

**“AN IDIOT BEFORE GOD”**

**Philip Pinto, cfc**

I know more or less  
How to live through my life now  
But I want to know how to live what's left  
With my eyes open and my hands open:  
I want to stand at the door in the rain  
Listening, sniffing, gaping  
Fearful and joyous,  
Like an idiot before God.<sup>1</sup>

*“We are fools for Christ's sake”<sup>2</sup>*

*"In the course of history, there comes a time when humanity is called to shift to a new level of consciousness, to reach a higher moral ground. A time when we have to shed our fear and give hope to each other. That time is now."<sup>3</sup>*

Until you are willing to step into a journey where you do not know you are going and have no answers, you have not begun.

The problem with so much of religious life is that we just keep the show on the road. It is so hard for us to realise that the show is over! Too many of us are using our skills to prop up things we really do not believe in. This is the time to speak the truth. Only then will change begin. The answer to 'how' is: yes! That is the message of the Annunciation.

There is a great dramatic moment in Part I of the trilogy *“The Lord of the Rings”* which strikes a deep chord in me. Gandalf the wizard has brought a small group together to help overthrow the evil empire of Sauron that is threatening the peace of Middleearth. Someone in the group has to take on the key role of sneaking into Modor to cast the famous Ring into the Crack of Doom, the only way the evil influence of Sauron can be destroyed. The little hobbit Frodo seems the least equipped for taking on such a daring and well-nigh impossible task.

*Frodo glanced around at all the faces. Still no one spoke. They all sat with eyes downcast. An overwhelming longing to rest and remain at peace in Rivendell filled his heart. At last with an effort he spoke, and wondered to hear his own words, as if some other was using his small voice. ‘I will take the ring and go’, he said, ‘though I do not know the way.’*

What clearly emerges in the story is that together they can find the way. As Daniel O’Leary once said in a slightly different context rings true now: What the Church needs is older religious who refuse to give in to oldness of life, and younger religious who refuse to give in to oldness of soul.

I love the image from the world of gardening that Fr. Seamus Ryan speaks about. Referring to the dilemma facing the Church and religious life, he writes: *“I am looking at a potted plant in my room as I write. It is beginning to wilt and wither. It was a healthy plant with a lovely sheen on its green leaves when first put in the small container. But it has been in this particular container too*

<sup>1</sup> Kerrie Hardie, extract from *“What's Left”*

<sup>2</sup> I Cor 4:10

<sup>3</sup> Wangari Maathai's Nobel Lecture, delivered in Oslo, 10<sup>th</sup> December 2004.

*long. The roots yearn for a rich and more abundant soil. When you lift the plant out you see how the long white roots go round and round the small amount of soil, yearning to find more fertile ground in which to flourish and grow. After forty five years as a priest, I see the Church I love become increasingly pot-bound in a 'Catholic' culture of yesteryear when the real world has moved on at a bewildering pace."<sup>4</sup>*

I want to share with you how we might once more be good news for our world, how we might listen to the Spirit of God speaking to us – actually screaming at us – from the midst of the search for meaning going on all around us today. As the American philosopher Sam Keen tells us, *"To be on a quest is nothing more or less than to become an asker of questions."*<sup>5</sup> It is critical now that we ask questions which pierce the surface of these unexamined assumptions, seeking what is being concealed or what might be revelatory. More than ever we are called to listen to the voices of our world.

Here is something from my own Indian tradition:

*Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!  
Whom do you worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut?  
Open your eyes and see your God is not before you!  
God is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground  
and where the path-maker is breaking stones.  
God is with them in sun and in shower,  
and his garment is covered with dust.  
Put off your holy mantle and even like him (her) come down on the dusty soil!*

*Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found?  
Our master himself has joyfully taken upon him the bonds of creation;  
God is bound with us all for ever.  
Come out of your meditations and leave aside your flowers and incense!  
What harm is there if your clothes become tattered and stained?  
Meet God and stand by the Divine in toil and in sweat of your brow.<sup>6</sup>*

*"We are always torn between the wish to regress to the womb and the wish to be fully born. Every act of birth requires the courage to let go of something, to let go of the womb, to let go of the breast, to let go of the lap, to let go of the hand, to let go eventually of all certainties, and to rely only upon one thing: one's own creativity. To be creative means to consider the whole process of birth, and not to take any stage as a final stage. Most people die before they are fully born. Creativeness means to be born before one dies."<sup>7</sup>*

In recent years, in their work with organisations facing changes, systems experts find themselves listening to and supporting a number of religious communities as they struggle to find their way into the future. They use the model of living systems as against the mechanistic model that most Congregations base their organisation on. When one is familiar with the nature of living systems and how life works, it is comparatively easy to see the elements that lead to decline and ultimately to systems' collapse. It also helps to identify the unhelpful patterns that must be disturbed and the conditions needed to make deep changes possible.

