



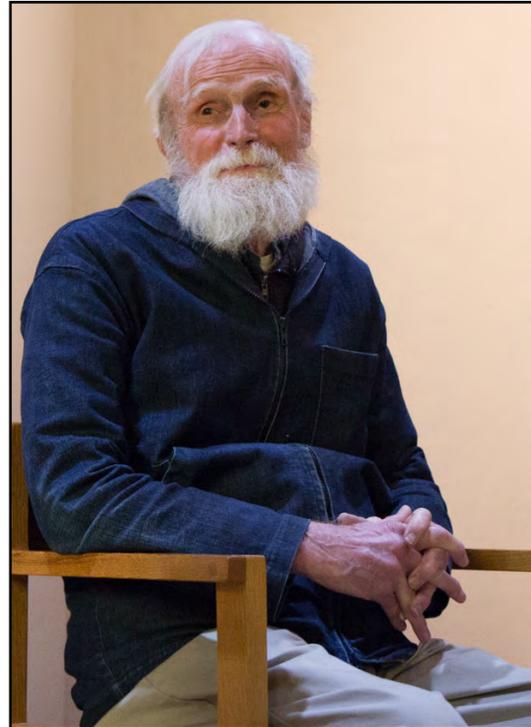
Interview with Father Bruno

by Rose Feerick with Steven Bonsey

When I first started spending Christmas at the New Camaldoli Hermitage on the Big Sur Coast, I was fascinated by Father Bruno Barnhart. He was an older monk who spoke just above a whisper and yet who articulated a vision that felt full of power and life. I rarely felt like I fully understood the depth of what he was saying, but his words captivated me. I still remember his instructions at midnight mass one Christmas: “If you want to know where Christmas is happening, put your ear to the earth and listen.”

In 2008, I signed up to take a retreat he was offering on Wisdom Christianity. I knew he was an expert on the subject and yet I was not sure what Wisdom Christianity was. Was it the vision he preached?

During that retreat, we gathered in the chapter room behind the chapel twice a day. I remember well the cross that Father Bruno traced on the white board. The vertical axis, he said, symbolized St. John’s theology and the Wisdom of the East. These traditions focused on the relationship between the individual and God. The horizontal axis represented St. Paul and the movement of Christ in history. Referencing the Jesuit mystic Teilhard de Chardin, Father Bruno explained that matter is in an evolutionary process of becoming spirit and love. He spoke, too, about the shift from individualized and tribal senses of identity to a global consciousness in which



individuals do not lose their unique identities, but find them by participating in a larger whole. This, he said, is the horizontal dimension of Christianity, the Wisdom of the west.



Six years later, Harvest Time decided to consciously integrate Wisdom Christianity into our work. Wisdom was not new to Harvest Time; it had been there since 2001 when Bryan Sirchio and I discovered that there was something in the story of Mary of Bethany that had the power to shift the conversation about money from moralism to heart-centered freedom. But it took us years to find theology to describe



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the connection we were seeing between the mystical poetry of the Song of Songs, John's Gospel and our work with money. Father Bruno was one of the theologians who helped. That is why when Harvest Time was beginning the process of creating Wisdom & Money, Steven Bonsey, Rachel Parikh and I travelled to New Camaldoli Hermitage to talk with Father Bruno. He was quite frail at that point and yet as soon as we began to speak about Wisdom, which he referred to as The Sapiential, his eyes lit up and he was full of life.

I was eager to share the interview publicly, but it was not yet time, as we had work to do to set up the new organization. And so, I have been sitting with Father Bruno's words, re-visiting them from time to time, waiting for a good time to share them. That time is now.



Father Bruno died on the first day of Advent in 2015. I offer what follows in honor of his great sense of humor and his mystical vision of hope.

Rose

We are part of an organization that offers retreats for people who are exploring money and Christian faith. Some people in our network have become very interested in Wisdom theology and practice. We are trying to understand how to integrate Wisdom into our work in a life-giving way.



Steve

We know your work in helping to revive the Wisdom tradition in the Church. Is there something about Wisdom that you would want us to know?



Bruno

Wisdom is a lost child that needs to be rediscovered. Rediscovered as a child in the sense that it's brand new for us. We don't really have a Wisdom of the west. Our Christian Wisdom tradition, whether monastic or more general, is still eastern in the sense of being other-worldly and somewhat static and non historical. There is going to be a new Wisdom that has to do with the history of the west particularly.

