

How Do We Know? Merton, Dostoevsky and the Question of God

Herman Sutter

You see, I shut my eyes and ask myself if everyone has faith, where did it come from? And then they do say that it all comes from terror at the menacing phenomena of nature, and that none of it's real. And I say to myself, 'What if I've been believing all my life, and when I come to die, there's nothing but the "burdock's growing on my grave?"' as I read in some author. It's awful! How - how can I get back my faith? But I only believed when I was a little child, mechanically, without thinking of anything. How, how is one to prove it?

(Dostoevsky, p.47)

'How do people know there really is a God?', Isabel asked me one night. She's six years old and often troubled by the world and its odd ideas. Her older sister, Lucia, constantly celebrates the presence of angels and fairies, finding evidence of their affairs everywhere she looks. The grace and joy of the miraculous doesn't come so easily to Isabel. She doesn't see the same magic her sister sees, and it troubles her.

It's one of those *High Noon* moments of parenting when a Dad is supposed to summon from his storehouse of stoic wisdom some grace filled *bon mot* of spiritual insight. But what did I say? Probably some vague platitude about God

always being right there with us even though we can't see Him, *like the air you breathe, dear...* Whatever I said, I knew immediately it wasn't satisfactory, but what with laundry to fold, a wife to kiss, and dishes to wash... her question quickly slipped right out of my mind. Until, that is, weeks later as I sat up late one night reading Merton's *No Man Is An Island*. I didn't have the sense to mark it at the time, but something I read recalled to me a passage from Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. Early in that dense symphonic work, in one of its most insightful passages, Madame Khoklakov (a wealthy widow and spiritual dilettante) visits Fr. Zosima (the beautifully wise old monk hidden at the core of the book). She has come, ostensibly, in search of a miraculous cure for her daughter's hysterical paralysis. But the more she talks, the more we realize that she has come not for her daughter – but for herself. In an oddly self-serving confession she boldly proclaims her selflessness and charitable urges to the old monk, then describes to him her fear of acting on them. Her fear of poverty, ingratitude, suffering, all of which she might bear, if only one thing...if only she could be certain there was a God:

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say that it all comes from terror at the menacing phenomena of nature, and that none of it's real. And I say to myself, 'What if I've been believing all my life, and when I come to die, there's nothing but the "burdock's growing on my grave?"' as I read in some author. It's awful! How - how can I get back my faith? But I only believed when I was a little child, mechanically, without thinking of anything. How, how is one to prove it?

Suddenly it occurred to me, perhaps I hadn't answered Isabel's question at all. As parents we think we know our children, know what they are like, often we sum them up by saying: *she's just like her mother*, or *she's just like her father*, etc. At our house, common knowledge is: Isabel is just like me. She has my sad eyes, she loves to write, and we both cry too easily. And because at 46 I am still awaiting my first real crisis of faith, I don't think I took her question seriously. And worse than that, I don't think I really heard what she was asking.

Reading Merton, thinking about Dostoevsky, and remembering Isabel I began to wonder: what if she wasn't asking, in effect: *Daddy, is there really a God?* What if she really is like me? What if she was asking the same question I have been asking most of my life, the question that presses me to read Dostoevsky and Merton, instead of say Shakespeare and Aquinas; not *does God exist?* But really, truly, and deeply - in our heart's core, *How do we know?*

How do we know?

How *do* we know there is a God? On the

surface the answer is clear: in most cases somebody told us; probably our parents. And how did they know? Their parents, the witness of the church, the example of the saints and martyrs? St. Lawrence, St. Lucia and St. Maximilian Kolbe all believed in something so deeply they were willing to die for it. Within our tradition there are even philosophical "proofs" for the existence of God, but consider comforting a six year old with a proof for God that begins with the existence of a chair? And ask yourself, how many martyrs gave their lives because they knew deep in their soul that there must be an unmoved mover?

How do we know? On the surface the answer is clear, but the surface doesn't speak to the loneliness we feel in our heart when someone we love has died, the desperation we feel when our dreams come crashing down around us, when our best efforts fall fruitless or rejected. To know that for thousands of years men and women have given their lives to God is one thing, to know God is quite another. I think that is why it was so much easier to say: *Yes, God exists. Don't worry, sweetheart. Go to bed!* than to consider a question that, though I believe it has been my own life long obsession, I have never consciously asked: how do we know?

