

PART I IT'S TIME TO MAKE CONNECTIONS

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Recent events have reverberated with claims that the climate crisis is “the defining issue of our time”, “the biggest threat the human race has ever faced” etc. It’s true, of course, if we’re looking only at symptoms. Surely the underlying causes that create such a crisis, prolong it, and make it harder to fix, is a bigger problem! But that comes down to human attitudes and behaviour, and that is a moral/spiritual problem. Twenty years ago, Pope John Paul II and Patriarch Bartholomew 1 put it this way:

The problem is not simply economic and technological; it is moral and spiritual. A solution at the economic level can be found only if we undergo, in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change of lifestyle and sustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act. (Common Declaration, 2002).

So long as the moral/spiritual dimension is not noticed and named, the solution is sought only at a political level, with the shallowness of political bargaining, trade-offs and compromises – re-arranging the deck chairs.

This shallowness also results in inconsistency; it neglects the fact that environmental damage and social damage go hand in hand. Because of the way everything in nature is connected, “We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental, and the other social, but with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental.” (Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, 138,139). Ten years ago, Pope Benedict asked: “How can we separate the protection of the environment and the protection of human life... since the book of nature is one and indivisible?” (Caritas in Veritate, 51). Failure to respect this unity results in “tendentious analyses which neglect parts of reality. At times this attitude exists side by side with a ‘green’ rhetoric.” (L.S, 49).

A further consequence of not recognising the moral/spiritual character of ecological, social and economic distortions is to look for someone else to blame - scapegoating! History shows how we have treated supposed witches and heretics in times of crisis. Today, those not coping well with reality often try to avoid it by recourse to conspiracy theories, and blaming people in authority, sometimes with rage and threats; and, of course, bizarre apocalyptic preaching (often from fundamentalist sources in the U.S.A.)

In the way that one thing leads to another, false ideologies don’t necessarily start at the sharp end of the spectrum. A recent documentary on “The Making of a Nazi” featured the atrocities and mass murders carried out under Heinrich Himmler, and then it recalled that he started as “the champion of organic farming and herbal medicine, promoter of handicraft and new age mysticism, the radical environmentalist... who valued nature more highly than humanity...”

There is no need for predictions of the end-time to explain our crises. The devaluation of human lives is occurring in “ordinary time”, and in all the ways we “normalise” various distortions, and hardly notice we are doing it.

The market-place has many examples of unethical practices deemed normal and acceptable. Family violence has been called “New Zealand’s hidden pandemic”, even before we include its inter-generational consequences. And it is deemed a ‘right’ to be able to take human lives – at their most vulnerable - sometimes for no better reason than someone else’s convenience, turning a blind eye to what the sciences clearly teach concerning the newly conceived human being.

The pandemic has done us a good turn by showing up radical individualism for what it is – not something to be proud of after all. Indifference to the needs and wellbeing of others flows directly out of a narrow focus on “my rights, my choice, my freedom ...”. In U.S.A. this individualism is euphemised by simplistic comparisons with “collectivism” and “socialism”. Catholic social teaching combines the rights of all with the rights of each in its teaching on the “common good” and “subsidiarity”. Do we need to ask why our teaching has not been more credible and more effective?

In our own country, whatever happened to common sense that some people needed the courts to tell them that a government has the duty and the right to safeguard its citizens against false understandings of “freedom” and personal “rights”? We need look no further than the road code to know that “freedom” does not mean the right to do whatever we like, that concern for others is a component of civilized life, and that a government is within its rights to make rules that are mandatory. Try telling the judge that road rules should be optional; or that allowing only those with a licence to drive violates the freedom of those want to drive without a licence. Or, just try thinking.

Ultimately, we have to own up to and confront the disorders where they start. The Second Vatican Council reminded us that “... imbalances under which the world labours are linked with the more basic imbalances rooted in the human heart. For within our hearts many elements wrestle with one another...” (GS 10). Nothing less than a “change of heart” is needed to liberate us from social, economic and ecological disorders.

To change from behaviours that are less human and inhuman to ways that are truly human presupposes a complete turn-around in the way we think and act. It means living “no longer for ourselves but for others”. It is the opposite of narrow self-interest and shallow thinking.

If the future is to be better than the past, we need to ask: where was the Church’s influence when Western society developed this self-centred individualism? Richard Rohr’s comment is telling:

I suspect that Western individualism has done more than any other single factor to anaesthetize and even euthanize the power of the Gospel. Salvation, heaven, hell worthiness, grace, and eternal life all came to be read through the lens of the separate ego, crowding God’s transformative power out of history and society... thus leaving us with almost no care for the earth, society, the outsider, or the full Body of Christ. This is surely one reason why Christianity found itself incapable of critiquing social calamities like Nazism,

slavery and Western consumerism. For five hundred years, Christian teachers defined and redefined salvation almost entirely in individualistic terms, while well-disguised social evils – greed, pride, ambition, deceit, gluttony – moved to the highest levels of power and influence, even in our churches...(*The Universal Christ*, 164).

He is describing individualism within the practice of the faith! Salvation, and the practices of faith, were too much about “God and me”, with exactly the social consequences Rohr identifies. Even lots of “me’s” worshipping in the same space, though comforting for each “me”, does not constitute the “we” of Christian identity, Christian worship and Christian mission. That’s because Christian identity, worship and mission call us out of that kind of privacy into the relationships and the dynamics of community – a people acting as one body – within the liturgy and within society. The need to overcome individualism (in liturgy and in life) is ultimately what the Second Vatican Council’s liturgy reform was about.

