

Becoming a leaf

BY TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE OP

Timothy Radcliffe OP - Second talk from the NCP Convention

I began by suggesting that we are living through a crisis of meaning. There is a gulf between Catholicism and modernity, which can make it tough even for Catholics to make sense of our faith. On the one hand, the secular consumerist world is alien to our sacramental and symbolic world, a world of gratitude and grace. And on the other the Church is often resistant to the beautiful aspirations of the secular world, for fairness, due process, tolerance, the equality of women and the respect for gay people, and so on. The Church has become too defensive when faced with modernity, and modernity is stuck in a deep suspicion of Catholicism.

This is crucifying our people. And we priests are with them right in the middle. That is where we have to be. We can only thrive there, I suggested, with a profound understanding of obedience to God, an attentive listening that harmonizes obedience to the scriptures, to the truths of modernity, to the poor and to the hierarchy. Following our consciences is not just consulting some inner feeling. It is searching with all our heart and mind, our imagination and intelligence, for what God asks of us today: 'Oh that today you would listen to my voice and harden not your heart.'

The American Franciscan Michael Crosby has argued that we need to move from a monarchical to a Trinitarian model of the Church. A good theology of the Trinity puts the mutuality of God's love at the centre. Monarchy begins from the oneness of God; Trinity puts relationship at the core. This sounds awfully revolutionary, but this is pretty much the theology of the present Pope. *Caritas in veritate* has a Trinitarian model of the Church. Pope Benedict once said, 'The Trinity is truly perfect communion! How the world would change if in families, in parishes and in all other communities relationships were lived following always the example of the three Divine Persons, where each one lives not for themselves but with the other, for the other and in the other' (Quoted Crosby p105 and 106).

So we have the theory. How do we help that glorious Trinitarian understanding of the Church become flesh and blood instead of just a nice idea? Ultimately, it will imply, among much else, a transformation of the Church's government from monarchy to

mutuality. Cardinal Basil Hume believed that the Church must pass from being governed by the Pope and the Vatican, served by the bishops to become a Church governed by the Pope and the bishops served by the Vatican. He believed that the heads of the Episcopal Conferences of the Universal Church should elect a small number of bishops who would govern the Church with the Pope, helped by the Vatican. Collegiality would be installed in the heart of the Church. Relationships would become fundamental. At the centre of the Church, there would not be a solitary monarch, but communion and dialogue.

Wonderful, but, alas, it is very unlikely that anyone in the Vatican will say: 'Gosh, Timothy Radcliffe has reminded the Australian priests of Cardinal Hume's ideas for the transformation of the Church. What a bright idea! Let's go for it' So, what can we do? I would suggest that we priests have to live Trinitarian lives. We must be priests whose lives embody this mutuality, this love which lifts into equality. The Trinity is the mystery of an equal love, and every truly Triune love seeks to overthrow domination, manipulation, condescension. We have to be priests moved by the deep instinct for an equal love, the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I can think of an eminent Irish Dominican, Cardinal Michael Browne, who returned home after a glorious time in Rome. He went to see the ancient nun who had baptised him as a baby in emergency, to thank her. She said, 'Your Eminence, it was honour to baptise you in the name of Jesus, Mary and Joseph.'

Jesus did not announce the Kingdom of God by writing articles, or even giving lectures about it. He did not organise demos, except perhaps on Palm Sunday and in the Temple! He did not sign petitions. He lived the Kingdom. He lived the mutuality of God's love, engaging with Pharisees and lawyers, prostitutes and tax collectors, Jews and Gentiles. His whole being was relational, an expression of his relationship with his Father. It put him on the cross. As Herbert McCabe liked to say: 'If you love you will get hurt, and perhaps killed. If you do not love, then you are dead already.' If we want a new Church to be born, a Trinitarian Church, then that is the risk that we must take.

We will only bring to birth a Trinitarian Church by being Trinitarian people. Anything else will be mere power politics.

