



Throughout the Council there was fierce opposition led by the Roman Congregations to the ideas that were proposed in the revised texts. The final documents of the Council were accepted by a large majority of the Council members but a minority were not able to agree and voted against them. These documents contained ideas and reforms which were calculated to bring a major change in the understanding of the Church and its place and mission in the world.

Over the centuries the Church has developed into a large multinational institution with a strong central government based in Rome. This government which is referred to as the 'Curia' consists of congregations or departments which control the various areas of church life and activity under the leadership of the pope. When the Council ended, this Curia would be responsible for implementing the changes which had been agreed. Since they had led the opposition to many of the Council's ideas and proposed changes and remained unconvinced of the need for them, it is not surprising that the pace of change would be very slow.

In addition, for a quarter of a century we had in St John Paul II a strong and charismatic leader who favoured strong central government and leadership. During his reign there were new movements and orders with a focus on the poor, evangelisation and on building bridges with other religious groups. Two of them, Opus Dei and The Legionaries of Christ were his favourites that he promoted as ideals of church life. Both of these were traditional in their outlook and behaviour, emphasising obedience, loyalty to the system and the observance of the minutiae of rubric, dress and personal piety. Being a theologian of any note during this time became a dangerous occupation. A steady stream of them, some of them the experts behind the Council documents, were investigated and made to endure lengthy inquisitions by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Some saw their books condemned and some were removed from their teaching posts.

Since Pope Francis is seeking to revive the vision of Vatican II it should not be a surprise that a strong opposition to what he is trying to do has re-emerged. Pope John XXIII recognised that the Church was in history, that history had moved on and the Church now lived in a new and very different era. Pope Francis also recognises this, "the categories and assumptions that we used to navigate our world are no longer effective. It is an illusion to think that we can go back to where we were", (Let us Dream). He writes about a fundamentalist rigid mindset that offers a false security in challenging and destabilising situations, that is afraid of setting out on the road to truth.

Pope John XXIII also wanted to give the Church back to the people and the Council proposed a new power-sharing structure in the Church described as 'collegiality'. This would involve developing collaborative, co-operative and consultative relationships among all the members of the Church – Pope, Bishops, priests and laity. Pope Francis is trying to revive this proposal by using the ancient practice of 'synodality'. The term comes from a Greek word meaning 'walking together'. He sees this as a process where all in the Church walk together and face up to conflict and differences rather than just trying to avoid them. In a process of discernment we all walk together in search of truth, avoiding a spirit of confrontation, seeking to resolve differences or at least accepting them.

Pope Francis has proposed a world-wide Synod starting this October and finishing in Rome in 2023. Root and Branch, a group based in Bristol want to help by ensuring that all issues and concerns, no matter how difficult, are included. With the help of expert speakers and opinions from all sections of the Church they have attempted to express some of these. They are also concerned that involvement in the Synod might be restricted. Some documents give the impression that the laity will only be involved at the level of consultation.

Tony Lear

*The power of the Holy Spirit blazing out from the inner depths of the Church brings warmth and light and the power to purify and transform.*



## A LOOK BACK TO VATICAN II



Pope John Paul II liked to describe the Vatican Council in a way that made it sound ponderously like an episcopal retreat, where Bishops spoke only in whispers and smiled sweet smiles at one another – when they weren't actually caught up in prayer for direct guidance from the Holy Spirit. What I saw as a journalist covering the Council was a battleground between fairly fierce factions – the missionary-minded reformers fighting to make their Church more relevant to the 20<sup>th</sup> century facing off against those led by the self-satisfied elite who tried to block every move they made. In the process the reformers brought a large measure of humanity exercising a questioning and freedom of speech quite common in the early Church but rare in the Church of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result Catholics learned that important decisions were the result of heated debate rather than special revelations from on high. Overnight the Church seemed less angelic and a lot more human.

Those wanting reform took their cue from John XXIII whose training was in history rather than theology. Cardinal Ottaviani, the theologian was in charge of the Holy Office whose role was to safeguard doctrine in the Church. The motto on his coat of arms was 'Semper Idem' (Always the same). The pope, with all those who know history, knew that the Church was not always the same. The Church was in history and had changed. From his experience as a papal diplomat in Turkey he was very familiar with the history of the Crusades, the holy wars against the so-called infidel and didn't want to see any more campaigns not even against Communism. He wanted to end the era of "us-against-them." He did not want the Council to condemn anyone or anything. He said "we have had enough of saying no to the world. Now is the time we want to say yes." He once told some Communists from Bologna, "you do not have to be Catholics as long as you are helping to make a better world." When visiting some Protestant monks at Taizé he asked why they couldn't get together. When their leader replied that they had different ideas, his response was, "Ideas, ideas! What are ideas among friends?" A pope who believed that setting the Church apart from the rest of humankind was divisive was something new in Catholic history.

Pope John XXIII said that he wanted to make "a leap forward" into a place where the Church's best thinkers could reinterpret the Gospel for their own times because "the substance of the faith is one thing but the way in which it is presented is another."

Up to the time of the Council the teachings and writings of many Catholic scholars, whose thinking was to form the basis of many Council documents, had been rejected and even condemned. At the Council some prominent cardinals and bishops spoke freely and broke through this repressive atmosphere of fear. They heard the Cardinal of Bologna saying that the Church didn't have all the answers and that it was on a wandering, sweaty pilgrim march through history. Archbishop Roberts of Bombay remarked, "They were saying things I'd always thought but never dared utter!"

Pope John XXIII also wanted to give the Church back to the people. Through history that community of loving persons, the Church, had gone through a variety of incarnations and now had a structure that needed up-dating. This new power-sharing structure was described as collegiality. It involved a cooperative, collaborative, consultative relationship between the pope and the bishops of the world which would extend to the relationship between bishops and their priests and priests and their people. The church would become less clerical and less hierarchical - the people of God, men and women in the world at the service of the world. It was to be the people of God not having all the answers but daring to search for them, a truly pilgrim Church.

*(Adapted from 'Vatican II, A Look Back', Robert B Kaiser)*  
*(<http://americancatholiccouncil.org/resources/notes-toward-an-essay-on>)*

## JULIAN OF NORWICH - A MYSTIC FOR TROUBLED TIMES

In May 1373 the Christian mystic and theologian Julian of Norwich received a series of visions of the Crucifixion. The messages imparted to her – that God is never angry and His love is unconditional – ran counter to the punitive orthodoxy of the time. She sought sanctuary as an anchoress, or hermit, living in a cell at the side of St Julian's Church. There she pondered the meaning of the visions and wrote the spiritual classic *Revelations of Divine Love*.

Humanity is struggling to survive what feel like overwhelming odds. We have heard recently of a steep rise in loneliness among British adults and that nearly one in five of us feels hopeless about the situation. The Mental Health Foundation's report *Coronavirus: Mental health in the Pandemic* also tells us that love promotes health, "strengthening the immune system and cardiovascular function".

Brian Thorne, emeritus professor of counselling at the University of East Anglia has described his experience as a practising psychotherapist: "We are living in a new Dark Age, in which the world is enduring a loss of love, a loss of tenderness ... for so many the pain is so great that there can be no trust in relationships and no safety in the universe. The yearning to love and to be loved is stifled and replaced by constant watchfulness and defensiveness. Lonely people, belonging nowhere and to nobody, cope as best they can. The search for intimacy has never been so desperate. Yet many people go in fear of ridicule, condemnation and rejection. They are filled with inner desolation and feelings of failure and worthlessness. Yet they are beautiful, and they are truly loved and they have reason to hope."

Julian's world, viewed from her little window, to which people came for comfort, reassurance and guidance, was harsher than we can imagine. She lived through a period of tumultuous change and suffering, war, famine and at least two plague pandemics. And yet she was able to assert with confidence that we are God's beloved, his precious darlings. In Julian's gentle, optimistic theology we find an assurance that God looks upon us with a compassionate understanding, "with pity, not blame".

"Do not blame yourself too much," Julian writes. "When we begin to hate sin and to amend ourselves ... there still persists a fear which hinders us, by looking at ourselves and our sins ... and the perception of this makes us so woebegone and depressed that we cannot see any consolation ... [this] is ... blindness."

Rumination and self-recrimination can drag us down into a cycle of negativity and hopelessness. God does not accuse us, she tells us, so we must forgive ourselves.

As the late Father Robert Llewelyn unofficial chaplain to Julian's shrine, explained to me: "We think we are honouring God in continuing with self-blame, but in truth we are dishonouring him ... because we are denying the generosity of God' love."

