

HUMAN INTIMACY AND DIVINE UNION

By Richard Rohr, OFM

Christ is the bread, awaiting hunger. – St. Augustine

Which comes first? Does feeling safe and held by God allow you to deal with others in the same way? Or does human tenderness allow you to imagine that God can and must be the same, but infinitely so? I don't suppose it really matters where you start; the important thing is that you get in on the secret from one side or the other. Yes, "secret," or even "hidden secret" is what those like the Psalmist (25:14), Paul, Rumi, Hafiz, Bonaventure, Lady Julian of Norwich and many mystics called it! Jesus praises God for "hiding these things from the learned and the clever and revealing them only to the little ones" (Matthew 11:25). So what is it that we learned and clever ones cannot see?

The big secret is this: An infinite God actually seeks and desires *intimacy* with the human soul. Once you experience such intimacy, or desire for such union, only the intimate language of lovers describes what is going on for you: mystery, tenderness, singularity, specialness, changing the rules "for me," nakedness, risk, ecstasy, incessant longing, and, of course, suffering. This is the vocabulary of the saints. *Our biggest secrets and desires are only revealed to others, and even discovered by ourselves, in the presence of sorrow, failure, need, when we are very vulnerable, and when we feel entirely safe in the arms of love.* When that happens, there is always a *broadening of being* on both sides. We are larger people afterwards. Those who never go there remain small.

And it is only when we are in such a tender place that God can safely reveal the "innards" of God to us. Those who are self-sufficient remain outsiders to the mystery of divine love because they will always misuse it. *Only the need of a beloved knows how to receive the need and gift of the lover, and only the need of a lover knows how to receive the need and gift of the beloved.* It is a kind of deliberate "poverty" on both sides. A mutually admitted emptiness is the ultimate safety net for love. "Fullness" cannot love because it leaves no openings, offers no handles, no give and take, nor is there any deep hunger. *Human vulnerability* gives the soul an immense head start on its travels, maybe the only start for any true spiritual journey. Our desire for intimacy or communion first creates the very hunger that God, with a little help from his friends, can then satisfy—yet never totally—in this world. In fact, the bit of satisfied desire only increases the desire—for more and again! It is a bottomless mystery.

The mystics (those who personally know the inner space of God) are aware that they have been let in on a big and wondrous secret. Anyone not privy to this inner dialogue would call such people presumptuous, foolish, or even arrogant. This is without doubt "God's secret, in which all the jewels of wisdom and knowledge are hidden" (Colossians 2:3). How do they communicate what is inherently a secret?

How do you pass on this intimate secret? How does it become unhidden? Well, *it becomes unhidden when people stop hiding*—from God, from themselves, and from at least one other person. Such risky self-disclosure is what I mean by intimacy and it is the way that love is transmitted. Some say the word "intimacy" comes from the Latin *intimus*, referring to that which is interior or inside. Some say its older meaning is found by *in timor*, "into fear." In either case, the point is clear. Intimacy happens when we expose our insides—and this is always scary. You never know if the other can receive what is exposed, will respect it, or will run fast in the other direction. You must be prepared to be rejected. It is always a risk. The pain of rejection after self disclosure is so great that it often takes years for people to risk again.

Because I am ordained, older, and have a public reputation, it is very easy for many people to put me on an utterly false pedestal. My greatest breakthroughs in spiritual direction and counseling invariably occur when I can mirror for the confidante my own struggles, failures, sin, neediness, and weakness. There are plenty to go around, I assure you. Once they know I am not above and beyond them, but exist

in trial and error just as they do, the floodgates invariably open: “If Richard is not at all perfect, then I can safely share my deeper secrets too.” Our fear of inferiority and the harsh judgments of others, seals everything inside of us. And how did I myself learn such a pattern of disclosure? Because many people have done the same for me! Even Jesus has revealed his “sacred heart” to me.

