

The Opal and the Pearl

The Church, as well as everyone else, must understand that the world was hit by a cultural tsunami in the Twentieth Century. We must humbly begin to pick up the pieces and put them back together again, in constant touch with the Holy Spirit. Only then can this vibrant twenty-first century begin to sing a new song to the Lord. In other words, my dear friends, this is the beginning of the rest of our lives. We have to start now preparing for the future. Some are afraid of the future as a destructive hurricane off our coast. Others welcome it. There is no future laid out like a map. The future is what we make it. We can be told, and some are better than others at surmising, what is most likely to happen if we go on being the way we are, and others around us do likewise. And the question we ask as Catholics is this: can we trust our Church to lead us into the future? At the moment, as Milton put it in his day, 'the hungry sheep look up and are not fed.' In a global universe more than ever driven by bureaucracy, rationalist economics and materialism, people of the Twenty-First Century need religion, they need like never before, open channels of communication with the God who is their salvation and their hope. Listen to your own Les Murray in an essay called 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia:' 'While (the Christian) vision is no longer the dominant one (in Australia), and may never have been, neither is any other at the moment. There is as yet no other vision abroad in our society which commands the same authority as ours does, the same sense of being the bottom line, the great reserve to be called on in times of real need . . . Unbelief, once a daring and rather aristocratic gesture, must now have exhausted most of its glamour; it is certainly no longer exclusive, or particularly rebellious. Much the same could be said of sexual indulgence, pornography and the like. Having by now surely lost most of its flavour of forbidden fruit, sexual licence has to justify itself in terms of whatever real satisfaction it can give; its utility as a bait to draw people out of traditional ways and beliefs . . . must by now also be wearing thin. And it will be difficult for the cult of unremitting youthfulness and physical beauty to survive in the era of aging populations which it has helped to produce. By now liberal humanism is as badly fragmented by dissension as our witness ever was, and its fiercest adherents are often covertly uneasy at its lack of gentleness, its readiness to force the facts and its desolate this-worldliness. . . . often when people who subscribe to it relax for a moment, their eyes are seen to contain an almost desperate appeal: please prove us wrong, make us believe there is more to it than this, show us your God and that Grace you talk about.'^[1] But the question they are also asking, so aptly formulated by David Tacey, is this: can they trust organized religion with their spiritual lives? Can the Catholic Church, for instance, provide them with such a possibility. In other words, can Christianity adapt to the requirements of religious sensibility in the world we now find ourselves in?

For too long the Church was experienced by ordinary people as a bastion of oppression. Coercion combined with innate guilt and shame, coupled with the rhetoric of eternal damnation, kept the so-called faithful under control. The battle cries of the Twentieth Century in terms of science, social progress, human rights and individual freedom, often became enemies to the older theocratic order. If the Church could be understood as a defender of religious orthodoxy, art can be seen as a champion of the orthodoxy of humanity. As such it can take on either an individual or a collective voice. It can be a protest against the way in which a whole group, a whole country, a whole culture is leading its people. It can try to show us that as a culture, as a nation, or even as a particular community, we have been journeying on the Titanic for a whole century, overconfident in the world-view, the infrastructure, the detailed management of daily life, that kept us afloat, and perilously neglectful of all that was going on outside or below an apparently subdued and tranquil surface. We

^[1] Les A. Murray, 'Some Religious Stuff I Know About Australia,' in *The Shape of Belief, Christianity in Australia Today*, Dorothy Harris, Douglas Hynd, David Millikan, [Eds.] Lancer Books, 1982, Pp. 13-28.

could be heading for collision with a perfectly natural ice-berg which we should have detected, assessed, situated and negotiated, if we had been living in the real world which not only surrounds us but actually is us.

