

## A REFLECTION ON REVERENCE

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What is reverence and how does it come about? Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations; from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe lies outside our control: God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. Reverence remembers what it means to be human.

Reverence is a virtue that keeps us from trying to take control of other people's lives. An irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself. As a result an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself, ordinary people, prisoners, homeless, addicted, disabled, mentally ill, children. Also there are many differences among people and cultures and so true reverence must rise above personality and cultural differences.

Even if our goal is justice, giving each one his or her due, this is not enough for a healthy society. Justice can be arrogant, rough, harsh, cruel; without reverence justice can tear people apart. Every aspect of human life gives occasion for reverence: the God we worship, family life, education, sports, music, the military, a funeral, birth, sex and marriage in the right form can all be occasions for reverence. E.g. at a funeral people will talk about the deceased, they will tell the truth as they remember it, they will share sorrow and silences and this will be for them an occasion of reverence. Together they will be conscious of the fragility of their own lives and perhaps feel a sense of awe at the immensity of the reality that does not conform to human wishes, the reality of death.

So the question remains: what sort of thing is reverence? Once we are clear on that, we can proceed to ask what it truly requires of us.

Reverence is a virtue and a virtue is a capacity, cultivated by experience and training, to have attitudes and emotions that make you feel like doing good. Reverence then is the capacity for an attitude or feeling that there is something larger than a human being and this is accompanied by capacities for awe and respect. We feel awe for what we believe is above us all as human beings, and this feeling helps us to avoid treating

other human beings with contempt. Reverence enables us to feel the right degree of respect in each case. You can know that your feelings of respect spring from reverence if you feel and show respect for your underlings as well as for your superiors.

Reverence does not let us forget our common humanity. If we take on airs of superiority or know it all or attack we forget our humanity. We are tempted to regard as inferior, strangers, people who are different or others whom we judge do not know as much as we do. I don't have to like you or approve of you to show respect for you with sincerity. Our place as a human being is at bottom no different from anyone else, vulnerable to error, temptation, failure but also truth, strength and achievement. An act of respect says that

none of us is all knowing or all powerful that no one can play god and get away with it. The act of respect means I cannot get away with treating you like dirt, no matter who I am. No matter how low, how immature, how foolish or how weak I think you are, reverence does not allow me to overlook our common humanity.

A reverent person first listens to other people even when in some way they are inferior. Listening helps us remember that we are human together with them. Reverence overlooks differences of culture, social class, age and even gender and looks to the unique human person and life in each one with a sense of wonder. Reverence is about just being human, this unique human and not about a distinctly white, black or mentally ill human. One who remembers his humanity remembers how to feel. So to present yourself to another as all knowing, as superior, as condescending, is to forget your humanity and lose reverence for the other. Overconfidence is an ever present danger and the best defense against it is listening to others with reverence. As Kipling wrote: "In my brother's voice I hear my own unanswered agonies."

So reverence must stand in awe of something, not only something that reminds us of human limitations but something or someone that cannot be changed or controlled by human means, is not fully understood by human experts, something mysterious or transcendent. Reverence is a humble attitude that knows the limits of human knowledge and never presumes to know everything about the other. Reverence is always open to learning. So even though you may actually know more than the other,

good leaders, good teachers, good helpers listen to the people before them and in this they are reverent. Every encounter with another is an opportunity to learn. A reverent person does not speak as if he has nothing to learn from others. And perhaps the peak of reverence is achieved when we recognize, affirm, validate, appreciate and believe in and promote the human good we find in others.

An open, humble, listening reverence gives all of us the power to change, change in attitude, feeling, perspective, direction, and hope.

(Source: Paul Woodruff, *Reverence: renewing a forgotten virtue*, Oxford Univ. Press 2001)

Theologically we can gain insights into reverence by reflecting on the kenosis of Christ, his emptying of himself, as a revelation of how God relates with the world, and also our relationship with God and with each other. In the example of Christ we see that it is precisely the suffering of love that holds the key to resisting the suffering of the world. Jesus' self emptying is not about self-denial, self sacrifice, but about self-sharing. God's self-emptying is not only God's giving to the world, but also God's openness to and acceptance of the world. It is a relationship that takes in both giving and receiving: emptying the self also involves making room for the other, reverence for the other in his or her uniqueness. Reverence involves valuing, respecting and caring for the unique being of every creature.

