



TRADITION, CHALLENGE, WITNESS An Address to the Carmelite General Chapter

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Then the LORD said [to Elijah]: “Go out and stand on the mountain before the face of the LORD. Behold the LORD is about to pass.” And there was a great and powerful wind, rending the mountains and shattering the rocks before the face of the LORD. But the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind, there was an earthquake. But the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake, there was fire. But the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire, the sound of a faint whisper. (1 K 19:11-12)

One of the great paradoxes of the spiritual life is that the God whom we seek is present to the world of space and time precisely by being absent from it. God’s presence is through a perceptible absence. God is not in the world as a discernible object, but as a presence as close to nothing as we can conceive. As Elijah’s vision at Horeb indicates, the presence of God seems to be no more than the sound of a faint whisper. It is silence. Real yet subtle beyond our imagining. Even while we can affirm God’s agency in the world we are baffled by the fact that God is not-a-thing, not a thing alongside other things, but a reality that is utterly other. Whatever we say about God is necessarily trite and without foundation, yet it is this experience of the density of God’s absence which kindles the desire that is the driving force of every spiritual journey.

The marketing of such “an unknown God”, as Saint Paul quickly discovered, is not easy. The alternatives are atheism or some form of idolatry. The lurking temptation to make contact with other more accessible deities is ever-present, and gods of our own creation are usually more amenable to our ways of thinking and acting. But manufactured religion (*ethelothreskia* – Col 2:23) has no transcendent component; it can be only a variant of social conditioning. Because the divine nature is directly unknowable – even if God’s existence is postulated – it would seem that human beings are limited to an effectively godless existence.



Then came the surprise. God spoke. God's self-revelation. In various ways God addressed patriarchs and prophets, and as the centuries passed we received the gift of authoritative instruction in the things of God (*torah*). Furthermore, we were admonished by saints and sages to find the vestiges of God even in the opacity of the created world. Then, in the fullness of time, God sent the Son, born of a woman. In him the fullness of the Godhead resided, so that by his becoming human we might become divine.

Christ, as the site of God's definitive self-revelation, is the portal by which we are able to make contact with the spiritual world and, thereby, with the God who dwells in inaccessible light. This ongoing revelation is living and active; it is not inert. It is the means by which God's agency in the world continues to be accomplished. It is the means by which eternal life – which comes from contact with the divine – is transmitted. Christ as the source of eternal life transmits it to us through human mediation: the proclamation of the Good News, the sacraments, the life-giving communion which is the Church.

And there you have a description of tradition – one that goes beyond sociology and cultural anthropology and views it in terms of theology and metaphysics. It is the transmission of life. Eternal life.

1. Tradition

“[Elisha] picked up the cloak which had fallen from Elijah and returned to stand on the bank of the Jordan. There he struck the water with Elijah's cloak, saying ‘Where is the LORD, the God of Elijah?’” (2 K 2:13-14)

Tradition is often misunderstood as a stodgy reality, referring to the conservation of the past and, thereby, resistance to the present and an indifference to the future. The form of the word contradicts this reading. The suffix *-itio* in *traditio* indicates that it is a process. It is closer to a verb than a noun. Properly *traditio* refers to the act of handing on something to another, rather than the thing that is being transmitted. Tradition is alive as long as it is being passed on from one generation to the next. Far from being static, it is an ever-flowing Heraclitean river.¹

But there is a catch. The verb *tradere* means not only “to hand on” but also “to betray”. Ironically, what is handed on is inevitably changed. The act of reception

¹ On this see M. Casey, “Tradition, Interpretation, Reform: The Western Monastic Experience,” *American Benedictine Review* 69:4 (2018), pp. 400-428.



modifies what is received. This is the presupposition of the “telephone game” (*téléphone arabe*), sometimes called “Chinese whispers” (*Chinesisches Flüstern*). It is impossible to receive a message and to pass it on without adding to it something of oneself. So far from being a museum-keeper’s climate-controlled sterility, tradition promotes preservation by replicating itself in a variety of forms, each version drawing sustenance from its own unique and particular environment.

