IN JUNE THIS year Fr Dennis Murphy MSC, co-founder (along with Bishop Jim Cuskelly MSC) of Compass passed away in India. Compass was founded at the beginning of 1967, just a little over a year after the closure of Vatican II in December 1965. As I wrote in my first editorial in 1999:

They were stirring times, with excitement and turmoil throughout the Catholic world as the Church strove to come to terms with what the word aggiornamento might mean. Compass had plunged with eyes wide open into the immediate post-conciliar commotion with the aim of providing a better point of reference and guidance for Catholics than the regularly sensationalised and confusing coverage of journals such as Time Magazine and Newsweek. Compass set out to give depth and background to the debates, providing reliable information about trends in theological thinking, about the results of current research and about possible approaches to controversial questions. It wanted to ‘open up the inner dynamism of theology, which is not meant to be a pastime for a clique, but an urgent attempt to bring God’s Word in its purity and fulness to the world of our time’ (first editorial, 1967).

Fr Dennis Murphy (1927-2014) achieved much in his ministry as Scripture scholar, seminary lecturer and rector, author, Provincial Superior and missionary. He was very much appreciated by all who knew him.

On several occasions he had the kindness to tell me that he was pleased with the way Compass was continuing. I was glad to give him that satisfaction. May he rest in peace.

* * *

I find William Barclay’s scripture commentaries very helpful. At present I am reading his New Daily Study Bible: the Gospel of Matthew which I have on my e-book. His commentary on Matthew 13:24-43 concerning the parables of the darnel in the wheat, of the mustard seed that produces a great tree, and of the yeast in the flour reflects on the kingdom of God as already here and as still coming.

He reflects on what Christianity has achieved down the centuries, while recognising that there is much yet to be achieved. He produces some facts of history that contradict many assertions of militant atheists.

Put simply, Christianity makes bad people good.

Christianity transformed life for women. In Greek civilisation women lived lives of total domesticity, utter seclusion. When the family travelled, the father would be mounted on a donkey, the mother would be walking and carrying a burden. I find this an interesting contrast with our images of the Holy Family fleeing into Egypt—Mary rides on the donkey nursing the Christ child, while Joseph leads the way on foot. This corroborates Barclay’s assertion that Christianity transformed life for women.

Christianity also transformed life for the weak and the ill, who in pagan life were considered a nuisance. In Sparta only fit new-born children were allowed to live—the weak or deformed were exposed to die on the mountainside. Christians by contrast came to the assistance of the weak and the ill. It was a Christian monk, Thalasius who founded the first asylum for the blind. The first free dispensary was founded by Apollonius, a Christian merchant, the first hospital by Fabiola a Christian lady.

Christianity transformed life for the elderly. Prior to the coming of Christians the elderly were considered a nuisance and of no value because they were unable to do any work.

Christianity transformed life for children. Marriage and home life had broken down and
children were a burden, and the custom of exposing children to death was very common—especially in the case of girl children.

Barclay concludes these reflections thus:

Those who ask the question, ‘What has Christianity done for the world?’ have delivered themselves into a Christian debater’s hands. There is nothing in history so unanswerably demonstrable as the transforming power of Christianity and of Christ on the individual life and on the life of society.

We must take the long view—look back down the centuries—and see the Kingdom coming. These parables teach that a new force has been let loose in the world—the Kingdom of God is coming. In the Acts of the Apostles the people of Thessalonica cried: ‘These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also’ (Acts 17:6). There is nothing in this world, asserts Barclay, that is so disturbing as Christianity. And that is why so many people oppose it.

Applying this truth to what we see happening in Australian society today, we see that while the majority of the Australian population agree with the cruel treatment of asylum seekers, Christians are prominent among those who are opposing the policy.

And Christians have worked for greater justice in every field where there is injustice: agitating for justice for Australia’s indigenous people, working for peace, seeking a better deal for the poor, concern for the environment and creation, concern about our prison system, support for family life.

Working for justice and a fairer society is integral to living a Christian life. It is motivated by Jesus’ great commandment to all his followers: ‘Love one another as I have loved you’. The sad truth that we do not always do what Jesus told us to do is due to the fact that we fail, it is not because Christianity has failed—on the contrary, it demonstrates the strength of Christianity and its role in making bad people good and reforming our behaviour.

—Barry Brundell MSC, Editor

The permanent principles of the Church’s social doctrine are:

* the dignity of the human person,
* the common good,
* subsidiarity,
* solidarity.

These principles, the expression of the whole truth about the human person known by reason and faith, are born of “the encounter of the Gospel message and of its demands summarised in the supreme commandment of love of God and neighbour in justice with the problems emanating from the life of society”.

—Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church par.160
IN 1942 AT OXFORD, in a sermon *The Weight of Glory*, CS Lewis began: ‘If you asked twenty good men today what they thought to be the highest of the virtues, nineteen of them would reply, Unselfishness’. He went on to say that if they had asked the early Christians, they would have replied, ‘Love’.

A negative term has replaced a positive one. Lewis points out that the Gospels have lots to say about self-denial but not for its own sake. We take up our cross to follow Jesus who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The call to discipleship is His answer to our craving for happiness.

And so, continues Lewis, in nearly every description of the goal of walking with Jesus, there is an appeal to desire. Perhaps, lurking in the background, yearning for happiness, and even more, enjoying it, is not Christian. Lewis rejects this firmly as more Stoic than Christian.

Lewis continues. If we consider the staggering and unblushing nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels

…it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

Lewis is right on two scores. First, we can too quickly settle for second (or third) best. Second, it is desire that drives and animates our lives and, more specifically, the spiritual quest. What insight, then, does our Christian tradition, past and present, offer us about yearning and desire?

---

**Our Desire**

Desire has many faces—from the life-giving and uplifting to the dark and destructive. The struggle to sort them out is part of the human story, one mirrored in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Desire’s impact (together with a range of human emotions) on our relationship with God is mirrored most strikingly in the Psalms. For instance, there is a persistent use of the metaphor of thirst. Our desire for what ultimately (and completely) satisfies us is like the ‘deer that yearns for running streams’. Alternatively, we pray in Ps. 62:

O God, you are my God, for you I long,
For you my soul is thirsting.
My body pines for you,
lke a dry, weary land without water.

So, too, in the Church’s prayer we find, now at the interpersonal level,

It were my soul’s desire
To see the face of God;
It were my soul’s desire
To rest in his abode.

—Hymn for Morning Prayer Saturday Week 1

Underlying all this is a central thread. It is the desire for ‘I know-not-what’, for something more. Conn argues that the most fundamental human desire is for transcendence, or rather, self-transcendence, in our relationships with the world, other people and God. This entails the impulse to understand the experience of mystery (of life and creation). This quest revolves around the big questions: about identity (who are we?), origins (where do we come from?) and destiny (where are we going?). At the same time, we are drawn to probe the mystery of experience (what happens to our awareness and attitudes when we
engage with the realm of mystery?). Thomas Aquinas said that, hidden in this yearning to understand, especially in wanting to be happy, is the desire for God.

We cannot, then, escape the questions: what do I really desire? what drives my life? Or, to paraphrase Jesus’ words, who or what have I set my heart on? Ultimately, all human beings long for happiness. To have my deepest desires satisfied is central to God’s relationship with us. Hence, we should take seriously Jesus’ words to the blind Bartimaeus: ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ This question is emblematic of the human quest for meaning.

It is through desire, then, that God draws us, almost in spite of ourselves, to Himself, to where we are meant to me. Desire underpins Jesus’ call to ask so as to receive, to seek and find, to knock for the door to be opened. Desire, then, implies that we are not complete yet it opens us to possibilities in the future.

Evelyn Underhill, the Anglican spiritual writer, is helpful here. For her, the human being, special and unique in creation, is open to receiving God (*capax dei* — a term used in the Christian spiritual tradition). She sees the religious urge to have a relationship with the Real, with mystery, with the transcendent, as a universal phenomenon. It is marked by two forms of desire: human yearning for Reality (God) and, alternatively (and more importantly), God’s desire to reach out to us. The divine purpose (Absolute Will and love) revolves around this double movement.

Further, Underhill’s imagery is such that the divine Spirit draws us to the Real, as a magnet, in sustaining our desire to engage and respond to mystery. Again, the driving force of the spiritual journey is not human effort. It is rather God who first seeks us out and desires to have a relationship with us. In all her writing, desire is central for Underhill (and the spiritual tradition). The magnet seems, for her, to be a root metaphor for desire working in creation and especially between the Spirit and the human being.

Underhill’s approach mirrors Paul’s—his vision of Creation as ‘eagerly waiting’, ‘hoping’, ‘groaning’ to be freed and to achieve its purpose (Romans Ch 8). The cosmos is drawn by desire. God attracts humankind through the urge to understand and engage with ‘the more’, to probe both the experience of mystery and the mystery of experience. Desire is the powerful undertow which is the heartbeat of creation.

**God’s Desire**

But desire does not only impel us and the created universe. As Underhill implies, it is at the heart of God. In his discussion, Denys Turner cites the writings of the Pseudo-Denis who sees creation in terms of an explosion of divine eros. God’s longing to share his life, goodness and love overflows in a surge of ‘ecstatic energy’. This is a God who is ‘beside himself’ in love. John speaks of the ‘love that the Father has lavished on us’ in Jesus, most of all in his death and resurrection (1 Jn. 3:1). Hence, the yearning to see God’s face in the hymn cited above is fulfilled: ‘to have seen me is to have seen the Father’ (John 14:9).

Take the title of William Barry SJ’s book *God’s Passionate Desire and Our Response*. Perhaps the same hesitation about desire as part of our divinely wrought humanity makes us uncomfortable with the idea of desire in God. A God who is passionate can suggest being out of control, even obsessive. There is also implied something of the erotic in God. Yet, if we image God in our humanity, our deep
emotions and our sexuality are integral to this. Consider the images used of God in Scripture as the lover in relation to the beloved: in the Song of Songs, as flirting and playful interfused with absence and longing; in the Prophets, as a jealous lover, as moved to anger when rebuffed or when God’s loved ones are threatened, harmed or, with the poor, ignored. Jesus of the Gospels feels deeply—he weeps, is angry, afraid, flooded with compassion, speaks of his longings (concerning the Father or Jerusalem) and, at times, is overwhelmed with love and joy.

As noted earlier, there are many forms or desire as they are many faces to love. Desire is particularly associated with eros-love, with our capacity to love truly with ‘focused attention and a quality of dedication that is deeper than duty or will-power’. Helpful here is Edward Vacek’s distinction between the three classic forms of love by the phrase ‘for the sake of.’ We may love the beloved (1) for the sake of the beloved (agape), (2) for our own sake (eros), or (3) for the sake of the relationship we have with the beloved (philia). While agape (or charity) is usually regarded as ‘the distinctively Christian form of love’, all three may be seen as Christian and as ‘forms of cooperating with God’.

Further, these forms of love are present in God. God’s desire and love is (1) for our sakes—self-giving love or agape; (2) for God’s sake (eros)—God as filled with love and ecstatically happy; (3) for friendship’s sake (philia)—love desires intimacy and union. God’s love means that God does get carried away, can be ‘beside himself’ with desire. God wants to share the delight and the mutual abandon of the divine love of the Trinity with us and Creation. Catherine La Cugna sums it up:

The deep yearning and desire for God we find inscribed in our hearts is more intelligible if that desire is rooted in the very nature of God, that is, if God yearns for and desires another.

When God’s Desire Meets Our Desire

Our deepest yearning, then, for happiness, or, ultimately, for union with God, is matched by God’s passionate desire that our longings be fulfilled. What happens when our desire and God’s desire meet in the person of Jesus? Catherine of Siena has a striking comment in her Dialogue:

You have nothing infinite except your soul’s love and desire

In other words, we have an unlimited capacity to receive God. We see this epitomized in Jesus. In Colossians 2:9; it says:

The full content of divine nature lives in Christ, in his humanity.

We are confronted by this extraordinary mystery. In Jesus, in his humanity and we in ours as creatures, there are no limits to what we can receive of God. We can truly say that there can be infinite depths to our knowing and loving God and to our sharing in God’s knowing and loving the divine self. Any obstacles arise from us—from our fears, from our resistances or, in Scriptural terms, from our ‘hardness of heart.’

In her quotation above, Catherine of Siena is in good company, that of St Augustine and his probing of the soul’s capacity through its desire:

The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire. What you desire you cannot see yet. But the desire gives you the capacity, so that when it does happen that you see, you may be fulfilled.

Suppose you want to fill some sort of bag, and you know the bulk of what you will be given, you stretch the bag or the sack or the skin or whatever it is...In the same way by delaying the fulfillment of desire God stretches it, by making us desire he expands the soul, and by this expansion he increases its capacity...let us stretch ourselves out towards him so that when he comes he may fill us. ‘We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.’

Limitless desire opens us to unlimited love. Paul prays similarly in Ephesians: that ‘we are filled with the utter fullness of God.’ Like Jesus, and through our union with him, we have to be open to ‘receive the Spirit without re-
serve’ (John 3:33). Like Mary—we must be empty so that ‘what you have said be done to me’ (Luke 1:38).

But is this the whole picture? What about the resistances, obstacles and opposition arising from our desires just mentioned?

_Desire as Dark, Destructive and our Common Humanity_

While it is true, as Lewis remarked, that we may be ‘far too easily pleased’, we may also be easily ‘deceived’ by our desires. Human desire is something ambiguous, with the potential to be either life-giving or destructive. When the latter is the case, we recall the two qualities of evil that emerge (and endure) from distorted desire at work in the account of the Fall in Genesis Ch.3. These are deception (of oneself, of others, of God) and division (within oneself, with others and with God). While, then, given their intensity, our desires can energize and guide us, especially our deepest selves, they can also mislead and divide us, enslave us or ‘dissipate our energy’. Unlike instincts, desires involve a reflective element. Given their complexity and power, then, we need to attend to and ‘befriend’ them, including those ‘negative’, even potentially destructive, ones that disturb or shame us. As Sheldrake points out:

…unless we own our desires in the first place, we will never learn to recognize those that are more fruitful and healthy, let alone how to live out the deepest and truest desires of all.13

Clearly, desires need both our attention and our evaluation as to whether they are life-giving, namely with an orientation to what is truly good, to authentic humanity. We must remember also that depth of desires ‘is not necessarily the same thing as intensity of feeling’.14 I can feel very angry and, even vengeful, towards someone who has hurt me. While this is normal and natural, it is important that these feelings be named, claimed and tamed.

But they must also be aimed, namely, directed in a constructive way, guided by a deeper level of our authentic selves ‘where the power of forgiveness can be found’. This reflects a pattern noted by Sheldrake that ‘our deepest desires move us, to some degree, beyond self-centredness to self-giving…with the growth of the Kingdom of God’. They reflect, then, God’s longing for each person and for the world. There is clearly a ‘social or collective dimension’ to authentic desires.15

This social aspect raises another consideration. Desires that enslave or are destructive have traditionally been categorized as the Seven Capital or Deadly Sins. This description is not because they are always grave but because they can easily be the sources or roots of other sins or of vices—habitual dispositions to sin. Their description is normally a variation of the term ‘inordinate desire’ within a generally individualistic approach to the spiritual/moral life.16 For all that, advances in psychology since Freud have made us more aware of the impact of unconscious motivation on our conscious life and decisions.

More recent developments have led to a greater consciousness of the extent to which social and cultural influences shape us as beings of desire. Theologians and spiritual writers have drawn on the insights of René Girard and his analysis of the imitative or ‘mimetic’ nature of desire.17 In essence, our desires reflect and are shaped by our social and cultural environment. For instance, parents know only too well what it is like when children begin to fight over a toy. If one child wants the toy, it immediately makes it more desirable for the other child. The roots of desire, then, are not so much in the object, or in ourselves, but are ‘interpersonal’.

