

Hope and Concern - The Church and the Culture on the Eve of a New Millennium

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Ronald Rolheiser omi

I. Introduction

Some years ago, David Tracy wrote a fine little essay entitled: **Naming the Present**¹. In it, he tried to name, religiously and philosophically, the moment in history within which we are living. Like a meteorologist trying to read the weather, Tracy tries in this essay to read the inner weather of the present time, the movements of soul as manifest within the movements of history. This lecture, in its own modest way, will attempt something similar. It will try to name the present moment in terms of the hopes and concerns it carries for believers.

What is happening in terms of the movement of soul below the surface of present events today in Western history? How is this shaping our faith for good and for bad? What elements of hope are contained in this? What things should we, as people of faith, be concerned about?

Somebody once astutely stated that "*Not everything can be fixed or cured, but it should be named properly!*" The effort here, given the limits of time and space, will be precisely more at naming than at fully explaining. The result will be more of a skeleton than a detailed thesis. The hope however is that this, skeleton-type, listing of the hopes and concerns that the present moment carries can then help serve as a framework for development both within the areas spirituality and pastoral theology. Such is the hope of this lecture.

In the struggle to name something, it can be valuable to begin by seeing how people are reacting to it. So we begin in this fashion:

II. Spontaneous reactions to the present moment

In Tracy's attempt to name the present moment, he begins by pointing out *three* major reactions to it. I present here, briefly, his analysis²:

The first reaction, he calls *modernity*. This version of things sees what is happening today as simply more of the same, namely, more of what has been happening already for a long time. Rationality and technology are the ultimate values, Western life

and culture are superior to the rest of the world, individual rights supersede all else, and evolution in some form continues to triumph in history, despite problems. *Modernity* sees what is happening as essentially inevitable and good. The future will look much like the present, only better. We recognize this view in many of the forces that are driving our economies, driving globalization, driving our governments, and generally too driving our centres for higher learning. For *modernity*, often identified with the liberal, the present moment is good.

The second reaction, in his terms, is that of the *anti-modern*. This person sees the present moment as a time of trouble, a time within which many of the key traditions and values that have sustained us for thousands of years are being destroyed. For the *anti-modern*, continuing in the direction we are going will mean the death of all moral meaning and probably even of life itself. For an *anti-modernist*, we need to retreat to the past and reclaim the values we once had but have since lost, including the value of sacrificing for community rather than inflating individual rights. The cry here is for old-time religion, old-time family values, and old-time ways of organizing ourselves. For the *anti-modern*, often identified with the conservative, the present is bad.

The third reaction, Tracy calls *post-modern*. The *post-modern* person is equally suspicious of both past and present. He or she does not share modernity's enthrallment with rationality, the West, technology, science, globalization, the Internet, and most everything else we identify with progress. Neither is he or she enthralled with tradition, as is the anti-modern. For the *post-modernist*, there are many centres (not just the West), many meanings (not just rationality and what it produces), many avenues to the truth (and not just those espoused by liberals and conservatives), and, indeed, no clear way of even knowing whether the present moment is good or bad. For a *post-modernist*, hope lies in otherness, in the marginalized, in the mystic, in the artist, and in madness. For the *post-modern*, the present moment is both good and bad.

What one sees in these reactions is that the liberal, the conservative, and the post-modernist, each in his or her own way points out different strengths and weaknesses within the present time. In these different reactions then we see precisely the various hopes and concerns within the present moment.

What, more specifically, are these hopes and concerns as they impact us as believers?

III. Naming the present moment in terms of hope and concern

A) The more obvious - Secularization and the explosion of technology and information

What is most obvious and most analyzed within the present moment are the twin phenomena of secularization and the explosion of technology and information. There are libraries of good literature on this and the intent here is not to try to summarize that

research. For our purposes, *two* things need to be highlighted:

1) The marginalization of the religious dimension within ordinary life with the result that everyday consciousness is largely agnostic and we now have the curious phenomenon of unbelief among believers.

We live, to a very large extent, in a post-Christian culture within which the culture no longer carries the faith. To believe today, in anything more than a token sense, is to find oneself part of a cognitive minority, a cognitive deviant in fact. Already a generation ago, while teaching at Yale, Henri Nouwen commented that the dominant consciousness, even among seminarians preparing for ministry in the church, was agnostic³. God essentially has no place in the everyday consciousness of the culture and, surprising though it might seem, even in the ordinary consciousness of believers. The problem of unbelief today is almost as acute within religious circles as outside of them. This phenomenon is more novel within recent history.

