Be ready for your thoughts to be off to the races almost immediately. (Watching the sun rise over a mountain.) St. Teresa of Avila compared our thoughts during adoration/CP to a little dog that sniffs at every tree and bush. Just keep gently recalling yourself to prayer: “I’m here for God to gaze on me, and me at Him.”
- 7) You’re experiencing “radiation therapy”: you will gradually, over time, begin to realize that God is doing something very important through the prayer.

Example: I was working with a gentleman with SSA. His parents’ marriage was quite unhappy. His father had greatly favored his younger, more athletic, less sensitive, and more assertive brother. His mother had “emotionally espoused” him as a confidante, disrespecting his boundaries by, e.g., walking into the bathroom or his bedroom while he was

showering or getting dressed. After college, after several dependent relationships with heterosexual men, he realized that he was using them to “medicate” his sense of inferiority, loneliness, and rejection. When he felt compulsively led to call one of them, he instead spent a half hour or more just sitting and “hurting” in God’s presence. The pain would at first intensify, but reliably, it would get less intense and be replaced with a sense of peace and consolation. As he persevered, he began to experience a decreased neediness and increased sense of solidity and “fullness”. He began to experience greater freedom and health in how he related to heterosexual men.

Acts of Consecration:

A major struggle and area of healing for people with SSA is ambivalence: having opposing feelings regarding the same object. The ambivalence extends to people of the same sex, in that I may at the same time envy them and despise them; but also to people of the opposite sex, in that I may both feel more at home with them, yet be fearful of them or holding a lot of repressed anger at them. I may have conflicting emotions about my own body, which I may be both fascinated by and ashamed of. People with SSA typically have strong ambivalence toward each of their parents. And there is conflict regarding their own SSA, because they may long to be free of it yet dread losing it for fear that there’ll be no comfort to replace it.

Because of this ambivalence, acts of consecration can be quite powerful. They are, by definition, a wholehearted, unambivalent, absolute surrender of oneself to relationship with God, the Blessed Mother, or one of the other saints. Acts of consecration actively work against and heal the fear of deep, intimate, vulnerable, open relationship with the same sex and the opposite sex that SSA men and women struggle with. Also, because consecrations implicitly or explicitly are surrenders of the whole person (body, mind, soul, and spirit), they help unify the internal divisions of the SSA person, who wants to serve God and be chaste, but have to battle with the pull of the body.

The purpose of the surrender/consecration is to enter into relationship with that person. All Christians, of course, believe in relationship with Jesus; the wisdom of Catholic teaching is that we can also enter into a real relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary or any of the saints, just as we can with Jesus.

Popular acts of consecration include the “Anima Christi”; “My Queen, my Mother”; Consecration to the Sacred Heart of Jesus; the Morning Offering; and St. Louis de Montfort’s consecration to the Blessed Mother. Just do a web search on “acts of consecration” and a bunch will come up.

I’d of course recommend consecration to Jesus – the Anima Christi (Soul of Christ) is a wonderful one. But after that, I particularly encourage consecration to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to St. Joseph. SSA people of both sexes, but for different reasons, generally have major problems feeling safe with and connected with either parent.

Relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary is ideally suited to addressing the “mother wound” It also opens one up to a whole new depth of holiness. Mary is the perfectly attuned Mother, who asks for nothing but gives everything; who is truly “all about you”. She nurtures without smothering and loves completely without trampling boundaries. She is the icon of strong, complete, nonintrusive, and respectful motherhood and femininity.

The Blessed Mother longs to mother us as she mothered Jesus. Go to catholic.com (Catholic Answers) and do a search on “relationship with the Blessed Mother”, and you’ll find good tips. The Rosary is another wonderful way to enjoy Mary’s presence, similar to how contemplative prayer enables us to enjoy God’s presence.

Similarly, relationship with St. Joseph can bring great healing in the area of fathering. He may feel more accessible to some men and women than God the Father. One can draw from St. Joseph’s quiet, strong, protective foster-fatherly presence. He quietly leads, based on of his own attunement to God the Father, who guided him step by step through dreams. As brothers and sisters of Jesus, we can receive what we need in human fathering from the same man that Jesus received it from.

