

DEVELOPING YOUR OWN SPIRITUALITY

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UNIT FOUR SESSION FIVE: Social presence



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First printing 2000 Tenth printing 2009

*The transformation through which the world must pass will not be merely political. It is indeed an illusion to think that the forces which are at work in our modern society are, above all, political. The great political movements of our time, so complex and so often apparently so meaningless, are the smoke screen behind which are developing the evolutions of a spiritual war too great for men to wage by any human plan. This is something that is going on in the whole of mankind, and it would go on even if there were no political movements. The politicians are only the instruments of forces which they themselves ignore. These forces are more powerful and more spiritual than man.*¹



*Peace is not merely the absence of war. Nor can it be reduced solely to the maintenance of the balance of power between enemies. Nor is it brought about by dictatorship. Instead, it is rightly and appropriately called "an enterprise of justice" (Is. 32:17). Peace results from that harmony built into human society by its divine founder and actualized by people as they thirst after ever greater justice.*²



*You will never have real mercy for the failings of another until you know and realize that you have the same failings in your soul.*³



*If there is among you anyone in need, a member of your community in any of your towns within the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbour.*⁴



*We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help.*⁵



¹ Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey*, Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977, 36-37.

² *Gaudium et Spes* ("Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World" from the Second Vatican Council), 78.

³ St. Bernard of Clairvaux, "The Steps of Humility and Pride", III, 6, in *Treatises II*, trans. M. Ambrose Conway, Cistercian Publications, 1974, 35.

⁴ Deuteronomy 15:7.

⁵ 1John 3:16-17.

THE UNIVERSAL HUMAN DIMENSION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

**** All healthy life formation is social because it is, at its core, living relationships (ie genuine spirituality).***

**** All spirituality and all religion will be deeply personal but there is no such thing as “private” spirituality or “private” religion.***

**** All healthy life formation leads us into an ongoing conversation with our world and that might in turn lead us where we would rather not go.***

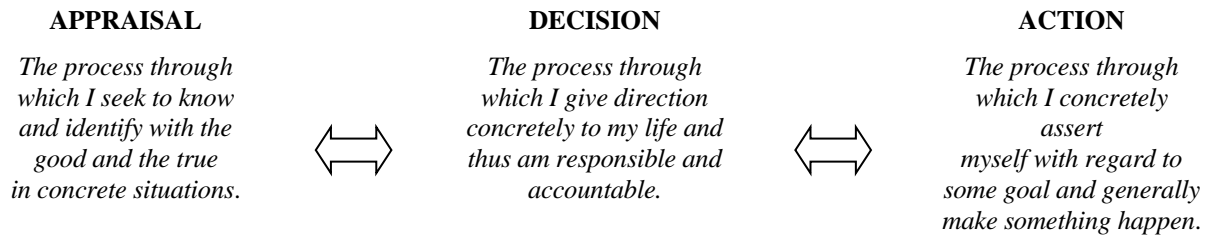


Recalling appraisal

The processes and content of the course to this point should have assisted you, among other things, to sharpen your abilities in appraising life’s situations, to see more clearly what matters in the end, and thus moving more deeply into the journey that is your truth. The work of appraisal, focused primarily on those dispositions – such as obedience and detachment – that enable us to live wisely into the unknown, is critical to any healthy life formation process. In other words, one of the primary aims of appraisal is to assist us to live life as a mystery rather than simply a problem to solve.

Making decisions is one of the deepest expressions of our humanity. It is an expression of our freedom and it releases energy. Making decisions knowingly and taking the consequences of those decisions – one of which might be humbly accepting that the decision was wrong – is one of the marks of adulthood. To pass this process over to others, for whatever reason, suggests lack of maturity.⁶ It is possible to “put our lives on hold,” as it were, for too long, even years, because we have not made the necessary appraisals and the decisions that those appraisals called for. We could map this pattern by which life moves forward as follows:

⁶ We need to make a distinction here. There will be occasions in life where I do not have the knowledge to make a functional decision. For example, I may not have the medical knowledge to make the decision about an operation. Clearly it is appropriate to yield this sort of functional decision-making to those who have the expertise. But even in doing that I do make a moral decision. That decision must be mine. No one else can make that for me. And if the medical procedure does not turn out as we hoped, assuming the medical staff have done their best, I should not blame them for the decision. It was my decision to accept their expert advice. I must take the consequences.



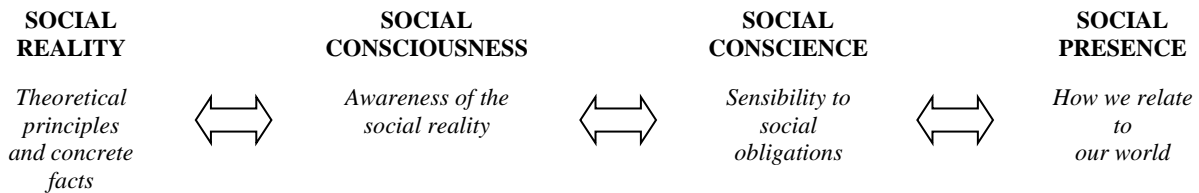
The double-headed arrows between Appraisal and Decision and between Decision and Action signify that this is an ongoing process: Action feeds back into Decision which feeds back into Appraisal and vice versa. This may be considered as a never-ending spiraling process taking us ever-deeper into the True and the Good, the Beautiful and the One. In other words, we learn by living. We discover the journey that is our life by setting out. And we are always setting out. How much we learn from this process or whether or not we learn anything, depends very much on our ability to listen, to be honest and to have the courage to submit to the emerging truth. In other words, this spiral of life is built around the *obedience* and *detachment* patterns.