2) An over-whelming, confusing, over-rich pluralism.

We are a culture that is rich in almost everything, except clarity. We are virtually drowning in information, in new discoveries, in entertainment, in competing ideologies, in competing values, in religious choices, in personal options, and in an explosion of technology and information that render most everything we learn (or buy!) almost immediately obsolete.

This affects more than just the decisions we make on what kind of computer software to purchase. More deeply, it shapes our psyches and our souls. Many effects, both positive and negative, might be mentioned here, two need to be highlighted:

** Daily we are losing our capacity for synthesis.*

We are a culture and a people that is long on analysis but short on synthesis. Today we know more about more things but are finding it increasingly difficult to form any picture of the whole. This is especially true of young people and it is becoming particularly true within the areas of values, ideology, spirituality, and religion. More and more we are seeing an eclecticism which, while very rich, is also very confusing. As a consequence we are seeing that less and less people can form for themselves a vision - political, moral, and religious - that is somehow whole, internally consistent, and is able to distinguish what is essential from what is accidental.

** A psychology of transience.*

We are a culture that is long on experience but short on commitment, long on openness but short on trust. It is becoming ever more difficult for us to believe in anything permanent, including commitment within personal relationships and within religion. This is not surprising, given that we fully expect that most everything we know

will soon be rendered obsolete.

We can see therefore that secularization and the explosion of technology and information, even in their more obvious manifestations, indeed do reshape the soul. This, as we shall see, is in fact a mixed blessing, that is, something not nearly as bad as the most paranoid conservative analysts would make it out to be and not nearly as good as the most naive liberal analysts would suggest. Secularism is a rich stream, though hardly a wellspring of purity. It carries with it significant elements of both hope and concern for the believer today.

However this is still the surface reality. Secularism and the explosion of technology and knowledge have a hidden, more important, face. Under the surface, a lot of things are fermenting. What are these?

B) Underlying Secularism: "three great divorces, six great ferments"

1) Spirituality versus Ecclesiology

A strange thing is happening in the Western world today. As the number of persons participating in our churches is dramatically decreasing the number of person interested in spirituality is proportionately increasing. We are witnessing a drastic decline in church life right in the midst of a spiritual renaissance. What is happening?

A divorce is taking place between spirituality and ecclesiology, between those who understand themselves to be on a spiritual quest and those inside our churches. The simplest way to explain this is to give an example.

Several years ago, an American author, Sam Keen, published a book entitled, Hymns to an Unknown God.⁴ Keen is no novice to organized religion since he holds both a master's degree and a doctorate in divinity. What he does in this book is to draw a distinction between spirituality (the spiritual quest) and religion (church life) so as to legitimate the former and denigrate the latter. He calls himself a "trustful agnostic", a "recovering Presbyterian" and wears a question mark rather than a cross around his neck. He understands himself as a searcher on a spiritual quest. But the path of spirituality, in his view, is not the path of organized religion. Every religion begins with the answers, he asserts, the spiritual quest begins with the opposite, the questions. For Sam Keen, within spirituality, unlike religion, you don't just surrender. You don't just obey.

Moreover, in this view, in the spiritual quest you never, in this life, really arrive. For him, once a person settles into the practice of a religion, he or she can no longer claim to be on a spiritual quest. Spirituality has been traded in for religion.

In saying this, Keen speaks for our age, articulating something that millions of men and women in fact feel and believe. Typical today is the person who wants faith but not the church, the questions but not the answers, the religious but not the ecclesial, and the

truth but not obedience. More and more typical too is the person who understands himself or herself as a "recovering Christian", as someone whose present quest for God has embittered him or her towards the church where there once was membership.

But this split is not just one-sided. The reverse, sadly, is just as true. We have more than enough church-goers who want the church but not faith, the answers but not the questions, the ecclesial but not the religious, and obedience but not the truth. The "recovering secularist", bears a striking similarity to his alienated cousin, the "recovering Christian".

The effect of this divorce is to separate two things which should ideally be mutually enriching, spirituality and ecclesiology. Today these are too isolated from each other. Ironically, both have never been richer in what they have to offer. Unfortunately too, as they are constellated today, both bring their own dangers.

So we turn to look at each of these in terms of what they offer vis-a-vis hope and concern for the believer:

a) Spirituality

What gives us cause for hope when we look at that rich ferment which the popular mind today calls spirituality?⁵ Among other things, we should note the following:

- Its openness, its tolerance, its sense of interconnection and universality, and its itch for harmony.
- Its emphasis on peace, justice, and the integrity of creation.
- Its views on gender and race.
- Its sense of aesthetics and its valuing of the beautiful.
- Its sense of God's goodness and forgiveness.
- Its tapping into traditions of the great world religions and the wisdom traditions within the great mythologies of various cultures.

