

Breathing

BY TIMOTHY RADCLIFFE OP

Timothy Radcliffe OP offered two talks at the NCP Convention in Warrnambool in July. The first is about priests living in relationship to the Church and the world. The second is about how priests work practically in this task and it follows in the current edition of *The Swag*.

This is not an easy time to be a priest. I do not have to go through the list: the sexual abuse scandal, the way that many bishops handled that, the drop in vocations to the priesthood and religious life leaving us with a lot of strain, lots of people leaving the Church, and most of the young indifferent or hostile; many women feeling alienated and angry and the imposition of a clumsy translation of the Mass.

Perhaps, most painfully, is a collapse of conversation, of a Church often polarised between so-called conservatives and progressives who find it hard to talk to each other; the naming of bishops who often have a hard disciplinary approach, and who, in the States especially, throw around excommunications as if they were parking tickets. You have had the removal of Bishop Bill Morris, and there is the heavy handed intervention of the CDF with the American Religious Sisters' Leadership Conference. It is hard at the moment to love the Church and to represent her. And you have asked me to reflect on how we navigate the shoals and reefs of this present situation and not end up shipwrecked on Bondi beach! You must be pretty desperate to invite a Pom!

Let me begin by repeating very briefly something that I have often said but which is worth repeating: crises can be, with God's grace, moments of the renewal. I joined the Dominican Order in 1965. By a stroke of genius I managed to choose the worst moment in the history of the English Province since the Reformation. I had hardly unpacked my bags when the crisis broke. I used to tell everyone 'post hoc non ergo propter hoc.' I had six novice masters in the course of one year, two of whom ended up married. Those in formation dropped from 42 to 9 in a few months. One wag put a sign on the board which said, 'Will the last person to leave please put out the lights.'

I learned a lesson then which has shaped my life. Crises may be times of blessings. Those of us who hung on shared in the slow rebirth of the Province out of the fire. The whole of salvation history is just one crisis after another: Expulsion from Paradise, the Flood, the destruction of Babel, periodic exiles, the destruction of the monarchy. The history of Israel is one of being gradually stripped of everything that gave her identity and then finding God closer.

The early Church was born of three major crises in the first forty years, even less time than for us since the Council. The worst was the first, the Last Supper, when it became clear that the disciples would lose Christ, deny him, run away and their fragile little community would collapse. And in this darkest moment, when all seemed lost, then he gave them himself. 'This is my body given for you'. Every Eucharist carries us back to this moment of apparent despair, which was the beginning of new intimacy. The second crisis was the admission of the Gentiles, which almost destroyed the Church but which gave birth to a community in which we could have a place. Thirdly was the vast disappointment of Jesus' failure to return in glory during a time of persecution and collapse. This caused profound perplexity but it gave us the gospels. Compared with these, our present crisis looks like a storm in a teacup.

Crises just seem to be how things happen. We become human as we pass through the crises of birth, of weaning, of puberty, leaving home, and finally the crisis of death. Even the planet seems to have brought life into being through periodical crises, the five great extinctions of species so far, always leading to new life. So crises are not to be feared. My American brethren gave me a T shirt which said, 'Have a good crisis.' Unfortunately it has inexplicably shrunk during the years and I can no longer get into it.

But what is the nature of the crisis that we are living in the Church now? I suspect that it is the end of the Tridentine Church which came into existence because of the crisis of the Reformation. Old Medieval Christendom was simply not in a state to respond to the new world which was coming into being. The clergy were uneducated, could barely manage to say Mass. Many had concubines. Often they signed a contract that if they took a concubine, she must not be from the parish. Perhaps a practice we could reintroduce. They could offer little spiritual direction. People often turned to the religious, but we were not much better. There was a later Spanish saying: 'Never trust a Jesuit with your wallet; never trust a friar with your wife.' So you can trust us with your wallets.

Trent gave us a tremendous new spirituality of the priesthood: new seminaries, a new

pastoral vigour. It was a wonderful success. It saved the Church in much of Europe and launched a mission to the whole planet, and produced the greatest educational system in the history of humanity. But it had consequences that we are now confronting. It was defensive against modernity. It was too much the Church militant rather than the maternal Church.