There are, therefore, two false notions of tradition. One is to identify it with a fixed and unchanging deposit – of beliefs, values or practices – which serves as a permanent criterion of orthodoxy. The other is to view it within the nineteenth-century mentality of continuing progress; every onward step is an improvement which makes the past redundant. The reality comes somewhere within this polarity. Tradition remains itself by constantly changing. It is ever new, yet it loses nothing of what it was.

Tradition is a process of ongoing re-formation of whatever is received in accordance the emergent situation. Re-formation is not an occasional necessity; it is an integral component of the process. The shape of this re-formation is not determined exclusively by what has previously existed; it is a response to new challenges. Taking the Good News beyond the ambit of the lost sheep of the house of Israel inevitably meant that the Gospel would be modified in the process. There are today thousands of ways to embody the beliefs and values of the Gospel, differentiated by their geography and by their individual cultural pathways through the centuries. The self-revelation of God has produced an almost-infinite variety of resonances in the hearts of human beings that collectively testify to the unfathomable richness of the divine entity.

This principle is exemplified in the different traditions of Gospel living that are associated with the various religious orders that have sprung up in response to what Vatican II famously termed “the signs of the times”. We can, if we are so inclined, trace the genealogy of these traditions, noting how through different concatenations of circumstances a single stream of tradition is repeatedly re-formed.² Many of these re-formations imagine themselves as the recovery of the original and authentic tradition that had been lost or deformed over the course of time. But, in every case, it is something new that is emerging. And, of course, traditions are often deformed in the course of re-formation – that is why the history of so many of the older religious orders is punctuated by spasms of reform.

² In “From Desert to Cloister” in *Monks Road: Gethsemani into the Twenty-First Century* (Trappist: Gethsemani Abbey, 2015), pp. 9-87, I tried to demonstrate how different facets of monastic spirituality were successively brought into play by the distinctive social conditions of the eras to which it was addressed.



The Second Vatican Council summarily described the task of the renewal of religious life as returning to the sources **and** responding to the signs of the times. The key word is, of course, “and”. One or other of these courses of action is no more than moderately challenging; to pursue both objectives simultaneously is much more demanding. Within the ranks of those who follow particular traditions there have always been some who hanker after returning to the past and others who want to leave it behind and precipitate themselves into the present. And this requires – to use another much-favoured ideal of Vatican II – dialogue. Otherwise, the result is polarisation and sometimes division between what might be termed “conservative” and “progressive”. In such situations, the wisdom of the well-known saying of Hegel is often forgotten. "Genuine tragedies in the world are not conflicts between right and wrong. They are conflicts between two rights." Two rights often make a wrong.

At the heart of this dilemma is the issue of hermeneutics. Is the tradition being read correctly and dynamically or is it being seen as something fixed and immovable – on the one hand to be embraced, on the other to be rejected? The interpretation of a spiritual patrimony is not governed by the same norms as the juridical reading of legislative texts. There is a kind of family access that allows those who have long lived according to the beliefs and values embodied in the tradition, intuitively to contextualise what is written and to grasp its meaning in their own very different situation. There is the possibility, as Hans-Georg Gadamer pointed out, of a “fusion of horizons” (*Horizonverschmelzung*) which is the prerequisite for arriving at a common language that permits dialogue.³ To engage with our spiritual tradition we need the fundamental openness of a listener⁴ that permits “uninterrupted listening”,⁵ and this presupposes that, in approaching the text, we are “radically undogmatic”.⁶ I accept that in coming to the tradition for guidance I will encounter “some things that are against myself”.⁷ Previous internalisation of the beliefs and values of the tradition is not meant as a defence against change, but as a point of departure for a new expression of ancient truths in which the enhanced sensitivity of the committed reader plays a necessary and creative role.

We must not lose sight of the theological component in spiritual traditions. The tradition of a religious order is one expression of ecclesial tradition, one channel by which the out-pouring of God’s self-revelation flows into us. Our participation in a tradition – and not merely our reception of it – is a source of life. It is a means by which the life of Christ flows into us and enables us to live at a level otherwise impossible. Consider your call. Was not our experience of vocation a perception of

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1965), p. 273;

“Understanding ... is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves.”

⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p.324.

⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 421

⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 319.

⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 325.



a path leading to more abundant life? It opened out before us as a means of access to the spiritual world, which we could accept or decline. It was more than a career-choice. We experienced it as the call of Christ not greatly dissimilar to the call of Simon the fisherman, or Matthew the tax-collector, or the rich man who went away sadder.

Our corporate sense of being called by Christ is the hermeneutical key to understanding our tradition. We approach our patrimony with the desire to understand what it is to which we are called – today. Not yesterday. “If today you hear God’s voice...” I suppose that what is operating here is the grace of communion which energises those who give it admittance, not only to ensure that the tradition is alive but to aspire to make it lively. This means that we who participate in a tradition are obliged to allow that tradition continually to work its magic on us. With one hand we receive from the past, we make it our own and, with the other hand, we pass it on to the future. This particular lifeline by which God acts in self-revelation and self-communication is kept alive by human mediation. That is, by us. By continuing the tradition we become instruments in God’s work of sanctification.

The communion of saints is imaged in the New Testament as the Body of Christ – a body in which the different members are functionally distinct. This means that there is no ground for comparison between the relative value of one against another. “The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I do not need you’.” Within the universal call to holiness there are distinct vocations, each contributing to the divine master-plan. And we have to admit that no matter how much we labour over our vision statements and mission statements, we do not really know with much clarity exactly what is our ongoing role in the universal scheme of things. As a result, we often misjudge what is happening around us as we pass through necessary but unwelcome periods of transition. Nothing remains the same for long. Religious orders typically pass through alternating seasons of expansion and contraction. What we often fail to understand is that the driving forces of growth are often the lessons learned during diminishment.

In particular, we tend to be overly negative in assessing the potential inherent in the present situation. This is a convenient excuse for luxuriating in our lack of prospects and sinking into purposelessness, tending the fire sufficiently to keep ourselves warm, but lacking any missionary zeal to allow it to flourish. Many of us feel inclined to exclaim with Cicero, *O tempora! O mores!* We look around at problems and divisions within the Church, at the disheartedness of so many religious because of reduced numbers and diminishing vitality. We find rising in our hearts what may be termed the mantra of despair. “If only.” If only the pool of potential recruits were larger. If only we had more candidates. If only more of those that enter persevere. If only our leadership were more dynamic... To which God may well reply, “There are still seven thousand who have not bowed their knee to Baal.”



Too often we are held back from the good we can do by what Jean Baudrillard has termed “eclectic nostalgia”.⁸ We are tyrannised by our selective memories of what it used to be like, as though the exuberance many orders experienced during the 1950s, or in the nineteenth century, were normative. We are sent to interact with our own time and culture, whatever that may be now, and whatever it may be in the process of becoming. This is why tradition is alive; it draws its energy from the real world, which it views as an exciting complex of brand new challenges. The athleticism with which tradition has responded to change in previous centuries is a source of confidence that it is well able to serve God and advance God’s Kingdom in any situation that ambient society throws up.

Nobody would take seriously a tennis player who insisted on playing only those shots to which he had given prior approval. The point of the game is that a player does not know what sort of ball his opponent will send down next. He has to be ready not only to defend against his opponent’s shot, but creatively to turn it back on him in a way that is not expected. In kindergarten tennis it may be different, but the professional is expected to be able to deal with anything the other player throws at him.

Maybe it is time for us to pay less attention to the “prophets of doom” and their statistics and projections and begin to see what are the particular possibilities that this time of change brings. We should be in no doubt that we are confronting not merely an epoch of change, but a change of epoch. As Pope Francis has said.⁹ We are living through a paradigm shift.¹⁰ This may very well require of us new learning and new skills, but it is not the end of the world. And it need not be the end of the tradition to which we belong. Unless we have some sort of a death wish that robs us of hope and saps our energy to resist extinction. Perhaps we should take to heart the famous poem of Dylan Thomas: “Do not go gentle into that good night. / Rage, rage against the dying of the light.”