The future is not something out there which we step into as into an already designed space. The future is ourselves as we choose to become. Such a choice needs to meld with the world we inherit as we choose to arrange it. As Christians we believe that culture is a cooperative work achieved by ourselves and the Holy Spirit, 'a co-creation of eternity and time.'^[2] The future is alive with possibility to the extent that we are open to change. Change occurs most probably in the wake of fundamental shifts in our way of being. These occur mostly because someone has imagined and described them.

How do we even begin to envisage such possibilities? Such vision of humanity and of the world it might inhabit is often the artist's task, sketching possible shapes for the future. The message of artists to us, since the beginning of our history, has been consistent and quite other. Their point of view has been repudiated or ignored by officialdom both in the church and in the state. Ottavio Paz, the Mexican writer, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1990, wrote a series of 'Essays on Modern Poetry' called *The Other Voice*:

That voice was not heeded by the revolutionary ideologues of our century, and this explains, in part at least, the cataclysmic failure of their plans. It would be disastrous if the new political philosophy were to ignore those realities that have been hidden and buried by the men and women of the Modern Age. The function of poetry for the last two hundred years has been to remind us of their existence; the poetry of tomorrow cannot do otherwise. Its mission will not be to provide new ideas but to announce what has been obstinately forgotten for centuries. Poetry is memory become image, and image become voice.^[3]

Many have taken upon themselves the task of explaining and regulating the mystery of human life, few have had the opportunity of putting their ideas into practice. Situations such as The French Revolution, The American Declaration of Independence and the history of Russia since 1917, have provided scope and opportunity for the implementation of such ideologies.

The message of the artists might be summarized as follows: The picture of humanity that you are painting, whether in its ideal form, or in your perception of what it is actually like, is too narrow, too pessimistic, too 'other-worldly,' too unsubtle. You refuse to accept the blood-and-guts reality of what we are, the bodily, sexual, earthy amalgam that makes us who we are. We want to be human, fully human. If God doesn't want our humanity the way it is, the way he made it, then he doesn't want us at all. He wants something else. The job of the artist is to describe, to express that reality as it actually is. Your own David Malouf says it so beautifully: 'He was speaking of poetry itself, of the hidden part it played in their lives, especially here in Australia . . . how it spoke up, not always in the plainest terms, since it wasn't always possible, but in precise ones just the same, for what it deeply felt and might otherwise go unrecorded; all those unique and separate events, the little sacraments of daily existence, movements of the heart and intimations of the close but inexpressible grandeur and terror of things, that is our *other* history, the one that goes on, in a quiet way, under the noise and chatter of events and is the major part of what happens each day in the life of the planet, and has been from the beginning. To find words for *that* ; to make glow with significance what is usually

^[2] David Tacey, *Reenchantment, The New Australian Spirituality*, Harper Collins, 2000, P 38.

^[3] Ottavio Paz, *The Other Voice, Essays on Modern Poetry*, Translated by Helen Lane, Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1991, Pp. 150-155.

unseen, and unspoken too – that, when it occurs, is what binds us all, since it speaks out of the centre of each one of us; giving shape to what we too have experienced and did not till then have words for, though as soon as they are spoken we know them as our own.^[4]

Artists have been telling us that from the beginning of our history and because they have been doing that, they have been condemned, banned, excommunicated by the official organs of the Church and State. W.B. Yeats believed that the whole person, in the totality of every constituent part, was needed to discover and embody any worthwhile and reliable truth. He held that there is a religion which reneges on its responsibility to discover such truth and which becomes a search for immunity against the shocks of life. Such an impoverished religion was the one being proposed, in Yeats's view, for the New Ireland of the Twentieth Century. Such a fearful attempt to hide from the demands of human passion and human life was, for Yeats, a denial of the two essential mysteries of Christianity: Creation and Incarnation.

The thrust of what artists are telling us is that we have created a mould for human being too narrow and too restricted. When we know the kind of people we were meant to be, we can summon up the courage and exercise the discipline necessary to achieve such a goal. The paradigm of 'perfection' which Christianity, for instance, proposes to its adherents may be satisfactory for some, but it does not suit all. Morality cannot provide a 'one size fits all' formula when dealing with the multiplicity and diversity of humanity.