When internalized, this pattern of copying the desires of others can see others as rivals in competition for something prized. Robert Doran sums it up: ‘Imitative desire, wherever it occurs, is always a desire to be another because of the radical insufficiency of one’s own very being’.18 For Girard, this form of rejection of who or what one is, a desire to be other than oneself is a ‘metaphysical desire’ or ‘a
will to self-destruction’ that reveals ‘a radical ontological sickness at the core of mime
desire’.19

Despite this distorted form of mimesis, Girard’s construal of desire indicates that hu-
man identity depends on relationality and that ‘human beings seek to build identity by satis-
fying an existential yearning (or lack) that un-
derlies desire’. Inherent in desire, then, as Hodge points out, is transcendence, that hu-
mans are oriented beyond themselves towards a ‘higher plane of mimetic and spiritual
fulfillment in unity and reconciliation with the Other, and so, all others’.20

From these considerations, Ormerod high-
lights three things that have bearing on the re-
flexive and evaluative imperative sur-
rounding desire and its authenticity. First, we are
not originators of our desires but shaped by
our cultural and social contexts. Second, far
from our spontaneous desires reflecting our
true selves, Ormerod reminds us ‘to most of
us most of the time, the origin and direction of
our desires is hidden from us’. Third, our de-
sires are not the end of a process in express-
ing our deepest and truest selves. Rather, they
are the starting point to which we must attend,
about which we must ask questions, weigh up
and make judgments.21

This brings us to our final consideration:
how does the redemptive action of Christ trans-
form the pattern of mimetic desire and its im-
 pact on individuals, societies and cultures?
How is the yearning for transcendence within
desire reclaimed and harnessed?

The Risen Jesus: Transformation of Desire

As noted earlier, for Girard, at the very core of mimesic desire, there lies a ‘radical ontol-
ogical sickness’ which, observes Ormerod, is ‘not unlike or unrelated to the notion of or-
iginal sin’.22 In relation to Concupiscence or the disordering of desire, Girard’s account of in-
ternal mimesis through the mediation of soci-
ety and culture ‘helps us appreciate the ways
in which the desires of others shape our de-
sires without any decision or responsibility on
our part’.23 How, then, can we be healed of
this deep ontological malady of desire?

Ormerod, building on Doran, suggests this
occurs through the process of ‘positive mime-
sis’ through the social and cultural mediation
of grace. ‘Grace conceived as interiority in-
volves a shift in affectivity, a realignment of
my desiring, a turning of the heart’s desires to
the things of God’.24

Such a process is associated in the spir-
itual tradition with the imitation of Christ and
the saints. More foundationally, it occurs
through identification with Christ in a shared
life and in the formative impact of the Church’s
liturgical and sacramental life. The ecclesial
community, then, can practice and model
‘positive forms of mimetic relationality’.25 This
reminds us of two things. The transformation
of our affectivity as an aspect of deification
is primarily the work of God and not of our ef-
forts. Second, while acknowledging this, the
transformation of desire is still a collabora-
tive process. We are responsible for our de-
liberations and decisions in the exercise of our
affective life.

In relation to personal affectivity, Sebas-
tian Moore can be helpful. Girard’s exposi-
tion of ‘metaphysical desire’ as an ‘ontologi-
cal sickness’ revolves around the formative
role of society and culture on the individual’s
affective life resulting in a distorted sense of
oneself. It is a weakness that ‘undermines us’
creating what Sebastian Moore refers to as ‘an
‘inner wobble’, a weakened sense of our own
worth, which inclines us, with statistical in-
evitable, to sin’.26

Moore sees the human person as a being
of desire. We desire because we are desirable,
from those feelings of self-esteem at the very
core of our being. This underpins the urge to
reach out to the horizon of mystery, for inti-
macy with others and with an ‘Other’, in an
attitude of complete trust. The historical and
anthropological context of this process from
infancy involves a separation from one’s
mother and the push to be involved in the wider
world. Negotiating all this generates a deep uncertainty in us about whether our deepest desires can be trusted. For Moore, Original Sin is one’s hesitancy to accept one’s deep lovability and to trust the impulse to reach out for full intimacy, “to become the desired of God”. It is a profound resistance to growth manifest particularly in fear. One feels caught between being a self (separate) and being in intimacy (communion).

Moore argues that, through the Abba experience of being totally loved and desirable, Jesus does not experience the tension between his desiring, separate self and his desire for communion. According to Moore, during his ministry, Jesus awoke indirectly in people, especially his disciples, a sense of being desirable and lovable, through his teaching, deeds and interactions with them. In giving them new hope, he was creating the Kingdom of God. But with his death, this hope collapsed. Moore argues that Jesus’ encounters with his disciples after his Resurrection effect a divine awakening. But now God is known directly. There is an immediate arousal and awareness of a sense of being desirable by the One who desires us into existence. It is done through Jesus present in their midst.

What are the fruits of this for the desires and affective life of the early disciples, and ultimately, for ourselves? First, their shared experience of Jesus as Spirit-giving brings a peace beyond understanding and a restoration of primordial communion of the self and the world. Second, the symbol of this transformation of desire is the cross. As Moore notes:

What we learn from the cross is the difference between liberation from desire (the latter equated with the insatiable self-promoting ego) and liberation of desire from the chains of my customary ways of thinking about myself.

Real desire is to be ‘more and more myself’ done in relatedness to ‘everything and everyone in the mystery, trying to realize myself. Desire is love trying to happen. It is love that permeates all the universe, trying to happen to me’.

Third, the experience of the Spirit’s interior transformation is the gift of the New Covenant, fulfilling the promise of a ‘new heart and a new spirit’ adumbrated in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. This has three effects. There is an interior divine influence modifying the ‘heart’ understood in the Hebrew sense of the moral core of the person involving understanding (beliefs), will (commitments) and affections (attitudes, dispositions and responses). Second, the indwelling Spirit gives a new energy and power to humanity to realize the plans of God. Third, the Risen Jesus’ presence in his community points to a reconciliation of the unresolved tension of the inner/outer dimensions of experience, of the relationship between the personal and the communal and a, finally, clarification of what is authentic and inauthentic in a way of life centered on God revealed in Jesus.

Final Thoughts

We are drawn by desire to God? True, but desire, as we have seen, is multi-faceted and complex. Varied though desire might be, we return to the magnet as a telling if not a controlling metaphor.

Augustine, in his Confessions, acknowledges that our hearts are restless and will not rest until they rest in God. In his book On Religion, John Caputo suggests ‘impudently’, that this could be interpreted as saying that ‘we are all a little unhinged’. We are driven hither and thither by one desire after another, sometimes by a smorgasbord of desires at once. How do we bind them together and give them a clear direction? For Augustine, we shall not get any peace until we ‘rest’ in God, ‘the name of what we love and desire’. It is encapsulated in the words that life consists in loving God, ‘obeying his voice, clinging to him’ (Deut. 30:20). The magnet has locked into the object of its desire.

So we need to join St. Anselm in the 11th century at his prie-dieu as he starts his Proslogion. Before engaging in theology, he
prays:
Teach us to seek you, and reveal yourself to us as we seek; for unless you instruct us, we cannot seek you, and unless you reveal yourself we cannot find you. Let us seek you in desiring you; let us desire you in seeking you. Let us find you in loving you; let us love you in finding you.32

NOTES

4. ‘The deep desire to reach out for “the Perfect” and, most importantly, the fact of the living Reality ‘over against man, who stoops towards him, and first incites and then supports and responds to his seeking,’ The Spiritual Life, 48.
5. In 1911 she writes ‘Desire is everything in nature; does everything.’ Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A study in the nature and developments of Man’s spiritual consciousness (New York: A Meridian Book, 1955), 117 citing Bernard Holland and his introduction to Boehme’s dialogues. Towards the end of her life she remarks that we are ‘drawn, almost in spite of ourselves, ‘to the real end of our being, the place where we are ordained to be.’ Underhill, The Spiritual Life. 34-5
6. The Perfection which is the object of the awakened soul’s gaze is a ‘magnet drawing him (sic) towards itself.’ Ibid., 76.
11. ‘A reading from the Treatise of St. Augustine on the first letter of St John’, The Office of Readings, Friday Week 6 of the Year.
12. Philip Sheldrake, ‘Befriending Our Desires’, The Way 35:2, April 1995, 91-100, at 93. For St. Ignatius, superficial, misplaced or enslaving desires were known as ‘disordered attachments.’
13. Ibid., 91.
14. Ibid., 93.
15. Ibid., 95-6.
16. For example, an inordinate desire for honour/ approval (pride), material possessions (avarice), sexual gratification (lust), or sadness, even resentment, at someone else’s gifts or good fortune (envy) etc.
21. Ibid., 195-8. The process of Ignatian discernment is relevant here as noted by Sheldrake, 95.
22. Ormerod, 196.
23. Ormerod, 196.
27. Moore, Let This Mind Be in You, 76.
29. Ibid., 93.
31. Ibid., 24.
32. Adapted by William A. Barry, SJ in the Foreword to God’s Passionate Desire and Our Response.
THE STORY OF MY VOCATION

KRISH MATHAVAN MSC

I AM CURRENTLY in my third year of theological study in Melbourne and my fifth year with the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart—or MSCs for short—and I would like to share a part of my story and journey with you as it relates to the gospel (Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time). This is a familiar gospel text that we read from when we celebrated the feast of the Sacred Heart, our feast day just a week ago. It describes the heart of Jesus that reveals the mystery of God to mere children, and that is gentle, humble and inviting of us to lay our burdens so we may find rest in that heart. In so many ways it describes the beauty of the MSC vocation for me, as well as speaks of my journey the last few years in being formed as a MSC.

I was brought up in Singapore in a small family: Mum, Dad, my sister and me. The need to be hardworking and excel in life was impressed upon me at an early age, and I remember wanting to do something significant with my life from when I was young but the question of priesthood did not surface then. After taking part in a youth retreat during my teenage years, I had my first experience of God that inspired me to be involved in church and youth ministry work, and that gave me lots of life and joy amid the challenges. I continued this into adulthood at which point I was working in a biological research lab with every aspiration of becoming a scientist and finding a cure to help humanity—or so I thought.

I had a chance of being able to really listen when I visited Sydney again for World Youth Day in 2008. This did not happen during the hustle and bustle of WYD itself but afterwards when I took the plunge to spend eight days in silence in the bush lands of Douglas Park. There is a retreat centre there run by the MSCs, and of course I wanted to reconnect with them having met them during my study days at UNSW. It’s amazing when I look back on how God uses these seemingly random encounters to speak to me.

The retreat was my first time being in prolonged silence, and I still remember fondly how I wanted to tear my hair out even as I faithfully did the prayer exercises given to me.

I had come to Sydney having just finished a big chapter of my life spent in biological research, and I was drained and devoid of any inspiration to even write up my research findings. I just wanted to leave it all behind. I had not found what was satisfying in my life and/or impactful for others. After spending so many years in it, I had felt disillusioned and lost. I came to the retreat with that load on my chest and it was pretty hard to let it go.

There is wisdom in the recommendation of eight days, because it was only on the eighth day that I had settled into a comfortable stretch of quiet without fidgeting or worrying. It was then that I experienced a deep
peace descending on me and a passionate love firing me up. I felt loved to my bones and it was amazing. It was no longer just an emotional high but it was a deep conviction from within. For the first time I felt I could do anything with my life.

Without planning or realizing it, I had come to face the question not just of career but of vocation, and God showed me that desire for God that had always been there, that now was being fired up to live and love as God does. For me that was the beginning of discernment that led to my joining the religious community of the MSCs. For me it felt like a call to be on earth the heart of God, who loved unconditionally, inclusively, passionately and personally. That was how I had experienced God and that in turn would shape my vocation.

My time of formation was really about becoming like a child again, helpless and powerless and dependent on God to lead me into a deeper mystery of communion that Jesus eloquently describes in the mutual knowing at the heart level between him and his Abba, and how that communion invites all of us into that deeper knowing and loving, and that is life-transforming.

Yet it started off as a difficult road because it meant unlearning what my culture has encouraged me in being self-sufficient and measuring one’s worth according to one’s achievements and status. It meant detachment from the material and from the illusions of the self that seem to make us happy and in control, and to go deeper into the truth of who I am, and surrender to the mystery of God that dwells in me and discover the real joy that lasts and how that is available to and connects us all. I got to experience a whole new way of praying that gave me a deeper consciousness of the mystery we are all caught up in. It is about falling in love and staying in love.

Love is the only reason why I would commit my life to the religious vocation of being MSC; not my love for God but God’s love for me in Jesus. Love is the only reason why the yoke of Jesus is easy and his burden light. Perhaps this can be understood in the context of the religious vows we take—the vows of poverty, obedience and celibacy. While most would view them as being burdensome and restricting one’s freedom, they make sense only in the context of falling in love with God and responding to God with one’s whole life. It is akin to two people falling in love and committing themselves to marriage or union by their vows for each other. The religious vows free us to love inclusively and that has been the beauty of the MSC vocation for me. It is also the beauty of Jesus who was caught up with spreading the reign of God here and now among his people so that he forewent the blessings associated with starting a family. Yet he would later describe such a call to be a eunuch for the kingdom as a gift since not all would be able to bear the life; but again love is what makes such a life worth living as he would testify in the way he lived.

It’s my fifth year with the MSCs and I still reflect fondly on that experience that kick-started my vocation. Discernment is truly that listening for the voice of God that resonates with the truth in our hearts; that speaks to us as children and leads us into the mystery of communion with God; and that gives us rest for our souls. Every vocation, whether single, married and celibate, needs to be life-giving and God is that source of life. Vocation is then what gives us most life, and it requires knowing oneself and taking a risk with God and with another—for me it’s my community. We can

Krish Jon Mathavan is a Missionary of the Sacred Heart from Singapore who has joined the Australian province and is currently studying in Melbourne in preparation for ordained ministry.
so easily be paralyzed by fear when taking a plunge, and hence God’s love for me was the only source of safety, comfort and motivation that could allow me to leave all behind and go down this path less travelled.

Truly it’s been a blessing these last five years with regards to spiritual insights, community life, study and friendships with many I’ve met from all walks of life. I do not regard this life as a bed of roses of course. As others before me have testified, there will be days of discouragement, rejection and even persecution that can happen when we stand for something or someone in our lives, when we are called to put our lives on the line in love and courage because of what or who has captured our imagination and transformed our world. It’s both the challenge and beauty of every vocation.

And the vocation continues to work itself out—we never quite have it all together, or feel most ready or worthy when we answer a call; we can only be true to ourselves when we do.

Today’s readings invite us to be like children, to listen and surrender to a greater mystery of communion within and around us so that we may find rest for our souls, and from that place we can be life-giving. This is best done in silence, and I would specially like to encourage the guys who may be thinking about or discerning life choices (or if you know someone who does) to come to our special weekends called ‘What’s a life for?’ and spend it in silence listening for the voice of Jesus within who beckons us to come.

God is a God of surprises as I can testify, and we can’t go wrong when we put time aside and live our lives for God. Information on the retreat can be found on the website: www.whatsalifefor.com.

Thank you!

More than ever young people are discerning direction for their life. For some it is the question, ‘Where is God calling me?’ for others, ‘What is my heart’s desire, its deepest desire?’, ‘Where can I find true meaning in my life?’ ‘What journey will enable me to love the best way I can?’

This genuine search is not for a comfortable lifestyle, but a life fulfilled by living Jesus’ greatest command, to love God and to love my neighbour as myself.

Since 2006 more than 70 men have discerned their response to these questions at a What’s a life for? weekend retreat. Some have discerned they are called to Diocesan priesthood, others married life, others have joined Religious Orders. The Spirit is sometimes the quietest voice; a weekend retreat assists in this voice being heard.

Discern, ‘What’s a Life For?’ at St Mary’s Towers Douglas Park...
Synthesis

My aim in this article is to explore the originality of the spirituality of the heart of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (MSC), its development from the charism of Father Jules Chevalier, its values from a biblical perspective, and its meaning according to Bishop E.J. Cuskelley as he authored the term ‘a spirituality of the heart.’ A careful examination of the contemporary culture in Vietnam is to be summed up in three aspects: lingering traditional values, post-war impacts, and the process of globalisation.