Steve

Is there something about what's happening in the west at this point in history that creates this opening?

Bruno

It's almost like history begins to become transparent in a way that it hasn't been for a long time. What I mean by transparent is you begin to read history theologically. That is true because of globalization. When humanity as a whole begins to discover itself as one entity, one creature, one living being, that is very significant.

So, what is there to look for? What are the signs? How do we interpret them? How do we face in the right direction-- push in the right direction? Globalization is a good place to start in talking about that because it's like something is necessary for Christian eschatology to happen. Things have to simplify, clarify, and unite in some way, so that history becomes transparent in a massive way, in which it's not transparent yet. Our eastern Christian

Sapiential legacy is precious and vital to us, but it's a starting point rather than an end point.

Steve

It seems to me that another part of history right now is the peril.

Bruno

Yes. Everything could have concluded in the 20th century, for instance, if we ended up in some kind of apocalyptic war with nuclear weapons, or bacteria weapons. We could have destroyed humanity, made the planet uninhabitable. It didn't happen. Instead we got the Second Vatican Council, which is a miracle in the other direction. It was like the rebirth of the Church -- the Church becoming liberated from itself so that it can be its real self once again.

Steve

You mentioned the apocalyptic possibilities that were averted in the 20th century but now in the 21st century our normal daily way of life imperils our survival.

Bruno

That's right, something has to change if we hope to survive on planet earth.

Steve

What is your view?

Bruno

I'm committed to hope. I'm committed to the conviction that humanity will endure, will not become extinct given these encroaching perils and that it has a positive future, a redemptive future. I don't want to make the conclusion from the scientific findings. That's not where my conviction comes from. It has a Christian basis.

Steve

Yesterday we had a conversation with Father Cyprian and we were discussing the transformational power of Wisdom practices at a personal level, and he made the comment that they are transformative with ruinous consequences. He said that once there's a shift within it's no longer possible to live comfortably as we were before. We begin to need to make changes in our life.



Yet, within the Wisdom movement as I've participated in it, there's an inward focus, a focus on transformational practices. But the working out of that, making it historical, changing our personal lives and beginning in whatever small way we can to change the way we act together in society is terribly difficult. In Wisdom & Money, we have small, intimate circles of people accompanying one another and supporting one another in the process of trying to do that. I have been a parish priest for 30 years in the Episcopal Church and, while we are aware of the need for that kind of change of life, I don't see mechanisms in parish life for those kinds of shifts to happen.

Bruno

I think it's Grace that does it. I think it's less what we do than what happens to us, what we encounter. That changes us. That brings about transformation and obviously, what happens to

us then has to be lived out in some way. That's where the doing comes in.

Steve

Do you think spiritual practices have value in bringing us more readily to the place where Grace can work?

Bruno

Certainly... and take for instance a big bucket of practice called simplicity. There's enormous potential in simplifying our lives, simplifying our consciousness, and simplifying our environment as far as we can.

Monasticism is an eastern tradition. The Wisdom of the east is John's Gospel; it is about penetrating reality to a depth at which it becomes transparent. It is about being continually conscious and in contact with the central basic mystery, which for us has to be the mystery of Christ. The Johannine tradition tends to be more contemplative and less active, and less historically dynamic.

Paul is the opposite. In Paul's letters, there's a good deal of Wisdom consciousness but something has happened, is happening and is going to continue to happen. Of course I'm speaking crudely when I contrast Paul with John. They're both spiritual, both contemplative, but they're not both equally historical. It's the west that specialized in history.

I used to be especially in love with John. Paul was not nearly so significant for me. The west was not as impressive to me because it was not as spiritual. Yet the spirituality of the west is more mysterious. The element that appears in the west, particularly, is a kind of restlessness, a kind of homelessness. It starts there, as if the

western human being is in exile. Home somehow is in the future. The west is always heading for home.

As for the Sapiential tradition and the question of money, the eastern take on that would be poverty. And that would be it. The Carmelite mystical tradition, for instance, is eastern. It is completely interior. John of the Cross seems to me to write as if nobody else existed in the world, practically speaking, but you and God.



The western take on it would be Teilhard. The road of the east, according to Teilhard, is renunciation, simplification, and unworldliness; moving away from the world. The road of the west is about building the Kingdom of Heaven. Wisdom in the West, in other words, is about integrating all of your abilities, all of your experience, everything you've learned, everything you've learned how to do and everything you've acquired into the journey towards the Kingdom of Heaven, in a creative way.