PART II MAKING MORE CONNECTIONS

Peter Cullinane

People have told us often enough that “Church language” simply by-passes them. Of course, language is a two-way street: the Church’s language (in all its forms, not just its words) is meant to form us; we in turn shape it for different times and cultures. For both those reasons, we can ill-afford to ignore the disconnect people speak of. The issue here is not just translations: it involves the texts themselves – texts of the liturgy, texts of the catechisms, and texts of official communications.

How is this not a problem if participation in the liturgy is intended to enable the prayer of the Church to become the prayer of the people in this gathering, when the language or imagery used is alien to them?

How is the disconnect not a problem when language at odds with science is spoken into a scientifically-minded world? Or, if language borrowed from the days of empires and conquest continues in post-colonial times, especially when people know that Jesus’ “kingdom” is not of this world? Or, if language that belonged in feudal societies, and even in Christendom, does not resonate with people living in democracies? Or, if language that was characteristic of patriarchy now alienates? Language that doesn’t connect, is not life-giving, and becomes a big turn-off.

How is it not a problem when some Catholics ignore the role of the local churches in interpreting messages from the Holy See? In presenting the Catechism of the Catholic Church (1993), which Pope John Paul II issued for the universal Church, Cardinal Ratzinger said that catechism “cannot be considered the only possible way, or even the best way, of giving a catechetical re-expression of the Christian message.” He explained that it was to be absorbed, interpreted and then re-expressed in the idioms of the various local churches – in that sense “mediated” by the local churches. In our country we are blessed having people doing this for our religious education programmes.

Just as important is Cardinal Ratzinger's assurance that the same process of "mediating" is required for "Instructions" issued for the universal church. It cannot be presumed that such Instructions apply in exactly the same way in all the local churches. To simply take them from the web, by-passing the mediating role of the local church, is not true to Catholic ecclesiology. "Mediating" involves the teaching role of bishops, and, of course, in a synodal church the exercise of that role will be more sensitive, more complex, and multi-directional.

Language matters. Sharing the faith depends more on gifts like imagination, music, story-telling, and the witness of holy lives, than on the gift of reason. But reason, and how the faith is articulated, also matter. It matters that we use language that invites interest, and shun language that alienates, or isn't properly inclusive. It matters when Church communications regarding matters of concern to all engage only those who can manage the semi code-language of surveys and digital-speak?

Of course, there is no language for speaking adequately of God. God is infinite, and our understanding is finite, which is why we need imagery, metaphor and hyperbole. St Thomas put it this way: we can know that God is good, but cannot know what goodness in God is like. And yet, it is because of the goodness we experience within creation and in people's lives that we catch our first glimpses of God's intentions for us. We know God more surely when we come more alive to God's presence in nature and in history.

Through the experience of beauty, goodness and truth, we are being drawn to God. God's presence comes to us disguised in sunsets and other experiences of beauty, music, works of art, poetry, and smiles on children's faces. There we catch glimpses of what we have been made for. Our spontaneous responses are our personal God-language. It is homely language, yet deep, and foundational.

Nature cannot tell us the whole story of our relationship with God, but it can deepen our desire to know more. In the gift of human freedom, nature takes a leap, leaving itself behind by raising more questions than it can answer. Human choices are what make history. That's where God speaks through lives of faithfulness and unselfish love, through acts of forgiveness and compassion – but also through catastrophes and heartbreaks when healing and hope are never far behind, transforming our Good Fridays into Easter joy. These experiences give more depth to our God-language. The psalms ring out with cries of despair and joy, usually over the more dramatic ups and downs of life; mystics have not shied away from the language of erotic love.

The central prayers of the liturgy tell us, in narrative form, the story of what God has done and is doing for our salvation. Through our participation in the feasts and seasons of the liturgical year, God's story becomes our story; "salvation history" becomes our history. Our God-language takes on the character of an on-going narrative.

The on-going narrative becomes an on-going dialogue when God speaks in the Person of the Word, known more intimately as Jesus of Nazareth. In their friendship with him, his first disciples found their surest way of knowing God. And because Jesus' presence is as real among us as it was among them, it is in our relationship with him – in the experience of

keeping his company – that we have our surest way of knowing what God is like, and our surest corrective to inherited fear-based images of God.

Our union with the risen Christ is not a private or ‘interior’ affair. It is embodied in our relationships. It is as one body that we share his life, death and resurrection. Consequently, the language of liturgy necessarily takes on a community dimension. This community includes those who lived, prayed and died before us; in the Creeds we use language they used. What we say and pray together necessarily has a formal character to it.

But it does not need to be more formal than that. Reverent, yes. But reverence comes out of being alive to Christ’s real presence – in the congregation (“where two or three are gathered...”), in the word (where “Christ is speaking to his people” - present tense), in the ministry of the one ordained to act *in persona Christi*; and in the Sacrament; (Second Vatican Council, SC. 7).

Awareness of being in God’s presence generates awe. When awe is obstructed – by triteness or routine, or just too many words – liturgy is less telling. Our relationship with God cannot be reduced to correctness, or having the right answers, or – much less - seeming to put God in our debt, as if God owes us our salvation in exchange for certain devotions. Walking away from that kind of “religion” won’t seem any big deal. Religious practices ‘hold’ us when they resonate with the sheer mystery of God’s freedom, the gratuitousness of our own existence and our salvation, and give us cause for sheer wonder. Or, to adapt Rahner: Christians will either find themselves alive to God’s presence, or they just won’t be around at all.