Paula Downey, one such consultant, says that: *"Perhaps the prophetic role of the Church, at this critical moment in human evolution, is to teach us about system failure by standing as a beacon to*

<sup>4</sup> Seamus Ryan, *Treasure in Earthen Vessels*

<sup>5</sup> Sam Keen, from the audio tape *Living the Questions*

<sup>6</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*

<sup>7</sup> Erich Fromm, *Creativity and its Cultivation*

*humankind of what happens when an institution that appears to be so robust and invincible loses its way.*"<sup>8</sup>

She further observes that *"religious congregations are organized top-down and inside-out. A small number of people make the key decisions."* Paula advocates a "bottom-up" approach, where people engage with each other and with their context in new ways and for new purposes, thus participating in creating the future together as equals. Decision-making power is ceded to those who do the work, acknowledging that accountability and responsibility are integral to the process of participative democracy.

We are living at the hinges of history. These are the moments when the old gives way to the new.

Johannes Metz in *Followers of Christ* says about the origin of religious congregations: *"They are more apt to appear in times of turmoil and disorientation. These are the historical times when pain is deeper, aspirations more acute, when a settled world's values are up-ended, in short, when an old world order is dissolving and a new world is in the making."* Charism is at its most active here.

Listen to what the German writer, Lindworsky, says:

*Attention must be drawn here to the danger of illusion. Anyone entering an ecclesiastical order so as to live according to a rule approved by the saintly founder of that order, does not by that very fact automatically take over the religious aim-form of the saint, but only such external manifestations of it as are legislated for. The inspiration that animated the saint, and was the most important thing in his foundation of the order, cannot be transmitted by verbal formularies or an external refrain of conventional catchwords. This inspiration must be experienced anew by the novices and must be applied by each individual; each one to a certain degree must become the founder of the order, grasp the ideal of the founder, animate oneself therewith and apply it to oneself and one's particular conditions. Each individual member is then an order by oneself, with one's own aims, and one's own particular method of actualizing the ideal which the order envisages. If this be not the case, then instead of true disciples, we have mere empty husks of people, whose enjoyment of the style and title of their Order makes them so satisfied with themselves that they do not recognize anything more as demanded of them.*<sup>9</sup>

How do we live in such a way that we truly are disciples? I want to speak about this in the next section of this reflection.

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<sup>8</sup> Paula Downey, *Religious Life for a World of Transition*

<sup>9</sup> J. Lindworsky, *The Psychology of Asceticism*

## PART II

*When God's love for the world pierces our armor of fear  
it is an awesome experience of calling and accountability.*

*When God's love pierces our armor of fear*

*it is awesome*

*it is awesome to be pierced by God*

*to be called to accountability*

*to be called by God's love for the world.<sup>10</sup>*

*"The believer's cross is no longer any and every kind of suffering, sickness, or tension, the bearing of which is demanded. The believer's cross is, like that of Jesus, the price of social nonconformity. It is not, like sickness or catastrophe, an inexplicable, unpredictable suffering. It is the end of a path freely chosen after counting the cost ... The cross of Christ was not an inexplicable or chance event that happened to strike him, like illness or accident. To accept the cross as his destiny, to move toward it and even to provoke it, when he could well have done otherwise, was Jesus' constantly reiterated free choice. The cross of Calvary was not a difficult family situation, not a frustration of visions of personal fulfillment, a crushing debt, or a nagging in-law; it was the political, legally-to-be-expected result of a moral clash with the powers ruling his society."<sup>11</sup>*

*That night when the storm broke down my doors*

*I did not know*

*that you entered my room through*

*the ruins.*

*For the lamp was blown out, and it became dark;*

*I stretched my arms to the sky*

*For whom I did not know*

*I waited in the darkness as if in a dream.*

*That the storm was your banner,*

*I did not know.*

*When the morning came I saw you there*

*Pervading all the emptiness of my abode.<sup>12</sup>*

*"I know many people who've been changed by events in their lives, not by words they read in a book. These people have been changed by life's great creative force, chaos. One of the gifts offered by this new world view is a clearer description of life's cyclical nature. The mechanistic world view promised us lives of continual progress. Since we were in control and engineering it all, we could pull ourselves straight uphill, scarcely faltering. But life doesn't work that way, and this new world view confirms what most of us knew: no rebirth is possible without moving through a dark passage. Dark times are normal to life; there's nothing wrong with us when we periodically plunge into the abyss.*

