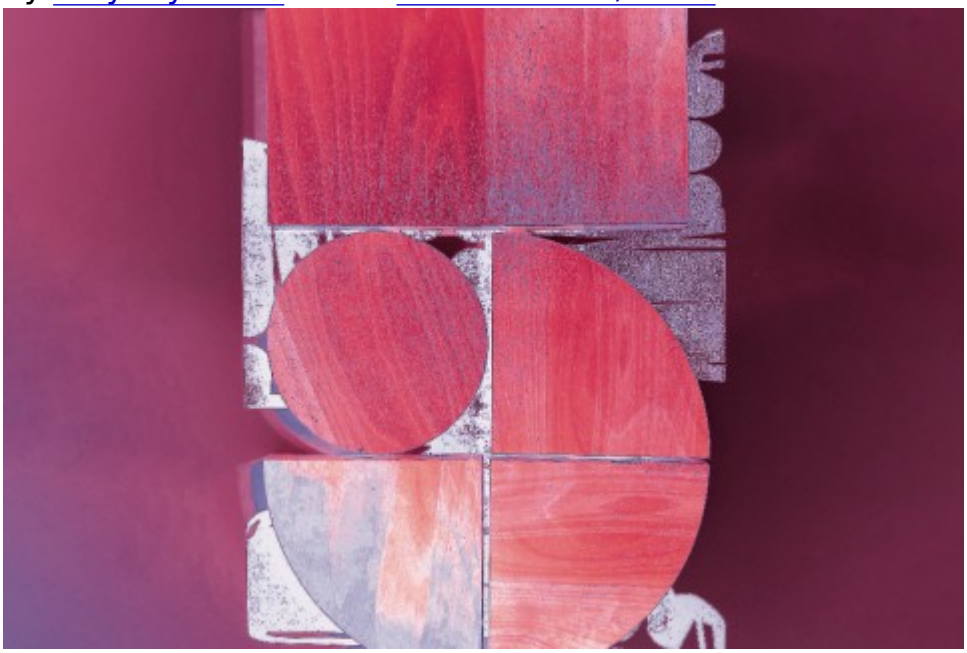
The five spiritual senses

Lessons from Maximus the Confessor and my dog

by Amy Frykholm in the November 17, 2021 issue



(Illustration by Daniel Richardson)

My husband and I recently adopted a rescue dog. He had had a rough life by the time he came to live with us. The crowning event was being mauled by another dog in his household. He was rushed to surgery with his jugular vein exposed. When we read the medical report, we could only shake our heads that he had survived at all, that the owner had been able to reach the hospital in time, that the veterinarian had even decided to operate.

When he came to live in our house, we observed how little will he exhibited. He seemed to have no sense of wanting anything. Mostly he tried to stay out of anyone's sight lines. When he was offered food, he approached it cautiously. He took one step toward it and another step back, as if he were certain he would be punished for his audacity. A few minutes later he would approach his food bowl again, take a piece, and run away with it. He found a hiding place under the dining room table where he stayed for hours at a time.

Gradually, day by day, we built a relationship with him. We fed him at regular times and didn't interrupt him when he tried to eat. We offered him comfortable places to sleep. We spoke to him gently. We took him on walks. But the main thing was that, as he allowed it, we petted him. And this is how we watched him come back to life. With touch, his will has returned, and with his will has come the capacity to experience delight. In the mornings, our new dog dances and sings. He twirls. When he sees my nephew, to whom he has become attached, he almost does backflips.

This experience has me thinking about Maximus the Confessor. Maximus was a seventh-century monk who died in exile in the far regions of the Byzantine Empire, in a little town in modern-day Georgia. He had gotten caught up in the Monothelite controversy and ended up on the wrong side of the emperor. (Thanks to Frederick Aquino at Abilene Christian University for his help in understanding Maximus.)

The basics of the controversy were this: Monothelites argued that Jesus Christ was fully human and fully divine but had only one will: a divine will. (*Thelos* comes from the Greek word for will.) Dyothelites, of which Maximus was a particularly passionate example, believed that in order to be fully human and fully divine, Jesus must have possessed both a human will and a divine will.