The clergy became a caste apart with an image of false holiness and purity. This has come crashing down with the revelation of sexual abuse.

Eamon Duffy argues that it went with an ecclesiology that emphasized 'the perfections of the Church and its ministers, unable to admit failure.' (*Faith of Our Fathers*, Continuum London 2004, p 156). We priests and religious became angelic creatures. People wondered whether nuns had legs.

One of our brethren went to say Mass at a convent in Edinburgh, and the door was opened by the superior: 'Oh, it's you father. We were expecting a man.'

This way of being Church is now, I suspect, reaching its end. What is to come, we do not know. We shall be surprised, and it may not come in our lifetime. But I hope that it will be a Church which is humbler, simpler, less clerical, and more human. I think that we have to leave behind a whole monarchical model of the Church. In the aftermath of Trent, and even before, the Church battled for her freedom against monarchs like Henry VIII of England. And to survive it became increasingly like its opponents. But the world of powerful monarchs is over, even here in Australia despite your fierce loyalty to Queen Elizabeth II. The Church evolved to defend itself against Imperial powers that wanted to bend it to their will, like Napoleon. But this defensive, militant model is not the best suited for the challenges of today. It is



like sending the cavalry out to fight tanks on horses in the First World War. In the West at least, despite battles over abortion or euthanasia, the biggest challenge is cultural. We face not armies but a secular way of seeing the world, the world in which our people live every day. The challenge is internal, right down the middle of every one of us: How can we be modern and truly Catholic?

This is a crisis of meaning. Many lay people simply do not find that official statements by Church leaders connect any more with their experience. They do not make sense.

The head of the Australian Bishops' Pastoral Research Office said: 'When we asked



people why they stopped going to church... they said they stopped because they can't find relevance; they can't see a connection between the Church's agenda and their own agenda, they disagree with certain church teachings.' (Michael H. Crosby, *Repair My House: Becoming a Kingdom Catholic*, New York 2012 p.46)

Many people hunger for a word of life, dissatisfied with consumerism and with the banality of much of modernity. When the New Zealand Prime Minister was in Rome recently he asked the Superior General of the Jesuits what he thought was the biggest challenge that the world faces, and Father Adolfo replied, 'Superficiality.' Souls are being corroded by banality. You would have thought that this would be a wonderful time for the Church. People long for a deep meaning to their lives, and we believe that in Jesus Christ we encounter the one who alone satisfies every human desire. People should be banging on the doors of our churches, begging to be let in. Why

not? - For at least two reasons. First of all, a Catholic view of the world needs to be sustained by a sort of Catholic culture. I grew up in world which was saturated by faith. We were not very pious, but God was in the air we breathed. The saints were our friends; prayers were an ordinary part of life; we lived by the rhythm of the liturgical year. It was a rich symbolic world. Every Ash Wednesday we walked around with black smudges on our noses because the parish priest did not have a good aim. It was a culture of gratitude, of blessings, of forgiveness. I never came across any of this so-called Catholic guilt. That Catholic culture has largely collapsed, and that makes it hard for secular people to make sense of a Catholic faith. Our sacramental life is hard to enter, and in a culture of entertainment, liturgy just seems dull.

On the other hand, there are all sorts of wonderful values of modernity which the Church appears to reject: equality of all, the dignity of women, open discussion, due process, respect for gay people, fairness. The Church's apparent rejection of all this undermines its authority, and so secular people cannot accept the good things of Catholicism because the Church seems to be hostile to the good things of society.

So there is a crisis of disconnection between the world of the Church and our secular age. This is felt most strongly with regard to sexuality. So many of the touchy issues revolve around sex: extra marital sex, gay sex, contraception, abortion, divorce and remarriage. What the Church has to say about sexual ethics, much of it wonderful, simply does not connect anymore with what most Catholics live. Even most of the young people who do come to church, love the Pope, gather for World Youth day, simply ignore the Church when it comes to sex. And the sexual abuse crisis has destroyed our authority to speak about sexual morality.