Social implications

All human life formation is *social*. The *formation field* is constituted in and through relationships. The *formation mystery* of which the formation field is itself a concrete manifestation, is constituted by mutuality, giving and receiving. The *Great Mystery* beyond the mystery of formation, we must assume, is in some way revealed in the mystery of formation and the many formation fields of life. These formation fields that are the stuff of our daily lives are dim echoes of the Great Mystery. They point, they are always evocative of “the more than.” They are redolent with Being Itself. Everything suggests that the Real and the True – Being Itself – is constituted by relationship and manifested in relationship. To foster the True and the Good and the Beautiful and the One is to foster true and good and real relationships and relatedness. Disconnectedness, breakdown of relationships – indeed *destructive* “relationships” – are not indicative of the True and the Good and the Real.⁷

We can never think of our true selves as utterly individual or totally unconnected. My true self is always *self-in-relation*. I am a unique *and* communal being, always transcending the current situation as I grow into the True and the Good, the Beautiful and the One. And that journey is pre-eminently constituted in and through relationships. Living is relating. Living well is relating well. We could map this in a similar way to the Appraisal-Decision-Action pattern, with which it obviously has much in common:

⁷ Unless, of course, the disconnectedness is in service of deeper and more real relationship.



Social reality: The connectedness that constitutes our humanity

The *social reality* considered in terms of *theoretical principles* may be summed up by reiterating that *to be human is to be in relationship*. This names the underlying structure of our existence. Human beings are social beings. The human reality is a *social* reality. Try a little test: Can you think of any way of describing yourself that does not at least imply some connection with other people, events or things? Suppose you say:

- “My eyes are green.” How did you come by those green eyes? From whom did you get them?
- “I am a teacher.” The notion of teacher implies teaching and being taught.
- “I live in Sydney.” An address situates you in a certain place relative to other places and normally also implies a human community.
- “I am the owner of a new car.” Apart from setting you in relation to the car, the people who made that car, or the parts for it, are signified by its very existence.

This is all most poetically stated by John Donne, the 17th century English mystical poet:

*No man is an island, entire of itself;
Every man is a piece of the continent,
A part of the main.*⁸

Perhaps we could use the metaphor of “story” to describe our interconnectedness. We could speak of five significant “stories”:

- Firstly, there is the “personal story”. Each of us is a “story” – a unique and communal tragicomic story.
- Secondly, this “personal story” is part of a particular “family story”.⁹

⁸ John Donne, *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*, Meditation 17.

⁹ There are occasions where the family story is not known, or at least hardly known. In the case of adopted children, the family story is, most immediately, the story of the adopting family. However, it would be reasonable to suggest that something of the blood mother and father and

- Thirdly, each “personal story” and “family story,” is part of at least one bigger “collective story” – eg the “Australian story”, the “Catholic story” and/or the “Aboriginal story” and/or the “Methodist story” and/or the “baby boomers’ story” and so on.
- Fourthly, the “collective story” is part of the “cosmic story”. The cosmos, with its unknown number of universes and astronomical systems, is the “story” within which the “collective,” “family” and “personal stories” are told.
- Fifthly, each of these “stories” is in turn part of the “eternal story,” the “story” of the Great Mystery beyond the mystery. Each of us can truly say: My “story” is “personal,” “family,” “collective,” “cosmic” and “eternal.”¹⁰

Each story is significant to our sense of identity and our sense of belonging and being grounded. We are incomplete in some significant ways when one or other of the stories is only partially told or misrepresented or left entirely untold. It is a very healing thing when we are able to tell our story or when a significant chunk of our story, hitherto unknown to us, is told. The good listener who can receive another’s story as sacred is giving that other a precious gift. It is not hard to imagine different scenarios in which one of these significant stories is untold or unheard in a person’s life. Similarly, it is not hard to imagine a scenario in which all those significant stories are told and heard and embraced with care and compassion and generosity and good will.

Implied in the foregoing is the *concrete social reality*. This refers to the actual life situation and how the truth of relatedness is in fact realized here and now. Who are the people of my world and how do I relate with them? What are the events and things of my world and how am I in fact connected with them and they with me? In other words: What are the concrete facts pertaining to my being in this world at this time in this place with these people, events and things? That is my concrete social reality and, along with the remote principles that define me and my world in terms of relatedness, it carries a remarkable and complex story made of many stories. My existence is a call to participate in this mysterious concrete reality.

their stories are somewhere in there, even if only biologically. The importance of the family story is obvious. Consider, for example, the plight of those aborigines referred to as “the stolen generation,” and the typical desire of those who have been adopted to trace their biological parents.

¹⁰ It is probably true to say that in the post-modern consciousness, the “personal story” is typically not experienced as an integral part of any other “story” – in some instances, perhaps, not even part of a “family story”. Disconnectedness seems more real than connectedness to the post-modern consciousness. We might wonder, for example, what “collective stories”, if any, post-modern people identify with; how they experience the “cosmic story” in relation to their own “personal story”; whether they have any experiential sense of the “eternal story” and, if so, what difference it makes to them. Will the post-modern consciousness assist or obstruct social awareness and social conscience and therefore have a deleterious effect on social presence?