A tradition is not usually extinguished by external forces alone; if it fades it is because those who bear it become disheartened, lose their nerve, and put down their burden.

⁸ “Postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.” Sourced from www.azquotes.com/author/1049-Jean_Baudrillard.

⁹ “We are not so much living in an epoch of change, but a change of epoch.” *L’Osservatore Romano*, 4 July 2014, p. 10.

¹⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 4th Edition 2012). p. 175. See Hans Küng and David Tracy [ed.], *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1989). Hans Küng, *Can We Save the Catholic Church?* (London: William Collins, 2013)



2. Challenge

And, behold, a voice came to him saying, “Why are you here, Elijah?”. (1 K 19:13)

The most serious component of the situation in which we find ourselves is that we have lost the invincible sense of our own identity, perhaps as individuals, but also as an order. It is true that we have all kinds of symbols of our identity: our habit, our special vocabulary, the places and personages that bear our brand. But do we have a firm sense of who we are in today’s Church and today’s world? Here history is not much help. Most orders have been different things in different circumstances, and picking and choosing among historical precedents to find something that appeals to us is not necessarily helpful. The task that is ours in the present is not only to find a way that is sustaining and life-giving for ourselves, but to find one which also provides scope for our generative capacities – one that enables us to contribute to the forward march of God’s Kingdom.

It helps if we are a little bit mad. It may well be true that common sense is the guide of the virtues, but sometimes an excess of prudence can render us too timid to respond to the call of the Spirit. I love the fact that the great cathedral of Saint Basil in the Kremlin is dedicated not to the great Cappadocian Doctor of the Church but to Saint Basil the Fool (d. 1552), who was wont to wander around stark naked during the formidable Russian winter, in order to gain some attention for the message he was impelled to deliver. It is an exaggerated common sense that gives rise to “a preference for moderation that can all too easily lead to mediocrity”¹¹ The histories of religious orders often testify to periods of self-legitimizing spirals of decline, during which many small choices are made which cumulatively subvert the basic purpose of the particular group. Each individual choice is defensible, but no one takes the time to step back and assess where it is all leading. Perhaps they have forgotten Winston Churchill’s advice: “Watch the tides, not the eddies”.

And so we are led to underline the importance of a strong corporate experience of identity – strong in the sense that it enables us to arrive at choices that are in harmony with our fundamental purpose, and are not merely driven by a rapid response to opportunistic demands or possibilities. Perhaps we need to outgrow our need for winning approval by blind conformity to the self-interested expectations of others, and to invest our limited resources in doing well what we do best. In other words, all of us need to give a certain priority to those activities that are most closely linked to our particular charism, recognising that sometimes renewal is more a matter of subtraction than addition. May I recall the remark of Cardinal Braz de Aviz at the

¹¹ Thus, David Malouf in a different context; *A First Place* (North Sydney, Knopf, 2014), p. 301.



Benedictine Abbot's Congress in 2012? Sometimes "we must have the courage to diminish our works to save our charism."

Obviously, it is not for an outsider to define the nature of your charism. Just as obviously, it must be the task of the General Chapter of your Order to enter into a sustained dialogue about how to refocus your understanding of the tradition by which you live so that it becomes sharper and more capable of penetrating the fog which pervades the postmodern world.

Because I am not averse to rushing in where angels fear to tread, may I say that it seems to me that probably the issue that is most important and most urgent is to decide on the relative priority of activities that stem from your being a contemplative brotherhood and activities that relate to your ministry and life of service to the Church. You must surely have given serious consideration to this question in the Chapters that followed the Second Vatican Council, but that was half a century ago. The times have changed. The combination of the contemplative life with active ministry is a noble objective, but the practicalities are difficult to unravel. In Saint Luke's story about Mary and Martha, Mary sits at the feet of Jesus, whereas Martha "stands over him" [*epistasa*] (Lk 10:40), a word which, in the Third Gospel, indicates superiority. As the mistress of the house Martha is trying to bully Jesus. We will probably find that in our own religious life the demands of activity are always more strident than those of the contemplative life.