So what can the spirituality of the heart offer in dialogue with the Vietnamese culture today, especially in Ho Chi Minh city (or Saigon) where the MSCs are building the first foundation? In what ways can it humbly challenge the culture in terms of human dignity, human integration, and human wholeness? After only ten years since the MSCs came to Vietnam bringing with them the heart spirituality to a new culture and people, these questions cannot be addressed with definite answers but they will be dealt with through more visionary responses, which hopefully will contribute to the development of a genuine dialogue between the culture and the spirituality in the land of one hundred-and-eighteen Christian martyrs. Looking into the future, the spirituality of the heart in Vietnam would be envisioned as a leading model for a new evangelisation which is less pragmatic and more contemplative. Therefore, it could be judged as ineffective and theoretical. But surely heart spirituality is not about quantity but primarily quality, not external but more internal.

Introduction

The MSC mission in Vietnam is the latest outreach mission of the Australian Province. It is treasured and fostered by the Province and other provinces within the international community. As a Vietnamese-born Australian MSC, I feel encouraged and inspired to contribute to the building up of a theological and spiritual foundation for the Vietnam mission. I would like to begin my essay by defining the spirituality of the heart—the essence and the reformed expression of our Founder’s charism and spirituality. Next I will examine today’s Vietnamese culture, particularly in urban areas like Ho Chi Minh and other surrounding regions, with three main characteristics: traditional, post-war and globalised. After that, going through some typically cultural aspects, I am going to suggest some dialogical interests—both affirming and challenging to the culture—that the heart spirituality can commit itself to. Finally, looking into the future, I will briefly offer thoughts about the future opportunity and challenge of this spirituality in an emerging evangelisation.

The Spirituality of the Heart

Let me start by noting that although this spirituality of the heart began and developed in the mission of Father Jules Chevalier (1824 – 1907), the term ‘spirituality of the heart’ was not used until after the renewal prompted by Vatican II. And so, let me develop the general concept of charism and spirituality of the founder of a religious congregation, what our Founder’s spirit was, and what Bishop E. J.
Cuskelly—a Missionary of the Sacred Heart—meant when he articulated the term ‘a spirituality of the heart’ as a new expression of the Founder’s spirit.

Charism is a gift of the Spirit to an individual for the good of others. It provides the founder with a focus or vision on some particular aspects of Jesus’ life, and leads him/her to follow Jesus and to serve others in specific ways. However, charism as an outpouring of grace of the Spirit exists not ‘out there’ but when embodied in people’s way of life—spirituality. ‘Charism forms the heart of a spirituality; every sound spirituality is the embodiment of a charism.’ Charism and spirituality are two faces forming one coin of the spirit of a founder, so that one cannot be fulfilled without the other.

Carefully examining the Constitutions of the three Congregations founded by Father Chevalier—the MSC, the Daughters of our Lady of the Sacred Heart and the MSC sisters—Cuskelly draws out the gist of Chevalier’s spirit: (1) a deep concern for all people, (2) a belief in the love of God revealed in Christ, a belief that this love is the answer for all human questions and the source of our mission, (3) this love is revealed through charity, gentleness and kindness. This charism was a fruit of his genuine search for a response to the illnesses of his time: egotism and indifferentism—to which Karl Marx (1815 – 1883), his contemporary, was endeavouring to find a solution. However, while Marx was convinced that the only solution was violent disruption—destroying the old and building a new egalitarian society—Chevalier envisioned a new world emerging from the Heart and Love of God revealed in Jesus. Chevalier writes:

During his [Jesus’] mortal life, he was happy to pour out all the tenderness of his heart on the little ones, the humble, the poor, on those who suffer, on sinners—and on all the miseries of [humankind]. The sight of a misfortune, an unhappiness or any pain, touched his heart with compassion.

The humanly compassionate heart of Jesus—appearing on every page of the Gospel—reveals the unfathomable love of God for each one of us throughout our life and beyond it. The author of the first letter of John expresses it in this way: ‘So we have known and believe the love that God has for us’ (1 Jn 4:16). Cuskelly beautifully describes the love of God as not like our human love—we love someone when we see the goodness and loveliness in them; but ‘God loves us into our existence’—meaning God loves us before we are formed, and our being and existence are created entirely by God’s transformative love. A belief in this love of God for each one of us and for all leads to a conviction that this love is able to give meaning and purpose to human life, and it can touch deeply into the desires and restlessness of our hearts.

This reflects what Cuskelly called ‘a spirituality of the heart’ in replacing the older expression of ‘the devotion to the Sacred Heart’ which merely evokes a set of pious practices and prayers. After Vatican II, in the renewed spirit in the Church, we need a new expression for our charism, an expression that is sound and relevant to the signs of the time.

The spirituality of the heart can be summed up in four main journeys. The first journey is the journey to the depth of our heart to realise our own longings and desires for true life, love and liberation. The second journey is the journey of faith, inspired and guided by the Spirit, to the Heart of Christ in order to find the living water to quench our yearnings through prayer, reflection and contemplation. By these inner journeys, our heart is to become an understanding, giving and open heart, and so enables us to...
make the third journey of going out to our brothers and sisters—‘To be on earth the Heart of God.’ And lastly, the fourth journey is the journey of perseverance and fidelity in the face of difficulties and challenges. Today’s world still desperately needs the faithful and constant presence of the Heart of God in human form, as Jesus, throughout his life, was to his world.

The Contemporary Culture in Vietnam

Vietnamese contemporary culture is a complex topic due to the mixing of traditionally cultural values and Western cultural ideologies, a consequence of the colonial years under the French and Americans in the last century as well as after the Cold War and the normalisation of relations with America in 1995. Through research and my own life experience, I have nominated three characteristics describing the Vietnamese culture nowadays—traditional, post-war, and dramatically globalised.

Traditionally, Vietnamese culture, as many other Asian cultures, is an ancient culture and civilisation which has been developed over three thousand years and consists of a variety of ethnic cultures. Some argue that there is no Vietnamese culture but only a blend of ‘Vietnamese ethnic cultures’—highlighting the diversity of different cultures of the various ethnic groups. And even though many traditional values have been forgotten by the younger generations, especially those living in the urban areas, some of these values, to a great extent, still remain in people’s lives. Andrew Lam recognises that regardless of the rapid cultural revolutions happening in Vietnam, the society remains private and traditional. This is surprising as ‘private’ is not a traditional characteristic of the culture but perhaps a recent influence of Western individualism. ‘Community’ or ‘village life’ is more likely to be a traditional value of the culture which has been significantly lost in city life today. However, filial piety is still an important and respected value in families and society in general. Family relationship remains a significant and enduring part of the young Vietnamese growing up, despite the social issues which can endanger the stability and intimacy of family life. Recently, I have observed a revival movement of filial piety in Vietnamese contemporary music, which the people find quite touching and delightful.

Attached to this characteristic is the value of harmony, not only in family but in the wider society. Influenced by Confucianism during their long history, the Vietnamese tend to maintain a hierarchical order in communal life based on their age and position. The young should respect the old. The laity should obey the priest. This value is still deeply rooted in the people’s mentality, even with those who have left the country for a long time.

Another traditional characteristic which still lingers is the religiosity of the people. Vietnamese culture is a multi-religious culture—Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity, Caodaism and many other minor religions. Even for those who do not belong to any religion, the cultural and religious rituals or practices are still parts of their cultural life.

The second aspect of the contemporary culture in Vietnam is the aftermath effect of the wars and colonisation. The long-standing oppression and tremendous suffering of wars in the past have hugely shaped the Vietnamese culture today. The people have become humble, more adaptable to change, gaining amazing perseverance through difficulties. Nevertheless, the scars of war have left in the people an unconscious anger which, in my observation, has not yet been addressed appropriately. The communist government’s dictatorship today is perhaps an example of the unacknowledged anger which has made the oppressed become the oppressors. Seventy percent of the Vietnamese population is under thirty years of age—they hardly remember the war and the sufferings that their parents and previous generations had experienced. The memory of war has disappeared quite quickly from the consciousness of later generations. ‘Nobody owns it,’ Thomas Fox says in his article about Vietnam after twenty-five years of peace.
the younger generations towards their elders might be a sign of the challenging transition of Vietnam from a time of war to a time of socio-economic development. It can also be seen as a revenge of the young against the old for their deceptions. There seem to be socially and culturally internal angers.

Furthermore, the wars and colonisation have left Vietnam in devastation and poverty. Despite its significant growth and adaptations to the world economy, Vietnam remains an economically developing country. The economic gap between the rich and the poor in society is significant. The rich becomes richer, and the poor poorer. Social issues e.g. unemployment, poverty, insecurity, corruption, drugs, prostitution, AIDS all menace a gracious and hospitable culture.

The third aspect of the Vietnamese culture, as with other countries in Asia today, is the impact of globalisation—in urban regions of Vietnam. Observing the life of the Vietnamese youth nowadays, Lam points out three features of their lifestyle: di quay— to go wild, get drunk and stir up trouble; song voi—to live fast, to hurry life and to spend away; van hoa toc do—a culture that moves at high speed. And Fox states that Vietnam is a young nation which adapts the foreign cultures ‘in the speed of light’. The effect of this process of globalisation is most evident in terms of sexuality or sexual life of the young people. The Vietnamese culture once was very careful, even conservative, in sexual expression, now has become so dramatically radical as to scandalise the older generations.

Indeed Vietnam has one of the highest rates of teenage pregnancy in the world. The globalisation in Vietnam—the migration of other cultures and ideologies from developed countries—not only brings financial and economic benefits to the people and country, but it also challenges the traditional culture and, perhaps, triggers a new adopted expression among the young for the socially and culturally inattentive angers from the traumatic past of wars and oppression.

Even though Catholics only make up around eight percent of the population, Vietnam is perhaps no longer a ‘mission-receiving’ country as when Alexandre de Rhodes first arrived in the seventeenth century. The Christian churches are well-established and the Catholic church is even ‘exporting’ its vocations mainly to developed countries due to the shortage of vocations in those places. In a situation like that, what can the spirituality of the heart offer to the Vietnamese Church and culture? How can this spirituality be inculcated in people’s lives?

In Ten Years of Grace of the MSC in Vietnam—a collective journal published in 2013 in celebration of a decade since the MSCs formally established their foundation on the land of the martyrs—the Australian MSC Provincial at that time recalls the assurance of the Vicar for Religious in Vietnam: ‘the Church of Vietnam needs your spirituality.’ I wonder why he said it so surely. I think it is because our spirituality has something that touches people’s deep desire and something to challenge the culture.

Christianity was first seen as a religion of mutual love in Thang Long (now Ha Noi) because of the love that the first Vietnamese Christians showed one another. One can see from the previous section that the traditional values of Vietnamese culture—filial piety, harmony and religiosity—embrace the realm of relationship. Love and relationship are interconnected. Love is the most genuine source and means for relating, and true love cannot exist without the expression of relating. I think that is why the Vietnamese were so receptive to Christianity, as long as it is proclaimed in the terms of relating and connecting. In his latest article reflecting on ‘Mission, Culture and a Spirituality of the Heart,’ Anthony Arthur (MSC) states that the spirituality of the heart—containing kenosis and koinonia aspects—is
actually the culture of the Divine. He asserts that the culture of the heart is about ‘weaving relationships, and establishing risky inter-personal communication.’ The spirituality of the heart is the representation of the core value, meaning and purpose of both the Old and the New Testament; it is also the only purpose why God came into the world in the person of Jesus: ‘God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...’ (Jn 3:16). Jesus sums up the Torah with two commandments—love God and love your neighbour as yourself (Mt 22:37 – 39). He himself gives a new commandment that ‘you love one another’ (Jn 13:34). In the Asian Synod of 1998, the Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam declares:

In the same document, the Vietnamese Bishops reassert the cultural relevance and attraction of the relational image of Father/Son in the culture of loyalty, filial piety and humanity. Cuskelly, in his essay ‘With a Human Heart,’ skilfully draws out the invitation of God to love with a human heart—with all its weaknesses, struggles and inconsistencies—in the encounter of the resurrected Jesus and Peter in John’s Gospel (Jn 21:15–19). He states that Jesus expects of Peter, and all of us, not a confident love with absolute fidelity and obedience, but a humble, deep and affectionate friendship that endures through failures and weaknesses. In other words, God invites us into a relationship, not with the angelic heart, but with our most genuinely human heart, with our deepest humanity. The humanity of the spirituality of the Heart—I usually describe it as ‘the down-to-earth character’—needs to be emphasised and brought forth into the Vietnamese culture as a reminder that it is an integral part of the culture from tradition, and needs to be revived to let people love truly and genuinely as who they are. I find an exciting foundation that the spirituality of the Heart can be dialoguing with the Vietnamese culture: humanity and relationship, or a genuine human relating. This is not a new concept for the Vietnamese, but it needs to be reaffirmed and to grow practically in everyday life.

Furthermore, despite progress, the majority of Vietnamese people are struggling in poverty with an average earning of one dollar per day. Peter C. Phan emphasises a triple dialogue of evangelisation in Asia—dialogue with the people, especially the poor and the marginalised, dialogue with their religions, and dialogue with their cultures. The Vietnamese Bishops in the Synod also stressed that the only sign the Christians in Vietnam should be recognised by, is the sign of love for our brothers and sisters (cf. Jn 13:35), ‘a preferential love for the poor.’ The Constitutions of the MSC uphold the spirit of the Founder in a commitment to this love, and to social justice: ‘The spirit of our Society is one of love and kindness, humility and simplicity; it is above all, one of love for justice and concern for all, especially the very poor.’ The spirituality of the Heart is not a practical economic force that would purge away the poverty in society, but it is a transformative power that comforts, encourages and liberates people from within. The focus of the heart spirituality is not God or the love of God from ‘outside in,’ but it is about discovering an immanent God and a love that ‘breaks out from the inside’ of our humanity. People are truly free when they are liberated from the inside. At the same time, heart spirituality should be open to some appropriate, spirit-filled and discerned opportunities to challenge the root of social injustice, to speak out for the poor and the oppressed. But this must take into account the great risk of living under the current communist regime.

Additionally, reflecting on the significance of the Asian Synod, Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle of Manila talks about the unacknowledged dynamism of globalisation in evangelisation in Asia today:

When one says ‘be true to the worlds of Asia’ it
means more than just a nostalgic thing in terms of costume and colours. Are we facing the contemporary worlds of Asia affected by this globalisation of cultures and values which has been changing the cultural and the human landscape? What is Asia now?... The Church must confront the fast-changing, dynamically changing cultures that define the worlds of Asia today.26

It is because of this dynamism of globalisation that I find it difficult to identify the typical characteristics of Vietnamese contemporary culture. Examining Vietnamese culture in the big cities at the present time, it seems to be more American and Korean-like than traditionally Vietnamese in perspective.

One of the tremendous effects of globalisation is the loss of identity and the restlessness of human beings.27 In this dilemma, heart spirituality, I believe, is the way of leading people back to their heart, rediscovering their own identity, and relieving their restlessness through the humanly, immanent and mysterious love of God manifested in Christ. Also, this spirituality is not a pragmatism—in the sense of visibility, people cannot see the external changes and effectiveness—but it is a contemplative way of life, because the changes primarily happen within the human heart, the temple of the Holy Spirit.28 This way of life is inevitably a solid challenge to the lifestyle of globalisation in which exist an unthoughtful and unreflective culture of immediacy and instancy, an impersonal era of machinery and advanced technology, and a materialistic—driven global society. This way of life challenges people to stop and think, to take time out in silence and reflection. This way of life demands of people that they meet others as human persons—instead of machines or virtual persons—to look them in the eye, to establish and maintain personal relationships with them regardless of the disturbance and messiness in their relating. Finally, this contemplative way of life will remind people of what is at the heart of the fundamental basis of human life and identity—the material or the spiritual?

