



Rector's Essay - The Permeable Self

By Jarrett Kerbel (06/26/26)

When I endured the ordination process in the Episcopal Church, a full psychiatric screening was required; The Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI). Questions on the test included, “Do you ever hear voices?” and “Do you ever talk to people who are not there?” As I took the test, I thought to myself, “St. Francis would fail this exam!”

What a pickle for a young person of faith aspiring to serve the church! If I am honest and say, “Yes I do pray to God and I hear responses,” will I be rejected as a crazy person?

In short, here is the dilemma of faith in the modern age. Our basic permeability to a living God who guides us, speaks to us, listens to us, moves through us, inspires us, and urges us to Christ-conformity is insanity from a secular perspective, i.e. the perspective of exclusive humanism and the buffered self.

When it came time to hear the results of the MMPI, I went to see a psychiatrist at St. Luke's Medical Center in New York City. Sitting in his stuffy, over-heated office listening to the results, I could feel in my body the heavy gray cloud of depression hanging on this man. As an empathetic, feeling and permeable person who is no stranger to depression, I could feel his feelings without him telling me.

Ironically, the permeability that is key to priesthood and discipleship showed up in a conversation designed to make sure I did not experience unspoken messages.

Tanya Luhmann, the great American Anthropologist, explored the modern dilemma for people of faith in her book, “When God Talks Back.” By embedding herself in a charismatic church on the South Side of Chicago she studied the direct reports of

spiritual experiences of the church members. She did this with great sympathy but also with the distance that comes from social-science observation. She concluded that communities of faith represent strange islands of permeable people within a larger culture that only recognizes the buffered self of modernity.

And to that I say, thanks be to God. We have a real (in fact the most real) gift to share in a lonely, despairing, atomized age. We exist in communion with God and each other. Our lives unfold under the loving care of our God who subtly moves in us and around us to shape our lives and redirect us to our full humanity in Christ!