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Writings & Essays

# The Contemplative Parish



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Who was it who said he believed passionately in progress but it was change he could not handle? If the ancient institution of the parish is to progress and so expand its range of relevance for future generations it will need to initiate change at a level that defines Christianity in its third millennium as a whole. There is no progress without change and no serious change without radical reevaluation of purpose and direction. What is the parish for? What direction should it be taking? These are questions that have acquired an increasing urgency in our time, if not a desperate urgency. They do not arise merely from organizational issues in a church beset by clerical shortages, the loss of authority and respect due to sexual scandals, dwindling congregations and financial problems. The parish represents an important way Christian faith is lived in the modern world.

Parishes fulfill many functions, of course. And there are many different kinds of parishes. Yet, historically, as a family-based religion, Christianity has, in most of its forms, developed some kind of parish structure as a defining sign of its witness to the world of its inner life and faith. The parish, in diverse ways, forms a physical center that concentrates on the religious needs and spiritual life principally of people who live within an easy drive of its congregational center. Multiple parishes under a single leadership offer a different model, but this development is generally a desperate attempt just to keep things going as they have been done so far, rather than initiate change through a reevaluation of the meaning of the parish. The closing of inner city parishes in many cities is necessitated by the relocation to suburban security of a certain social class that constituted the parish community exclusively for many generations. In some parts of the world, these new housing developments

offer the opportunity for new, more vibrant parishes which nevertheless remain closely, over-cautiously bound to old models of parochial life that have not looked at themselves and asked what they are really for in the modern world.

At its worst, parish life is moribund, resistant to change, or plain boring. The best parishes often suffer from also being hyperactive, breathlessly pre-occupied with external projects and measurable results. The contemplative parish, as I would like to describe the viable and attractive parish of the future, would find the middle way. If the term 'contemplative parish' seems to be a silly oxymoron, it will be necessary to explain it.

In his teaching at the house of Martha and Mary (Lk 10:38-42) Jesus gives the first defense of the contemplative life in the Christian tradition against the oft-leveled charge that the solitary, silent contemplative is selfish and insensitive to the needs of the world. Jesus not only affirms Mary's contemplative work but does so emphatically: 'She has chosen the better part.' Yet, he does not condemn Martha's work, only her distractedness. 'You are fussing and fretting about so many things.' Then he adds, without defining what the thing is, that 'only one thing is necessary'. Could we say that the one thing necessary is to restore the friendship between the sisters in their household? Martha and Mary are not merely two personality types with different scores on the Enneagram. Certainly, human beings fall into different types, some being the extroverted, fixers and problem-solvers of any organization; others the quieter types who are content just to sit in a corner and listen. Jesus is saying more than that. Martha and Mary represent the two sides of the human soul which need to be friends and to live in an integrated and wholesome way together in the house of the self.

They are the two sides of a parish as well. If a parish, as most of us do as individuals, falls into an excessive activism and neglects the value of the contemplative, it runs the same danger as Martha of collapsing into rage and dysfunctional behavior. When Martha, at the beginning of the story, complains to Jesus about Mary and tells him to go and tell Mary to give her a hand, is she not the only disciple in the gospel who orders him what to do? When Martha falls out of friendship with Mary, the wholeness and peace of the self is lost and with it goes reverence for the presence of God.

A 'contemplative parish', then, means a local Christian community which has learned to integrate and balance the active and contemplative aspects of the gospel life. It does not mean turning the parish into a surrogate monastery. As my monastic community at Cockfosters in London also runs a suburban parish, I am well aware that a parish and a monastery are different things. At Christ the King, we have a vibrant parish with regular sacramental celebrations and a diverse range of parishioner-led ministries. There is also a spirituality centre offering a stimulating program of events and training in spiritual direction, a meditation centre with introductory and ongoing groups, a guest house, the divine office sung in the parish/monastic church at the usual hours with lay participation and, each morning and evening before the Office, a half-hour of silent meditation for monks, guests and parishioners. Because of the presence of the monks, the contemplative dimension of the gospel is more readily shared with the parish and enriched by it. But there is no reason that even in a parish with a single overworked pastor this dimension could not be realized and integrated both for the pastor's benefit and for that of the parishioners. We can see how this could be done if we look at some different aspects of the parish. We can then imagine how the parish might progressively change in the next era of the church's history when the changes that have been long waiting to happen finally arrive.