The ideals on which Westerners base the conduct of their lives come from European philosophy at its earliest. Most of our thinking was done for us by the Greeks. Their legacy was so solid and convincing that few thinkers coming after them gave their explanation a second thought. If the Greeks have done such a good job explaining the universe why bother to reinvent the wheel. Western European philosophy has been described as a series of footnotes to Plato. What we inherited from the Greeks was a way of life, an explanation of ourselves, an architecture for our civilisation. Most of our words to describe any of our important enterprises are Greek: politics, ethics, economy, philosophy etc. The list is almost half of our vocabulary. Every time we invent or are overwhelmed by something new we reach for a Greek word to label it. The 'tele', the 'phone', 'gamma' rays, 'micro'soft, 'paedophile', 'psychopath' are Greek words.

The basic legacy of this Greek philosophy has been a belief that consciousness is our way to human perfection. Anything irrational is off limits. Aspects of ourselves were discounted as substandard, unworthy of our glorious title: rational animal. These pariahs to be rejected are mostly connected with our bodies. Plotinus, perhaps, after Plato and Aristotle, the greatest inventor of our Western world, was ashamed of being in the body. Neoplatonism, deriving from the teachings of Plotinus, influenced a large part of medieval doctrine and spirituality, especially through the writings of the so-called Pseudo-Dionysius, a [it was much later discovered] 6th century Syrian monk who was thought to be the New Testament convert of St Paul (Acts 17:34) and who deliberately forged his writings to pass as such. His merging of Neoplatonic philosophy with Christian theology received almost apostolic status because he was believed to have been a contemporary of St Paul. And although it did provide some very beautiful and fruitful guidance towards a particular school of mystical experience, it also loaded the dice very emphatically against the body, corporality and physical self-expression.

Quite naturally Greek words became the vehicle for Christianity in many of its fundamental formulations. The unwritten teachings of Jesus Christ became articulated in systems of thought which were available and apparently compatible. These are essentially Greek patterns of thought,

^[4] David Malouf, *The Great World*, London, Chatto and Windus, 1990, Pp. 283-4.

although fed also by other sophisticated local cultures. The result was and is a very admirable and very beautiful explanation of the universe and of ourselves. However, it is dangerous and detrimental when it makes serious errors of judgement about who we are, about what is essential to our nature and what is not, and, above all, what an all-powerful and all-perfect God would or would not find acceptable about our humanity. Our invitation to become 'children of God', which is what the Incarnation was about, when translated into this local culture, became an invitation to renounce being human and to set about becoming divine, to stop being animals and start being angels. The invitation is read as asking us to become the opposite of what we are as human beings. If 'spiritual' is interpreted in this way it means renouncing or repudiating everything that is not spiritual, which means our nature, our flesh and above all our sexuality. This, of course, could be a very different agenda from the one which Christ's Incarnation might have been offering. God's adoption of us as his children might have meant that our humanity was being vindicated and validated, that being fully human was what God intended us to be. 'The Glory of God is humanity fully alive,' as the first century Irenaeus of Lyons puts it.

The way you imagine you are, determines the way you decide to behave. When you believe that mind is the all important element in your make-up then you try to arrange for this one element to govern the rest. You install a monarchy and your life becomes a game of monopoly. In this regard it has been constantly stated that the head should rule the heart, that reason must govern the passions, that the soul must reign supreme over the body. Various strategies have been devised to implant this monopoly and implement this policy. The mistake here is not that mind or spirit or soul should have authority and power to enslave or even destroy, but that any particular faculty or element of our make-up should be promoted to the detriment or destruction of any other. This all-powerful hegemony of a dictatorial principle over all the rest was a choice governed by prevailing tendencies in the cultures from which it sprang; it was decisive in the development of European social and psychological history. It is a colonial bias, *carte blanche* to kill whatever refuses to submit. In such an option it is not just the choice of absolute ruler that is wrong, it is the fact of despotism itself. Everything in this strategy must lead step by step to the highest point which must be singular and from which all legitimation and authority must flow. This demands order, hierarchy, central government, arranging everything according to its own predetermined priorities. The one privileged ruler is invested with totalitarian power over all the others.

