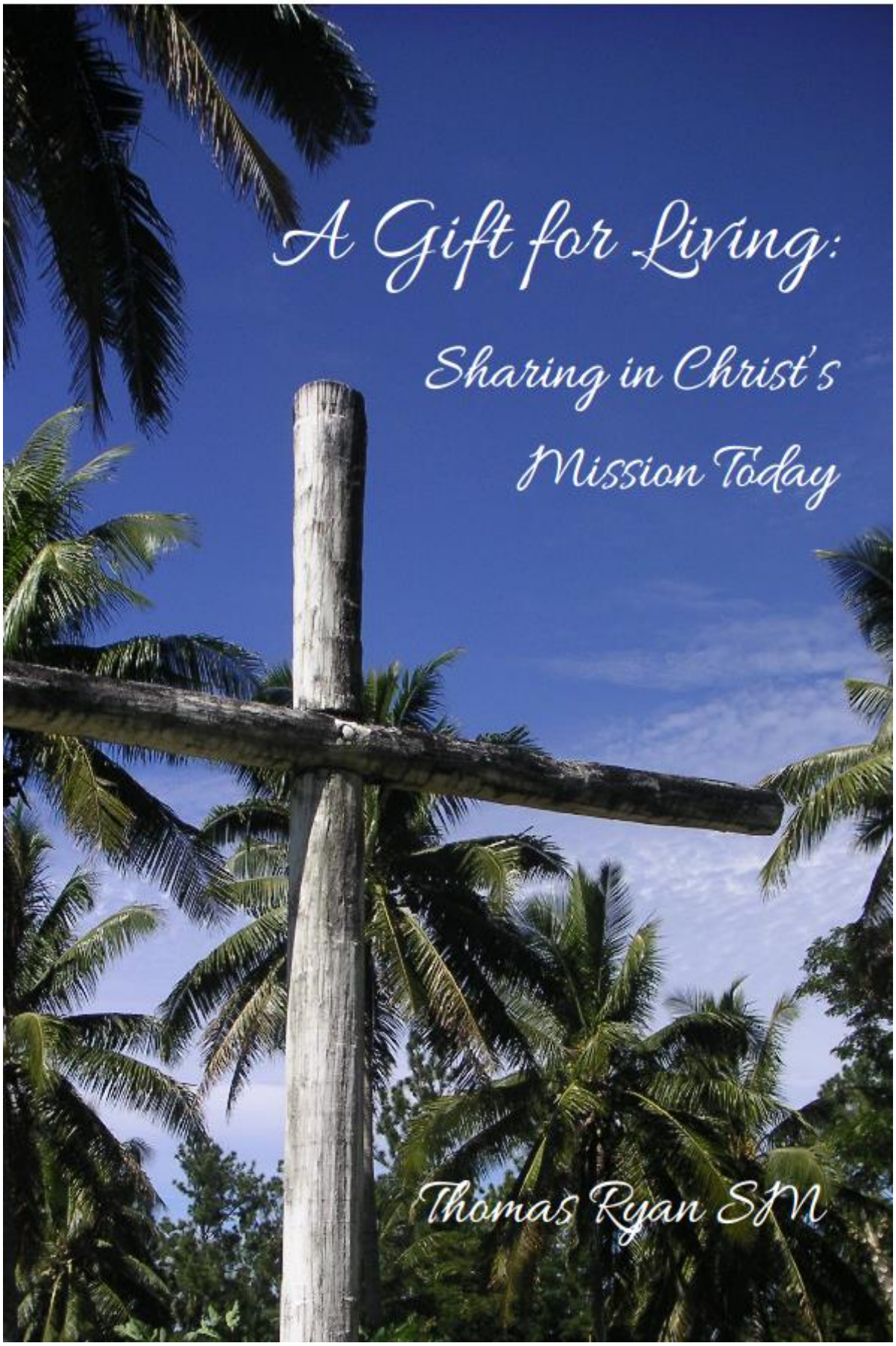
A Gift for Living:
Sharing in Christ's
Mission Today
Thomas Ryan SJN

A GIFT FOR LIVING

SHARING IN CHRIST'S MISSION TODAY

THOMAS RYAN SM

A GIFT FOR LIVING:
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First Published, November 2024

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Published by
MARIST MISSION CENTRE
3 Mary St., Hunters Hill, NSW, 2110, Australia
https://maristmissions.com/

DEDICATED TO

The Marist Mission Centre, Hunters Hill, Sydney Australia:
All the lay people, priests and religious who have worked there
together with the MMC Directors:
Fr. Michael O'Halloran sm
Fr. Ronald Nissen sm
Fr. James Carty sm
Sr. Vivienne Goldstein sm
Fr. Kevin Stewart sm
Fr. Paul Sullivan sm

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The first part of this book (and chapter twenty in part two) is built on articles and shorter pieces written originally (during 2005-2006) for the NZ Marist Messenger under the heading the Christian Living Series. More recently, and in briefer form, they appeared in the Sunday Bulletins at St Patrick's Church Hill. The second part has two chapters originally published in Liturgy News plus seven further chapters that are original and unpublished. Reproduced material is used with permission of those two journals noted above.

I have worked on the material so as to bring a unity to the collection of articles so that they form a book with its own distinctive focus and purpose, captured in its title above.

This has shaped the 'line and length' of the book as a whole—those seeking thoughts, stories etc., that are in accessible language and offer food to ponder. Each chapter, for the most part, is around 1,500 words followed by some questions for reflection.

However, as I was working on this material, advertising arrived about the 75th. anniversary of the founding of the Marist Mission Centre (MMC). I, and others, considered that the overall thrust of the book, especially in part two, is, in addition, clearly aligned with the MMC's identity and purpose. This is reflected in the epilogue.

On that basis, this book is dedicated to the Marist Mission Centre – its directors, assistants and all those who have supported MMC over those 75 years and into the future.

I am indebted, as always, to Marist confreres for their help and encouragement; to Fr. Anthony Corcoran SM, the current District Leader of the Society of Mary in Australia; Frs. Paul Pearce SM and Robert Hollow SM for reading the proofs of the book; Fr. Ronald Nissen SM for his design of the book's cover; Fr. Gerald Arbuckle SM for his appreciative reading of the draft, his comments and endorsement of the book.

Finally, and importantly, to Fr. Paul Sullivan SM, Anne Martinus of the MMC and webmaster Leo Chan who designed the e book for the MMC website.

The final text and any inadequacies are, ultimately, mine.

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INTRODUCTION

What is this book about?

It is an extended reflection on St Paul's words:

> God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given us (Rom 5:5).

The title above captures its main thrust. Further, in its content and style, the book is a form of practical theology for the general reader.

The Christian life is essentially a gift. It is God reaching out to each person who is open to that divine gesture to share in the divine life, namely, to receive God's love. This is what we refer to as 'grace', and its foundation is faith. Exploring that gift and the action of the Holy Spirit in terms of day-to-day living of discipleship and sharing in the mission of Jesus at the personal, social, and global levels —that is the overall aim of this book.

In the first part, (the Gift Explored) we look at the foundations (the gift of grace), what that means in our relationship with God and the virtues (attitudes, dispositions, behaviour) that are needed to nourish that shared life. Chapters then discuss virtues to do with God (theological) and those needed in our relationships with others and in the exercise of moral responsibility (known as 'cardinal' virtues). Attention is also given to the role of the Holy Spirit in all this, which forms one part of the bridge into the second part.

The second half of the book (the Gift At Work: Sharing in Christ's Mission Today) begins with constructing the other half of the bridge; the Holy Spirit is shown to be present and active in Mary's Annunciation and Visitation scenes and, later, in Jesus as he begins his public ministry in the synagogue in Nazareth. In these scenes, there emerges the pattern of affective receptivity, recognition, and response. This is the dynamic that threads its way through the workings of grace and divine love (through conscience) in our relationships with others, society, and the natural world—a task centred on justice and peace.

On that basis, other chapters in part two explore aspects of recognition and responsibility exercised in the workings of conscience: our use of words; the plight of refugees; racial prejudice; the common good in the light of the COVID pandemic; care for our common home and social friendship (taking our cue here from Pope Francis). These lead to a discussion of the Spirit's presence in the lives of non-believers. Two chapters offer reflections on the gift of God at work in shared worship and in farewelling loved ones and friends at funerals.

The book ends by returning to the beginning, but with a caution. The gift of God's love 'poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit' drawing us to collaborate with Christ, is always (and everywhere), not just a human enterprise. With St Paul, 'It is all God's work…' (2 Cor 5:18).

An epilogue to the book acknowledges one distinctive mode of exercising a Marian form of recognition and response, namely, the ministry of the Marist Mission Centre, Hunters Hill NSW. as it celebrates its 75th. Jubilee in 2024.

****

PART ONE

THE GIFT EXPLORED

CHAPTER 1

FINDING THE BEST PLACE TO START

As I began revising this chapter, a memory came to me.

It was of a returned soldier, not married, with injuries to his jaw suffered in the second world war, walking along the footpath, on his way to Mass in the local parish. That, and taking his dog for a walk, was his regular practice, without fail, until he died.

But I cannot recall him ever moving forward with others to receive Holy Communion. He remained kneeling in the pews, shoulders hunched, head bowed. I would say, looking back, he was very close to God. But I wonder now whether he was one of those faithful who were influenced by the residual effects of Jansenism, where very few were considered worthy to receive Holy Communion?

Rather than daily bread, receiving our eucharistic Lord and friend was reserved for those who were 'perfect'. Concern for this lay behind Pope St. Pius X (The Pope of the Eucharist) and his unequivocal statement, over a century ago, that members of the laity were to be encouraged to receive Holy Communion frequently, even daily—assuming the right dispositions and the state of grace as friendship with God.[1]

This memory offers a very apt segue into our discussion here.

We have had many upheavals (even earthquakes) in our Catholic life in the past few decades or so. One of them concerns our understanding of the Christian moral life. It has had a huge bearing on how we understand the spiritual life, in other words on how to be a disciple of Jesus and (as above) on our view of the Eucharist.

What was this major shift in how morality is viewed? It is perhaps best expressed by saying that it is about two ways of seeing God—*Before* and *After*. Alternatively, it can be expressed in terms of finding the best place to start.

BEFORE—WHO IS YOUR GOD?

Let's take the *before* aspect, what we changed *from*.

There is probably much truth in saying that, for some hundreds of years in our Catholic life, there was overall one dominant image of God. It was of a demanding God, who judges, rewards, and punishes. This is the God who is angered by sin. The suffering, death, and

[1] '*Sacra Tridentina:* On Frequent and Daily Reception of Holy Communion,' issued on December 20, 1905. And also lowering the age for children to receive Holy Communion from fourteen to seven years of age.

resurrection of his Son was God's solution to the breakdown in relationships between God and the world. God did this out of love but deep-down was motivated by anger at being rejected.

What happens when *that* God invites us into a relationship and asks us, 'what is your response to what I have done?' Because our instinct is to make sure we match *that* God's expectations, we try to meet his demands. What matters? We do not want to fall out with God.

So, living as a Christian is about watching out for the potholes, keeping on side with God, not breaking the law. The focus is basically *to avoid sin* and its motto is, 'you can't be too careful'. We can never be up to (God's) par. And that is what being good or *morality* is all about.

What is the core of this view? '*If I am good, God will love me*'.

What this approach does is to foster five things:

- it puts the spotlight on not getting sick (sin) rather than living a healthy life (growing as a Christian);
- it tends to be motivated more by fear and guilt than by love;
- it reinforces a sense of never being good enough;
- it is inclined to focus on my actions (how many times) and neglects my attitudes (what prompts my actions);
- it emphasises very much the idea that living a good life is mainly about 'me' and God.

AFTER—WHO IS YOUR GOD?

Let's take the *after* aspect—what we have been called to change *to*?

We must keep in mind that for hundreds of years in our Catholic life many people lived fruitful, holy lives despite the dominant image of God as an angry judge. Somehow, the Spirit of God works despite us, our images, and our systems.

Many people sensed something wasn't quite right. In their personal lives, in their many devotional practices (especially to Mary), they were drawn into, and nourished by, another way of seeing God. This is the God who is all loving, who only wants to give and share. With *this* God, love and compassion just bubble over almost as if God cannot help it.

So, let's start with *this* God. *This* God loves us (you, me, and the world) without any conditions—no holds barred! God's love is a *gift*, embodied in Jesus, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Jesus comes to reconcile the world to God, not out of anger but from overwhelming mercy and compassion (symbolized in the cross).

God enters our world to save us, but from what? The late Sebastian Moore, OSB suggests that it is from being afraid to truly accept that we are *loved and loveable*. It is there we find the roots of sin.[2]

All *this* God wants of us is that we allow ourselves to be loved. And that means that we are open to receive the *gift* of being loved by God. Once we let that happen, then we appreciate that the gift is also an invitation.

What results when *this* God invites us into a relationship and asks us 'What is your response to what I have done?' In recognising and saying 'yes' to the gift, our next step is to say 'how can I respond? How can I love in return?'

Notice how the focus has shifted.

- It is on God and on a relationship (rather than me);
- It is about sharing a life, living a gift, growing in that life together (rather than avoiding sin, or potholes, or worrying about getting sick or making a mistake). It is about trying, striving, making the effort;
- It is about friendship, allowing God to work to slowly transform my attitudes (more about *who I am* than *what I do*);
- it is about sharing life with a community of persons (God) and others;
- it is about helping to make our world a better place.

What is the core of this view? '*God loves me, no matter what*' and that love is a *gift for living*, to find meaning in our lives.

WHAT CAN WE CONCLUDE?

What we have seen is that the *before* approach was certainly *not* the best place to start. Basically, it was because of the way it saw God and finished up with a stress on the *negative* **(**things we shouldn't do).

The *after* approach starts at the best spot, really the right way round (God's way). It ends up putting the emphasis on the *positive* (how we can grow in friendship with God).

With the God of *before* I had to earn God's love by not sinning. With the God of *after* when I am not my best self (i.e., sin), God still loves me.

Does that mean *sin* goes out the window? Obviously not. To have no sense of sin is as bad as being obsessed by it.

Does that mean *guilt* doesn't matter? Of course not. But if it is the *only* thing that matters, that is as unhealthy as having no sense of guilt at all.

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[2] See his *Jesus: The Liberator of Desire* (New York, Crossroad, 1989).

What does this imply about being *saved*? It means that we are not just saved *from* something by God (sin as selfishness, being alienated, broken relationships, unwilling to be loved and to love). Being saved *from* only makes sense if we are saved *for* something (*life* shared with and in God and spilling over to others and to the world). After all, Jesus was God's gift to us that 'we may have life and have it to the full'.

TO END AT THE BEGINNING

Finding the best place to start makes all the difference to where we want to go and how we get there. And that very much depends on our image of God. In many ways, the best (and only) place to start living the gift (with Jesus) is not with ourselves but with God. Perhaps it is best summed up in a quote from Edward Collins Vacek who captures in four brief, simple phrases what Christian morality is all about.

GOD LOVES US
WE LOVE GOD
WE AND GOD FORM A COMMUNITY
WE AND GOD COOPERATE [3]

This compact summary is our guidepost to explore God's gift for living in the rest of this book.

****

FOR REFLECTION

- Jot down the words, images, memories that first come to mind when you see the words 'morality' or 'being moral'?
- Can you see something of yourself in the journey from the *before* to the *after* God in the above chapter? In what way?
- In your view, how did Jesus understand 'morality'?
- What questions arose for you as you read *Finding the Best Place to Start*?

****

[3] Edward Collins Vacek, SJ, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), xv.

CHAPTER 2

‘MYSTIC’—YOU MEAN *ME?*

In the previous chapter, we saw that our best starting point in walking the way of Jesus is that ‘God loves us’ and offers us a gift for living. As we noted, to begin with ‘If I love God enough, God will love me’ creates a host of problems. Most importantly, it isn’t where God wants us to start. Perhaps we can probe a bit more the phrase ‘God loves us’.

First, those three words lay behind Vatican II’s document on the Church which has one chapter entitled ‘The Call of the Whole Church to Holiness’. The word ‘whole’ is spelt out when it says ‘…all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity’.[4]

Holiness has its roots in charity—the love of God above all things and of other people for God’s sake. It stems from ‘God loves us’ received as a gift which itself enables us to respond in ‘we love God.’

All this seems sort of obvious. But has it always been that way? No, and we have been reminded of something often blurred, even buried, in our Catholic awareness. The call to be holy is for every believer. It is not only for a select group, an elite, a special huddle of premium class within the Christian community (such as priests, religious, hermits).

Everyone is called to reach the heights (‘fullness of the Christian life’). There is no Christian who cannot be a faithful disciple, who cannot live a life glowing with love (profound sanctity in ‘the perfection of charity’).

Why had this aspect of our faith and of ‘God loves us’ become fuzzy, even distorted? This brings us to another angle on what we saw earlier.

STARTING THE WRONG WAY ROUND?

The *before* approach to God and to Christian living had three basic steps. Each step can be described (in brackets) by the branch of theology dealing with it.

Step 1: I start by avoiding sin (*moral*)

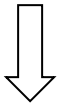
Step 2: I go beyond avoiding sin through penance, devotions fostering the pattern of a good life. (*ascetical*)

[4] *Lumen Gentium,* par.40.

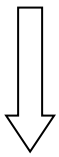
Step 3: If I follow Steps 1 and 2, God will love me. (*mystical*)

Let's look at that in a diagram:

STEP 1: *MORAL*
= I AVOID SIN



STEP 2: ASCETICAL
>>>>PENANCE
>>LIVE GOOD LIFE



STEP 3: *MYSTICAL*
>> GOD LOVES ME

This is a simplified (perhaps exaggerated) form of something complex but, as an overall pattern, it has some truth to it. Further, over hundreds of years, there emerged a more schematic way of understanding Christian life and theology. Theology and stages in people's lives were put into categories:

- *mystical* theology dealt with advanced stages in prayer and spiritual life, namely, the 'fullness of the Christian life and the perfection of charity';
- *ascetical* theology (in today's language = spirituality) described the practices and stages as one advances in Christian living;
- *moral* theology dealt with what is needed to get started—avoiding sin, staying on side with God particularly by keeping the Ten Commandments.

While these were (and are) helpful to clarify our understanding, there were two unfortunate side effects.

First, the categories left the impression that achieving holiness ('fullness' or *mystical*), getting to the top of the mountain, was only for a select few. 'God loves us' (and holiness as the gift of love being fully realized) was true only of a small number. To use a sporting analogy, they are like the team selected for the Rugby World Cup.

Next, there were many who led a good spiritual life (*ascetical*) and moved towards holiness. But again, that was not for everyone. These are the players in the Super Rugby Pacific competition.

But most people were at Step 1—that of *moral* theology or avoiding sin. They managed to hang in there but were not called to (nor capable of) much more—like the players in the local club Rugby competition.

Secondly, this approach to Christian living where, 'God loves us' was only true of a small cluster (of 'us'). It was also aggravated by a distorted view of words such as 'mystical'. 'mysticism', and 'mystic'.

Try a quick exercise. For you, what do those three words mean? For many Christians today 'mystic' and other such words still probably suggest something like 'unusual experiences of God' or 'special people who have extraordinary experiences of God' (e.g., states of ecstasy).

True, there are people (in many religious traditions) who experience abnormal phenomena in their spiritual journey. The words 'mystical', 'mysticism,' 'mystic' can be used in that sense. But their primary meaning is about the everyday, the commonplace, the ordinary person. How so?

Let's start with our common humanity. These three words have in common the ancient Sanskrit *my* as in the word '*my*stery'—what is hidden, inexplicable, beyond us. All human beings are, at times, aware of being part of something much bigger—the 'mystery' of life. This prompts the 'why' in our lives, the search for 'more'.

But there is also the Christian sense of the word 'mystery'. The Greek word *mysterion* in the New Testament refers to the Reign of God or to the divine plan hidden from all ages and revealed in Jesus. It signifies the divine design— 'God loves us' (and the world), invites us to receive that gift and respond to it. We encounter God's love (the *mysterion*) in Jesus, in the Paschal Mystery of his dying and rising principally in the Word and Sacrament of the Church's liturgy. It is the love of God 'poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit that has been given us' (Rom 5:5).

The Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner speaks of 'everyday mysticism'. He argues that whenever human beings ask questions or seek meaning, we are, in reality, reaching out beyond ourselves. It is a desire for 'more' common to all of us.

Generally, we do not consciously advert to it as 'going beyond'. Occasionally, we experience it in more intense moments of awareness such as the birth of a child, the company of friends, watching a sunset, the death of a loved one. Overall, whether consciously or unconsciously, we humans live immersed in an ocean of mystery.

Christian 'mystery' (God's plan of love) and everyday 'mysticism' have something in common. It is found in allowing oneself to be aware of, touched by, something or Someone bigger than oneself—open to the mystery that is a gift. In this sense, David Steindhl-Rast's

variation on John Ruskin's description of an artist has a point: 'A mystic is not a special kind of human being; rather every human being is a special kind of mystic'.[5]

So where to from here?

STARTING THE RIGHT WAY AROUND?

This brings us back to the *after* approach to God and Christian living with the three basic steps and related branch of theology.

Step 1: God loves us without any conditions. (*mystical*)

Step 2: We allow ourselves to be loved, recognise and accept the gift as an invitation, respond to sharing a life with God as disciples of Jesus (*ascetical*)

Step 3: That will mean that we perceive, love and act like God—in relation to God and others in the world. (*moral*)

Look at the steps in a diagram:

STEP 1: MYSTICAL

GOD LOVES US

⇩

STEP 2: ASCETICAL (SPIRITUALITY)

WE ACCEPT THE GIFT >> FRIENDSHIP
WE RESPOND: LIVE AS DISCIPLES

⇩

STEP 3: MORAL

WE LOVE & ACT
WITH & LIKE GOD

[5] David Steindhl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 86.