"Elijah stepped forward and said ... 'How long will you sit on the fence?'" (1 K 18:21 NEB)

Many of us rely on a facile belief that matters will sort themselves out without much interference from us. That is to misread the urgency of the present time. The fact is that the contemplative life – as distinct from occasional contemplative experience – always ends up in second place. I see four reasons for this.

1. Contemplation is a gift of grace; we cannot produce it through our own efforts, the most we can do is to reduce alternative activities so as to make room for the grace which comes on God's initiative.
2. There is no direct causal link between what we do and what we experience; and so we easily come to the conclusion that since there are no visible results we are wasting our time devoting ourselves to the things of the spirit.
3. The fruits of contemplation are not always apparent to the one who receives them, and so we easily become discouraged – especially because some symptoms of progress are counter-intuitive.



4. Living a contemplative life demands much in terms of discipline and asceticism. Mostly we are more comfortable in choosing a less demanding lifestyle.

The worst thing we can do is to do nothing. We need to respond to the signs of the times. And so, let us talk about the need for a disciplined way of life. Every religious tradition that seeks to be taken seriously makes demands on its adherents through prescribing specific practices and observances, through the giving of time or money, or through stricter codes of personal and social morality. There is always a dialectic between comfort and challenge.¹² “*A certain amount of tension with secular society is essential to success – the trick is finding, and maintaining, the right amount.*”¹³ In fact, it seems that the more demanding the conditions for membership, the more the institution thrives. In 1994, American sociologist Laurence R. Iannaccone published an article entitled “*Why Strict Churches are Strong.*”¹⁴ In it he presented the evidence for his conclusion that strictness tended to improve the health of a community both by excluding uncommitted members, and by enhancing the morale and participation of those prepared to meet its demands. Easy-going communities offer pretexts for members to drift in and out. Some become marginalised and migrate to the fringes, others see the common life as a kind of smorgasbord in which they have the right to select what appeals to them and leave everything else aside.

In many religious orders there is a continuing resentment at the perceived severity of former practice and a corresponding resistance to anything that might be seen as a return to what is labelled the “inhumanity” of past decades. Discipline was seen as penitential and perhaps even vindictive, rather than as a means of attaining the goal for which persons entered religious life. It was, furthermore, something for novices – to be discarded once maturity was attained. In this matter, we may be surprised to discover that millennials are far more positive about meaningful discipline than the middle-aged mavericks who inveigh against it.

If we intend to advertise the distinctiveness of our tradition by pointing to its strong contemplative component, then we need to make sure that inquirers are not disappointed when they encounter the reality. This involves more than providing a contemplative pathway for them to follow; it means that we ourselves must walk the walk, as well as talk the talk.

This is where it becomes difficult. Contemplative prayer does not fall within the ambit of human achievement. It is, rather, as Saint John Climacus avers, God’s gift to those who pray.¹⁵ This means that we have to initiate newcomers into a practice of prayer which progressively exposes them to the

¹² This is the dilemma explored in Charles Y. Glock, Benjamin B. Ringer and Earl R. Babbie, *To Comfort and To Challenge: A Dilemma of the Contemporary Church* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).

¹³ Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion: Secularization, Revival and Cult Formation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p 134.

¹⁴ *American Journal of Sociology* 99.5 (March 1994), pp. 1180-1231.

¹⁵ John Climacus *Ladder*, 28:64. [Lazarus Moore trans.], *St. John Climacus: The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 258.



realisation of their own incompetence, and their consequent reliance on the agency of God. In prayer, but also in life. What we teach them is that prayer cannot be taught.

I have to admit to having reservations about insisting on particular techniques, even though it is prudent to have at our disposal a range of methods for entering into prayer. Sometimes the lesson we learn so reluctantly is that, when it comes to prayer, we are helpless and hopeless in achieving the goals we optimistically set before ourselves. As I have already said, we cannot produce prayer. All that we can do is to reduce activities that displace it. And this is the proper function of the common life. A formative community facilitates the development of a discipline of life that progressively optimises both the qualitative and quantitative expansion of prayer in the hearts and in the lives of its members.

