

Things to Consider

- ▶ We come into this world and almost unthinkingly embrace *Eros* in our younger years until a point is reached where we start to recognise that *Thanatos* is becoming more dominant. The question we must face and answer is: Can we slowly come to embrace *Thanatos* without surrendering to bitterness, despair and escapism? Only with a rich inner life will this embracing be possible.
- ▶ We are dealing with something very sacred and we need to honour it with the respect that it deserves. When we are young we need to embrace *Eros* in ways that are life-giving both to ourselves and others. As we grow older, so we need to begin to embrace *Thanatos* with a generous spirit, filled with thanksgiving for what has been and in many ways still is, so that a certain wisdom may begin to emerge.
- ▶ It is more likely that an older person is reading this than someone younger, so let me focus on this. Reflect back on your life and see how God's energy has been at work in you down through the years. What do you need to give thanks for and might there have been things for which you need to repent? What is happening now and is there something in this area of *Thanatos* with which you are struggling? Being able to name it can loosen its grip and power over us. And yes, there will be new struggles to come; it is never once for all.
- ▶ In our later years there is a kind of self-emptying that begins to occur, preparing us for that great self-emptying that occurs with our death. Jesus too, as God's Son, faced this and Philipians reminds us of it: '... Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness.' (2.5-7)
- ▶ In his Gospel John tells us '... unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' (12.24)
- ▶ It is only in those 'little deaths', that self-emptying that is so necessary for us, that we will grow, mature, and become all that God would have us be. It can be painful at times and tinged with sadness as we let go of what has been: health, vitality, a position in life that may come through work, or a family 'leaving the nest'. But, only in this way can a certain peace, filled with wisdom, emerge. And we may also come to notice, what has always been true, that God is at our side, only we had been too busy to notice because of the intensity of our life. To the extent that we are able to do all this we will become life-giving to those around us and perhaps a mentor to the younger generation. We will become a witness to the power of Christ's Gospel.

AtG/B22/MBH

Attending to God

'God's Energy in Us'

Part One



We live in a Western world that has become highly sexualised, courtesy of the media, consumerism and advertising. They have recognised the truth that to be human is to be sexual and that there is an energy within that drives us in this direction. But as with many of the truths in life, it can be pushed to an edge which is unhelpful, if not psychologically unhealthy.

You may be somewhat surprised that I am focusing on this in a brochure that is aimed at helping us deepen our relationship with God. Our problem is that we may fail to realise this is one of God's gifts to us and that it is a powerful driving force in creation. At the same time we have, as a society, seriously narrowed its meaning only to genital sex and many would think that Christians have viewed sexuality negatively.

I want to explore this in a different way, focusing around this as energy that each of us has been given by God. In this sense it is not about whether we are single or married, nor is it about the sexual issues of the day.

Peter O'Connor in his book *Facing the Fifties: from denial to reflection* tells us that the ancient Greeks had two words that can help us: *Eros* and *Thanatos*. Unfortunately we have reduced that first word to mean physical sex and the second to mean death and this misrepresents both.

Eros is about that life force coming into being, making connections. It is instinctual and is to do with energy and we particularly see this with young people. They are coming into being, embracing life, and they almost seem to ooze an energy and curiosity, which most of us wish we still had. Slowly they will learn to channel this in positive directions. At the same time, there are also numerous dangers with this. It can be used unwisely and indiscriminately and bring harm to self and others.

Thanatos is also about energy, but in the sense of letting it go. It is a process of disconnection mostly beginning in our middle years and ultimately ending with our death. And yet the paradox is that even the small child, will also be learning to let go. For example, in that growth movement from being a baby to a small child. Tears can be involved in the process as it can be for each of us in letting go at any stage of life. The question for us is: at which stage of life are we at; does *Eros* or *Thanatos* need to be predominating without completely excluding the other?

Of course, this is greatly oversimplified, but there is a real truth here about which our bodies remind us, whether we be embracing life or slowly letting go. *Eros* belongs to the first half of life and *Thanatos* to the second. (This is one reason why youth suicide is such a tragedy when the young person should be embracing *Eros* and not *Thanatos*.) The young person is going to live forever! Conversely the person in their middle years may

start to focus more inwardly than previously, as they begin to reflect upon their mortality and in small ways let go of some things they previously held dear. Where they can't do this, cynicism and despair is the likely response; perhaps a jealousy of the young, and a desire to try staying young, may follow.

In our Western societies we have reduced *Eros* to sexual attraction and living it out in a physical way. But as Ronald Rolheiser reminds us, in origin there were differing words to emphasise differing aspects of *Eros*. Yes, there was the erotic attraction, but another word (*mania*) gave us romance and more extremely, sexual obsession; friendship (*philia*), added another dimension; as did playfulness and teasing (*ludens*); family and home life a fifth word (*pragma*); and *agape*, a sixth, as the highest form of love which is self-sacrifice for the good of another with no desire for anything in return.

Each of these Greek words expresses an aspect of that God-given energy which we seem to have reduced to little more than physical sex. Each of these expressions of God's energy can be used positively or negatively, in life-giving ways or in ways that are destructive both to self and others. The choice is always ours.

Rolheiser describes it as 'the drive for love, communion, community, friendship, family, affection, wholeness, consummation, creativity, self-perpetuation, immortality, joy, delight, humour, and self-transcendence'.

Alone, we are incomplete and we feel this deep within. We are made for each other and yet even here in love we cannot find that wholeness for it is only in God in the life to come that this wholeness and completion will be found, that this energy will find its true consummation. We all experience this gap, this reality, as a kind of loneliness that something is missing even if we feel deeply blessed and loved in life. We can almost feel haunted by it.

So why is this focus important? We all possess this God-given energy in varying degrees and we can squander it or use it wisely for the good of others as well as self. We might be in the time of life where we are embracing this energy, allowing it to shape us. Or we might be at that time where we are allowing it to mature, slowly letting it go, and allowing it to be more life-giving to others as we love, support, and mentor them in generous ways. In this we now recognise the place of *Thanatos* in our life.

In all this the question for us is: Are we using this beautiful and wondrous God-given energy in an appropriate way for our stage of life that is life-giving for us and others.