Note the contrasts between diagrams.

- The *after* approach is a reverse of the *before* approach. It starts with God's love (rather than ends with it). The focus is on *We* not *I*.
- Everyone is called to be loved by God and to receive that gift. It is not a reward for goodness or for a few.
- It means that anyone open to God in faith is open to receiving, accepting, and responding to the mystery of God's love in Jesus. In that sense, every Christian is a potential mystic (hence the chapter's title).
- Our moral life builds on that primordial experience of being loved by God. It means that, in accepting the gift, we strive to respond, to share a life by living accordingly (and that obviously means avoiding what impairs or opposes that life, namely, sin).
- This means that the top of the mountain (holiness) is the goal for everyone.
- Hence, the phrase 'a gift for living' for this book. Our *moral life* needs spirituality but, most importantly, builds on an experience of the mystery (*mysterion*) that 'God loves us', namely, yearns to give us a share in the divine life.

Let's leave the last word to a comment about St. Thérèse of Lisieux.

> Sanctity does not consist in this or that practice, but a disposition of the heart which makes us humble and little in God's arms, aware of our weakness and having an almost bold confidence in His Fatherly Goodness.[6]

****

FOR REFLECTION

- To test whether the *before* way really did shape attitudes, ask yourself how many times have you heard (perhaps still hear) someone remark 'I'll be quite happy to sneak in through the door of Purgatory?' For you, what is that really saying?

- Any thoughts on the quote above concerning Thérèse of Lisieux?

- In the light of this chapter, can you explain why devotion to St. Thérèse swept through the Catholic Church like a tidal wave during the fifty years prior to Vatican II? What do you think it was saying?

- 'Mystic? You mean ME?' Any comments?

****

[6] Conrad de Meester, *With Empty Hands: The Message of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (London & New York: Burns & Oates, 2002), 100.

CHAPTER 3

THINKING ABOUT FRIENDSHIP AND GOD

If we had any hesitations about the first two chapters, then we might well open the first Letter of John and read Chapter 3. It gives us God's perspective on the topic above. Perhaps take a few minutes to do that.

Then turn back to Chapter 15 of John's Gospel and read it slowly.

In this third chapter as we consider 'a gift for living' and the way of Jesus, we bring together some of the ideas in those two readings of John.

We can begin by reminding ourselves of that crisp summary from Edward Vacek cited in the first chapter *Finding the Best Place to Start.*

GOD LOVES US
WE LOVE GOD
WE AND GOD FORM A COMMUNITY
WE AND GOD COOPERATE

We have seen why we should start with 'God loves us' and how that is the source of a 'gift for living'. At some stage, we want to explore how we can respond in 'we love God'. But to do that we have to spend some time with the third phrase 'We and God form a community.' So, we will begin there.

GETTING A LIFE

If God loves us, what happens? One answer is 'nothing'. God loves the world and every single person in it, past, present, and future. But that is not the same thing as saying that someone is *aware* of God's love or of wanting to receive that love.

So, the other answer is 'it depends on the person'. God has made us free. Thomas Aquinas reminds us that the image of God shines in us most brightly in our freedom. As persons, we are like God—we can know who we are called to be and to achieve our purpose in life because we choose to do so. We are not forced to do so or driven by blind instinct.

In other words, God will not force-feed us with the truth nor press-gang us into being free. Specifically, God will not compel us to accept the gift of the God-self, to love God against our will. God will do handstands to get our attention but will not blackmail us. A God who says 'you have no option but to love me' is a contradiction in terms. It would be like trying to make a square circle.

We can only receive God's offer to love us freely. But if we accept that gift, say 'yes,' what happens? Many things: a different way of seeing the world and especially the people in it; God-given virtues, beliefs, and attitudes; states such as peace, a sense of harmony. All part of the gift to us and for living. Because we share in a real, though hidden way, in the life of the persons of the Trinity, we have the ability to see, judge, love, act as God does.

We certainly, 'get a life', one could say 'in spades!' (or should it be hearts?). We receive the presence and action of the Holy Spirit that brings a deeper and more inclusive level of awareness, experience, motivation, and relationships. The core reality is that we become God's adopted children, members of God's family.

In other words, 'we and God form a community'. We will take just one aspect of this and put a spotlight on it. It picks up what we read in Chapter 15 of John's Gospel.

'I CALL YOU FRIENDS'

We have mentioned earlier, words such as disciple, love, relationships, community. One point we have not mentioned is that God meets us in our desires, and especially in our desire for *happiness.* Thomas Aquinas said that if we follow the path of our yearning for happiness and see where it leads, it will bring us to God. That has an important role in trying to clarify what will truly make us happy, in what 'getting a life' involves in terms of our attitudes and actions.

The other human experience Aquinas suggests that can help us to understand what 'getting a life' with God means is the experience of *friendship*. When we say 'yes' to 'God loves us', we become God's friends. It sounds astonishing, almost blasphemous, but it is true, suggests Paul Wadell.[7]

Yet, it isn't new in the Scriptures. Friendship between God and ourselves is found modelled between God and Abraham (Gen. 18: 17ff) and God and Moses (Exodus 33:11). But what is amazing, as Aquinas picked up, is that we are called to find our deepest selves, to find happiness in life in a relationship of love, by loving precisely as God's friends and to grow in friendship with God (and hence with others). What exactly does that mean?

It means two things. Firstly, for Aquinas, friendship is the most accurate way to describe what our life with God is and what it should be. Another word to describe it is 'charity'. This is the love with which Christian living begins, by which it is nourished and the goal towards which it is directed. In friendship we give ourselves away and yet come to be what God 'in perfect love has always wanted us to be' says Wadell (p. 120-1). Gift received leads to gift returned.

Second, Aquinas suggests that friendship is not just a state, a relationship. It is a *virtue*. It is an enduring habitual disposition to discern, recognise, respond to, and choose to do, what is

[7] Paul Wadell, *Friendship, and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

truly good with increasing ease and pleasure. Here, the 'good' will be concerned with the relationship and the other friend in that relationship. To be God's friend is to love God in a certain way. And, as Aquinas suggests, achieving that requires that we possess and cultivate the qualities integral to friendship.

- The first is what he calls 'benevolence'. One desires and strives to achieve the friend's best interests, well-being, and happiness. We evaluate things in terms of what is best for the *friend's sake,* or for what will nourish the relationship. With God, we will what God wills and make God's well-being our own. In doing this, we are cooperating with God in achieving our own well-being and happiness since that is precisely what God wants for us.

- The second quality is that the friendship is *mutual*. Friendship entails a love in which the desire to promote the other's well-being is returned by the other person. With God it resembles a type of equal standing between friends, as if we and God can look each other in the eye.

  It also implies that friendship involves a life together. In the words of Aristotle, friends who *never spend time* with each other do not stay friends for long (which says something about our prayer). We are also transformed by our friends. It is their love that forms us into what we hope to become. [8]

- Finally, the bond of love between friends means that each becomes for the other, *another self.* We can see ourselves in the other person because we have been 'formed, shaped, defined by the same love'.[9]

  This does not mean that we are absorbed into God or lose our identity. It means that this divine 'gift for living' means we grow in the likeness of God and find our truest selves. So, Jesus' prayer for his friends in John 15 must be balanced by Paul's prayer for the Ephesians that 'through his Spirit for your hidden self to grow strong' (Eph. 3:16).

Let's end with three quotes. The first brings us back to John's Gospel. One

> ...can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends (Jn 15: 13)

The second is from Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities.* They are the words of Sidney Carton as he replaces his friend and awaits execution.

> *It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest,*

[8] Wadell, *Friendship,* 135.

[9] Wadell, *Friendship,* 137.

that I go to, than I have ever known.[10]

Such self-giving love is, in Christian discipleship, the high point of the moral (and spiritual) life. It is the most God-like action we can do to express our freedom, to determine our destiny and become the sort of person we want to be. Paradoxically, such a commitment reveals the heart of what it is to be truly free**.** It is the freedom to bind oneself in love and to give oneself for the sake of another.

Which brings us to the final consideration, built on one phrase.

'I CAN LOOK AFTER MY ENEMIES…'

They are the words of a young man called Salvatore Giuliani who led a short-lived rebellion in Sicily against the civil and military authorities in the 1940's--1950's. He was lured into a town square and shot. Before his death, he foresaw his fate with realism and an insight tinged with sadness.

'I can look after my enemies but God protect me from my friends'.

Those words have lingered since I first read them as a boy and came to mind again in writing about friendship. Their echo whispers the harmonic of another (and final) question: 'Would they have been the words of Jesus?'

Our reflections end on that note: perhaps read again Chapter 15 of John's Gospel.

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FOR REFLECTION

- In pondering the two readings from St John, did any phrase stand out for you? Was there any word or image that you found yourself moved by?
- The way of Jesus as 'a gift for living': how do you see that phrase at this stage?
- Any thoughts from your own life-experience about friends and friendship?
- Did the quote of Salvatore Giuliani ring any bells? Perhaps Ps. 55: 12-15 comes to mind and is worth checking out…

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[10] https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/470-it-is-a-far-far-better-thing-that-i-do

CHAPTER 4

WITH JESUS—BY THE WAY OF THE HEART: A CONVERSATION

Before going any further we need to review our steps.

A Gift for Living. What is it?

Living like Christ. Following Jesus— the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6)

Who is this Jesus? The one who 'is close to the Father's heart' (Jn 1:18).

This is Jesus whose Abba/Father 'gives him the Spirit without measure' and 'has placed all things in his hands' (Jn 3:33)

But how would Jesus respond to the question above? Consider what the Gospels reveal about Jesus—his mind, attitudes, convictions, desires, loves, fears, angers. In tapping these, perhaps we can be guided by Jesus' question to Bartimaeus: 'what do you want me to do for you?' (Mk 10: 51). On that basis, we could imagine a conversation…??

WHERE DOES IT ALL START?

Tom: Jesus, where does it all begin for you? What drives you?

Jesus: I know I am loved. That's basically it. I just *know* with that sort of deep-down awareness and conviction that is almost beyond words. I feel in my very bones that I am the apple of my *Abba*/Father's eye.

Sometimes this 'being-loved' is like a flood and I am saturated by it. At my Baptism in the Jordan. Even in my turmoil in Gethsemane. All I desire is to say 'YES'. To love my Father back. I yearn to tell others and share that gift with them. I only want to follow wherever it leads.

You could say 'loved to death'. And of that? Waves of pain. Looking back, I still grope for words. A piercing scream. I throw myself into His hands. I have nowhere else to go. Yes mingled with No? Abandon with abandoned? Giving in with giving up? I can only trust.

On the other side of darkness, light glimmers to a glow. Sunrise. *Abba* is waiting, smiling, proud of me. Love pressed down, shaken together, and running over pours down into my lap, soothing my wounds—and yours.

That's it really. That's who I am. That is what drives me in what I do.

GOD AS *ABBA*/FATHER

Tom: Jesus, you constantly talk of God as *Abba*. No one else before you in the Jewish tradition appears to refer to God like that, or to pray to God in that way. It seems distinctive to you. Why do you do it?

Jesus. It is the only way I could come close to describing who my Yahweh is for me. That means to capture the 'feel', the texture, the taste of the God who is always loving me.

I first heard *Abba* from our neighbours' children about their father. I heard it too from my mother. So, I often used the word as a child or later with Joseph in the workshop at Nazareth. It is a term of affection for a father who cares, who protects his family, who gives advice and counsel.

But for the son(s) in the family, it meant something more. What belonged to the father belonged to the son. And that meant that a son carried out his father's instructions.

So being a Jew I fell back on what I knew to best describe what God is like for me. He is *Abba*/Father who loves me and, as a son, I always do what pleases him.

WHY FRIENDS?

Tom: You say somewhere that you don't see your disciples as servants but as friends. Friends must be important to you?

Jesus: Very important. I can't get by without them. Many of the people I healed and taught became my friends. I really enjoy their company especially at meals. People relax. A few wines and they open up. It's amazing what happens over the dinner table.

I also need companions in my work. I can't do it on my own. And anyhow, that's not a good way of encouraging people to develop their gifts. It's not the way friends should treat each other.

In one sense, too, my Abba/Father is my friend—and yours. One of my favourite images to describe that relationship is of the master of the house who comes home, sits the servants down, and waits on them. That really shocks people. That sort of behaviour—from God?

Of course, what I do as the son of the house is sit down and share a meal with them, side by side. It's the sort of thing the Father would do in my shoes.

So that's why I tell people that the best way to see God is as a friend. If you want to talk about *A Gift for Living*, start there.

WHERE IS YOUR HEART?

Tom: What's the metaphor or symbol that captures what it means to live and act as your friend?

Jesus: I think the image of the 'heart'. It's not quite the modern understanding of the word—the centre of the affections. In the Hebrew Scriptures the 'heart' is a symbol of *the whole person*. As a symbol for the 'inside' of a person it embraces feelings, memories, ideas, plans, decisions.

I am very conscious that every person is made in our divine image. And this is especially visible in their freedom. To be a person is to know what is true, what is good, and to choose to act on it freely.

My Father and I won't force people with the truth. We can't compel people to love us. They have to be led gently by the Holy Spirit. Truth and love have to convince by their own power. It is an *invitation* to share a life, to say 'yes' to a gift.

So that's why I like the 'heart' metaphor because a person's heart is the centre of their freedom. It is the place where people enter to be in dialogue with themselves and where they open themselves or close themselves to God. It could be described as the core of what you call 'conscience'.

To have a 'heart' also means the capacity to be *in relationship*. That is crucial for me since it is *from* my *Abba*/Father that I am who I am. I am made *for* and *to* my Abba/Father and together we reach out in love to others with the Spirit.

And it is the same for human beings. Being-in-relationship in a community is the primary image of God. and why the Church is so necessary. Further, within the Church you are part of the wider network of relationships in the world.

BY THEIR FRUITS…

Tom: Jesus, you link 'heart' with another image in order to highlight what's really important in your eyes.

Jesus: It's the tree and its fruit. '…each tree is known by its own fruit; the good person out of the treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks' (Lk.6: 43-45).

As an example of this I tell the story of the man mugged on the road between Jerusalem

and Jericho. The point of the story is that someone who acts spontaneously from what fills his heart, namely, his *core* attitudes and values.

He has a 'neighbour's' heart, one open and sensitive to all of the real, to embracing it in an inclusive way. Here is a Samaritan (the last person most Jews would expect) who, by the fruits of his living, shows that, in reality, he shares in the divine life**.** The 'gift for living' is alive and well in him. This is the behaviour of one of my (and my Father's) friends.

I had come across people who were not Jewish but who, much to my surprise, were obviously open to God. Like the Roman centurion and the pagan Syrophoenician woman. I didn't really expect that sort of reaction. But I learnt from those experiences.

I was trying to help some of the Jewish leaders to be sensitive to the same signs of 'grace' in their midst. They still thought they had a monopoly on God and on an upright life. They had become blinded to true goodness and God's presence. They were, to say the least, a bit miffed by the story.

I wanted to get people to look not so much at what they do, but at what *motivates* what they do. In other words, to be aware of who they are, what drives them, the sort of person they become by their actions. How they are moved, affected and respond.

My point was about how one sees the world. It is not about 'who is *my* neighbour?' Who counts or does not count, who qualifies for help or not.

It is about 'who is *a* neighbour?' It is about the person who sees things through God's eyes, with God's mind and heart. This is someone who is open to recognising and responding to anyone in need, no matter their class, race, gender. It's about being inclusive in one's love—like God.

A FINAL WORD

Tom: Thank you Jesus. Have you any final suggestion about '*A Gift for Living'*?

Jesus: Stay in touch. You are not alone. The Father is always with me and the two of us and the Spirit are with you. *A Gift for Living* in company with me cannot be a solo exercise. We do it together. We cooperate. Try to act in a way that is in tune with God's action in the world.

Finally, never forget that we love you. Do not be afraid. You are made in our image.

Remember, we trust you. That's what friends do.

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FOR REFLECTION

- What question would you like to ask Jesus?

- If Jesus asked you ‘who do you say that I am?’ Or ‘who am I for *you*?’ what would be your answer?

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CHAPTER 5

‘YOU’RE JUST DOING THAT OUT OF HABIT’.

You arrive at work and get out of the car. You enter the building. You turn the door handle to your office and it triggers a memory—the one that pre-occupied you during the drive to work.

Then you realize something. You can’t recall the journey between home and work this morning. You know you got here in the car. You followed the same route as normal, passed the same lights. In your day-dreaming, you just cannot remember anything about the trip.

Sound familiar? It’s happened to all of us. Does that mean we drove carelessly or dangerously? No. If the car in front stopped suddenly I would react as I pick up its brake lights. I would notice the traffic warden stepping forward, with flag waving, onto the school crossing. I must have stopped at all the red lights and went again on green. I didn’t hear a police siren (or if I did, I can recall the feeling of relief that it wasn’t meant for me).

In other words, the habits involved in driving meant that I went into automatic mode. The skills used over years came into play. I did not need to concentrate on my every single action as I drove, gripping the wheel and gritting my teeth. We would be trembling wrecks by the end of the journey if we did, leaving aside being a threat to others on the road. (And of course, we would soon find family and friends who preferred to take the bus or an Uber – thank you very much). Those habits of years enable us to drive with ease, confidence and the level of attention needed for the task.

HABITS AND PRACTICES

Between getting up in the morning and going to bed at night there are hundreds, if not thousands of things we do. They range from waking up, having breakfast, getting to work, writing reminder notes, checking emails, using our mobiles, talking to people etc.

To handle the many (and complex) demands of life, we develop certain patterns of acting in order to have some sort of regularity, some order in our lives. We have the ‘practice’ of doing certain things, at certain times, in a certain way. When those practices become regular we will ‘tend’ or be ‘disposed’ to act in those ways. In other words, the practices become habits. They also make us into a certain type of person. In some things, our ‘quirky’ ways can even annoy or amuse others.

These practices affect all aspects of living. They shape and influence us more deeply in some areas, especially in our way of life and our area of work. Getting on with people involves being adept and proficient in many things. We need skills and sensitivities to navigate the (sometimes) stormy waters of living in a family. These combine with other forms of know-how and dexterity learned in doing one’s job.

Wherever we are (home, work, leisure, parish, praying) two things are true. First, we live in a whole network of relationships. Secondly, our lives are 'human' and that means 'moral'. We live and act as free beings and presume, in principle, that we and others are responsible for how we act and who we become.

It means too that there are certain qualities in a person that we admire and imitate (being thoughtful, caring, generous, compassionate) and others we condemn and reject (being resentful, selfish, insensitive, vengeful).

But words can be a problem. For some people 'virtue' can have a sort of prissy, 'holier than thou' aroma to it. 'Habit', too, can have a negative ring. If I do something 'out of habit' it can suggest that it doesn't mean a lot, or that I am just going through the motions. My action is better if I act with thought and conscious choice.

In one way there is a point here. Routine can sometimes deaden our sense of the meaning of what we are doing. We need to check now and again that this particular practice does mean something to me. I have to review, perhaps renew my reasons for the conviction that drives this particular practice in my life. For instance, why do I go to Mass? Why do I act in certain ways to this person or that group of people? Even, why do I remain a Christian and a Catholic?

On the other hand, doing something out of habit can indicate a belief or value that has been deepened over the years. A good habit or practice we call a 'virtue'. It is like a water-course carved in a rock by the slow, regular drip of water.

Stopping the practice can leave a gap in my life, the sense that something important is missing. In other words, the habit is hard to get rid of; without it I am not truly myself. I have become the virtue I have been practicing. It is not something I have, but something I am, whether it is being thoughtful, compassionate, just, or grateful.