Chris [McGillion] had that wonderful quote from Karl Marx yesterday, that we must look at what we can do, and leave the rest to history. Peter [Brock] showed us beautifully how St Mary McKillop changed the Church by being herself, strong, holy and not Irish! Gandhi showed the way to get rid of the British was not by violence, but by rooting out the violence within his own people, within Hinduism. We have to become deeply non-violent people.

First of all this implies that we must live a deeply relational model of being a priest. I was very moved yesterday when one of you said that even after golf, it was impossible to admit that you had had a tough week. We priests often succumb to a macho, self-sufficient understanding of being a priest. We can become the Lone Rangers, who tough it out, not needing anybody else. It is bad form to admit need. But we are the ministers of a God who became human in a needy child, a kid who had to have his nappies changed, and feed at the breast of his mother. Our faith challenges any idea that you can be self-sufficient. God said to St Catherine of Siena that 'I could have made you each sufficient to yourselves but I made you need each other, so that you could be ministers to each other of my grace.' Our mutual need as priests is a sign of a Trinitarian life.

An English bishop told me that the best parish in his diocese was run by a priest who was a total alcoholic. He was incapable of doing anything by himself, and so he needed the people to do everything, which they did wonderfully. I am not suggesting that you should take to the bottle....!

We priests must become members of the presbyterate, the first religious community, gathered around the bishop in mutual support and support of the people. We must witness to the mutuality of the Trinity by being unafraid to be needy. A Trinitarian person is not auto-sufficient.

What about within the wider Church? I would suggest three things.

- We must refuse self-marginalization.
- We must engage profoundly with those who are different, with whom we disagree.
- We must free ourselves from fear and the impulse to control everything.

Let us begin with self-marginalization. It has become common for some people to distinguish themselves from 'the

official Church' or 'the institutional Church.' To talk in this way is, I deeply believe, to marginalise ourselves and to promote a vision of the Church which is unTrinitarian. It is to disenfranchise ourselves, as if we baptised and ordained people were not officially Christian. To talk about the 'official church' is to embrace a position on the edge. If we believe that the Church is the Body of Christ, then we are no less 'official' than anyone else and so let's just stop talking about the 'official church'.

And there is no such thing as the institutional Church. The Church is a rich weave of overlapping institutions, the hierarchy, dioceses, the religious orders, universities, thousands of NGOs, fraternities, the new movements, periodicals, pilgrimages, weird and wonderful devotions. The media think that the Church is one great big monolithic organisation but we should know better. One of the extraordinary things about the Catholic Church is that it has always been and is endless fertile in creating new institutions. Not a day goes by without the invention of a new religious congregation often wrapped in bizarre exotic robes, unlike our beautiful Dominican habits.

Of course the hierarchy has a special role which should be to hold all this pullulating, evolving web of institutions in unity, so that no single one, from Opus Dei to the Jesuits, can claim to be the Church. It should be like the chassis of the car, holding it all together, but not necessarily the motor nor the sat nav or the wind screen wipers. The challenge is not to liberate ourselves from institutions but to transform and invent new ones, as Dominic and Francis invented new ways of being religious faced with the new urban culture of the thirteenth century. Another form of this self-marginalization is by talking as if orthodoxy and official teaching is just a matter for this so called official Church. Sister Margaret Farley has written a book called *Just Love* in which she proposed a sexual ethic which clearly departs from the Church's official teaching. It might be a wonderful book for all I know. But I was puzzled by the defence she gave: 'In the end, I can only clarify that the book was not intended to be an expression of current official Catholic teaching, nor was it aimed specifically against this teaching. It is of a different genre altogether' (Jerry Filteau, *Vatican criticizes US Theologian's book on sexual ethics* NCR June 4th 2012). Maybe I have misunderstood, but that sounds to me like accepting a gulf between the 'official Church' and the rest of us. They teach

officially and we do our own thing. But everyone one of us teaches and preaches as a Catholic, as part of the Church. We are all part of the Church's endless journey into truth.