The practices that allow prayerfulness to expand are well known to you all, as are the issues that inhibit its growth. I would like to single out one observance that has a particular relevance in our time: silence. Your rule rightly admonishes, “Employ every care in keeping silence, which is the way to foster holiness.”

The resurgence of interest in silence in our increasingly noisy world is indicated by the number of recent books devoted to this topic from the standpoint of various disciplines.¹⁶ This perhaps suggests that we should do an audit of the practice of silence in our communities. It seems to me that we should be thinking less of imposing rigid and draconian regulations than in developing within our membership an appreciation of the human and spiritual value of silence, maybe recognising how much it has been eroded in recent decades.

Perhaps the testimony of Sara Maitland, an Englishwoman who spent years pursuing silence, may provide us with a starting point for reflection.

Almost all serious writers on contemplative prayer, from all traditions and across history, are clear that this kind of praying can only be developed in a context that includes a great deal of silence.¹⁷

In the right circumstances, silence is not experienced as a negativity even though arriving at it involves many negations. Gustavo Dudamel, the conductor of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra has insisted that the silence of the audience is an integral part of any performance; it communicates an energy that is lacking when the

¹⁶ For example. Max Picard, *The World of Silence* (Wichita: Eighth Day Books, 2002). Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks* (Sydney: Hodder, 2003). Stuart Sim, *Manifesto for Silence: Confronting the Politics and Culture of Noise* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* (London: Granta Publications, 2008). Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Silence: A Christian History*, (London: Penguin Books, 2013) Maggie Ross, *Silence: A User's Guide* [Two volumes], (London: Cascade, 2014 and 2017). Erling Kagge, *Silence in the Age of Noise* (London: Penguin Books, 2018). Alain Corbin, *A History of Silence: From the Renaissance to the present day* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2018).

¹⁷ Maitland, *A Book on Silence*, p. 24.



orchestra rehearses in an empty hall. Silence creates a space that attracts whatever is repelled by a high density of sound. Its overall effect is enrichment.

There are, clearly, different levels of silence and all do not have the same spiritual value. When physical noise is reduced to a minimum, silence reigns – for a moment. Then softer, subtler sounds begin to make themselves heard. Sounds which are below our normal threshold of hearing because they are blotted out by the roar of modern life. There is often a connection between immersion in nature and silence. Even though nature itself is not silent, it calls us to wordless admiration. It induces us to leave aside our wordiness and our noisemaking devices and to be attentive. We experience this as uplifting for the soul. We are taken out of ourselves for the moment and touched by a transcendent reality. This is probably why Alfred North Whitehead was able to write: “Religion is what the individual does with his own solitariness ... and if you are never solitary, you are never religious.”¹⁸

We stand in need of silence for original thought and self-expression. Lack of originality is one of the aspects of postmodernity that Jean Baudrillard laments, and it may well be because of the insistent encroachment of noise into everyday life.¹⁹ We need quiet to think and to find our own voice. Totalitarian states recognise this; that is why there are loudspeakers in public places. Their purpose is not merely the communication of content and the rousing of patriotic fervour, it is also to prevent that most subversive of activities: private thinking.

While we need silence to find ourselves, silence also offers us the possibility of leaving ourselves aside. As we enter more deeply into silence, we find ourselves called to let go of the many egotistical desires that continue to populate our hearts, even after many years of spiritual pursuit. The spiritual warfare in which we are engaged has as its objective that singleness of heart which is the seedbed of deep prayer. There is no substitute. There are no short cuts.

There is a certain irony involved in spending so much time speaking about silence. I have done so in the belief that more attention in this matter is one of the ways in which we may gently move towards a more contemplative existence. I believe also that more silence will be good for most us, in the sense that it will help us more completely to embody in our own lives and in our own way something of the richness of our age-old tradition. And, if we are in the business of making resolutions, it might be good to have in mind the possibility of reading one of the recent books written about silence, in the hope of thinking new thoughts about a topic which has been long familiar.

¹⁸ Alfred North Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1927), p. 7.

¹⁹ See footnote 7.