A Vision into the Future: Challenge and Opportunity

Last year, the MSCs celebrated their tenth year of presence in Vietnam. Challenges and opportunities for the MSCs remain unclear as we have not been registered as a religious congregation in the country, thus cannot spread the spirituality of the heart on a wide scale to see how it may touch and change people’s lives. However, positive signs are present. One of our Vietnamese MSC seminarians told me how the religious sisters were indignant with his ‘contemplative’ approach in his pastoral ministry. He was taking his time to converse, to listen and just to be with the residents in a Catholic-run nursing home, instead of helping the sisters with their work around the place. Despite the sisters’ implicit demand, he went on doing his ‘ministry of presence,’ and as a result, the old people there really appreciated his presence with them. They said: ‘No one has done this to us before; the sisters are always busy.’ These seemingly opposite responses, I believe, can pinpoint the future opportunities and challenges for heart spirituality in Vietnam.

On the one hand, the mission of evangelisation in Vietnam is no longer a means of propaganda for converting and baptising pagans, but has gradually become a task of informal and non-institutional dialogue—with culture, people, their life struggles, joys, hopes and desires.29 Originating from a belief in the goodness of humanity through the revelation of Christ and a firm conviction of the love of God for each person, heart spirituality is an ultimate foundation for personal exploration and revelation, interpersonal interaction, and trans-personal experience which encompasses a wider vision of reality. In this sense, heart spirituality should be present in the Vietnamese Church as a leading and prophetic model for future evangelisation.30

On the other hand, the process of transformation and liberation in the human heart does take time—even a lifetime for people to grasp the mystery of God’s love for them.
It is a paradoxical reality that even though this secret is already within each person, it seems so deep that its recognition and recovery need quite some time and effort. Furthermore, despite how beautifully described in the theological and spiritual writings, heart spirituality is still a contemplative way of life—so far from the pragmatic effectiveness that people expect. The number of baptisms and converts means nothing in the way of the heart. Only those who truly interact and grow with it know how effective and meaningful it is to their lives. In a materialistic and consumerist society and culture, how can one—even the optimist—dare to imagine how the young, the majority of the country’s population, may understand this contemplative spirituality? Perhaps, in this case, living action will speak louder than beautiful words.

**Conclusion**

The spirituality of the heart cannot be a merely theological and theoretical thing, but must be the heart of humanity with all its real experiences and life-changing power; it is, above all, an expression of the Heart of the Divine manifested in Christ which fearlessly embraces all that is human and makes all become divine. In a traditionally relational and communal, torn-by-wars and globalised culture, Vietnam can be both the fertile and rocky soil for the seed of Father Chevalier’s way of the heart. The seed can be choked or bear great fruits (cf. Mt 13:1-9).

Theologically speaking, it would be a leading model for a new evangelisation in Vietnam due to its compatibility and relation with the traditional values, and its ability to challenge some of the adaptations and changes present in the emerging culture. The Vietnamese culture was once unique—it might be still the case in some rural areas—and it needs to remain so, regardless of being inundated with the cultural influences of other developed countries. But this will happen only when the people, especially the young, experience the need to look into themselves in order to rediscover the hidden and buried treasure of tradition which has made them who they are today, and to invent new ways of expressing these values and identity relevant to today’s context.

**FOOTNOTES**

8. Some of my research for this essay have been done through the interviews with some of the Vietnamese MSCs working in Vietnam Mission, and a Vietnamese diocesan priest from Vietnam who is studying in Australia and living with us at Blackburn.
12. According to Archbishop Tagle of Manila, this is the general situation in Asia. See James H. Kroeger, *Asia-Church In Mission* (Quezon City: Claretian Publication, 1999), 86.
16. The term quoted from the Synod of Bishops -
25. *Constitutions and Statutes of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus*, (Rome, 2005), #13. At one stage, Chevalier wanted to form a Christian political party in France to fight for the poor and the underprivileged; however the Pope did not permit his proposal (see Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, *Ten Years of Grace of the MSC in Vietnam*, 12.
28. Ibid.
30. This spirituality can be a founding ground for an open and genuine interreligious dialogue which is so vital in Vietnam. However, regarding to the length limit of this section, this aspect is not discussed in detail.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

EARLY CHRISTIAN writings show a marked advance in the area of spousal relationships in comparison to pagan writers and Roman law prior to the middle of the third century AD. In contrast to the practice and secular laws of the time, the early Christian church regarded marriage as a loving, reciprocal relationship, with no husband possessing absolute rights over the wife. The Christian belief that wives are ‘weaker vessels’ was not an arbitrary licence for husbands to dominate them out of any innate mental inferiority or emotional flaws, but as fitted by nature and the surrounding society to be solicitously sheltered by their husbands, who were stronger due to their larger body mass and physical strength, and greater experience with the evils outside the home.

In early Christian teaching, a husband’s role was best described as ‘head’ of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church. This appears in Ephesians 5:23, as well as in Origen’s *Commentary on Ephesians* 5:22-23. Origen was considered the greatest Bible scholar, teacher and preacher of the first half of the third century. Dean of ‘the first Christian university’ (McGuckin 2004, 1), he was well-posed to know and record the consensus of Christian beliefs and practices from region to region, because he travelled frequently throughout the eastern Mediterranean at the invitation of local clergy as a theological consultant. He composed his *Commentary on Ephesians* sometime between AD 232 and 244.

The husband’s headship is also indicated in the *Didascalia Apostolorum* 3, a Syrian manual of church and individual Christian practice compiled in the first three decades of the third century.

Origen also designated a higher but nevertheless loving status for the husband. Husbands, Origen wrote, are to relate to their wives in the way that Jesus relates to the church, while wives are to relate to their husbands as the church does to Jesus. In the same vein, Origen instructed husbands to think and do the things of Christ while wives are to think and do those of the church (*Commentary on Ephesians* 5:22-23).

A wife is under the further duties of helping her husband in all things, and ‘fear’ him (*Didascalia* 3), which is the word that older ancient Christian translations use where we say ‘respect’, the latter being employed for the same feeling in Heine’s translation of Origen’s *Commentary on Ephesians* 5:33.

There are many passages in early Christian literature that instruct wives to submit to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22, 24; Colossians 3:18; Clement of Alexandria *Paedagogus* 3:12; *Didascalia* 3; Origen *Commentary on Ephesians* 5:24; 1 Peter 3:1; Titus 2:5). Unlike the abuse of the Bible in comparatively recent times, this is not submission like a slave but springs from the acknowledgement that the wife is a ‘weaker vessel’ (1 Peter 3:7), whose conformity to her husband materially aids him in his role as the ‘stronger vessel’ that protects and provides for her. In his *Homilies on Joshua* 3:1, Origen explained it as an analogy from why men but not women fought as soldiers in the ancient Israelite army: a weak vessel is not sent into conflicts lest it become broken and useless.

Today’s Olympics and other sporting events recognize that women are weaker when they provide separate competitions for them. This is not men lording it over women but recognition of differences in ability and specialization conferred by nature. The difference in function and status that results from being weaker does not mandate abject subordination; rather, 1 Peter 3:7 commands Christian hus-
bands to honour wives as the ‘weaker vessel’. It is the duty of the husband to brave conflicts in order to protect his wife.

Besides being equipped by nature to fight in literal battles, husbands until the twentieth century possessed a greater knowledge of ‘the world’—workplaces, business, and evil men therein—acquired by working and associating with many people outside the home, at a time when females were confined to home and family. For this reason, says Origen’s Commentary on Matthew 14:24, a Christian husband has a right and duty to prevent his wife from doing what is not fitting, and from associating with such men he knows from general experience to have dishonourable intentions. Clement mentioned the additional duty of keeping his wife from acting in a way that contravenes virtue and salvation (Stromata 4:19).

To maintain the balance of wifely submission and husbandly leadership, the church father Tertullian around AD 200 forbade husbands to be ruled by their wives (On Patience 16), and for a woman to select a man to marry on the basis that she could dominate him (Letters to His Wife 2:8). Tertullian was a Roman lawyer before being converted and ordained, and became founder of Latin Christian literature from his base in Tunisia.

Paul’s instructions in 1 Corinthians 14:34f, that women must not voice questions aloud in church but must ask them at home from their husbands, are not evidence of female subjection or disenfranchisement. Origen’s Homilies on Joshua 3:1 explains that one person cannot help another unless the intended helper can teach something to the other person. Husbands thus have a duty to help, teach, and inform their wives and themselves on spiritual matters.

Origen received his formal theological education at the world’s foremost institute of Christian learning at Alexandria in Egypt. The dean at the time was Clement, the most outstanding Christian thinker of the day. In the AD 190s Clement wrote much about relationships between spouses, particularly the sexual aspects. While the celibate Origen wrote in generalities that husbands are to regulate the matters of marriage (Commentary on Ephesians 5:22-23), the married Clement gave details. The husband, wrote Clement, is under an obligation to control and regulate himself and his desires so that he loves and delights in his wife as a person more than as a source of pleasure in intercourse (Stromata 3:7 [58]).

According to Clement, a husband’s trustworthiness, reliability, good behaviour, self-control, honesty, and love of others that characterize a Christian in his relations with outsiders are also to be exhibited to his wife. Indeed, said Clement, marriage should be the training-ground for developing and practising love of neighbour (Paedagogus 2:10 [97]).

Clement also taught that the husband has a duty to ask the wife’s consent to sex, a novel idea at the time. In an age when wives and other slaves were considered mere playthings and tools for a free man’s pleasure, Clement revealed new ground by allowing a woman to veto her husband’s advances (Stromata 3:7 [58]).

Christianity before the middle of the third century AD introduced yet another novel duty (and, for its time, outrageous) for husbands. Husbands were obliged to actually love their wives. There are many more injunctions in the early literature that a husband love his wife than that she should love him.

Husbands are instructed eight times to love their wives: 1 Corinthians 7:33, Ephesians 5:25, Ephesians 5:28, Ephesians 5:33, Colossians 3:19, in two of Clement’s books (Paedagogus 3:12; Stromata 3:7 [58]), and in the Letter from Ignatius to Polycarp 5:1. Ignatius was a bishop of Antioch who had worked alongside apostles and was martyred.
around AD 107. Love by wife for husband, without mentioning that he love her, is found only in Titus 2:4, Polycarp’s Letter to the Philippians 4:2, and Origen’s Commentary on Romans 10:20. Writing in the first half of the second century, Polycarp was a bishop who in his youth had associated with the Apostle John and other first-generation Christians. He was probably ‘the messenger of the church in Smyrna’ in Revelation 2:8.

What was this new love? Ephesians 5:25, Clement (Paedagogus 3:12) and Ignatius (Letter to Polycarp 5:1) said that the husband is to love the wife ‘as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for it’, while Ephesians 5:28 commands husbands to love their wives ‘as their own bodies’, adding that ‘he that loves his wife loves himself.’

Of course, men can ‘love’ many things: their dogs, their automobile, their football team, and—among Roman men in the early Christian centuries—a sex partner of either gender. But these are means to an end, put aside when he becomes more interested in something else. Love for wife was to be permanent and constant. A husband must spend time with the wife and for the wife’s benefit by teaching her, considering her sexual needs (1 Corinthians 7:3-5 and Clement Stromata 3:15 [97]), controlling his sexual passion, protecting her from evil-intentioned persons, living considerately with her and honouring her (1 Peter 3:7), and leading the way towards God (Origen Homilies on Genesis 4:4). Such love excludes bitterness and harshness (Colossians 3:19). To perform these responsibilities he needs to be head of the wife.

There was a wide contrast between Christian teaching and Roman law of the time, when a wife was just another of a male’s possessions, and a father had the right to put a family member to death, while Christian literature before AD 250 was remarkably lacking in the concept of a husband owning his wife. The Christian husband’s role and the sort of ‘submission’ his wife was to render him were more like the relationship between a loving, benevolent teacher and an eager pupil, not between a master and his serf as it became many centuries later in Christian society.

The duties and relationship between spouses were to produce the happy Christian marriage described in Tertullian’s Letters to His Wife 2:8:

Together they pray, together prostrate themselves, together perform their fasts; mutually teaching, mutually exhorting, mutually sustaining. Equally are they both found in the Church of God; equally at the banquet of God; equally in straits, in persecutions, in refreshments. Neither hides ought from the other; neither shuns the other; neither is troublesome to the other. The sick is visited, the indigent relieved, with freedom. Alms are given without danger of ensuing torment; sacrifices attended without scruple; daily diligence discharged without impediment. There is no stealthy signing, no trembling greeting, no mute benediction. Between the two echo psalms and hymns; and they mutually challenge each other which shall better chant to their Lord. Such things when Christ sees and hears, He joys. To these He sends His own peace. (ANF 4.48)

In this quotation we see how marriage was envisioned by the Christian church. Unlike common practice and secular laws of the time, the early church regarded marriage as a loving, reciprocal partnership, with no husband possessing authoritarian rights over the wife. What rights one spouse had to the other was for the benefit of both, and were intended to help one or the other to fulfill a responsibility.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


CONTRACEPTION REVISITED

JOHN FRAWLEY

CONTRACEPTION has contributed to more than a little distress for Catholics who find the Church’s teachings regarding the immorality of artificial means of contraception contrary to responsible sexual practice and parenthood within sacramental marriage. Since Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of 1968, which reaffirmed the teaching on contraception, there has been ever decreasing adherence to it by the catholic lay community. Many surveys have suggested that up to 80% of nominal Catholics disagree with the teaching.

The Church’s teaching on contraception is by no means new. Indeed, the Old Testament condemns contraception as contrary to God’s law and all Christianity had done so until the Anglican Conference of Lambeth in 1930 when the Anglican Church formally permitted artificial contraception. Some Western Christian societies banned contraception under Civil Law until as recently as the mid-twentieth century. Other Protestant denominations soon followed the Anglican position after the Lambeth Conference, leaving the Catholic Church as the sole adherent to the concept of the fundamental immorality of frustrating God’s creative purpose and intention through contraceptive measures, all considered to be contrary to the natural moral law.

Human life and the family form an important part of the considerations to be addressed later this year and next in synods established by Pope Francis. Since the processes surrounding contraception were not fully understood scientifically until the mid twentieth century, perhaps the time has come for the teaching on contraception to be revisited and either affirmed yet again or modified.

The question, ‘*When does life begin?*’, dictates the moral and ethical debate on such matters as contraception and abortion. The answer has always been ‘at conception’.

It was not until the twentieth century, however, when medical science advanced through microscopy and a knowledge of hormones and their effects on human tissues that the processes involved in conception were accurately identified. It is now known that pregnancy results from first, fertilisation of an ovum; second, the fertilised ovum’s development to the blastocyst stage; third, the successful implantation of the blastocyst in a receptive lining of the womb. Each of these three stages, although wonderfully coordinated in one seamless process, is in fact separate in its individual implication for the inevitable formation of human life. The fertilised ovum faces a perilous journey of some 6-7 days, which it may or may not survive, during which the single fertilised ovum repeatedly divides to form the multicellular blastocyst before it is implanted in the womb.

Human life is not inevitable with fertilisation of an ovum, neither is it inevitable with development to the blastocyst stage, both of which processes take place outside the womb in the abdominal cavity and in the Fallopian tube. Thus, although the fertilised ovum is living and identifiably human in its cellular characteristics, for at least 6-7 days from the time of fertilisation it does not represent the established inevitability of human life but rather the potential for human life which might never come to pass because of natural attrition, the fate of many fertilised ova.

The implanted, living, human embryo is in the earliest stages of an evolutionary journey which will continue for many years through intrauterine life, infancy, childhood and a variable portion of adulthood. At all
stages of its evolutionary journey following implantation in the womb the developing cellular mass is identifiably human, is alive, and possesses the inevitability to realise ‘that unitary and integrated whole that is the human self’. (In an address to The 18th International Congress of the Transplantation Society in Rome on the 29th of August, 2000, Pope John Paul II clarified the Catholic teaching on death in the words, ‘the death of a person is a single event consisting in the disintegration of that unitary and integrated whole that is the personal self’. This statement, in defining death, also defined human life). The inevitability of human life can only exist with the advent of the spiritual component of the human being, bestowed by God the Creator, since human life does not exist without both a mortal human and an immortal spiritual element (the soul). That inevitability comes with implantation of the blastocyst in the womb. Thus, it can be genuinely argued, that human life does begin at conception, specifically at that time during the conception process when successful implantation of the blastocyst in the womb occurs and not at fertilisation of the ovum or during its journey to the womb.