We priests find ourselves occupying the space between the teaching of the Church and the secular world. We live with a foot in both camps, trying to mediate. We have to live in that gap, offering the Church's teaching somehow and identifying with people in their struggles, their questions, their incomprehension. We may feel split down the middle, and that is good. An English priest, Tony Philpot, wrote: 'It is ... uncomfortable, occupying the space between ... the rock and the hard place. It is uncomfortable to belong to the world of orthodoxy, and yet spend so much of my time and energy with the unorthodox,

and indeed to belong to their world too. I would want to say to men preparing for diocesan priesthood that this divided heart is the characteristic pain of their vocation, and if they experience the pain, it is a sign that they will be good priests'. (*Priesthood in Reality: Living the vocation of a diocesan priest in a changing world*. Bury St Edmunds 1998 p.88).

It is a tough place to be because you can feel attacked from both sides, by lay people who are bursting with anger at the Church, and by some people in the Church who feel that we must raise the drawbridge and retreat into a nice, cosy Catholic ghetto. It is popular to talk of a 'leaner, cleaner Church', the faithful and pure remnant. But the ghetto is not the answer. It would be a betrayal of Jesus' open hospitality, his welcome to the strangers, the odd balls, the tax collectors and the prostitutes. Jesus did not want to be trapped by purity laws, but gave his life for the impure, and shared their exclusion. But assimilation to modernity would be another form of betrayal.

So it is our vocation to live in this space, which is a place of ambiguities, of questioning and searching. That is why you bear the beautiful name, secular priests, mediating between the secular and the sacred.

The Church is living through a sort of crisis of puberty. Children like everything to be clear and straightforward. They want to know the rules, even if they disobey them. But with puberty comes complexity, uncertainty, confusion. Teenagers learn to live with ambiguity and paradox, loving and hating their parents at the same time, and spending a lot of time thinking about sex. That is where many of us are now: squeaky voices, pimply faces, confused and thinking about sex!

This place between the Church and the world is uncomfortable, but it is also the place where there is energy and life. Outside my room at Blackfriars there is a glorious vigorous white beam tree. It is alive because it is utterly itself. From the highest leaf to the deepest root it is white beam all the way through. Every leaf is white beam. It could never be confused with one of your ghostly eucalyptus trees. But it flourishes because it is in constant interaction with what is not itself, its roots burrow into the soil for nourishment, its leaves are open to the sun and the rain, not to mention dollops of bird shit. They absorb the nourishment of rain and sun and filter

out the pollution. Its bark is its skin. A tree that was hermetically sealed from the atmosphere would be dead.

We priests are like the leaves of the tree, the interface between the tree and what is not tree. There are other leaves, thinkers, lay people, some bishops, also. We have to be that place of energy and interchange, without which the tree would die. What I want to look at in these two lectures is how we can flourish there, and be happy, even if the occasional splodge of bird shit lands on us.

7 Let's begin by thinking about obedience. This will give us, I hope, a general model of how to be a flourishing leaf. Then in the next lecture I will look at some of the nitty-gritty challenges of putting this into practice. So forgive me if I am a little theoretical at this stage. We shall knuckle down to the daily challenges in the next lecture.

We are living through a crisis of obedience. When things get rough, we shall probably be told to be obedient. It is obedience that holds the Church together. About forty years ago, my community at Blackfriars began giving out the chalice at Mass every day. Our Archbishop was the terrifying George Patrick Dwyer. He commanded us to stop. We said that we would like to talk to him about it. He wrote back: 'Why can't you Dominicans just do what you are told. Stop!' We had a long community meeting and again wrote to him asking to have a conversation. We waited with bated breath. He wrote back and said, 'Ok, do whatever you like!'