It isn't my contention that Thomas Merton set out to write a reflection on how we know God, when he wrote his 1955 work, *No Man Is An Island*, but it is my contention that within that beautiful book he provides just that. The section of the book that I would like to focus on is entitled, "Mercy." It begins:

How close God is to us when we

come to recognize and accept our abjection and to cast our care entirely upon him! ...We learn to know Him, now, not in the "presence" that is found in abstract consideration... but in the emptiness of a hope that may come close to despair.

(Merton, p. 206)

Merton announces here that his topic isn't an "abstract consideration" of mercy, God's or ours, but the concrete results thereof. And clearly Merton is suggesting that through His mercy we may find our one true way of knowing God. His opening statement announces both linguistically and theologically the strangeness of what he is going to say. Linguistically it starts as a tentative question that is transposed mid-sentence into a proclamation: "How close God is to us when we... cast our care entirely upon him." And never does Merton imply that any of this is theoretical; he asserts it as a fact, a most literal truth.

His concept of mercy isn't sentimental in the least. He sees it as an instrument connecting us directly to God. He develops this idea further in a brief meditation on the beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful." Here he writes:

We can have the mercy of God whenever we want it, by being merciful to others: for it is God's mercy that acts on them, through us, when He leads us to treat them as He is treating us. His mercy sanctifies our own poverty by the compassion that we feel for their poverty, as if it were our own.

(Merton, p. 211)

It seems that he is asserting that to know God more fully, we must submit to His mercy. But this isn't a passive submission. Merton seems to be saying that this submission has an active element; we must bear that mercy to others, in essence become *instruments* of God's mercy, and that it is through that instrumentality we begin to truly know God. Of course an element of the mysterious nature of grace is behind all of this, but considered as an answer to a mysterious grace filled question, there is something that rings sonorously true.

"If we want to know God, we must learn to understand the weaknesses and sins and imperfections of other men as if they were our own." (Merton, p. 212) Clearly the poverty Merton speaks of isn't material, but spiritual, just as the commitment he prescribes isn't theoretical but actual. This is a concrete directive that cannot be avoided: "If we want to know God... then we must..."

Reading that phrase again as I write it, I wonder: was that the key that set off all this inter-textualizing? Was that the phrase that sent me scurrying back to Dostoevsky and the delirious Madame Khokhlakova? Perhaps, because I feel a need to turn back to her again just now.

When she visits the old monk and confesses her doubts and fears (centered, I would venture, on a fear of material poverty and spiritual anonymity) Fr. Zosima offers her an answer. His response is often dismissed as syrupy theology in an otherwise intellectually thrilling and brutally honest piece of social criticism. I, on the other hand, have always found it to be one of the most beautiful and overlooked passages in literature. First the old monk tries to soothe and reassure this anxious

dilettante, but then he offers her what has come to be known as his theology of "active love":

...there's no proving it. Though you can be convinced of it... By the experience of active love. Strive to love your neighbor actively and indefatigably. Insofar as you advance in love you will grow surer of the reality of God and of the immortality of your soul. If you attain to perfect self-forgetfulness in the love of your neighbor, then you will believe without doubt, and no doubt can possibly enter your soul. This has been tried. This is certain. (Dostoevsky, p.48)

When Merton tells us that if we want to know God, "we must understand the weaknesses and sins and imperfections of other men as if they were our own," is he not illuminating for us the mystical depths of Zosima's "active love"? Through the old monk Zosima, Dostoevsky tells us that if we love our neighbor "actively and indefatigably," through that love we will strengthen our faith, conceivably to the point of absolute certainty where "no doubt can possibly enter your soul."

I have always believed Zosima (or Dostoevsky) was right, but never understood how it is supposed to actually work. Merton, on the other hand, without mentioning Dostoevsky or "active love," clearly understands it. This is what I have gleaned from my reading of Merton's text as if it were a gloss on Dostoevsky's: to actively love my neighbor, I must open myself to the grace of mercy. To truly open myself to that grace I must

see that my neighbor's poverty is literally no different from my own; they are one. His poverty is mine as mine is his. To truly understand this I must understand that the "weaknesses and sins and imperfections of other men" are my own. If I understand this, then I can truly love my neighbor "actively and indefatigably." And the more we love in this way, the more certain we will be of God's presence. Merton reminds us that this merciful love isn't easy, and it isn't a simple intellectual exercise:

Such compassion is not learned without suffering. It is not to be found in a complacent life... *If we want to know God, we must learn to understand the weaknesses and sins and imperfections of other men as if they were our own.* [emphasis added] ...If my compassion is true, if it be deep compassion of the heart and not a legal affair, or a mercy learned from a book and practiced on others like a pious exercise, then my compassion for others is God's mercy for me. My patience with them is His patience with me. My love for them is His love for me.