Conscientization – in some form – begets social consciousness – in some form – which begets social conscience – in some form – which begets social presence – in some form

In a healthy life formation process we will normally become *aware* of our social nature and our sense of belonging somewhere, of being part of some bigger network. We will also seek to be aware of the concrete manifestations of this social reality and the response asked of us in the facts of our situation. In other words, we will seek to know the stories. Families are primary places for this to happen. We grow up listening – at least implicitly – to the question: What is happening? This dual process – of listening to the social reality and the concrete facts – is sometimes called *conscientization*. It occurs more or less well, never perfectly, always imperfectly.

We could say that this growing awareness develops a *social consciousness*. Our social consciousness will always be more or less limited. It is worrying, however, to find people who are simply unaware of the people, events and things of their world – people, in other words, who have an undeveloped or at least underdeveloped social consciousness.¹¹

Social consciousness in turn demands *social conscience*. We need to be able to appraise our life situation and make realistic choices. Our social conscience will always stand in need of formation, it will never be a perfect servant. Social conscience, at its best, gives us a sensibility (sense-ability) for our obligations and responsibilities. It reminds us that we are connected with other people and this physical world and what happens to them is relevant to us. Each of us is, in some measure, accountable for our behaviour in and for the world. Social conscience urges us to think of the implications of our lifestyle in general and our actions in particular.

Social conscience also urges us to keep things in perspective, to be real. Thus, a healthy social conscience alerts me to reflect on *this* need *relative* to *that* need, *this* good possibility *relative* to *that* good possibility. It respects our limits as well as our possibilities and promotes a certain weighing up of competing responsibilities. A well formed social conscience can, for example, help us to say “No” and be at peace with the consequences when the issue before us is crying out for a response from someone.

Social conscience may thus be a place of great struggle and ambivalence. Given the possibility of a heightened social awareness today – through the general

¹¹ In passing we should note a certain complexity in this. We can only do so much and only cope with so much awareness, especially of human misery. Without pre-empting the reflection which will follow on social conscience, we could perhaps wonder about the human ability to rationalize and thus “adjust” or “adapt” social consciousness so that we can cope with life. For example we categorise and stereotype people. These categories and stereotypes then become social or cultural filters that save us any need to understand them or interact with them. What are your social and cultural filters in Australia?

cultural mood which forces us to question and the media which purports to address our questions and thirst for information – it is almost inevitable that thoughtful and honest adults will find themselves face to face with serious social questions for which they have no immediate answers. We find ourselves asking the question: What can I do? What *must* I do?

Social conscience may lead us to make some radical decisions about our lives or it may lead us to simply acknowledge there is nothing we can do and that we must get on with our lives attending to what we can do.¹²

Social awareness and social conscience serve *social presence*. The whole point of becoming aware of the social reality and developing a sensibility to my obligations is that I might be present to my world in a more life-giving way, entering the giving and receiving of the mystery of formation with greater freedom. Like the Appraisal-Decision-Action spiral, this pattern flowing from my social nature thrusts me into the world in a particular way. It is oriented toward engagement with people, events and things in accord with my unique and communal limits, possibilities and needs. Given the foregoing discussion, it is clear that our social presence will be more or less constructive, real, generous, wise

Again, the double-headed arrows signify a movement both ways. There is a spiraling movement towards the True and the Good, the Beautiful and the one, *in* and *through* social presence.

Some complicating human factors

In Footnote 11 above we referred to the “filters” – specifically the social and cultural “filters” – with which we approach reality. The medieval Scholastics had a saying that we might do well to remember:

*Quidquid recipitur, ad modum recipientis recipitur. (Whatever is received is received according to the manner of the recipient.)*¹³

In other words, we all are somewhat determined in our experience of reality by the peculiarities of our previous experiences and our personalities and our dispositions and personal preferences, thoughts and feelings at the time. As the French philosopher, Merleau-Ponty observed, all knowledge is perspectival. None of us ever has an utterly objective and unbiased experience of the True and the Good, the Beautiful and the One. Our knowledge of the situation will always be

¹² Sometimes we must be quite deliberate and explicit in appraising social situations. We may, further, have to be quite deliberate and explicit, at least in our own minds, in facing the fact that there is nothing we can do. We should be wary of being manipulated – either by our own thinking or the urgings of other people – into feeling false guilt. A certain impotence can be generated by the thought that I *should* do something when I *cannot* do something. This may lead us into apathy and indifference rather than thoughtful concern and openness to new possibilities.

¹³ See *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 75, a. 5; 3a, q. 5

from a certain perspective. We are all aware, for example, of how easily our perceptions and judgments are affected by anxiety or fear. We tend to believe what we want to believe.¹⁴

Some people are more objective than others, some people are more subjective than others. In more serious cases, for example, our subjectivity might lead us to believe we have actually “discovered” in people, events or things, unfavorable – even hateful – characteristics that are *not* there. This, in fact, is one of the more typical dynamics of prejudice and all forms of sectarianism, racism and bigotry. We *pre-judge*, we do not listen and allow truth to emerge. We are not obedient. Nor are we detached. This allows us to behave in a more or less hostile way to those people, events or things. Propaganda has, as its primary intention, precisely this kind of twisted dynamic.