#### SACRAMENTAL CENTRE

In the Catholic tradition, parishes are seen as centres of sacramental life but they are meant to be

more than the sacramental production-lines they often become. Pastors can exhaust themselves providing sacramental service and then feel perplexed or hurt when people complain that the liturgy is dead and people don't seem to want to get married or have their children baptized, as in the past. The more popular parishes, often at the evangelical end of the denominational spectrum, tend to be those with a stronger emphasis on the celebration of the Word, great music, family involvement and community sharing. I attended an American Dutch Reform Sunday service recently which did all this better than I had ever seen done before. A good crowd gathered beforehand to listen to a talk on meditation. After the readings, moving hymn-singing and an intelligent, sincere sermon, I was ready for Eucharist. But the table that stood in front of the stage and pulpit remained unused when we moved to coffee. The feeling of incompleteness was similar to that in a Catholic church where the sacramental Eucharist almost wholly overshadows the liturgy of the Word. Worshiping in both Word and Sacrament in ways that are both beautiful and participatory is one of the great challenges for the parish of the future. It can be achieved when the power of integration arises from the contemplative experience - worship in spirit and truth. In any parish community today, those practicing contemplative prayer in a regular, disciplined way may be a small minority. Yet their influence will be felt at every level of the community's life including the decisions taken about the liturgy. Even those who are not regular meditators frequently complain about the speed, noisiness and lack of times of silence in the liturgy. Younger people seem especially hungry for the contemplative dimension of the liturgy. The Council reminded us of it when its document on liturgy said that the purpose of the liturgy is precisely to cultivate a 'contemplative orientation' in the people of God. In some parishes this may lead to a regularly scheduled contemplative mass. In others, the existing liturgies will be influenced by the recognition in the community as a whole of the contemplative dimension of prayer.

#### PLACE OF COMMUNITY

One of John Main's seminal insights was that 'meditation creates community'. This is an important clue

to the regeneration of the parish in the life of Christianity. We have come to think that community is created exclusively by doing things together. Action, whether it is a social evening, running parish organizations, administration or work for a political cause, can bring people together in the consciousness of a common cause and selfless work. If the contemplative consciousness is lacking from this work, however, it runs a greater risk, inherent in all excessively Martha-driven activity, of becoming both superficial and egocentric. Politics and competitiveness enter into all human activity. Contemplation does not eradicate the political ego, but it does make us more aware of its presence and reduces the level of self-delusion it is responsible for. The pettiness of parish-pump politics turns many people away from parish involvement who are genuinely seeking a way of service to others in community.

Naturally, this is true of all human activity and relationship that together create community. Among the early Christians it was a commonplace that the way you prayed determined the way you lived. Today we call this 'spirituality'. The level and quality of prayer determines the level from which our sense of meaning arises through daily experience as well as the quality of our relationships and self-knowledge. Community is vitally influenced by this. Religious community above all needs a contemplative spirit moving within it to ensure that its activity is continuously being checked against the standard of love and discipleship. We really believe in love and commit ourselves to discipleship only to the degree that we have an identity beyond the horizons of the ego. When we even barely glimpse the reality of St Paul's statement that 'I live no longer but Christ lives in me' our way of relating to other people is radically transformed.

A great discovery awaits us when we sit regularly with others in silence and then get up to work with them for the good of others. Silence is not an absence of the communication that we think exclusively creates community. It is the experience of communion at a level deeper than that of the words and gestures with which we normally communicate. Many secular organizations and committees begin their work or meetings with a period of silence know-

ing that this not only clarifies the minds of those present but somehow makes them better listeners to each other and more amicably disposed to accept differences without turning them into divisions. In a society so damaged by divorce, stress and loneliness many people look to the parish as a place of community and spiritual friendship. This is often expressed and shared by doing things together either in recreation or for the good of others in need. The capacity of that work to be truly spiritual, not just superficially social, will depend on the awareness in the community of the experienced contemplative dimension of both prayer and life.

#### EDUCATION

Parishes are places of worship and community but also of learning. In the past the learning was passive and consequently shallow. The congregation listened silently as the priest sermonized from a pulpit above them. If they were listening and dared to think for themselves and disagreed there was no forum for discussion. Most people today would find this form of spiritual education laughable or offensive.

Some parishes do run good adult education courses, but the full potential of the parish as a community for ongoing religious and spiritual learning waits to be realized in the parish of the future. We will get there when the Church as a whole moves from preaching to teaching. To teach means firstly to listen to those learning and assess where they are in their quest for understanding and what they actually desire to learn. Most people today with a conscious desire to deepen their spiritual life and knowledge are looking for more than courses on the Catechism or the foundational dogma of Christianity. The hunger for truth that impels them perceives truth as what is personally discovered rather than delivered in a package. Religious education means more than being told what it is you have to believe if you are to call yourself a Christian.