What Jesus was about was lived out in his relationships. The meaning of his life is about drawing everyone into relationship with each other and with God. So in his emptying not only is the self totally given to the other; it is also totally open in acceptance of the other. So Christ's self-emptying is an openness and reverence for the unique being of every creature. This reverence values each creature for its own sake and therefore resists destructive suffering and does everything possible to foster the well-being of all creatures. In Jesus God is engaged in the reality of suffering. God's way of relating is openness to the other, vulnerability, service, involvement, generosity, forgiveness, the suffering of love. God gives everything and is fully engaged with the world, but in

a way that encourages and empowers the world's full participation and responsibility in the relationship.

So mutuality is essential to authentic relationship. Giving to others is important but receiving what they give is equally so. It signifies that they have worth and dignity in our eyes, which is at the heart of what love is about.

If we are to love as Jesus loved we have to learn and practice what love concretely consists in. We are to pattern our lives and relationships after God's self-emptying love: God's reverent valuing of every other whom God has created. Reverence means valuing the other for itself, awe for the sacredness and mystery of its being, concern and care for its welfare and resistance against any violence to it, and working toward the conditions that promote its potential and flourishing.

Reverence is the fundamental attitude which acknowledges the intrinsic worth of each creature, and the gift that its life is to us as well as its rights and its claims. Furthermore it is a way of life and of structuring the world that does whatever is necessary to ensure the life, well being and rights of every creature. And true reverence looks to the individual person. Treating people in general terms as white, black, Latino, Muslim, homeless, mentally ill, addicted, ex-offender, etc. can hinder us from seeing the unique and real person in front of us. Stereotyping can block us from seeing the individual truth of the other and thus deny his needs, rights and claims and potential. This can make us oversimplify and exclude what we do not want to deal with. Generalizing allows us to ignore and dismiss the concrete, personal suffering of others and desensitize us to the reality of their suffering.

Reverence acknowledges the value of what is unique and different and is willing to be open to this and engaged in it for the sake of the other. What is ultimately important is the actual, concrete human being, the one whose very being and life depend upon its relations and upon how it is treated by others in a personal way. This means that one is willing to be affected by the other in a way that entails giving part of oneself over to the other. We cannot impose our own vision and desire

but further allow the other to be his own unique self if he is to truly thrive. Simply giving to another and doing good to another without openness to that other is not reverent love.

True reverence means that room is made for the other. Love does not set preconditions on its acceptance; it allows the other into the self and opens itself to the difference this makes. It means letting oneself be acted upon by the other, letting oneself be changed by the other. However reverent love causes one to enter into the suffering of another and to agonize over what happens to them but it also means that the acceptance of the other lays the self open to suffering such as rejection, hurt, misunderstanding, anger, manipulation, abuse etc. Reverent love can have a cost. But true reverence can rise above all this and focus on the other as an intrinsic value in itself and for its own sake. Being open means allowing oneself to be affected and being at risk of receiving pain. Both are forms of suffering to which love must be open if it is to maintain reverence for the other. The God in Jesus refuses to be anything other than reverent toward the people that God loves, even when it caused him intense suffering. In this He is revealing God's unconditional love. Jesus dies because he remains faithful to God in the face of the world's rejection. God still wants love, fellowship, reverence, openness, communion with each one of us. God is open to the world in its otherness in self-sharing, and reverence, and in all that this brings with it, simply because God loves. E.g. if my dearest friend hurts me or has a serious personal problem, that hurt becomes part of our relationship, but it is not essential to the relationship; rather I choose to accept its impact because I have chosen to allow my friend into my life. I accept that pain only because I keep on loving. In Jesus God embraces the suffering of the world in love only to overcome it eventually. God is truly with us and we may be with God in our pain.

In summary, our reverence toward others is to be modeled after God's reverence toward us, that is, to value others for who and what they are and to take them seriously in their otherness. It is both an unreserved self-giving but also an unreserved acceptance: You, as you are and in what you are, are so important to me that I want to include you fully in the exchange of love. As the model for our way of being reverent God

shows us how to be open and reverent, inclusive and sharing, how to value each being for itself and care for its fullness of life.

(Source: Jane E. Linahan, *The Kenosis of God and Reverence for the Particular*. Dissertation, Marquette University, Milwaukee WI, 1998)