Julian says our horizons are limited by our "poverty in love". Why else would we condemn and punish ourselves when God has loved us out of any need of guilt?

Thorne says: "For some of us, it is very hard to simply accept Julian's assurance of God's love – her insistence that God never stops loving us, no matter what we feel and what we do – because many of us have never experienced anything approximating to that kind of love. For those who feel alienated and alone and for whom there is no meaning in life, she reveals the tender compassion of God who created everything for love and preserves it by the same love."

Speaking her words of comfort across the centuries, Julian promises that we are "enfolded" in love and held safe in an embrace which will never let us go.

"All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.

Julian's kind, comforting words are as fresh and relevant as though she had spoken them a minute ago.  
*Margaret Coles (The Times, 8 May 2021)*



I am now more comfortable with the notion of a divine presence at the heart of creation, a divine presence within each one of us, a divine presence that is continuously creating and who involves us as essential partners in this ongoing act of creation. This divine presence is not distant, far away, in a heavenly realm, but is part of us, and is keeping everything in existence with an almighty and enduring love. This is not the pantheism of old, it is not suggesting that everything is divine, but rather that every aspect of creation is infused with the Divine Spirit. We don't need to persuade or appease this divinity any more, but just to be aware as best we can of the loving presence in the heart of everything, and to rest in the assurance and security of that presence. So our prayer gradually takes on a different style and content. A friend of mine, in discussing this concept of God as divine mystery, suggested that it poses difficulty for people who find comfort in praying to a personal God. Maybe it is possible for us to rethink the very nature of prayer.

If God is not someone who dispenses favours, where, when and how do we pray? I have a certain trepidation in writing about prayer lest it gives the impression that I do a lot of praying or that I am putting myself in a position where I am telling others how to pray. I think that the answer to my question is that we pray as we can. The question of prayer cannot be considered apart from the absolute belief that God is love and we are loved by God, individually and collectively. It is important to know that the urge to pray, the act of prayer, does not spring from ourselves, it springs from the Spirit of God who lives in our hearts, who sustains our every breath. Spending time in prayer is a way of being open to God's love within us, of recognising our dependence on the Divine, and it enables us to come to terms with the reality that we are not in control of our world. In some ways, the recent pandemic taught us this lesson.

It is my belief that the gift of life is given to us by a loving God and that we come into this world in a state of purest innocence. As we go forward in this life, the sin of humanity, the flawed human condition, the fractured nature of our world contaminate us so that we want to possess, to control, to be important, to be at the centre of all that goes on. Taking time for prayer is a means of moving away from this egotism. We do not pray so as to feel good about ourselves. The old catechism had a definition that is worthy of our attention. It defines prayer as 'a raising up of the heart and mind to God'. If we take out the words 'raising up' in acknowledging that God is not 'up in heaven', we get the idea of prayer as a way of focusing our attention on God. We pray so as to be still in the presence of God who dwells in our hearts. That is the main thing I have to say about prayer, that it is a time of stillness to which God calls each one of us, a time to just be in the presence of the Divine. Each one of us is called to this and our response to this call demands a certain degree of commitment. If we take this seriously, it should change the way we see ourselves and how we view others. If God dwells in my heart, I must recognise that every other person is also imbued with the Spirit of God. This should keep us from judging others, but many of us struggle in this area.

What about vocal prayer, what about the Rosary, what about the novena? They are all valid forms of prayer as long as our intentions are right, as long as our hearts are set on the kingdom of God. Of course, our efforts at prayer can often be a struggle and are criss-crossed with multiple distractions. What matters is that we recognise that the call to prayer comes to us from God, not the other way around, and that we don't use prayer as a means of manipulating God. The words of the Our Father, 'thy will be done', sums it up.

*(From the Outside, Rethinking Church Doctrine, Tony Flannery: Red Stripe Press)*

# THE LINKS BETWEEN LIFE AND LITURGY

When we declare the liturgy to be 'the centre and summit of the Christian life' we are not only committing ourselves to a certain way of looking at worship, but, more importantly, we are committing ourselves to a way of looking at the whole of our lives. It is a vision of the universe in which we can encounter the mystery of God in our ordinary, everyday lives. The creation is not just 'stuff', just something 'there', something 'we just use', but the loving gift of God.

It is useful at this point to ask ourselves two questions. If gathering with our sister and brother Christians, and collectively praising the Father, is the *summit* of prayer, then where are the foothills and the plains? If a formal celebration of the Eucharist is the *centre* of our prayer, then what does the periphery, the surrounding of the centre of prayer look like? Here lies the key to so much of our confusion about worship and, in particular, about the Eucharist. This confusion has two distinct elements. The first confusion is that when we worship we imagine that we somehow step out of the world of the ordinary, move away from the world, stand aside from the creation – the world of work and material things – and enter into some 'other world' of 'the spiritual'. This 'other' religious world we set up through a series of binaries: the ordinary world / the special world; the material / the spiritual; the profane / the sacred; the everyday / the holy. And in the end we forget that all we are, and all this is, every material 'thing', and all we know comes from God: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' (Ge 1:1). *All* is God's gift.

Furthermore, crafting this special religious world has the effect of keeping God at a distance. We do not like admitting this distancing, but severing the creation from its Creator, suits us: it allows us to treat the creation as just 'stuff' we can use, abuse and throw away without seeing any sinfulness in our actions. It allows us, while sounding reverential, to ignore our duties to one another and to the poor as being the primordial expression of love of God: "But if any has the world's goods and sees his sister or brother in need, yet closes his heart against them, how does God's love abide in him?... If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother or sister whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1Jn 3:17 and 4:20). Moreover, it allows us to limit religion to a little box. It might be a lovely jewelled box, smelling of incense and with wondrous, beautiful music, all warmed by nostalgia, but it is still a box: an ornament on a mantelpiece that we admire and praise, but do not see as affecting 'real' life.

The second confusion is that we think of the Eucharist – literally 'the action of thanksgiving' – as a ritual whose focus is upon Jesus: remembering him, meeting him, 'receiving' him, and making him present. But 'eucharist' is a *verb* before it is a noun, an *activity* not an object. Eucharist is, in truth, focused on the Father. Jesus, whom we remember, gathered his followers and led them in blessing and thanking the Father for all his goodness, then they celebrated this in sharing a loaf and a cup. The Eucharist is our praise of the Father through the Christ, with the Christ, and in the Christ. When we gather we address our prayer to the Father, in the power of the Spirit, 'through [the] Christ, our Lord.' And as the Christ entered into the creation, and all that is came into being through him ('all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made' – Jn 1:3), so our eucharistic action takes place within the creation. The foothills and the plains of the eucharistic summit must be, therefore, in our ordinary lives. There, in union with the *Logos* made flesh, we offer our praise and thanks to the Father.

Only when we have a genuine sense of the wonder of all that is – our own lives, the lives of those around us, the amazing wonder of human life, and all the life on this planet – can we see ourselves as those whose place within the creation is to reflect back to the Creator the praise of the creation for its existence. When we see ourselves as the voice of the whole creation, our first word should be: we thank you Father, Lord of heaven and earth for all we are, all that is: it is your gift to us!

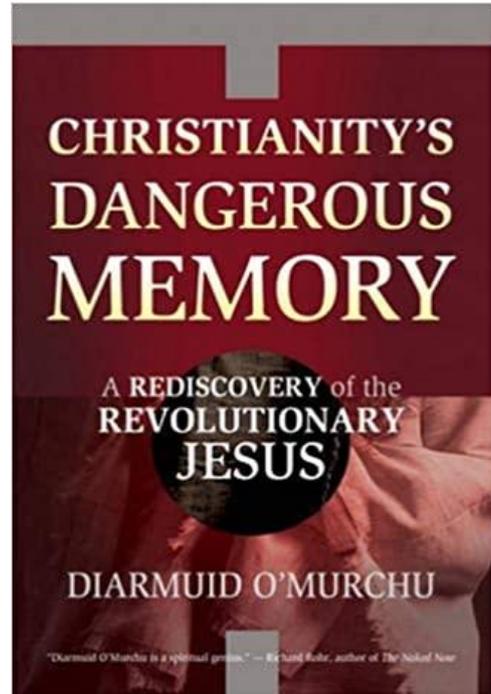
But trying to keep the whole cosmos in mind all the time is beyond us, so we concentrate our gratitude on that which brings us face to face, every day of our lives, on our dependence on God's goodness: food.