This goes with the opposite mistake, of limiting the word 'Magisterium' just to official statements of the Vatican or the Pope, as if this is the only real Catholic teaching. This is a very modern and unhelpful way of talking and only dates from the nineteenth century. Magisterium is the teaching office within the Church, especially exercised by bishops but also by theologians and all teachers. Eamon Duffy wrote: 'In fact, Catholic teaching takes many different forms – a mother teaching her children their prayers, a catechist preparing young people for the sacraments, a parish bible-study group discussing the Gospels, sermons, lectures or discussions in a seminary, university or adult education class, religious books or articles, pastoral letters, conciliar documents, papal encyclicals. Some of this is more, and some less, important but all constitutes Catholic teaching, and all involved in such activities are teachers, sharing the prophetic work of Christ.' We have to reclaim for us all that beautiful and misused word 'orthodox.' It has come to be identified with the position of just those who see unquestioning acceptance of Rome's every word as the test of orthodoxy. But this can sometimes be what Karl Rahner called the heresy of dead orthodoxy. But Catholic orthodoxy is the glorious wide open space of our communal search for God. It is the endless adventure into the mystery of God's Trinitarian life. G. K. Chesterton talked of the 'adventure of orthodoxy.' It is keeping on the trail of the God who is always new, ever a surprise. I sometimes read that conservative theologians are very orthodox and even that I am considered not very orthodox. This is nonsense. Orthodoxy is the oxygen of our common Catholic faith. Heresy is the narrow option of those who have everything sussed. I care vastly about being orthodox, and no party in the Church can claim it just for themselves. We sustain each other in the truth, some cherishing the receiving tradition, others pushing the boundaries, asking the awkward questions. Both are part of living orthodoxy! So that is my first point, if we are to become truly Trinitarian priests, we must refuse to plunk ourselves on the margins, especially by claiming victim status. We are the Body of Christ.

The second thing that we must do is to engage with those with whom we disagree.

Think of how often our language about others in the Church is infected by rancour and contempt, giving the very worst interpretation of other people's actions, insinuating the basest intentions. Vatican officials are often referred to as 'the Temple Police', as if they are responsible for the death of Jesus. I am sometimes shocked by the contempt with which people speak of the Pope and the Vatican, as male patriarchs, driven solely by a lust of power and a hatred of women. I lived in Rome for nine years and I know that this is simply untrue and unjust.

The other day I was sitting next to a lay University chaplain who was complaining bitterly about the English and Welsh Bishops' statement on gay marriage. She said, 'They say that marriage is all just about reproduction.' I could not resist, saying, 'Actually that is not true. In many ways it is a beautiful and nuanced document.' She replied: 'I don't do nuance.' Justice and charity demand we do nuance. We cannot build a Trinitarian Church by rubbishing other people.

We have to engage in adult discussions in which we admit that other people with whom we disagree may have something to say. St Dominic founded our Order in a pub, arguing all night long with the Albigensian innkeeper. And, as one of my brethren said, he could not have spent the whole night saying: 'You are wrong, you are wrong, you are wrong.' And sometimes when the CDF intervenes to ask questions, then we should admit that there is something to discuss. We may be critical of how they do so and we may deplore the lack of due process, but accept that there are questions to be raised. If we claim our rightful place at the centre of the Church, we must dare to engage with them.

Catholics need vast freedom to explore new ideas. We need the freedom to play around, and see where things go. We need the relaxed enjoyment of new perspectives, without feeling that you have got to get it right the first go. Meister Eckhart said that we cannot attain the truth without a hundred errors on the way. So the freedom of discussion, wide open spaces for tentative ideas, is vital for a Trinitarian Church. The Church should be our home, and when you are at home, you can play, and even be a bit wild at times. St Paul let himself say foolish things in his second letter to the Corinthians. He dares to take that risk.

But we also have to accept that sometimes there are serious questions to be asked.

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Every time the CDF invites a theologian to a discussion, it is not necessarily the case that they are just being oppressive and are exercising patriarchal domination. Edward Schillebeeckx had many discussions with the CDF in his time and he was never condemned. Once at a meeting of Concilium, he announced that he had been forbidden to speak. Everyone got into a terrible state and denounced the Vatican, until he explained that it was his doctor that had silenced him! At a General Chapter someone asked Gustavo Gutierrez how he coped with being interrogated by the CDF, and he said that they had the right to question him, just as he questioned them.