What might be causes for concern for believers?

- Its naivete about energy, especially spiritual and sexual energy, i.e., its over-eagerness to shed all past taboos. ⁶
- Its tendency towards an impersonal God.
- Its capacity to compartmentalize life, morality, and God so as to render certain areas exempt from religious and moral scrutiny.
- Its adolescent attitude towards its Christian past, complete with an unhealthy projected anger.
- Its naivete about the importance and place of family.
- Its incapacity, for the most part, to elicit commitment and personal sacrifice. ⁷

b) Ecclesiology

What should give us hope when we look at the churches?

- They are the primary stewards of a rich, over-brimming tradition of revelation. They carry thousands of years of religious experience, including that of countless saints.
- Their own ongoing internal renewal, i.e., in terms of theology, scripture scholarship, liturgical revival, deepening moral sensitivities, and ferment for justice.
- Their non-negotiable demand for actual community.
- Their refusal, at least theoretically, to compartmentalize religion, morality, and God.
- Their concept of a personal God.
- Their time-tested taboos and boundaries regarding our relationship to energy, sexuality, and family.

What are the causes for concern when we look at what is actually happening inside the churches?

- Our own infidelity and incapacity to live up to our own ideals. All atheism is a parasite off of this.
- Our infighting - between denominations and within denominations. Sometimes, it seems, the concern is more to score partisan ideological points than to collectively pass on the faith to our own children.
- Our propensity to divorce our wisdom from life, i.e., we is often colourless, humourless, bland, anti-erotic, anti-aesthetic, and would be scandalized by Jesus of Nazareth.

2) Life versus Wisdom

Some years ago, I was visiting a Benedictine monastery in Belgium when an episode occurred that still haunts me. What happened? Well, you need to picture a scene to get the full impact:

It was April, but still very cold and the chapel where we had just celebrated the Eucharist and the cafeteria to which we had retired for coffee afterwards lacked somewhat both for heat and light. There were about a hundred of us present, monks and seminarians mostly, along with a few lay people. All of us were sombrely drinking coffee and making small talk, except for one child, a little girl of four. She, dressed in a smart, bright little coat, was skipping smack down the middle of the cafeteria, singing to herself, letting off steam after having been forcibly silenced during the long liturgy that had just preceded.

Maybe it was the cold and bad light or maybe it was the heavy monastic dress so much in evidence, but if the best Hollywood director in the world, or the devil himself, had

choreographed the thing, it could not have been set up better. Everything about that little girl spoke of life, while everything about the rest of us spoke of soberness, lack of colour, lack of life, age, and dram duty. If God were running a public relations campaign, this would not be the film to show by which to draw anyone to church. At that moment, for all the world, it looked like there was more real life in one little girl, who had just been released from church, than in all the rest of us, God-fearing, duty-driven, church-going, wisdom-filled persons, none of whom could skip publicly if our lives depended on it.

I walked out of that cafeteria not knowing exactly what to make of this, given that I have some empathy for both sides of the equation, and I have noticed a lot of similar contrasts since. We all have. How often does it appear as though what is happening in our churches is dead, duty-driven and sterile, in comparison to that powerful pulse of life that literally surges out of our youth, our rock stars, our athletes, our secular comedians, our raunchy sitcoms, and so much else in our world that seems a lot freer and full of life precisely because, like that little girl, it has been released from church?

Time and time again, it seems that life, colour, and energy take their source elsewhere, and not in the faith or in the church. A lot of the real energy that drives our world - and not just negatively in terms of greed and lust - does not emanate from the churches. A lot of joy, love, zest, and colour take their origins elsewhere.

There is a lot that needs to be reflected upon here because in the end what is at issue is considerably more complex than what is spontaneously suggested when we see a little girl happily skipping among sombre monks after having been released from church. What this suggests is that lately much of **life** is uninitiated by **wisdom** and much of **wisdom** is disconnected from **life**. What is being said here?

Too often today we confuse **life** and **wisdom**, or simply fail to distinguish between them. For example, we see a lot of **life** - raw energy, eroticism, colour, wit, intelligence, beauty, and health - simply divorced from wisdom, cut off from that which holds the community together at its heart. That is why something can be brilliant, funny, beautiful, healthy, and full of real energy and yet of itself be unable to deal with the real issues of meaning, community, family, suffering, death, wound, and forgiveness. You watch **Seinfeld** for fun, not for wisdom.

