

# Conversion, Contemplation and Compassion

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### Introductory Address to Symposium – 11-13 August 2011

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We are giving ourselves these days to reflect on prayer, and to pray. We have already been welcomed in the manner of the tangata whenua. It is my pleasant duty to extend that welcome on behalf of the whole diocese, and perhaps especially on behalf of those who have put so much care into planning and organising this event.

As we know, prayer is not a security blanket in which to closely wrap ourselves. On the contrary, it is a way of opening ourselves to the wonder of life, originating in God, and flowing through us into the world. To be a conduit of life is the calling of every person. That's why when a child is born, in a sense the world starts again – each time with someone never seen before and who will make their own unique contribution to breathing God's life into the world.

Prayer involves opening ourselves to something very much bigger than ourselves. We are participants in *God's programme* of "making all things new". This is simply not reducible to self-concerned, private piety.

To be participants in God's programme on making all things new involves what I shall call the three "C's":

- Conversion (by which I mean our own deepening conversion through which we are becoming our true selves);
- Contemplation (which is a different way of being in the world, resulting from a different way of seeing);
- Compassion (which leads to the radical transformation of all our relationships).

I suggest that prayer leads into and out of these three C's. I hope that this Symposium will lead each of us more deeply into conversion, contemplation and compassion. In this introduction I merely want to draw attention to the connections between them; how they lead into each other.

In his 1975 Apostolic Letter on Evangelization, Pope Paul VI reminded us that there can be "no new humanity unless there are first of all new persons" (18). He insisted that this does call for "interior change" (20). But he went on to show that our own conversion is incomplete if it does not "affect the whole of life, all human activities, all our relationships, family life, social and economic life, international relationships, and our commitment to the works of justice, peace, development and liberation" (cf 18, 29).

Little wonder that Pope John Paul II, in his first Encyclical, was able to say that the Christian agenda is to "make human life more human". In fact he said that "what it means to be human is the way the Church must go".

This emphasis on the human is not new. In the early centuries of the Church, St Irenaeus famously said that "the glory of God is the life of human beings". He was hardly talking about merely biological life; he meant that "abundant life" that Jesus came to bring. So, Irenaeus was really saying that "the glory of God is human beings fully alive, and truly human". Being truly human and alive, and giving glory to God, are really two sides of the same coin.

One of the great distortions of religious thinking that has crept into all denominations and all faiths, is the dualistic idea that love for God and love for the world are in some kind of opposition to each other; – as if the more we focus on the one, the less we focus on the other; in other words, inverse proportion. But if St Irenaeus is right, and if our Judeo-Christian faith is right, then the proper relationship between them is *direct* proportion. So be wary of those who talk about the need to "balance" these things, because balance presupposes inverse proportion. And I am saying that our real aim should be the proper *integration* of love for God and love for the world, so that each leads to the other. Well, our personal conversion involves this *integration*.

When Irenaeus said that "the glory of God is the life of humans", he went on to say (in fact it was the second half of the same sentence) that "the life of humans is seeing God". Isn't this our second "C" – contemplation? This is a way of being in the world that results from a way of seeing God in all that is, and knowing we are on holy ground. Richard Rohr puts it this way:

In mature religion, the secular becomes sacred. There are no longer two worlds. We no longer have to leave the secular world to find sacred space because they've come together. That was the significance of the temple veil rending when Jesus died. The temple divided reality into the holy world inside and the unholy world outside. That's why Jesus said the temple had to fall. "Not a stone shall stand on a stone." Our word "profane" comes from the words *pro* and *fanum*, which mean "outside the temple". Teilhard de Chardin said there is nothing profane for those who have learned how to see. There is only one world, and it's the supernatural one. There is no "natural" world where God is not. It is all supernatural. All the bushes burn now if you have seen one burn. Only one tree has to fill up with light and angels, and then you never see trees in the same way again. That's the true seeing that we call contemplation. (*Everything Belongs*, p.159)

In this interactive relationship with God, it is ourselves who are being transformed. This special way of seeing becomes a different way of being, and consequent upon this all our relationships are different. This transformation of relationships, resulting from a renewed relationship with God, is our third "C" – compassion.

Compassion is not limited to what is just, or justly due, or owed. The point is, God's love for us was not owed, not deserved, and nevertheless abundantly poured out. Love like that is a circuit-breaker; it makes new starts possible; this is the love that "changes everything".

This transformation of all social relationships, coming from compassion; which in turn comes out of the transformation of ourselves (conversion), which in turn comes from seeing God (contemplation), is how we carry out the mission of the Church. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, says this:

What is needed is for the Church to be what it is meant to be – a living model of renewed social relationships depending on a renewed relationship with God.

So it starts with a renewed relationship with God which transforms all our own relationships, and in this way the Church becomes a paradigm of what God intends for the whole of creation.

The great spoiler of this whole process of transformation is anything and everything that kills off opportunities for stillness and silence, without which we can never experience deeply the mystery of life itself, of the fact of existing at all, and of our own existence. (As Elijah discovered on Mount Horeb, God was not in the storm, or the earthquake, or the fire, or any of life's noises, but in the gentle breeze).

When in stillness, it really strikes us that all created existence comes out of a choice that God didn't have to make but did, and that our own existence comes out of that choice, which God didn't have to make but did, then we really are on the brink of deeper conversion and contemplative prayer – every time we let this happen.

When we are still enough to be overwhelmed by the awesome dimensions of the universe, and of time, or by the microscopic universe within each molecule or DNA, then we stand alongside the scientists of our day, and the little people of all times, experiencing awe, wonder, and the need to adore.

It's when we allow ourselves to be challenged by the mystery of evil, wondering how God could allow terrible things to happen, – why God would even bother creating this kind of world – yet knowing that a God who can is somehow greater than a God who couldn't, then we find ourselves in the presence of the real God – the God who is not accountable to us, who doesn't have to answer our questions, and who answered Moses' question with "I am who I am". Seeing God like this, we are transformed – becoming real.

It is when we contemplate the mysteries of redemption – the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, and all that these reveal to us about the wonderful outcome of human history, and of our own future, suddenly it is the present that is different. We know more surely that even the joys of this life are in some way forever, and sorrows are not. Life itself seems to smile.

Never underestimate what is revealed in human smiles. When someone's smile is generated by beauty, or love, or reconciliation, something deep and truly wonderful is being revealed to us. We know more surely what we have been made for.

Personally, I like to allow my faith to be tested and stretched. And so I linger before the mystery of a God whose ways totally exceed all human understanding; knowing what it is like to not have the answers, staying there, mute – until one is forced to explain "O mysterious God".

Then I move on to linger before the revelation of all that God has revealed about a wonderful future that has been guaranteed for us by Jesus; I experience surprise and wonder that God would do this; and I stay there, mute, until forced to exclaim "O wonderful God".

Then I pause to come right down to earth in awe of God's forgiveness for sins committed even after one has known God's wonderful plan and love; and what else can one say but "O merciful God".

O mysterious God... O wonderful God... O merciful God... The mystery just keeps getting deeper, and one knows it is good to be there.

Welcome to this time together.