A Theology of Integrity

From the abundant storeroom of Christian tradition and I pulled out 7 treasures that might stimulate your reflection about a theology of integrity.

I begin with one of the most practical and consistent claims about integrity in Christian tradition, namely that it is finally a matter of love.

A. The former leader of the Jesuits, Pedro Arupe, tells us that

"Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything.

It will decide what gets you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude.

Fall in love, stay in love, and it will decide everything."

B. We find this same theme echoed in the words of Dag Hammarskjold, former U.N. Secretary General. Drawing upon his own personal struggles with rising to the awesome call God made to him, he offered an experiential test for integrity when said:

"If your goal is not determined by your most secret pathos, even victory will only make you painfully aware of your own weakness.”

Dag Hammarskjold, U.N. Secretary General, 1953-1961

C. Both Arupe and Hammarskjold take us right to the heart of Christian integrity by telling us that the most basic question about integrity is not:

“What should I live for and how?”

Instead, it is question of imagination, reason, and ULTIMATE LOVE:

“What or Who actually moves you in the most ultimate way? Who is your God?”
Let’s step back for a moment to briefly consider the origin and meaning of the word “integrity.”

D. Integrity comes from the Latin word “integer” meaning whole, as in a whole number or integer (as opposed to a fraction).

The Oxford English Dictionary lists three meanings for integrity in current usage:

1. complete
2. unimpaired
3. virtuous moral character

All three uses share something in common:
--the condition of being fully integrated, pulled together, or unified.

In sum, Integrity is the **state of wholeness**.

E. A Christian theology of integrity begins with the affirmation that God is the most complete, uncorrupted, and upright being. It should come as no surprise then that Christians such as Arupe and Hammarskjold, find integrity in love of God.

F. This leads me to the first of 7 theological resources for integrity:

**1. Fall completely in love with the One who can offer complete love.** Allow your roots to become so intertwined with those of God that it is inconceivable that you should ever part.

This next slide provides an overview of the remaining resources, namely

7 Resources for Christian Integrity
1. Fall completely in love

2. Learn from the integrity of the Trinity
3. Allow the Body of Christ to complete you
4. Identify with the story of Jesus
5. Develop your moral imagination
6. Practice habits of heart that bring the fullness of life
7. Exercise spiritually

2. **Learn from the integrity of the Trinity**

SLIDE: GEESE

G. Just _Who_ is the One who can offer complete love? The Nicene Creed professes that the One is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Three persons united in a complete and incorruptible community of love reveal the fullness of integrity.
H. The image of the geese flying in a “V” formation offers a metaphor for the unity of the Trinity. First, one bird takes the lead position and breaks the wind so that the others can fly in the draft that it creates. Next, a different bird moves to the lead position so that the former lead bird can draft off the new lead. (Bicycle teams in the Tour de France do the same.) If one of the birds is injured and falls to the ground, another bird will stay with it until it can rejoin the flock.

I. Similarly, in the Trinity, the Father first takes the lead position in the act of creation and follows it by sustaining every breath we take.

J. Second, the Son takes the lead by becoming one of us in order to heal and redeem the brokenness of creation.

K. Third, God’s living, Holy Spirit draws together the diverse members of the Body of Christ and sanctifies what the Father has created and the Son has redeemed.

L. Together, Father, Son, and Spirit invite us to share in the integrity of their journey of love.

M. The remaining five points simply spell out some of the practical implications of falling in love with the Triune God.

3. Allow the Body of Christ to complete you
   SLIDE: EUCHARIST

   N. Ephesians 4 tells us that we are not complete on our own. We can participate in the fullness of life found in the Triune God only by sharing and receiving the diverse gifts that Christ gives to his body.

   O. In Catholic language, we are saved not alone but in community, that is, by our participation in the inextricably communal body of Christ. Integrity depends upon relationships.

4. Identify with the story of Jesus
   SLIDE: ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO

Mature or Integrated Christian identity avoids the extremes of identity diffusion and premature identity.

1. identity diffusion show itself in a lack of conviction and focus. We have all encountered the person who seems unable to initiate or sustain commitments. Such a person simply can’t be relied upon.

2. On the other hand, we also encounter the person who knows when she is in high school that she will be a doctor, married with 2.5 children, a with a certain kind of home, etc. We can be so eager to avoid the uncertainty that helps us to mature that we can jump into a “ready made” identity. We prematurely foreclose our development and avoid the difficult work of sorting out who we really are called
Mature identity requires continual growth through exploring different roles on the way toward ever deeper commitment. Stories provide precisely this well focused yet dynamic or developing integrity.

Christian identity emerges through identification with the story of Jesus and the persons and causes with whom Jesus identified.

As the powerful film *Romero* shows, Archbishop Romero found integrity only by identifying so fully with the same persons with whom Jesus identified completely, namely the poor and oppressed, that, like Jesus, he was executed. In short, Christian identity is found through participation in the Body called together by Christ.

5. **Develop your moral imagination**

   SLIDE: MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. MARCHING IN PROTEST

   P. Imagine or see the world through the integrating lens of the story of Jesus (and his followers) and find a creative way to remain true to the story.

   Q. As Walter Wink argues, when faced with the evil that would destroy our integrity, Jesus’ characteristic response was to imagine a creative alternative to the options offered by the world. For example, he offered a third way beyond fight or flight.

   R. From Anabaptists to Baptists such as Martin Luther King, Christianity has a rich tradition of disciples who have caught the rhyme of Jesus’ way and found a “third way” that sustains their Christian convictions.

6. **Practice habits of heart that bring the fullness of life**

   SLIDE: GRAND CANYON

   S. Our moral character is formed by the patterns of our freedom. Like the waters that helped to form the Grand Canyon, each act we perform cuts a groove into our character. When we repeat actions, we increase the tendency that our freedom, *like a stream grown into a river*, will flow down the well-worn path.

   T. Virtues are the dispositions that result from good habits. Virtues are the building blocks of Christian integrity. Becoming virtuous (or the state of integrity) requires practice of the virtues.

   U. Christian virtues flow from identification with Jesus’ story. For example, the Christian virtue of charity is defined by the charity of Jesus: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

   V. Here is an exercise for you to discuss at your tables. Who do you want to be at your 85th birthday? What patterns would you need to change now?
7. Exercise spiritually
SLIDE: RUNNER

W. Spiritual practices school our imagination, form our habits of the heart, and open us to continual sanctification.

X. For example: One of the exercises used in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola involves imaginatively participating in a Scripture passage. After reading and rereading the story of Zaccheus, you might imagine that you are Zaccheus and listen to what Jesus has to say to you. When you imaginatively live the story you integrate it into your spiritual landscape.

In closing, Integrity for humans is, in the words of Dag Hammarskjold, a journey of “casting anchor in the experience of the mystery of life” until we become conscious of the source of all integrity Who calls us by name.