Steve

When you speak of Teilhard's description of the path of the west and, in contrast, the renunciation of the east, I think of my children's generation and their belief in the dynamism of the marketplace and technological innovation, as powers that can be redeeming. Many people of my generation see that capitalism and technology are things that got us into this mess.

For me the global marketplace and extreme concentration of wealth is part of the urgency of the historical moment. How can this be seen within the providence of God and how can God work in that historical mechanism right now? I

struggle to find a way to bring some Wisdom from the Christian tradition into the situation of extreme concentration of wealth to direct us in a redemptive use of that concentration of wealth.

Bruno

Redemptive use and sometimes redistribution and sometimes justice oriented.



Steve

Is there something in the Sapiential tradition that we can bring into the conversation about economic justice?

Bruno



You have to delight people. You have to attract them before you can influence them. Lady Sophia has a power for

winning hearts and then when the heart is won the heart can begin to be transformed. Once it has found the truth in depth and in an experiential way, a lot of other things can happen.

The first of them may not be a passion for social justice but that may come fairly soon afterwards. To grasp the mystery of Christ is to experience the sweetness of it, the unity, the organic complexity and beauty of the mystery of Christ. Then you begin to accept the teeth of the Gospel, the sharp edge of the Gospel. Often Wisdom in the West has been something that people who had the leisure and the freedom to cultivate it did, like a hobby or like the diversion of poetry or something like that.

But it can be much more than that. There is a Sapiential understanding that the Gospel has practical consequences and practical exigencies that are no longer avoidable.

Rose

I learned a lot in my young adulthood about social justice. I was spiritually formed by the Jesuits and by Christian social activists. There is something about seeing Christianity as the faith that does justice that is very meaningful for a lot of people.

But when we were beginning to engage with people of wealth, I noticed that starting with the challenges of social justice sometimes shuts people down. Wisdom, on the other hand, opens a door. There is something about Wisdom that is about connecting with the fire in the heart. Then the social justice conversation can happen in a very different way.

Bruno

I think that's true in the early phase of captivating the heart. But the other side of the Gospel is social justice, which is very direct. The beauty of the Old Testament tradition is that faith will cause justice towards your neighbor. There's no way out of it.

Rose

But even in Paul, if you don't have love, then it can become a different kind of harshness. Wedding the Wisdom tradition with action in the world is part of what we are trying to tap into.

Bruno

There is also a big picture that is indispensable. Paul very often gives you the big picture. He doesn't give you the narrative of Jesus. He doesn't even give you the words of Jesus often at all. But he hits you on the head and the

heart with the big picture. It's very powerful because he's got it polished; it's as if it was all in one experience for him and that's the way he communicates it. So one aspect of the Sapiential is that big picture. And the authority that it carries with it touches everything. Like in Ephesians and Colossians where Paul talks about all things in heaven and earth remain one and it's God's plan to bring everything together. That's the Christian big picture that Paul gives you so often and so powerfully.



The other side is the participatory quality of the personal, the participatory view of the spectator. That is when you feel the mystery of Christ in your own body, you find it in your own life; you realize it in your own day-to-day existence somehow. For instance, maybe you experience the death and resurrection of Christ once a week. Maybe you find yourself getting killed one day and then rising from the dead miraculously the next morning. That's the participatory part. That's the delicious part. It is in your bones; it's in your flesh; it's in your day-to-day experience. And in the critical experiences of your life, the pivotal ones, the participatory quality is essential.

You could also define Wisdom as loving knowledge. The Sapiential contains the seed at the heart of love within it; that's its light really. Then that separates into the direct allure and passion of the spiritual theology and the intellectual passion of the big picture.

Rose

Some people are very inspired by a more intellectual vision and that is what motivates their use of money.

Bruno

Yes, and to other people it doesn't have any power at all.

Rose

Other people are really looking at their own life and looking for where Christ is present in a particular moment or a particular decision with money. That is participation. How can we continue to be a part of the Christ event as it's continuing to unfold? The Sapiential tradition has attraction and it reorients how we even think about money.

Bruno

The big picture is where I think social justice particularly shows its teeth. The Sapiential tradition has not delved enough into the awareness of social injustice and the inequalities in the world, and then bringing that together with the mystery of the event of Christ.

Rose

Our foundational story as an organization was the Anointing in Bethany story, where there's a whole conversation about money and social justice right in the middle of it.