*Over the past years, nudged by the science, I have come to know personally that the journey of newness is filled with the black potholes of chaos. The science has restrained me from trying to negotiate my way out of dark times with a quick fix. But even though I know the role of chaos, I still don't like it. It's terrifying when the world I so carefully held together dissolves. I don't like feeling lost and emptied of meaning. I would prefer an easier path to transformation. But even as I experience their demands as unreasonable, I know I am in partnership with great creative forces. I know that chaos is a necessary place for me to dwell occasionally. So I have learned to sit with*

<sup>10</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Surrender*

<sup>11</sup> John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, 1972

<sup>12</sup> Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*

*these dark moments – confused, overwhelmed, only faintly trusting that new insights will appear. I know that this is my only route to new ways of being.*<sup>13</sup>

*Perch where the wind comes at you full force.  
 Let it blow you apart till your feathers fly off and  
 you look like hell.  
 Then abandon yourself.  
 The wind is not your enemy.  
 Nothing in life is.  
 Go where wind takes you  
 Higher lower backwards.  
 The wind to carry you forward will find you  
 when you are ready..... When you can bear it.*<sup>14</sup>

*To learn to love  
 Is to be stripped of all love  
 Until you are wholly without love,  
 Because  
 Until you have gone  
 Naked and afraid  
 Into that cold, dark place  
 Where all love is taken from you  
 You will never know that you are  
 Wholly without love.*<sup>15</sup>

Mark's Gospel criticises the Twelve, called to be 'Apostles' by Jesus in 3:16-19, not only for failing to understand Jesus' vision, but also failing to understand what it meant to be leaders of the young community. In this, Mark is not really interested in the Twelve (almost all of whom would have died by the time of the writing of the Gospel – many of them as martyrs). He is actually challenging something past, something present and something permanent about Christianity.

Look at Mark 8:22 – 10:52 in particular. It is framed by two stories about healing blindness, and both incidents open in similar fashion: "*They came to Bethsaida*" and a blind person finds healing (8:22-26); "*They came to Jericho*" and a blind person is healed (10:46-52). Both these healings are successful. The second healing ends with the words, "At once, he received his sight and followed Jesus along the road". The meaning is clear: Bartimaeus has his sight restored and becomes a disciple. The question is: how are the Twelve doing on 'the Way'?

The two healings of the blind are set around three incidents when blindness is not healed, where Jesus fails abysmally to heal the blindness of his own disciples.

Think about this for a moment. The Twelve were challenged to take up their cross and follow Jesus (8:34). That sounded like an invitation – not to *substitution by Jesus for them*, but to *participation with Jesus by them*. Initially, it might have sounded like a challenge to come to Jerusalem and get crucified alongside Jesus. But, by the end of the triple sequence, it becomes clear that crucifixion for the followers of Jesus is really a fellowship in the paradox of servant-style leadership. There are, says Mark, other ways of dying to Imperial normalcy than by execution.

<sup>13</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Journeying to a New World*

<sup>14</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Raven, teach me to ride the winds of change*

<sup>15</sup> Madeline L'Engle, *The Birth of Love (Lines Scribbled on An Envelope, 1969)*

This is the great stumbling block for all of us: *'The Son of Man must suffer and so enter into his glory!'* This is not only about Jesus, but it is also about us. Bartimaeus follows Jesus 'along the way' with his robe thrown off.

This is the way that leads to Jerusalem. Most of us are happy to stay in Jericho, the oasis, and that is where, over the past forty years, most Congregations have been content to stay. But what has happened recently to challenge us to move beyond? Suffering. Meaningless suffering. No shortcuts, no detours will manage this crisis, but only walking resolutely through it.

*"Without the Cross we are not disciples of the Lord; we are worldly. We are bishops, priests, cardinals and popes – but we are not disciples of the Lord,"* said Pope Francis. Equally striking was his homily at his inauguration, when he declared: *"Let us be custodians of Creation, of God's plan inscribed in nature, protectors of one another, of the environment; let us not allow the signs of destruction and death to be part of the journey of our world. Caring, protecting, demands goodness and calls for a certain tenderness."*

What lesson was Jesus trying to teach as he entered Jerusalem riding a donkey, that first Palm Sunday? The best answer was one I heard from a distinguished Methodist, Dr. Colin Morris, who may have quoted John Wesley by saying that: *"you cannot preach the Gospel from the rich to the poor"*. Everything that makes the Church look rich and powerful erects a wall between people and the message. The aphorism implies that even if the rich and powerful are saying all the right words, it ceases to be the Gospel by the very fact that it is they who are preaching it. Ultimately, the medium undermines the message.