An alternative model of authority and regulation could be found in conciliarity and consensus. Here unanimity might be achieved by dint of understanding between, and fulfilment of, each part of the composite whole in accordance with the aspiration and identity of each. This would achieve the well-being of the whole because of the satisfactory development of each particular part. Such is the effective government of an orchestra or choir, for instance; government which respects individuality and originality and has the imagination and the patience to see how these can combine to produce an unanticipated harmony. It does not sacrifice idiosyncrasy and peculiarity to expediency and efficiency. It lets the flowers grow before it arranges the pattern of the garden.

A distorted simplification of the complexity of humanity, an arbitrary selection of certain elements for cultivation and certain others for cauterization, the imposed authority of one particular faculty over all the rest: these provided the groundwork for the socio-cultural and psychological back-drop which became our Western heritage. Such foreshortened divisions have caused our present schizoid culture, the great divide between spirit and flesh, between soul and body, between mind and matter, between heaven and earth, between male and female. Such a simplistic topography has inhabited the European mind from the beginning, and though the paradigms may have differed marginally and variations occurred to suit local or temporal fashion, the essential structures have remained in place.

Following imagery suggested by James Joyce, human perfection could be compared to an opal quite as effectively as the more usual Christian choice of the pearl. There must be at least two ways of reaching the goal of human fulfilment. Concentration on the one has been to the detriment of the other. It is not a question of either or, it is possible to do justice to both. Gregory of Nyssa, one of the most renowned fathers of the Church in the fourth century, has this to say about Christian perfection:^[5]

Any action, thought or word which involves passion is out of harmony with Christ and bears the mark of the devil, who makes muddy the pearl of the soul with passions and mars the lustre of that precious jewel. That which is pure of every inclination to passion tends towards the source of all tranquillity, namely Christ.

When we know the kind of people we were meant to be, we can summon up the courage and exercise the discipline necessary to achieve such a goal. As Kierkegaard says, when I get to the next world I won't be asked why I was not more like Christ or anyone else, I will be asked why I was not more like myself. No one objects to renunciation which promotes life and cuts off whatever is holding us back. Renunciation as punishment, as doing to death some essential part of myself is unacceptable; renunciation as pruning towards better and more abundant growth is welcome. Renunciation of food, of pleasure, of even life itself, all these are possible; renunciation of what I am is absurdity.

The pearl and the opal are symbols of two different ways of achieving the beauty which human beings can radiate. Such beauty is not something that we do, not something that we have, it is what we are, what we become, if we are true to our being. Our bodies and our faces are icons of that inner equilibrium which life can accomplish in us by a wisdom kneaded through us which leads us towards integrity. But we, in our spiritual traditions, have promoted one kind of love and despised the other. The word opal comes from the sanskrit *úpara* meaning 'lower.' It is a colourless silica mineral which is the principal constituent of most rocks. Certain impurities, an abundance of tiny gas-filled cavities, give body colour to this undistinguished yet durable base. Light causes colours to flash and change whenever the stone is viewed from different directions. The light gains access through minute cracks and other internal inhomogeneities in the stone. In other words, because the stone is translucent and full of imperfections it becomes potentially colourful and thus assumes its identity as a jewel. Many of us need such imperfections to accede to our status as jewel.

