

## Engaging the Moral Issues of our Moment

### Reflection 2: Learning our Voice

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To the issues of today, we seek to speak a word, a word not our own, but a Word that has been pronounced to us, the Word of revelation, the Word of God. Given that it is not a Word that is simply derivative of personal experience, and determined by how we feel, it is a word that is foreign in our culture.

As Catholics, we come together each Sunday to place ourselves before this Word because we believe this Word to be our anchor and our reference in life. But even we struggle to hear this Word in its clarity because of the chatter in which we are immersed. We distrust those who are commissioned to speak out this Word. Their language and the cultural language which we have absorbed seem at odds. And for this reason, though the leadership of our Church holds one position about such issues as same-sex marriage and voluntary euthanasia, there are many in our own parishes and agencies who hold another view. Subsequently, it is not uncommon to hear commentators highlight that though 'the Church' preaches its view, most people who say they are of a religious faith are thinking differently. What we are discovering is a clash of two different ways of thinking, what in a very technical sense we might call a 'clash of epistemologies' - the leaders of our Church, trained and educated to think in one way, whilst a significant number of those in the Church have taken on the alternate way of thinking that is endemic in our culture, a way of thinking I outlined in my first reflection.

What we can forget, however, is that the way of thinking that saturates the popular imagination is very recent, the product of philosophical currents into which we have been swept only in the last decades. They may be recent, but they are embedded now into our consciousness, such that it is very difficult to argue a position that is not in accord with them. For this reason, it is a very difficult time to be Christian, and not only Christian, but someone who draws meaning from an ancient Catholic Tradition. For us in the West, to talk of persecution of Christians is to over-reach. However, it is a stressful time to be Christian. The times are not for us. Unlike only a few decades ago, we now find ourselves in a culture that does not offer us the framework of support for what we have inherited and seek to develop. We can appreciate just how difficult it is, especially, for our young people to declare themselves as Christian, or as Catholic, as they seek to make their way into the world. Perhaps it is a little easier for us who are older, and making our way out of the world! However, to be Christian – not just in feeling, in the way that I feel (which many mistake as what makes them Christian), but as someone immersed and accountable to the full Christian Tradition - means being different, standing apart, being alone. And this is a price too high for many to bear.

I have been fortunate to study the work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar of spirituality, Michel de Certeau. De Certeau sought to give words to the experience which I am describing. He wrote how in our current context we can feel as if have fallen from a sinking ecclesial ship, "lost in the vast and uncertain poem of an anonymous reality which comes and goes . . ." <sup>1</sup> Civil society has "replaced the Church in the role of defining tasks and positions, leaving the Church with only a marginal possibility of correcting . . ." <sup>2</sup> In response, he outlines how we can be tempted to create alternate sites of meaning. However, the risk, then, is that we become, as it were simply, a religious ghetto, a museum

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<sup>1</sup> Michel de Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing: From the Body to Writing, a Christian Transit," translated by Saskia Brown in *The Certeau Reader*, edited by Graham Ward (London: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 229.

<sup>2</sup> De Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing," 226.

piece that can exercise no agency in our society – what the American philosopher of religion, David Tracy, calls “a private reservation of the spirit.” This, though, would be to abandon the call of the Gospel which is to change the world according to the divine paradigm of being, and to abdicate the essential public character of Christian life and mission.