There has been a lot of noise, and rightly, about the CDF's intervention with the American Leadership Conference of Religious Women. I have not studied the case, but it seems to have been done clumsily, and has probably made everything worse. I suspect that a lot of it the fruit of internal Vatican politics. But my American sister friends will admit late at night, when the second glass of whisky is being consumed, that there are questions to be discussed. The CDF may not discuss them well, and may bully people and have no due process, but let's admit that there are some pretty crazy ideas are floating around. To admit this is not a failure of solidarity with our sisters. It is the beginning of a grown up debate, a Trinitarian Church.

For this debate to happen we need due process. Frank Brennan wrote: 'The process for dealing with Bishop Morris has been a disgrace. The people of Toowoomba still don't know why he was sacked, and we are still waiting for a public creditable explanation for the reasons for his dismissal. Are we really to believe that it was for having the temerity to point out that people overseas are talking about women's ordination?' (Keynote Address, Sandhurst College Education Conference May 23rd 2012, published in Eureka Street June 7 2012 eureka@eurekastreet.com.au). We need due process so that justice is done, and people accused have the right to know of what they are accused and why. It is possible, at least in my experience, to insist on proper process. For example, when I was in Rome, we had the policy that we would refuse to discuss with the CDF any material that was sent anonymously. Once our Procurator General was over with the CDF, when an accusation was produced against one of the brethren, and he simply asked: 'Is it signed?' 'No.' 'Then on principle we will not discuss it.'

There are two things that inhibit this sort of adult engagement, fear and the culture of control. We live in a highly tribalised society which is afraid of difference. It is often claimed that modernity is highly tolerant of difference. We welcome people of different faiths, ethnicities and sexual orientations. One of the criticisms of the Church is that it is stuck in ancient prejudice. But is modernity so very tolerant after all? Lots of sociologists like Richard Sennett argue that modern society is so fluid and mobile that we fear to really engage with difference. We have to pretend that we are all the same.

The Internet enables us to bond with likeminded people, flat earthers and model railway enthusiasts communing in cyberspace. If we disagree, we can disengage in a second. Faced with the radically other, our inclination is to turn off, to hibernate. This is known as turtling. You retreat like a turtle into your carapace. If ever you let on at a party that you are a Catholic priest, often the reaction is a fixed smile and a hasty retreat. 'Lovely to meet you, but I have just seen an old friend over there.'

Tolerance means, literally, to bear the difference of the other person, to engage with it. It implies an attention to the particularity of the other person, a savouring of how he or she is unlike me, in their faith, their ethnicity, or whatever. Aun San Suu Kyi explained in Oxford three weeks ago her fascinating discovery sitting on the bus with a European friend, that one had pointed knees and the other round knees. What a wonderful world in which even our knees are different!

This fear of difference, alas, deeply penetrates the Catholic Church. It is most obvious in the United States, which reflects the culture wars of Democrats and Republicans. Conservative and progressive Catholics can barely talk to each other. Vicious blogs hurl around insults and contempt. I have suffered from them myself. I was once accused of giving permission to a Provincial to keep a mistress, a nun, in a railway carriage. It was not true. She was not a nun. Only joking! A community of the like-minded is not a sign of the Kingdom of God, just of itself. I think that the American culture wars are in danger of infecting the very centre of the Church.

If we are to be Trinitarian priests, heralds of the Kingdom, then we must refuse to get trapped in party political tribes, yakking on about how awful the others, complaining

about the young, while we are the pure and the good. Can we welcome a conservative young seminarian into our parish for the summer, and listen to him. Are we open to conversation with a member of Opus Dei?