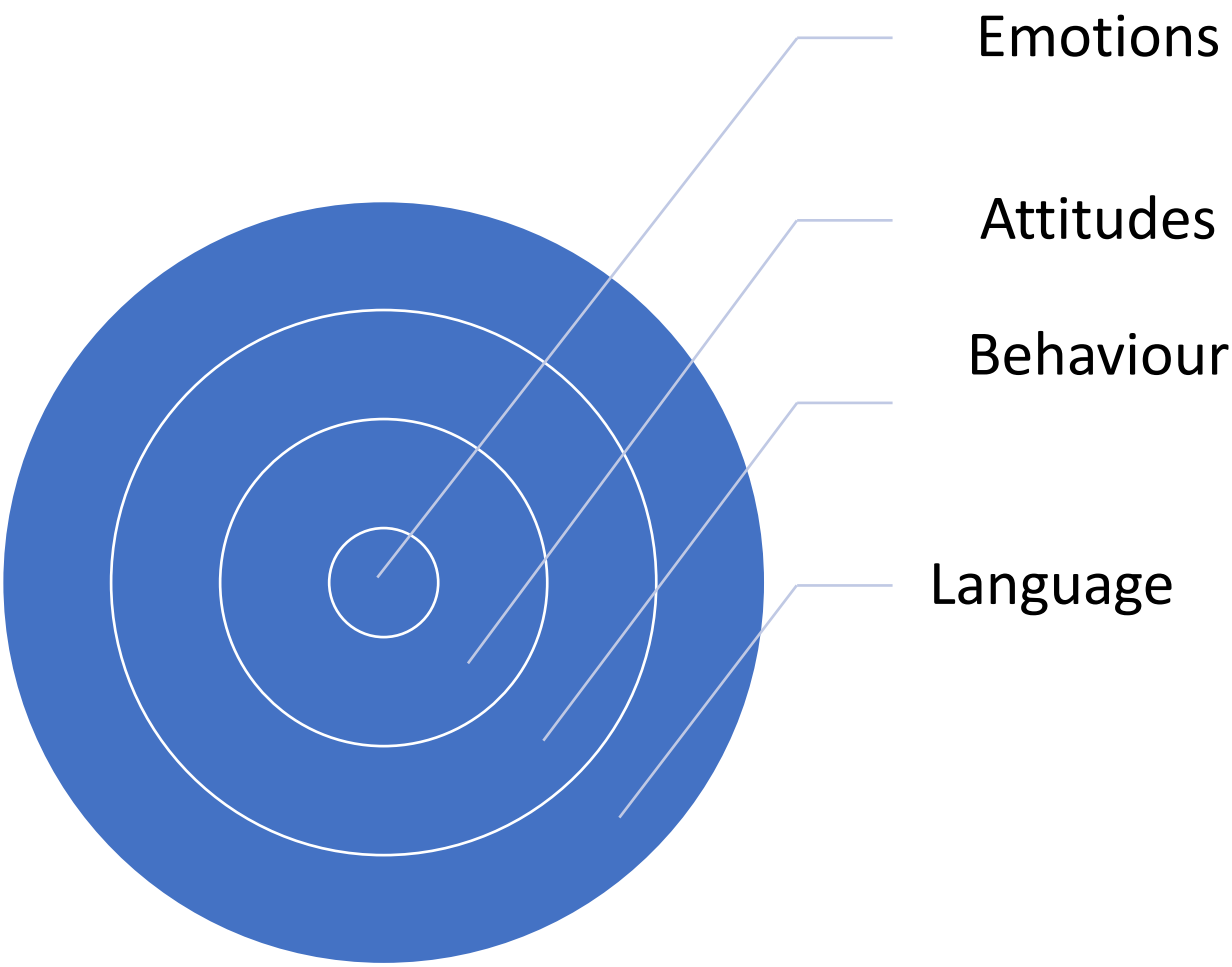
Alternatively, bad habits (or 'vices') are those that make me less than human. These sorts of practices are also hard to eradicate. They can be very deep-seated. It takes time and lots of effort to change or remove them, and importantly, God's help.

THE WHEEL OF CHANGE

A helpful way to understand how we grow in the virtues, in walking with Jesus with his 'Gift for Living', is through the *Wheel of Change* (diagram below). Our lives involve three interrelated things: our attitudes, our behaviour, and our language. They all reflect and influence each other.

Those three aspects converge on our emotions. Any change in one of the three will involve an emotional shift. Any change in one of the three will involve an adjustment in the others. If I change my behaviour, there will be a corresponding shift in my attitudes or language. And so on. Finally, we can get on the *Wheel of Change* at any of those three entry points – by starting with my attitude, or my behaviour or my language.

THE WHEEL OF CHANGE



AT THE CENTRE OF THE WHEEL ARE OUR

EMOTIONS

THEY INFLUENCE AND ARE INFLUENCED BY OUR

LANGUAGE, BEHAVIOUR AND ATTITUDES

Some years ago, I was asked to conduct a seminar for employees in a Health Care organization. It was on dealing with situations when things go wrong in the workplace. The aim was to understand better how people behave towards each other and/or to clients or patients at such times.

Using the *Wheel of Change*, we did two things. First, some scenarios were designed involving a problem amongst health workers or with clients. These scenarios were acted out in 'role play'. The other workshop participants observed and later commented on each role play, e.g., on the behaviour, language, the feelings, and attitudes they picked up.

We then repeated the role plays. They were the same scenarios with only a few words changed. The key words were 'please,' thank you', 'we,' and addressing the other person by name. The group then made comments.

The outcome was simple but obvious (even with role-played situations and not real life). We realized that it was virtually impossible to be blaming or aggressive using a certain form of language. With the key 'words' came a shift in attitudes and emotions which were reflected in the 'body language'. Most importantly, using 'we' made it a shared problem rather than 'your' fault or 'I'm' not to blame.

This is one example. It tells us how important our language is in reflecting the way we view life and people, and in how we respond and act. You could think of other situations where you start on the *Wheel of Change* with one's attitudes or with one's behaviour.

ENDING WITH JOE

These thoughts form helpful background when we next start to look at the essential virtues that enable us to live in Friendship with God in Jesus, to exercise the 'Gift for Living'.

We finish with our heading above and the (true) story of Joe told at his funeral. I have used it in other pieces but it bears repeating— as we shall see.

Joe's wife Mary had been in a nursing home for some years. She had Alzheimer's disease. Joe came every day. He fed her breakfast and lunch, read to her, wheeled her outside in the sun and generally spent hours with her.

One day a nurse said to Joe, 'Joe, you are wonderful to Mary. You are devoted in the way you come and care for her. Just remember that we're here and you don't need to come every day. It must be hard at times now that she doesn't recognize you'.

'Yes,' said Joe quietly (and without any hint of reproach). 'I know that. But I recognize *her*'.

****

FOR REFLECTION

- Can you think of a time in your life when you decided to change your behaviour ('I am going to do this, or that') and how it gradually led to a change in your attitude and how you felt about things, situations, people?
- Can you recall occasion(s) when you realized, with a mix of shock and horror, 'How could I get it so wrong?' OR 'Did I really do that?' OR 'My God, am I really that sort of person?'
- Can you think of examples in which our language gives us away?

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CHAPTER 6

'…WE SHALL BE LIKE HIM…':

THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

It looks so easy. Watching these top tennis players where each stroke seems effortless.

Or hear Joan Sutherland or Ella Fitzgerald as they, ever so smoothly, brush each song with its own caress.

And Oscar Petersen or Martha Argerich charming the piano into doing what even the piano doesn't know it can do!

Then there are the violinists and orchestras who bring Mozart or Bach into our living rooms.

Not forgetting the wordsmiths whose novels, poems, or short stories compel us to read more…

It comes down to the skills and habits honed by years of daily practice. That is why it appears straightforward, natural, as if anyone could do it. It is perhaps best summed up by the Roman poet Ovid when he said, 'The art of art is to conceal its art.'

It is the same with *A Gift for Living* and walking with Jesus. It's an art. It requires skills or 'competencies' (to use the language of management) that have been practiced and refined so that they become second nature. But it doesn't strut about or hog the centre-stage.

This (and subsequent chapters) look at the skills or virtues involved in maintaining and developing the gift of divine love, our friendship with God; how to grow in grace and be divinely graceful.

A SHARED LIFE

Recall Edward Vacek's phrase, 'We and God form a community'? God's love for us, received by us, means that we share a common life. The life is that of the three persons of the Trinity. Two things come from that.

First, we are *radically transformed* through the Holy Spirit. This embraces those human capacities that make us unique in creation—to know, to love, and to choose. Because we possess these powers we are created 'in God's image'. Participating in God's life changes the way we know, appreciate, desire, respond, love, judge, and act. We are enabled to do these things with God's eyes, God's mind, and God's heart (more on this in chapter ten).

Second, this new life is like a *seed*. It has to develop gradually. Living beings grow through the momentum and force of the life built into them. That is how nature works.

When it comes to living the gift, the drive that comes from our shared life with God takes the shape of the virtues. These are the habits accompanying the new life. They do not come fully blown. They need to be cultivated. Here, we'll look at those skills of 'grace' at the centre of God's friendship with us.

THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

In sharing a life with God, the 'building block' virtues we receive are those concerned with God. 'God loves us' is a gift but one we choose to receive. The mystery is that, we must remember that, for us to say 'yes' to God, God has to give us the 'yes' for us to be able say it!! It is just beyond us.

Why? It is because God's life, as we have seen, is essentially a *gift.* Persons (you and I) can only share their inner lives, their deepest selves, because we *choose* to do so. As we saw earlier, can we demand, even force someone else to love us? To share and reveal their deepest selves to us? Of course not.

It is the same with God. God shares the divine life. We can't earn it, demand it, or evolve towards it. It can only be given. It is a 'grace'. God's loving bubbles over and opens up the divine inner world to us. This is God who is gracious. And we can only say yes to that grace because God is with us, empowering us, 'gracing' us to say 'yes'.

This 'yes' is captured in the biblical understanding of faith as living faith which embraces hope in God's promises and is expressed in love. In virtue-language we are talking about faith, hope, and charity. These are the divinely-given habits whose focus is the God whose family life we share.

FAITH

Faith is my ability (God's gift) to believe in (trust) God and to believe God (in revealing the innermost secrets of God). Faith is a mix of mind and heart. Perhaps there has, in the past, been too much emphasis on faith as *what* we believe (truths, the intellectual side). Living faith is to believe *in* God, trusting and relying on God as always reliable, always faithful (the personal or heart aspect).

This is the God of the Scriptures—always faithful, always there, who never forgets his people. With Jesus, it is now God our friend on whom we can always rely. Again, if we go back to 'God loves us' as our place to start, it reminds us that believing in God means trusting that God, as any friend, loves me and accepts me as I am. All God asks is that I be open to that gift, to allow God to work in me so that together we create my best self—the common aim of the friendship.

HOPE

In many ways, faith concerns something or rather someone we have now. Hope is partly about the future. It is the gift of believing *in* the God who will be faithful and bring his promises to fulfillment. It looks to the complete realization of the *mysterion* or God's plan revealed and enacted in Jesus.

Hope is also about the grace to keep going when things look at their worst. The tragedies when God does not seem to be there. When we can't pray. Those times when we seem to hit a brick wall. When the risen Jesus our friend seems out of sight and beyond our reach. When, with the two travellers on the road to Emmaus, we feel the urge to walk away from Jerusalem (and Jesus) because our hopes have been dashed.

They are the sorts of things Paul writes about in Chapter 8 of *Romans*. He sees them as part of a bigger picture where creation is groaning, straining in hope, in an act of giving birth. When we cannot pray, are lost for words, and all we have is the desire to do so, then the gift of hope sustains us.

Through hope, we hang in there. We try to stick with the friendship. When we are conscious of our limits, our weakness, there is, then, *more room for God to work*. God will always be faithful. We are part of something much bigger. Our prayer is taken up into that of the Holy Spirit.

CHARITY

God loves us and we accept the gift. So, it is only natural that a key skill we receive is that of loving. Charity or love is the core of all the virtues and of our shared life in God. This is true in three ways.

First, the three persons make their *dwelling place* in us. This comes about through the action of the Holy Spirit. Our desires and our affective life are transformed by the Holy Spirit. The quality that emerges from this is the gift or virtue of charity.

Second, it is love that animates our friendship with God. It keeps it alive. In thriving, it gradually permeates our lives. The more loving we are, the more intense our loving becomes. In other words, it *soaks* through to every level of our being so that God lives in us and we live in God. We slowly grow in the likeness of Jesus.

For our third point we turn to a story. Some years ago, there was a talk on the BBC by William Hewitt, an English Jesuit. His topic was a ten day fast he had done. He started his talk with 'I am thinking of fasting'. He then proceeded to list about ten reasons for undertaking the fast: it was a new experience; it was good for his 'soul'; to identify with the starving; to lose weight; to experience, as had many others, a sensitizing of the Spirit to God's presence, plus half a dozen others.

Hewitt had a whole range of reasons for doing the fast. And it is no different for us. In our lives, we do things often from a mixture of motives. Sometimes we are torn between them. We are complex beings, and that is true of what motivates us and of the way we make choices.

James Keenan makes a very helpful point in this regard. Charity is primarily about us and God. It guides us about what is central in our lives. It is charity that is God's gift by which we are enabled to integrate our *many motivations* and to discern what is *most important* to us.[11]

CONCLUSION

'What do I love when I love my God?' asked Augustine. That question explains the importance of the three foundational theological virtues and the first three commandments. If God is the centre of our lives, we have our magnetic north.

Like Joe…remember?

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FOR REFLECTION

- Think of three or four ways in which your faith has been strengthened throughout your life.
- Jot down times when hope in God has kept you going. What did you learn? How did you change?
- 'What do I love when I love my God?' What is your response to that question?

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[11] James F Keenan, SJ, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians* ([Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 1999], 50.

CHAPTER 7

CARDINAL VIRTUES:

GIFTS FOR ACTION IN OUR RELATIONSHIPS

The theological virtues centre on God (*theos*). We need to consider virtues concerned with our relationships with others, traditionally known as the 'cardinal' virtues. The word 'cardinal' comes from the Latin word *cardo* = a hinge.

It is on these four virtues that the rest of the Christian life hangs in terms of our relationships with other people. With the theological virtues, they open the door giving access to the moral world: our *perception* (noticing what matters or is relevant); our *dispositions* (guiding how we should respond); *identity* (about who we are and seek to become).[12]

A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

The four traditional cardinal virtues are prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice. In the past, the focus of these virtues tended to emphasize the person as an individual. They guide us in finding balance and in growing as a Christian. They also find parallels in eastern ethical traditions, such as in Mencius and Confucius.

A recent interpretation broadens their scope. James Keenan sees these virtues as belonging primarily to the context of our relationships. They entail practices that nourish our relationships while developing as individual Christians in the process.

Keenan's approach is basically this. Imagine yourself at the centre of four concentric circles in relation to the four virtues in the order given above.

- The first (innermost)] circle (or axis) is the area of prudence—which reaches out across the other circles and guides our judgments in our acts and all our relationships;
- The second circle concerns oneself—the virtue of self-care, my relationship to myself;
- The third circle includes those to whom I am more closely related by family ties or commitment—the virtue of fidelity;
- Finally, the outer circle embraces my relationships to people in general. Justice demands that we treat everyone equally.

If I wish to be a friend of God and a truly moral human being it is as someone who loves God and others by being prudent, self-caring, faithful, and just. Keenan observes that these are not the only virtues, and not the only 'cardinal' or 'hinge' virtues. He suggests that relationality calls for an emerging emphasis on belonging and inclusion (of the poor or marginalised), hence,

[12] See William C Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 1992), 2

on virtues such as mercy and hospitality and, we could add, care. Twenty-five years on since Keenan's proposal, one could include solidarity, and its increasing urgency in today's world, especially with those whose lives are precarious and vulnerable.

We consider, now, some thoughts on prudence followed by chapters on self-care and justice.[13]

PRUDENCE

Again, we have a problem with language. The English word 'prudence' easily suggests 'prude' which is described in the dictionary as a 'person of extreme (esp. affected) propriety in conduct or speech'.

The word 'prudent' itself is defined as referring to a person or conduct 'careful to avoid undesired consequences; circumspect, discreet'. We can see that the emphasis is negative. It is really the virtue of 'you can't be too careful'!!

But the understanding of the word in the Greek and Scriptural traditions is much richer and more positive. It is the virtue whereby a person judges rightly about whether actions are right or wrong in a particular situation.

It is the habit of being wise and making wise judgments. It is as much about being creative and imaginative as about being discriminating and careful.

Prudence, as the virtue of judging wisely, is very important. All the other virtues depend on it. It is the skill that enables us to know what to do in order to be just, faithful, and self-caring in this or that situation. It is about responsible decision-making.

'Providence' and 'prudence' have the same origin in Latin. God's providence is a type of divine prudence directing things carefully and wisely to their goal and realizing the divine purpose for all of creation.

Everything is under God's providence but humans achieve their destiny by self-direction, namely, by making personal choices. As *Gaudium et Spes* notes, it is precisely here that we see an 'exceptional' sign of God's image in us. In exercising the virtue of prudence, we share in God's providence. We are God's stewards. We and God cooperate. In other words, God trusts us.

It is the virtue that enables me to weigh things up when I have a conflict of duties or of motives. How can I balance family, personal needs, and work? What takes priority and when? Charity gives life but it is prudence that guides our judgments. And we cannot make good decisions and choices without right judgments even if, at times, we make honest mistakes.

[13] Part of a chapter will deal with fidelity/courage in the second half of this book.

Prudence is also something we use all the time, often without being aware of it. Take a simple example. Buying Christmas presents. Some families I know (often larger ones) do not give a Christmas present to every other family member.

Instead, they draw names out of a hat, and one person gives one present to another member of the family. The understanding is that there is an upper limit on how much each person spends on the one gift.

In that situation, I can imagine myself more motivated to choose a present carefully. I will consider the person, their needs, likes and dislikes. I will weigh up whether or not the person would appreciate and get pleasure from this or that gift.

It requires imagination. Some presents would be 'right' for one person but not another. It's the skill of arriving at the best 'fit' between gift and person. It is exercising the skill of prudence.

IT'S ABOUT SPECIFICS…

A *Gift for living* is ultimately about what is concrete and particular. In a talk or homily, I sometimes make the following (overstated) comment to make a point.

'There's no such thing as truth. No such thing as love. Ever see truth and love walking around? There is only *this* particular thing or statement that is true. Or I meet this *person* who is loving and truthful. Or I see *this* act that is loving ("I'll take her shopping"), or this particular loving attitude ("these new neighbours must feel a bit out of it. Let's ask them over for a beer")'.

It's what Alexander Pope was getting at. He said he had no trouble loving humanity in general. The problem came in loving Jack and Jill and Mary.

Life (and God) are ultimately found in specifics rather than in the abstract. It is about verbs rather than nouns; doing rather than thinking. 'When did we see you hungry, or thirsty…?'

That's why we have the Ten Commandments. They are God's gift instructing and guiding us on how to share in Divine providence in our behaviour.

Recall the *Wheel of Change* in an earlier chapter. Getting on that *Wheel* is prompted by prudence. In what specific areas do I need to change my attitudes, my behaviour, or my language? For example, how do I really view Asians or refugees or those who are disabled? How do I treat or speak about them? Is there a noticeable difference between what I say to their face and behind their back?

In his *Virtues for Ordinary Christians*, James Keenan makes helpful suggestions about the workings of prudence. How can I imagine situations differently? How can I anticipate and plan ahead? That will mean I require insight into myself, into my strengths and my limits.[14]

I also need skill in finding a balance between extremes. Virtues lie somewhere in the middle— between fear and recklessness, being stingy and being wasteful, caring and indifference, biased and naive. They are about keeping a balance.

A REASONABLE GOD

Finally, in this context we should keep in mind that, in all our judgments and decisions, God asks of us our reasonable best. Not the ideal best, but what I am capable of now, given who I am and where I am in my life. Our model is found in Mark's Gospel 12: 41-44. Jesus praises the widow in the Temple for her 'best', done with a devoted and generous heart.

All this assumes our good-will in being receptive to God's grace. We need to keep open the channels of communication in our friendship with God. Otherwise, our judgments from prudence will lack life and direction. The hinges will squeak and catch if they are not lubricated by prayer.

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FOR REFLECTION

- Think of an occasion in your life when you felt torn between two alternatives about what to do. How did you resolve it? Why did you act in that way?

- Jot down a couple of instances in the past month when, with two different people, you had to weigh up each person's needs and respond to them. What was different in how you handled each situation?

- Read Mark 12: 41-44. What did you hear in the passage? What was Jesus teaching you? How did it affect you?

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[14] James F Keenan SJ, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians* (Sheed & Ward, 1999), 77-81. See also his *Commandments of Compassion* (Sheed & Ward, 1999).

CHAPTER 8

'… AND THAT RUINS EVERYTHING': SELF-CARE

We can start with three quotes and a question.

The lady who said 'Everywhere I go I have to take myself along and that ruins everything'.

CS Lewis' wrote of the Christian who went around doing good for others. 'You could tell the others by their hunted look'.

Jesus said 'love your neighbour as yourself'. What Jesus says is not new. It reclaims the words of the Book of Leviticus.

Still, why do 'self-love' or 'self-care' seem to suggest 'selfish' or 'self-centred'?

Worth talking about…

SELF-CARE AS A VIRTUE

A surprising heading— 'self-care as a virtue'. Let's think about it.

In one way, the call to 'love your neighbour as yourself' is not particularly 'religious'. It's plain common sense. Further, like the Ten Commandments, it is meant to make us human, not angels.

How can I love others if I feel I'm missing a self to love them with? Like the lady with the 'me' she has to take along that she thinks 'ruins everything'.

How can I care about others if I feel I am not worth caring about by me?

How can I give myself to another if I feel I don't have a self (or something of myself) to give? How can I judge wisely or be faithful and just?

Then, if God loves me and I'm loveable, doesn't that make any difference at all? God thinks I am worth caring about even (dare one say it?) by me…

SELF-ESTEEM

Modern psychology has clarified the 'as yourself' of Leviticus (and Jesus' own experience). The building blocks of the self are in self-esteem. This is not how I see myself and how other people see me, i.e., my self-image (of course, they are interconnected).

Self-esteem is about self-worth, how I *feel* about myself as worthwhile and lovable. It is the sum of feelings and attitudes to the self, of approval or disapproval and the extent to which a person believes oneself capable, significant, worthy, or successful.

Its origins are in infancy. It emerges as the long-term appreciation of the self that underpins my identity and attitude to myself (and others).

My self-esteem enables me to have a sense of being '*a self*'. It shapes my attitudes, behaviour, and language. I am able to trust and enter into relationships with others, God and, naturally, myself.

We can have an average reservoir of self-esteem yet can still hesitate. It is captured in the title of John Powell's book *Why I am afraid to tell you who I am.* The suggested reason is captured in a phrase in the book 'because you may not like me and I'm all I've got'.