With a fuller appreciation of the physiological processes associated with the establishment of pregnancy, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in 1972 formally defined conception as implantation of a fertilised ovum in the womb. If this definition of conception is accepted, the implication for contraception is that the moral position should take account of the inevitability of human life with implantation rather than the potential for human life that attends the processes preceding implantation, namely, fertilisation and the development of the blastocyst. If any immorality, then, is to attach to preventing fertilisation by contraceptive measures, it is reasonable to suggest that such immorality is different from that which attaches to preventing implantation or destroying an already implanted embryo by contraceptive measures.

The physiological processes of conception raise the question, ‘If fertilisation does not lead inevitably to human life, is the prevention of fertilisation immoral?’ The prevention of fertilisation and implantation are fundamentally different, fertilisation representing potential human life, not possessing an individual soul, and implantation representing inevitable human life possessing an immortal soul. This implies that neither a single spermatozoon or a single ovum possess an individual spiritual component or soul, a concept analogous with taking an organ from one living person, the donor, and transplanting it in another, the recipient. The organ itself does not embody the soul of the donor, neither does it bestow a new or additional spiritual component on the recipient. The implications of this concept are that fertilisation which bestows only potential life does not include the genesis of an individual spiritual element or soul, while implantation which bestows inevitable life does.

Thus, the fundamental difference between the deliberate frustration of fertilisation and the deliberate frustration of implantation may imply a different gravity of immorality in such actions. In Catholic moral teaching, degrees of gravity in immoral action are expressed in the concepts of venial and mortal sin. The prevention of fertilisation which does not destroy an inevitable human life might properly fit into the venial category, the immorality related to the deliberate attempt to deny the potential for procreation implicit in the
sacramental marriage covenant. Once implantation has occurred, however, to terminate that life as a form of contraception equates with abortion and fits the grave or mortal category of sin. Clearly there exists a great difference between the two and perhaps Catholic teaching on contraception should reflect that.

The prevention of fertilisation involves a number of well documented artificial means while the artificial prevention of implantation relies on an intrauterine device (IUD) which prevents implantation by producing hormones and by physically damaging the womb lining, both of which render the womb unreceptive to the fertilised ovum. Surgical sterilisation of either man or woman as a contraceptive is an anti-fertilisation measure and thus attracts the same moral consideration as other anti-fertilisation methods. However, it does involve the abandonment of responsible moral stewardship of one’s own life in the deliberate risking of that life and in the mutilation of one’s own body in unnecessary surgery. It thus incurs a degree of moral transgression elevated above the venial level. None of the anti-fertilisation methods interfere with an already implanted ovum and thus do not influence the inevitability of human life. Once implantation has occurred the inevitability of human life now exists and this is patently no longer a matter of contraception but a matter of deliberately terminating human life in its inevitable fullness which includes an immortal soul, albeit in the very earliest phases of its inevitable journey to that unitary and integrated whole that is the human self.

Some IUDs have been modified to carry abortifacient drugs such as ellaOne and orally administered abortifacient drugs such as RU486, both of which are available under the guise of contraceptives when indeed they are abortifacients. Following implantation, deliberate abortion is the only option to avoid the eventual birth under normal circumstances of a human being. The IUD and the abortifacient drugs must be considered the gravest form of artificial contraception.

Any method of contraception within marriage must be evaluated in the light of the Creator God’s purpose for sexual union of man and woman. That purpose is the creation of human life through the intermediary of man and woman and is the basis of the sacramentality of Catholic marriage, a covenant (or contract) between the married couple and God for the purpose of creation of human life. Sexual union within marriage, if it is in accord with the moral natural law, must, in Catholic teaching, be open to the creation of human life. Thus any conspiracy to defeat that purpose is contrary to Catholic teaching.

Prevention of fertilisation by natural means enjoys moral approval in Catholic teaching, and represents perhaps the greatest of all paradoxes. Natural means of birth control (the Billings method) demands very concentrated intent and cooperation by both partners in a sexual relationship with the express purpose of identifying ovulation and by avoiding sexual intercourse for some days before and after ovulation occurs. Such conspiracy to defeat God’s purpose of creation is equally as contrived as other means of contraception with the sole aim of deliberately preventing pregnancy. To assume a favourable moral position for the Billings method flirts with fallacy or, more explicitly, embraces it. Indeed, acceptance of a moral position for the Billings method represents a simple Aristotelian syllogistic fallacy. (All contraception [A] is deliberate prevention of pregnancy [B] — All deliberate prevention of pregnancy [B] is immoral [C] — therefore, All contraception [A] is immoral [C].) The Billings method should logically be considered in the same light as other means of contraception, since the immorality exists in the intention to prevent God’s creative covenant with the married couple, not the means whereby that intention is achieved.

Within marriage, in view of the sacramen-
nal nature of the marriage covenant, contraception must of necessity take account of the responsible procreation of human life and acceptance of the stewardship of any life for which the marriage partners are responsible. That stewardship involves the care for the moral, spiritual and temporal well-being of all children in the family, those living and any future children conceived. This is a responsibility which must be part of the consideration of parents in the decision to use anti-fertilisation forms of contraception balanced against the ability to provide the moral stewardship of parenting.

Indeed, it can be argued that the responsibility of parenthood in the interests of the moral wellbeing of the children is a greater moral imperative than producing a child in circumstances wherein the moral stewardship of the child is not possible, when such an event could be prevented by anti-fertilisation means of contraception carrying a lesser moral imperative. The same balance, however, can never be justified if the contraceptive measure used involves abortion of an implanted embryo regardless of the duration or tenure of that embryo in the womb. God will judge the decision that the morally responsible and informed parent has made in a non-contrived conscience.

So that conscience on this matter can be informed, there is an urgent need for review and clarification of the Church’s teaching on the nature of human life and its conception and the establishment of an education commitment to the Catholic laity. Pope Francis’ upcoming synods on the family provide the opportunity to do this.

SYNOD OF BISHOPS INSTRUMENTUM LABORIS:
The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelisation, Vatican City 2014

Pastoral Recommendations
128. From the pastoral point of view, the responses, in very many cases, see the need to make better known what was stated in Humanae Vitae and to propose a coherent anthropological vision in revitalized language, not only in pre-marriage preparation but also in instructional courses on love in general.

Some responses suggest that the presentation of the methods of the natural regulation of fertility be done in collaboration with well-qualified people from both the field of medicine and the parish. For this purpose, the responses insist on collaboration with academic institutions engaged in study and research on these methods and in the promotion of a more ecologically-minded approach to human living.
VATICAN CITY, June 27, 2014. In the lead up to the forthcoming Synod on the Family, the Vatican has released the results of a worldwide consultation addressing a variety of pastoral topics, such as same-sex ‘marriage,’ reception of the sacraments for divorced and remarried couples, and the promotion of openness to life.

The Instrumentum Laboris (working document), which has been made available on the Vatican website, is based on questions in a Preparatory Document which was sent out to dioceses around the world about a month after Pope Francis called for the Synod on the family. [...] The working document notes that many responses were ‘submitted by the synods of the Eastern Catholic Churches sui iuris, the episcopal conferences, the departments of the Roman Curia and the Union of Superiors General. In addition, other responses—categorized as observations—were sent directly to the General Secretariat by a significant number of dioceses, parishes, movements, groups, ecclesial associations and families, not to mention academic institutions, specialists, both Catholic and non-Catholic, all interested in sharing their reflections.’

Convoked by Pope Francis on 8 October 2013, the Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which will take place October 2014, will focus on the theme: The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization. [...] The 75 page document is divided into three parts, reflecting the eight primary subjects addressed the questionnaire. Part one, the Gospel of the Family, ‘treats the divine plan and the vocation of the person in Christ’.

‘Within this perspective, the section gives indications—positive as well as negative—of the faithful’s knowledge and acceptance of pertinent teachings on the family from the Bible and the documents of the Church’s Magisterium as well as the faithful’s understanding of the natural law.’

The second part of the document, entitled ‘The Pastoral Program for the Family in Light of New Challenges’, addresses ‘various challenges and actual situations related to the pastoral care of the family.’

Finally, part three is dedicated to the topic of an openness to life and the responsibility of parents in the upbringing of their children—characteristic of marriage between a man and a woman—with particular reference to difficult pastoral situations.

Included among the themes which the working document addressed are the issues pertaining to homosexual partnerships, the reception of the sacraments for divorced and remarried couples, cohabitation, and the promotion of openness to life.

The document also addresses the issue of diversified acceptance of Church teaching on matters pertaining to the family and sexual morality.

‘A good number of episcopal conferences mention that, when the teaching of the Church is clearly communicated in its authentic, human and Christian beauty, it is enthusiastically received for the most part by the faithful,’ the document reads, adding: ‘Church teaching is more widely accepted, when the faithful are engaged in a real journey of faith and are not just casually curious in what might be the Church’s thinking in the matter of sexual morality’.

In the converse, the document notes that many respondents to the questionnaire ‘confirmed that, even when the Church’s teaching about marriage and the family is known, many Christians have difficulty accepting it in its entirety.’ Examples of this difficulty pertain to acceptance of Church teaching on contraception, divorce and remarriage, homosexuality, etc. ‘However, many responses recount how Church teaching on the dignity of human life and respect for human life might be more widely and readily accepted, at least in principle.’

In the follow-up to October’s Synod on the Family, an Ordinary General Assembly will be held in 2015, ‘representing a great part of the episcopate and continuing the work of the previous synod, will reflect further on the points discussed so as to formulate appropriate pastoral guidelines.’

—Ann Schneible
THE CHRISTIAN faith has its own integrity, a core message that remains ever the same—we retell that story every time we recite the creed. But every age, every culture, presents its own particular needs and challenges, so the message, like St Paul’s on the Areopogas (Acts 17:16-34), will need to be shaped and coloured to attune with the new circumstances.

In a world of blogs, uploads, downloads, twitters, slogans and apps, our sense of ourselves and of our world is being rapidly transformed. John Milbank thinks that everything is blurring around the edges:

Postmodernity means the obliteration of boundaries, the confusion of categories. In the postmodern times in which we live, there is no longer any easy distinction to be made between nature and culture, private interior and public exterior, hierarchical summit and material depth; nor between idea and thing, message and means, production and exchange, the state and the market, humans and animals, humans and machines, image and reality; nor between beginning, middle, and end.¹

Within this melting pot, fact far outweighs value, individual wants become political demands, scepticism and rationality replace heart and faith, information overwhelms truth, and the interests of production trump all other interests.

Atheism is thriving in this milieu, while religious practice is in drastic decline. It tells a story of a universe without any inherent meaning, of evolution that is blind, of faith that is an illusion, and of a science that will inherit the earth. It seems, however, more a part of the problem than an answer, for all does not seem well with modern culture.

Lurking in the modern collective consciousness are huge infestations of vampires, aliens, super-villains, zombies, and even machines with evil intent, all engaged in a fight to the death with the remnant forces of good, battles for the most part set in the devastated urban landscapes of the future. Coupled with that is our growing fascination with transgression and consciousness-altering substances. Are they just facts? Or symptoms? At the very least they indicate a crisis of ‘meaning’ and ‘value’ in our culture.

These outbreaks of the ‘unnatural’ and ‘sinister’ and ‘violent’, even if under the guise of entertainment, seem to indicate our deep-seated doubts and fears about what we ourselves are becoming and where we might be heading. How ‘inhuman’ do we feel we are? What will a future be like created in our image and likeness? It seems we suspect it could be horrifying. In this scenario things appear deeply uncertain. Surely faith has something vital to say to this modern unease.

In recent months Pope Francis has been showing how we might talk freshly of our faith. The New Atheism has revealed a void of meaning and value in modern life—how might we respond? Can rationality replace faith, as the New Atheists want? Modern ‘reason’ divides and conquers. Faith, on the other hand, is about relatedness and engagement. At its base, faith is a story, a point perhaps forgotten in the quest to formulate doctrines and rules. It is a vastly different story from that told by the New Atheists.

Instead of a void, the Christian story speaks of a Care, a giftedness, a Promise, at the heart of all reality, of a practice of worship, of love and of a search for justice, that opens up inti-
motions and energies of God’s Presence for us, and of God as the ultimate Ground of the universe’s intelligibility, of our freedom, and of the value of who we are and the good we do. Without God, we lose our sense of depth and our sense of life as a quest, both of which enrich our lives and history. All we are left with is endless wanting and a stifling chase after material happiness.

John F. Haught maintains that faith makes possible a deeper, hope filled, reading of the story of the universe without conflicting with the findings of science:

Without contradicting any particular scientific reading, can we perhaps also ascertain that the actual shape of the universe and its evolution conforms more compliantly to the contours of hope than despair? Cosmic pessimists claim that science gives us no reason to hope, but religions—or at least some of them—have encouraged us to read the cosmos on a deeper level as a source of meaning that can have a reconstructive effect on our lives.2

Faith is too often seen as a closure to questioning, a suitcase of dogmas, when it is more a wonder and an enquiry at the way the universe has unfolded into the abundance, diversity, complexity, and beauty, of our world. Included in this is our own self-awareness and freedom, which also constitute a question and an openness to the future, supported by God’s promises and grace.

Science is not, and was never meant to be, a source of meaning and value, as Raymond Gaita clearly sees:

The sciences which deepen our understanding of our nature as a species have little to tell us about these things—little to tell us about, for example, love, little even about erotic love. Biology will not teach us the difference between real and counterfeit love... the inner life as we mean it when we say that some people have rich others impoverished inner lives—is not a discovery which a sophisticated culture has made possible for us... It is constituted by our culturally mediated reflective responses to the defining facts of the human condition.1

Rather than always teetering on the edge of the void opened up by atheism, with our own wants and fears pushing us ever closer to the brink, faith ‘holds’ the centre of ourselves—who we are and what we do matters.

While it never fully escapes our needs and wants or the culture it exists in, faith at its best conjugates our deepest needs and desires, holding in tension our successes and failures, and ever attempts to foster our connectedness to one another and to the whole of creation.

Faith is essentially about value: particularly our own individual worth and the worth of our human endeavours. Faith is more a verb than a noun—it invites, affirms, celebrates, discloses, inspires, evokes, interprets, guides, forms, challenges, reconciles, enriches, and enlarges our human possibilities.

As John Cottingham states, it is really only faith that is capable of bringing together all the disparate and often conflicting aspects of our lives:

For we human beings were never meant to live fragmented lives, splitting off the intellect from the emotions, or keeping our theoretical beliefs neatly separated from our deepest commitments and responses...Although all the specific secular disciplines and activities may be involved as contributors, no other form of human life... is equipped for this quest in the way that religion, at its rare best, aspires to be: in a way that is truly unifying, and nurturing of our most precious human potential, the potential for wholeness or integrity.4

One advantage of reading Alain de Botton’s Religion for Atheists is that it can make us aware of the things we do well as Christians, but which we tend to take for
granted. In the current climate we would do well to take more notice. De Botton lists, among many other things, sustaining goodness, countering egoism, attending to the needs of the soul, reminding people of what matters most, teaching wisdom, advocating kindness, helping people face their disappointments and vulnerability, providing a wider perspective on our lives and world, and sustaining hope—it reads like a recipe for our times.

De Botton makes special mention of ‘community’:

Catholicism starts to create a sense of community with a setting. It marks off a piece of earth, puts walls around it and declares that within these parameters there will reign values utterly unlike those which hold sway in the world beyond... gives us rare permission to lean over and say hello to a stranger. We are promised that here... ‘the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ belong to all who have assembled.