I admit that for as many times as I have read about the Monothelite controversy, I've never been able to make sense of it. Whenever I talk about it, I seem to be reciting facts that have not really entered my understanding. It has seemed like a question of semantics—people fighting and dying over words. Why would Maximus have been willing to lose his tongue and his right hand to this battle? Why did he end his short life in exile, cut off from his students and his beloved church?

Only as I have contemplated the work of Maximus in relation to my dog have I finally been able to dimly grasp what Maximus was so concerned about. For Maximus the question of Jesus' will is intimately tied to the work and purpose of humans in the world. If Jesus did not possess a human will, then he could not serve as a full bridge between humans and the divine. He was always, of necessity, separate and other. Humans could thus do no better than to be God's servants—they could not be God's friends.

But Maximus was convinced that Jesus intended for us to be God's friends. He saw the incarnation as an invitation into an intimate relationship of love in which humans could learn to practice God's will, through the transformation of their own wills.

A significant part of Maximus's life was his role as a practical teacher on the subject of the spiritual life. Many of his writings appear in the *Philokalia*, a collection of spiritual texts that began as a handbook for monks and became influential throughout the Eastern church.

How can a person grow toward God during their lifetime on earth?

Because of his belief in the transformation of the human will, Maximus was interested in the question of spiritual growth: How can a person grow toward God during their lifetime on earth? He sought ways to unify bodily experience, rational thought, and the work of the will so that all aspects of the human being could grow in unity toward Christ's own nature. He believed that there were two primary ways to grow in this way: contemplative practice and virtue practice.

Maximus believed that each of the physical senses corresponds to a spiritual faculty or capacity given to humans by God—and that all of these work together for good. For example, the physical sense of touch corresponds to the "vivifying faculty," the spiritual capacity to bring something more fully into life.

Though I didn't have language for it, this is precisely what I experienced with my dog. Day by day, touch by touch, he came more fully into life. The vivifying capacity is both spiritual and physical; it is emotional as well as cognitive, and it demands actual physical touch. Thinking about touch won't do.

I thought of these words from Rainer Maria Rilke:

> Have you noticed how scorned, lowly things revive when they come into the willing gentle hands of someone solitary? They are like small birds to which the warmth returns; they stir, waken, and a heart begins to beat in them, rising and falling in those hearkening hands like the utmost wave of a mighty ocean.

The sense of smell Maximus connected to what he called the "incensive faculty." What is this? At first I was mystified. But then I thought about the monastery I sometimes visit. The walls there seem to have absorbed the smell of incense, to give it off. Whenever I smell this, I am drawn back to myself. I become sharper and clearer. For Maximus, smell leads to discernment and spiritual insight. It is associated strongly with the Holy Spirit.

The sense of sight corresponds to the “intellective faculty.” The Greek word Maximus uses is *nous*—from which we get the adjective *noetic*—and it is difficult to fully translate. Our contemporary understanding of intellect locates that capacity almost entirely in the brain, and we usually translate that as mind. But the Greek word allows more centers of knowing and more locations for intelligence, including the heart and the guts. Still, in Maximus’s typology our knowing corresponds specifically with seeing. The greater our capacity for seeing—and this does not mean only physical sight but also perception—the greater our capacity for the spiritual concept of knowing.

The spiritual senses are related to the physical senses but don’t necessarily require them.

Hearing corresponds to the “rational faculty,” the capacity to reason. I think about the way that each act of listening is a kind of spiritual journey, full of obstacles both in the self and the other. Listening to another human being or to a situation is a virtue practice because as you listen, you work to clear distractions in order to hear as fully as possible what is being said, even if not all of it is spoken. What is being said is never a matter of words only but also of emotions, will, desires, intelligence, experience, and so on. Love underscores, anchors, and solidifies true listening because it isn’t blown about by the spirit of vainglory. Reasoning is, in the spiritual realm, closely tied to discernment.

Taste corresponds to the capacity for desire, what Maximus calls the “appetitive faculty.” By paying attention to our desires, even to something so lowly as our desire for food, we can learn about how God uses our appetites to expand our capacity for love. We can learn about the relation between our physical appetites and our spiritual appetites, and not only about their frequent disconnection.

