

For Commemoration Day
June 25, 2022
Community of St. John Baptist

It's been a difficult week in our country and perhaps, one could say, the world. So I was delighted, for a brief time, to tune into the radio and hear a recording of Peter, Paul, and Mary doing their rendition of the children's song, "Blue" - about a dog named "Blue". On this particular recording, Peter Yarrow was introducing the song to a live audience by talking about it as a primary example of a story embodying the basic characteristics of children's songs. "Children's songs," he said, "have three, basic characteristics. First: *simplicity* - so that the child can understand it. Second: *pathos* - to prepare the child for life's future traumas. And third: *repetition* - to give the child a false sense of security."

The audience laughed and my mind was immediately drawn to the concept of **repetition**. Does repetition lead us to a false sense of security? The Church is full of various forms of repetition, from the three-year lectionary cycle to the yearly celebrations of events in the life of Jesus, to the weekly Eucharists to the daily offices. Is the Church institutionally giving people a false sense of security?

My musings on the concept of repetition led me to recall that a homiletics professor I had in seminary came in to class one day and said: "Never repeat for emphasis. *Never*, repeat for emphasis." Does repetition dull our senses and lead us to boredom, numbness, and eventually death? It can. It certainly has that capacity. And there are times when we intentionally utilize this side of repetition for precisely that effect. We count sheep when we can't get to sleep, and the desired monotony of doing so lulls us into sleep. A clock ticking, the swinging back and forth of a bright, shiny object for us to stare at, or the sound of waves repetitiously breaking on the shore have a hypnotic effect on us. And we sometimes use repetition intentionally for just such an effect.

But is there another side to repetition? Is there, in fact, a side of repetition that produces the opposite of monotony, boredom, and death? - which is to ask, Can repetition produce variety, renewal, and life? Let's explore that possibility together.

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1) God created light and "separated the light from the darkness". "And there was evening and there was morning, one day." God then created "a firmament in the midst of the waters," and "called the firmament Heaven." "And there was evening and there was morning, a second day." Then God created dry land for the growing of vegetation, fruit trees, and other kinds of plants. "And there was evening and there was morning, a third day." As the familiar creation story continues, six "evenings and mornings" pass while God creates; and on the seventh day, God rests.

Later on in the Book of Genesis, when God is promising Noah in the first formal covenant of the Bible that God will never again destroy the earth (Genesis 8:21), God also says: "While the earth remains, seed time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease." (Genesis 8:22)

Life, itself, is repetitious. We are all born into a world characterized by the cyclical repetitions of change. Day gives way to night, gives way to day again. Winter melts into Spring which blossoms into Summer which ages into Fall which dies into Winter again. And we count these cycles: 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022...

Not only are these repetitious patterns in life a given; but it is also the case that we adapt our own habits and customs to these patterns - and, along the way, we invent repetitious cycles of our own. The “taking, blessing, breaking, and distributing” pattern of our celebrations of the Eucharist is one such cycle. We gather as a worshipping community every seventh day to worship the God who, in effect, we are trying to imitate by so doing! And we have consolidated the highlights of Jesus’ life, ministry, death, and resurrection into one, yearly cycle which we manage to acknowledge in approximately the time it takes for the earth to move once around the sun.

The late Mircea Eliade has suggested (in The Myth of the Eternal Return, published under the title Cosmos and History in a paperback edition published by Harper Torchbooks, New York, 1959), that the governing principle which motivates our desire to use repetitious patterns is a kind of longing for perfection in the sense of *completeness*. As human beings, we are aware of our *incompleteness*, our lack of wholeness, the sinful parts of our lives and so we strive to *imitate*, to *repeat* what we feel we’ve known or experienced as *sacred* in life. We strive, in a sense, to imitate God, the Creator. Creation itself seems to do this as the seasons change but also relentlessly repeat themselves as if yearning to come to fulfillment.

Now we may begin to perceive that repetition is, in fact, a *neutral* term defining imitation in patterns or cycles. Repetition has the capacity to move us in either of at least two directions. Repetition can move us toward monotony, boredom, and death; or toward variety, renewal, and life. Now the question is, What makes the difference? What determines the direction in which we move when we participate in the repetitious cycles of life? - more particularly, in the very repetitious cycles of our religious rituals?

Paul Jordan-Smith tells the story (Parabola Magazine, Vol. XIII, No. 2, 1988, p. 102) of an Orthodox priest who went to Kentucky to officiate at baptismal and confirmation rites. While there he met a blacksmith who was just being admitted to the Church. This blacksmith was of the generation of the Sixties, which saw the dissemination of a great deal of spiritual literature of all kinds. He had come across the wonderful little 19th-century book translated into English as The Way of a Pilgrim, in which the Jesus Prayer is described. Now the Jesus Prayer, for those of us not familiar with it, is the prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” And it is meant to be prayed repetitiously, coordinating each phrase with either breathing in, or breathing out; inhaling, or exhaling. This has, historically, been one way recommended by spiritual leaders, to attempt to “pray without ceasing” - quite literally.

The blacksmith of our story felt that there might be something in this practice, so he decided, in his own words, “to give it twenty years,” and if nothing came of it, only then to give up. And so he practiced the prayer as he understood it, without variation and without too much philosophizing about it. As he told the priest, he practiced it on long rides in his truck to distant farms and, as he put it, “since there’s not much you can do under a horse,” he tried it when he was changing horseshoes. When he awoke late at night and couldn’t sleep, he would practice it then, too, and at other times when it seemed possible and appropriate. “And did you have any unusual experiences?” the priest asked him. The blacksmith replied, “Oh, you mean the lights and colors and all that? Yes, but that’s really not the point, is it?” “And did you really try for 20 years?” asked the priest. “Yes. This is the 20th year - and here we are.”

Now who among us would persist in such a practice for twenty years? I’m not sure I would! And part of the reason is my own fear that this little ritual act called the Jesus Prayer might become a dry, empty, meaningless act on my part. But the blacksmith gives us a big clue concerning the difference between whether repetitious ritual becomes empty and meaningless or

somehow brings renewal of life to us. The clue lies in our own expectations of the ritual - our approach to it.

When I participate in the Eucharist each week, or when I repeat a prayer, how do I begin? What is my inner state when I start a spiritual exercise? Generally speaking, I have my expectations of what the exercise will bring me as a precondition of my participation, that is, not what the exercise itself requires. So it is the case, very often, without my awareness, of “*My will be done*”. To the extent that my expectations occupy my attention or focus my intention, I am not in a state appropriate for receiving whatever blessings the prayer or ritual might bring. I am already in a state of fullness - full, that is, of myself. There is no room for anything else. In that case, some space must be made, for otherwise it is certain that nothing will come of my efforts. The repeated prayer, the repeated ritual becomes void of any meaning because in my present state, I allow no other meaning than my own.

A strange and apparently paradoxical thing takes place, however, when one is able to make a simple acknowledgment of this state of affairs - that it is I who am void of meaning, not the prayer or ritual. The situation reverses itself: to the extent that I can let go of my preconditions, the prayer becomes rich with meaning. Now it can exercise itself in me, because there is room for its operation. The name of this process of letting go is various: humility, simplicity, emptiness. It is also the way in which repetition leads to renewal. We allow God to work God’s newness in us. The empty places of our lives become filled with God. We are given hope for the future. Light is born in the darkest possible places of our very selves.

That’s what John the Baptist does! His message is still familiar to us, repetitiously so. “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Prepare. Repent. Be baptized. “Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”

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