I recommend an act of consecration to Jesus and Mary daily. It’s just a great way to start one’s day.

Examples:

- The effects of relationship with the Blessed Virgin Mary can be quite powerful across the board. I don't have examples specific to SSA but am very confident that the effects would be at least as powerful. My own experience of consecration to Mary, in which I entered into relationship with her, was that she's like the ruby in a laser. As the ruby takes ordinary light and greatly increases its intensity and power, she deepened my love for Jesus indescribably. In men with a deep devotion to Mary, I've seen a peaceful, gentle, strong masculinity that made me say, "I want that!" In women, I saw a nurturing, joyful, peaceful femininity.
- The effects of relationship with St. Joseph are subtler but real. In my own life, I've experienced a greater sense of groundedness and calm as a husband and father. There's a security in knowing he loves me, and I love him. He's very cool! My wife has experienced him as the saint and foster-father who comes through in the clutch: if she has a particularly heartfelt need, she gives it to him.
- A little note on the Sacred Heart: because issues of feeling safe in relationship can be prominent in SSA, the idea of resting within Jesus' Heart can be very healing. The same is true of Mary's Immaculate Heart. Imagine climbing into the wound in Jesus' side and finding inside His Heart a warm, safe resting place. Ask Mary to hold you in her heart – or in her womb – as she held Jesus in her heart and in her womb.

ADDENDUM

I. "Looking Through"

It can be very helpful to take the aching longing for connection with someone of the same sex and bring it to Jesus; to the Father; to Mary; to St. Joseph. Jesus is "the Man"; Mary is "the Woman". Gaze through the object of your longing to them. As you gaze through the object of longing or temptation, let yourself know, "S/he doesn't have what I need, but Jesus/the Father/Mary/St. Joseph does."

II. Useful Scriptures for Lectio Divina

- God wants me truly to desire healing
John 5:1-15 The Healing at the Pool
- God can overcome any obstacle in my life
Exodus 14:10-31 Crossing the Red Sea
Isaiah 43:1-7 "Fear not! I have chosen you..."
Ezekiel 37 The Vision of the Dry Bones
Judith 12:10-13:20 Judith's Victory over the Enemy
Mark 2:1-12 Jesus Heals the Paralytic
John 9 The Man Born Blind
- God forgives me, frees me from shame and accepts me as I am
Mark 1:40-43 Jesus Cleanses the Leper
Luke 7:36-50 Mary Magdalene Washes Jesus' Feet with Her Tears
John 7:53-8:11 The Woman Caught in Adultery
John 21:15-19 Jesus Heals Peter's Denials
- Jesus is the answer to all of my desires
John 4 Jesus the Living Water
John 6 Jesus the Bread of Life
Philippians 3:7-14 "I want to be found in Christ..."
Revelation 21:1-7 The Fulfillment of All Desires
- God especially loves me and chooses me
 - When I feel abandoned and forgotten: Isaiah 49:14-23 "I will never forget you..."
 - As His beloved child: Hosea 11:1-4 "When Israel was a child, I loved him..."
 - As His forgiven child: Luke 15:11-32 The Prodigal Son
 - As His chosen disciple: John 15:1-17 Jesus the True Vine
 - As His beloved friend: John 20:11-18 The Risen Jesus Appears to Mary Magdalene

- I am safe in God's protection

Psalm 23	The Lord, My Shepherd
Psalm 131	I Am a Child in God's Lap
John 10:1-10	Jesus, the Good Shepherd

- God calls and empowers me

Isaiah 49:1-7	God Calls Me and Gives Me Strength
Jeremiah 1:4-10	God Called Me from My Mother's Womb
Acts 2:1-13	God Fills Me with the Holy Spirit and Power

- God passionately loves and desires me

Song of Solomon 2 (really, the whole book): each of us, male or female, is "the bride" because we are part of the Church; Jesus/the Lord is the groom) "Arise, my darling..."

- Mary is my Mother, given by Jesus John 19:25-27 "Behold your mother..."