Opinion
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A caravan of mainly Honduran migrants heading to the United States kneel in prayer Jan. 17 i

A caravan of mainly Honduran migrants heading to the United States kneel in prayer Jan. 17 in Vado Hondo, Guatemala. (CNS/Reuters/Luis Echeverria)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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Editor's note: *This is the second of a series of columns focusing on the Beatitudes.*

I discovered over the years that one of the major soul-searing questions to be dealt with in spiritual development is the friction between tradition and traditionalism. I spent years trying to figure out which was which and why there was a problem.

In the end, it was a Sufi story that broke open the differences between the two for me.

According to the Sufi story, a pilgrim on his way to the mosque for the feast day, slumped to the ground exhausted. The sun had been hot, the path had been rough and uneven. "I must stop for a while," he told himself, and settled down on the side of the road just in sight of the mosque and within earshot of the muezzin.

He was hardly asleep before he felt himself being shaken roughly awake. "Sufi, get up," the man said. The voice was not kind. The hand was not gentle.

"Some Sufi you are," the stranger went on. "You're a disgrace." He paced and flailed his hands. "How dare you lie down at the time for prayer with your head turned to the West," he shouted, "and your feet pointed toward God in the holy shrine."

The old Sufi stirred a bit and opened one eye. "I thank you, sir, for your concern," he said. Then, a grin playing at the corner of his mouth, he went on, "so would you be so kind as to turn my feet in some direction where they are not pointing at God."

Now I understood the problem. The Sufi knew that tradition and traditionalism are not the same thing. Tradition is the celebration of the core beliefs of the faith — the keeping of the feast day. Traditionalism, on the other hand, idolizes practices that repeat the old ways of celebrating our beliefs. Praying while turning his head to the West rather than to the East, for instance, and not pointing his feet away from the mosque were common practices. But those customs were far less essential to the Sufi's faith than celebrating the feast itself. It was not these customs to which the Koran had testified.

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Clearly, tradition — the great insights and beliefs of the faith — energizes an institution; traditionalism — substituting personal practices for the established truths of the spiritual life — can easily choke the life out of it.

Why? Because on the creed hangs answers to the spiritual essence of life, to what we must do to live it to the full, to what's really essential to it and what's not. For instance: priesthood is our tradition; clericalism is an accretion of traditionalism.

Jesus left us a set of values — not a set of ritual behaviors or ancient prayer forms or scheduled feast days. For us, then, to maintain the tradition means to live the Beatitudes that Jesus himself taught us that are at least as needed on the globe now

as they were then, in the villages of Palestine.

It is tradition that requires us to answer the question, "What does it mean to be holy as Jesus was holy *in* the here and now?" The answer to that question is what we call the Beatitudes.

In a world of warring tribes and ever larger bombs and the displacement of thousands of people as their once-homelands burn behind them, Christians must surely consider what the beatitude "blessed are the meek" implies about the way you and I live now. How could something like that possibly have real meaning for us in this day and age?

I'll tell you.

As I began to write this second reflection on the value of the Beatitudes to an age like ours, the television anchor of the moment informed me that American officials were meeting with the leadership of the Taliban to negotiate the process of ending the U.S. presence there.

The question, after 20 years of war, enmity, distrust, and fear of the future, is what will all the "negotiations" come to? And the answer is that in the end, such crucial "negotiations" depend on whether the beatitude "blessed are the meek" is defined as weak or as "respectful."

If past concerns give way to the present mission of both sides, the negotiations can become the beginning of a new kind of peace for both groups.

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On the other hand, if invective and taunts, mockery and demeaning nicknames, intimidation and domination, bullying and disrespect are the tenor of our talks, our relationships, our business deals — now a commonplace of American political culture — then nothing changes except the silencing of guns. The deepening of our conversations is aborted. The mutuality of our agreements is suspect. Fear takes over and dashes the coming of hope.

The problem is that as a world, even as a people, we have learned to doubt that the cultivation of the God of peace in our homes, in our love lives, in our communities and political parties, in our governments and our world is possible anymore. We have girded our speech for war everywhere.

Leaders at our highest levels refuse to negotiate, have failed to respect others, reject cooperation, fail the republic and consciously set out to divide this country. Worst of all, it has poisoned our cities, split our families, and poisoned our civic structure. We crawl into our dark caves and call out insults at old friends, long-lost loved ones and our siblings. And, of course, at those who are "not like us" who are breaching our borders to find themselves unwelcome, whatever their needs. So, separation is a ploy of survival now while our hearts die within us on every level from personal struggles to the edges of isolation.

Knowing that so-called "rules for war" have shriveled in our time, that the whole notion of a "just war" is ridiculous in a world where noncombatants are called collateral damage, the meek come determined to arrive at a decision that enables both sides of the issue to leave the discussion with dignity, without embarrassment or humiliation. Our continued mouthing of "the rules of war," of the days of "honor and justice," as if we were still committed to them need serious review. Those hallmarks of humanity have all been exhausted.

Recognition of basic humanity have all disappeared in a nuclear world that puts force and torture where decency and dignity must be if we are ever to be great again. Worst of all, this new irrationality has permeated the hallowed centers of private life. It has tainted the language of children. It has made social life, neighboring contacts, "the American way of life" loud, loaded with imprecations, impossible.

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Instead, the meek — the humble — are soft and serious listeners. They negotiate, they don't enforce. They listen for the concerns of the other; they quietly and calmly present their own. Then, they hope to seal the hopes of both.

The humble see their counterparts as good as they themselves aspire to be. They see them as worthy to be heard, as well. And they themselves are neither wimps nor cowards. When they say "yes" they mean yes. When they say "no" they allow *no* the

space it needs to grow into an advantage for both. They are not intractable or impertinent. They are above and beyond both adult childishness and insane warmongering. They really believe in negotiation.

Most of all, the meek — the humble — those who know their gifts and talents and plans but respect the gifts and talents and plans of the other as well — "possess the land." They seek to bring us all together again, to make welcome everywhere a mark of the nation, whatever the differences of civic or ethnic opinions, of political policies or regional realities.

From where I stand, force — not reason, not justice, not equality — has, at least to this point, won the day. The only hope we have to preserve, to reclaim, what we have always known ourselves to be is exactly what Jesus was trying to teach us when he said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the land."

Clearly the Beatitudes are all we have left to make humanity humane. As the Hindu Swami Sivananda, like Jesus, has been quoted as saying, "Humility is not cowardice. Meekness is not weakness. Humility and meekness are indeed spiritual powers."

Clearly, raw power and personal force are not working: Maybe next time we should try "blessed are the meek." It is, after all, our tradition.

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