A gathering for worship typically brings together people of all ages, of differing income and educational backgrounds, and of different ethnic groupings, where they celebrate together their shared faith, hope, love, their deepest convictions and aspirations, and their own proneness to frailty. In a world driven by commerce and individual wants, such a community is an achievement of grace and shared humanity. We do more than we realize.

The Church currently lives in a challenging moral climate in affluent societies—its focus on marriage and family, and pro-life stances, are facing strong headwinds. Individual wants and preferences have mutated into ‘rights’. ‘Equality’ also has been excised from its traditional economic context and transplanted into the gender wars.

Pope Francis has sought to break out of this bind and turned attention to the ‘inequality’ which affects the vast majority of the world’s population, but which is largely swept under the carpet in the developed world. Oxfam has recently claimed that some eighty-five individuals own as much as half the world’s population. It would be difficult to get more unequal than that.

The New Atheists’ attacks have demonstrated that what is fundamentally at stake is the deep value of humanity. The subjective or personal viewpoint is being lost, values pared down to a miscellaneous of individual wants, and the edges on all sides being blurred, so that any clear idea of what is distinctly human is being lost in the mist of conflicting ideological interests.

‘Faith’ has been the principal target of the New Atheists, and their agenda has almost exclusively been the domestic libertarian issues of the Western World, such as marriage equality and privacy. But on a wider front, both within and without the developed world, the world is bigger, much bigger, with bigger issues, such as armament expenditure and poverty. It is especially, on all fronts, a contest about human worth, heart, and soul, as well as genuine equality.

Street credibility is important. Allowing oneself to being manoeuvred into appearing as the enemy of ‘genuine’ social progress is a real impediment to that credibility. The Church lives in many cultures and has a wide and deep vision, derived from its own rich tradition, which needs to be brought more to the fore. Terry Eagleton, who is not a Christian, provides a good example, which is, at the same time, a challenge:

In the end, only love (of which faith is a particular form) can achieve the well-nigh impossible goal of seeing a situation as it really is, shorn of both the brittle enchantments of romance and the dishevelled fantasies of desire. Clinical, cold-eyed realism of this kind demands all manner of virtues—openness to being wrong, selflessness, humility, generosity of spirit, hard labour, tenacity, readiness to collaborate, conscientious judgement, and the like; and for Aquinas, all virtues have their source in love.

I am not sure how much of our present selves we are able to see in that portrait.
Yet the New Atheists are helping to make clearer what the deep issues are, although rising to the challenge might require more changes in our current ways of thinking and acting than we may care to contemplate. Casting off the shackles of affluence is not easy. It has infiltrated our mindsets and our behaviour.

For the New Atheists religion is not only delusional, but also irrelevant to modern ‘scientific’ societies. As the Second Vatican Council remarked ‘no small part’ of this charge can be sheeted home to Christians themselves (GS 19).

It is a matter of shifting priorities, which at present appear focused on the internal issues of Church life, to a more prophetic concern for those disadvantaged or made vulnerable by our own pursuit of affluence. It is an integral part of the Church’s heritage: it needs to be more prominent a part of the Church’s mission, if street credibility is to be regained. It goes without saying that this applies also to the Church’s treatment of people.

Essentially, however, the challenge is to show that without faith life is shallower and poorer. Faith is able to broaden our horizons to include others, especially those in need. It is able to enrich and deepen who we are and what we are to become. It is able to hold open a very different future than the one modern anxieties tend to predict, a future created in God’s image and likeness, not our own.

REFERENCES

3. A Common Humanity ( Melbourne: Text Publishing, 199) 244.

Gentle As Silence

Oh, the love of my Lord is the essence
Of all that I love here on earth.
All the beauty I see, He has given to me,
And his giving is gentle as silence.

Every day, every hour, every moment,
Have been blessed by the strength of His love.
At the turn of each tide, He is there at my side,
And his touch is as gentle as silence.

There’ve been times when I’ve turned from his presence,
And I’ve walked other paths, other ways,
But I’ve called on his name, in the dark of my shame
And his mercy was gentle as silence.
FOLLOWING the first steps in exploring what I have called ‘Archetypal Theology’ it is timely to widen the exploration into the other processes of the mind in deep consciousness. Exploration has meant analysis of one’s own experience of consciousness and proposing it to another to see whether the results of their own self-exploration matches the original.

In The Deep Within consciousness was imaged as a well with successive layers of perception. At the surface is the consciousness which we use in everyday life and in which we hold discourse in areas as diverse as science, history, philosophy, politics, technology, commerce, industry, economics etc. Less often do we penetrate deeper layers of consciousness and less familiar are we with how it works and how we can use it (I use the term ‘deep consciousness’, rather than ‘subconscious’ or ‘unconscious’, to underline that there is no discontinuity between the two, but one can pass readily from one to the other).

Surface Consciousness

Without repeating the detailed critique of surface consciousness as found in The Deep Within, one might summarise it as follows. The other is known by its external qualities (shape, colour etc.) through the five physical senses (sight, hearing, touch etc.), reconstructed in the brain, objectified in the mind as concepts (abstract universal ideas), expressed in words (spoken, written). Concepts are linked by the identification of subject and predicate (A is B) and can be further extended by syllogistic chains of reasoning (A is B, B is C, therefore A is C). The inclusion of class A in class B gives rise to a hierarchical structure of knowledge, and so to a hierarchical world view. Information is linear in that it grows by the addition of successive ‘bits’ of knowledge. Degree of difference (‘how much’) is quantified by number, allowing for unlimited differentiation. Thinking is highly analytic and discriminative. To the dualism of subject and object is added the dualism of true or false (whether the statement of fact corresponds to reality), good or bad, right or wrong and other sets or dyads of contradictory opposites. I call these dialectic attributes, in that one delineates, or sets the boundary of, the other. Thinking and discourse in this ordinary mode of consciousness is rational and objective. It represents knowledge about the other.

Playground

This is the area of the arts, music, storytelling—the work of creative imagination. Here metaphor and other figures of comparison (‘types’) supply form to the formless feelings arising from deeper down in the consciousness and allow their endless juxtaposition in playful mode. Certain juxtapositions of types are seen to give new meaning to actual events, patterns of experience or life directions on the way to human intentionality. The types thus juggled in creative playfulness include metaphor, allegory, symbol, ikon, maxim, parable, myth—indeed the whole spectrum of figures covered by the Hebrew *mashal* or Greek *parable*. Some types are casual and ad-hoc for the player’s immediate purpose. Many, including biblical types, are cultural, varying from culture to culture. Some are universal, common to all humankind. With a suffix denoting superiority or anteriority, archetypes are powerful forms for feelings arising from primordial experience. Besides the visible and audible forms objectifying feelings there are
also mental images or sounds which swirl around in the mind as one ‘plays with ideas’ in seeking a solution to a problem.

A distinctive characteristic of the Playground, by contrast to the rational discourse of the surface, is the non-dualism it shares with deep consciousness. Since there is no statement of fact, which might or might not correspond with reality, there is no question of truth or falsity. Opposites are not contradictory but complementary. The True, the Good, the Beautiful, the One are not dialectic values (delineated by their opposites) but transcendental, merging as the positive goal of human intentionality.

Deep Consciousness

Psychologists terms ‘subconscious’ or ‘unconscious’ suggest discontinuity between ordinary conscious and what lies deeper within. Yet these depths are readily accessible in meditation and in the habitual deep awareness of certain people. This is the ‘heart’ in biblical language (followed by patristic and spiritual writings), and it has its own internal senses, analogous to the physical senses, ‘the ears and eyes of the heart’. The Chinese word Xin can be translated ‘heart-mind’, so that to know with Xin means to know intuitively, with passion and commitment. The experience of the other gives rise to distinctive feelings with their own emotional tags. Some biologists, such as Charles Birch, propose that all things have a certain subjectivity or awareness of their environment, that is, they behave not only as separate particles, but as waves interacting with their peers. So perhaps my heart-mind resonates with the subjective experience of the other and registers that internally as a feeling, which remains formless until given form in the Playground. Unlike the abstract objective concepts and their rational identification at the surface (A is B), deep consciousness recognises the patterns of things and the assimilation of like patterns (A feels like B, A suggests B). Such knowledge is not objective but subjective, intuitive, relational. One no longer knows about the other, but knows the other.

The experiences which give rise to feelings probably operate at successively deeper levels. At one end of the spectrum are trivial, passing experiences, at the other are deep primordial experiences, which in the Playground take the form of archetypes. Whereas Jung and his disciples posit the collective unconscious as the ground of such feelings, to me sufficient grounding can be found in the experiences of early childhood (‘unremembered memories’), in possible ancestral experiences (as suggested by epigenetics) and even in the primitive drives of the limbic system.

Intuitive Knowing

In this kind of knowing the knower is felt to be engaged with the known. One’s subjectivity resonates with the subjectivity sensed in the other. The knower can be likened to an amoeba which consumes a nutritious particle by encircling it with its pseudopodia, an embrace which makes it part of itself. The following stages of engagement were originally proposed for the engagement with God in prayer, but were seen applicable to other forms of engagement, such as eating and sexual intercourse, and are here applied to knowing (to the degree that subjectivity is sensed in the other).

1. Setting out. The knower goes out of him/herself and relates to the other as ‘I-Thou’. There is a certain losing of self, or ego-death, as one opens out in wonder at the other. One is freed from the bond of self so as to freely reach out to the other.

2. Communion. More than simple union, the knower and the known are bonded together
in a mutual indwelling. The one is in the other, and the other is one. This conglomeration of the two changes the ‘I-Thou’ relation to ‘we’, in a parallel and shared subjectivity.

3. Oneness. The knower and the known become one. ‘We’ becomes ‘I’ in a single subjectivity. I know myself as part of everything I know. In memory of something, I recall myself at the instance of that merging. (How much are feelings part of ones identity? In English the subject is identified with a feeling; ‘I am fearful’; whereas in French and other European languages the feeling happens to self: ‘I have fear’, ‘J’ai peur’).

Intuition in Scientific Investigation

Surface rationality plays such an important role in the gathering and processing of scientific data, in practical problem solving and in devising advanced technology, that it would seem that these intellectual pursuits are conducted only in the upper levels of consciousness. Yet many researchers will affirm that there has been an intuitive pre-conceptual stage in their enquiry, showing that several levels of thinking have complemented each other in the overall task. So, for example, an archaeologist gets the ‘feel’ of an artefact, of the placing of a site in its environment, of the stratification read from the section of a trench, of the observed changes in the assemblages and of the signs of technological development through time, all leading to the reconstruction of the life of a people in the past. Such intuitions must then be translated into objective, scientifically acceptable language in the final report, so as to fix the information in a form verifiable by peers.

Earlier, I had proposed that in scientific research there is a pre-rational stage of assembling data, each represented by a ‘mental image’ (or some other mental analogue of sense perception). There follows an important stage of ‘playing with images’ in the Playground. The mind’s eye rapidly re-arranges this assemblage in different juxtapositions, like the changing shapes and colours of a kaleidoscope, until it sees a right ‘fit’ and calls a halt. Once the right juxtaposition has been perceived, then follows the difficult task of translating it all into words, with logical form and sequence. I described the valuable advantages of pre-conceptual thinking:

It is, typically, wild and lateral, intuitive and creative and, therefore, very free. It offers expandable categories and free associations of ideas, before settling down to the restriction and dogma of established discourse. It complements the more respectable rational approach in various disciplines by giving the right hemisphere of the brain an active role in problem-solving. I suspect that pre-conceptual thinking is responsible for the intuitive leap of genius (which, of many areas of human intellect, computers cannot duplicate) that can recognise patterns and, hence, parallels between otherwise dissimilar data. It opens up possibilities which might otherwise be unsuspected, but which can be tested empirically.

Primal Thinking

 Worlds apart from our own modern thinking, with its advanced science and technology, is the thought world of traditional tribal people, well exemplified for us in our Aboriginal people recently emerged from a stone age culture. For them all parts of the cosmos are alive, conscious and paying attention to each other, and the individual, as one of those parts, engages in mystical union with the rest. I believe that primal people, together with monks and mystics of all religions, live habitually, or almost habitually, at a deep level of consciousness, powerfully aware of the numinous surrounding them and of the myths in which they consciously take part. Against the highly abstract and scientific language of the West, there are languages expressive of such consciousness which are thoroughly concrete and earthy, more poetic than factual, alive with deep-felt symbols and metaphors. Better known are ancient Semitic languages, such as classical Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic, whose vocabulary is built on tri-consonantal roots, based on verbs (therefore more relational than particulate). It can be said of Semitic languages that they do
not express meaning (as in the West) but suggest meaning. Often numbers express, not a mathematical value, but an emotional value (often with exaggeration). It is commonly remarked that the Hebrew verb ‘to know’ does not designate an intellectual knowledge, but an intuitive experience of what is known, coming to grips with what is subjective in the other, like an intercourse between knower and known so that the two become one.

The language of the Bible is highly typological. The Fathers of the Church recognised biblical types as persons, things or events in the Old Testament which prefigured, and found fulfilment in Jesus Christ (N.T. anti-type). But this use of typology ranges more widely than the doctrinal concerns of the Fathers. This usage is consistent with the biblical predilection for mashal (Hebrew) or parable (Greek), words whose meanings can cover proverbs, maxims, riddles, metaphors, allegories, similitudes and other forms of comparisons, even by way of extended narratives such as gospel parables. These figures of comparison highlight the similarity between patterns of experience, such that one throws light on the other to give it greater meaning. This mutual illumination, or what I call projection, can be emphasised between sets of relationship such as macrocosm and microcosm, phylogeny and ontogeny, type and anti-type, myth and experience. The logic of imagery in the Bible as distinct from that in rationality, can argue from one image to another:

— a pari (if A, then B)
— a fortiori (if A, how much more B)
(Both types are famously found in Romans 5).

Reading the Bible

If the language of the Bible shows it came from the deep consciousness of the inspired authors, it makes sense to read the Bible with the mentality of the People of God, who produced and cherished it. It must be emphasised that bible reading is a cross-cultural experience, linking the reader to a very different culture, with its own language, concerns and literary genres over 2,000 years ago.

Fundamentalist Christians are mistaken in seeing the Bible as ‘the Word of God’ (an Englishman, of course), written to them in plain language all could understand in their (Western) common sense, embodying infallible factual truths to be taken literally. Equally mistaken in seeing the Bible as a compilation of factual statements are the sceptics who cast doubt on the canonical text on the grounds of contradictions, inconsistencies and impossible events (miracles, resurrection etc.). Likewise misguided were the early biblical archaeologists and other scholars who attempted to bring science to bear on ‘proving the Bible true.’ Also somewhat departing from the ancient Semitic mentality is the modern tendency to psychologise or rationalise the text.

The mentality of the people who authored the sacred books and those who received them is summed up in the example of Mary, the great woman of faith: ‘Mary treasured all these things and pondered them in her heart’ (Luke.2:19,51). The reverent wonderment of the child, rather than the mastery of the expert, is what marked off the Fathers of the Church in their commentaries on sacred scripture. St. Benedict began his Rule with the words ‘Listen, my child, with the ears of your heart’; and the monks learned to apply the same contemplative listening to monastic Lectio Divina on the sacred text.

Intercultural Dialogue

Just as reading the Bible is a cross-cultural exercise, most fruitfully conducted in the depths of one’s consciousness, so any cross-cultural encounter is more fruitful at depth, rather than in the rationality of the mind’s surface. In the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry both Father Frank Fletcher MSC and I experienced the striking contrast between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal thinking9 and the fruitfulness for both of drawing on each others spirituality at the deepest level. Father Frank’s life, work and writing—especially his last book Jesus and the Dreaming—are eloquent testimony to
the value of heart-felt encounter between Aboriginal and European Australians. A similar encounter between the Christian Gospel and native animism in 6th Century Ireland and Scotland gave rise to a vibrant Celtic Spirituality. Again the experience of the Blue Mountains Interfaith Group shows the value of heart-felt meeting of different religious cultures.