It seems reasonable to suggest that, for the most part, the violence we wreak on others is in fact a projection of unresolved conflicts within ourselves, whether the “self” in question is the individual “self” or a collective “self” such as a religious or national or cultural group. And that violence does not have to be of the particularly brutal kind which we see too often on the TV news. It may be in the more common and “respectable” form of the cutting remark or name-calling or gossiping or “point scoring” or simply putting others down. Idealizers are probably particularly prone to this sort of behavior because of the inner conflicts inherent in their way of living.¹⁵

It sometimes happens that individuals with unresolved anger find covert outlets, perhaps unconsciously, for their unacknowledged anger in fighting the injustices of the world. There are enough instances of injustice in any age to keep us all angry for the rest of our lives if we so choose. However, it is one thing to be angry at this or that in a straightforward and appropriate way. It is quite another to use this or that reason for anger – probably unconsciously or implicitly – to vent anger that is actually to do with something altogether different.

I may, for example, have unresolved conflicts and much anger in relation to one or other of my parents and or my upbringing. Rather than own that conflict and its accompanying feelings and work through that, I might engage angrily with the world around me. The net effect of such covert behaviour is probably not positive. In fact, in such circumstances injustices may be perpetrated under the guise of doing justice. We may, for example, end up hating the oppressors more than we actually love the oppressed. The following comment is apropos:

¹⁴ My experience suggests two practical assumptions when dealing with people in conflict: Firstly, none of the parties to the conflict will be telling the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth; secondly, when the parties to the conflict stop and listen to their own feelings, the feelings of the other, their own biases and biases of the other, their own expectations and perspectives and the expectations and perspectives of the other, etc, much of the friction goes out of the conflict and you are probably more than half way to resolving the matter.

¹⁵ Recall Karen Horney’s references to self-hatred. See Unit Four, Session Two. We should not forget that ideologues are idealizers – all ideologies are idealizations. And our times have many ideologies and ideologues.

The most subtle and unreachable problem of politics, and one of the profoundest seats of evil, is therefore self-righteousness, which sometimes produces more terrible results than realpolitik. It is even a mistake if academic people - or liberals of a second generation who have not really felt the toughness of the world - take to painting their enemies as too vile in their wickedness, or sincerely feel them to be so. Too easily one overlooks the amount that can be achieved by the kind of thought which reconciles. And though the promotion of benevolent causes is an important thing, this does not vindicate the kind of people who hate the capitalists more than they love the poor. The essence of the fight between good and evil is something that happens at a different level altogether inside every one of us.¹⁶

In all the above it is not difficult to see the value of embracing the obedience and detachment patterns of life. It is also not difficult to see how ideologues and other idealizers will have more or less diminished capacity to enter that process which leads to a life-giving social presence.



¹⁶ Herbert Butterfield, *New York Times* on January 3 & 4, 1973.

CHRISTIAN ARTICULATION: GUIDING PRINCIPLES

** The social reality of human life formation is an expression of the Trinitarian life of God and finds its best possibilities in and through the Incarnation.*

** We are invited to participate in the liberating love of God, enfleshed in Jesus Christ, thus fulfilling the moral injunction to love one another.*



God acts in and through the world

In and through the Incarnation God *enters the world*. The word “incarnation” comes from the Latin words *in* – a prefix meaning *in* – and *caro* meaning flesh. When we speak of the Incarnation we are speaking of the *enfleshing of God*. John’s Gospel says: “The Word became flesh.”¹⁷ The story of the great Promise, “I am with you!” is beyond our comprehension. The promise fulfilled when God enters creation as creature! The Christian community must constantly meditate on this great mystery. It scandalises the rational mind and is therefore likely to be rejected or domesticated. Either way we will miss the profundity of what God has done and continues to do through the Incarnation if we fail to grasp, or at least *begin* to grasp, the reality of the “enfleshing.” We will find God *in* the world, everywhere *in* the world, anywhere *in* the world.

Let us look more closely at one concept: *the world*. Over the centuries institutionalised Christianity has tended, for the most part, to use the expression, *the world*, in a more or less negative way. *The world* was seen as the place of opposition, a dangerous threat. The Church was a sanctuary *from the world*. The Church existed over *against the world*. Missionaries went *out to the world* to “save” people from eternal damnation.¹⁸

In the Book of Genesis there is a clear indication that this world is an incomplete place and humanity must work with God as co-creators to bring about its completion.¹⁹ Isaiah prophesied that God will create a new heaven and a new earth.²⁰ In the Christian Scriptures, the Book of Revelation picks up on this prophecy.²¹ One biblical scholar writes of the social mood among the Jews at the time of Jesus:

¹⁷ John 1:14.

¹⁸ This description is probably a little simplistic, though it seems a generally fair indication of the historical reality. There is almost certainly a link between this view of “the world” and the docetist view of the Incarnation. You would also have to wonder what understanding of “the Church” does it imply? Perhaps more fundamentally, you would have to consider that this negative view of “the world” goes hand in hand with a pessimistic anthropology.

¹⁹ See Genesis 1:28.

²⁰ See Isaiah 65:17; also 51:6 and 66:22.

²¹ See Revelations 2:17 and 3:12.

*In a prolongation of the mysterious prophecies (of Isaiah) the Jewish contemporaries of the NT represented the end of human history as the passage of the present world (or age) into the world (or age) to come. The present world is the one we inhabit since that time when death entered upon the scene (Wisdom 2:24) through the envy of the devil (and man's sin). The world to come will appear when God comes to establish His kingdom. Then will the realities of the present world, purified together with humanity itself, recover their primitive perfection: they will be truly transfigured like the image of heavenly realities.*²²

We can recognise a twofold truth in this. On the one hand *the world* as a creature of God is wonderful and good. “God saw that it was good.”²³ On the other hand, *the world* as the place of human society and activity is often fraught with all manner of misery. This latter truth cries out for transformation and redemption.²⁴

It is not easy to hold the two truths in tension. Very often an ambiguity develops as a result. We find this ambiguity even in the Christian Scriptures. For example:

- Matthew 16:26 implies the goodness and wonder of the world when Jesus says: “What will it profit you if you gain the whole world and ruin your very self?”
- John uses the word “world” mostly to designate something negative, but he also uses the word in a positive way – for example: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (3:16).
- St Paul, preaching in Athens makes reference to “the God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth” (Acts 17:24); the use of the word “world” seems to be positive.
- In Colossians 1:16 St Paul picks up the most positive theme of all things coming to be through Jesus Christ, thus pointing to the destiny of all creation: “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him.”
- St Paul, when preaching to the people in Lystra, says: “... yet he has not left himself without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and

²² Xavier Léon-Dufour, *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, 597.