*Thomas O'Loughlin, (Doctrine & Life, January 2020)*

# UNMASKING THE POWER OF THE CHURCH

For a long time, Christians have been making interpretative choices that are no longer sustainable. We have evaded some central truths that now need to be reclaimed, and the process is already well under way, although largely ignored (and sometimes despised) by church officialdom. The retrieval taking place belongs to scripture scholars and theologians from within the sphere of academic scholarship and research, but also to a growing body of critical creative thinkers from within the wider Christian community.

Speaking truth to power is a daunting enterprise. Centuries of tradition, accumulations of laws, layers of customs that over time have morphed into ideologies, institutions, dogmas, and doctrines – all developed to safeguard the truth of power often at the expense of the power of truth. Every major religion gained cultural supremacy because in its primordial vision it cut through inherited ideologies and made radiant a new spiritual awakening with more direct access to the light of enduring truth. This, I suggest, is what Jesus achieved in his unflinching allegiance to the Companionship of Empowerment.



Jesus rattled the certainties of his day. He questioned truths nobody dared to doubt and subverted procedures couched in divine law. He broke rank with those who expected his allegiance and fidelity and befriended those disenfranchised by the power-mongering of the day. In doing all that not merely was he deconstructing an ideological edifice; more importantly, he was rekindling a kind of primal spiritual force that underpins all religion and predates formal religion by thousands of years. What made Jesus authentically messianic was not some direct access to the God described as “father” in John’s Gospel, but rather a deep attunement with the Holy Spirit, the source of all life and animation throughout the entire web of creation. In the empowerment of the Spirit, symbolized in baptism Jesus is declared to be God’s Beloved!

In the language and liturgy of the Christian churches one rarely hears the word “empowerment!” And while the word “community” tends to be used extensively, it fails to encapsulate the sense of partnership and egalitarianism denoted by the notion of “companionship.” Power is often invoked, mainly as an attribute of God, as in the phrase “the power of the Holy Spirit.” On closer examination, however, we note that God is portrayed as powerful because humans are – and always will be – powerless. God’s power is essentially a redemptive power through which sinful humans can be rescued and redeemed.

For most churches, empowerment is a strange word. But more to the point, it is a dangerously disconcerting word. Organizationally, churches may boast about pastoral councils, consultative bodies, and delegation of authority, but in all cases it is unambiguously clear where the buck stops: with the parish pastor, the bishop, or a member of the ecclesiastical hierarchy at a more elevated level. Empowerment of others is acceptable as long as everyone is clear about the chain of command, and all acknowledge the one in whom authority and power are finally invested.

Empowerment has strong connotations of giving power away, passing on wisdom and skill, so that the people of God become the church they were always intended to be. A noble aspiration indeed, but there is little evidence for its existence in the landscape of modern Christianity.

*(From ‘Christianity’s Dangerous Memory’, Diarmuid O’Murchu, Crossroad Publishing Company)*

# CELEBRATING AN ETERNAL ADVENT

In the first 1200 years of Christianity, the greatest feast was Easter with the high holy days of Holy Week leading up to the celebration of the resurrection of Christ. But in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, a new person entered the scene: Francis of Assisi felt we didn't need to wait for God to love us through the cross and resurrection. Francis intuited that the whole thing started with incarnate love, and he popularized what we now take for granted as Christmas, which for many became the greater Christian feast. The Franciscans popularized Christmas. Maybe their intuition was correct.

Francis realized that if God had become flesh—taken on materiality, physicality, humanity—then we didn't have to wait for Good Friday and Easter to “solve the problem” of human sin; the problem was solved from the beginning. It makes sense that Christmas became the great celebratory feast of Christians because it basically says that it's good to be human, it's good to be on this earth, it's good to be flesh, it's good to have emotions. We don't need to be ashamed of any of this. God loves matter and physicality.

With that insight, it's no wonder Francis went wild over Christmas! (I do, too: my little house is filled with candles at Christmastime.) Francis believed that every tree should be decorated with lights to show their true status as God's creations! And that's exactly what we still do 800 years later.



Remember, when we speak of Advent or preparing for Christmas, we're not just talking about waiting for the little baby Jesus to be born. That already happened 2,000 years ago. In fact, we're welcoming the Universal Christ, the Cosmic Christ, the Christ that is forever being born in the human soul and into history.

And believe me, we do have to make room, because right now there is no room in the inn for such a mystery. We see things pretty much in their materiality, but we don't see the light shining through. We don't see the incarnate spirit that is hidden inside of everything material.

The early Eastern Church, which too few people in the United States and Western Europe are familiar with, made it very clear that *the incarnation was a universal principle*. Incarnation meant not just that God became Jesus; God said yes to the material universe. God said yes to physicality. Eastern Christianity understands the mystery of incarnation in the universal sense. So it is always Advent. God is forever coming into the world. “The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world. He was in the world and the world came into being through him, and the world did not know him”. (John 1:9,10).

We're always waiting to see spirit revealing itself through matter. We're always waiting for matter to become a new form in which spirit is revealed. Whenever that happens, we're celebrating Christmas. The gifts of incarnation just keep coming. Perhaps this is *enlightenment*.

(Richard Rohr, cac.org)

## Shock Waves of Bethlehem

In one of her striking reflections Annie Dillard described how we would behave at Mass if we understood its full impact. We would strap ourselves to our seats, wear protective headgear, and be utterly attentive to the earth-shaking import of what was happening around us. We have many ways, she was pointing out, of avoiding what we would rather not face. And so we argue over translations, rubrics and rites. We distract ourselves with the non-essentials, thus escaping the awesome risk of surrendering to the shocking mystery of incarnation and transubstantiation, of being crucified into the cross-pattern of eucharistic living. But most of all, of grappling with God's astonishingly unexpected way of becoming present to us.

Something similar happens at Christmas. Eucharist and Incarnation tell the same stunning story about divinity in the most ordinary realities - bread, wine, a baby. The shock-waves of the Bethlehem truth still reverberate across the universe – but, as with the Mass, we do not pause to ponder the mystery. We have the experience but we miss the meaning. The profound simplicity of it all is too much for us. We would rather concentrate on something else. And there are many counter attractions. But for those who do wish to explore the mystery, how do we get our heads and hearts around the Christian truth that God stole into our world in the same shape as we all started off with? How do we cope with the ensuing belief that the divinity of all of us is now revealed? And how do we make any sense of the consequent expectation that we must therefore embrace our enemies, even die to restore dignity to a dishonoured earth? On such personal decisions and moments depend the salvation of the world.

Mill Hill Missionary Fr Chris told me about the experience of his friend Fr Gerard in a black township in South Africa. The weary parish priest forced himself to attend the last part of a school play during the final week of Advent. This is how he tells the story. 'After the wise men had come and gone, I noticed the arrival of three more strange characters – one was dressed in rags, hobbling along with the aid of a stick. The second was naked except for a tattered pair of shorts and was bound in chains. The third was the most weird. He had a whitened face, wore an unkempt grey wig and an Afro shirt. As they approached, a chorus of men and women cried out, "Close the door Joseph, they are thieves and vagabonds coming to steal all we have." But Joseph said, "Everyone has a right to this child - the poor, the rich, the unhappy, the untrustworthy. We cannot keep this child for ourselves. Let them enter."

The men entered and stood staring at the child. Joseph picked up the presents the wise men had left. To the first strange man he said, "You are poor: take this gold and buy what you need. We will not go hungry." To the second he said, "You are in chains and I don't know how to release you. Take this myrrh; it will heal the wounds on your wrists and ankles." To the third he said, "Your mind is in anguish. I cannot heal you. Maybe the aroma of this frankincense will soothe your troubled soul." Then the first man spoke to Joseph. "Do not give me this gift. Anyone who finds me with this gold will think I have stolen it. And sadly, in a few years, this child will end up as a criminal too." The second man said, "Do not give me this ointment. Keep it for the child. One day he will be wearing chains like these." The third man said, "I am lost. I have no faith at all. In the country of my mind there is no God. Let the child keep the incense. He will lose his faith in his Father too."

While Mary and Joseph covered their faces the three men addressed the child. "Little one, you are not from the land of gold and frankincense. You belong to the country of want and disease. You belong to our world. Let us share our things with you." The first man took off his ragged shirt. "Take these rags. One day you will need them when they tear the garments off your back and you will walk naked." The second man said, "When I remove these chains I will put them at your side. One day you will wear them – and then you will really know the pain of humanity." The third man said, "I give you my depression, my loss of faith in God and in everything. I can carry it all no longer. Carry my grief and loss with your own." The three men then walked back out into the night. But the darkness was different. Something had happened in the stable. Their blind pain was diminishing. There had been a kind of epiphany. They were noticing the stars now.