What happens with someone like the lady who has to take herself everywhere and 'that ruins everything'? If this is a persistent attitude and pattern, this person has low self-esteem. One will not trust people (or oneself). In fact, we will tend to build ourselves up at others' expense. Or get fearful, as in Anthony de Mello's story:

> A Teacher observed that one of the little boys in her class was quiet and withdrawn.
> 'What are you worried about?'
> 'My parents. Dad works all day to keep me clothed and fed and sent to the best school in town. And he's working overtime to be able to send me to college. Mum spends the day cooking, cleaning, ironing, and shopping so I have nothing to worry about'.
> 'Why are you worried then?'
> 'I'm afraid they might try to escape'.[15]

Lack of trust and fear will lead to a pattern of not being able to get on with others. One suspects, too, that the people who felt 'hunted' by the local parishioner above were sensing that the 'doing good' was more for her sake than theirs.

GROWING IN THE VIRTUE OF SELF-CARE

Self-esteem is the foundation of self-care. Our primordial feelings of being loveable and worthwhile are the psychological underpinnings of following Jesus in God's *Gift for Living.*

But God's friendship brings with it an ability that interlaces with the human gift of self-esteem. It needs to be cultivated. Hence, we say self-care as a virtue.

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[15] Anthony de Mello, *The Prayer of the Frog*, Vol. 1 (Anand, India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1989), 216. https://z-lib.io/book/17224458

In nourishing that gift, we have (and need) God on our side. Prayer is central. It marks the difference between living God's gift, a good human life, and the idea that if I am OK psychologically, I'm OK!

So, we pray, with Paul, through the power of God's Spirit 'for (our) hidden self to grow strong' (Eph. 3:16). We develop in this and other virtues since 'We and God cooperate'.

WHAT ARE SOME SIGNS OF PROGRESS IN THE VIRTUE OF SELF-CARE?

First, being-at-peace with myself becomes more persistent in my life. One indication is in how I handle compliments. Do I brush them aside or deny them? Or just say 'thank you for saying that.' That is humility.

Second, I am able to have sympathy for myself. I can accept my own weaknesses and limitations. I can be realistic in attending to my own needs.

Can I say 'No?' Progress in self-care will mean that I can express this without lingering feelings of guilt. 'I think I'll give that a miss today'. 'That may be a bit beyond me just at present'.

Third, basic self-esteem is not the same as having it 'all together'—as they say. I appreciate that I (with everyone else) am *scarred* in various ways. These come from our childhood, from life, in hurts, losses, disappointments, failures. Hopefully, they do not overwhelm me. I can even see that they have helped to make me who I am.

Fourth, I am more aware of the ways I am *scared*, of the fears and anxieties I may carry with me. We try to ease these fears. Or we try to make up for feeling inadequate in certain situations.

It has been suggested that most sin has its roots in fear. We use others, money, sex, ambition, or reputation to dull our fears, to keep control and build up a low or threatened sense of my own worth.

We'll find that, as we move forward in walking with Jesus and living God's gift, we are less prone to give into those fears and play those sorts of games.

Fifth, we'll be more at peace with the limits of our relationships. For example, we can see this in the difference between forgiveness and healing. I may have been deeply hurt by someone. I made the *decision* to forgive that person (and renewed it seventy times seven times!).

The *healing* of the hurt has taken much longer. Once it used to be red raw. Now it is a scar that I can touch and remember with slight sadness. I have been able to let the hurt go and not carry it around with me to feed my resentment.

Perhaps, the other person was never able or willing to acknowledge their actions. So, we were not really reconciled. I've done my best. I can accept that the relationship will never be the same. I am at peace with that.

Finally, I realize that however much I and others are wounded, even damaged, we are not permanently crippled with a self that 'ruins everything'. Jesus can bind up our hurts because 'by his wounds we are healed'.

It may not be a complete cure. But it can be the divine healing that enables us to rise above, even be strengthened by, our wounds. We can walk, perhaps with a limp, and with a realistic acceptance of ourselves.

BACK TO WHERE WE BEGAN

Are self-love or self-care the same as 'selfish' or 'self-centred'?

Of course, they can be. I can make myself the centre of the universe. But I can feel I have no place in that same universe—which is just as unhealthy.

Our Catholic past often suffered from a distorted approach to self-denial. It resembled self-loathing and led to a mistaken understanding of humility.

Alternatively, today's world may well be obsessed with self-esteem and self-affirmation (remember Miss Piggy's *moi*?). We can easily become blind to our limits, our weaknesses, and particularly, to the evil in our hearts. Lies and self-deception are alive and well (not just 'out there' in politics and business!).

And so back to the start. It is to see ourselves as God sees and loves us. We are loved into being and into becoming our deepest and truest selves. Growing in love, as in the virtue of self-care, brings us closer to God and closer to ourselves.

To our *real* selves.

> 'What is REAL?' asked the Rabbit one day. 'Real isn't how you are made,' said the Skin Horse. 'It's a thing that happens to you'.
>
> 'When a child loves you for a long, long time not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real'. [16]

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FOR REFLECTION

[16] Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Velveteen_Rabbit, 2. Accessed August 25, 2024.

- Can you see yourself in parts of this article?
- Jot down three ways in which you are more at home with yourself than in the past.
- Think of occasions Jesus cared for his own needs in the Gospel.
- Check the website above for *The Velveteen Rabbit* if you have not read it.

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CHAPTER 9

SHARING IN CHRIST'S SEARCH FOR JUSTICE

'We and God cooperate'. Our discussions about this have basically concerned our personal relationship with God and how this influences our other relationships.

But what about working hand-in-hand with God to create a better world? What of our call to 'redeem' the world with Jesus?

This raises the matter of justice. Justice is the virtue by which we give to each person what is their due. It entails the right of every human being to share in the benefits and blessings of this world.

It underlines every person's right to have what is needed to live a basic human life. It raises questions about peace, employment, food, freedom—those things we put under the heading of 'human dignity'. It is the pervading theme of the Last Judgement scene in Matt 25: 31-46.

What place do those considerations have as we consider sharing in Christ's mission through living God's gift?

GOD'S REIGN

It is important that we clarify something. God's Reign (or God's Kingdom) has, as its stage, the world. We tended for too long to identify it with the Church; that the Church and the Kingdom of God are the same thing.

But we realize, with Vatican II, that the mystery of God's plan is much broader than that. God's Kingdom is far bigger than the Church. The Church is central in that it is the sign and instrument of God's Reign. It points to, and helps bring about, God's loving action in the world. The Church is the community that should embody in its life and behaviour what God's Reign should be. We are only too aware of its gross and damaging failures in, for instance, the sexual abuse crisis.

So, the setting for the *Gift for Living*, even for a Catholic Christian, is not principally the Church. It is in the world that we are called as members of the Church to live out the axiom 'we and God cooperate'.

Secondly, we know that God loved the world so much that he sent his own Son into our midst to bring us salvation and life. It is God who, in Jesus, reconciled the world to himself and has given us the ministry of reconciliation…. 'so we are ambassadors for Christ' (2 Cor 5: 19-20).

This is another aspect of what we have already seen. We share, through the virtue of 'judging wisely' (prudence) in God's providence. In that way, we cooperate with God. We are called, in Genesis, to be stewards of the earth, sharing in the creative power of God.

Hence, 'we cooperate with God' is at the heart of friendship with God, of living the divine gift, of walking with Jesus. But if God loves the world, he must have a vision for that world. It must somehow embody those values and attitudes that are integral to the fulfillment of God's plan. They are the qualities accompanying reconciliation: justice, harmony, equality, peace.

As Christians, cooperating with God means concern for, action towards, bringing about such a world, the sphere of social justice. Which brings us to a question.

DID KARL MARX HAVE A POINT?

We have all heard the phrase of Karl Marx that 'religion is the opium of the people'. Marx was a philosopher and an atheist in the nineteenth century whose thought formed the basis of Communism.

The way this phrase has been presented is that Marx rejected religion because it was no more than a drug. It deadened people to the reality of their plight (economic privation in particular). Its role was to lead people to the next life rather than being involved in this present world.

It might help to consider what Marx actually wrote. Here is the relevant section:

> Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. [17]

Marx sees religion as a protest, but a limited one. It provides solace and hope for people, like a drug taken to ease pain. It may well be that Marx betrays some sympathy towards religion in that it tries to become society's 'heart'? Marx is really critical of society because it has become heartless. His concern is less the symptom (religion) but more the underlying cause of the pain, namely, of economic and social suffering.

TRUE RELIGION

If religion, namely, the Christian Churches of Marx's time, seemed to have no desire or interest in making this world a better place, then Marx had a point. When religion suppresses its prophetic voice, it can anaesthetize us to reality—the only place where God can be found.

There is something very wrong when, in the name of religion, we ignore or neglect people who are suffering. That includes hunger, unjust working conditions, inadequate housing, basic

[17] Is Religion the Opium of the People? | What's On Reading (whatsonreading.com) Accessed Aug 24, 2024

illiteracy, discrimination (in all its forms). It is not true religion. It is certainly not the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Christians and the Christian Churches should ask questions, act for justice for those unjustly treated and fight for the basic human rights of human beings everywhere.

Perhaps we can better understand the importance of Leo XIII's encyclical in 1891 *Rerum Novarum.* It was the Church's first significant statement about economic and social issues in the modern era. It was, in many ways, a reply to Marx—while learning something from him and others.

The tradition of teaching and concern for social justice have continued right through to the present day. It is characteristic of Popes St. John XXIII, St. Paul VI, St. John Paul II, Benedict XVI and continued by Pope Francis (discussed in a later chapter). If the Church is radical in any area, this is certainly one of them.

GROUNDS FOR HOPE

As this topic may make us aware of some of the massive problems confronting our world today, one could consider three things that sustain our hope.

First, there is no culture, situation, social or historical circumstance that is beyond the breath of the Spirit of God. Many may say 'we don't believe in God' but God continues to believe in us and to love us. Jesus, in his death, broke *all* barriers and obstacles to love and life.

Second, Veronica Brady points out that, in an age which changes so quickly, it is tempting to desire and design a God who suits us. This is the God who answers our need for security. This may be the God who gives his blessing to what we like and rejects what we dislike.

But is this the God revealed in Jesus? Is this, in the words of Blaise Pascal 'Christ in agony until the end of time' who has thrown in his lot with human history? We are reminded that we may feel lost and disappointed with our world 'but God loves it still and shows himself still within it, revealing its divine possibilities and continuing to work in it and with it'.[18]

Third, have you ever sat down and read slowly the Preface to *Eucharistic Prayer of Reconciliation II*? It is really the Eucharistic Prayer for this third millennium with a vision of the world of God's plan. We pray to our God in terms of belief in the Divine Spirit of Jesus at work in saving the world: 'that enemies speak to each other again, adversaries join hands and peoples seek to meet together…that hatred is overcome by love, revenge gives way to forgiveness, and discord is changed to mutual respect'.

A PRIVATE CHRISTIAN?

[18] Veronica Brady, 'Postmodernism and the Spiritual Life', *The Way*, 36, no. 3 (1996), 180.

Is there such a thing?

For an answer, we are guided by Gerard W Hughes SJ:

> The mark of a healthy spirituality is that the person is seized by the tenderness and compassion of God for all his creatures. A sign of any unhealthy spirituality is a dichotomy between prayer and life, the natural and the supernatural, body and spirit, often characterized by a greater preoccupation with the devil and with evil than with the love and goodness of God, coupled with a curious inability of people to see the evil in the social, economic, and political systems they so often support. [19]

From what you have read so far in this book (and from your own experience), what do you think?

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FOR REFLECTION

- Jot down three current situations in your area or country you consider are unjust.
- Have you ever written to your local member about an issue that concerns you?
- Do you think Catholics are more or less socially active these days about issues of Social justice? Can ordinary citizens actually change things?
- Sometimes politicians or commentators say that Church leaders should keep their preaching to the pulpit and not be involved in social, economic, and political issues. What is your reaction to that?

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[19] I have seen this cited many times but have no record of its original source. I think it was *The Tablet.*

CHAPTER 10

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT MAKE?

Those of us of a certain age might recall Convent primary school days and the time put aside for the 'Catechism class'. Lots of rote learning, done aloud with Sister leading, in conductor mode.

Those were the days when we would have referred to 'the gifts of the Holy Ghost'. In class-unison, listing them with a two-beats-in-the-bar rhythm and a final descending coda: 'wisdom/understanding, counsel//fortitude, knowledge/piety, and fear-of-the-Lord'. Remember? [20]

The general understanding was that the gifts were particularly associated with Sacrament of Confirmation. They were given after Baptism, a type of high-octane divine energy that helped us move into a level of spiritual overdrive.

But we have come to appreciate that the gifts (now 'of Holy Spirit') are included in the initial share in God's life, in the grace of Baptism (and deepened in Confirmation). The gifts sustain the spiritual and moral life of a Christian in that they 'complete and perfect the virtues of those who receive them' and make a believer 'docile in readily obeying divine inspirations'.[21]

We can pursue this further with specific reference to the gift of wisdom.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE GIFT OF WISDOM

As noted above, the gifts are seven modes of virtuous dispositions inherent in our sharing in the divine life.[22] We are helped, through the Holy Spirit, to see, appreciate, be moved, and respond in the way that God does, hence, we exercise the *Gift for Living* through the workings of conscience.[23]

We need to clarify something here. Virtues and the gifts are part of the gift of grace. They are under the action of the Holy Spirit as infused habits (attitudes and dispositions) orienting a person to God and a supernatural destiny. Hence, we are talking about sharing a Gift and walking a path (with Jesus) as a spiritual/ moral process. Importantly, for Aquinas: 'virtue is a

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[20] The other memory was the Act of Contrition which started' O my God I am heartily sorry…'. I think many of us thought it was 'O my God, I am hardly sorry…' And the Lord smiled/smiles?...

[21] *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (NSW: St. Pauls, 1994), 450.

[22] Traditionally, these are listed as seven gifts: four that enhance a) our intellectual capacities— wisdom, understanding, counsel, knowledge; and three for b) our affective abilities—fortitude, piety, and fear of the Lord.

[23] In the following paragraphs I draw on my earlier discussion in *The Eyes and Ears of Conscience: Lessons of Encouragement* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2022), 214-218.

good quality of mind, by which we live righteously and which no one uses badly and which God works in us, without us'.[24] 'Without us' is not in the sense that we are not free; rather, that virtue and its exercise, is primarily an action of God with which we cooperate. A gift for living.

Living a virtuous life (guided by conscience) is less what I do but rather God at work in us, through us and, importantly, with us, hence, a partnership. The analogy used here is the movement of a boat. When the emphasis is on our effort (as in the usual sense of the virtues), it is similar to using oars to propel the vessel. Alternatively, the more God is at work resembles putting up a sail for the wind (here, of the Spirit) to give the boat its forward momentum (and quietly guiding the human hands on the rudder and in trimming the sails).

Further, this Spirit-driven form of virtue (the gifts) engages the activities of our reason (mind, heart, and will) but not in a step-by-step rational manner. Rather, it all happens in a way that resembles 'doin' what comes natur'lly' (as the Irving Berlin song goes); as if from second nature, instinctive, an immediate grasp of what is true and good and done with a certain ease (captured in the word 'connatural'). It is a type of emotional intelligence about the things of God.

The gift most important here, then, is the gift of wisdom, the Spirit-guided skill in making wise judgments (a graced mode of prudence), one captured in the metaphor of taste. In these human activities enlivened by divine grace, we have the counsel of Jesus to help us since he is, as Thomas Aquinas sums up so beautifully, 'our wisest and dearest friend'.[25]

But there is another aspect in all this. It concerns the way in which the Holy Spirit works between friends or where there exists an affective bond and a common mind. We are helped here by contemporary studies in social cognition.

For instance, consider a parent playing a game with a child. There is an affective attachment between them, one that is two-way—they can identify with one another and can be moved emotionally by each other. Within such a 'two-sided' relationship there can arise what is known as 'joint attention'. Mother and child can simultaneously have their attention fixed on some third object or state of affairs (such as playing a game). The reciprocal nature of their mutual bond means that attitudes and responses to the game can be shared in a way that is direct and intuitive. This offers an insight into the action of grace and the 'sharing of minds' between God and each of us. The gifts of the Holy Spirit dispose a person to be attuned to, and to follow, the divine impulse or instinct of the Holy Spirit.[26]

In the dynamism of friendship, the beloved becomes the guiding standard of the lover. Through affective union, what our friend wants will appear fitting and 'connatural' to us. Sharing God's life is through the gift of the theological and infused virtues (especially faith,

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[24] *Summa Theologica* 1.2.55.4.

[25] *Summa Theologica* 1.2.108, 4.

[26] See Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-person perspective in Aquinas' ethics: Virtues and gifts* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2010), 75-6.

hope, and charity). As a 'Gift Shared', it is a mode of inter-personal union that can entail a shared stance towards the situations requiring joint attention (as with mother and child).

Here, the issue is not in what we know (so as to make a judgment of prudence to guide conscience). Rather, it is the manner in which we are moved (or not) by what or whom we know. The virtue of love means that 'one loves with the beloved what the beloved loves'. [27] With the gifts, one is moved by a second person, namely, God, within a second personal relationship. It is a joint or 'mutually moved' activity through sharing in the *attitudes* and action of our divine friend.

Consider the gift of wisdom: it involves, a 'sympathy' for the divine. In being part of the divine life, through grace, there is a shared 'stance' from which comes an intuitive judgment. In relation to a common object, event, or state of affairs, it is a 'sure estimation that something ought to be adhered to' and that one should withdraw from its opposite. This evaluation stimulates the will—to desire to choose and act—guided by a shared attitude.[28] In other words, a person is moved by the Spirit to taste with the divine taste what is the right (and Godlike) thing to do.

But there is a final and important aspect to all this—our next concern.

NOURISHING THE *GIFT FOR LIVING:* PRAYER

Consider the words, 'choose life…hold fast to him…' (Deut 30:20). To walk with Jesus and remain supple to the Spirit's movements, we must nourish our relationship with God from the core of the deepest self. From within this sacred space, we find the life-giving source to guide us in our judgments.

This is aligned with the guidance of St. Augustine: 'Because I am human, therefore I am weak. Because I am weak therefore I pray'. In citing this text, Michael Casey underlines that one of the fruits of self-knowledge is our increasing dependence on God:

> We have (finally) become convinced of the precariousness of our virtue and the ease with which we could fall away, our faith generates a heartfelt appeal to God for help that extends itself over our past, our present, and our future.[29]

Prayer is needed, then, since, at times, each of us can be tone-deaf or just stubbornly resistant to the Spirit's promptings. Living the divine gift, the moral life at work through conscience and the virtues, must be interwoven with prayer (spirituality and devotion).

Intimacy with God brings what we saw earlier— the loving knowledge that is 'connatural', or second nature. In other words, this is the gift of wisdom flowering in our judgments as a

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[27] Pinsent, *The Second-person perspective*, 71.

[28] Pinsent, *The Second-person perspective*, 40 citing Eleonore Stump, 'The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas's Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions', *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no.1, (2011): 29-43, at 41.

[29] Michael Casey, OCSO, *Grace: On the Journey to God* (Strathfield NSW: St Paul's Publications, 2018), 85.

share in the divine taste. This highlights how important it is to put aside five or ten minutes once to twice a day to make room for God—to stop, look and listen, to waste time with a good friend., to nourish the gift for living. [30]

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FOR REFLECTION

- What aspect or thought in this chapter particularly struck you?
- How would 'our wisest and dearest friend' and God apply in your case?
- Can you think of moments when the idea of 'joint attention' with the Holy Spirit was present in the way you handled a particular situation?
- 'What is the Lord saying to me' by the end of this chapter?

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[30] See https:/www.ignatianspirituality.com/The Awareness Prayer - Ignatian Spirituality, accessed 28 January, 2021.

PART TWO

THE GIFT AT WORK

CHAPTER 11

MARY: MODEL OF GIFT RECEIVED AND OF SHARING IN CHRIST'S MISSION

The considerations of this book revolve around the Gift Received and the Gift at Work: of sharing in and living out Christ's mission. In what way can we look to Mary in the light of the overall thrust and themes of this book?

I would like to focus on three 'moments' of the Spirit's action from the Gospel of Luke: two concerning Mary; receiving the gift (Annunciation) and the gift at work (Visitation); one in relation to Jesus as he inaugurates his public ministry. Before engaging these texts, a brief explanation is offered for a way of approaching and understanding the Annunciation scene in Luke 1: 26-38 and also the other two scenes. Further, such an approach guides the discussion in subsequent chapters in this book.

AN INTERPRETATIVE WINDOW

In his recent book, James Keenan presents the underpinnings for contemporary ethics. He does so with Christian references, e.g., the parable of the Good Samaritan, that could resonate with many people whether secular or religious. Keenan argues that vulnerability is not primarily about our proneness to being hurt or wounded. It is, essentially, the human capacity to be moved, namely, *affective receptivity*—foundational for recognising and responding to others. Conscience guides the actions of the person once they are moved to recognise others. Keenan then proceeds to apply this model within a Christian framework of discipleship with Jesus through the practice of the virtues.[31]

The Annunciation scene (and its dialogical structure) is particularly amenable to being interpreted by using such a model—the interplay of being receptive, being moved, recognising, and responding.

GIFT RECEIVED

If we consider this Annunciation scene as a story, its narrative thrust is between two moments: the first of recognition in v. 28 'rejoice so highly favoured! The Lord is with you'; the second of response: 'I am the handmaid of the Lord…let what you said be done to me' (v. 28). In between, we find implied Mary's recognition of God and of her being receptive and moved to say 'yes' to God's invitation.

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[31] James F. Keenan, SJ, *The Moral Life: Eight Lectures* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2023). The next four chapters of his book offer a pathway for a distinctively Catholic Christian approach to the moral life at the personal and social levels, one centred on discipleship exercised in the virtues and the beatitudes.