What does it mean for us to be obedient? Obedience, as we all know, comes from ob-audire, to listen deeply. To whom must we listen? First of all we owe obedience to God. As priests we witnesses to the absolute priority of God. When Pope John Paul gave Mother Teresa a building for a new community, a prominent cardinal from the Curia presided at the Mass and preached. And he said, 'first of all we must thank his Holiness for the gift of this chapel.' But Mother Teresa interrupted him, 'No your Eminence. First of all we thank God.' 'As I was saying, we must thank his Holiness...' 'No, your Eminence, you are not listening. First we thank God.' Paul Murray, an Irish Dominican, has a lovely photo of Mother Teresa continuing all during the Cardinal's sermon to point upwards with an impish grin on her face.

But what does it mean to be obedient to

God? Most of us do not hear messages directly from the divine mouth, and the Church has always been suspicious of anyone who claims to do so. There is, first of all, obedience to the Word of God. The International Theological Commission published last November an interesting document, *Theology Today*. And it begins with the primacy of obedience to the Word of God. This is not the obedience to a text, but the personal encounter with God in his Word. This is our first obedience. Cardinal George of Chicago has complained that the Church 'is not a Christ-centred church, as it is supposed to be; it is a bishop-centred church.' (*National Catholic Reporter* October 7 2009. Quoted Michael Crosby p.83). The militant Tridentine Church, with its defensive attitude to modernity, tended to want to line us like good soldiers, obeying orders. The great Tridentine order, the Jesuits, who I love dearly, was founded by a soldier who became their General, the foot soldiers of the Pope. That model works no longer and the Jesuits were among the first to recognise it.

Of course we do owe obedience to the hierarchy. Blessed John Henry Newman said that there were three offices in the Church, each with its own authority, to each of which we owe obedience: there was the authority of government, the authority of the truth and the authority of the experience of God in worship, which he calls devotion. Each of these is necessary, but each can go wrong if it becomes absolute. In the history of the Church they are always mutually correcting each other, like someone trying to stay upright on a wobbly bicycle.

If reason becomes the absolute authority, then you can end up with an arid rationalism; if devotion becomes the only authority, then he thought that you could land in superstition. And if the authority of government became too strong then, Newman believed, the danger was 'ambition and tyranny.' (Via Media (n. 10) p.xli quoted by Nicholas Lash *Authors, Authority and Authorization* in ed Bernard Hoose *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice* London 2002 p.62).

That is perhaps more of a danger at the moment than rationalism or superstition. The Church has wobbled too much towards the authority of government. This should not make us panic. She is always wobbling in one direction or another. As priests it is not our role to oppose the institutional government of the Church. That would

be a barren dissent. But we are called to embody recognition of the other forms of authority. This may be seen as dissent, but it is not so. Obedience to God lies in a right ecology of obedience, listening to different voices.

We also owe obedience to the truth that we discover in the world. The Holy Spirit is not confined to the Church but breathes where she wills. Thomas Aquinas writes: "Do not heed by whom a thing is said, but rather what is said you should commit to memory." (Epistola de modo studendi, in *Opuscula Omnia*, Vol.IV, ed., P. Mandonnet Paris 1927 p.535). If we are leaves of the tree, we must be attentive to the wisdom of our contemporaries, of novelists and film makers, of thinkers and just men and women. One of my greatest gurus was a Dominican from Sri Lanka, Cornelius Ernst. He wrote of our need to find God in what he called 'the tradition of the human heart: novels, art, music, tragedy. I cannot allow that God can only be adored in spirit and in truth by the individual introverted upon himself and detached from all that might disturb and solicit his heart. It must be possible to find and adore God in the complexity of human experience.' (*Multiple Echo* edited Fergus Kerr OP and Timothy Radcliffe OP London 1979 p.1). The Church will only have authority if it gives authority.

If we recognise the authority of the good and wise people of other faiths or none, as Aquinas did of Aristotle, Avicenna and Maimonides, then they shall recognise ours.

There is obedience to the stranger and the poor who are Christ. We must acknowledge the authority of their experience. This is vital obedience in a world in which the poor are ever more despised. Owen Jones asserted in a recent book that members of the working classes 'are demonized by the tabloid press and by popular television shows as feckless welfare junkies, who drink too much, smoke too much, eat too much, breed too much and make bad parents. They have become regular butts in the media's theatre of cruelty'.