The script of the performance was written by a man from Central Africa. Because his vision was extraordinarily true he told his story well. The unwelcome visitors now knew that God was somehow present in an innocent child who was already destined to be one like them – in all their poverty, pain, depravity and sin. And they also began to believe, what we perennially resist, that this human mess was the manger of hope - for themselves and for the world.



Christmas reveals that there is a light within the darkness, a love within the Cross, a life within each death. Our sins and certainties, our wayward compulsions, our despair and desperation, the wars and poverty we collude in – all are redeemed, all are taken care of. And often, it is from precisely there, and maybe only from there, that the redemption of creation begins. And all because the baby was utterly human. Above all, Christmas reminds us, as it did the unwelcome visitors, that the most extraordinary things happen in the most ordinary moments.

Sr Hilary Lyons, a Missionary Sister of the Holy Rosary working in West Africa, writes about a painting of the Annunciation in Futru parish church in Cameroon. 'Mary is preparing a fire for cooking. Behind her the firewood is stacked. She is turning to add a stick to the fire when a luminous presence surrounds her.' Heavenly intimacy in a human kitchen. God's secrets are strewn extravagantly around us. God's fingerprints are everywhere. Nothing has ever been written by theologians about God's beautiful presence that hasn't been better traced in the crystal calligraphy of a frosty morning. Nothing has ever been preached by saints about divine intimacy that hasn't been better sung by the summer wind in the roadside trees. Nothing has ever been taught by scholars about indwelling joy that hasn't been better danced to the music of a heartbeat or the rhythm of the spheres. And nothing has ever been created by artists about incarnate love that hasn't been more poignantly revealed in the sleepy eyes of a new baby.

*(Daniel O'Leary, djoleary.com)*

## THE ONE MYSTERY OF FAITH

In the theology most dominant in the 20<sup>th</sup> century "mystery" stood for matters that ordinary reason found difficult to understand. In teaching and preaching there are many mysteries and they are to be found in statements of the Creed, such as that there are three persons in one God. Also they are provisional, lasting for this lifetime only; after death all will be made clear. Can't understand a Christian teaching? It is a mystery. But all will be revealed in the world to come.

The theologian Karl Rahner saw this as a limited notion of mystery. For him there was only one mystery in Christian faith. It isn't to be found in doctrinal statements but in the reality of God's own being as self-giving love. It is not provisional but endures for all eternity. This one holy mystery is the God who while remaining eternally infinite, incomprehensible, inexpressible, wishes to communicate himself to the world and does this in the historically tangible person of Jesus and in the grace of the Spirit so as to become the blessedness of every person and of the universe itself.

This insight goes beyond that of recent theology which does justice neither to the otherness of God nor his divine nearness. It also goes beyond the notion of God as a deity of the Christian tribe alone by affirming God's presence in each and every human being. Nor is it a case that divine nearness varies and is close to some and far from others. Rather with loving generosity the gift of divine life is graciously offered to everyone, everywhere, and at all times.

In the end, Rahner insists, all Christian doctrine says only one thing, something quite simple and radical: the living mystery of absolute fullness who is nameless and beyond imagination, has drawn near to us amid the tangle of our lives through Jesus and the gift of grace so as to be our salvation, splendour and support. While the outcome of our own lives and that of the world are not yet known, we can have confidence that it is an adventure held safely in God's mercy. Faith, then, becomes an act of courage. We can dare to hope.

*(Adapted from 'Quest for the Living God', Elizabeth A Johnson, Bloomsbury)*

# CONFESSIONS OF A 'NICE RACIST'

*Ronald Rolheiser*

I grew up in a good family. Our parents instilled in us the notion that everyone on this planet was equal, regardless of race or colour, and that we were never to look down on anyone or consider ourselves superior to anyone. The very idea of racism or racial privilege was repugnant to me. Every moral fibre in me was anti-racist.

But I also grew up in a white family in a totally white community in a totally white rural area. The only non-whites I ever saw were a Chinese couple who ran a local café and African-Americans playing football, baseball or basketball on television. Up to my early twenties I had never talked or related to a non-white person even as every bone in my body told me I was not a racist. By the time of my later studies for a degree in theology I had some minimal contacts with African Americans and Black Africans all of which had been positive and friendly. This reinforced my naïve sense that I was above racial prejudice.

I was due for an unpleasant awakening. While studying at the University of San Francisco I served as a chaplain at a hostel for young women. There were a number of young African American women there and I got to be good friends with some of them. One night, sitting with two of them in my office, one of them said to me; "You know, Father, you're a racist. Now you are a nice racist, but you're still a racist. You don't have the same ease with us as you have with the others here." She didn't need to elaborate. Her words, though spoken without judgement, stung. I knew it was true. I was a racist (even if I was a nice one).

Recognising this truth was a wake-up call, a beginning, a place to start from. I asked these two women to help me move beyond feeling safe and trusted only in what was familiar to me, and they helped me with my "nice" racism as I helped them with some of their issues from broken relationships and broken hearts.

Since those days my ministry as an Oblate missionary has had me living with multiracial communities in many different parts of the world. I have worked closely with women and men of various races and made very close friends across racial lines. But this doesn't erase the way I grew up, nor is it supposed to. I still treasure the home I grew up in as I now treasure deeply the multiracial homes that I have lived in for most of my nearly 50 years since.

But am I still a racist? I am now pretty comfortable one-on-one with almost everyone and feel anti-racist inside. But just as I breathe the air of whatever city I live in, I breathe in too our culture, a collective unconscious racism, a white privilege, which mostly like the air I breathe, I don't see. I am living in and in multiple ways supporting a cultural ethos that privileges me as a white man and dis-privileges others. We can be good-hearted and still be racist, a "nice" racist. Our good-heartedness and our racism can comfortably co-exist inside us.

The killing of George Floyd and the international protests that followed helped many to understand that while we may be nice racists, we are still racists and our society and culture may also be nice but still racist. And, partly, it's our niceness that needs to be confronted by Black Lives Matter and other such movements. Moreover, we need to accept too that such movements will not come to us pure. They will contain some very mixed and malevolent agendas. But, despite that, we must still let them challenge us to recognise and confront something unhealthy in ourselves and in our culture, beneath our niceness.

*(Adapted from The Tablet, 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020)*

# QUOTES NOTES



God's power can transform any of us into the best version of ourselves.

*Dr Allen Hunt*



The highest compliment we can give to God, our Creator, is to thoroughly enjoy the gift of life. One should never look a gift universe in the mouth. The best way to pay for a beautiful moment is to enjoy it.

*Ron Rolheiser*



"I heard your prayer. Now trust my timing" - God.



I AM NOTHING;  
*I AM BUT AN INSTRUMENT,*  
A TINY PENCIL

*IN THE HANDS OF THE LORD*  
WITH WHICH HE WRITES WHAT HE LIKES

*HOWEVER IMPERFECT WE ARE*  
HE WRITES *BEAUTIFULLY*

"With imagination you don't have to travel far to find God – only notice things. The finite and infinite live in the same place. It is here alone, at this precarious and vital point, that the holy is laid bare. I live in this world by attention."

*Simone Weil*



The *family*  
Is God's greatest  
*Masterpiece.*



God's love does not protect us from suffering. God's love protects us in the midst of suffering. *Hans Kung*




The first ever cordless phone was created by God. He named it – “Prayer” It never loses its signal and you never have to recharge it. Use it anywhere!

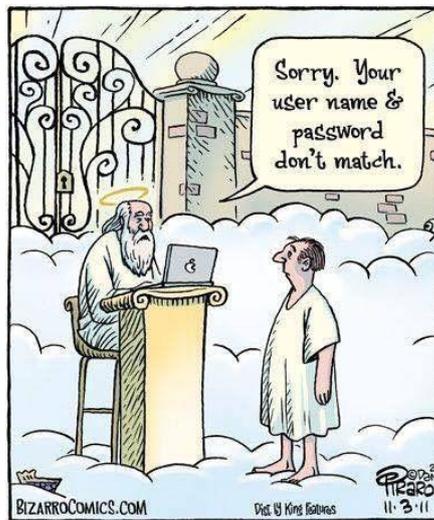
*Let the Church always be a place of mercy and hope, Where everyone is welcomed, loved and forgiven.*



*Pope Francis*

Not everybody has a genuine sense of humour. That calls for an altruistic detachment from oneself and a mysterious sympathy with others which is felt even before they open their mouths. Only the person who has also a gift for affection can have a true sense of humour. A good laugh is a sign of love; it may be said to give us a glimpse of, or a first lesson in, the love that God bears for every one of us.