But the reverse is just as true. We often see a **wisdom** that is disconnected from life, that precisely lacks any real connection to energy, eroticism, colour, wit, intelligence, beauty, and raw health. That is why sometimes someone can deal with the issues of meaning, pain, death, and forgiveness and yet be unable to radiate any real energy or health. You go to church for wisdom, not for fun; at least that seems true lately.

One should never confuse Alanis Morissette with Mother Theresa, Jerry Seinfeld with John of the Cross, or Michael Jordan with Henri Nouwen. In one, we see more the raw beauty and pulse of God's life, in the other we see the maturity of God's wisdom. Part of our task is to bring them together. Since Scripture tells us that God is the one author of

all that is good, within both life and wisdom, a good composite of the face of God, I submit, would have both traces of Mother Theresa and Alanis Morissette, John of the Cross and Jerry Seinfeld, and Henri Nouwen and Michael Jordan. Lately, however, fewer and fewer people are able to bring these two together into one face of God.

Thus, we live in a culture within which **life** and **wisdom** are too separated from each other. Life does not enough enliven wisdom, just as wisdom does not enough initiate life. Each is pretty much on its own ... a fertile, living compost carrying clusters of hopes and concerns for the believer. What are these hopes and concerns?

a) Life

When we look at all those rich forces of life that surround us and pulse within us, tragically often totally secularized and even anti-ecclesial, what should give us cause for hope?

- We see the many faces of God in the beauty, power, colour, humour, and goodness of its raw energy and its achievements.
- The art that it creates.
- Its technological achievements (from new medicines to the internet) are helping improve the quality of our lives.
- Its simple capacity to cheer us up at times - sometimes there is no spiritual medicine as life-giving as art or even just a delightful distraction.
- It brings life - analogous to what young children bring to an aging family.

What might be the causes for concern for a believer?

- Its divorce from wisdom, from the heart of community.
- Its idolatry of achievement, celebrity, physical health, and sexual attractiveness.
- Its lack of vision of the cross.
- Its not-so-subtle arrogance towards the poor.
- Its limited horizon and its denial of death - the "nihilism of Seinfeld".

b) Wisdom

What hope does wisdom, even when too-divorced from life, bring?

- It is the chief steward for the wellsprings of tradition, divine revelation, and experience.
- Its capacity to inspire altruism and self-sacrifice.⁸
- Its knowledge of the cross.
- Its concern for the poor with their many faces.
- Its horizon, the infinite.

What are the causes for concern in the face of a wisdom that is too divorced from

life?

- Its present isolation from so many of the centres of importance within ordinary life.
- Its incapacity to initiate its own young - we are becoming more and more helpless to initiate our own children into responsible adulthood.
- Its propensity to self-protect rather than risk crucifixion in the real world.
- It does not often enough manifest a real love for the world and an appreciation for the beauty and goodness that are found there.
- Its propensity to timidity, anti-eroticism, and colourlessness.
- Its propensity to rigidity and even, at times, to fundamentalism.

3) Justice versus Piety

Ernst Kaseman, the renowned Scripture scholar, once commented that what is wrong in the world and in the churches is that the pious are not liberal and the liberals are not pious. He is right and that, in caption, names another tragic divorce that has taken place within Western culture, namely, private and social morality are too rarely found within the same person.

Too rare is the case where we see together in the same person, the same ideology, the same group, or the same church, an equal passion for social justice and for private morality, for action and for contemplation, for statecraft and for soulcraft, for politics and for mysticism. What this means is that the person who leads the protest group usually does not lead the prayer group, the person concerned with family values is usually not as concerned with poverty in the inner cities, and the social, political agitator generally lacks the personal integrity, selflessness, and calm of the mystic. The reverse is also true. This is far from ideal.

Ideally one should be equally concerned about both - liberality and piety, action and contemplation, private morality and social justice, the concerns of feminism and Green Peace and the ten commandments. Sadly today, these are mostly divorced from each other. Thus we live in a culture and, for the most part, in churches within which justice rarely informs piety and piety rarely expresses itself in committed social action. Too often they are lived out separately. Yet, each carries important hopes for the believer and each, certainly as it is being lived out concretely today, comes fraught with things that should obviously concern the believer. What are these hopes and concerns?

a) Justice

When we look at those groups and individuals who define the faith primarily by its dimensions of justice, what should give us cause for hope?