The task forward, however, according to De Certeau, is not simply to try to fortify the Church’s bulwarks such that it reclaims a power stronger than the prevailing trends, but rather for each baptised person to take up their personal responsibility, and precisely in the anonymity of their situation to seek to exercise this imperative. He calls this moment, for the Church, our “empty tomb.”<sup>3</sup> The body of the Church, as it were, is absent, at least in the social culture; it has no force. As he contends, no longer can we enjoy the litany of past strengths – ecclesial property with cultural prestige. Indeed, the capacity of the Church as an institution to speak on any moral issue has been severely weakened by our own history of the abuse of children and of our neglect to act properly in response. What we do have, however, now is our own personal voice, a voice that is not afraid to be different. In the silence of an apparent absence we must learn ourselves to speak. But the word that we speak must, De Certeau proposed, be ‘interrogative’ – that is, a voice ready to ask questions, ready to suggest different perspectives, even though our proposals may sound very feeble even to us. Each of us is commissioned to speak out a word as the Scripture scholar, Walter Brueggemann details, “neither in rage or cheap grace, but with the candour born of anguish and passion.”<sup>4</sup> As De Certeau alludes, we cannot now issue a dogmatic word, a word that demands. We must train ourselves in the word which is humbler, and which invites. The French-Canadian philosopher, Paul Ricoeur once wrote, “any ethic that addresses the will in order to demand a decision must be subject to a poetry that opens up new dimensions for the imagination.”<sup>5</sup> In other words, “don’t tell me what to do; tell me how it can be.” This is the word which all of us must learn, for this alone will be the word that can be heard today. This is the word which nurtures, which nourishes. It cannot be a moralising word, but a word which seizes people’s imagination because it deeply respects them, and evokes in them the desire for something more, something different - that ‘new beginning’ which is the mark of the Spirit.

In this regard, there must always be a deep respect for persons in the public debate into which we are drawn. There can be no space for an attack on other persons, or an attack on groups of persons. There can be no space for demonising minority groups whatever they might be, or for shrill and apocalyptic hyperbole. If persons experience themselves as being attacked, naturally they will attack back. Rather, we must stay attentive to the issues, and to principles. Nor is it helpful to impose religious argument on those who do not share our religious conviction. Religious argument is for ourselves, not for others. Though we ourselves might be inspired by our own religious convictions, in the public debate we must search instead for the rational ground on which we can stand together with those who do not share the perspective of our beliefs.

Even so, our voice of invitation will not be acclaimed; it will be criticised. Our voice will not win us friends; it will draw suspicion. It may even result in our condemnation. For the currents of thought with which we are faced are not without virulence; contrary opinions are summarily dismissed as bigoted, as an affront to compassion and tolerance and inclusion, and, therefore, as offensive - as if the Christian word must be relegated to the limp category of ‘nice.’ It is remarkable how a climate of tolerance breeds intolerance.

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<sup>3</sup> De Certeau, “The Weakness of Believing,” 224.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Paul Ricoeur quoted by Frederick Herzog in “Liberation and Imagination,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* Vol 32 (July 1978), 228.

And so, we enter the very difficult pathway to nothing other than crucifixion. We should be under no illusion. To listen deeply to the Spirit of God, to be accountable to a vision of life that we have received from a reality outside ourselves, to be drawn into a field of meaning that we ourselves have not determined, is to set ourselves up for estrangement in a climate that determines the rightness of something from how I feel about it, and which cannot entertain the objectivity of meaning beyond reference to my own personal experience of something. For this reason, the religious voice is considered obsolete in the discussion of social issues. It is deemed as having nothing to offer. Subsequently, we experience the attempt to marginalise completely the religious voice from public debate, even though it is preposterous arrogance to think that 2,000 years of rational, philosophical reflection has nothing to offer trends which are hardly fifty years old.

We are essentially talking about here the way of the Cross. Unless we are prepared to take up our Cross, we can be no follower of Jesus (Matt 16: 24-26). And for this reason, many stopped following him, and many of us may, too (John 6:66). And yet, it is precisely the way of the Cross - what De Certeau links to the fragile, perishable word we must personally be prepared to speak - that will, albeit in ways that we may not see, bring forth new life, a whole new language.<sup>6</sup>

At our baptism, we were immersed into the mystery of this Cross: the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. We were not baptised into something that felt good. We were not baptised into something that we control, something from which we can pick and choose to make our own. We were not baptised into a narrative without definition, and which is inclusive of every position without boundaries. We were not baptised into a feel-good mythology in which love is reduced to being nice to everyone, and in which the tortuous project of compassion is reduced to acceptance of everything. We were baptised into a story of renunciation, a story of sacrificial love, a story of resistance. We were baptised into a life that resists everything that would truncate us of our humanity and draw us from the truth of ourselves. Incorporated into the life of Christ, we were made with him kings, priests and prophets.

