

THE DIGNITY OF INTIMACY: CONFESSING IT IN ORDER TO REDISCOVER IT¹

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Abstract

The dignity of persons, particularly persons living on the edges of life, is seriously challenged. Part of this is the lack of intimacy they experience. This paper argues for the church's recovery through confession of the dignity of intimacy. By tracing the confessions regarding creation, redemption, sanctification and glorification in the Nicene Creed it is argued that intimacy is an integral part of every created person and as such should be recovered, confessed and celebrated. It is submitted that, because the church is in communion with the Triune God and also because she is entrusted with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, she should initiate and promote the recovery of intimacy as a response to the challenge to the dignity of persons.

Key words: Church, Confession, Human dignity, Intimacy, Nicene Creed

Introduction

Society and the church today are faced with a lack of or impaired dignity of persons, particularly those living on the edges of life: The poor, those infected and affected by HIV and Aids, persons with various disabilities and gay persons have become broken and tainted.

In this paper the church is called upon to rediscover through confession the dignity of humanity. She is called specifically to confess and rediscover the intimacy of persons. It is argued that intimacy is an intrinsic part of human nature and consequently that the rediscovery of the dignity intimacy will promote the recovery of human dignity. The confessions in the Nicene Creed are used to support the argument of the created intrinsic nature of intimacy in the human nature and the need to rediscover it.

The paper first will focus on the suppression of intimacy at certain times in history and then will argue that intimacy is an integral part of the human person and his or her various relationships; that intimacy is integral to our understanding of the Triune God; that intimacy is the essence of the relationship between humanity and the Triune God, and also is intrinsic to the nature of the church as the Body of Christ.

The Suppression of Intimacy

Intimacy can be defined as "a process in which an individual expresses personal feelings and information to another and as a result of the other's responses comes to feel known,

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validated and cared for".² This process of self-exposure and validation underscores a person's self-worth and dignity.

Storkey says that intimacy is "the experiencing of *Another*": Firstly of God, but also of fellow human beings.³ She indeed goes further and states that "human beings are created for intimacy, to know and to be known, to love and be loved".⁴

Nouwen⁵ speaks of a corner, where we need to feel safe and relaxed, where we can safely expose ourselves to someone else and give unconditionally. Intimacy is thus a need to be known, but also a need to know. It is an experience of reciprocal expression that validates our humanity. In essence intimacy is part of the dignity of every man and woman.

Intimacy takes place in different realms in our daily lives. In the public world of business it is not common and frowned upon. The work place is a place of production not affection. In the private world of the home however, husband and wife are expected to be open and demonstrative to one another. Consequently, in the public realm intimacy has become impoverished and in the private realm overemphasised. These two worlds in which persons move about every day have become divided. During office hours a person is functional and focused on performance, whilst outside the office he or she has to be expressive and loving. This division places a daily tension on us and our understanding of intimacy becomes obfuscated.

The intimacy of marriage remains one of the primary forms of intimacy that fosters stability in relationships and in society, but is also the most risky. It is a decision to "put all your eggs in one basket", to trust another wholly and to fully expose oneself to one's husband or wife. Akin to this is the intimacy of the family, a complex network of relationships that needs to be nurtured with love and loyalty so that love and loyalty can be continually created within the family, but also in the broader social realm. The realm of the intimacy of the church, the *koinonia* between believers struggling to live and operate as the Body of Christ, also is integral to the life of any believer and needs to be consciously fostered.

Intimacy is thus not new. We are created with it, it is inherent to our being and experiences as humans. The lack and impairment of intimacy challenges the natural and created dignity of persons and the loss of intimacy over the past decades therefore needs to be arrested by rediscovering our intimacy and the dignity thereof.

In our quest to find and restore the dignity of intimacy it is necessary to explore the reasons for its suppression and loss. Thus a brief sketch of the role dualism has played in denying our intimacy and diminishing the dignity thereof will be appropriate.

The Suppression of Intimacy

Throughout history the church in general and some philosophers in particular have promoted a philosophy of dualism, of separating body, mind and soul. In this separation the body has usually been diminished and has been considered demeaning whilst the soul or the mind has been uplifted and glorified. One can follow the path of this dualism over the centuries.

Already early in the history of the Christian church, St. Augustine praised the soul, but described the body as degenerate and sex as debasing. He was influenced by Neoplatonism –

² Parrott, L III 1999. *Intimacy*. In Benar, DG and PC Hill (eds.), *Baker Encyclopaedia of Psychology and Counseling*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 648.