A Christian is baptised into Jesus Christ. Christ is the one whose very being embraces a difference beyond all our imagination: truly divine and truly human. In him we are one with God. As St Thomas said, we are joined to God as to the unknown. So how can we possibly be afraid of fellow Catholics whose difference is that they are more conservative or whatever than we are when we are joined to God, the one who is utterly other? Above all, if we are to have good Trinitarian relationships, we need to be unafraid of engagement with others. Iris Murdoch, the English philosopher, said that if you are to understand someone else, you must know of what they are afraid (*Sovereignty of the Good*, Abingdon 1970 p.71). We live a Trinitarian love if we have sympathy for the fears of others, and face our own with courage. I argue in my latest book, *Take the Plunge*, that for many more conservative Catholics, the fear is chaos. They want a nice, ordered, secure world in which everything is in its proper place.

This is often reflected in a concern for an ordered liturgy, in which every rubric is obeyed, or the ordered discipline of canon law. It's not my world. I did study canon law, for about twenty minutes! We must not knock or mock this longing for order and security. It embodies a good desire at the heart of every human being, which longs for the safety of our home in God, where no harm can come for he will 'tread on the lion and the adder, and the young lion and the serpent you will tread under foot.' (Psalm 91.13). Chaos did indeed overwhelm the world on Good Friday, but it was defeated for ever on Easter Sunday and so there is no need for fear. So we must have imaginative empathy for the fears of those with whom we disagree. And what are the fears that liberal Catholics must face if we are really to be free for dialogue? Often it is the fear that the Church is not being transformed as they had hoped, that fifty years after the beginning of the Vatican Council, the Church seems ever more hurt by clericalism and we are no nearer the inclusion of women. We must face this fear, and remember that Jesus promised to be with us until the end of the ages. However frustrated we may feel, however angry, the Lord is with his Church. Bonhoeffer wrote: 'He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself

becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial' (*Life Together* quoted by Ian Stackhouse chapter 85).

The other key to a good debate is that we must be unafraid of where it will take us. We need not control things. We live in a society that is obsessed with control. Charles Taylor wrote a marvellous book called *A Secular Age*. He demonstrates that with the fading of belief in God's providence in the seventeenth century, we see the emergence of a culture of control. If God is not steering everything with his gentle providence, then we must take charge. We see the emergence of the centralised State, absolute monarchs, the standing army and, eventually, the police force. The poor cease to be our brothers and sisters in Christ, but a menace that must be locked up, along with the mentally ill and strangers. Taylor calls this 'the disciplinary society.' One form it takes today is of a crazy obsession with health and safety, everything needing to be monitored, checked, measured. An American lifeguard was sacked last week for rescuing someone

on the wrong beach! In contrast, the Church should be an oasis of freedom. If we believe in God's providence, then we can take our hands off the steering wheel. I once told a senior official at the CDF that if the Holy Spirit is poured on the Church, then we do not have to worry about a few Dominicans saying crazy things. Relax! But the Church has largely succumbed to this secular culture, and in the name of God! It is not enough to denounce this. More radically we have to become people who follow Jesus, and let things happen to us, trusting in our Father. We must become uncontrolling people, empowering others in our parishes, letting the unexpected happen, even in our relationships with our bishops and the Vatican. Jesus appears on Easter morning to the disciples who are locked in the upper room for fear of the Jews. Their only unity is their fear. Often it is fear that locks us into small spaces, unable to talk to those who are different. And to them Jesus says, 'Peace be with you' and he shows them his hands and his feet.

The peace of the wounded Lord releases us from fear. We do not have to fear getting hurt. Nothing can destroy that peace, not

even our feelings that we are not at peace. There is space for us all. And because the peace of Christ cannot be destroyed, then we can relax a bit, faced with disagreement. We cannot destroy the Church. Someone came to see the Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi, and said, 'Your Eminence, the situation is very serious. Napoleon wishes to destroy the Church.' To which the Cardinal replied, 'Not even we have succeeded in doing that!'

Maybe at this moment, many of you feel the need to speak a prophetic word. If so, then speak it as charitably as possible. Speak that word, and trust that if it is indeed the Word of the Lord, then it will bear fruit, even if you do not live to see that. If it is not the Word of the Lord, then it will disappear without trace. If you speak a godly word, then it will come to pass. Isaiah said in the midst of exile too: 'So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and succeed in the thing for which I sent it' (Isaiah 55.11). If we believe that, then we shall be calm, even when the bird shit falls on us!