3. Witness

[The woman] said to Elijah, ‘Now I know that you are a man of God and that the word of the LORD on your lips is truth.’ (1 K 17:24)

If we are to play a prophetic role in the postmodern world, the first requirement is that we are what we say we are. As Blessed Christian of Tibherine wrote, “The only way for us to give witness is ... to be what we are in the midst of banal, everyday realities.” This recalls the sentence dictated by Catherine of Sienna in a letter to Stefano di Corrado Maconi (Ep. 368), “Become what you were meant to be and you will set fire to the whole of Italy and beyond.” If we are truly men of God, people will notice, just as they also notice when we are phony.

To be what we are called to be involves more than extricating ourselves from the constricting coils of capitalism, consumerism and exploitation. We certainly need to shake off these constraints. But there is more. We need to allow the grace of our charism to flourish and bear fruit in our individual and corporate lives. To be what we are meant to be. In the midst of banal everyday realities.

Fidelity to our particular call is the most fundamental means of evangelisation. Silence can sometimes communicate more effectively than words. There is scope in today’s Church for a more apophatic approach to theology and ministry. Sometimes I get the impression that Church leaders lose credibility by speaking too loudly, too often. There is much that is wrong with today’s world; that is self-evident. But perhaps we need to follow the example of Jesus’ response to the adulterous woman in the eighth chapter of the Fourth Gospel. Until such time as the Church regains its credibility in moral matters, we may well achieve more by saying less. This is not so much a matter of doctrine than of tactics. Doctrine is unchanged, but our delivery of doctrine is attuned to the receptivity of those whom we are addressing. Many, especially younger people, are saying to us, “Don’t tell me. Show me.”

We need to consider the possibility of transferring our emphasis from hard-edged dogma to something subtler. Moving away from left-brain binary thinking and Cartesian categories to something more integrally human. Pope John Paul II famously spoke of the two lungs of the Church.²⁰ For too long in the West we have been breathing on a single lung. We need to develop a theology that is more “Eastern”: one that is more in awe of the ineffable mystery of the transcendent God, one that regards the celebration of this mystery in the liturgy as an irreplaceable complement to its formulation in words, one that sees the primary response to divine

²⁰ For example, John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, §54.



revelation as the living of a godly life. Perhaps also, we should overcome our reluctance to speak about mysticism and see it as a topic that is integral to ordinary mature faith.

All of this points to the importance of a spirituality that is simultaneously authenticated by a long tradition and saturated with lived experience. Perhaps what God's faithful people most expect of us is help in living a spiritual life, help in coming closer to the reality of God and the meaning of their own lives. There is a growing demand for centres to which seekers of solitude may return. This means, of course, that first we have to be faithful in our own practice so that it will reveal to us what will be helpful to others. It is not merely teaching that is sought, but the example of fidelity in practice – both personal and communal. Why it is important that some assume the role of giving guidance to others is simply that the spiritual journey is full of counter-intuitive twists and turns, the outcome of which is predictable only by those who themselves have passed through them.

Nor should we underestimate the political importance of the silent and contemplative life in the postmodern world and in the institutional Church. Putting ourselves beyond the pale of mass-marketing and standing apart from populist clamour are political acts. Such a stance – whether absolute or relative – not only protects the integrity of our Christian discipleship, but also represents a refusal to become complicit in the systems of oppression that surround us. When, by a deliberate choice, Pope Francis declines to watch television or participate in the Internet, this is more than a private option. It is fulfilling the admonition Saint Paul addresses to us all, “Do not be conformed to this world” (Rom 12:2).

Taking the spiritual life seriously demands much of any who would follow Christ. I think Pope Francis is right in considering the cheerfulness of committed Christians to be a powerful instrument in the evangelisation of unbelievers. As Saint Thomas More quipped, “A sad saint is a sorry saint indeed.” Notwithstanding the challenges facing us in today's world, we have a living tradition to support us in the confident hope that, indeed, God will bring to completion the good work that has been begun in us. *And may God lead us all together into everlasting life.*

“Suddenly there appeared a chariot of fire and horses of fire ... and Elijah was carried up to heaven in a whirlwind.” (2 K 2:11)