Many are sadly ignorant of the Christian mystical tradition except in the devotional lives of the saints they have learned about as children. An enormous potential awaits the parish in becoming a centre for the teaching of the forgotten contemplative riches of

the Church. The full teaching of this tradition will require the concerted resources of scholars and teachers beyond the confines of the parish. This need might stimulate the bishop to fulfill his role as spiritual teacher and coordinate the project through all his parishes using resources that may be available only at the diocesan or national level.

I recently visited a Buddhist centre in central London to meet a visiting rinpoche who was teaching for five consecutive days a group of several hundred students. This was but one part of a program extending over several years and demanding intense study of a foreign culture and philosophy. There are not a few Christians with as deep a thirst for the spiritual riches of the great masters of their own tradition. Even in seminaries, dogmatic theology dominates the curriculum. Yet it is in making friends with the great spiritual teachers of the church throughout history that our own spiritual journey is often stimulated to move from mere cerebral knowledge to contemplative experience, from mind to heart.

#### SPIRITUAL GROWTH

A parish, it is true, is not a meditation centre. Being family-based (though open to people in all walks of life to make community with it) the contemplative parish will embrace people at every stage of their spiritual journey. Usually, however, there is little movement spiritually from the early days of entry into the community. In fact, the desire to grow spiritually, to mature in the faith and deepen one's prayer, is often viewed with suspicion rather than encouragement. The priest often feels threatened and other parishioners make the offending member feel awkward or rebellious. Yet what is the purpose of the parish if not to be a place of spiritual growth and movement? What is the meaning of parish leadership if it is not to prod and encourage each of its members to be continuously growing? For some this might mean learning the basic theology of the sacraments or the Creed. For others it might mean leaving behind an exclusively devotional spirituality and moving through the night of the senses into contemplative prayer.

If the parish is seen primarily as a place of spiritual maintenance it will be trying to hang on to its

members. Little energy will be left for sharing the faith with others outside the community. If, on the other hand, the parish is a place encouraging spiritual growth and exploration, new members will be attracted to it. The sad spectacle of churches trying to advertise themselves as a religious product of fading appeal will be replaced with the contemplative parish as an alluring sign of spiritual vigor and courage.

#### INTERFAITH DIALOGUE

Two great challenges offer the parish and the Church as a whole an opportunity for regeneration: the rediscovery and reappropriation of its contemplative tradition as a living practice among all its members and the encounter in deep dialogue with other faiths. These two are intimately linked. Since most of the religions we are called to be in dialogue with are contemplative rather than missionary or activist, it is necessary that the Christians involved in meeting them come from the contemplative level of their own faith.

Inter-religious dialogue (like inter-denominational ecumenism) thrives in a contemplative environment. Unity is then seen as an already existing reality rather than as something to be created. Friendship and humour replace competitiveness and pomposity. Parishes have a particular contribution to make to this dialogue of religions because in so many families where a child comes home announcing he is becoming a Buddhist and will stop going to church, the ensuing discussion around the kitchen table becomes a seminal form of dialogue.

The Archdiocese of New York recently distributed to all its parishes an admirably written brochure with a brief, accurate description of the principal beliefs and practices of each of the main religions it shares the space of the city with. The first level of dialogue to which the contemplative parish contributes is the reduction of the abysmal ignorance that so many Christians have about other faiths and of the fear and hostility that proceed from ignorance. Some more evolved parishes may then go further and institute an interfaith centre that will work to create friendship with other local faiths in their places of

worship. Silence will be a major element in the praying together that will enrich all who share in it.

Two simple things can be done to help develop a contemplative parish. The first is to actively encourage a weekly meditation group. However small this may be, it will offer a place for others to come and learn and to persevere. Its very existence raises consciousness about the contemplative dimension of the gospel in the parish as a whole. In many dioceses, such as Brisbane, in the Caribbean, Dublin, Montreal, or Mauritius, this encouragement from church leadership has led to a remarkable flowering of meditation groups and many graces to the parish and diocesan life. The second is the establishment of a meditation centre in the parish, such as at Dun Laoghaire in Dublin or at Cockfosters, London. This offers a place where regular morning and evening meditation periods are held near the main place of worship, but in an atmosphere dedicated to silence.

The contemplative parish is a place where a deeper and broader knowledge of Christ can be allowed to flourish. The fruits of this will benefit all within it and in contact with it. If contemplation, as Aquinas said, is only the 'simple enjoyment of the truth' what is to prevent this ideal from being realized in every parish?



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