A French Dominican came to stay at Blackfriars when I was a student. For years he had been a worker priest, working in the Renault car factory in Paris, and no doubt stirring up lots of trouble. The managers must have been relieved when he felt the call to make a more radical step, and to go to India to share his life with the very poorest of the poor. He came to Oxford to learn Bengali, given its large Indian

population. I asked him what he was going to do when he arrived in Calcutta. He replied that he did not know. It was the poor who would show him what it was that he had to do. That is also part of our obedience. I could list others, such as attention to the planet and its needs, obedience to the wisdom of women, but you get the idea.

I would suggest that obedience to God lies in a healthy ecology of all these forms of obedience. How do we find this? I have used the metaphor of the leaf which breathes for the tree and keeps it alive. Let us think for a moment of the breathing of our lungs.

We must breathe in and out. We inflate our lungs and we empty them, otherwise we die. We have to find the right rhythm. Obedience to the hierarchy draws us back into the universal community of the Church, obedience to the truths of our society, to the poor and despised, draws us out. Obedience to the teaching of the Church anchors me in the great tradition, holds me in communion with Catholics throughout time and space. The leaf remains attached to the tree. Obedience to the truth wherever I find it animates the mission of the Church, reaching out to all of humanity. That is rhythm of our priestly life, the breathing of God in our lives, just as God breathed into the lungs of Adam, and breathed out on the cross, and into the disciples on Easter morning, and sent them out on mission at Pentecost.

These various obediences can be in tension, and tension is fine. But they should no more be in ultimate contradiction than breathing in and breathing out. When we are unfit then we get out of breath if we jog. We want to breathe in and out at the same time, and find it is impossible. We get stitches.

Often we shall be sometimes unsure, wondering where God's will lies. Then we need obedience to our formed consciences. Let me quote Father Joseph Ratzinger in 1967, not long after the Council. "Over the Pope as expression of the binding claim of ecclesiastical authority, there stands one's own conscience which must be obeyed before all else, even if necessary against the requirement of ecclesiastical authority" (Joseph Ratzinger in: *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. V., pg. 134 (Ed) H. Vorgrimler, New York, Herder and Herder, 1967). Conscience is not a mysterious interior feeling. We form our consciences by attending to the word of

God above all, listening to the hierarchy with its proper claims on us, the truths that we learn from great thinkers, the demands of the poor. Having a formed conscience involves a lot of hard thought and prayer.

To live that ecology of obedience, we need to be men of God. I have been blessed by knowing great brothers who have suffered in their pursuit of truth: Yves Congar, Marie-Dominique Chenu, Edward Schillebeeckx and Gustavo Gutierrez. And what has impressed me is that they are, or were, all men of God, prayerful people. They believed in the Church as part of the good news, they could never for one nano-second imagined leaving the Church, but they teased their way through conflict and even being silenced and disciplined, because they were, their lives were, rooted in prayer. I first met Gustavo in 1988, when he came to give a series of lectures. We all expected a fiery revolutionary who would summon us to the barricades. Instead, he talked about how to pray.

When the media talk about the Church, they see it as the Vatican. They show little interest in the gospel. The world is interested in the Church, but the Church should be interested in the gospel. But aren't we sometimes caught up in this obsession with ecclesiastical politics as well? I had dinner with friends just before I flew here, good old liberals of the sixties, and before I had a first sip of wine, they were going on indignantly about the Vatican. 'Did you see who had been appointed assistant sub-secretary of the Finnish section of the CDF? Isn't awful?'

So I think that if we are to occupy that difficult painful space, mediating between the Church and the world, being the leaves of the tree, with others of course, we need to be above all people of calm and quiet, who despite everything find the time just to listen.

Robert Frost wrote:
*Moments of great calm
Kneeling before the altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for God
To speak...* (Kneeling quoted RH p.165).

In this first session, I have been trying to understand where we are at, the nature of the crisis, and a basic model of how to live there, with an ecology of obedience. This has all been a bit theoretical. In the next session, I want to get more down to earth and look more closely at how we can breathe in and out calmly. That is tougher.