- A passion for justice and the equality of all peoples which is a centrepiece within the gospels.

- A preferential option for the poor which is a centrepiece within Christology.
- An insight into the structural, systemic nature of injustice, i.e., the insight that personal is political and the political is personal.
- A capacity to inspire secular martyrdom.
- A valuing of the integrity of physical creation.
- An actual influence upon politics.

What are the causes for concern, given the concrete way within which social justice often finds voice?

- Its more strident expressions.
- Its often ideological-driven adjudications.
- Its rather frequent cavalier attitude towards private morality, especially private sexual morality.
- Its naive faith in social change without a concomitant personal, interior conversion.
- Its lack of a theology of original sin and grace.
- Its incapacity to, within ecclesial circles, inspire joyous self-sacrifice.⁹
- Its lack of prayer.

b) Piety

What seeds of hope lay quietly fermenting within the hearts and circles of the pious?

- The deep personal call, which too is a centrepiece of the gospels, to every one of us to have a personal relationship with a very personal God.
- The call to personal conversion and to faith in God as the ultimate basis for social change.
- A biblical anthropology that includes a healthy theology of human nature (original sin) and the need for, and presence of, divine grace.
- A healthy sense of the importance of family and the non-negotiability of private sexual ethics.
- A capacity to inspire joyous self-giving within ecclesial circles.

What are the causes for concern?

- A tendency to bracket the Gospel's non-negotiable demand for justice.
- Too many simplistic "doctrinal" adjudications.
- A tendency to not take structural evil seriously enough and to simply identify private charity with justice.
- An often narrow, ad intra-focused, agenda.
- A propensity for self-protection over evangelization, boundaries over risk, the tendency to worry more about self-preservation than saving the world, i.e., the too frequent neglect of the fact that Christ came to save the world, not just the

church.

In summary then, given all the rich ferment within each of these, what might we name as the key traces of hope and concern for believers within the present moment?

IV. Summary - The Hope and Concern within the present moment

A)) Traces of Hope within the present ferment

- A new openness and tolerance, beyond former intolerance imposed by religion, gender, ethnicity, locale. The shedding of many old, unhealthy boundaries.
- Powerful life forces (both outside of and inside of the churches) pushing for justice.
- Major moral gains in the area of sexism.
- Major moral gains in the area of racism.
- Some major gains in regard to our practical theology of God - the old God of punishment and violence is being put to pasture!
- Major strides in Ecumenism - both within Christianity and with World Religions. A growing universal among all people of sincere heart.
- The positive moral and educational opportunities inherent within the advance of technology and communications, i.e., despite a certain moral downside, the explosion of information, especially as accessible through the Internet, is making education available as never before and is assuring that in the future no totalitarian group can ever again control information.
- A renaissance of spirituality within the secular culture.
- The emerging concern for ecology and the integrity of physical creation.
- A new humility and honesty within the churches.
- The "faces" of God that reveal themselves within the raw energy, colour, wit, and creativity within the secular culture.

B) Causes for Concern within the present ferment

- The growing split between spirituality and ecclesiology, life and wisdom, justice and piety.
- The growing "impersonalization" of God - and a concomitant decline in prayer.
- An increasing naivete about spiritual and sexual energy.
- The growing agnosticism of our ordinary consciousness.
- The "recovering Christian" syndrome.
- The growing idolatry of achievement, celebrity, health, and sexual attractiveness.
- A blindness, save for highly select places, to the poor.
- An ever-shrinking spiritual horizon - replaced by the nihilism of Seinfeld, entertainment, professional sports - and the denial of death.
- A dangerous and growing fundamentalism as a reaction to the ferment.
- The fragmenting and breakdown of community at every level: marriage, family,

church, neighbourhood, nation.

V. Naming the elements for a response

Given what the present moment is bringing, this ensemble of hopes and concerns, what might be the broad outlines for a Christian response?

At the broadest level, obviously our task is to try to bring together in a new marriage the rich polarities that we just analyzed: spirituality and ecclesiology, life and wisdom, justice and piety. But how to do this?

As a general principle, of course, it could be said that we should build on the hopes and try to address the concerns. Simplistic as that sounds, this is not without value. In essence, that is the task, indeed that is what it means to "read the signs of the times." More, of course, needs to be said. Where should we be going in the face of all of this? How might a believer act, given all of this?