The word ‘invitation’ is important. It captures the intervening verses and how they can be described as a process of discernment. Mary is disturbed—part puzzlement, part curiosity and part wonder. This leads her to ask questions. Not in any obstructive way. Rather she seeks to make a more informed judgment underlying her choice in saying ‘yes’: that it is God’s action through the Holy Spirit calling her to a unique task in the divine plan of salvation—to be the mother of the Saviour. Underlying her response of ‘yes’, is her receptive attitude to God’s desires for her and, implicitly, her recognition of God as God and of the divine purposes for her in that plan. In all this, the dialogue is one of a divine intervention in Mary’s life that is respectful of her freedom.

Within the forms of recognition that begin and end this scene, we find a process of discernment, a gathering of information so as to weigh, judge and decide. It captures what we saw in chapter seven about wise judgment in the virtue of prudence.

Yet, the role of the Holy Spirit in this scene suggests more (discussed earlier in chapter ten). In many ways, it can be viewed as dialogue engaged to arrive at a point of joint attention, of being moved *in tandem* by a common object or event, to a coming together and being of the same mind. The gift received by Mary enables the reciprocal nature of the mutual bond between her and God and the ‘sharing of minds’. While the joint attention is not, on the narrative account, ‘direct and intuitive’, we are offered an insight into the action of grace and the ‘sharing of minds’ between God and Mary and, also, each of us.

What is unique about this story is reflected in the dialogue between the angel Gabriel and Mary. As Wright points out, Luke (and Matthew) ‘are simply reporting that Jesus did not have a father in an ordinary way, and that this was because Mary had been given a special grace to be the mother of God’s incarnate self’. It is the Holy Spirit who will come upon Mary and enable her (as the Spirit always does) to ‘do and be more than she could be herself’. In all this, God himself ‘the creator, will surround her completely with his sovereign power’.[32]

As Wright continues, when God takes the initiative ‘it is always a matter of love, a love which will care for us and take us up into his saving purposes’. Mary, in that way, is

> the supreme example of what happens when God is at work by grace through human beings. God’s power from outside and the indwelling spirit within, together results in things being done which would have been unthinkable any other way.[33]

‘Let what you said be done to me’ captures Mary’s affective receptivity; a reflection of the first Beatitude at work in Mary as ‘poor in spirit’ (she admits her need and is receptive to God); as creating a space for God to work; as receiving a gift so as to, in turn, respond. In so doing, Mary is moved out of love and in a special way to share in the mission of her Son (and its costs, as she later stands at the foot of the cross).

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[32] Tom Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (UK: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 10.

[33] Wright, *Luke for Everyone,*11.

In all this, Mary is a model of faith in hearing the word of God and keeping it—the model of a true disciple. She joins 'the long line of women who have, in the course of Israel's history, faithfully served the purposes of God'. Further, she offers the first instance of an emerging constant pattern, namely, 'the generous response of those on the margins to the outreach of God's grace'.[34] This aspect of 'margins' brings us to the second 'moment'. The pattern of recognition and response will continue in the next scene—when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth.

THE GIFT AT WORK

The pattern of being affected/recognition/response continues when Mary visits her cousin Elizabeth (Luke 1: 39-56—take a few minutes to read this passage).

Here (and elsewhere in Acts), Luke uses a device of bringing together two individuals who have both had a religious experience they only 'partly understand'. Sharing their personal experience moves it to a community level and, in the process, 'finds full meaning'.[35]

This passage is a mini-drama of two women meeting, of being so affected (moved), they express mutual recognition and, then, each responds accordingly. Both women come to better appreciate how God has been (and is) working in their lives. As Byrne notes, 'the two women and the two stories have come together, and faith overflows in knowledge, testimony and celebration'.[36]

The hospitality they exchange reflects how they have been drawn into the hospitality of God, a gift and a task that is to continue in the community of Jesus (then and in the future).

In the opening of Mary's *Magnificat* canticle (Lk 1:46:56), the phrase 'lowly handmaid' sets the tone while underlining a key aspect. God's choice of her (a young girl from a remote village in Galilee) to be the mother of the Messiah is the start of a pattern of divine action recurring throughout the Gospel. God's focus (and preference) is not toward those at the centre of power: rather, it is one that favours those who are marginalized and lowly.

This is expressed more powerfully in vv. 51-53—scattering of the proud, the powerful dethroned, the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. This is the great reversal and shake up of values that is given more detail later in the Beatitudes (Lk 6: 20-26). In speaking of God as 'Saviour' (v. 47), then, Mary 'is paradigmatic for the poor and oppressed of all ages, especially women'.[37]

Such words lead to our final consideration: the Spirit at work in Mary's son, the Saviour.

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[34] Brendan Byrne, *The Hospitality of God: A Reading of Luke's Gospel* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2006), 24.

[35] Byrne, *The Hospitality of God,* 24.

[36] Byrne, *The Hospitality of God,* 25.

[37] Byrne, *The Hospitality of God,* 25.

HOLY SPIRIT AND JESUS: THE THRUST TOWARDS MISSION

Later in Luke's Gospel, when Jesus returns to Nazareth, we find him inaugurating his mission in the Synagogue. The scene revolves around the themes expressed by his mother earlier (as we saw above). We can listen as Jesus reads the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
> because he has anointed me
> to bring good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim release to captives
> and recovery of sight to the blind,
> to let the oppressed go free,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour (Lk 4: 18-19 (NRSV)

Jesus sat down; with all eyes fixed on him he proclaims:

> Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing (v. 21).

If we view this is a type of 'policy' statement, the focus is very clear: it is outwards, with the radiating and inclusive thrust of the Holy Spirit present and at work in Jesus (as earlier in Mary and Elizabeth). Further, it implies that the pattern of being affected/recognition/response is replicated in Jesus as he begins his ministry and persists throughout his mission. This brings us to a final consideration.

As we noted earlier in this chapter, it is conscience that guides the actions of a person once they are moved to recognise and respond to others.

Conscience is integral to our humanity in that we are created in the image and likeness of God. It is a *gift* of moral awareness through which we 'recognize opportunities for goodness, justice, compassion, and love but also to 'act on them'.[38] But it is also a *call* to moral responsibility through which we enhance goodness and love in our relationships and in the world around us. In so doing, we share in Christ's mission to enable God's reign to emerge.

The process of being affected, recognising, and responding revolves around conscience. We speak of 'dictates of conscience' and also 'pangs of conscience'. Guilt is an essential part of conscience and of our humanity. It is a warning flare that we have failed and, often, harmed another or others.

Further, in conscience we appreciate that 'we are bound by the truth as it really is…not as something we made up but as something that compels us'. As Keenan concludes: 'a well-

[38] Patricia Lamoureux and Paul Wadell, *Christian Moral Life: Faithful Discipleship for a Global Society* (NY: Maryknoll, Orbis, 2011), 147.

formed conscience teaches us in humility to allow truth to have its say and does it when we vulnerably recognize the other'. [39]

This is our cue, then, to see how that applies in our social and global context in the following chapters, namely, the gift for living involves sharing in the mission of Christ today.

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FOR REFLECTION

- Jot down the words, images, memories that first come to mind after reading this chapter.
- What sort of person is Mary for you? Did this chapter help to understand her better?
- Take your bible and read the scene about Jesus in the temple discussed above. The listeners we 'amazed' or 'astonished' at what Jesus says. Then what happens?
- Being affected by, recognising, and responding to the' other'. Does that pattern rings bells for you?

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[39] Keenan, SJ, *The Moral Life*, 72.

CHAPTER 12

THE AWAKENING CONSCIENCE

In the previous chapter, we spent time with Mary, Elizabeth, and Jesus. These three scenes are working examples of the pattern of being affected, of recognising and responding—to God and to others. The other character present and active in those events is the Holy Spirit.

In the incident in Luke's Gospel (19:1-10) where Zacchaeus meets Jesus, we have another example of someone allowing themselves to be led (moved, affected) but, now, by curiosity—with unexpected results. The event can be viewed as a play with two acts. We can follow the trail and see where it leads.

The first act introduces us to Zacchaeus: a man whose job as a tax collector places him on the fringes. He is socially and religiously on the outer. For all that, Zacchaeus is intrigued with what he hears about Jesus. He climbs a tree to get a better view of Jesus as he is passing through the town. Jesus catches sight of Zacchaeus above the crowd. Jesus himself then takes the initiative; he invites himself to Zacchaeus's house. He spends time with him which, as is implied, includes sharing a meal.

In all this, Jesus not only notices Zacchaeus and is affected in the process. Jesus also recognizes him, appreciates him as an individual. Importantly, Jesus is not hesitant to be associated with him in public. But he goes further. He responds by including Zacchaeus amongst those acceptable to God in Jesus' table fellowship. In other words, Zacchaeus is honoured in God's system of values. The honour and hospitality have a ripple effect—salvation comes Zacchaeus' entire household. At the same time, Jesus' public acknowledgement affects Zacchaeus' awareness of himself, which brings us to the second act.

As suggested earlier, Zacchaeus and the tax collectors in general were objects of hatred for other Jews. They were agents of the Roman authorities and other Gentiles, but also reputed to be dishonest. Zacchaeus, as the story intimates, was typical: he was into rorts—ripping off the public. In today's vernacular, he was using his position to get his 'snout in the trough', a suggestive (and not inappropriate) metaphor. He was prepared to compromise his Jewish identity since he was driven by greed (for money) whereas, earlier in Luke, the prodigal son did the same but was compelled by physical need (for food).

Zacchaeus' curiosity that led to his meeting with Jesus, then, was a spark fanned into a glow— of being accepted, recognised and of belonging. In other words, he experienced a form of religious conversion. This reverberated within Zacchaeus personally. The spark became a light, a beam of insight into himself.

His numbed conscience is now sensitized; it nudges him beyond the divine hospitality he has received and emerges as a moral conversion. From a life centred on self-satisfaction, he takes responsibility for his actions. He wakes up to himself; he starts to evaluate his

relationships with others in the light of rights and duties, recognises what that involves, and responds accordingly.

This is evident in his sense of remorse about his behaviour that becomes apparent when he is confronted by the onlookers. He feels compelled to make public amends for the money he has extorted from others (‘four times the amount’). His conscience is aroused about the injustice he has caused; he wants to put things right.

He is ready now, if not eager, to make reparation for the harm he has done. In a gesture of restorative justice in healing damaged relationships, he gives half his property to the poor. Further, he is not defined by his morally deviant behaviour and the expectations of others. His guilt is transformed into a repentant and, it would seem, lavish generosity—consistent with what he himself has received.

What else can be said about incident? Two things.

First, it illustrates someone turning to God out of a need, receptive to being accepted and loved. Once Zacchaeus is acknowledged and recognized by Jesus, he is free (and secure) enough to admit something in his behaviour that was (understandably) veiled by self-deception, namely, the wrong he had done to others. Through being accepted, recognised, and loved, he is ready to take responsibility for his moral life, recognise others and the harm done to them, and also is enabled admit that he is a sinner in need for forgiveness.

Second, acceptance by Jesus was an implicit expression of such forgiveness. It enabled Zacchaeus, as we have noted, to grow in his awareness of himself and others but also in appreciation of the moral implications of his actions in his public role. The personal aspect of his conscience expanded in its scope to include its social obligations—moral integrity serving justice. This is a much-needed reminder that wrong-doing and sin are not just personal and private: they have social and, at times, public outcomes.

How is this incident about conscience and justice relevant to us today?

Zacchaeus and Today: The Evil Tongue

We could focus on damage resulting from the behaviour of those holding positions of trust in public life, or it could be on the harm done to someone’s reputation in a salacious piece blazoned on the front page of a national paper. Months, probably, years later there is a settlement (confidential, of course) with an expression of regret or, if one is lucky, an apology. But the item will not be on the front page: it might be found buried somewhere near the advertisements,

But let’s stay closer to home, to a concern found in the letter of James, ‘that no one can tame the tongue’ (James 3:8). How do I handle the truth in talking about others? It could range from telling ‘porkies’ to delicious items of gossip. True, there are situations where we are evasive or tell a ‘white lie’ to avoid hurting a person’s feelings or when it is about something that is none of their business. Those are not our concern here.

What is essential about lying? When I lie, I deliberately intend not to tell the truth. We are obliged to tell the story as it is, without bending it, changing the facts, spicing it up a bit. Our concern here is how such tactics may harm a person or their reputation, a failure to recognise their dignity and respond accordingly.

We are human. There are those whom we avoid, dislike, even, distrust. We might tend not to speak well of them, even tend to distort stories about them. That could well involve a frisson of pleasure on hearing something that fits in with our picture of that person. Such actions can mean someone is treated unjustly, and is not able to defend themselves.

The other side to this is concerned with telling the truth to others about someone else in order to harm, or demean that person in their absence and, perhaps, to feed our sense of superiority. It can be petty, even, mean-spirited. The information passed on may be truthful, but is it fair? The person discussed has no chance to defend themselves.

At times, the information gets spread around and takes on a life of its own. Again, this is a matter of harm, of injustice to a person (and to others in the process). A person's reputation is being eroded. Have I considered that, like Zacchaeus, I have a duty to try to repair the harm I have done to that person? Do I need to become more aware of this, to recognise it for what it is?

When it is a matter of someone who is hurting others (and even themselves) by their behaviour, I might well be obliged to raise it with them personally. What we call fraternal correction can be a duty but it must be done out of charity and concern. In this case, I am directly talking to the person; I am not attacking them behind their back.

In considering the 'awakening conscience', it might help to heed James Keenan's advice. He suggests how we could well be guided by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin's *Code of Jewish Ethics* when he discusses the 'evil tongue' (*lashon hara)* and the practice of rubbishing a person behind their back, especially under the guise of telling the truth:

> Choose one day, perhaps the first day of each month, as a *Speak No Evil Day.* For twenty-four hours, guard your tongue from saying anything negative about or to anyone. And, on the other days of the month, choose a two hour period each day when you will be particularly careful to speak no *lashon hara*. Some people agree to do this, then jokingly resolve to carry out their commitment between 3.00 and 5.00 a.m. It is best to schedule the two hours during a period that includes a meal, for this is when many of us are likely to speak *lashon hara.*

Telushkin goes on to suggest: 'If the above seems too demanding, try this: Over the coming week, make sure that at least once a day you resist saying a negative truth about someone'.

'Not bad advice, if you ask me' concludes Keenan.[40]

…and Zacchaeus would agree?

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[40] James F. Keenan, *Ethics of the Word: Voices in the Catholic Church Today* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 114.

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FOR REFLECTION

- What did you find helpful in this discussion?
- Was there any particular insight you gained?
- Did any questions arise for you as you read and thought about the chapter?
- Can you recall a situation when you were unfairly maligned behind your back? What was that like? What did you do? Looking back, what did you learn?

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CHAPTER 13

THE WRESTLING CONSCIENCE

This chapter builds on one short phrase early in Matthew's Gospel. A few words of introduction before getting to that.

In describing the birth of Jesus Christ, we are told that his mother Mary 'was betrothed to Joseph' but that, before they lived together, 'she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit' (Mt 1:18, NRSV). We then read:

> Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to divorce her quietly (1:19).

About the situation facing Mary, the mother of Jesus, Brendan Byrne is quite candid:

> No false piety should make us shrink from this plain implication of the story. From Joseph's point of view Mary is in a truly dreadful situation. If exposed to the full rigour of the Law, she is liable to be stoned as an adulteress (Deut 22:23-4). Even if such rigour no longer applied, she is vulnerable to public shame and lifelong humiliation.[41]

The relationship between Joseph and Mary was truly a marriage, not just 'engaged'. The dilemma of Joseph ('good', 'upright', 'righteous') was in knowing that Mary was pregnant from relations with someone other than himself, hence, it would appear, she is guilty of adultery. At this stage, no angel has appeared to Joseph in a dream,

Joseph's conclusion about Mary (her 'adultery') is understandable and consistent with his 'being righteous' (a faithful Jew). But through how Joseph is affected by this development we see the other side of his sense of moral responsibility. He is protective towards her. Rather than risk that Mary be exposed publicly with associated disgrace and punishment, Joseph makes a sensitive appraisal of the situation: rather than shame her, he 'planned' to end their betrothal quietly (without publicity).

But that is not his final decision. In the following v. 20 we find the short phrase noted above. Joseph is still 'turning the matter over in his mind' (JB Phillips); he 'agonized about this' (Anchor Bible). Joseph, then, is someone who is 'wrestling' with his conscience. This struggle is resolved with the first dream; the angel assures him that Mary's pregnancy is 'through the power of the Holy Spirit' (Mt 1:18, 20); he receives a commission to be the foster father of Jesus.

Joseph is a good man, one of integrity and character, whose righteousness (true appreciation of the Law) is revealed in how he judges what is the right thing to do, what is God's will about what to do in this situation confronting him 'here and now'. It is not easy, but something Joseph

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[41]Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2004), 23.

has to struggle with. His judgment and ensuing actions find their overriding source in his sensitive and compassionate attitude toward Mary. He recognizes her situation (and, importantly, her as a person) and responds accordingly. Pope Francis points out that:

> Even though he does not understand the bigger picture, he makes a decision to protect Mary's good name, her dignity and her life. In his hesitation about how best to act, God helped him by enlightening his judgment.[42]

Joseph follows his conscience not so much despite (or in conflict with) the Law but as consonant with the fullest expression of the Law. Joseph, in so responding and acting, is righteous in the way that Jesus will later define righteousness throughout Matthew's Gospel: as marked by the highest virtue of a compassionate, forgiving, and merciful love toward others (modelled in Jesus himself). Joseph is a model, 'in an anticipatory way [of] the fulfillment of the Torah that Jesus will promote (Matt 5:17-20)'.[43] These qualities are further complemented by his courage—more apparent after the three subsequent dreams.

His protective role involves the judicious handling of a precarious, even, life-threatening situation. Entrusted with his special mission, Joseph, by further divine guidance (the three dreams), is the instrument through whom the safety of Jesus' family is secured against hostile forces (Herod and state authorities). This is done without 'forceful resistance' on the part of Joseph and his family.[44] While they finally settle in Nazareth, their earlier experience shares the plight of refugees today: without any control over where they may live in safety; subject to being moved from place to place; their lives controlled by government authorities or those in power.

Consistent with this is another side to the question of safety—staying out of the limelight. One can well imagine that when they returned to Galilee and lived out their lives in Nazareth, Joseph would be conscious of not putting his head 'above the parapet' to attract any unwanted attention on himself or his family.

In considering Joseph and his actions before and after the birth of Jesus, we recall Pope Francis' words cited earlier: 'God helped [Joseph] by enlightening his judgment'. His appraisal of the situation emerged from the particular way in which he was affectively receptive to Mary's situation. This, in turn, guided his recognition of her and his resultant response. In other words, Joseph lived by his conscience according to the recipe of being prayerful, wise, and street-smart —all peppered with courage.

How is our discussion of Joseph relevant?

St. Joseph and Today: The Cry of Refugees

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[42] Pope Francis, *Patris Corde*, p. 6, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/papa-francesco-lettera-ap_20201208_patris-corde.html. Accessed 26 Sept 2021.

[43] Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*, 23.

[44] Byrne, *Lifting the Burden*, 31.

Consider these mind-numbing statistics. At the end of 2023, an estimated 117.3 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations, and events seriously disturbing the public order. Based on operational data, UNHCR estimates that forced displacement has continued to increase in the first four months of 2024 and by the end of April 2024 is likely to have exceeded 120 million.

The increase to 117.3 million at the end of 2023 constitutes a rise of 8 per cent or 8.8 million people compared to the end of 2022 and continues a series of year-on-year increases over the last 12 years. One in every 69 people, or 1.5 per cent of the entire world's population, is now forcibly displaced—nearly double the 1 in 125 people who were displaced a decade ago.[45]

During his visit to Hungary and Slovakia in Sept. 2021, Pope Francis urged those countries to 'extend [their] arms toward everyone'. Thomas Reese notes that 'while the anti-immigrant frenzy is disrupting Europe, Francis stands almost alone as politicians either join the frenzy or run for cover'. Reese continues:

> This is Francis at his prophetic best. He is standing up for the marginalized who have been bloodied by war, starved by famine and displaced by persecution. Nor is he speaking out only for his own flock — most of these refugees and immigrants are non-Christians.[46]

These words apply well beyond Europe, hence, to Australia. We were reminded in Sept. 2021 of its stance on these matters with the twentieth anniversary of the Tampa incident. In 2024, the issue is now refugees from war-torn Gaza. The refugee question, as Andrew Hamilton has pointed out, is the 'canary in the mine' when it comes to the state (healthy or not) of a country's social conscience—as reflected in governmental (or opposition) policies.

'Wrestling' and 'anguishing' might well apply to the consciences of citizens in the wider community when confronted by what is a daily reality in the media, exemplified by the crisis in Gaza (or Afghanistan, or the Ukraine). In some ways, it is difficult not to avoid feeling helpless, even paralysed, by the immensity of the problem.

Perhaps Voltaire's adage can help: 'the best is the enemy of the good'. Some forms of response may be beyond us as individuals (e.g., in terms of resources). Still, we can do something: contributing money to an aid agency; letters to local members of parliament or signing a group petition; engaging politicians about their stance on refugees at election time.

We should never underestimate the power for change of the spoken and written word particularly when combined with group action. While digital technology may enhance the possibility of global action, perhaps the most practical working axiom is still 'think globally,

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[45] Global Trends | UNHCR Australia Accessed August 26, 2024.