The pearl, on the other hand, is a more orthodox and traditional image of virtue, and is possible and available to many, even if these become fewer in number as the paradigm becomes less attractive to an age of hedonistic exploration. However unrealistic and arbitrary the model of the pearl may seem to our generation, it still can and does fashion certain exceptional individuals, who accomplish and endure a life of asceticism and restraint. However, such a programme is reserved for the gifted few and it should never be imposed, nor should it be, or ever have been, a requirement for all those who are called to the priestly or so-called 'religious' life. It can only promote in the ordinary lives of most people a despairing tension. Disregard for the emotional and sexual aspect of ourselves and the other-oriented structure of our bodies and personalities may allow us to develop defence mechanisms and outer armour which help us to survive in the desert without nourishment for our philanthropic appetites, but it can also mean that we remain illiterate and undereducated in our relational faculties. Those who fail to become beautiful and impressive pearls or hermits may find themselves stumbling through the market-place of life, guilty, insecure, awkward and angry.

^[5] Gregory of Nyssa, *On Christian Perfection*, PG 46, 283-286. Breviary, The Divine Office, III, Pp 224-225.

Pearls will always be treasured as exceptional jewels. They are the product of a defence against any invader. In Latin *pernulla* means uncontaminated, impermeable; nothing has ever penetrated the core; they are unattested; nothing has ever got through. Natural pearls are rare. Only one oyster in a thousand contains one. Such beauty is available to a tiny minority and should never have been imposed as a standard on the majority. There are more ways to heaven than one. Such an option for the pearl as opposed to the opal dictates that our role models and preferred heroes will be solitary, celibate, rugged and ascetic [and usually] male.

While in no way condemning the valid and valuable vocation of the few to the contemplative life and the life of the hermit, which we have described as the beauty of the pearl; there must be an equally valid path to fulfilment which incorporates the full gamut of our lives as full-bodied persons. This alternative formation, described in the image of an opal, suggests a life of contact and intimacy with others which has its own rigours, discipline and demands. Both these paths towards fulfilment require introduction, formation and education; neither come naturally to us. But each of the two involves a way of being which we must be taught. To become either opals or pearls we must learn to speak a quite different and very specific language. The emotional and sexual sides of ourselves must be understood as an essential part of our human growth and development. Unless our ethical philosophies include a way of negotiating all such human contact, from the most rudimentary and basic tactility right through to consummated orgasmic communion, they fall short of the comprehensive inclusivity required.

The suggestion that Christian, especially Catholic, orthodoxy is irrevocably aligned with the first of these attitudes, must be eschewed. Christian teaching and principles may well advance and promote the morality prescribed in the life of the pearl, but these can only be undermined and reviled if they are not complemented and counterbalanced by the equally valuable morality of the opal. If we are faced with a choice between supposedly 'Christian' values and more contemporary 'heretical' discoveries, we create once again oppositions entirely of our own making. These were never meant to be pitted against each other, certainly not by the founder of Christianity, whose salvation was sent to reach the ends of the earth. No one has the right or the mandate to deprive Christianity of any aspect of our humanity. Everything we discover about ourselves should be integrated into our Christian anthropology, so that 'in the end,' as Rilke says, whatever route we take, 'we shall have been marvellously prepared for divine relationship.'

Our job is to prepare an alternative possibility for being human, which can work for ourselves and for our children in a new century. If we deny the reality of what we are, and set ourselves a corresponding programme of completion, the unacknowledged half of our make-up, which has been overlooked or neglected, will eventually break away and lead a maverick life of its own. *The Strange Story of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was Robert Louis Stevenson's way of describing such a possibility. If, like Mr Rochester, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, we lock up our mad wife in the attic, and pretend to ourselves and to everyone else that she does not exist, eventually she will escape, creep out at night, and burn the house down.

Morality that forbids us even to enter the attic and examine the other side of ourselves cannot be taken seriously in present circumstances. Neglect of, and disregard for, the emotional and sexual side of ourselves, and the other-oriented structure of our bodies and personalities, has two inevitable consequences: we develop defence mechanisms and outer armour which allow us to survive undernourishment of our philanthropic appetites, but we remain undereducated and illiterate in our relational capacity.