My effort here, given the limits of time and space, will necessarily be modest. Rather than attempt to outline anything that would pretend to be a comprehensive, I will instead propose *four* principles which, if taken together, can, I believe, help us walk to where we should be going, even if for now we cannot always clearly think of where we should be going. In essence, these principles can help us do the next right thing. They might aptly be termed: *Guidelines to help us walk prophetically in today's world:*

1) Love the world, affirm it, and bless its goodness, energy, and life ...

Julian of Norwich once described God as "COMPLETELY RELAXED AND COURTEOUS, HIMSELF THE HAPPINESS AND PEACE OF HIS DEAR FRIENDS, HIS BEAUTIFUL FACE, RADIATING MEASURELESS LOVE, LIKE MARVELLOUS SYMPHONY; AND IT WAS THAT WONDERFUL FACE SHINING WITH THE BEAUTY OF GOD THAT FILLED THE HEAVENLY PLACE WITH JOY AND LIGHT."¹⁰

Jesus, it seems, agrees. The scriptures assure us that God's first look at this world is not one of condemnation, but of delight and blessing. God still smiles on this planet, albeit we often find it difficult to smile back and especially to smile at each other. As well, the scriptures assure us that all good things come from God. There is but one author of all energy, life, art, music, intellectual achievement, wit, graceful bodies, sexual attraction, and colour.

Our first task as believers, long before we begin to make any critical moral judgements, is to recognize this, that is, to recognize God's many faces as they appear in the world. A composite of God's face must run the gamut from Mother Theresa to Alanis Morissette, from John of the Cross to Jerry Seinfeld, and from Henri Nouwen to Michael Jordan. All that is one, good, true, and beautiful - not to mention graceful, colourful, and humorous - comes from God and both reflects God's face and God's creativity in this world. Our initial response must be to bless that life and energy and all the raw goodness,

beauty, and colour it brings. Like God, our faces must too be relaxed and courteous, radiating more blessings than curses, grateful to bask in the richness of an energy and diversity that speaks of a God whose heart and imagination certainly have more rooms than we can imagine. In our attitude, our countenance, and our preaching, we must then first of all bless the world we live in and delight in its richness. Long before we ever begin to point out what is wrong in this world, we must first of all love this world and recognize that it is for this particular world that God's son gave his life. If God loves the world, and we are assured by everything that Christ said and did that God does, then how can we do otherwise? ¹¹

Only when we have the prophetic courage to love the world and to bless it, as God does, can we begin to bring together the many faces that God takes in life and in wisdom and in spirituality and in ecclesiology.

2) Stand where the cross is erected, at the margins, where the poor find themselves ...

On the other hand, our world is also full of infidelity, sin, injustice, blind egoism, racism, and violence. Daily we see millions suffer hunger, exclusion, and injustices of every kind. Daily too we are made aware of hundreds and sometimes thousand of persons who are dying from violence. Self-centredness, greed, crass egoism, and the drive for power and privilege, it seems, are everywhere.

In the face of this, to be prophetic is to stand where the prophet stands, namely, at the edges, at that place where the cross of Christ was first erected and where it is still perennially erected, namely, where the poor find themselves ... where stands the excluded one, the unnoticed one, the insignificant one, the crucified one, the one who is alone against the mob, the one who is rejected but who, like Jesus, ultimately is the cornerstone for the building. ¹²

We must bless the world, but we must also stand at its edges, at the place where the cross of Christ is erected in each age. But how is this possible? Are these two not mutually exclusive? How can one bless the world and challenge with the cross, all at the same time?

An image, a model, might be helpful here: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, in his **Mass for the World** shares how he understands the offering of the bread and the wine at the Christian Eucharist. When the bread is held up in offering, he says, we are holding up this world, with all its achievements, its legitimate glories, its real progress, and its many strengths. In offering the bread, we both celebrate and bless the world's triumphs. One second later however, we hold up the wine, crushed grapes symbolizing blood, and symbolizing too all that is so brutally crushed as all this progress moves forward. In offering the wine, we take our place beneath the cross. As believers we offer to God daily both the glorious and crushed bodies of this earth. We bless the former and identify with the latter.

So we bless this earth, even as we stand where the cross of Christ - the marginalized and the poor - stand. And what do we say to our world from there? Two things: words of confrontation in the face of the world's faithlessness and words of hope in the face of God's fidelity and power:

3) Confront the world's faithlessness and self-absorption from the place of the cross ...

Standing at that place where our generation erects the cross, we must speak words of prophetic challenge to our generation, never forgetting of course that, first, we need to hear them ourselves. What are those words? Where does our generation need most particularly to be challenged?