³ Storkey, E 1995. *The Search for Intimacy*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 4.

⁴ *Ibid.* 238.

⁵ Nouwen, HJM 1969. *Intimacy*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 23.

basically a dialectical dualism which pitted body against soul, spirit against flesh, mind against matter. This dualism still underlies much of our thinking. This denigration of the body continued for centuries. It was endorsed by papal powers and became entrenched in the theology and anthropology of the church. Sex was tolerated as a means to procreation only – it even was debated whether women had souls! The height of this tragic dichotomy perhaps is reflected best in the fifteenth century, the time of the famous medieval treatise on witchcraft, *The Hammer of the Witches*, when thousands of women were executed on suspicion of witchcraft and of having sex with the Devil. The soul was considered primarily good, the body evil. This simple dualism left no room for intimacy, not to mention room for its dignity.

In the eleventh century the pre-Renaissance introduced courtly love which included intimate exchanges between women and men. Thus it acknowledged emotional relationships of love and respect as part of human experience. Yet at the same time, and for some centuries thereafter, flagellation of the body was common and encouraged by the church as a way of pleasing God, thereby further distorting the dignity of persons and their need for intimacy.

The Reformation did not manage to reform the perspectives on the integrity or the dignity of humankind. Whilst Luther had a fairly hearty view of man as a socio-economic being and Calvin had a more dour perspective, neither truly transformed the traditional view of man being superior to woman and woman being sub-ordinate to man.

Some centuries later Victorianism applauded and glorified women. They were romantically perceived to be morally spotless and pure. Not surprisingly this was a time when prostitution and pornography increased and another dualism was created: That of the chaste Victorian wife and the unchaste prostitute - men were entitled to a taste of both kinds of women. Thus history again skewed the dignity and integrity of man and woman and the expression of being man and being woman, including the expression of intimacy.

Cartesian dichotomy, the separation of *homo sapiens* into body and mind, has had a deep lingering influence in our contemporary view of the body, sickness and health. The Age of Reason introduced an era in which emotions were scorned and the mind glorified. Even today, should we become ill, we seek its cause solely through x-rays and laboratory tests and its cure in pills and surgery. We forget that emotional experiences probably also have an influence on our physical well-being or lack thereof. This separation and elevation of mind and reason degraded the role of emotions and the need and value of intimacy.

The twentieth century brought capitalism and the emancipation of women, but also the demands of consumerism and the industrial revolution. However it also brought about reflections on the notion of romantic love and the importance and need for intimacy. In the past few decades we have been challenged to explore a holistic view of men and women.

Towards the end of the twentieth century the rights individuals have been accentuated. Individualism is currently the pervading ideology and the egocentric emphasis today on *my* rights diminishes the identity and dignity of the other. Yet again the dignity of men and women is being challenged.

The dualistic separation of body and mind/soul has resulted in the suppression of the body, the complexity and integration of its multi-layered nature, including the inherent intimacy of the body. The entrenched denigration of the body over twenty centuries now demands the rediscovering and reclaiming of the dignity of the body and of intimacy. We are indeed called upon not only to rediscover, but to confess and celebrate intimacy as an integral part the body.

Rediscovering the Dignity of our Intimacy

The church's identity is defined by what she confesses. So too is the church's understanding of our intimacy and its dignity. This understanding needs to be traced back to her confessions about God and herself. Thus the reclaiming of the dignity of our intimacy is confessional.

In this paper, in considering ways to rediscover the dignity of our intimacy through confession, the Nicene Creed will be focused on. The confessions regarding the Trinitarian Creator (Father Son and Holy Spirit) are briefly examined as well as those concerning the unity of the baptism and the hope of the resurrection. The Nicene Creed reads:

We believe in one God,
 The Father, the Almighty,
 maker of heaven and earth,
 of all that is, seen and unseen.
 We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
 The only Son of God,
 eternally begotten of the Father,
 Light from Light,
 true God from true God,
 begotten, not made,
 of one Being with the Father;
 through him all things were made.
 For us humans and for our salvation
 he came down from heaven,
 was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
 and was made human.
 For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
 He suffered death and was buried.
 On the third day he rose again
 in accordance with the scriptures;
 he ascended into heaven
 and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
 He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
 and his kingdom will have no end.
 We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
 who proceeds from the father,
 who together with the Father and the Son,
 is worshipped and glorified,
 who has spoken through the Prophets.
 We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
 We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
 We look for the resurrection of the dead,
 and for the life of the world to come. Amen"⁶

⁶ *Confessing the One Faith. An Ecumenical Explication of the Apostolic Faith.* 1991. Faith and Order Paper No. 153, WCC Publications: Geneva, 11-12.