*Karl Rahner*



The human heart is exquisitely fragile. Our judgements need to be gentle, our understanding deep and our forgiveness wide.

*R Rolheiser*



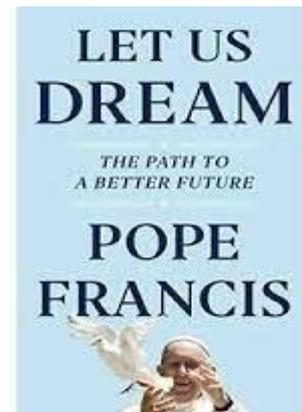
*Be patient with yourself. Nothing in nature Blooms all year.*



God does not always take us where we want to go, but He always leads us where we need to be.

*Martha Finley*

# CHANGE, DISCERNMENT, FUNDAMENTALISM



Coronavirus has accelerated a change of era that was already under way. By “change of era” I mean not just that this is a time of change, but that the categories and assumptions that we used before to navigate our world are no longer effective. It is an illusion to think that we can go back to where we were. Attempts at restoration always take us down a dead-end street.

Faced with this uncertainty, ideology and the rigid mind-set have an allure that we must resist. Fundamentalism is a means of assembling thought and behaviour as a refuge that supposedly protects a person from a crisis. Fundamentalist mindsets offer to shelter people from destabilising situations in exchange for a kind of existential quietism. They offer you an attitude and a single, closed way of thinking as a substitute for the kind of thinking that opens you to truth. Whoever takes refuge in fundamentalism is afraid of setting out on the road to truth. They already “have” the truth and deploy it as a defence, so that any questioning of it is interpreted as an aggression against them personally.

Discernment, on the other hand, allows us to navigate changing contexts and specific situations as we seek the truth. Truth reveals itself to those who open themselves to it ... Opening ourselves to this kind of certainty calls for humility in our own thinking, to leave space for this gentle encounter with the good, the true and the beautiful. I learned this way of thinking from Romano Guardini. It was his style that captivated me, first of all in his book ‘The Lord’. He showed me the importance of unfinished thinking. He develops a thought but only takes you so far before he invites you to stop to give space to contemplate. He creates room for you to encounter the truth. A fruitful thought should always be unfinished in order to give space to subsequent development. With Guardini I learned not to demand certainties in everything, which is the sign of an anxious spirit. His wisdom has allowed me to confront complex problems that cannot be resolved simply with norms, using instead a kind of thinking that allows you to navigate conflicts without being trapped by them.

This is an approach to truth quite distinct from that which demands that we choose sides rather than hear the evidence. Yet it doesn’t mean thinking in set ways that are closed to new possibilities; it contains both an element of assent and an element of continuous searching. That has been the tradition of the Church: her understanding and beliefs have expanded and consolidated over time in openness to the Spirit. Tradition is not a museum, true religion is not a freezer and doctrine is not static but grows and develops, like a tree that remains the same yet which gets bigger and bears ever more fruit. There are some who claim that God spoke once and for all time – almost exclusively in the way and the form that those who make this claim know well. They hear the word “discernment” and worry that it is a fancy way of ignoring the rules or some clever modern ruse to downgrade the truth, when it is quite the opposite. Discernment is as old as the Church. It follows from the promise Jesus made to his disciples that after he was gone the Spirit “will guide you into all the truth”. (John 16:13). There is no contradiction between being solidly rooted in the truth and at the same time being open to a greater understanding. The Spirit continues to guide us in translating the Good News into different contexts so that the words of Jesus continue to resound in the hearts of men and women in every age. This is why I like to quote Gustav Mahler that “tradition is not the repository of ashes but the preservation of fire”.

*(Adapted from ‘Let us Dream’, Pope Francis, Simon & Schuster)*

# ON PATIENCE

Patience is a gift of the Holy Spirit. The word *patience* is derived from the Latin verb *passio*, meaning “to bear or endure.” Patient people are those who can bear trials and pains with calmness and equanimity. They are able to put up with delays, wait for the right moment, and bide their time.

Patient people are more flexible with time than impatient people. Impatient people exist in only one time frame — their own. They are comfortable with only one schedule — theirs. They want things done when they want things done. And they expect the rest of the world to adapt to their schedule. If they want their child to be potty trained by twenty-four months and he is not by twenty-six, they get angry. If they have to stand in the queue at the shop while an elderly lady ahead of them carries on a brief conversation with the cashier, they get upset because that lady is disrupting their schedule.

Patient people, on the other hand, can flow back and forth between different time frames. They know, for example, that potty training a child may necessitate entering a time frame other than their own. Waiting in line for a few extra moments while an elderly lady chats with a cashier invites patient people to momentarily set aside their own schedule. They enter with compassion the schedule of another, someone who is lonely and who may have more time than she knows what to do with. Recently I did some creative imagining and took a walk with Patience. When I asked her, “What can I do to become more like you?” She thought for a moment, smiled warmly, and said, “Plant an acorn. . . . Befriend a robin. . . . Teach a child.”

*How patient am I? Am I able to step out of my own time frame and enter with compassion the time frame of someone else? God of infinite patience, let me walk with you today.*

*Excerpted from [Gracious Goodness](#) by Melannie Svoboda, SND*

# HIGH STAKES FOR RELIGION

Like millions of plant and animal species, many religions have become extinct in the course of time. Studying this phenomenon of obsolescence, the theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg observed “Religions die when their lights fail”, that is, when their teachings no longer illuminate life as it is actually lived by their adherents. In such cases, the way the Holy is encountered does not keep pace with changing human experience. History’s dynamism is inexorable. Some people will cling to the old views, but eventually most will move on, seeking ultimate meaning in a way that is coherent with their current experience of life. Then the lights of the old religion dim and go out; the deity becomes irrelevant. This phenomenon is not a case of beings dictating to God what they want in a deity, as some fear. Rather it is a test of the true God. Only the living God who spans all times can relate to historically new circumstances as the future continuously arrives. A tradition that cannot change cannot be preserved. Where people experience God as still having something to say, the lights stay on .

*(From ‘Quest for the Living God’. Elizabeth A Johnson. Bloomsbury)*

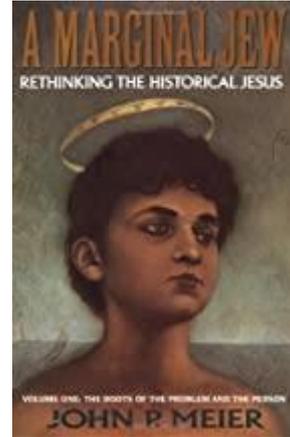
# GOD’S PRESENCE

Ignatius’s greatest legacy is the challenge to open our eyes in search of the traces of God’s presence outside the stereotypical conventional places that we normally associate with religion. There is often a perception that God is confined to churches, religious services and ‘holy’ places, objects and persons, with ‘holy’ taking on a severely restricted, other-worldly meaning that excludes mere mortals. The idea of God’s presence being everywhere is neatly summarised by the French author and broadcaster, Yves Bouvin: ‘Everything is not God, but everything speaks of God’. We would really have something to celebrate at Sunday Mass if we adopted this attitude. Eucharist, thanksgiving, would take on another meaning. It would be more like a picnic in the park with much to celebrate. God speaks the language of love, the language that keeps us alive. Ignatius asks us to pay attention, to listen to where love is spoken.

*(Jim Maher, SJ, Pathways to a Decision, Dublin: Messenger Publications)*

# JESUS AND PRIESTHOOD

One aspect of Jesus' family background was so obvious to his Jewish contemporaries that, as far as we know, neither he nor they ever commented on it during his lifetime. Yet this aspect has been so overlooked or misunderstood by later Christians that it needs to be emphasised. It is the simple fact that Jesus was born as a Jewish layman, and died as a Jewish layman. There is no reliable historical tradition that he was of Levitical or priestly descent. There is good reason for thinking that, even during his lifetime, Jesus was believed to be of Davidic descent. While this might have heightened some Jews' evaluation of him, at the same time it meant clearly that he belonged to the category of "laity" at a time when the priests controlled the levers of power. Simply by being a layman from an obscure town in Lower Galilee meant that he was already marginal to the holders of religious power when he set foot in Jerusalem.