Bruno

Ah yes, a good place to start from the Sapiential point of view, when Mary



anoints Jesus and the fragrance of the perfume filled the whole house. That's a Sapiential image right there. On one level what she's doing anticipates what Jesus is about to do. The fragrance that fills the whole house is the Holy Spirit and it can only be liberated when Jesus has died and risen. She is prophetically

acting in anticipation and in imitation, symbolizing what he's about to do. The perfume filling the whole house is the Holy Spirit filling the whole world and filling the whole person as well. That is a powerful gospel for introducing Sapiential understanding.

Steve

When people feel an attraction of the heart and begin to make money choices that move from love, there is delight in that. Money flows through everything; it can be like the fragrance that seeps out everywhere. When it's moving with the currency of love and people touch into that possibility that can be another level of experiencing the delight of what the resources that we have can be doing. Some people in our network come in with the social justice picture, but lack the heart place, the freedom of the heart.

Bruno

That's where the Sapiential is strong.

Steve

Right, and others start with the heart. I'm thinking of people who come from a more conservative tradition, but

lack the social justice analysis. We're trying to hold both together -- the invitation of Sophia and the way that fragrance can be infused into actual financial currency.

Bruno

The word gift becomes very important. Jesus brings God into the world in a particular way and the quality of that presence is largely gift.

It's not exchange. Forgiveness is like that. When Jesus forgives somebody's sins, he says your sins are forgiven. It's that gratuity of God that delights us and thrills us. The gratuity, generosity, the not asking for something in return, is part of the Christian gift to the person who is able to give

Rose

If it's given with a condition or expectation it's actually not a gift. Pure gift is free. It's just open heart.

Bruno

There's a beautiful theology that's right there, gift and gratuity. Jesus comes into a world of harsh relationships and a world without mercy, a world that is cruel, ferocious at times. The empire was ruthless. And what does he bring? He brings in something entirely different that contradicts that ruthlessness. You can call it gratuity.

You're not asking people to become poor, but to learn gratuity, to learn the joy of giving. To learn the joy of that freedom and not being attached, of not being somehow bunkered inside your wealth, but using it for good.



One thing that really impresses me about the Old Testament is the inseparability of faith and social justice. That runs right through the scriptures, all the way from the old, right through the new, and right at the center of each one. The prophets say you can't really worship God if you are not just to your brother and sister. And Jesus is teaching largely the same thing.

Rose

In some ways he's embodying that in how he relates to people across all the social boundaries.

Steve

One of the things that we talk a lot about is that money in the culture is very abstract. It's become so abstract that we don't know what the money that we have in the bank is doing, for example. Some people are talking about putting human relationship back into money, about restoring human relationship to money flow. In that sense, it's not really about money. It's about human relationships and how to bring those back into awareness in a culture that has disconnected money from human relationship.

For instance, when you go to the market and check out, you can avoid having to encounter a human being because you can check out with the machine. How do you have an encounter with a human being who works there when you buy your milk? Little things like that is what I'm talking about -- putting human relationship back into the transaction quality of money in our culture.

I've been dwelling on the notion of gratuity and thinking especially of that quality of gratuity in the relationship. But sometimes the conversation about justice doesn't lead to that gratuity; it's more a matter of balance.

Bruno

Justice, you can say, is a level of ethical business rule, and gratuity is something else. There's a beauty and a sweetness to gratuity. And, it is just another word for freedom. We have experienced gratuity when we felt free within ourselves, felt unattached. That is what Jesus brings into the world, into a world of tit for tat and a world that, at it's best, is the world of exchange, with fairness in buying and selling.

Into a world of that kind Jesus brings something absolutely new. This wonderful thing is gratuity and is expressed in so many ways.

Steve

Does gratuity transcend justice?

Bruno

Yes it does. Strict justice is objective in a sense. Gratuity comes from the inside, like when you forgive someone. Somebody has clearly hurt you. You know how people can be dominated by those bitter memories for their whole lifetime and can't get rid of them. They're prisoner to that. Then all of a sudden some day they look up and realize they are free. "I don't have to do that anymore." Now we're touching the center of a human person, so you get particular power when you get to the core of a human person, called heart, if you will.

Heart certainly has very much to do with gratuity. But, it's better not to tie it down too much, but to let it be a mystery. Whatever it is, that center of a human person, you know it when you're there. You know it when you hear it. You recognize it, but it's almost impossible to define. For one thing it's divine. You can't define God. You can't define Grace, except by saying it's that which is free. It's that which I didn't earn, that which I didn't make, it was given to me.



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