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“... it has not yet been revealed what we shall be....” (1 John 3:2)

There is a story told about a rabbi who was visited by some of the college students from his synagogue. “Rabbi,” they said, “we have a problem. It is the liturgy of the synagogue: we think it needs to be changed; it does not express the way we feel.”

The rabbi replied: “Children, it is not the job of the liturgy to express what you feel. Rather, it is your job to learn to feel what the liturgy expresses.”

Contained within these two seemingly simple statements are, in reality, two fundamentally divergent views of what it means to be human. These views are opposed to each other; they ultimately cannot be reconciled.

Let’s start with the rabbi’s response because it reflects the older view, and let’s call it the traditional view. In this vision of man, the human being is a work-in-progress. There is a definite goal or end in view for the human being and for which he is created. The purpose of life is, through effort and practice, to attain to this goal, this ideal. This will require much effort from us as it will involve a process of purification of our emotions, our passions, our desires, and of directing these purified energies toward the goal. In this view, the human being is full of potential that must be realized. Man, then, is a work of art. The raw materials of this art are all the things that make up the human being: body; soul; desires; emotions; mind; etc. But as in any work of art, these raw materials must be shaped and formed by an artist, one who knows how to transform paint and wood and stone and sound into a thing of beauty.

The statement of the students, on the other hand, neatly summarizes what we will call the modern view. In this way of thinking there is no ideal, no goal, and no end in view for man. We are what we are and we have no reason to aim at being anything else. Our emotions, desires, and passions, rather than being disciplined and educated toward some distant ideal, should be given relatively free reign so long as they don’t hurt anybody else (thus interfering with their free reign). In this view, the art of being human is the art of expression. Rather than conforming and transforming one’s self through discipline into a work of art (the traditional view), the art consists of learning how to express what you already are: your passions, desires, emotions, thoughts, etc. These don’t need to be disciplined or formed, they simply need to be put out there for all the world to see and hear.

Once we are aware of these two opposing visions of what it means to be human, we begin to see the differences between them everywhere. Specifically, we can see the all-pervasive influence of the modern view in our present culture. What is the mantra of our culture, after all, except “Follow your dreams and believe in your self.” What does that mean except what we have already seen above: you have no need to attain to some ideal, you have only to express what you already are.

This view is everywhere in our culture’s music, films, literature, and art. And as we see in the opening dialog, it has also begun to permeate the religions and “spiritualities” of this culture: “We want the liturgy to express what we feel.” What is so much contemporary worship

and spirituality but the rendering religious of this desire for self-expression, and, thus, worship of the self. When our passions and desires and emotions are projected out (“expressed”) onto the big screen of the universe and then we worship this image, we have succeeded in creating an idol of our selves.

The rabbi’s answer, though, offers us a way out of this narcissistic cycle of self-worship: “...to learn to feel what the liturgy expresses.” How? Speaking in defense of the Church’s liturgy, the reason is, quite simply, because the liturgy orients us toward our end and goal and that for which we were made. When, through purification and education of our passions, desires, feelings, and thoughts, we begin to feel and think what the liturgy of the Church expresses, then it is that we begin to discover our true life which “is hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3, NKJV). Then it is that we begin to perceive the mystery within the Theologian’s words: “Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.” (1 John 3:2-3, NKJV)