²³ Genesis 1:25.

²⁴ Blaise Pascal writes: “Knowledge of God without that of our misery, equals pride. Knowledge of our misery without that of God equals despair. Knowledge of Jesus Christ strikes the balance since in him we find both God and our misery.” (Blaise Pascal cited by B. Bro, *The Little Way*, Christian Classics, 1980, 64.)

fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy.” The people are so thrilled at this proclamation they want to reverence Paul and Barnabas as gods: “Even with these words, they scarcely restrained the crowds from offering sacrifice to them” (Acts 14:17-18).

- St Paul says that the created universe is capable of revealing God to us and therefore there is no excuse for those who reject God: “For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Romans 1:19).²⁵
- In Hebrews 1:2 we read: “... in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.”

In other words, the world-as-creation is seen to be the work of God. However, the NT reminds us that this world is under the power of Satan. Romans 5:12 tells us that sin entered the world and with sin, death. As such, the world is intimately bound up with the mystery of evil. This theme runs through not only St Paul’s thinking but John who speaks of rebellious people²⁶ behind whom is Satan, prince of this world.²⁷ We also find suggestions of this same theme in the descriptions of Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness.²⁸ Perhaps the parable of the dandelion and the wheat is the best pointer to how Jesus saw our life in the world.²⁹

It is possible to maintain a creative tension here if we keep our eyes fixed on the main character of the drama – Jesus. For example:

- John’s Gospel sums up Jesus’ life as follows: “He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not”.³⁰
- Jesus is not of “this world”,³¹ nor is his kingdom.³²
- Matthew 28:18 reminds us that Jesus holds his power from God.
- Luke 4:5-8 suggests the same thing when he says Jesus does not gain his power from the prince of this “world.”
- John 14:30 agrees with Matthew and Luke when he says that Satan, the prince

²⁵ The Catholic tradition has a profound and enduring sense of the sacramentality of the world. That is, every person, event or thing bespeaks the divine for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. In the finite is the infinite, in the temporal is the eternal, in the profane is the sacred, in the human is the divine.

²⁶ See John 3:18f; 7:7; 15:18f; 17:9 and 14 etc.

²⁷ See John 12:31; 14:30; 16:11.

²⁸ See especially Luke 4:6; also Matthew 4:9.

²⁹ See Matthew 13:24-30.

³⁰ John 1:10.

³¹ See John 8:23 and 17:14.

³² See John 18:36.

of this “world,” has no power over Jesus.

- John 15:18 goes on to say that this is the reason “the world” hates Jesus.

In the Gospel story, there is a certain blind hatred against Jesus. St Paul, in 1Corinthians 2:7ff, says this blind hatred finally provokes his condemnation. And herein lies the heart of the Christian story, the essence of the Good news. Blind hatred, in bringing about the death of Jesus, brings about its own demise. For through Jesus’ death, life triumphs, death and its dominions of hatred and deceit, alienation and disconnectedness, fail. The world is the place of redemption and is itself redeemed, goodness triumphs over evil, truth over lies, beauty over corruption and unity over disunity.

The Christian tradition

Gross failures and horrible aberrations notwithstanding, the overwhelming witness of the Christian tradition has been to the love of God in the world. The failures and aberrations are seen precisely as that – failures and aberrations. We could draw attention to one example – an example that lasted almost two centuries: The awful cruelties and shocking waste of human talent and life associated with the Crusades.³³

And it would not be difficult to enumerate many other instances in which Christians have failed in significant ways to give witness to God’s love in and for the world.³⁴ There is, however, also plenty of evidence to suggest that the Gospel has been kept alive in the Christian community. One scholar, for example, writes of the Patristic tradition:

1. As far as content is concerned, there are obviously certain aspects on which the Fathers' teachings are, in our contemporary experience, no longer acceptable either by excess or by default. Their negative attitude towards

³³ From the end of the 11th century through until roughly the end of the 13th century, there were a number of “crusades”. Mostly, the intent was to “liberate” the Holy Land and defeat the Muslims. In fact, they were, for the most part, a very complex sociological, cultural, political, economic and military phenomenon carried through under the guise of religion. There were some great people associated with the Crusades – St Bernard of Clairvuax preached the Second Crusade (1147-1149); St Francis of Assisi accompanied the Fifth Crusade (1215-1251); the saintly King Louis IX of France led the Seventh Crusade (1248-1250) and Eighth Crusade (1270). The Eighth Crusade was the last. Amidst all the tragedies associated with the Crusades, perhaps none is greater than that associated with the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), when Constantinople was sacked and the schism between the East and West was sealed in the blood of those Eastern Christians slaughtered by the Western Crusaders.