This is our time to be the prophets we have been baptised to become. As another great Catholic thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jacques Maritain, wrote,

Too long, in modern times, 'has the Christian world obeyed two opposing rhythms, a Christian rhythm in matters of worship and religion, and, at least among better men, in things of the interior life; and, a naturalistic rhythm in things of the profane life, the social, economic and political life . . .' Today, at least for Christians who have ears to hear, this dualism is past.<sup>7</sup>

. . . we must not only act *as* Christians and *as* Christians *as such*, as living members of Christ, on the spiritual plane; we must also act as Christians, as living members of Christ's body, on the temporal one.<sup>8</sup>

And yet, if we are to be true and faithful to the story into which we have baptised, we must act not simply according to what feels right to us. To do so is to abandon our accountability to the Mystery which has called us into itself, and not which we have called into ourselves. This Mystery alone can be the genuine means of discernment in respect to the position that we might adopt about the current questions before us, if we are to remain Christian not only in name – and not only in feeling - but by our baptismal responsibility and obligation.

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<sup>6</sup> See De Certeau, "The Weakness of Believing," 234, 237.

<sup>7</sup> Maritain, *Scholasticism and Politics*, translated and edited by Mortimer J Adler (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), 201.

<sup>8</sup> Maritain, *True Humanism*, translated by M.R. Adamson, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press Publishers, 1941), 292.

Now is the time to make a choice in respect to our baptism – and yes, to accept the price, or otherwise. Yes, our long Tradition into which we have been baptised does celebrate a defined perspective about life, about marriage. This framework has not changed. As Chesterton once quipped, “The Church is the only democracy where the dead have a vote.” In other words, what we consider to be right is not just about what our generation might consider to be so. We must pitch our opinion against something larger than ourselves – the experience and witness of countless disciples of Jesus that have lived before us in an unbroken perception of what is true. And yes, we must make a choice: do we want to continue to be a part of this Tradition or otherwise? If we cannot accept this Tradition and if we wish to have the personal authenticity so prized by our generation, then the stark reality is that it is better for us to find a new pathway of meaning. We have the freedom to choose.

In the swirl of all these considerations there is one further consideration that might assist our navigation through turbulent waters. In having the fortune of visiting Malta, and re-reading the account of St Paul’s time there, I realised that the texts about his sojourn, though historical in character are, in fact, highly elaborate commentaries, not simply on Paul, but on the Church, for which Paul is presented as a metaphor. The actual account of Paul’s shipwreck detailed in the 27<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Acts of the Apostles teaches us it in a very particular way. Taking the peculiarities of the chapter into account this is not just a chapter about Paul’s arrival on Malta. It is not just a story of Paul battling rough seas, seeking to reach the shore safely. Much more profoundly, it is the story of the early Church at sea and during the storms threatening to shipwreck it, discovering that which is most essential to it – the very mystery of the Eucharist. What brings Paul to safety during his own storm is the mystery of the Eucharist. At the heart of the storm as the text says, “he took bread, gave thanks to God in everybody’s presence, broke it and began to eat. All were encouraged and they ate too” (Acts 27: 35-36). This is a clear scriptural allusion to the Eucharist and demonstrates what is most central for us. In the storm of our own moment in history we too must not cease to take bread, give thanks, break it and share it. This means that during all that we face we must come back to the essential Christian act: the act of self-emptying become a self-giving which is what the Eucharistic mystery is about. This is the mystery that is its true anchor and through which alone we can find our harbour and safety. As the story alludes everything else can be jettisoned overboard. In the very midst of the storm the mystery of the Eucharist, that mystery of Jesus’ self-emptying become a self-giving, is the one thing, however, we must remain true to, that gives meaning to all else, and that holds us together.

Redemption does not come to us in explanations. Redemption comes to us only in an event, the crucifixion of our status and the resurrection of a praxis which lives the salvific love of Christ himself. Both the call of God and our response to that call are only known “through self-giving to [others] in a world [which we are] to humanise.”<sup>9</sup> The theologian Edward Schillebeeckx terms this ‘political love.’ The exercise of this love is what it means to be a prophet. This is the love at the heart of the Eucharistic mystery. It is the love into which we are summoned as a Church, and which, in the end, will be the only voice that will be able to be heard.

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<sup>9</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An experiment in Christology*, translated by Hubert Hoskins, (New York: Seabury, 1979), 630.