Trinitarian Creator

Creation is Trinitarian⁷ and it is difficult to distinguish between the work of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in it (1 Cor. 8:6; Col 1:15-17, Heb. 2:10). This reflects both the unity and intimacy of the Trinity; the Father as the maker of heaven and earth, the Son through whom all things were made and the Holy Spirit as the giver of life. Intrinsic to the Trinitarian Creator is love. God is Love. Thus neither the Trinitarian Creator nor creation can be understood in the absence of love. God revealed himself as the Father of everlasting covenantal love, as incarnate Son and as the Holy Spirit in communion with us; He created in love and sustains in love; He gives love and is to be loved in return. Moreover, the church confesses that we are co-creators with God and as such we should also co-create and sustain in love and give love.

God created humankind, male and female he created them, and God saw that they were good. Created in the image and likeness of God, we believe that “humankind is given a permanent dignity which requires respect for human life (Gen. 9:6)”.⁸ “The first, middle, and last thing to say about creation is that it is good. The goodness of creation is to be confessed at every turn of belief and at every turn of living. It is not self-evident that creation is good. That creation is good is a calculated confession of faith”.⁹ Thus the church confesses that intimacy too is good and inherent to the dignity of humankind.

Genesis 2 teaches that God formed (*ysr*) man and woman and blew life into their being. This powerful and very personal image establishes the foundation of intimacy between Creator and creature. Therefore too humankind’s intrinsic intimacy and need for intimacy is good and is to be valued and celebrated. We need to reclaim the words and images that show not only God’s power and majesty but also the personal and intimate Creator, e.g God as Potter (Isa. 64:8) and as Weaver (Ps. 139). The very nature of our relationship with our Creator is thus an intimate one and is characterised by the ability to continually expose ourselves to God in the safety and the guarantee of forgiveness and re-creation.

A further dimension in creation is its rhythm. The principle of rest is integral to this rhythm, to our being and to our relationships. Creation and her creatures are made also to rest. None other than her Creator exemplifies that we need rest, that we need to interrupt our rhythm of production and work, that the land needs to lay fallow and that landowner, children, slaves and even beasts and aliens are to be allowed rest (Gen. 2:2-3; Ex. 20:10-11; Lev. 25:4-5).

Intimacy takes time, much time at any given moment or over a period of time. The sharing and revelation of oneself to another is a process of giving and receiving, an exercise of trust which, by its very nature, takes time. Yet today time is in short supply and subsequently the growth of intimacy is inhibited. The slogans “time is money” and *tempus fugit* determines much of the rhythm of life and almost eradicates rest from it. The sabbatical principle of rest and restoration is neglected in our contemporary world of commercialisation and consumerism where the focus rather is on production and speed than on rest and recuperation. This too impairs our dignity and our intimacy. It is becoming more and more apparent that it is necessary to take time out, to change the rhythm of our lives. The very nature of intimacy is slowness. It takes time to work on any relationship of intimacy, be it between God and believer, or between persons; the reciprocal sharing of oneself with another needs time. A clear example of this is the slow, rhythmic dialogue of the two lovers in

⁷ *Ibid.* 39.

⁸ *Ibid.* 41.

⁹ Willis, D 2005. *Clues to the Nicene Creed: A Brief Outline of the Faith*. Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 37.

the Song of Songs. Time and care is taken in the poetic praises they sing to one another. Each delights in hearing and discovering how sensual and desirable he/she is for the other; each lover thus experience profound intimacy.

Furthermore, to grow intimately with the Lord we need to take time in worshipping him, take time in prayer. Intimacy is unlikely to be enhanced by books on “3 minute devotion”. Many prophets and Jesus himself are exemplary in their need for and taking time for prayer. We need prayer; meeting God is central to our intimate relationship with Him. In prayer we are also naked before God, exposed, our sins and mortality are illuminated, but so too are our sanctification and dignity.

We should also not forget that the Sabbath was created for God and for man (Mk. 2:27-28). It is a holy day to celebrate creation – which includes ourselves – and to worship the Lord (Gen. 2:2; Ex. 16:5, 22-30). We need to rejoice and take delight in God’s creation, including our intimacy¹⁰ (Ps. 19 and 148). If we reclaim the holiness and rest of the Sabbath and build into our lives the rhythm and meaning of the Sabbath we not only obey the Lord, but deepen our intimacy with Him.