Matthew, Mark and Luke portray Jesus in frequent conflict with Scribes, Pharisees and "rulers of local synagogues". While individual priests might follow the Pharisaic school of thought or even learn the technical skills of a scribe, on the whole, Pharisaism was a lay spiritual movement and the profession of scribe a lay profession. But at least Jesus speaks to these groups on a regular basis. Lines of communication remain open, even if they are often red hot. Also in some instances these groups appear in a neutral or positive light, for example Jairus, a leader of the synagogue pleads humbly at Jesus' feet for the healing of his daughter and his household show their respect when they come to him saying, "your daughter is dead: why put the Master to any further trouble?" (Mark 5: 23,35). Also one of the scribes hearing the debate about the greatest commandment appreciates Jesus' good answer and is himself commended by Jesus for his answer, "you are not far from the Kingdom of God." (Mark 12: 28,32,34). A Pharisee invited Jesus for a meal in Luke 7:36 and Pharisees warn Jesus that Herod is out to kill him in Luke 13:31. Also Matthew uses the image of 'scribe' to describe any follower of Jesus who learns the mysteries of the kingdom. (Mtt.13: 52)

Matthew does add the Sadducees to scenes in which they did not originally appear, for example Matt 16:1-12. This is an example of his united-front-of-Judaism approach and in verse 12 seems to suggest the Pharisees and Sadducees have a common doctrine. In fact the Sadducees are made up mostly of the priests and lay aristocracy in Jerusalem. In the Synoptic Gospels Jesus comes into conflict with them on only one occasion, in the dispute over belief in the resurrection at the last day (Mark 12:18-27). This encounter is marked by hostilities on both sides. The Sadducees try to make Jesus look ridiculous by proposing a ludicrous question about which of seven brothers at the resurrection will have as a wife a woman whom all seven married in this life. Before Jesus replies to their question in detail, he goes out of his way to attack the Sadducees personally accusing them of ignorance of the scriptures and the power of God. This sharp criticism is aimed at these priestly guardians of divine revelation and divine power centred in the Jerusalem temple. There is a hostility in this situation which is not present in Jesus' disputes with the scribes and Pharisees.

John's Gospel places Jesus in Jerusalem more often than the other gospel writers and so it is not surprising that Jesus encounters priests more frequently in his gospel. In John's mind the opposition is the high priests plus the Pharisees yet the Pharisee Nicodemus is respectful, Nicodemus defends Jesus before the Jerusalem authorities and Joseph of Arimathea provides Jesus with an honourable burial. No such good intentions or gestures are forthcoming from anyone specifically designated as a priest.

All of the Gospels show the same pattern. While Jesus can at times engage in civilised or even friendly dialogue with Pharisees, scribes or "rulers", the priests are never presented in such a positive light. Their hostility is unrelieved; and all present priests, specifically the high priest Caiaphas as instigating the plot to have Jesus put to death. By the time the Gospels came to be written, the priests were no longer a central power in Judaism and it was the Pharisee or their spiritual heirs who were the main opponents of Christianity. This seems to underline that the tendency to allow some

“good” Pharisees but no “good” priests was very much rooted in the pattern of Jesus’ own ministry. Between Jesus, the Galilean peasant layman, who claimed charismatic religious authority outside the recognised channels, and the high priestly families of Jerusalem, whose power depended on controlling the sacred centre of Jerusalem, the temple, there was only unrelieved hostility.

I have purposely emphasised Jesus’ status as a layman because Christians are so accustomed to the imagery of Jesus the priest or the “great high priest.” We owe this theological vision of Jesus the priest to a highly educated 1<sup>st</sup> century unknown Christian who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews’. Here and here alone in the New Testament is Jesus called a priest and high priest.

But even our learned author does not try to base his claim that Jesus is a priest on his levitical descent. Instead, Jesus is specifically said to be of the tribe of Judah, not Levi; and our author readily admits that the Jewish priesthood was never associated with the tribe of Judah, “a tribe which Moses did not even mention when dealing with priests (Heb. 7:14). Hence the author of Hebrews needs to explain in a rather convoluted way how Jesus obtained a priestly office superior to the levitical one, namely a priesthood like that of Melchizedek (Heb. 7: 15-28).

Yet no sooner does our author finish his exposition of Christ’s priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek than he makes an observation often forgotten by Christian theologians, but in perfect harmony with what we have seen in the gospels. Having just referred to Jesus as a priest seated at the right of God (in virtue of Jesus’ exaltation to heaven after his death), the author explains, “If he (Jesus) were on earth, he would not be a priest (Heb.8:4). This is obvious to our author, since in his theology Jesus becomes a priest only by undergoing a sacrificial death on the cross and then entering the heavenly sanctuary. In other words, in the Letter to the Hebrews, Jesus’ atoning sacrifice is also his ordination.

Thus for all the theology of Christ the high priest in Hebrews, the letter in no way contradicts the Gospel presentation of Jesus as a Jewish layman. Rather, it confirms that picture: from a Jewish point of view, Jesus could not count as a priest (Heb. 7:14). In fact it goes on to say that, even from a *Christian* point of view, Jesus was not a priest during his earthly ministry (Heb. 8:4). He achieved that status in Christian eyes only by his death and exaltation.

Thus, as we read through the Gospels, we must remember that Jesus the layman who confronts the various authorities of Judaism, had no formal or official basis for his own authority. All the more astounding did that authority seem, and all the more did it become a source of contention. At the beginning of his ministry Jesus’ teaching in the synagogue at Capernaum “made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority”. Later when in the Temple Jesus is challenged by the chief priests, scribes and elders who said to him “what authority have you for acting like this? Or who gave you authority to do these things”. (Mark11: 27-28). But apart from certain clashes in Jerusalem, priests were not Jesus’ usual dialogue partners. When they did talk with him, the tone was harsh on both sides.

It is perhaps in this atmosphere of mutual hostility that we should listen to the parable of the ‘Good Samaritan’ (Luke 10: 30-37), with its slighting references to the Jerusalem priest and Levite who pass by their fellow Jew – presumably a layman – in need. If we visualise Jesus, the Galilean layman telling this story to other Galilean lay people, it has quite an anticlerical tone!

None of these remarks should be taken as falling into the old stereotype of Galileans as obstreperous rebels who didn’t care much about worship in the Jerusalem temple. Galilean Jews were very faithful in their duty of pilgrimage to the Jerusalem temple. But this reverence towards the central place of worship did not mean that they were not critical of the rich and worldly priestly families in Jerusalem. A laity, dedicated to the high ideals of a holy priesthood conducting pure worship, can be all the more critical of the flesh-and-blood priests in front of them. The fact that his ministry made Jesus stand out from the run-of-the-mill laity made his criticism much more dangerous – for the priests and for himself.

*(Adapted from ‘A Marginal Jew, John P Meier, Doubleday)*

# THE LORD'S PRAYER

Eternal spirit, Earth-maker, Pain-bearer, life-giver

Source of all that is and that shall be,

Father and Mother of us all,

Loving God, in whom is heaven:

The hallowing of your name echo through the universe!

The way of your justice be followed by peoples of the world!

Your commonwealth of peace and freedom

Sustain our hope and come on earth.

With the bread we need for today, feed us.

In the hurts we absorb from one another, forgive us.

In times of temptation and test, strengthen us.

From trials too great to endure, spare us.

From the grip of all that is evil, free us.

For you reign in the glory of the power

That is love, now and for ever.

Amen.

*(From a New Zealand Prayer Book)*

## LITURGY IN THE PANDEMIC

The experience of a Poor Clares community

For the Poor Clares the biggest deprivation during the pandemic was that they could no longer have Mass. Faced with Easter without a priest they decided to have a special Last Supper dinner with Gospel readings and instead of the washing of one another's feet had a washing of hands which, because of the pandemic, had a symbolism. Easter weekend was the start of a revelation. "The Last Supper took us to a new place", says Sr Gabriel, "We imagined how it had been that night, and we were there".

The nuns went four months without Mass. In the absence of a homily, the sisters took turns to share reflections. "It brought to life for us a great truth, that in the early Church the Word was considered no less than the Eucharist", says Sr Aelred, "I experienced weeks and weeks without Mass and it didn't impinge one iota with whatever union with Christ I have in my life. We would never have chosen it – we were devastated initially – but later we said: wasn't that wonderful? And going forward, if there's no priest available to say Sunday Mass, I doubt we'll ever be ringing round the parishes to find someone the way we used to do".

*(Adapted from the Tablet, 17 October 2020)*

# POPE FRANCIS' ECOLOGICAL JOURNEY



For a long time we carried on thinking we could be healthy in a world that was sick. But the crisis (coronavirus) has brought home how important it is to work for a healthy world.

The world is God's gift to us. The biblical story of creation has a constant refrain: "And God saw that it was good" (Genesis 1:12). "Good" means bountiful, life-giving and beautiful. Beauty is the entryway to ecological awareness. Beauty, like creation itself, is pure gift, a sign of the God who overflows with love for us. If someone who loves you gives you a beautiful and valuable gift, how do you handle it? To treat it with contempt is to treat the giver with contempt. If you value it, you admire it, look after it, you respect it and are grateful. The damage to our planet stems from the loss of this awareness and gratitude. We have grown used to owning, but too little to thanking.