³⁴ See for example the Statement from the International Theological Commission, “Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past” (April 2000). We might add to these the part Christians have played in the destruction of the environment and our tardiness in redressing that destruction.

commerce and interest-taking seems obsolete since both of these activities are the normal facts of our present economic life. Already the oft-repeated condemnations of interest-taking by councils and popes in the fourth and fifth centuries are signs that the patristic teaching was not universally effective. On the other hand, the Fathers' position on slavery as a social institution appears too weak in view of our affirmation of the basic human rights and the actual abolition of slavery as a social institution.

On other points, however, the social teaching of the Fathers should continue to shape the social teaching of the Church today. Among these are the affirmation of the basic equality of all human beings; the doctrine of the right of private ownership; the principle that the material goods are destined by God for the use of all human beings to satisfy their basic needs; the insistence on the necessity of conversion of heart and detachment from earthly possessions; the inculcation of the duty of almsgiving not only out of charity but also of justice; the doctrine of the identity of Christ with the poor. These elements are the perennial heritage that the Church should cherish and preserve in presenting its message of solidarity and hope to the world of today.

2. No less important and relevant is the method with which the Fathers interpreted the social message of the Scripture to the people of their age. Challenged by the social and economic conditions, first as a persecuted minority in a hostile environment, then as a privileged religion in a converted Empire, the Fathers attempted with varying success on the one hand to be faithful to the message of the Scripture and on the other to interpret it and make it applicable to their times. Many of their writings on social and economic issues are but commentaries and homilies on the Scripture. But they did not simply repeat verbatim the words of the Scripture; there were not a few issues on which the Scripture has said nothing or precious little, and for which there were consequently no ready-made solutions. Their fidelity to God's word was not a mechanical repetition of formulas but a creative and dynamic reinterpretation of the scriptural message in the experience of new situations and a critical judgment of these in the light of the Scripture. An example will make this clear. From a few scattered scriptural statements on the relationship between the Christians and the temporal power, the Fathers developed first a theory of non-interference in the first three centuries when the Church and the State were at a hostile distance, then a theory of distinction of powers and collaboration from the fourth century onwards when the two societies recognized their proper autonomy and mutual need. Of course the Church of today is encountering many problems which the Fathers did not and could not envisage: strikes and unions, the arms race and nuclear warfare, organ transplants and genetic engineering, just to mention a few,

and for which there are not cut and dried answers from the Scripture. The Church must, however, do now what the Fathers then did, namely carry out "the responsibility of reading the signs of the time and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel"(Gaudium et Spes, no. 4). In this process it will recover, not only the traditions but also the Tradition by which the Good News of salvation is made effective in a world that is socially and economically more complex than ever.³⁵

The same author goes on to cite specific examples from the writings of the Fathers. The following text by St Gregory the Great (540-604) on the Gospel story of Lazarus and the rich man, is typical of their very down-to-earth use of the Gospels:

You have learned of Lazarus' repose, you have learned of the rich man's torment. Act heedfully on this; seek out those who will plead for your sins and defend you in the day of judgment; these are the poor. You have many a Lazarus among you; many like him lie at your gates, in need of what falls from your tables when you have had your fill. The words of the sacred lesson should prompt us to do the commands of piety. Every day, if we will but search, we can find a Lazarus; every day we see a Lazarus although we make no search. The poor come unsought to crowd upon us and beg; and these are those who will one day be our intercessors. It is we who should do the asking, and yet they ask of us. Ought we to refuse the request when those who make it are our advocates? Do not waste the occasions for mercy, do not flout the means to salvation granted you. Think of doom before you come to it. When in this world you see outcast people, even though some things in them seem blameworthy, do not despise them. Poverty may be healing their blemishes. If some things in them really call for rebuke, you may and you should turn such things to your own reward, using these very faults to enrich your own piety. Give them bread and a word as well – the bread of refreshment, the word of correction; let them receive more food than they sought; nourish them with a spiritual as well as a bodily sustenance. If then the poor you see are blameworthy, admonish them, but without despising them. If they have nothing to be reproached with, then give them your utmost veneration; they are the ones who will plead for you hereafter. But, you say, those we see are many, and we cannot apprise the desserts of each. Venerate them all, then; the greater your duty to humble yourself to all, since you do not know which of the poor may be Christ.³⁶

³⁵ Peter C Phan, *Message of the Fathers of the Church: Social Thought*, Michael Glazier, 1984, 42-43.

³⁶ Peter C Phan, *op cit*, 266-67.

Summary remarks

We have hardly scratched the surface of this theme of Christian social presence. Among the further issues we would need to address if we were to give an adequate treatment might be such themes as:

- Eschatology and the implications for social presence – how is the eschaton – “the end time” – relevant to the here and now? What happens to our thinking when it is not genuinely eschatological?³⁷
- The differing levels at which we are present to one another as human beings and at which our lives are structured:
 - Firstly, the *mundane level* of human institutions and social structures, the level at which politics and economics and social and general organizational factors are concretely played out;
 - Secondly, the *theoretical level* of thinking, ideas, principles and ideologies that underpin that mundane level;
 - Thirdly, the *existential level* of the very nature and structure of existence, the level which God addresses in and through Jesus Christ, most particularly in and through his liberating death;³⁸ this level cannot be adequately addressed by those means which are adequate to levels one or two and even the most successful methods for addressing issues appropriately at levels one and two will remain terribly imperfect because of the dynamics of the third level – dynamics which can only be adequately addressed by God, with our cooperation of course;
- The so-called “messianic secret” of the Gospels – why did Jesus try to draw attention away from the miracles and the mundane structural level? Why did he not attempt to establish a new political or social order or health care system? What was he pointing to and what does it say about the ultimate source of oppression and therefore the processes by which we must address oppression in its manifold forms?
- The haunting references in the Gospel to the first being last, the poor being truly rich, life emerging from death and so on – is it possible for us to maintain our exclusively rational thought processes and still understand the Gospels and what they demand of us? In what sense is it true to say that the deeper life demands that we cross the threshold that separates the “rational”

³⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar represents the Christian tradition well when he writes: “Christian existence and the Church as a whole are ‘eschatological’: We could perhaps render the word best by ‘de-finitive’: That is to say, insurpassable and in its essence inalterable. Both, Christian existence and the Church, are not temporary but eternal and they are the sign in the midst of the passing ages that the definitive future of God has already begun here and now”. (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans John Riches, SPCK, 1975, 202.

³⁸ Thus the soteriological question: What did God do in and through Jesus’ death? In what sense is that event pivotal to human history?

from the “trans-rational”?

- Tensions that must necessarily exist between faith and culture, church and state, institution and charism – have we identified too closely with the typical ways of business and politics in a secular world? Is the Church of the West too “middle class”? Are we able to be a sign of God’s love in the world and continue as we are? Can we speak of a specifically “Christian” social or economic system or does Christianity transcend all systems? If so, what might this look like in practice? Is it possible to have a “Christian state”?

Whatever our thoughts might be on these and other themes pertinent to social presence, the fact of the Incarnation and the person and teaching of Jesus must be constantly sought out as the beginning and end of all we intend to be and do.



Snippets for meditation

(1) *“No country has ever risen without being purified through the fire of suffering. Mother suffers so that her child may live. The condition of wheat is that the seed grain should perish. Life comes out of death. Will India rise out of her slavery without fulfilling this eternal law of purification?”*³⁹



(2) *“My personal trials have taught me the value of unmerited suffering. As my sufferings mounted I soon realized that there were two ways in which I could respond to my situation – either to react with bitterness or seek to transform the suffering into a creative force. I decided to follow the latter course. Recognising the necessity for suffering, I have tried to make it a virtue. If only to save myself from bitterness, I have attempted to see my personal ordeals as an opportunity to transfigure myself and heal the people involved in the tragic situation which now obtains. I have lived these last few years that unearned suffering is redemptive.”*⁴⁰



(3) *“War is exciting, even if it entails risk for one’s life and much physical suffering. Considering that the life of the average person is boring, routinised and lacking in adventure, the readiness to go to war must be understood as a desire to put an end to the boring routine of daily life – and to throw oneself into an adventure, the only adventure, in fact, the average person may expect to have in his life. ...*

“Not the least dangerous result of insufficiently compensated boredom is violence and destructiveness. This outcome most frequently takes the passive form of being attracted to reports of crimes, fatal accidents, and other scenes of bloodshed and cruelty that are the staple diet fed to the public by press, radio and television. People eagerly respond to such reports because they are the quickest way to produce excitement, and thus alleviate boredom without any inner activity. Usually overlooked in the discussion of the effect of the portrayal of violence is that in as much as portrayal of violence has an effect, boredom is a necessary condition. Yet there is only a short step from passive enjoyment of violence and cruelty to the many ways of actively producing excitement by sadistic or destructive behaviour; the difference between the ‘innocent’ pleasure of embarrassing or ‘teasing’ someone and participating in a lynch mob is only quantitative. In either instance the bored person himself produces the source of excitation if it does not offer itself ready-made. The bored person often is the organiser of a ‘mini-Coliseum’ in which

³⁹ Mohandas Gandhi, *Non-violent Resistance (Satyagraha)*, ed Bharatan Kumarappa, Schocken Books, 1961, 112.

⁴⁰ Martin Luther King, jnr, “Suffering and Faith”, *The Christian Century*, 77 (April 1960), 510.

he produces his small-scale equivalents of the large-scale cruelty staged in the Coliseum. ...

“The motive for these killings does not seem to be hate, but an unbearable sense of boredom and impotence and the need to experience that there is someone who will react, someone on whom one can make a dent, some deed that will make an end of the monotony of daily experience. Killing is one way of experiencing that one is and that we can produce an effect on another being.”⁴¹



(4) *“War does provide an excitement that can give life a new interest for those whose ordinary existence has been dull and mechanical. In one of James Jones’ novels, two veterans of World War II are spending a vacation in the West Indies. They fall to discussing their histories and come to the conclusion that nothing interesting has happened to them since the end of the war. An incident like that makes one wonder whether we have reckoned sufficiently with the fact of boredom in the contemporary world, and what boredom does to people.”⁴²*



(5) *“When I have occasionally set myself to consider the different distractions of men, the pains and perils to which they expose themselves at court or in war, whence arise so many quarrels, passions, bold and often bad ventures, etc, I have discovered that all the unhappiness of men arises from one single fact, that they cannot stay quietly in their own chamber. A man who has enough to live on, if he knew how to stay with pleasure at home, would not leave it to go to sea or to besiege a town. A commission in the army would not be bought so dearly, but that it is found insufferable not to budge from the town; and men only seek conversation and entering games, because they cannot remain with pleasure at home. But, on further consideration, when, after finding the cause of all our ills, I have sought to discover the reason of it, I have found that there is one very real reason, namely, the natural poverty of our feeble and mortal condition, so miserable that nothing can comfort us when we think of it closely.”⁴³*



(6) *“Why is it, that a man riding on a good commuter train from Larchmont to New York, whose needs and drives are satisfied, who has a good home, loving wife and family, good job, who enjoys unprecedented ‘cultural and recreational facilities’,*

⁴¹ Erich Fromm, *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973, 214, 248 & 251.