Spiritual wisdom is passed on from person to person, which is the real and lasting meaning of “apostolic succession.” You can only give away as a gift what you have yourself received as a gift. Without such human and divine encounters we cannot know God—or ourselves. It is the Trinitarian Mystery transferred to space and time—and us (The Divine Water Wheel of the Trinity is this: self emptying → outpoured to the other → vacuum immediately filled). One grows by leaps and bounds in such moments of intimacy. It might even be the only way to move forward, spiritually speaking.

God takes this risk every moment of our existence, and most of us run from such a divine seduction: “See, I have branded you on the palms of my hand,” Yahweh says to Israel (Isaiah 49:16). “I do not call you slaves, I call you my friends,” Jesus says (John 15:15). Or “You are my son, not my servant,” as Paul puts it (Galatians 4:7). How, we ask, could God “who is so rich—become so poor for our sake, [except] to make us rich out of his poverty” (2 Corinthians 8:9)? And that is exactly what intimacy always is, even from God. It is always an experience of “poverty” from one side or the other—or both. It is this opening that we all wait and long for. Then one side *calls forth* and even *creates* the other—and neither side needs nor wants to take the credit! *On some level, love can only happen between equals. Only some kind of vulnerability levels the playing field.* What Christians believe is that God somehow became our “equal” when he became Jesus. I hope you have been there, or there is something essential you do not know. It is called grace.

True human or divine intimacy is somewhat rare and very hard for all of us, but particularly for males and for all “important” people, who are trained to protect their boundaries, take the offense, and to be afraid of all weakness or neediness. God begins this glacial thawing by coming in male form as a Jesus figure—who exposes maleness itself as naked, needy, and nailed to a tree. Mind blowing, heart exploding, and surely impossible, most cultures would say! Only *those who have been there on some level would continue to gaze upon such an embarrassment and not turn away in discomfort* (Zechariah 12:10). Thus the transmission continues in space and time primarily through what Jesus calls again and again “the little ones.”

Let me end by quoting a recent posting to my blog (<http://richardrohr.wordpress.com>), Unpacking Paradoxes:

I think that many of us men, celibate men even more, are very afraid of intimacy. I would define intimacy as the ability to mutually share one’s needs, one’s wounds, or one’s weaknesses with another person. The sharing of our inner or interior world is always a risk, usually a fear of rejection, and thus many of us never go there. It might change our self image. But I am going to make a rather absolute statement: people who risk intimacy are happier and much more real people. They feel like they have lots of “handles” that allow others to hold on to them, and that allow them to hold onto themselves! People who avoid intimacy are always, and I mean always, imprisoned in a small and circular world. *Intimacy is the only gateway into the temple of human or divine love!*¹ And I really mean *only*.

One good thing about celibacy is that it can tell us that an awful lot of sex is not intimacy at all. The good thing about sexuality is that it creates an obvious and ideal container for true intimacy, at least now and then. I really wonder how one would know how to be intimate with God if you have never practiced mutual self-disclosure with at least one other human being. I sincerely doubt the possibility. (Is this the real meaning of “nakedness”?) Both healthy celibacy and sexual encounter

¹ CDs on Sexuality and Spirituality

demand deep and true intimacy, and both can be the most effective avoidance of it. (And I write this after almost 50 years in a celibate community of men, and after lots of counseling in a “strangely” sexualized world.)

Intimacy is not just a well kept secret of the soul, not just a mystery that defies logic, not just a poverty that we avoid; I believe vulnerable intimacy is the entrance into and the lynchpin between all human and divine love. It really does not matter which comes first, it is just important that we pass through this gate of fear and find what lives inside. Intimate love is the true temple that we all desire. I guess you have to want to love and to be loved real badly—or you will never go there.²

An edited version of this article will be a chapter in Fr. Richard Rohr's upcoming book, Immortal Diamond, due out in December, 2012

² Richard Rohr. (2011, December 28). Fear of Self Disclosure. Retrieved from <http://richardrohr.wordpress.com/2011/12/28/fear-of-self-disclosure/>