[46] Thomas Reese, 'Pope calls on world to welcome refugees and immigrants', *National Catholic Reporter* Sept. 21, 2021, ncronline.org, accessed 6 Oct. 2021. See also Andrew Hamilton, 'Refugees are the canaries in the mine', *Eureka Street,* 29 Oct, 2020.

act locally'. Hopefully, the pandemic experience has brought a heightened sense of the common good. Similarly, 'behaviour modification' has another layer of meaning with the 'stay safe' imperatives—face masks, social distancing, and COVID-19 restrictions.

There is a related issue: a tendency to look to the government to solve to all our problems. This is associated with a point made by Pope Benedict in *Caritas in Veritate*, namely, the importance of 'social capital' in a truly civil economy: the contribution from the civic ties and social bonds; the harnessing of talents, good will, and energy from local communities in voluntary associations, local groups, and service clubs.

Importantly, a faith perspective offers an essential resource; opening space for God through prayer, as did St. Joseph. It builds on a heightened sense of our vulnerability, of being affected and finding ourselves recognising a precarious situation (and the human beings involved) yet restricted by limits in how we respond—times when it is just beyond us, humanly speaking. As St Paul reminds us: it is all 'God's work' (2 Cor 5:18). Petitionary prayer makes it possible for Jesus to be at work in an area, such as a need or crisis and, with Joseph, for the required courage (to go against the tide of public opinion?).

Finally, these reflections align with the Zacchaeus story: the awakening, the need to sensitize and foster conscience. This involves following the dynamic of being affected, recognising, and responding —allowing the Holy Spirit to work. Discussion, advertising, group action, informed resources from Church agencies, prayer, and persevering determination: when combined, such tools can arouse a gradual shift in public attitudes, to more refined moral antennae about refugees, the displaced, the exiled—reflected in government policies.

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FOR REFLECTION

- Was there any particular insight you gained?
- Did this discussion raise any questions or concerns for you?
- What struck you about the portrait of St. Joseph in the early part of Matthew's Gospel?
- Would you agree with words such as a 'wrestling' or 'agonising' conscience in your own life? Or, more generally when it comes an issue such as that of refugees and those fleeing persecution?
- In the light of these reflections, how would you view the Australian government policies about refugees, displaced persons, and those fleeing persecution?

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CHAPTER 14

THE BLIND CONSCIENCE

In everyday life we speak of 'blind spots'; about the rear-view mirror when driving a car; about an aspect of one's life or a certain situation ('I think I have a blind spot about Collingwood supporters?').

The phrase can denote a prejudice while also suggesting what we refer to as 'moral' blindness. That might mean not facing up to a wrong I have done. It might also indicate I did not even know what I did was wrong but should have known—perhaps indicating, for example, a serious form of prejudice.

This brings us to the guiding idea of this reflection; that the Great or Last Judgment scene in Matt Ch. 25 is about moral blindness. It is about seeing and not seeing. Perhaps pause and read the text.

How good and evil are sorted out has already been flagged in Matt Ch. 13—weeds from wheat and, later, good from bad fish. What Ch. 25 portrays is the passing of sentence rather than the 'sorting out'. The process of judgment has already been done—the division into two groups of 'sheep' or 'goats'. In this instance, it is through a form of self-selection:

> Members of the human race have determined the outcome for themselves according to whether they have acted or neglected to act on behalf of those in need.[47]

What is the criterion of judgment? It is not confession of faith in Christ. Rather, the benchmark is that of specific 'works', of acting with loving care for people in need. This is encapsulated as the works of mercy ('feed the hungry', 'care for the sick' etc.). The six works of mercy are repeated four times in the narrative.

Importantly, this is not some general humanitarian ethic. The moral life based on love and mercy has its basis in Jesus (the Son of Man, here presented as the 'King') and, importantly, in his personal identification with the needy and disadvantaged of our world.

One particular phrase weaves its way through the various forms of care and mercy that are given or not given. It is the question asked of the King: 'when did we see you?' (vv. 37, 38, 44)—with regard to being hungry, thirsty, a stranger etc. Let's think about that.

Jesus often uses language about sight; for instance, of seeing but not perceiving. That seems to be exemplified here but also as seeing *and perceiving*. 'Seeing' as noticing the person in need (or not); 'perceiving' as recognising that person, appreciating them as a centre of value (or not doing so). The reason is not just out of someone's need; implicitly, its roots are in the very fact of being human. It's about recognition.

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[47] Brendan Byrne, *Lifting the Burden: Reading Matthew's Gospel in the Church Today* (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2004), 192.

A parallel process of seeing/not seeing plays out in Luke's Gospel with the rich man and Lazarus: the rich man could easily help but is oblivious to the wretched beggar lying at his front gate (16:19-31). His luxury has so absorbed him that he is not touched, not moved by the plight of the needy, hungry man. So too with the Good Samaritan parable (10:29-37); the two religious leaders pass by on the other side, see but don't perceive (discussed in the next chapter).

In all these stories, we see individuals in (desperate) need who are the object of moral blindness. They do not register on the sensitivity radar; they are non-persons. Implied here (and common to Matthew and Luke) is the value of the human being, so much so that Christ has identified with each person (as seen earlier).

The acts of compassion and love, initially prompted by seeing, and then by recognising and responding to someone in need, have a deeper dimension which may not be appreciated. This is again suggested in 'when did we see you?' This question points to those who have no faith yet strive to lead a good life.

As we know from Vatican II, a person can be saved who does not know Christ's gospel nor the Church; they sincerely seek God, and under the influence of grace, try to live in accord with the call of conscience. So too with anyone who has not reached an explicit knowledge of God but with the help of divine grace, strives to live a good life.

The Holy Spirit, then, 'in a way known only to God offers to every human being the possibility of being associated with' the paschal mystery.[48] Its silent workings in the conscientious non-believer are revealed in the 'displacing of the ego (that) becomes a giving "place" to others'.[49] Such a process of moral self-transcendence is embodied in the specific works of mercy of this scriptural judgment scene.

The seeing/not seeing dynamic we have discussed has one particular aspect noted earlier, namely, a form of moral blindness that we call 'prejudice'. This can affect the moral vision (and sensitivities) of anyone, whether of faith or not, past and present. That is our next concern.

THE GREAT JUDGEMENT TODAY: RACIAL PREJUDICE AND JUSTICE

Much has been written about social sin in recent years, especially concerning discrimination in all its forms. It can take a structural form in the policies and practices of groups or cultures whose values and 'felt meanings' are either totally deformed or are distorted in some way. One is racial prejudice or racism.[50]

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[48] *Gaudium et Spes,* par. 22.

[49] Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St. John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1979), 12.

[50] This section draws on chapter seven in my *The Eyes and Ears of Conscience: Lessons of Encouragement* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls, 2022). Also, Gerald A. Arbuckle, *The Pandemic and the People of God: Cultural*

We have become more aware of what is described as the pervasive criminalization of black men in the United States and the extent of violence against them from, for instance, the police.

Here in Australia, we think of Adam Goodes and how he, and others playing sport, are the target of racial abuse. Or more broadly, the markedly disproportionate percentage of indigenous Australians that make up the total prison population—a mirror of the figures in the United States.

Theologian Bryan Massingale asks a question relevant beyond the USA:

> How does one account for conscience formation in any atmosphere of what I call a cultured racial indifference, that is, where one's very socialization instils in one insensitivity or social callousness towards those with darker skin? How can one form conscience in a morally compromised environment when that environment is not only familial but the very culture itself? [51]

To capture something that has its roots in the very pervasive condition of one's culture, Massingale uses the word 'scotosis'. It means intellectual blindness, but even more. It suggests a certain hardening of the mind, a resistance to a way of viewing, being affected by, and responding to, an aspect of reality, a refusal to be open to wisdom that is not wanted. As he says:

> stripped to its core, racism is that disturbing interior disease that enables people to not care for those who don't look like them.

He suggests that one of the most 'pervasive' effects of unconscious racism is 'racially selective sympathy and indifference'. In other words:

> the unconscious failure to extend to a minority the same recognition of humanity, and, hence the same sympathy and care, given as a matter of course to one's own group.[52]

If conscience is responsible to the truth, what can free us from a blindness that is culturally induced? Amongst his suggestions, Massingale proposes a way forward in the 'cultivation of authentic racial solidarity and transformative love (compassion)'. This entails:

> an ability to hear and be present to black anger; the interior space to welcome perspectives that significantly differ from one's own; and the cultivation of genuinely affective relationships with people of color.[53]

Impacts and Pastoral Responses (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), Ch. 10 on 'Racism and International Racism Exposed'.

[51] Bryan N Massingale, 'Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racial Bias', in David. E DeCosse and Kristin E Heyer, eds, *Conscience and Catholicism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis 2015), 53-68, at 55-6.

[52] Massingale, 'Conscience Formation', 59.

[53] Massingale, 'Conscience Formation', 59.

Finally, it is a call to all, the Church included, to grieve, lament, mourn, the distortions of our history and our culture. In so doing we come to recognise and appreciate the ways deforming influences have been, and are still, at work (as too concerning the sexual abuse issue).

We must submit ourselves in need before a power at work beyond human capacities. We must reach out to God. We beg for redeeming grace that heals and, at the same time, refines the sensitivity of conscience.

TO CONCLUDE

Our reflections on the Great Judgment in Matthew' Gospel and the effects of moral blindness highlight the dignity and preciousness of each human being. It brings to mind the line of Victor Hugo that is sung in the closing scene of Les Misérables: 'To love another person is to see the face of God'.

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FOR REFLECTION

- Was there any particular insight you gained? Any questions that arose?
- What struck you, perhaps, surprised you in this reflection?
- In considering the Great Judgment passage, what image of God seems to pervade the scene?
- What are your thoughts about what Massingale says about racial prejudice?
- Do you consider his comments relevant to Australia, even, in your own life?

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CHAPTER 15

THE SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

What do we mean by a ‘social conscience’?

It is a sense of moral responsibility towards others and the wider community (locally and globally)—to work for a just world.

This chapter considers one aspect of ‘a social conscience’, namely, conscience and the common good. It does so in the light of global pandemic.

This crisis shaped our behaviour, at home and in public. Washing our hands, wearing facemasks, ‘keeping your distance’. So too with phrases such as ‘public spirited’, being ‘neighbourly’ and the ‘common good’.

How do the Gospels illuminate the relationship between conscience and the common good? How does Scripture further illustrate the pattern of being affected, recognition and being responsive in a social context? In turn, how are these related to the global pandemic?

We start with a parable and an incident involving Jesus.

THE STORY OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN (Lk 10: 29-37).

This is a wayside drama about ‘seeing’ and ‘not-seeing’, hence, about moral blindness. It is triggered by the lawyer’s question: ‘who is my neighbour?’ Jesus replies with a parable about a man travelling from Jerusalem who is mugged, robbed, and left ‘half dead’.

Two pillars of the religious establishment—a priest and a Levite—pass by, see the victim but keep going. Perhaps they are afraid of becoming ‘unclean’ through contact with someone injured or close to death? Or are afraid of being beaten up and robbed themselves? Whatever the reason, they do not want to get involved; they don’t ‘see’ the injured man.

Jesus’ audience would be very conscious that, when travelling, any one of them could be attacked and left an innocent victim, desperately needing help. Who wouldn’t feel compassion and do something? But not so with these two religious leaders. Because they do not *recognize* the man as someone in distress, they are not moved to help him. For them, he is invisible, a *non-person.*

Help comes, however, from an unexpected source: a third traveller; probably a merchant going about his business, but, a ‘hated’ Samaritan. He ‘sees’, is moved, and responds immediately. He arranges that the man be cared for at a nearby inn. He is concerned yet practical in his generosity. He not only notices another’s distress; the Samaritan is moved to do something about it, with some inconvenience on his part.

Jesus ends by throwing the lawyer’s question back at him:

> which of these three, do you think, proved himself a neighbour to the man who fell into the brigands' hands?

'Neighbour' does not denote a limited set of people who deserve our attention, an 'in-group' of any type (a common faith, race, culture). Rather, for Jesus, that particular word indicates how we see people and respond to them precisely as *human beings.* It is not just about who we 'see' (recognise) but *how we see*. If we see with a neighbour's eyes, we will respond with a neighbour's heart. Vulnerability is as much about being responsive as it is about being in need. This is social concern, the neighbourly conscience at work, even with someone who might be a stranger but still part of the human community.

Take another incident.

JESUS HEALS THE LEPER (Mk 1: 40-45).

In Jesus' time, leprosy was a term that covered a range of skin diseases; it triggered an understandable fear of contagion. There was also the overlay of religious 'uncleanness'; it was associated with sin and a form of punishment from God.

The person, then, was subject to quarantine—no social contact, no sharing in common worship. Imagine it: the person could not be touched or hugged. But, here, Jesus can't help himself. He touches the leper who begs to be cured.

From that spontaneous action, Jesus is seen as a health risk (physically and spiritually). He has to isolate himself for a prescribed period of time. Sound familiar?

We should not be distracted by the religious aspect, unjust though it may have been, namely, that leprosy (or blindness) was the result of someone's moral failure, of sin in some form or another.

In addition, we should not overlook common sense and lived experience underlying the distancing (physical and social) mandatory in Jesus' time. Its basis was the fear of a (skin) condition spreading through bodily contact, i.e., contagion. Modern science can certainly confirm that is the case, but also that microbes and germs can be transmitted through our breathing, through the air, hence, the need for masks.

Again, consider Jesus' spontaneous action from another angle; he failed to observe 'distancing' in touching the leper. In the context, that gesture was both spontaneous on his part (compassion for the man) and also made a point. He recognized the leper as a person, as someone with dignity and worth and, in so responding as he did, he paid the price.

That price implied that Jesus acknowledged there was a common good at stake. He was prepared to follow the 'protocols' involved, even when it meant (considerable?) inconvenience to himself.

In that sense, Jesus was offering himself as a model of how to be our brother's and sister's keeper. He was demonstrating, in his behaviour, a working model of how to be a 'Good Samaritan', of being affected, recognising, and responding to someone in need.

We return to where we started.

JUSTICE, THE COMMON GOOD AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The global experience of the pandemic has shaped our behaviour but also sharpened our appreciation of words such as 'vulnerable', 'precarious', and 'solidarity' together with our sensitivities to others. Government and health agencies, guided by scientific expertise, have been central in navigating a path through this crisis. We see here concern for the common good 'writ large', namely, the overall well-being (economic, medical, social etc.) of the national and global community.

If I consider a situation where there is a duty of the taxpayer (through the Government), to help, for instance, Support Packages, and that I have a right to such assistance, this suggests a form of mutual obligation, of mutual recognition. In other words, it goes both ways. Such a two-way form of justice has touched all of us during the pandemic. That has meant, as we know, that our freedoms have been curtailed temporarily for the good of the community.

Once COVID-19 vaccines were available, there were still many problems. One author pointed out that:

> Amnesty International has called for a human rights approach to prioritising vaccines, pointing out the vulnerability of communities such as Indigenous people in the Amazon who face a higher risk due to shortages of water, food, and medical resources. Refugees living in unsanitary and crowded camps are also at increased risk. Some have even called out 'vaccine thieves'.[54]

We might focus on one aspect.

While aimed at the medical care of each individual, the availability of vaccines has an inevitable social context, given the ease with which the virus can be transmitted. As we know, this has occurred when one person (unintentionally and observing all protocols) has subsequently proven to be a first link in a chain of people being affected by the virus. We are indebted to the scientific technology that makes such tracing possible.

Government legislation (or local policies) requiring vaccination is consistent with the ease of transmission. It might emerge as a policy of 'No Jab, No Work'. But more importantly, if I owe it to myself to be vaccinated, I also owe it to the people I live with and to the wider community. Are COVID rules discriminatory when their aim is to ensure others are not put at risk?

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[54] Daniel Sleiman, The politics of vaccines (eurekastreet.com.au), accessed Oct 26, 2021.

Pope Francis pointed out that anti-vaxxers have vaccines to thank for no longer having to worry about things like polio. 'It's a bit strange, because humanity has a history of friendship with vaccines', Francis said, and that for decades, children have been vaccinated against measles, mumps, and polio, 'and no one said anything'. [55]

Further, the *Pontifical Academy for Life* stated that 'all clinically recommended vaccinations can be used with a clear conscience and that the use of such vaccines does not signify some sort of cooperation with voluntary abortion'.[56] Early in 2021, the Pope declared that not getting vaccines known to be safe and effective is 'suicidal denialism'.[57]

CONCLUSION

If we share in the life of a community, we have an obligation to observe what is needed to maintain order (and safety) in our lives together. That means taking the reasonable measures needed to ensure the health of oneself but also in how that has an impact on others—family, friends, and the wider community. At times, as we know from first-hand experience, that may involve some inconvenience, such as restrictions on our freedom.

But, as with Jesus and the Good Samaritan, we owe it to each other. Being a good neighbour is not really an optional extra. It is about seeing and recognising the dignity of each person. That requires a duty of basic respect and concern—not just in words but in our actions.

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FOR REFLECTION

- Did you find this reflection helpful? In what way?
- In considering the incident of Jesus and the leper or the Good Samaritan parable, what stood out for you?
- Can you think of one thing that the pandemic has led you to appreciate more?
- What is your view about those who are 'anti-vaxxers'?

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[55] https://apnews.com/article/health-religion-coronavirus-pandemic-pope-francis-raymond-burke-b2f2b16321f0275e7b57fbadbd5cfaec Accessed August 26, 2024.

[56] 'Note on the vaccine issue' (20170, Pontifical Academy for Life, academyforlife.va, accessed 26 October 2021.

[57] Pope Francis Tells Vaccine Skeptics to Stop Being Idiots and Get Their Shots | Vanity Fair, accessed Oct 26 2021.

CHAPTER 16

THE ECOLOGICAL AND GLOBAL CONSCIENCE

In September 2024, there was a virtual 'convocation' across six Catholic dioceses in Australia in which there was an interchange of ideas and a sharing of wisdom on how to care for creation —our common home. Brisbane Archbishop Mark Coleridge told those gathered that the Season of Creation 'is a time to see with new eyes and listen with new ears, and to focus upon action'.[58]

While the use of *Zoom* and other media technologies reflect how much our world is a 'global village', the virtual meeting is symptomatic of a major shift in awareness about how humankind relates to the natural environment; how, in a way, we form one community with our natural world.

The event is also indicative of how far the Catholic community has come since Pope St. John Paul's World Day of Peace message in 1990.[59] Those developments (captured in the above heading) are reflected in two recent encyclicals from Pope Francis: *Laudato Si'* and *Fratelli Tutti.* These are our guides as we consider the gift received and at work in sharing Christ's mission.

COLLABORATIVE MISSION: THE ENVIRONMENT

In the 1960s, two names represented a growing awareness of the exploitation and degradation of the natural environment, especially since the Industrial Revolution. In *Silent Spring* (1962), Rachel Carson discussed the impact of pesticides on the oceans. Later, Lynn J White addressed the impact of the Judaeo-Christian tradition on attitudes to nature in his essay 'The Historic Roots of our Ecological Crisis' (1967).

Generally, discussion about the environment has been couched mainly in political, scientific, and economic language. In Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (2015), a clearly elaborated religious and spiritual perspective enters the discussion. It takes the form of an invitation to consider this faith perspective especially when creation is viewed as a holy and precious gift of God. It is to be reverenced by all men and women through 'care for our common home' through partnership with God and solidarity with global humanity.[60]

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[58] https://cathnews.com/~documents/media-releases/media-releases-2024/240916-caritas-australia-catholic-earthcare-convocation-sees-wisdom-shared-on-caring-for-our-common-home/?layout=default. Accessed Sept. 17, 2024.

[59] *Peace with God the Creator: Peace with all of Creation. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/messages/peace/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_19891208_xxiii-world-day-for-peace.html*

[60] For the full text and other material see papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudatosi_ en.pdf (vatican.va).

The Pope underlines three key ideas.

First, he emphasises (more than once) the damaging impact of environmental change on the poor and on the developing world; that the economy is part of a wider net of interconnections.

Second, drawing on the Catholic tradition (scripture, social teaching, papal statements), Pope Francis criticises the exclusion of anyone from the benefits arising from the goods of creation. The natural environment is a good for everyone, the patrimony of all humanity and the responsibility of everyone (par. 95), a form of collective good that involves rights and duties, including to future generations (par. 93).

Third, as a counter to a 'consumerist mindset', Christian spirituality offers a model of growth marked by 'moderation and the capacity to be happy with little' (par. 222). This means the urgent need to redefine our notion of progress—a change of heart and to nurture 'ecological virtues' (par. 88).

In relation to our main concern (sharing in Christ's mission today) Pope Francis traces the theme of love for creation through both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. The Book of Genesis reminds us how one manner of being (and living) the image of God is through the stewardship of creation. Again, Pope Francis reminds us that God, in Jesus Christ, became not only human, but part of the natural world and that he appreciated that natural world—as is so often evident in the Gospels..

As Christians, we are also called 'to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale' (par. 9). Further, we must not forget how 'everything is interconnected, and that genuine care for our own lives and our relationships with nature is inseparable from fraternity, justice, and faithfulness to others' (par. 70). We must be open to being so affected that we recognise God's creation and respond accordingly.

A new and universal solidarity is an imperative, exercised especially through dialogue. Further, all of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements, and talents (par.14). God, who wishes to work with us and who counts on our cooperation, can also bring good out of the evil we have done (par. 80).

These considerations on stewardship offer another dimension to sharing in Christ's mission.

COLLABORATIVE MISSION: SOCIAL FRIENDSHIP AND JUSTICE

'Care for our common home' took on another level of urgency in the light of the global pandemic that emerged during 2020. Francis responds to this later crisis by appealing to a universal 'social friendship' in his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*.[61] He highlights an attitude of fraternity that gives priority to the recognition of, and respect for, persons and the common

[61] *Fratelli Tutti*, October 2020, papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.pdf (vatican.va), accessed Sept 10, 2024.

good, over individual interests—in social, economic, and institutional relationships (as intimated earlier in chapter fourteen of this study).