This seems to be something that both Archbishop Welby and Pope Francis understand – as did the founder of Methodism. Not ancient encrusted institutions, but poor, humble Christian communities, whose leaders do not address each other as Most Reverend or Your Grace, who do not wear gold leaf on their mitres, who do not travel in chauffeur-driven limousines, and who refuse to stand with the powerful, could at last command a hearing. And not just from the poor. The spiritual hunger that gnaws at their soul below their affluent surface is even greater among the better off. But what Church leaders need is the modern equivalent of a humble donkey and all that it signifies. Pope Francis used a bus in Buenos Aires. How much dismantling of the trappings of ecclesiastical pomp and circumstance would it take to do the same in Rome or London?

*"When God becomes man in Jesus of Nazareth, he not only enters into the finitude of man, but in his death on the cross also enters into the situation of man's god-forsakenness. In Jesus he does not die the natural death of a finite being, but the violent death of the criminal on the cross, the death of complete abandonment by God. The suffering in the passion of Jesus is abandonment, rejection by God, his Father. God does not become a religion, so that man participates in him by corresponding religious thoughts and feelings. God does not become a law, so that man participates in him through obedience to a law. God does not become an ideal, so that man achieves community with him through constant striving. He humbles himself and takes upon himself the eternal death of the godless and the godforsaken, so that all the godless and the godforsaken can experience communion with him."*<sup>16</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer often repeated in his letters from prison: *"the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ turns upside down everything that religious people might expect of God"*.

If we really want to deepen our relationship with God, we need to let go of our image of God. *"Give up God if you wish to understand God"*, say the mystics. They insist that the major obstacle to God is our present belief about God. Every person on the quest for God comes to understand

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<sup>16</sup> Jürgen Moltmann

this sooner or later. The Dark Night of John of the Cross is that grace in the spiritual life whereby the soul finds a new understanding of God. That was Elijah's quest at Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. Oedipus had to abandon his certainties, his clarity, and supposed insights in order to become aware of the dark ambiguity of the human condition.

Perhaps one of the most poignant and painful moments in the passion of Jesus was this letting go of his understanding of God before he dies. Just imagine it. He has this extraordinary experience of the Mystery we call God at what is known as his baptism. Here he discovers, in a whole new way, that he is loved – *'You are my child, my Beloved!'* His whole world changes. He gives himself totally to this One whom he names, 'Abba'. *'My food is to do the will of the One who sent me.'* *'I have shared with you everything I have learnt from my Father.'* All his parables give us insights into the vision of what God is about and what God is like. For this One, he is willing to go to Jerusalem, where *'the Son of Man will be ridiculed, and tortured and put to death.'*

Then, as he enters the final hours of his life on earth, slowly he discovers that, one by one, all his illusions and attachments are stripped from him. And we have that final cry, *"My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?"* The One he has relied on, on whom he has built his whole life, is now conspicuous by his absence. Jesus has had to let go of his image and understanding of God in order to fall into the embrace of Mystery. Look at what we find in Mother Teresa's diaries: *"I call, I cling, I want --- and there is no One to answer. --- No One on Whom I can cling – no, no One. Alone... The loneliness of the heart that wants love is unbearable."*

There is no meeting the Larger God without suffering of this sort. This is not for the faint-hearted. We never hear about this in Church, probably because so few church people have experienced it or committed themselves to it. And yet this is all that we need to be aware of.

*"Religion is not about accepting twenty impossible propositions before breakfast, but about doing things that change you. It is a moral aesthetic, an ethical alchemy. If you behave in a certain way, you will be transformed. The myths and laws of religion are not true because they conform to some metaphysical, scientific or historical reality but because they are life enhancing. They tell you how human nature functions, but you will not discover their truth unless you apply these myths and doctrines to your own life and put them into practice."<sup>17</sup>*

*"Sometimes it takes darkness and the sweet  
confinement of your aloneness  
to learn  
anything or anyone  
that does not bring you alive  
is too small for you."<sup>18</sup>*

And finally, Rumi, the Sufi mystic puts all this so beautifully:

*"In this narrow cage, your soul has long trembled  
The bird from heaven drops to the earth.  
Its lament will eventually open the doors of mercy  
Beat your wings against the door and against the roof;  
This is the key."*

<sup>17</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Spiral Staircase: My Climb Out of Darkness*

<sup>18</sup> David Whyte, *The House of Belonging*