At the surface level there are serious barriers to cultural exchange. The most notable is the dualism between perceived true and false. The language and thinking at this level is very judgmental and discriminatory, leaving no room for opposites to co-exist. We readily see ourselves as ‘us and them’. Deeper down these sharp divisions are replaced by approximations, where opposites are found to be complementary, offering welcome to mutual enrichment.

‘Heart Speaks to Heart

Out of the depths of the Godhead, God speaks to the heart of the believer. Revelation is not given to us in concepts and rational discourse, after the manner of theological conclusions. After the Covenant on Mt. Sinai, God continued to reveal God-self to the Chosen People in their historical experiences, in which the prophets reflecting saw the hand of God guiding his people, until finally the Word of God, the full expression of the Father, came among us as man. That was the fullest experience of God for humankind.

At the personal level I come to know God through my experiences brought to light by personal reflection. What about the stream of doctrine which come to me in the words of teachers, preachers and reading? Yet all these words come alive only after and confirm the direct intervention of the divine companion in my life journey. How many words, spoken or printed, even the inspired language of the bible, have gone over my head without making any impact? It is simply because they strike no resonance in my life to date. There is no firsthand experience, no emotional echo to give them, for me, a concrete and personal reality. It is only when I have had the appropriate experience, that is God moving in my life, that then the words of the bible, the preacher or the teacher ring true and confirm the revelation, providing a form of words to capture it. The words coming after help the faith-inspired reflection to recognise and canonise the felt movement of God in my human experience.

The experience of the Word of God is not only in the occasional, life-shaking thunder clap, but often and constantly in barely heard whispers. As we the People of God come together in all kinds of socialisation, we experience each other as God whispering his Word in the ear of our heart, with the Holy Spirit tuning our heart to the wavelength of God. Jesus said ‘where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst’. So if I meet you in his name, Jesus is present to both of us: I make him present to you as you present the Word to me. Likewise are the presentations of the Word in the sacraments, my reading, my flashes of insight, my appreciation—whatever moves me in my daily life. He is ever coming to me.

It can be said, with Meister Eckhart, that the Word of God is becoming incarnate in my life through the action of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit moves in the deepest part of my consciousness. It is there, in whatever mysterious way, that a spiritual experience or theophany takes place, accompanied at times by a mental image (‘vision’) or sound (‘a voice’). St. Johns Gospel records the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan Woman (John.4). By contrast with the well (pege) of Jacob, to be drawn on repeatedly and with effort, the Gift of God which Jesus offers the seeker is:

‘living water...which will become in him...a spring (pege) of water bubbling to life eternal’ (John.4:10,14).

Later, in John 7:37-39, Jesus is recorded as crying out:

‘If anyone thirst let him come to me and let him drink who believes in me. (As scripture said) ‘Out of his belly shall flow rivers of living water’. This he said of the Holy Spirit, which they would receive who believed in him.’
‘Dadirri’ I have defined as an Aboriginal form of contemplation which goes out to the environment, while Aboriginal mysticism ‘seeks oneness with the environment, in which every part is felt to be alive, conscious and alert to every other part’. The contemplator absorbs, and is absorbed by, the other (which other is the interface with the Totally Other, i.e. God). Using the word ‘engagement’ as a communication by which the one is in the other and the other is in the one, I see dadirri as an engagement with the other at the deepest level of consciousness. There are no words, no discussion, no noting of attributes—simply a mindfulness of the other in a timeless moment overwhelmed by a wave of oceanic wonderment.

There is a dadirri in the company of others, an environment of persons. Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr gives examples of a campfire setting and of ceremony, but it can also be a case of one to one, a going out to a person in the depths of consciousness, a mutual absorption. Unlike the frequent exercise of talking at a person, as if a glass wall separated the speakers, Aborigines in conversation are able to speak directly to one another—in the words of Newman’s motto ‘cor ad cor loquitur’—heart speaks to heart. Aboriginal conversation is, I believe, the highest art form of the people. It is sometimes accompanied by words (wording which on the face of it may be inconsequential, even banal), or most potently by body language (in which Aborigines are past masters). It is the deepest sharing of feelings.

Judging by his writings, Father Frank Fletcher was evidently at home with this kind of encounter with Koorie. From the early days of the colony of Sydney, a beautiful example of such encounter between the races is instanced in the story of Patyegarang and William Dawes.

Offered as a postscript to ‘Plumbing the Depths of Consciousness’ by way of tribute to Father Frank Fletcher MSC, remarkable for his empathy with Aborigines in the Aboriginal Catholic Ministry.
In his book about Anglicanism, Roger Scruton makes the off-hand remark that Anglicanism, like Catholicism, is pitched at the average sinner. There is, regrettably, in the popular church at least, a view which is very close to that, which is that a deeper religious life may appeal to a small minority of people, and, if they are serious about it, they can go to a convent or monastery and work on it.

But the great mass of believers is in fact satisfied with something less: with avoiding serious sin and doing what you have to do to be saved. And that is compatible with leading a happy, constructive life in the world, without having to do anything extra.

There are some hazy assumptions built into this, one of which is that asceticism is somehow linked to mysticism, and that is not compatible with an ordinary life. Asceticism seems to mean giving things up in a big way, leading an austere life, something different from the contemporary life which is strong on barbecues, beaches, cars and holidays.

If that’s the kind of thing you have to do without to become a mystic, no wonder it has limited appeal. Granted, in order to become a mystic, one has to take virtue seriously. In popular parlance, one has to be earnest about being good. But that is compatible with being a fun loving person. St Teresa, one of the world’s greatest mystics, was fun to be with:

Teresa was a warm, human person, a little tubby, bright eyed, vivacious, and fun to be with. She would play the tambourine and dance with her ‘daughters’; they would greet her with song.¹

Many of the Islamic mystics were married. One reads that chief rabbis are often mystics, and they would be married. In the Muslim world, the late President of Egypt, Anwar Sadat, was strongly attracted to mysticism, as are many Muslims and Christians living in the workaday world to-day. Although discipline is needed for mysticism, asceticism is not.

That is borne out by Alister Hardy’s memorable book *The Spiritual Nature of Man, A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience*, (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1984). Hardy was a professor of biology at Oxford. By a curious coincidence, he was head of department when Richard Dawkins arrived there as an undergraduate. Dawkins remembers him as ‘genial but batty-looking’. Hardy had a good excuse. He had survived the First World War, which had moved him to spend the rest of his life seeking a reconciliation between religion and evolution.

The reconciliation, he came to believe, is that religion is a source of fitness in the biological sense, since one who has communicated with God is stronger, and religious experience contributes to that. In order to find out what kinds of religious experience are current in contemporary society, Hardy put notices in London papers inviting people to send in descriptions of their religious experience.

He received thousands, which, like a diligent biologist, he set about classifying. Here is one: ‘I felt caught up into some tremendous sense of being within a loving, triumphant and shining purpose.’ (p.53) There is an interesting contrast between what Hardy expected to find and what he actually found. What he was expecting was a ‘continuing feeling of a transcendental reality or of a divine presence’ but what he mostly received were descriptions of brief, dramatic experiences. Sometimes,
though, he received both:

As far back as I can remember I have never had a sense of separation from the spiritual force I now choose to call God... From the age of about 6 to 12 in places of quiet and desolation this feeling of ‘oneness’ often passed to a state of ‘listening’. I mean by ‘listening’ that I was suddenly alerted to something that was going to happen. What followed was a sense of tremendous exaltation in which time seemed to stand still. (p. 20)

These descriptions came from ordinary citizens going about their everyday lives.

Is there anything we can do to open ourselves to such experiences? Spiritual writers stress that one must be striving to lead a good life. And strong motivation is required. Need can supply that. We should ask God to reveal Himself to us.


Evelyn Underhill, Mysticism: A Study in Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness (Preface to the twelfth edition)

Since this book first appeared, nineteen years ago [1911], the study of mysticism—not only in England, but also in France, Germany and Italy—has been almost completely transformed. From being regarded, whether critically or favourably, as a byway of religion, it is now more and more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man.

The labours of a generation of religious psychologists—following, and to some extent superseding the pioneer work of William James—have already done much to disentangle its substance from the psycho-physical accidents which often accompany mystical apprehension. Whilst we are less eager than our predecessors to dismiss all accounts of abnormal experience as the fruit of superstition or disease, no responsible student now identifies the mystic and the ecstatic; or looks upon visionary and other ‘extraordinary phenomena’ as either guaranteeing or discrediting the witness of the mystical saints.

Even the remorseless explorations and destructive criticisms of the psycho-analytic school are now seen to have effected a useful work; throwing into relief the genuine spiritual activities of the psyche, while explaining in a naturalistic sense some of their less fortunate psycho-physical accompaniments.

Catholic priests have been much in the news. There has been much discussion of a book by Chris McGillion and John O’Carroll on Catholic priests working in parishes. The discussion of *Our Fathers* has been colourful. It has retailed pithy quotes from priests interviewed in the book, and highlighted disagreement with church positions, and critical judgments of Roman and episcopal authority. The book and the criticism made of it deserve reflection.

Media coverage of the Catholic Church usually assumes that it is a homogeneous and disciplined body with bishops, priests and laity walking in step with the Pope, and that its uniformity derives from fear of authority. From this perspective the difference of views and plain speaking among Catholics will always be presented like rebellious voices in a strict school, with unspoken anticipation about how the headmaster will deal with the situation.

This way of telling the story is unreal. Priests are more like franchisees than employees. They identify with their parish and are fairly independent in building it up. Like franchisees most have been ready to criticise any authority above them, and always ready to grumble. This need not amount to disaffection.

In this survey the level of dissatisfaction is about what I would have expected. It reflects the tumultuous times priests have lived through, when as a group they have gone from being highly to lowly esteemed, when the church they serve has diminished and aged, and when their own workload has increased with age.

The attitudes to moral issues and to doctrine described in this book are also much as I would have expected, especially given the ambiguity of the statements to which the priests were expected to respond. Most priests learn to use words carefully when dealing with questions about contentious issues of faith and morals.

In the survey, for example, they were offered the options to agree, disagree or be undecided in responding to the statement ‘it is always a sin for unmarried people to have sex’. This statement could be understood in two different ways. It might be taken to mean that it is never objectively morally justifiable for unmarried people to have sex. Or it could mean that unmarried people always commit a sin when they have sex (including, presumably, if they are sleep walking, are ignorant that what they are doing is wrong, etc).

Priests who understood the sentence in the second sense would have to disagree with it, even if they accepted the Catholic position that objectively sex is properly reserved to marriage.

Given similar ambiguities in other statements to which the priests were asked to respond, I am not convinced that the survey reveals a widespread rejection by priests of Catholic moral positions. The question needs closer and more precise analysis.

The quotations from interviews with a range of priests are the most thought-provoking part of the book. The priests generally speak the language of their people: blunt and straightforward. Their views are salty and down to earth, sometimes compassionate, sometimes unfair, and always worth listening to. Their language is that of men who have worked through the heat of the day.

For all their criticism of the Catholic Church, they present as a committed group of men with a passion for what they do. Indeed, most of the aspects of the Church that they criticise, whatever their presuppositions, are associated with a lack of generous passion.
Their language is characteristically Australian. A significant point in which it seems lacking is that words do not come easily to speak of the hunger for God and the relationship with God that underlies their ministry. That lack is also Australian. It is understandable when so much Church language is stale, referring to but not evoking God’s presence. But in times when a deep centre is required to be a priest, deep and earthed words are needed.

Taken together Our Fathers and ‘Catholic Parish Ministry in Australia: Facing Disaster’ suggest the size of the challenges that the Church faces. That is why they deserve close reflection.

A generally aging clergy whose numbers are clearly inadequate to carry on the forms of service and of local gathering that have been inherited, and who have toiled to serve their people in this difficult situation, need encouragement. It will be important that they can contribute their wisdom to the necessary reconfiguring of the Australian Church, and that their energies are engaged only in projects that have a high importance and a persuasive rationale.

—Andrew Hamilton SJ

(First published at eurekastreet.com.au.)


The Chairman of the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, Bishop Christopher Saunders, has welcomed the publication of Building Bridges: Social Justice Statements from Australia’s Catholic Bishops 1988 to 2013.

‘Building Bridges is an exceptional resource for everybody who wants to learn more about the Church’s social doctrine. It is especially valuable for schools, universities and parish and diocesan groups’, Bishop Saunders said.

‘I am very pleased to see these documents brought together in such an accessible form. I believe that this book will offer an invaluable insight into Catholic social teaching brought to life in an Australian context’, Bishop Saunders said.

‘These Statements address major social justice issues in our world: the quest for peace, economic justice, a just and inclusive society, and environmental integrity. In particular, they reveal an abiding concern to achieve justice for Indigenous Australians, for refugees and asylum seekers, for the disadvantaged and those on the margins of our society.

‘It seems that today more than ever before, our society is in need of voices that call for a focus on the common good and concern for the most vulnerable’, Bishop Saunders said.

The volume is fully indexed, making it an ideal resource for students and social justice groups. It includes an introduction by Sandie Cornish, a former Executive Officer of the ACSJC, that gives an excellent overview of the main issues addressed by the documents and supplies a summary of what the Church’s social doctrine has to say about our nation and our sisters and brothers in our region.

(Available from the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council Phone: (02) 8306 3499. For more information: David Brennan, Acting Executive Officer, Australian Catholic Social Justice Council (02) 8306 3499.)


This is a collection of articles written by laity, clergy and religious of New Zealand on issues that are pressing today—action against inequality in society, unemployment, inadequate housing; the effects of migration, imprisonment, racism and sexism.

In this book thirty-one people tell the stories of faith communities that promote greater fairness in New Zealand. It is a resource that will educate and encourage Christians in the twenty-first century.
PREPARING TO CELEBRATE THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

October 2014 to January 2015

From the Twenty Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) to the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B)

Prepared by Michael Trainor

PART ONE: OVERVIEW OF THE READINGS

The following is a brief overview of the Liturgy of the Word for major celebrations proclaimed from the readings for Sundays between October 2014 and January 2015, from Twenty Seventh Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year A) to the Third Sunday of Ordinary Time (Year B). Please feel free to use or adapt these reflections, with the customary acknowledgement of source.

The readings over this time are diverse for several reasons: We move towards the conclusion of readings for Year A, into the season of Advent and the beginning of Year B; we celebrate Christmas, with its associated feasts and the usual celebrations that occur over January, before we pick up the readings of Ordinary Time; we move from proclaiming Matthew’s gospel to reading Mark – the principal gospel for the remainder of the liturgical year, until Advent 2015; sometimes the regularity of the usual Sunday readings is interrupted by important feasts or celebrations (for example, November 2, the Commemoration of the Faithful Departed; November 9, Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome); curiously in the year of Mark, John’s gospel makes an occasional appearance; we also read from various First Testament readings chosen with the theme of the particular gospel in mind.

All these make for a challenging liturgical time as we seek to highlight helpful themes that are linked to each over the course of several celebrations, honour each of the readings with their unique historical and cultural contexts, and suggest how the readings might be celebrated.

It is important to remember that while the first readings are chosen with an eye to the gospel, these readings need to be respected in their own right. They are readings of the Jewish people expressing their faith conviction about God’s involvement in their lives. Rather than seeing the First Testament readings as offering prophetic statements ‘fulfilled’ in Jesus or as divine predictions about Jesus, they are more appropriately appreciated as declarations of faith about God’s ongoing fidelity to Jesus’ ancestors. This should be the spirit in which these readings are proclaimed and interpreted in the Christian Assembly. Advent is a particularly important liturgical season in which this appreciation needs to be at the fore. The prophetic readings, especially from Isaiah, are not predictions about Jesus fulfilled at his birth. They are profound proclamations of faith about Israel’s God and are, from this perspective, valid in themselves.