The document's 'moral compass' builds on the parable of the Good Samaritan and how it underlines 'practical friendship for the wounded stranger'. On that basis, the Pope emphasises the 'human rights of people made vulnerable by society—of women and children, of racial minorities, of refugees, of the aged and others'. Key headings speak of 'a heart open to the world', of the need for social dialogue to create a new culture, of the joy that comes from acknowledging others, and of religions 'at the service of fraternity in our world'.

Overall, the encyclical:

> … echoes the vision of a world at the crossroads where the path we take will decide whether the inheritance that we leave to our grandchildren will be wasted or saved. The way in which we set about rebuilding society in the face of coronavirus will be crucial.[62]

The document also highlights a crucial aspect of religions in serving global fraternity. The Pope reminds us that 'as believers, we are convinced that, without an openness to the Father of all, there is will be no solid and stable reasons for an appeal to fraternity'. It is only as children rather than as orphans, that we 'can live in peace with one another' (par. 272).

Again, while reason is capable of 'grasping the equality between men and of giving stability to their civic coexistence…it cannot establish fraternity' (par. 272). Further, 'if there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity, then there is no sure principle for guaranteeing just relations between people' (par. 273).

Finally, 'the effort to seek God with a sincere heart, provided it is never sullied by ideological or self-serving aims, helps us to recognise one another as travelling companions, truly brothers and sisters' (par. 274).

OVERVIEW

Cooperation with God through stewardship of creation, solidarity with humanity and social friendship is the framework, then, for exercising a moral imperative, of sharing in Christ's mission in today's world (and tomorrow's). As we saw earlier with racial prejudice (chapter thirteen), it is the call to broaden the horizon of conscience, to be more sensitive to crises that are a matter of justice.

Importantly, we are reminded of the social and global scope of our ethical responsibilities. It is not simply a secular form of humanitarianism, valuable though that might be. Lisa Sowle Cahill reminds us that the task of conscience and Christian discipleship is to witness to the transforming power of God's justice in the person of Jesus Christ—the crucified and risen Lord. Its markers are inclusion, forgiveness, compassion, mutual service, hospitality, and solidarity.

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[62] Andrew Hamilton, '*Fratelli Tutti:* seeking the common good' (eurekastreet.com.au), accessed Sept. 5, 2024.

As we saw earlier, its distinctive focus (and measure) is found the judgment scene of Mt 25:31-46, and, most especially, the 'victims of history' and 'needless human misery'.[63]

Such a perspective involves an asceticism that parallels the call to moral conversion and to moderation made by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'* but also to the virtue of solidarity and to social friendship in his later response to the pandemic. Stockton reminds us how such a shift in attitudes entails practices in which we need to 'school' ourselves: in 'compassion, patience, gentleness and simplicity'—a process that 'demands life-enhancing self-denial'.[64]

CONCLUSION

The practices suggested above by Stockton could well include the recovering (and nourishing) of a sense of wonder (and to learn from Indigenous Aboriginal spirituality).[65]

Perhaps, we can return to the beginning of this chapter and leave the final words to Rachel Carson:

> What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? ...I am sure there is something much deeper, something lasting and significant….
>
> … Those who contemplate the beauty of the earth find reserves of strength that will endure as long as life lasts ...there is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature—the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter.[66]

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FOR REFLECTION

- What aspect stood out for you in this reflection?
- Is 'care for our common home' part of our everyday lives, do you think? How so?
- Ponder moments when you experience wonder as did Rachel Carson…

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[63] See Lisa Sowle Cahill, 'Christology, Ethics, and Spirituality', in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed. Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003), 197.

[64] Eugene Stockton, 'Minding the Universe: Aboriginal Leads to Australian Spirituality', *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology* 29, no.1, (1995): 15-24, at 24.

[65] Which Stockton himself does in his *Wonder: A Way To God* (NSW: St Pauls, 1998).

[66] Rachel Carson, *A Sense of Wonder* (U.S.: Harpercollins, 1987), 100-101.

CHAPTER 17

‘THE SPIRIT MOVES WHERE IT WILLS’: THE BOTTOM LINE ABOUT SALVATION?

A few years ago, a death notice in the paper caught my eye. It was for a man whose wife I had known since I was at high school (we can call them Mary and John). They had been married for over fifty years and had a family. In that time, we enjoyed keeping in touch. In recent years, John had battled cancer. That did not stop him. He finished a doctorate. Not long after, the cancer finally caught up with him

I sent Mary an email when I read the obituary. I wrote what I admired in John and about them as a couple. I said I would say Mass for John, for her and the family. They were not Catholics and, to my knowledge, not regular Church goers.

In her reply, Mary was very grateful but two phrases struck me: ‘I feel very humbled that you offered Mass for us’ and ‘we will all miss him terribly, he was such a kind and caring person’.

I couldn’t stop thinking about those words. I felt free to offer Mass: they both knew who I was and what I believed in. They may not have shared that faith but clearly what I did meant a lot to Mary. I felt slightly uneasy about ‘humbled’. It was almost as if she (and John) did not think they were worthy enough. Is any of us ‘worthy’ enough really? Still, I think I know what Mary was trying to say. While she may not share that faith, she really appreciated that she and John could (somehow) be included in the ‘God-space’.

The second comment got me thinking. What is the ‘bottom line’ in life? In many ways, I guess it’s death. But if, as is true for many people, religious faith or God is not a reality in their lives, what is life’s ‘bottom line’? To use accountant ‘speak’—when you crunch the numbers, what is the result, the ‘bottom line’? Is it a credit or a debit? Or, is it that, ultimately, things just don’t add up?

Is that the only sort of calculus we bring to life? It’s not possible to include life’s many variables in the right or left side of the ledger. True, there is so much that doesn’t add up: suffering around us, distorted images of God, the blurred face of Christ because Christians don’t live and act as they should; systemic and global moral failure in Churches (especially ours) to protect the innocent and vulnerable.

If Christ’s message has little drawing power, if more people tick ‘no religion’ or ‘atheist’ in a census form, who can blame them?

Whatever the reasons, what is life’s bottom line in that situation? Perhaps, it is found in Mary’s phrase ‘he was such a kind and caring person’. When Mary struggles with her grief and the inevitable questions about death and ‘what’s after?’, I’d say to Mary: ‘hold on to those few words. That’s not only life’s ‘bottom line.’ It’s also God’s’.

Is that just a personal view? The incident brings to mind the discussion earlier (chapter fourteen) about the blind conscience and seeing/not seeing, recognising/not recognising the other who is vulnerable, in need in some way:

> 'In so far as you did it to the least of these brothers (and sisters) of mine, you did it to me' (Matt 25:40).

That same earlier chapter noted the scope of God's saving will and how much that is now better appreciated in the life of the Church, and in its prayer. God's universal saving will (embodied in the death and resurrection of Jesus) holds true not only for Christians, but for 'all men [sic] of good will in whose hearts grace works in an unseen way'.[67]

What is the bottom line in God's eyes? It is a person's striving to live a 'good life'; trying, under the impulse of grace, to live according to God's will as it is revealed through 'the dictates of conscience'. Grace makes its presence evident in people's persevering love for their families and children, in fidelity to promises, in compassion for others, in listening to the promptings of the Spirit in the depths of their conscience.

God's grace, even in its tiniest slivers, is very powerful. Like the seed in the parable, it grows silently, slowly, with its own momentum. As with love, its force is centrifugal.

In all this, we can again tap our tradition and worship.

Theological Tradition and Worship

Thomas Aquinas in a number of places makes the comment that 'all truth, wherever it comes from, is from the Holy Spirit'. He goes further elsewhere and says 'all truth and goodness are of the Holy Spirit'. [68]

The late Marist theologian John Thornhill points out that Thomas Aquinas' position on this issue of the action of grace beyond the boundaries of the Church was remarkable for its time. It did not represent prevailing views. Aquinas anticipates contemporary theology (the universal offer of divine grace) and Vatican II's teaching with his view that:

> each human being who achieves a mature self-determination, in so doing either turns to God and enters into divine grace with the remission of original sin, or culpably turns from God by not doing 'what within him lies'. [69]

Consider the Church's worship. In the *Intercessions for Good Friday,* the Church prays for those who do not believe in Christ that they 'find the truth as they walk before (God) in sincerity

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[67] 'Gaudium et Spes', No 22. in Abbot, *The Documents of Vatican II,* 221.

[68] Respectively, *Summa Theologiae* 1.2 109.1 ad 1; Commentary on 1Cor. 12:3).

[69] John Thornhill, 'A Wholesome Agnosticism and Christianity's Coming Dialogue with the World Religions', *Pacifica,* 6 (1993): 265–277, at 267 citing *Summa Theologiae* 1. 2. 89. 6 ad 1.

of heart'; and for those who do not believe in God that 'they may find him by sincerely following all that is right'. The Church, here, proclaims its conviction that there are people who, by their good lives, reveal an implicit love of 'God in their hearts while not knowing him with their heads'.[70]

Most importantly, in all this, we are given a lead by Jesus himself in the Gospels.

JESUS AND THE SPIRIT AT WORK

As we know, God's desire for everyone to be saved and 'reach full knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim 2:4) is integral to the Christian story, as illustrated in this incident:

> John said to him, 'Master, we saw a man who is not one of us casting out devils in your name; and because he was not one of us, we tried to stop him'. But Jesus said, 'You must not stop him; no one who works a miracle in my name is likely to speak evil of me. Anyone who is not against us is for us' (Mk 9:38-40).

John, (the son of Zebedee), speaks here in the name of the other disciples. Jesus' reply is not approval but a 'mild rebuke'.[71]

If someone uses Jesus' name for a 'good purpose', it is unlikely such a person would speak badly about Jesus. The main thing is that the grip of Satan is being broken; people are given the life associated with the reign of God. As Brendan Byrne points out:

> The disciples' action, on the contrary, shows them to be less focussed on the objective good being done and more concerned about an outsider's use of what they see as their own prerogative and possession, the 'brand name' of Jesus.

Jesus reinforces his comments by directing their attention to outsiders who give 'members of the community' (probably travelling missionaries) a cup of water to drink because they 'belong to Christ':

> Such outsiders show the kind of service to others that is supposed to be a hallmark of the followers of Jesus. What determines the 'reward' one will receive (at the judgment) is not whether one is inside or outside the community but whether one has performed the service expected of the community.

As Byrne sums up, Jesus, in his instruction:

> shows a remarkable openness to the possibility of goodness and effective ministry outside the community of disciples strictly so defined.

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[70] Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (London, Darton, Longman and Todd; New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 278.

[71] The ideas and quotes that follow are from the discussion in Brendan Byrne, *A Costly Freedom: A Theological Reading of Mark's Gospel* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls, 2008), 153–154.

It is an invitation to the disciples (and, implicitly, to all Christians) to find and rejoice in goodness, 'wherever it exists'.[72]

There is a precedent in the Book of Numbers 11:25–29. The same 'misguided response' is made by Joshua when two individuals (Eldad and Medad) manifest the same spirit of prophecy given to the seventy elders assisting Moses. Moses' 'large-hearted' reply parallels that of Jesus.

The attitudes conveyed in both incidents clearly touch on the divine activity beyond the community of believers. They converge with the free action of the Spirit suggested in John's Gospel. The Greek word *pneuma* can denote 'wind' (or 'breath' and 'spirit'):

> The wind blows wherever it pleases; you hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit (Jn 3:8).

This Gospel scene from Mark reflects a growing awareness in Jesus himself. He found faith in unexpected people, as in his bantering and bargaining interchange with the Syrophoenician woman (Mk 7:24–37). Elsewhere, Jesus was 'astonished' with the Roman centurion: 'never in Israel have I found faith like this' (Mt 8: 10). That was not what Jesus expected.

CONCLUSION

In considering God's 'bottom line' when it comes to the divine desire for everyone to be saved, God's magnanimity is revealed in Jesus in this incident from Mark's Gospel discussed above: divine saving activity through the Spirit can be at work outside the community of believers (the Church).

Further, just as Jesus, in the Incarnation and his ministry, adapted to the 'needs' of human nature, so too should the Church. In other words, this event in Jesus' life is a salutary reminder: the flexibility and adaptability of divine grace and of the Spirit's wisdom (and ingenuity) is enveloped in the mystery of a God who 'lives in unapproachable light' (and love).

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FOR REFLECTION

- Was there any particular insight you gained?
- Does the story of Mary and John resonate with your experience of your circle of family or friends?
- By the end of the chapter, do you think you might understand God in a different way?

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[72] Byrne, *A Costly Freedom*, 154.

CHAPTER 18

THE GIFT SHARED IN WORSHIP

Heard or said after Sunday worship: 'Something just clicked for me today at Mass'— a phrase in the homily, in the Eucharistic prayer, from a hymn, or from meeting someone on the Church steps. Or after a special occasion with a packed church, we leave feeling energized by the whole experience, lifted out of ourselves, part of something much bigger.

On the other hand, we can hear or feel 'nothing much happened for me at Mass today'. Or I may go home carrying the reaction to something that upset me—a sentence in the readings or something in the homily.

So, what can be 'reasonably' (and 'unreasonably') expected from our shared worship?? [73]

GOD'S WORK … IN ORDINARY LIFE

First, the Church's worship is God's work. It is not just *about* God but it is sharing *in* the life of God. Jesus is the perfect mediator between God and humanity, gathering the whole of humanity and creation in his act of worship and self-giving love of the Father. In Jesus, we are caught up in, what theologian Hans von Balthasar refers to as the 'event' of the Trinity: the endless energy of living and loving between Father, Son, and Spirit.

We are, then, through Baptism, 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter). Our prayer, whether personal, communal, or liturgical, allows the Holy Spirit to slowly transform us into the image of Jesus. The Spirit forms us cognitively (head), affectively (heart), and behaviourally (hands).

Don Saliers describes liturgy as the divine *ethos* of God's self-giving to us 'where grace and glory find human form' and which draws into itself human *pathos* (human emotions, suffering, and sinfulness). He explains beautifully that Christian liturgy 'transforms and empowers when the vulnerability of human pathos is met by the ethos of God's vulnerability in word and sacrament'.[74] Truly, a gift shared; of mutual recognition and response in action.

It is God's work, true, but God works in history, in events, in our daily lives. Since it is a process to do with life, it takes time and cannot be rushed. There is a type of divine respect for how we are made, how we function, how we grow. In everyday life, for instance, we don't live constantly on a 'high'. Could we, in fact? It would probably exhaust us. There is a rhythm to life and in nature: different seasons, day/night, action/repose. So too with human living. If every day is a holiday, we would soon need a holiday from holidays…?!

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[73] This chapter is a slightly revised version of my article 'Does Liturgy Always Mean Being on A "High?"', *Liturgy News* 43, no 4 (December) 2013: 6-7.

[74] Don E Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 22.

In other words, (as seen earlier) routine and habits of regular action are part of, and necessary for, life. We are, as we say, 'creatures' of habit but not necessarily as unthinking slaves. We need patterned forms of behaviour.

Think of family life, for example, and the regular routine for parents looking after their children: meals, school, sport, in times of success, disappointment, or sickness. Parents are driven by an underlying committed love in constant and, often, spontaneous actions. This is virtue at work, whether described as fortitude or fidelity.

This will involve a pattern of self-forgetfulness and sacrifice. At times, these acts may not entail a sense of excitement or elation, in fact, the opposite. But this behaviour will often bring an underlying contentment, a sense of always being 'there' out of love for the children. There will, of course, be special moments of great joy. And more often, any parent, at the end of the day, knows the feeling of deep serenity seated next to a sleeping child.

GOD'S WORK… IN WORSHIP

When we gather for worship, the liturgy, too, is built on patterned forms of behaviour and their function. It also reflects the rhythms of nature and life—the seasons of the Church's year, the alternating in the liturgical design between action and repose, the changes of pace characteristic of drama and theatre. It is neither a Town Hall meeting nor a Gospel Revivalist session. It should blend the welcoming and the reverent. There are times for seeing and hearing, for speaking and for being silent. These will have various levels of appeal, often depending on temperament and taste.

As in ordinary life, so in the liturgy, there will be times when we are truly uplifted. We go home carrying with us through the day and following days the reverberations of the experience. But, for the most part, it will be closer to a sense of contentment, a lingering sense of being 'in tune', at peace with God and life. 'If I did not go, something would be missing'.

So perhaps what we can 'reasonably' (or perhaps regularly) expect from liturgy is closer to the parent's sense of committed love, something regularly repeated and reflecting what is truly important to us. It is not *elation* that matters but *devotion.* It is the nourishing and deepening of enduring devotion and yearning for God that is central.

Liturgy that embodies our participation in the divine life gradually transforms us in the well-worn, underground watercourses of desire formed by, and reflected in, persevering practice. It is here that 'peak-experiences' or liturgical 'highs' find their meaning. As George Herbert says, the Church's prayer is 'God's breath in man returning to his birth…Heaven in ordinary'.

Saliers notes the difficulty, due to today's cultural pressures, in distinguishing 'between immediacies of feeling and depth of emotion over time'. Vital liturgy may produce 'feeling states' but that is not God's criterion. Authentic liturgy needs time to deepen our 'disposition to perceive the world as God's creation', to see and respond to the world through God's eyes and with God's heart. Gratitude, forgiveness, compassion, love, and joy illuminate life with meaning in our head, heart, and actions but these only 'unfold over time'. They are not so much felt or produced but 'elicited in season and out of season', as with joy in time of tribulation.[75]

[75] Saliers, *Worship as Theology,* 37.

THE GOD OF THE UNREASONABLE?

We rightly expect liturgy to be well-prepared and well-presented, especially by key people such as readers, the presiding minister, servers, musicians etc. Such cooperation with God offers many potential doorways for a nourishing experience of the divine *ethos.* Yet, even the unplanned event has its place. For instance, take the wayward infant running onto the sanctuary. It can offer a moment of domestic and spiritual warmth that is somehow 'integrated' into the Sunday Mass through the celebrant's sensitive and tactful handling of the situation. Perhaps, that small, unexpected incident or gesture is what we take home from that particular liturgy.

Yet, if it is all God's work, God cannot be constrained by our human ways of doing things, however high the standard, however adaptable to the unforeseen. God is still the God of surprises. We come, then, to our second question: what can we *unreasonably* expect of the liturgy?

God may not be 'unreasonable' in the sense of defying reason or opposing what is for our good. But God can act 'beyond' reason, for instance, by way of excess and generosity. As the Gospel reminds us, gifts can be pressed down, shaken together, and running over as far as *God* is concerned. As far as *we* are concerned, just by bringing ourselves, there can be uncommon moments, in prayer and liturgical occasions, when we feel God's lavish generosity and love.

Again, as far as *we* are concerned in everyday life and worship, God's unreasonable ways are evident. There are Scripture's metaphors of growth: the seed that grows at night and no one knows how or the seed that produces a hundred-fold—by human calculation, a staggering outcome for any investment.

This reminds us of the cardinal virtue of fidelity, of persistence that, at times, emerges as fortitude, of courage that taps the resources of determination and will-power. It is guided by an ongoing pattern of faithfulness, namely, in devotion, captured by the metaphor of growth (noted above). It is slow, hidden, and mysterious. Yet, it seems to be God's standard for measuring progress—devotion deepened by attentive prayer and worship. For Luke, the lives that move towards maturity are the 'rich soil' of 'people with a noble and generous heart who have heard the word and take it to themselves and yield a harvest through perseverance*'* (Lk 8:15 *New Jerusalem* version).

ON GOD'S TURF?

There is, perhaps, another sense to the God of the 'unreasonable'. It concerns the God who is so far beyond us, who both exceeds and subverts our rational capacity to know and to love. This is the God of silence, who lives in 'unapproachable light'.

The closer we get to the sun's light, the more we are blinded. So too with God. In the gift that is received and lived, we reach a stage with God where we have to feel our way. Or rather, God has to take us by the hand. If this is generally true of the spiritual life, it is also true of our common worship and liturgical prayer.

There comes a point, often described as 'dark nights' by spiritual masters, where our human capacities (to know, choose, desire, remember and imagine) hit a wall when it comes to God. It may be just part of life itself; it may be triggered by a life event or by a crisis in our personal faith or within the Church.

This is a stage where we are in God's territory. God alone can do the work. Only God knows the terrain. It will often manifest itself in something like this: I can't seem to pray like I used to. I don't get what I used out of going to Mass or weekly worship. I'm not aware of offending God and placing a wall between us yet I still feel what is going on (or not going on!) is my fault and I don't know what to do.

When that is happening, Gerald May, in *The Dark Night of the Soul,* suggests this question:

What is your deep-hearted desire?

The first part of a person's reply may be like this:

If I think about my life and what matters to me, I don't really understand what is happening and what to do.

May then suggests the second part of the reply. It points to how God may be at work:

What I really want is just to be with God, just to be in love with God.[76]

Progress in the gift shared and lived is towards deepening desire and devotion— captured in 'the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God' (Ps 42:1). It is to love God for God's sake and not just for my sake. This best encapsulates a response to our questions about what we can reasonably (and unreasonably) expect of the liturgy.

We leave the final word (and reflections) to David Hassell building on May's words above:

- Do I still desire to pray amid this prayerlessness? This desire is itself prayer.
- Do I still trust that God will rescue me eventually from prayerlessness? This trust is prayer.
- Am I willing to wait patiently for God's so-called return? This waiting is prayer.
- Deep within you, are you at peace with God's desires for you—even if you are not quite sure what they are? This peaceful wanting that God's will be done in you is your prayer: in fact, it is the Spirit's prayer within you.[77]

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FOR REFLECTION

- Did this chapter ring any bells for you?
- What aspect or thought in this chapter particularly struck you?