⁴² John Macquarrie, *The Concept of Peace*, Harper and Row, 1968, 44.

⁴³ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 139.

*often feels bad without knowing why? ... Why is the good life which men have achieved in the twentieth century so bad that only news of world catastrophes, assassinations, plane crashes, mass murders can divert one from the sadness of ordinary mornings?"*⁴⁴



(7) *"Are we afraid quiet afternoons will be interrupted by gunfire? Or do we hope they will? Was there ever a truly uneventful time, years of long afternoons when nothing happened and people were glad of it."*⁴⁵



(8) *"When I discover that I am poor, that I am confused, but that You call me by my name, that You love me, then there is the moment of transformation."*⁴⁶



(9) *"I cannot discover my 'meaning' if I try to evade the dread which comes from first experiencing my meaninglessness."*⁴⁷



(10) *"A reciprocal action is therefore required between the conversion of the individual and the reform of the structures, even though the former must remain the principal factor in the life of the Christian."*⁴⁸



(11) *"It follows for the Christian churches that they must fulfil further their old task of employing the Word of the cross to destroy religious idolatry and personal fetishism and to spread the freedom of faith into the very hovels of the obscure. Its new task then will lie in struggling against not only religious superstition but also political idolatry, not only religious alienation of man but also his political, social and racial alienation in order to serve the liberation of man to his likeness to God in all areas where he suffers from inhumanity. In this sense, I think, it would also be*

⁴⁴ Walker Percy, "The Delta Factor" in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has To Do with the Other*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981, 4 & 7 (3-45).

⁴⁵ Walker Percy, *The Second Coming*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980, 16.

⁴⁶ Jean Vanier, *Followers_of_Jesus*, Gill and MacMillan, 1976, 80.

⁴⁷ Thomas Merton, *Contemplative_Prayer*, Image Books, 1969, 68.

⁴⁸ Oscar Cullman, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries*, Harper, 1970, 55.

the task of the churches today to develop “social critical freedom” in institutions. I say “also” because man is basically enslaved by anxiety, and liberation from anxiety happens in the first place through faith -- not through social improvements.”⁴⁹



(12) *“We are the times; as we are, thus are the times.”⁵⁰*



(13) *Faces in the Street*

*“They lie, the men who tell us in a loud decisive tone
That want is here a stranger, and that misery’s unknown;
For where the nearest suburb and the city proper meet
My window-sill is level with the faces in the street –
 Drifting past, drifting past,
 To the beat of weary feet –
While I sorrow for the owners of those faces in the street.”⁵¹*



(14) *“I discovered something which I had never confronted before, that there were immense forces of darkness and hatred within my own heart. At particular moments of fatigue or stress, I saw forces of hate rising up inside me, and the capacity to hurt someone who was weak and was provoking me! That, I think, was what caused me the most pain: to discover who I really am, and to realize that maybe I did not want to know who I really was! I did not want to admit all the garbage inside me. And then I had to decide whether I would just continue to pretend that I was okay and throw myself into hyperactivity, projects where I could forget all the garbage and prove to others how good I was. Elitism is the sickness of us all. We all want to be on the winning team. That is the heart of apartheid and every form of racism. The important thing is to become conscious of those forces in us and to work at being liberated from them and to discover that the worst enemy is inside our own hearts not outside!”⁵²*



⁴⁹ Jurgen Moltmann, “Political Theology”, *Theology Today*, 28 (1971), 20.

⁵⁰ Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 80*.

⁵¹ Poem by Henry Lawson. This the first of thirteen stanzas in this poem.

⁵² Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community*, Paulist Press, 1992, 19.

(15) *“Too much and too long we seem to have surrendered community excellence and community values in the mere accumulation of material things. Our gross national product if we should judge America by that – counts air pollution and cigarettes advertising, and ambulances to clear our highways of carnage. It counts special locks for our doors and the jails for those who break them. It counts the destruction of our redwoods and loss of our natural wonder in chaotic sprawl. It counts napalm and the cost of a nuclear warhead, and armored cars for the police who fight riots in our streets. It counts Whitman’s rifle and Speck’s knife, and the television programs which glorify violence in order to sell toys to our children. Yet the gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages; the intelligence of our public debate, or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage; neither our wisdom nor our learning; neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which makes life worthwhile. And it can tell us everything about America except why we are proud that we are Americans.”*⁵³



⁵³ From an address by Robert F Kennedy, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, March 1968. For some inspiring quotations taken from Robert Kennedy’s speeches, go to <http://www.marlenesite.com/heros/rfk/index.htm>.

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Suggested exercises

1. This week make a special point of praying for someone you do not like.
2. Is there someone in particular with whom you feel the need for reconciliation? Mindful of the presence of God, pay attention to the part you have – or might have – played in the difficulty that now exists. Listen for personality factors, anxiety and its effects, honesty and dishonesty, fear and so on. Just become aware of *you* and *your* contribution. For the time being, this is just about awareness – do not try to do anything about making reconciliation happen. Listen and wait. Explicitly turn it over to God for the moment.
3. Notice the people around you this week. Think of each of them as a unique story, a tragicomedy – like you. Do not attempt to diagnose or analyse them. Just pay attention and see if you can become a little more aware of those others as “stories” in their own right.