• The Final Sundays of Year A (October 5 to November 23) look toward God’s ultimate coming, however this may manifest itself. This will usually be in the death of those we love, our own ageing, and the struggle we have with health and concerns about our well-being. The need to contemplate God’s coming is no less important for us in a post-modern world, as it was for the first generation of Jesus followers who had a particularly sharpened sense of Jesus’ second coming (sometimes called the ‘Parousia’ or ‘eschaton’). The themes of the readings allow us to reflect on
COMPASS

the necessity of wisdom and alertness to the realities of life that surround us. The final and climactic Sunday of the liturgical year A (the *Universal Kingship of Jesus* on November 23) allows us to contemplate how Jesus’ leadership is revealed in our church and amongst contemporary disciples and ministers. His spirit of leadership is evident in the ways faith communities respond to the socially disenfranchised. From the perspective of a critical economic and social analysis of our Australian society and global unrest, this final gospel reading from Mt could be particularly pertinent and powerful.

- **Advent** ushers in the new liturgical year B, with its focus on Mk’s gospel. It also allows us to become steeped in the prophetic wisdom of the Jewish people with readings taken from Isaiah (Advent 1-3). These readings come from what scholars call Second (‘Deutero’) Isaiah and Third (‘Trito’) Isaiah, rather than from the actual prophet himself. The historical context of these readings locates Israel in exile in the 6th century BCE. God promises liberation and happiness to a disconsolate people. The themes of our selections from Isaiah are most relevant to today’s Christian community. The gospel selections from Mk continue (in Advent 1) where the previous liturgical year left off, with a consideration of God’s coming or ‘advent’ at the end of time and the necessity of today’s disciples to be ever sensitive and alert to this. The focus in the remaining weeks of Advent turns to the coming of Jesus and his birth. It is this birth which determines the gospel for Advent 4 from Luke and its explicit story of the annunciation of Jesus’ birth to Mary. Those of us from a Catholic tradition have always found this Lukan selection a wonderful affirmation of Mary’s role in the story of salvation. The focus of the passage is, however, principally on Jesus. What it says about him is what is celebrated in his birth in the Christmas gospel, again from Luke.

- **Christmas** liturgy encourages the proclamation from Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth. Here, different from Mt’s birth story of Jesus, the continual emphasis on joy, redemption, liberation and celebration offers us with a rich tapestry of theological motifs to explore, eternally relevant, but particularly important for our church, nation and tragic events that always unfold in our world.

- **Sundays in January** after New Year’s and Epiphany pick up the systematic reading of Mk’s gospel. The themes of each gospel selection shape the choice of the first reading. In OT 3, for example, Mk’s Jesus proclaims the necessity of repentance. It is this theme which attracted the compilers of the lectionary to the story of Jonah and his repentant invitation to the people of Nineveh.

- **Gospel of Year B: Mark**: Finally, a reminder about the Gospel of Year B. Mk’s gospel is written for a struggling urban Roman community. The Roman followers of Jesus in the late first century around 70 CE seem divided. They experience loneliness in their discipleship. Political ill will and internal betrayal to the Roman authorities by some Markan Jesus followers does not make this an easy time of discipleship. Mark’s gospel is intended to address these serious, deep rooted and traumatic experiences: Jesus is portrayed as struggling, abandoned and misunderstood; the disciples as uncomprehending factionalists. The stories throughout the gospel become a snapshot of Mark’s own community in its effort to be faithful to Jesus. For 2015, this same gospel will be able to speak powerfully, encourage and challenge Australian followers of Jesus in their discipleship.

**PART TWO: NOTES ON THE READINGS**

**October 5—Ordinary Time 27: Is 5:1-7.**

God’s people are like a cared-for vineyard, though sometimes fruitless. *Phil 4:6-9.* Paul encourages the Philippians not to worry, and live faithfully and confidently in peace. *Mt 21:33-43.* The parable of what happens to the servants and son of a vineyard owner is an allegory of Mt’s gospel audience as they strug-
gle and suffer. Theme—Suffering. Mt’s Israelite Jesus followers see their own story reflected in today’s Gospel. To live with integrity and authenticity is costly. Are their local and pertinent examples of this?

**October 12—Ordinary Time 28:** Is 25:6-10a. Isaiah presents Paradise and life with God as a mountain feast with choice foods and wines. Phil 4:10-14, 19-20. In all that happens to him, no matter his physical or financial resources, Paul’s ultimate focus is God. Mt 22:1-14. God’s lavish banquet is for all, ‘good and bad.’ Theme—Eucharistic Inclusivity. Our local Eucharistic celebration is a reflection of the Universal Church: How do we celebrate inclusivity in our faith communities in a world of such cultural diversity?

**October 19—Ordinary Time 29.** Is 45:1, 4-6. An unexpected non-Israelite military emperor becomes God’s agent of salvation. 1 Thes 1:1-5. We listen to the opening lines of the earliest writing in the NT. Paul addresses a community with faith and openness in God. Mt 22:15-21. Jesus avoids a trap set by the religious leaders. God is the true source of all life, even political. Theme—God and Politics. Today’s readings offer an opportunity to reflect on the way God and religion have been co-opted into contemporary politics and military affairs. They offer an alternative focus: The heart of life and human community is God (First Reading and Gospel), not the human whim for power or the seduction of privilege.

**October 26—Ordinary Time 30.** Ex 22:21-27. God encourages the Israelites to attend to the poor and not oppress the resident alien. 1 Thes 1:5-10. Paul praises the Thessalonians for their hospitality and openness to God’s preached word. Mt 22:34-40. Here is Jesus’ summary of the heart of ethical life: love of God and neighbour. Theme—Hospitality to the Stranger. The treatment of asylum seekers, the indigenous and the poor in our country is the touchstone of authentic religion. A number of positive examples from the local scene can illustrate the living out of such authentic faith.

**November 2—Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed (‘All Souls’).** This commemoration invites us to bring those who have died and all our beloved into the heart of God. While there are many lectionary options the following gospel selection from Matthew is most pertinent: Mt 5:1-12. These opening words of Jesus’ teaching to his disciples (and Mt’s community) remind us that God is acting now in the most unexpected places and experiences. This openness to God’s act, especially for those of us who mourn for the dead, is the source of true ‘blessedness’ (in preference to the JB’s translation, ‘Happy’). Theme—Blessedness: God gifts us, living and dead, with grace and blessedness. This is the source of all consolation. And to grieve for the dead is a sign of love, not of failed hope.

**November 9—Dedication of the Lateran Basilica in Rome:** Ez 47: 1-2, 8-9, 12. The symbol of God’s presence, the temple, is the source of living water which enlivens all creation. 1 Cor 3: 9c-11, 16-17. Paul’s architectural and temple imagery is a metaphor for the action of God within the Jesus’ followers. Jn 2: 13-22. Jesus purifies the temple, symbolic of what will happen through his death. Theme—Communion. It may seem strange to celebrate a building, but this church in Rome is the Papal parish church, more important than St Peter’s, and symbolic of the communion of churches throughout the world. The feast, first celebrated in 1565, highlights the importance of our communion in charity amongst one another, our global unity, and the importance of the local church as a microcosm of this universality.

**November 16—Ordinary Time 33:** Prov 31:10-13, 19-20, 30-31. An ancient summary of the good, industrious and wise wife. This reading requires careful explanation that critiques the conventional stereotyping of women. 1 Thes 5:1-6. Paul encourages ongoing commitment to alertness from those who are ‘children of the light.’ Mt 24:36; 25:14-30. Like the first reading, this well-known parable requires careful study, lest economics rather than the struggle to do what is honour-
able and right (in the character of the third slave) is unwittingly promoted. Theme—Alertness. As the end of the liturgical year nears, the readings offer an opportunity to encourage spiritual and critical alertness to what is going on socially and ecclesially. The temptation to reflect on the ‘good wife’ (first reading) or encourage the use of one’s ‘talents’ (gospel) misses the point. The focus of the liturgy is about God and openness to God’s life in our world.

**November 23—Universal Kingship of Jesus:** Ez 34:11-12, 15-17. God promises to personally look after the Israelites, like a shepherd caring for sheep. 1 Cor 15:20-26, 28. Paul celebrates the authority of the Risen Jesus who has power over all. Mt 25:31-46. This key parable in Mt’s gospel encourages disciples to care for the marginalised.

**November 30—Advent 1 (Year B begins):** Is 63:16-17; 64:1, 3-8. The prophet implores God to intervene and be revealed in the events of human history. God is like the potter. 2 Pet 3:8-15. The writer affirms that God is faithful and will come. Such a conviction requires real practical patience. Mk 1:1-8. John the Baptist prepares the people for the coming of Jesus. Repentance, humility and openness to conversion are required. Theme—A Comforting God. Today’s readings reinforce the Advent assurance of God’s coming into the lives of human beings—a conviction in which many have lost confidence. We celebrate a comforting (not comfortable) God. Many today still seek to encounter this God. Are there experiences and stories where this encounter is tangibly expressed?

**December 14—Advent 3:** Is 61:1-2, 10-11. God’s servant, empowered by the Spirit, will bring solace and good news to the oppressed. 1 Thes 5:16-24. Paul gives sage advice to struggling disciples of Jesus: rejoice, pray, be grateful and open to God’s spirit. John 1:6-8, 19-28. This is the first of a few readings from Jn’s gospel in the year of Mk. Here, John the Baptist focuses our gaze on Jesus. He is the centre of life. Theme—Hope. The readings encourage hope-filled celebration to counteract a pervading negative and cynical attitude perpetuated by some, including political and religious leaders. Each of the readings provides ways in which this hope can be fostered in an Advent-graced and expectant people.

**December 21—Advent 4:** 2 Sam 7:1-5, 8-12, 14, 16. The writer plays on the image of ‘house.’ David seeks to provide God with a worship-house, but it is God who will build David a living house in his descendants. Rom 16:25-27. Paul’s hymn of praise to God’s wisdom and kindness celebrates Jesus, the focus of the hymn. Lk 1:26-38. We hear the familiar story of the annunciation to Mary of Jesus’ birth. The evangelist’s focus is Jesus: he will be great, God’s son, and rule forever. Theme—God’s Kindness. The image of God as essential kindness, and revealed to humanity through Jesus, can be celebrated in this final Advent
Sunday. Many need to experience and capture a sense of God’s kindness towards them and creation, despite pervading alternative messages.

**December 24-25—Christmas Midnight.** *Is 9:2-4, 6-7.* God brings light into the night of the world through the promised birth of the King’s son. *Titus 2:11-14.* God’s grace of liberation is revealed through Jesus. *Lk 2:1-20.* Jesus is born; people are attracted to him; the cosmos rejoices.

**Christmas Day:** *Is 52:7-10.* To a people experiencing Exile, the prophet proclaims a message of salvation and their ultimate liberation by God. *Heb 1:1-6.* Jesus is God’s revealer and revelation. *Lk 2:1-20.* Jesus is born; people are attracted to him; the cosmos rejoices. **Theme—Hope through Jesus’ birth:** Jesus is born to a peasant couple, victims of taxation, in a world controlled by foreign powers. The political parallels to today could not be stronger. This birth can offer real hope, that people in their struggles and tragedies are not forgotten. In fact, God, revealed in the birth of this child, is with them.

**December 28—Holy Family:** There are optional first and second readings for this feast. The following have been chosen to comment upon: *Sir 3:2-6, 12-14.* Here is wise and ancient advice to family members that needs to be carefully (and critically) reflected upon in the light of today’s challenges that face families, especially parents. *Col 3:12-21.* The first part of the reading (verses 12-15) offers a meditation on how to live in family and community. The second part (verses 16-21) needs to be carefully understood against the background of the Greco-Roman ‘household code’ of order, hierarchy and power. Its omission would be encouraged if it is not the subject of excellent and clearly nuanced preaching. *Lk 2:22-40.* Jesus is dedicated to God; his family will know suffering. **Theme—Family Life.**

Family life can be a struggle and it is important that all who celebrate and reflect on today’s readings feel included—especially the struggling, the elderly, the single, divorced and lonely. At the heart of the readings one message pervades: God seeks to be in communion with everyone. All are included in God’s family life.

**January 1—New Year’s Day: Solemnity of Mary, Mother of Jesus.** *Num 6:22-27.* God’s blessing is poured out upon a priestly people. *Gal 4:4-7.* Paul affirms Jesus’ human birth through Mary and his subjugation to life’s limitations. Through Jesus we come to know that our relationship to God is the same as his. *Lk 2:16-21.* The shepherds come to see the child lying in a place of feeding. **Theme—God’s Blessing.** The blessing of the first reading could be the heart of our celebration at the beginning of this New Year. What is it that we seek from God? What is the blessing we would like God to pour upon us, our family, friends, church and world?

**January 4—Epiphany.** *Is 60:1-6.* The people of God will be blest with God’s light and they will attract to themselves all the nations of the earth. *Eph 3:2-3.5-6.* God’s gift of solidarity with humanity (‘grace’) is now affirmed and revealed, even to the most unexpected of peoples (‘Gentiles’). *Mt 2:1-12.* The magi, kingly servants, seek out Jesus through their observance of the heavens and their consultation of the Jewish scriptures. **Theme—The Search.** Every person is on a search. The ultimate search is for God. Epiphany celebrates and affirms our ongoing search for God revealed in Jesus. The search becomes affirmed and clarified through meditating on our history, the cosmos, the heavens and Scripture.

**January 11—Baptism of Jesus.** There is an optional first reading (Is 12.2-3, 4) however *Is 55:1-11* reflects on God as the source of wisdom and life, for which we all thirst and desire. *1 Jn 5:1-9.* Faith in Jesus reveals God’s love for us and the ability to follow God’s path. *Mk 1:7-11.* Jesus is baptised by John and knows himself as God’s beloved one upon whom God’s grace rests (v 11). **Theme—Belovedness.** The renewal of church life comes out of recognition of the centrality of baptism. This gift empowers us, confirms our divine
belovedness and a ministry to those in our world who desire to know their own belovedness.

**January 18—Ordinary Time 2.** 1 Sam 3:3-10.19. The young Samuel encounters God but needs wise counsel from an elder to truly hear God’s call. 1 Cor 6:13-15.17-20. Paul affirms the importance and centrality of physical corporeality for religious life. We live not an angelic but human and earthly existence. Jn 1:35-42. This is the second reading from Jn’s Gospel in a year of Mk. Here, John the Baptist’s disciples are directed to Jesus who invites them to come and stay with him. **Theme—Encountering God.** Friendship with God lies at the heart of life and discipleship. Samuel (first reading) hears God’s call but needs help to recognise it; John the Baptist’s disciples see Jesus but need help to follow him. They also need time to become his followers. The readings invite our encounter with a companionable God revealed in Jesus. We, like the Baptist’s disciples, are invited to ‘come and stay’ with Jesus.

**January 25—Ordinary Time 3.** Jonah 3:1-5.10. Jonah calls on the people of Nineveh to repent, and, to his surprise, they do! 1 Cor 7:29-31. Paul reminds his listeners that there is a larger context by which life is lived—God. Mk 1:14-20. Jesus’ first words in Mk’s gospel encourage a change of attitude (‘repent’) and an openness to God’s call (‘believe in the gospel’) revealed in Jesus. These become the essential qualities of discipleship throughout the whole of Mk’s gospel. **Theme—Openness.** Both Jonah and Mark encourage a spirit of repentance. This is not the breast-beating attitude of one who should feel guilty or a sense of permanent moral corruption. Rather ‘repentance’ (metanoia, in Mk’s Greek) is an attitude of the person who is open to change, especially of the heart, so that God’s project (as expressed by Paul) can shape one’s life.

*Fr Michael Trainor is senior lecturer in biblical studies with Adelaide’s Australian Catholic University, and adjunct lecturer with Flinders University.*

---

The readings from the Word of God are to be listened to reverently by everyone, for they are an element of greatest importance in the Liturgy. Although in the readings from the Sacred Scripture, the Word of God is addressed to all people of whatever era and is understandable to them, a fuller understanding and a greater efficaciousness of the word is nevertheless fostered by a living commentary on the word, that is, by the homily, as part of the liturgical action.

— _General Instruction of the Roman Missal_, 29.

The homily is a means of bringing the scriptural message to life in a way that helps the faithful to realise that God’s word is present and at work in their everyday lives.

— _Verbum Domini_, 59.