[76] Gerald G May, MD, *The Dark Night of the Soul* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), 135-142.

[77] David Hassel, SJ, 'Norms of prayerfulness: evaluating prayer life', *Review for Religious* 41, no.1, 1982.

- What is sharing in regular worship like for you? What especially appeals to you?
- Are the questions asked by May (and reply) helpful? How would you reply?
- And the advice of Hassell?

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CHAPTER 19

FUNERALS ON THE FRINGES: GLIMMERS OF GRACE

A few years ago, a local funeral director phoned looking for a priest to conduct a funeral service at a cemetery chapel. The deceased person (and their family) wanted a Catholic ceremony (with burial or cremation). I put my hand up. That led to other funerals, again not in a parish but in a cemetery or crematorium chapel.[78]

Initially, I was a bit apprehensive. It was walking into unknown territory 'cold' — for myself and the family. We had never met; we were, in effect, strangers to each other. The first step was to contact a family member. Although not face-to-face, the initial phone call went some way to set up a personal relationship. Emails did the rest (given issues of distance and Covid).

In these situations, the contact person (with other family members, including the deceased) may be 'Catholic' nominally or only have minimal links with the Church. Again, a family death is not familiar turf. Though another loved one may have passed away previously, nevertheless, their family will still be grateful for help in knowing what to do and how to do it when it comes to the funeral.

Which means? How to remember (and be grateful). How to farewell (and, at times, be regretful). Importantly, that these elements within the Christian liturgy are handled respectfully and sensitively. In everyday parlance, through the funeral service, a family wants to 'do it right' —to recognise their deceased loved one and, perhaps, mend some fences at the same time.

I have generally found that, for the family and the deceased, their request intimates a sincere desire for a Christian service, one based on the Catholic rite of funerals—they want a celebration permeated with assurances of God's loving mercy and consoling hope.

Usually, as I work with the family, an opening prayer, and a reading (possibly two) are chosen, and/or, perhaps, a poem or prose reflection leading into the final commendation and farewell. I have yet to find (or sense) any need to press the 'mute' button about Jesus, the resurrection, divine love, and forgiveness.

WHAT ABOUT A EULOGY, EULOGIES OR FAMILY REFLECTIONS?

The recent practice of eulogies further enables family members and friends to participate in the funeral liturgy rather than, as often, be present as onlookers. Again, this possibility helps ensure the personal, if not unique, aspect of each funeral and of the person being farewelled. At the same time, it provides an opportunity for a 'review of life' of the deceased—an act of

[78] This chapter was originally an article published in *Liturgy News* Spring (2021), 12-13.

remembering, recognition, and of gratitude. A celebrant who is, in reality, a stranger, is not in a position to do that.

Naturally, placing boundaries around a eulogy (or eulogies) is an issue. These need to be negotiated with the funeral director since, in a cemetery chapel, a funeral is 'book-ended' by services that precede or follow. In one case, there were seven eulogies!! Still, all up they took around 35 minutes, with the service completed in just under an hour—well within the time booked for the chapel.

With such a funeral, as with others, I learned so much about the deceased person. There were tears, there was laughter. At times, someone, in presenting their few words, finds it a bit much. People understand. Whether the eulogies are completed or not, there is something real, truthful, about it all—in the remembering and the sadness, in the gratitude and the celebrating of a life.

Sometimes, the Catholic aspect emerges in the family's story; sometimes, it might receive little mention. For all that, I continue to be struck by the glimmers of grace, the hidden God beneath the secular language. By the luminous traces of God's unobtrusive presence in a deceased person's devoted love or generosity, in their learning from mistakes and failures, in forgiveness, in regrets—the threads that make up the tapestry of a person's life and of their family's story.

I am all the more convinced about how important it is for the deceased person's family to have the opportunity to name their experience through words. It takes a lot of courage to stand up and speak in public, especially for those not accustomed to it. Even more so, at the funeral of their mum, or dad, or sister, or brother or child. But it is also a step in the grieving process, one leading to healing and acceptance.

In allowing space for that, the Church is doing the mourning family a service. Such a gesture (and its response) might well prompt a moment of insight, a whisper of divine grace touching the deepest recesses of a heart, a nudge toward letting God (or more of God) into one's life — which might also include the Church.

VIDEO PRESENTATIONS

Nothing beats images and pictures for tapping those deepest affections in human life about what means most to us. When the earlier spoken 'words' are reinforced by images, a powerful blend results that can enhance the ritual itself and the lives of those present.

For instance, in one case of the sudden and unexpected death of a teenage lad, his mother's work colleagues (involved in the media) brought their skills to the video presentation, the design of the funeral and the accompanying booklet. The service included something I had never seen before — another striking instance of liturgy as participation (and collaboration). All those present (including the many young people) were invited to take a felt tip pen and write a farewell message on the young man's pinewood casket.

I have found, as a celebrant, that, even if I have never met the deceased, by this stage of the service I have a pretty good idea of the loved one who is being remembered and farewelled.

There will, almost certainly, be one or two aspects of that person I can briefly highlight leading into the final prayers of commendation. Still, at times, more words may not be needed. All that has been said, seen, enacted, and sung has enabled the funeral liturgy to close on a personal note but also, and importantly, within the context of faith in Jesus Christ, in God's love and the promise of eternal life—all of which the Catholic liturgy captures so beautifully.

AND THE MUSIC?

Music must be considered. Funeral chapels have good resources and helpful staff. Sometimes, the family might choose something like Gounod's *Ave Maria,* or the *Pie Jesu* from Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Requiem.* Generally, they may opt for something more loosely described as 'secular'. The service could close with Nat King Cole's *Smile.* In two funerals, the video presentation ended with an entrancing rendition of *Over the Rainbow* sung in a soft tenor voice and accompanied by a ukulele. You could hear a pin drop.

What if a song from a band such as Midnight Oil is requested? If the funeral's format is a collaborative exercise, there is always a place for negotiation, especially around this question: 'Is it sensitive and respectful to the occasion and, importantly, to the dignity (and memory) of the deceased loved one?'

As an aside, what about Frank Sinatra's rendition of *My Way*? Funeral celebrants (perhaps with a quiet inner groan?) can be met with a family's request for this song to close the service. So far, it has happened only once in my case. In this instance, it was ironic that the song's words were completely at odds with the texture and shape of the deceased person's story. Doing it 'my way' was quite the reverse of someone whose life revolved around being there for his wife, children, grandchildren, and friends.

Of course, there is another side to choosing *My Way*. Sinatra's daughter Tina once observed that her father grew to hate the song; he always thought it was 'self-serving and self-indulgent'. That made sense. Sinatra sang love songs; his attention was directed towards someone else, rather than on himself.

Such experiences have really made me think again about music and funerals. It brought to mind an observation from the late Dennis Potter — the English television dramatist, script writer and journalist. Somewhere, I heard (or read about) his comment that pop songs are really today's version of the Psalms.

Why the Psalms? Because they capture the deepest yearnings of the human spirit: love, loneliness, loss, failure, sin, regret, suffering, sorrow, and, especially, the pursuit of happiness or for 'something more'—God included (even if not named). These are the varied faces of human desire and of existential longings that pervade and animate African-American spirituals, soul, blue grass, country and western, plus, for instance, music from the Celtic and Asian traditions.

Another memory came from an interview some years ago here in Australia with a visiting singer who was committed (but not ostentatious) in her Catholic faith. She was asked why her

concerts seemed to have no 'religious' songs but only 'secular' ones. She replied along these lines: 'after the resurrection of Jesus I believe that all songs are sacred'.[79]

IS THERE A THEOLOGY IN ALL THIS? WHAT IS IT SAYING?

How can these reflections be viewed within our Catholic tradition?

First, the Bible itself incorporates books from secular sources such as, for example, *The Book of Ruth* or a wisdom book such as *Proverbs.*

Second, in the Gospels, Jesus suggests, in mainly secular language (images and parables of seeds, yeast, fruits, trees), that there are plenty of clues in the world itself about how God works. We only have to look and listen in order to recognise and respond.

How does God work? Rowan Williams reminds us that it is:

> Subtly, slowly, from the very depth of being. Or steadily, irresistibly, like the light reaching the corners of the room. He works outwards from the heart of being into the life of every day—not inwards from some distant heaven. This is how God works, and you ought to be able to see it around you in the world God has created and rules.[80]

I wonder if the funerals discussed above exemplify this process as not only active in our midst today but also one that seeks to be included in ritualizing 'critical events' such as death. We can look to 'secular' music, poems, songs that touch people; they tap into those yearnings 'from the very depth of being'. It is from here that God is also at work; the domain to which the Church (and ourselves) should be attentive.

Again, Pope Francis can be our guide:

> Importantly, never to stop at the surface of things, especially when we have a person before us. We are called to look beyond, to *focus on the heart* in order to see how much generosity everyone is capable of (*Misericordiae Vultus*, p. 9, emphasis in the original).

Finally, what the Pope says elsewhere may well apply here:

> Illumined by the gaze of Jesus Christ… [the Church] turns with love to those who participate in her life in an incomplete manner, recognizing that the grace of God works also in their lives by giving them the courage to do good, to care for one another in love and to be of service to the community in which they live and work (*Amoris Laetitia*, n. 291).

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[79] My recall of the incident (told to me by a colleague) was that it was an interview by Margaret Throsby with Mary O'Hara on ABC FM.

[80] Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Mark* (London, UK: SPCK, 2014), 43.

CONCLUSION

The Church has rich liturgical and pastoral resources to offer people at times of illness and death. These thoughts above are based on one person's experience. Whether they are representative (and helpful) is for others to judge.

Still, words such as dialogue, collaboration and synodality reflect God's call for today's Church. What emerges from these reflections offers an interesting case study in precisely such language at work in the interplay of the Church's liturgy and human experience. And, in circumstances when people are most vulnerable.

Perhaps, this could be sharing in Christ's mission today—at its very best…

Worth thinking about??

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FOR REFLECTION

- What aspect or thought in this chapter particularly struck you?
- What is your experience of funerals? Especially in the sort of situations discussed in this chapter?
- What is your opinion of the comment of Mary O'Hara about songs?

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CHAPTER 20

‘IT IS ALL GOD’S WORK…’

As we reach the final stage of this book’s overview of God’s gift to us and the share in Christ’s mission that it entails, the words from St Paul that head this chapter are salutary. It really is all ‘God’s work’. Paul goes on to say: ‘It was God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation …so we are ambassadors for Christ …’ (2 Cor 5:18-19, *New Jerusalem* version)

We are created in the divine image. There is something of God in us. God loves us and invites us to love in return. God wants to be part of our lives and to share everything with us. God takes us seriously and trusts us, calling us to cooperate in enabling his Reign and for his world to gradually emerge. We are co-creators with God, stewards of creation. We have been given a gift of living which is realised through sharing in the mission of Jesus. It shapes and directs our lives at the individual, local and global levels, sensitising us in how we are affected and respond to others, especially those most vulnerable.

Still, being human, it may be that, in our efforts to share in God’s work, we can be pulled in two directions.

In sharing God’s gift and in the mission of Christ, we are talking the language of love, of the Holy Spirit present and active in us and our world. But true love is very difficult. As parents know with their growing children, loving means letting go, allowing the person to find their way, respecting their freedom. To watch, wait, be there, and allow them to make their own mistakes, painful though it can be. But always to keep on loving, forgiving.

The other pull is towards the God-given task of bringing order, justice, and harmony into the world. That too can be hard. Taken to extreme it can become a compulsion to create a perfect world at any cost. When that is combined with interfering in the name of ‘love’ it can be a sort of dictatorship, a totalitarian state. It involves an instinct to give the world a spring clean, with no nasties, no problems. Everything (and everyone) is in its place—trim, neat and tidy. But is it God’s world, God’s justice, God’s Reign?

Where can we look to find a balance? Perhaps stories might help?

First, consider one of Pope Francis’ favourite parables, about the darnel (the wheat and the weeds) in Matt 13: 24-30. He appeals to this parable in the work of evangelisation, to remind us that time is greater than space. It is a principle ‘that enables us to work slowly but surely without being obsessed with immediate results’, to ‘endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans’.[81] What matters is keeping our eyes on the big picture, not where we are but where we are heading. God’s benchmark is one of taking the long view.

[81] *Evangelii Gaudium* (The Joy of the Gospel), (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2014), par. 223.

Take a moment to read that parable again.

God, then, is not so concerned about a tidy garden. If we try to get rid of all the weeds, we might undo the good that is being done. Let the pattern of life unfold, untidy though it may be. 'Let them both grow till the harvest; and at harvest time I shall say to the reapers: First collect the darnel and tie it in bundles to be burnt, then gather the wheat into my barn' (v. 30).

In other words, we do our best but we need God's perspective, namely, the long view. Ultimately, it is all God's work.

Second, we turn to Anthony de Mello.

> A woman dreamt she walked into a brand new shop in the marketplace and, to her surprise, found God behind the counter. 'What do you sell here?' she asked. 'Everything your heart desires,' said God.
>
> Hardly daring to believe what she was hearing, the woman decided to ask for the best things a human being could wish for. 'I want peace of mind and love and happiness and wisdom and freedom for fear', she said. Then, as an afterthought, she added, 'Not just for me. For everyone on earth'.
>
> God smiled, 'I think you've got me wrong, my dear.' He said, 'We don't sell fruits here. Only seeds'. [82]

Third, again from Anthony de Mello.

> A sheep found a hole in the fence and crept through it.
> He wandered far and could not find his way back.
> And then he realized that he was being followed by a wolf.
> He ran and ran, but the wolf kept chasing him,
> until the shepherd rescued and carried him lovingly back to the fold.
>
> And in spite of everyone's advice the shepherd refused
> to nail up the hole in the fence.[83]

The final story in this section comes from George F Will, a syndicated columnist and commentator in the United States. In a column written in the 1980s entitled 'Light at the End of the Day' he begins by noting that Americans consume twenty tonnes of aspirin a day. So,

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[82] "Every Living Thing Afire with God" : Christ Episcopal Church (christchurchepiscopal.org) *The Prayer of the Frog*. Vol. 1.

[83] https://oakhamteam.org.uk/sermons/reflection-for-easter-4/

they need some form of enjoyment after a stressful day. Many get it from reading to their children, especially poems written for children by an author named Shel Silverstein.

Will goes on to say that 'all children have a sweet tooth for praise, and there is no praise as sweet as being taken seriously, for example, by a parent who reads to you. But most of all, children like the sense that their parents are realists and truth-tellers. How else can children value their parents' praise? So, it is good for their souls to hear a parent read some of Silverstein's poems'. One is called *God's Wheel* in which a child is speaking. Here is the poem.

God's Wheel

God says to me with kind of a smile
'Hey, how would you like to be God awhile
and steer the world?'
'Okay,' says I, 'I'll give it a try.
Where do I set?
How much do I get?
What time is lunch?
When can I quit?'

'Gimme back that wheel,' says God,
'I don't think you're quite ready yet'.[84]

Will concludes with this comment. 'The smile, part shy and part sly, that flickers across the face of the listening child—a smile of rueful recognition—is, for an adult, more therapeutic than aspirin can ever be'.

THE GIFT RECEIVED: AT HOME WITH GOD

Is there another aspect to the words from St Paul that head this chapter? Perhaps, we need to return to where we started.

The three divine persons give themselves to us so that we 'will be able to share in the divine nature' (1 Peter 1:4). This is called the 'divine indwelling'. The Triune God makes a home *in us.* But another sense can be that we live *in God*, that we have a *home* in God. God makes space for us and for creation. God desires to share a family life, to draw us into his circle of friends.

'At home in God' suggests two images from St. Thérèse of Lisieux. In the first, she describes the Trinity with a word that is often translated as the furnace or fire of love. The French word she uses is the *foyer* of divine love. 'Foyer' here does not mean, as in English, an anteroom, or a gathering area, for instance, in a theatre.

[84] http://famouspoetsandpoems.com/poets/shel_silverstein/poems/14825. Accessed Sept. 25, 2024.

Rather, as is noted in G. Gennari's study of Thérèse, she uses *foyer* to suggest a glowing domestic hearth with the family gathered around it.[85] Think of a cold winter's night. A warm room, toast made on the open fire, a mug of hot soup, the glow from the fireplace and the play of light and shade on the faces around the fire.

The word *foyer,* for Thérèse, has suggestions of being warm, nourished, secure, belonging, being recognised, and accepted for oneself. It evokes feeling welcome and at home in God.

However, God's family is not self-enclosed. It is a family of hospitality. God's *foyer* is complemented by Thérèse's second image. It means she (and us) sitting at the table of sinners (as Jesus did) in compassionate solidarity—sharing in his mission. This shift indicates the broadening scope of Thérèse's love and her growth in spiritual maturity.

Despite the limits of her time and of her theological awareness, Thérèse shows a desire to be contemplatively present to those who are different from her. She is drawn to be open to people with other perspectives and convictions, such as non-Christians or unbelievers. To be receptive to, to recognise, and respond to them. She would have been in full sympathy with Thomas Merton's 'Apologies to an Unbeliever' written in 1968.[86]

CONCLUSION

Whatever our pathway to God, Thérèse reminds us of something crucial. It is the unlimited desire for *more*. This contemplative yearning, if it is authentic, will show itself in how we act, in the virtues. As an increasing capacity to see the world through God's eyes and with God's heart, it brings inescapably an ever expanding and inclusive love. This is the gift shared and at work: being open, receptive, and responsive.

So 'at home in God' means moving beyond 'our family' to sitting at table with those whose views are very different. In God's family, we make space for the 'other', making room for others around the *foyer.* We are called to be compassionate as God is compassionate. It means being ready to learn from those who are striving to do the best they can with what they have, to recognise the Spirit at work in them and their lives. Thérèse reminds us how God's Spirit can work in many (and unexpected) ways—as we have seen with Jesus in the Gospels.

A final thought.

In the *foyer* of God, who tends the fire? Who makes the toast? Who serves the soup?

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[85] Dr. G. Gennari, *An Echo in the Heart of God* & *Studies in the Self-Offering of St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Nedlands, WA: Carmelite Monastery, 2002), 212.

[86] https://theotherjournal.com/2008/03/thomas-mertons-apologies-to-an-unbeliever/ Accessed Sept 17, 2024.

Happy those servants whom the master finds awake when he comes. I tell you solemnly, he will put on an apron, sit them down at table and wait on them (Luke 12:37)

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FOR REFLECTION

- What particularly struck you in reading this chapter?
- Was there any story that you found appealing and helpful?
- The child's smile at hearing 'God's Wheel'…what does it say to adults do you think?
- Any final thought at the end of this book before the Epilogue that follows?

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EPILOGUE

SHARING IN CHRIST'S MISSION TODAY: A MARIST MINISTRY

The pattern of being affected/recognition/response is replicated in various forms in sharing in the mission of Jesus. There are many religious groups whose spirituality and way of life is centred on imitation of Mary. Each will speak of having a certain 'charism'—a gift to live out and witness to a certain aspect of Mary as a mode of sharing in the mission of her Son.

In Australia, the Society of Mary (or Marist Fathers), is one such group. As part of its pastoral ministry, it established the Marist Mission Centre (MMC) in 1949, originally to support the Marist mission in Japan. Over the years the scope of its work broadened and now extends to the Pacific and Asian Region but also internationally. Its aims are summed up thus (from the MMC website):

> *The Marist Mission Centre cares for the alienated, marginalised, and dispossessed. It focusses on development projects for poverty alleviation in countries of the Asia-Pacific region*.

Such an organisation as 'Marist' brings a certain 'style' or basic attitude to its ministry. It is guided by the Society of Mary axiom in its Constitutions—'to think as Mary, judge as Mary, feel and act as Mary in all things'.

This is allied with another phrase central in the Constitutions of the Society of Mary and for its founder Fr. Jean-Claude Colin SM, namely, 'hidden and, as it were, unknown in this world'. This phrase is not meant to promote a form of false humility.

Rather, it denotes a spiritual receptivity to being an instrument for divine action, not to get in the way of the Holy Spirit at work, as in the urge to be the centre of attention. 'Hidden … …unknown' suggests an outward-looking stance, an attitude with a centrifugal thrust, of striving to bring, like Mary, a form of 'other'–directed, respectful and enabling presence to each person we meet and to the world in which we live.[87]

In reality, it means allowing God, through the Holy Spirit, to be present and active in people's lives. Such an approach captures the spirit of the work of the Marist Mission Centre for over seventy-five years. It is also consistent with the central theme of this book.

For that reason, as indicated at the beginning, this book is dedicated to the Marist Mission Centre and all those involved in its ministry.

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[87] Evident in the Profile, Purpose, and Vision of Marist Mission Centre at https://maristmissions.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/2023-MMC-Annual-Report.pdf

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Gerald A. Arbuckle SM: Author: *Conspiracy Theorizing: Analysis and Scriptural Critique* (Routledge)

A Gift for Living:
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is available at no cost from the
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Donations welcome

Thomas Ryan is a Marist priest involved in tertiary theological education and adult faith education for many years. His recent books are *The Eyes and Ears of Conscience: Lessons of Encouragement* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2022); Conscience, Virtues, and Worship: Theological Perspectives (Generis, 2022); *The Reasoning Heart: Jean-Claude Colin and the Marist Spirit* (Adelaide, SA: ARF Press, 2021); Shame, Hope and the Church: A Journey with Mary (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2020).