God, the Father

We confess that God is our Father. The richness of this parent-metaphor needs to be embraced, together with parallel mother images (Isa. 49:15; 66:13). The image of God nursing Israel at her breast (Isa. 66:11) is profoundly intimate and comforting. It underlines the safety one needs for intimacy and assures one that one can be naked and vulnerable in her presence. Similarly, the *Abba*-addresses (Matt. 6:26; Rom. 8:14-16; Gal. 4:6) need to be emphasised as they are central to our intimate and personal relationship with God the Father, and our understanding of ourselves as his sons and daughters. “We may never surrender the language of ‘Father’ for it is...the language which expresses the personal relationships within the inner life of the Trinity, and in our own relations with God”.¹¹ It is in our communication with our Covenantal Parent, the One who is faithful and steadfast in his/her love and grace that we are able to stand unprotected, yet know we are protected in his/her presence.

Jesus Christ

We find the culmination of God’s creative love in the incarnation of Christ and in his full embodiment, body, mind and soul, of humanity (Jhn. 1:14). Jesus reveals true humanity to us as well as the dignity of humanity as it should be and can become in him.¹²

We also confess sanctification (1 Cor. 6:11) and recreation in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). At times in the past the church focused much on the innate sinfulness of humankind and on issues such as our sexuality and intimacy became tinged with sin and guilt. That which was of the body was debased and undignified. However, all that God created was good and, although we may be born in sin, we also know and experience the redemptive and renewing dying in and rising with Christ. We are baptised with Christ and so are forgiven and redeemed, enabled to recover and renew our dignity and our intimacy.

We participate in the crucifixion of Christ. We are the most intimate with Christ at the Communion table, when we remember his broken body and redeeming blood. We share in the brokenness of his body and in his sacrifice of love. This participatory suffering and sacri-

¹⁰ *Confessing the One Faith*, 42.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 31-32.

¹² *Ibid.* 54; Willis *ibid.* 54ff.

face, enabled by the Holy Spirit, encourages us to be broken and true in our relationships. It enables us to be truly intimate and reminds us that the dignity of intimacy is sacrifice and humility. The Cross reminds us of forgiveness and self-sacrifice, of giving ourselves for others – ironic victories for intimacy and relationships. Willis writes that “love delights in the good of another over one’s own good and finds one’s delight in the other. The capacity for another is, paradoxically, the way we find our identity.”¹³ It is the ambiguity of the Passion of Christ, the wholly giving of himself that restored his dignity and glory and has him seated at the right hand of the Father (Phil. 2:5-11). Similarly it is Christ’s exemplary sacrifice that enables us to see the Other and one another and to surrender ourselves to the Other and one another beyond our own individualism and so to recover our own dignity and intimacy.

Yet we also participate in Christ’s resurrection, in the victory over and celebration of all that suppress and bind us. It is the experience of the real and continuing presence of the risen Lord that redefines who we are, transforms us, and grants us our dignity. It is the re-beginning, the renewal of life and humanity on that first Sunday that is at the core of our identity and the rediscovery of the dignity of our intimacy. The power of resurrection is the foundation of our hope and our faith; through the resurrection “life eternal enters our lives” (Eph. 2:4-10).¹⁴

The union with the Body of Christ remains a mystery, yet that does not mean we should ignore or circumvent this mystery. “[T]he fact that Christ ties, binds, unites us to himself and to others believers in his body, the church, is not only a mystery but a miracle”.¹⁵ This union we celebrate not only in our relationship with Christ, but also with one another, it is fundamental to our relationships and the rediscovery of our intimacy is impossible without it.

Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is *Creator Spiritus* and *Redemptor Spiritus*; God who is continually renewing, redeeming and transforming us, our humanity, our dignity and our intimacy. “The Holy Spirit is God who takes the material of our identity and transforms it”.¹⁶ The Spirit teaches us to have faith, to hope and to love. The Holy Spirit is the Giver of these gifts and many other gifts which help to renew and restore the complexity of our humanity.

Through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit enables us to expose ourselves and respond to God and to one another. The interplay between the Word and the Spirit continually transforms and re-orientates us and presents us with new perspectives. The Spirit enables us to rediscover our human dignity and our intimacy; enables us to again look with dignity at those living on the edge, to look beyond the poverty and the scars of discrimination and to recognise the dignity of each person. Through its redemptive work the Spirit teaches us to look beyond the shame of sin and rediscover our own dignity and, moreover, to celebrate our intrinsic intimacy.