My own awareness of this truth began to take root during a meeting of the bishops of Latin America at Aparecida in 2007. I was helping to draft the final document and at first I was a bit annoyed that the Brazilians and bishops from other countries wanted so much in there on Amazonia. It struck me as excessive.

Last year, I called a special synod on Amazonia. What happened between these two moments? After Aparecida I started to see news stories: for example the government of a South Pacific Island was buying land in Samoa to transfer its population there because in twenty years' time its island would be underwater. A missionary told me that when travelling by boat he saw a tree sticking out of the water. He was told that once that had been an island. And so through many encounters, dialogues and anecdotes like these my eyes were opened. It was like an awakening. In the night you see nothing but little by little dawn breaks and you see the day. I gradually became aware of, until I became convinced of the seriousness of the issue. The writings of the Patriarch Bartholomew were particularly helpful on this topic.

That's how my ecological awareness came about. I saw that it was of God, because it was a spiritual experience of the sort Saint Ignatius describes as like drops on a sponge: gentle, silent but insistent. I started to see the harmonious unity of humanity and nature, and how humanity's fate is inseparably bound up with our common home. It is an awareness, not an ideology. There are green movements which turn the ecological experience into ideology. But for me it is an awareness. It's being conscious of what's at stake in the fate of humanity.

After my election as Pope I planned to produce an encyclical letter on care of the environment. I asked experts on climate and environmental science to assemble the best available data on the state of our planet. Then I asked some theologians to reflect on that data in dialogue with experts in the field from across the world. Theologians and scientists put their heads together until they reached a synthesis. *Laudato Si* is not a green encyclical. It is a social encyclical. The green and the social go hand in hand. The fate of creation is tied to the fate of all humanity. When I give audiences in St Peter's Square I often greet three or four rows of sick people. Particularly in the case of children I ask about their illness. I would say that 40% of the time it is an "unusual sickness" caused by neglect of the environment: the irresponsible use of waste, the reckless deployment of pesticides that are continually being developed. All of these things, among others, end up making people ill and mortgaging the future of the generations to come.

*Laudato Si'* links the scientific consensus on the destruction of the environment with our self-forgetting, our rejection of who we are as creatures of a loving Creator, living inside His creation, but at odds with it. It's the sadness of a humanity rich in know-how but lacking the inner security of knowing ourselves as creatures of God's love, a knowledge expressed in our simultaneous respect for God, for each other and for creation.

*(From 'Let us Dream', Pope Francis, Simon & Schuster)*

# ROOT AND BRANCH

Root and Branch began in January 2020 before the pandemic. It was responding to journalist Joanna Moorhead's challenge in The Tablet that the Catholic Church needed a synod that starts with women rather than tacking them on at the end or ignoring them altogether. Very soon, as the name suggests they understood that they needed to look at all areas of reform in the Church. As more and more people joined it became clear that it was not a single issue: women may have started it but it could not end there.

The rise in on-line forums allowed Root and Branch in October 2020 to work towards an inclusive lay-led synod and to listen to speakers both on-line and through correspondence. It has been open to and actively sought out opinion from all sections of the Church. Its journey has been accompanied by prayer and trust in the guiding inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Its hope is that its thinking has matured and deepened and become more inclusive as well as more bravely challenging.

The Bristol Text for Reform embodies some of the discoveries made over the past months and is offered as a contribution to our Bishop's Synodal Process and to Catholics around the world as part of our common preparation for Rome 2023. It is also intended to give confidence to individuals to form their own thinking, learning, decision making, conscience and practice. ([www.rootandbranchsynod.org/the-bristol-text](http://www.rootandbranchsynod.org/the-bristol-text))

## THE BRISTOL TEXT STATEMENTS

### 1. MORAL THEOLOGY

**1 Historical consciousness** The Gospel speaks of a seed which, once sown, grows by itself. The Church has to accept this unruly freedom of the word. Appeals to unchanging laws and unchallengeable authorities stifle this creative freedom in the Spirit. We should 'appear as joyful messengers of challenging proposals, guardians of goodness and beauty which shine forth in a life of fidelity to the Gospel.' (Evangelii Gaudium 22 & 168). This calls for faith that continually evolves to embrace encounters with different contexts and cultures, journeying together in every age as the people of God, forming our consciences, maturing in faith and character.

**2 Ways of thinking** Rather than asserting authoritative moral rules to be obeyed, church teaching should be concerned with ways of thinking, helping us to understand our lives as a process of continuous Christian formation along the path 'of wisdom, self-fulfilment and enrichment' (Evangelii Gaudium 168). This moral vision is not defined by fear but by dialogue with all seekers after truth. The Good News is 'marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness ... readiness for dialogue, patience, warmth and welcome which is non-judgemental...'. (Evangelii Gaudium 165).

**3 A holistic vision** We call for a holistic vision of the good life that is not dominated by issues of sexuality, but seeks the flourishing and dignity of the entire person, encouraging each individual to discover their personal vocation to holiness. The moral vision we seek has been manifest throughout history in the lives of all who have incarnated the hope and love of Christ; seeing God in others, welcoming the stranger, loving their neighbours as themselves, rejecting all forms of exploitation, abuse and violence, and living in harmony with the rest of creation. It is a vision that is rooted in biblical values of love, forgiveness, healing and acceptance, of 'faith working through love' (Gal 5:6). It is our living response to the prophetic vocation to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our God. (Micah 6:8)

### 2. CHURCH AUTHORITY

**1 Equality and justice for all** Jesus preached the Good News of the historical advent of the Kingdom of God, which brings justice and peace to all human beings, and liberation to the oppressed. For the Catholic Church to cooperate with God's Kingdom, it needs to model its organizational structure, and its Canon Law, on the principles of equality and justice for all. The Church's Canon Law urgently requires renewing both wholly and frequently, transforming it into a useful and accessible template, using the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights as its benchmark.

**2 Agreed by all** 'What touches all must be discussed and approved by all' [Decretum Gratiani, foundation of Canon Law from the 12<sup>th</sup> century.] By virtue of their common baptism as followers of Jesus, all adult Catholics have the fundamental right to participate and vote in all decisions concerning the common good of their community. Unity is not through fear but love. There is no teaching church or learning church but one, shared magisterium. 'The whole church, laity and hierarchy alike, bears responsibility for, and mediates in history, the revelation which is contained in the scriptures and in the apostolic tradition.' (International Theological Commission, 2014.)

Discernment belongs to all. It cannot be confined to the few. It follows that at every level of church communion, representative councils should serve as the principal decision-making bodies, with the inalienable right and responsibility to determine what decisions and actions fall within their competence.

**3 Elected by all** ‘The one who is to reside over all should be elected by all.’ [Pope Leo 1, ‘The Great’, 5<sup>th</sup> century, and many others since.] Legitimate authorities in the church must be based on the consent of the people. It follows that the church community has the right to evaluate, approve, and commission all those putting themselves forward for a ministry. It also follows that every adult Catholic, whatever their gender identity, sexual orientation, race, marital or social status, has the right to offer themselves as a candidate for election to any church ministry. And that all Catholics also have the right to have their leaders render an account to them.

### 3. REDEFINING AND RECLAIMING LITURGICAL MINISTRY

**1 Every baptised person is clothed in Christ (Galatians 3:27)** There is, therefore, in Christ and the Church no inequality on the basis of race or nationality, social condition or gender, because ‘there is neither Jew nor Greek: there is neither bond nor free: there is neither male nor female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ (Lumen Gentium 32, Vatican II). We should add, ‘people of all abilities and gender.’ We must learn to be open to all, and especially the destabilising influence of people not like us. ‘Whoever wants to be first must be the last of all.’ (Mark 9:35)

**2 The Church is the community of God** ‘For when two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.’ (Matthew 18:20). It is not an individual, but the community of saints, living and dead, who celebrate the act of thanksgiving to God, which is the Eucharist. Jesus has made it easy to celebrate his presence with us, since the ritual of simple eating and drinking together is inscribed within us as human beings. It does not require a separated priesthood. St Peter stated clearly of all the baptised, ‘you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood.’ (1Peter: 9)

**3 The Holy Spirit’s call to ministry may be heard by all people** We need a clearer understanding of vocations. All the baptised are eligible to answer God’s call to every ministry. That call is discerned within and by the community of God, which is a companionship of empowerment. Current research makes it clear that the earliest Christian gatherings, women and men, single and married, led communities in worship, exercising their baptismal calling.