Infidelity perennially takes the same forms and our age is not novel in its weakness and sin. Like our ancestors, whom we tend to judge too harshly, we too struggle with a lack of heart for the poor, with a lack of courage to face personal sin, and with the tendency to constantly narrow our horizons. Hence, where our generation needs to be most particularly and prophetically confronted is on *three* counts:

** On how we treats our widows, orphans, and strangers.*

Beginning already hundreds of years before Christ, the Jewish prophets laid down a singular principle: The quality of our faith depends upon the quality of justice in the land and the quality of justice in the land depends upon how we treat three special groups of people - widows, orphans, and foreigners (those with the least status in the society). Christ not only endorsed this, he deepened it and made it a condition for entry into the kingdom. In Christ's vision of things, the last are first, the poor are central, there is no place of privilege, and the person who is the most marginalized and least powerful in any group is the cornerstone that binds that community together.

Our culture, despite a growing rhetoric to the contrary, does not do very well either in understanding this or in living it out. Simply put, widows, orphans, and foreigners still do not fare very well, anywhere in our culture. Hence we must try to make ourselves see how our present cult of affluence, celebrity, glamour, sexual attractiveness, achievement, physical health, and eternal youth blinds us to the poor. And indeed we are blind to them. Our culture offers nothing more than scraps to anyone who is not somehow economically, physically, or intellectually endowed. Widows, orphans, and foreigners (those who cannot work the system to their advantage and privilege) are still everywhere the crucified ones.

** On our lack of courage to look at personal sin.*

Beyond our culture's insensitivity to its poor, we also suffer from a concomitant callousness within personal conscience. More and more, we have less and less courage to

look at personal sin; and indeed to even mention the word itself. Crassly stated, when we feel the need to write long, angst-laden, treatises on why it is therapeutically dysfunctional for us to sing the timeless words of **AMAZING GRACE** ("*that saved a wretch like me*") it is time for some biblical prophet to step up and call us not just to conversion but simply back to sanity. Each of us needs to be challenged to appropriate the words of Paul: "I cannot understand my own behaviour. I fail to carry out the things I want to do, and I find myself doing the very things I hate." 13 Anyone who feels that these words do not apply to him or her is rationalizing. Moreover, when private conscience is calloused, so too will be our social action; when private conscience makes moral exemptions, so too will we discriminate in the way we act socially; and when private conscience rationalizes, we cannot hope to have real integrity at a wider level.

- *On our tendency to see things only against a temporal horizon.*

To live in faith is to see things always against an infinite horizon. We do not do well on this particular score. The weighty realities of death and eternal life are rarely factored into any of our equations, let alone our personal, life decisions. Even within church circles, death and eternal life are rarely talked about. It has become both easy and fashionable (so long as we feel healthy, strong, and not greatly threatened) to slide into a comfortable nihilism¹⁴ - within which distraction becomes a functional substitute for religion and we live as practical atheists in regards to having any real sense that this life is not all that there is. Our narrow horizon needs to be challenged.

Our generation needs to be challenged from the place where it erects the cross. In brief, only when we treat properly our most vulnerable members, only when we have the courage to look at our personal sin, and only when we no longer ignore the realities of death and eternal life in shaping our horizon and our decisions, will we begin to more happily wed the rich fermenting realities of spirituality and ecclesiology, life and wisdom, and justice and piety.

4) Offer the world the hope of the resurrection, hope beyond infidelity, sin, brokenness, and death ...

In Mark's account of the passion and death of Jesus we are presented with a curious little vignette, seemingly unimportant. Standing with Jesus as he is arrested is a young man, wearing only a linen cloth. This young man, full of youthful grandiosity, seems ready to follow Jesus to his death for he has obviously come prepared, already wearing his burial shroud, the linen cloth. However when the frenzied crowd seizes Jesus, the young man immediately loses his courage and flees naked into the night, leaving his burial shroud in the hands of the mob. Like all the others, despite his grandiose intentions, he too betrays Christ. However, that is not the end of his story. Jesus, of course, is crucified, but we are to hear of this young man again. On the morning of the resurrection, inside the empty tomb, the disciples meet this young man and he, again dressed in a linen cloth but now in the white robes of baptism, announces the resurrection of Jesus in words to this effect: "*Fear not, have courage, the power of God is*

greater even than every kind of death and every kind of betrayal. The power and forgiveness of God is infinite. Go forth and live your life in the face of this." ¹⁵

This incident is Mark's way of telling us that, in the resurrection, a new power and a new forgiveness is revealed in our world. God has power to bring death back to life and to grant us a new, gracious, and guilt-free life beyond betrayal and brokenness. These two realities, God's power and God's forgiveness, are the ultimate stuff of prophecy. The prophet's real task is to stand in the midst of death and betrayal and offer the hope of life, forgiveness, graciousness, and gratitude beyond them.