(Merton p.212)

Emphasizing the cost of this understanding, Merton turns to the example of Christ on the cross, saying first that we must feel the poverty of others as Christ "experienced our own," (Merton, p. 212) adding even that we must "die as Christ died, for those whose sins are to us more bitter than death." (Merton, p. 212) If Merton is right, and his words are certainly harmonious with the images in Dostoevsky's novel (the two characters

who strive to live out "active love," Zosima and the youngest of the Karamazov brothers, Alyosha are both treated at times with varying degrees of ridicule, anger and outright hatred) then this theology of "active love," is anything but syrupy sentimentality.

What we see in Dostoevsky's novel is that it is a laborious effort, not unlike the way of the cross, involving many falls and much agony. But what we also see is that even through our failures God is working, and He never fails. An example of this in the novel is Alyosha's relationship with the Snegirov family. He first comes into contact with them, when he comes to the aid of the son who is being bullied by some boys. His efforts are rewarded by the boy with a ferocious bite on the finger. Later when Alyosha attempts to deliver some charity to the family, the gift is seen as an insult by the father, Capt. Snegirov, who tearfully throws the money in the dirt and stomps on it gleefully before running away. In the end though, it is through these early failures that Alyosha becomes a close friend of not only the boy and his family, but even the boys who originally were bullying him.

In fact, now that I think of it, perhaps the actual subject of Dostoevsky's novel is these seeming failures of "active love," and how God works His grace through them. What is it Christ says about the grain of wheat?

"Verily, verily, I say unto you, unless a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abides alone; but if it dies it brings forth much fruit."

John 12:24

Is it not most difficult to show mercy

when we are defeated, abused, and ridiculed? But is that not exactly when Christ asked His father to forgive us? Turning back to Merton's text, I find him asserting sanctification of our mercy by its reflection of God's own. Stating that it is somehow "a created reflection of His own divine compassion in our own souls. [And that] "therefore it destroys our sins, in the very act by which we overlook and forgive the sins of other men...my compassion for others is God's mercy for me. My patience with them is His patience with me. My love for them is His love for me. (Merton, p.211-212)

And there you have it... Is it not in that moment, right there, when through our merciful love for another that we find God's merciful love for us, and through that love, we find ourselves not as we have known us, but as God knows us... we find ourselves washed clean and standing impossibly but undeniably before the loving face of our God?

If you attain to perfect self-forgetfulness in the love of your neighbor, then you will believe without doubt, and no doubt can possibly enter your soul. This has been tried. This is certain.

(Dostoevsky, p.48)

The Struggle of Active Love

Whoever has two cloaks should share with the person who has none, and whoever has food should do likewise.

Luke 3:11

I have a friend, Dr. Charles Novo, who talks of the importance of being present to people. In his theory of this, we should give our attention completely to whom-

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ever we are with. We should attend to them with all our heart and all our mind. In his words, I wasn't *present* to Isabel. I didn't hear her question, regardless of what she meant or asked, because I was too busy thinking of what I would rather be doing. I saw her question only as a disturbance to be ably outmanoeuvred and disregarded once I shut off the lights and put the kids to sleep. If I had been present to her question, I would have found that she was opening a door for me, and there should have been no place on earth I would rather be than walking through that door with my daughter into the presence of our Lord.

But as I learned from Alyosha Karamazov, there will be other chances and I must be ready to say yes when they come. Have I ever gone back to Isabel with Dostoevsky's *active love* or Merton's *sanctified mercy*? Not yet. I wanted to finish this essay first. But now that it is done, I think I should ask her if she still wants to know, *how people know*. I sure hope she does.

There is a final Merton quotation that I would like to end with. It is a quotation

that, instead of encapsulating what I have tried to say, or reverberating with its echoes, actually opens the door to more questions. But I think it is the right way to end. Here goes:

"The fact that our being merely demands to be expressed in action should not lead us to believe that as soon as we stop acting we cease to exist. We do not live merely in order to 'do something'..."

Daddy, how do people know there really is a God? Well sweetheart... it isn't easy.

Works cited

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