The Spirit groans with the disabled and with those who are maimed by HIV and Aids. It encourages us to wait eagerly for the full redemption of our bodies. The Holy Spirit is the Giver of the first fruits, of the deposit of the new life, which inspire us to not only to rediscover, but also to promote the dignity of our intimacy (Rom. 8:18-27). The fellowship of

¹³ *Ibid.* 52.

¹⁴ *Confessing the One Faith*, 99ff; cf. Willis *ibid.* 99ff.

¹⁵ Willis *ibid.* 133.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 110.

the Holy Spirit guides us to live and look with faith, hope and love, to rediscover dignity and intimacy in what we see, but also to constantly look beyond it to the Unseen.

One Baptism and one Church

The oneness of the church is axiomatic. The unity and communion of the church are embedded in its communion with Christ; therein lies our *koinonia* and faith. There is an intimate bond between the church (the people of God) and God. Furthermore the church is established and rooted in Christ and therefore continues to proclaim the Kingdom of God and, with the indwelling of the Spirit, continues the ministry of Christ. The sacrament of baptism is a symbol of the communion and love between the church and the Triune God and the incorporation of each member into the promises of the ministry, but also into the mission, of God. The nature and purpose of this special relationship between the Triune God and the church is illustrated by the image of the vine. The church is intimately linked to Christ and incorporated into his love so that she may bear fruit (Jhn. 15).¹⁷ The intimacy of the church is boldly proclaimed by the metaphor of the body, is established by the baptism of the Holy Spirit and entrenched by the drinking into the one Spirit (1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4). We are not only one, we belong to Christ and to one another. The Spirit and its gifts are for the building up of the church and one another. Our journey within the church and with God is one towards maturity, towards becoming more like Christ, but also towards becoming more unified and intimate. Our baptism gives us the confidence that not only one day, but already now our hope of a wholly new creation and body has been realised. Baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ assures persons with a disability or with tainted dignity that they are new persons in Christ and already have dignity. Equally so, in the baptism of the Holy Spirit the dignity of intimacy of those infected with and affected by HIV and the poor can be rediscovered and promoted. The Holy Spirit is a Spirit of renewal and recreation, the Giver of Faith, Hope, and Love, which are the cornerstones of our relationships with God and one another.

Particularly challenging to the Church today is sexual intimacy and even more specific, intimacy between homosexual persons. Integral to this challenge are the issues of the self-worth and identity of the gay person. The church needs to teach and preach that all are created in the image of God, formed by his caring hand and thus that all are good and have dignity regardless of our sexual orientation. In addition we all are recreated in the crucified and risen Christ. This too is at the core of one's identity and forms the basis of one's self-worth.

Faced with the serious challenges to human dignity, the church needs to proclaim her confessions regarding human dignity and intimacy and so be faithful to the divine call to be a witness of the Kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Intimacy is intrinsic to our being; yet, the recognition and acceptance thereof as part of the dignity of humankind is not evident in society or the church. Consequently intimacy needs to be rediscovered and validated. The dignity and worth of man and woman, including their intimacy, also should be proclaimed and celebrated.

It has been argued that such recovery and proclamation should be confessional. The church needs to confess and celebrate the intrinsic nature of intimacy as good and part of the Trinitarian creation in love. The church and her people also need to reclaim human-

¹⁷ *Confessing the One Faith*, 81, 87, 90.

kind's intrinsic need for rest. We need to acknowledge the natural rhythm of time in our bodies; that we have been created to work and to rest. We also need to recover the intimacy in our worship of God and in our fellowship with one another.

The church needs to proclaim the safe sanctuary that each person can find in the presence of the nursing and forgiving Parent where one can expose oneself and become known and loved. The church needs to profess the redemption and the sanctification in the Incarnate Christ and the life-giving Spirit so that those maimed and marginalised can know that they can be recreated with dignity and experience intimacy. Moreover, the church has to emphasise the hope and recovered dignity in the glorification of Christ and the promised glorification of each member.

The church is the Body of Christ entrusted with the proclamation of the Kingdom of God and should consequently initiate and promote the quest for the rediscovery of the dignity of intimacy. In our society where the dignity of various persons is being challenged and intimacy is tainted or missing, the church needs to confess the created goodness of intimacy. The church herself was created in love and intimacy and it is this love that compels her to confess the dignity of intimacy.