Perhaps nothing is as needed in terms of prophecy today (save the for the clear words that God is real) as are words that challenge our culture to live more in trust of God: confident that nothing is impossible for God, that God can do things in and with us that we cannot do by and for ourselves; confident that both we and our world can in fact be new, beyond the seemingly hopeless ruts of betrayal and conflict within which we habitually find ourselves; and consoled in the fact that even beyond every one of our worst inexcusable betrayals there lies an unconditional, forgiving embrace which asks for nothing in return ... and seems to have a sneaky sense of humour besides.

References and notes ...

1) David Tracy, **On Naming the Present: Reflections on God, Hermeneutics, and Church**, N.Y., Orbis Books, 1995.

2) This section on **Spontaneous Reactions to the Present Moment** is essentially a synthesis of Tracy's thought as expressed in his essay **On Naming the Present**, *ibid.*

3) Henri Nouwen, Early Chapters in his books, **Intimacy, Essays in Pastoral Theology**, Notre Dame, Indiana, Fides Publishers Inc, 1969.

4) Sam Keen, **Hymns to an Unknown God**, N.Y., Bantam Books, 1994.

5) The word "Spirituality", in this context, is obviously being used in an arbitrary and restricted sense, i.e., as characterizing a religious quest that takes place outside of or independent of the churches; e.g., as described by Sam Keen. That restrictive definition can and should be challenged, but it is useful here - as a huge caricature and oversimplification - because it helps catalyze the contrast and because it is in fact often understood today in exactly this way in the popular mind. I offer a much fuller definition, complete with more nuance, in the first three chapters of, **Seeking Spirituality** (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1998).

6) For a discussion on how our present culture is often rather dangerously naive about erotic and spiritual energy, I offer my own discussion of this: **Naivete about the nature of spiritual energy**, in, **Seeking Spirituality**, *ibid.*, pp. 21-29.

7) Cardinal Francis George underscores this point, among others, in a presentation made at the University of Chicago on January 9, 1999. Offering a critique of liberal Catholicism, Cardinal George asserted: *"Liberal Catholicism is inadequate in fostering the joyful self-surrender called for in Christian marriage, in consecrated life, in the ordained priesthood, even in discipleship itself. ... A sociological theory that defines the central value as autonomy is only with great difficulty able to hear a doctrinal or gospel call to surrender."* (Quoted in the **National Catholic Reporter**, by Robert McClory, January 22, 1999, p. 7,)

While it can be argued that the same point might well be made against much of conservative Catholicism, Cardinal George's point does have the ring of validity here ... even if it might also ring with a similar resonance elsewhere.

8) George, idem.

9) George, idem.

10) Julian of Norwich, **Enfolded in Love: Daily Readings with Julian of Norwich**, London, Darton, Longmann & Todd, 1980, p. 10.

11) For some further development on this I recommend the document, **Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium**, document of the Thirty-Third General Chapter of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, 290 via Aurelio, 00165, Rome, Italy, 1998.

Thus, for example, at one point, the document offers this challenge: *"If God continues to believe in women and men, how can we despair of them? Humanity stands tall, alive, free, at peace with itself, at peace with creation, and somehow at rights with God. These are the people in our neighbourhoods, cities, and towns; everywhere giving us evidence that God still believes in us."* (Idem., number 8, p. 22.)

12) Again I recommend the theology which is articulated in the document just cited, **Evangelizing the Poor at the Dawn of the Third Millennium**, ibid., numbers 4-7, pp. 20-22.)

13) Romans 7, 15. (Jerusalem Bible translation)

14) Earlier we used the expression, *"the nihilism of Seinfeld"*. In essence, that captures what is being asserted here. Jerry Seinfeld, who is both a comic genius and a comic philosopher, has always stated clearly that his programs and comic skits *"are about nothing!"* Which is exactly what has made them so immensely popular. Perhaps he is too hard on himself because a lot of his material functions brilliantly as did the old, archetypal court-jester, namely, it deflates pompousness. This renders a valuable service. However, in the end, it is still a nihilism, albeit (and this is the point) a very

pleasant one.

15) Mark 14, 51-52 & 16, 5-8. Obviously my verbatim here is not a quote but a certain "rendering" of the text.