### 4. EMBRACING DIVERSITY

**1 Hierarchy distorts the beauty of diversity** Affirming diversity is imperative for attesting the dignity and sanctity of every form of life, valuing the uniqueness and contribution of each person. This calls for a radical re-imagining of the way of being Church, jettisoning inessential hierarchy, and any authority based on all-male leadership.

**2 Engage with the complexity of sex/gender** Male-female gender binaries are in practice institutionalised through the historical understandings of ‘family life’ and ‘natural law.’ Transgender individuals challenge sex/gender binary norms, but scientifically we now know that sex/gender is complex and that we also establish our identities through the stories we tell. The Church’s teaching and ideology on sex/gender is confused, out of date and contradictory, leaving the faithful with little guidance. It urgently requires renewing, both wholly and frequently, becoming a pastoral response to diverse family forms.

**3 Redefining ‘we’** For Catholics who are other than male/female and heterosexual, evangelization under current Catholic dogma implies being truth tellers in one sphere and liars in another, preaching an ‘objective’ Gospel that does not touch the real person. Our bodies and our spirits long for truthfulness and come alive when we allow them to bear witness to it. All the faithful must see themselves in their differently-aged, differently-abled, differently-gendered, differently-bodied, differently-sexually-oriented, differently-coloured, differently-tongued neighbour. Then we can create affirming, equality-expressing theologies where no one is excluded from the ‘we’ that is the Christian community.

**4 Accountability and apology** Accountability means taking responsibility for the ways in which our beliefs, theology and practices have contributed to the dehumanization and persecution of many people who are seen as ‘other’. ‘What have you done? Listen. Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground’. (Genesis 4:10). The words spoken to Cain after killing his brother Abel point to the critical need for accountability, restitution and transformation, restoring the dignity and rights of all as equal before God. Then the harm done by the Church can be acknowledged in ways that include the participation of those who have been harmed.

# GOD'S DREAM

The Lord God said:  
I myself will dream a dream within you ...  
Good dreams come from me, you know ...  
My dreams seem impossible  
not too practical,  
not for the cautious man or woman ...  
a little risky sometimes,  
a trifle brash perhaps ...

Some of my friends prefer  
to rest more comfortably,  
in sounder sleep  
with visionless eyes ...

But, from those who share my dreams  
I ask a little patience,  
a little humour,  
some small courage,  
and a listening heart ...  
I will do the rest

Then they will risk  
and wonder at their daring ...  
Run ... and marvel at their speed ...  
Build ... and stand in awe at the beauty of their building ...

You will meet me often as you work ...  
in your companions, who share the risk ...  
in your friends, who believe in you enough  
to lend their own dreams  
their own hands  
their own hearts  
to your building

In the people who stand in your doorway,  
stay awhile,  
and walk away knowing that they, too, can find a dream

There will be sun-filled days,  
and sometimes it will rain ...  
a little variety –  
both come from me.

So come now, be content  
It is my dream you dream ...  
my house you build ...  
my caring you witness ...  
my love you share  
and this is the heart of the matter.



*Charles Peguy, French Poet*



## PASTORAL RENEWAL EXCHANGE (PRE)

PRE is based in St Joseph's Dinnington. PRE was started by Fr Brian Green in 1978 to allow those involved in pastoral work to exchange ideas, personal experiences and information. Fr Brian taught at Ushaw College from 1969 -77 and developed a Pastoral Theology course. He then moved to Dinnington to become parish priest of St Joseph's in 1977. Fr Brian produced four editions of PRE most years from 1978 until his death in 2012. Publication was continued by a parishioner, Liam Harron who was joined by Tony Lear in 2014. Since 2019 two editions of PRE have been produced each year.

Contributions for publication are still very welcome but over the years it has become the responsibility of the editors to source most of the material. As editors we seek to provide interesting and stimulating material which will contribute to the renewal of the Church begun in Vatican II. PRE is received by clergy, religious and lay members of the Church in the British Isles, Europe, Australia and Canada.

PRE is a non-commercial project and we fully acknowledge the sources used. As a result, publishers are happy that their publications and resources are being commended to others.

There is no system of a fixed subscription. We have relied on members to send a regular donation. At the moment a donation equivalent to £10 a year is sufficient to cover our printing and postal costs. PRE is also available electronically by email.

Donations should be made payable to 'PRE'. These and any general communications should be sent to:

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<i>Sunday</i>	<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>	<i>Saturday</i>
<p><b>28<sup>th</sup> November</b></p> <p><b>First Sunday of Advent, Year C</b></p> <p><i>“Be vigilant at all times and pray that you have the strength to escape the tribulations that are imminent and to stand before the Son of Man.”</i></p>	<p><b>29<sup>th</sup> November</b></p> <p>When Jesus entered Capernaum a centurion came up and appealed to him.</p> <p><i>When Jesus heard this, he was amazed and said to those following him, “Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.”</i></p>	<p><b>30<sup>th</sup> November</b></p> <p>As Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter, and his brother Andrew, casting a net into the sea; they were fishermen. He said to them, “Come after me, and I will make you fishers of men.”</p>	<p><b>1<sup>st</sup> December</b></p> <p>Great crowds came to him, having with them the lame, the blind, the deformed and the mute and he cured them. <i>They all ate and were satisfied. They picked up the fragments left over, seven baskets full.</i></p>	<p><b>2<sup>nd</sup> December</b></p> <p>Jesus said to his disciples:</p> <p>“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.”</p>	<p><b>3<sup>rd</sup> December</b></p> <p>As Jesus passed by, two blind men followed him, crying out, “Son of David, have pity on us!”</p> <p>Then he touched their eyes and said, “Let it be done for you according to your faith.” And their eyes were opened.</p>	<p><b>4<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>As you go, make this proclamation:</p> <p>“The Kingdom of heaven is at hand. Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, drive out demons. Without cost you have received; without cost you are to give.”</p>
<p><b>5<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>John went throughout the whole region of the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah: <i>A voice of one crying out in the desert: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths.”</i></p>	<p><b>6<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>And some men brought on a stretcher a man who was paralyzed; But not finding a way to bring him in because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on the stretcher through the tiles in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, “As for you, your sins are forgiven.”</p>	<p><b>7<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>Jesus said to his disciples: “What is your opinion? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them goes astray, will he not leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go in search of the stray? And if he finds it, amen, I say to you, he rejoices more over it than over the ninety-nine that did not stray.”</p>	<p><b>8<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p><b>The Immaculate Conception</b></p> <p>Then the angel said to her, <i>“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus.”</i></p>	<p><b>9<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>Jesus said to the crowds: “Amen, I say to you, among those born of women there has been none greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the Kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”</p>	<p><b>10<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they said, “He is possessed by a demon.”</p> <p>The Son of Man came eating and drinking and they said, “Look, he is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.”</p>	<p><b>11<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>Jesus said to his disciples: “But I tell you that Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him but did to him whatever they pleased. So also will the Son of Man suffer at their hands.” Then the disciples understood that he was speaking to them of John the Baptist.</p>
<p><b>12<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>John answered them all, saying, “I am baptizing you with water, but one mightier than I is coming. I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”</p>	<p><b>13<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>When Jesus had come into the temple area, the chief priests and the elders of the people approached him as he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things? And who gave you this authority?”</p>	<p><b>14<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>Which of the two did his father’s will?” They answered, “The first.” Jesus said to them, “Amen, I say to you, tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God before you.”</p>	<p><b>15<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>“Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them.”</p>	<p><b>16<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>This is the one about whom Scripture says: Behold, I am sending my messenger ahead of you. He will prepare your way before you.</p>	<p><b>17<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.</p> <p>Abraham became the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers</p>	<p><b>18<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. When his mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found with child through the Holy Spirit.</p>
<p><b>19<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.</p>	<p><b>20<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p><i>The angel said, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God.”</i></p>	<p><b>21<sup>st</sup> December</b></p> <p>Elizabeth said; “Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled.”</p>	<p><b>22<sup>nd</sup> December</b></p> <p>Mary remained with Elizabeth about three months and then returned to her home.</p>	<p><b>23<sup>rd</sup> December</b></p> <p>When the time arrived for Elizabeth to have her child she gave birth to a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy toward her, and they rejoiced with her.</p>	<p><b>24<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p>You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way, to give his people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins</p>	<p><b>25<sup>th</sup> December</b></p> <p><b>For today in the city of David a saviour has been born for you who is Christ and Lord.</b></p>

