

Learn about the practice of detachment

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS

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By Sister Mary Garascia

The last Sunday of November this year is the first Sunday of Advent, the beginning of a new liturgical or Church year. Our November Sunday readings often speak of end times, and of a kingdom that is not of this world. We are all headed toward that kingdom and our own end times. The only difference is that some of us are closer than others! So I've always thought that November is the month to make a new year's resolution instead of January 1.

A little true story: right after college I lived in Phoenix in a large convent housing for faculties. A group of Buddhist monks was traveling through town on a speaking tour of some kind, and they visited us. Among the things they told us was that their names were not their original names. In fact, they had all gone through several names.

They explained that one of the teachings of Buddhism is non-clinging: that is, that everything we see and experience is transitory, and the root cause of suffering is clinging to these transitory things. And so, whenever these monks started building up strong personal identities – memories, achievements and learning, relationships, desires, etc. – their practice was to let go of their names and accept the assignment of a new name. This practice, they felt, helped them not to cling to even to their personal individual identities that they inevitably built up over time.

Of course, I was shocked at this, imbued as I was with our Western culture in which individual identity, the individual self, is praised above all, its self-esteem valued and guarded.

The "end time" readings we hear at the end of this liturgical year invite us not to cling to things that pass, including our own lives. These "end time" scriptures were written in the first century, by Christians who thought the Lord would come in glory in their lifetime. But when that did not happen, these "end time" readings were chosen for inclusion in our New Testament, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Through the centuries they annually invite us reflect on our life-lines.

In our Catholic spirituality, rather than the "not clinging" of Buddhism, we have the practice of detachment as something important for spiritual growth. We don't agree that all suffering is caused by clinging, but we do try to follow Jesus' teaching that we must not let the desire for God be smothered by material concerns. Remember Jesus' parable about the people too busy with material concerns to come to the banquet (a metaphor for heaven)?

Besides the scripture-based idea of detachment from material things, our spirituality also prizes Ignatian indifference. St. Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, taught that when difficult life decisions must be made, through sustained prayer we can come to a deep trust that God will be present in whatever outcome happens or is chosen. We can become "indifferent" to the outcome, detached from being driven by disordered desires toward one choice rather than another, and so at peace. Married couples sometimes need this indiffer-

ence, this detachment, when they must choose where to locate when both have different employment, or when they must choose between their children's needs and their own.

Life also imposes painful situations on us that require detachment. Experiences of loss do this. A child dies. A spouse leaves. A business fails. We receive a terminal medical diagnosis. Our world and its certainties fall apart. We try to hold on to these things, but they are taken from us.

If we want to find meaning and joy again, we must detach ourselves from that which we treasured and lost. We must change our perspective or relationship to that which we lost. Think of St. Francis, who detached himself from clinging to life and befriended death, saying: "Be praised, my Lord, for our Sister Death, whom we must all face." Grieving is a long process of detachment. Dying peacefully requires detachment.

Another life situation requiring detachment occurs when we find ourselves imbedded in something we cannot change. It could be a difficult work situation which we try to make better but cannot, and where we must stay for financial reasons. It could be a difficult family situation we cannot leave. It could be serious concerns with our Church to which we are called and committed, or a cause we are passionate about, but one which despite our trying we fail to change.

In these "stuck" situations, we need to work toward spiritual detachment and reach a condition of peaceful resignation.

But there also is a great spiritual danger in situations we cannot change. I'm sure you've heard people say that things like this: nothing will never change; no one really cares what I think; problems are too complex anyway, so who knows what is the right answer is; the powers that be are too powerful for even organized groups (like voters, for example) to affect. A lot of people just drop out and retreat to the comfort of private lives.

Instead of becoming detached, they become defeated, indifferent in the wrong sense of not caring anymore because it hurts too much. Detachment must never lead to that. We need to stay in the fire, involved with the world, clinging with passion to possibilities and working to promote the best for the world which God loves.

So how will you and I do that in this next year? As we listen to those "end time" readings during November, let us pray for the gift of detachment and proper indifference. And let us also pray for the corresponding passion to work for the coming of the kingdom with renewed hope.

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