Until I encountered Maximus I had never considered any of these faculties or the role that they play in my life. In the tradition in which I was raised, sensory experience was rarely called upon to teach us anything about God. In general, we were taught that the work of finding God was interior work, a searching through your thoughts and feelings more than anything else. I remember walking into an Orthodox church for the first time, around age 19, and wondering why people were distracting themselves with all of these smells and icons and commotion. Why did they stand when they prayed, when you could obviously go so much deeper inside yourself when you were sitting? I was challenged by this experience, and over the decade I

came to understand how and why to pay attention to my sensory experience.

Maximus's understanding brings clarity and even drama to the work of ordinary living. The acts of everyday life become almost an adventure as you explore, in curiosity, where and how God might be perceived, might be expanding your capacities, and might like you to use them. While I've discussed each of these capacities individually, real growth often requires taking them together and in relation. Maximus's vision is of the whole human being in relation to God, growing toward God like a plant toward the sun.

My friend Johnathan and I decided to experiment with these capacities during the 50 days of Easter this year. The days involved, à la Maximus, both conscious and unconscious development of these faculties. On some days, we developed the appetitive faculty by consciously seeking out the tastes of spring, for example. On other days, we sought out new knowledge. For several days, we exchanged Al Green songs—"Hallelujah Anyhow" and "Everything's Gonna Be Alright"—in an effort to connect what was happening in the world to our reason and our emotion.

After the Derek Chauvin trial, Johnathan, who is a pastor in New Orleans, spent a day in public prayer, attempting to connect his will to the divine will to society's will. On that day, I looked around my own tiny village and recognized how unlikely I was to encounter any sort of public demonstration of the kind that Johnathan was describing. So I went out in public anyway and took a prayer walk in an attempt to join my will to Johnathan's.

I've noticed that one of the keys to this kind of spiritual practice is to acknowledge how incremental it is, how low to the ground resurrection might be, how carefully you might have to look for it, and how tiny the cultivations in yourself might be. One day I told Johnathan I was going outside to look for signs of spring. I came home cold, wet, and seemingly empty-handed, unless you count soggy snow as a sign of spring.

But this incremental work is precisely what Maximus meant by "divinization"—the slow transformation of our own human existence into the image of the divine. It is a process, a practice.

The spiritual senses tradition asserts that God is constantly speaking through the tangible, sensible world. We can grow, this tradition says, in our ability to perceive this communication, not unlike a birder grows in her ability to perceive the presence

of birds or a chef grows in his ability to perceive flavors.

With touch, our dog's will has returned—and with it his capacity for delight.

In the Christian tradition, asceticism has been deemed essential for this perception, because through asceticism we clear the channels so that we can perceive more clearly. In liberation theology—as in the Gospels—there is an important sense in which marginalized people have what has been called "epistemological privilege." This is not because God endows poor or suffering people with special skills to compensate for their suffering but because the experience of suffering opens up different aspects of the world, physical and spiritual together, that are closer to what Jesus experienced in his own lifetime. Through struggle and suffering, people can become more attuned to God's work in the world.

In an odd twist, the spiritual senses are related to the physical senses but don't necessarily require them. We might consider the way that people who have disabilities that limit their sensory perception often develop keen sensations and perceptions that go far beyond the five senses.

I recognize that all of this has a complicated relation to my little dog. I don't know very much about the spiritual senses of dogs or chickadees or other creatures. But as we've spent time with him and watched him come to life, I can say for a fact that we've used our own vivifying faculty to help him gain what we might even call gifts of the Spirit: peace, patience, kindness, goodness, self-control. We've used the appetitive faculty, his more than ours maybe, to help him learn to be a part of us. We've consciously used our wills to heal his will. But the exchange is mutual. We've all been learning to use our physical senses to love—to give love, to receive love, to practice love. Love is, after all, a part of human experience that requires a body.

Before this exploration with the spiritual sense tradition, I might have said that the dog's utter delight at seeing me and knowing that I exist (something he almost seems to discover anew each time I leave and come back) could teach me something about God's love and delight in my existence. But now I wonder if his delight is God's delight in me. Through him, God shows this love—exuberant and unconditional and based on my very existence. The little dog allows me to experience this love viscerally. In this case, it's not a metaphor. It's a big, wet kiss on the lips.