

‘Catholic Spirituality: Contemplative and Transformational’

Jessie Nicholson BEM, Memorial Lecture, 15th Feb. 2016

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Thank you Fr Ian and members of the ACU Committee for your invitation to deliver this year’s Jessie Nicholson Memorial Lecture. It is a great honour. I have to confess that I struggled a little initially with the title that you gave me Fr Ian: Catholic Spirituality. Nothing like a small manageable topic to work with! When I started putting down ideas I ended up with the contents page of a fair-sized book. So, I have to confess that I’ve cheated a little and added a sub-title, ‘Catholic Spirituality: Contemplative and Transformational’.

I imagine that there will be little debate in the room over the description of Catholic Spirituality as contemplative (although I’m open to a curly question or two at the end of the lecture). Few of us are called to the contemplative religious life in community, but most of us enjoy a regular drink at the waters of contemplative prayer, through our daily meditations or on an annual retreat. In the opening of *The Waters of Silence* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1950), Thomas Merton writes: “There is intoxication in the waters of contemplation ... these are the waters which the world does not know, because it prefers the water of bitterness and contradiction. These are the waters of peace, of which Christ said: “[those] that shall drink of the water that I shall give [them], shall not thirst forever. But the water that I shall give [them] shall become in [them] a fountain of water, springing up into life everlasting”. They are ancient waters, bearing life and hope for the weary Christian soul, as the Psalmist describes (Ps 1:1-3):

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

Our Lady has long been the archetype of a contemplative openness to God, as Julian of Norwich writes (E. Colledge & J. Walsh, *Showings*, p. 187):

And to teach us this, as I understand, our good Lord showed our Lady ... to signify the exalted wisdom and truth which were hers as she contemplated her Creator. This wisdom and truth showed her in contemplation how great, how exalted, how mighty and how good was her God. The greatness and nobility of her contemplation of God filled her full of reverent fear; and with this she saw herself so small and so humble, so simple and so poor in comparison with her God that this reverent fear filled her with humility. And founded on this, she was filled with grace and with every kind of virtue, and she surpasses all creatures.

From this place of contemplative union Mary's praise echoes across time (Luke 1:46-8): 'My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed'.

In a reflection entitled 'The Silence of Love' Benedictine monk, John Main, writes (*Word Made Flesh*, p. 29): 'Language is so weak in explaining the fullness of the mystery. That is why the absolute silence of meditation is so supremely important. We do not try to think of God, talk to God or imagine God. We stay in that awesome silence open to the eternal silence of God. We discover in meditation, through practice and taught by daily experience, that this is the natural ambience for all of us. We are created for this and our being flourishes and expands in that eternal silence.'

The contemplative centring prayer that Main has so successfully reintroduced to modern catholic spirituality, from the parish to the cloister, is drawn among other places from the medieval mystical text *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In chapters 37-39, for example, the *Cloud* author describes what Main would term the 'mantra' meditation (*Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. H. Backhouse, ch. 37, p. 62):

True contemplatives could not value more highly the prayers of Holy Church and they use them in the form and according to the regulations ordained by the holy fathers before us. But their special private prayers rise spontaneously to God ... and when these spontaneous prayers are in words, as they seldom are, those words are few; indeed, the fewer the better. In fact, one word of a single syllable rather than two, is more in accordance with the spirit.

The *Cloud* author goes on to expound this spiritual principal by using an earthly example. What if you have just discovered that there is a fire? What would you say? Probably not: ‘Ah, Fr Ian. Excuse me. I’m sorry to bother you. I hope you are enjoying the lecture. Anyway, I went to the toilet a moment ago. Actually, while I think of it, the toilet paper has almost run out; you might like to mention this to the Vicar. So, back to the point. On my way back from the toilet I noticed that smoke is bellowing out of the room next door. I think there might be a fire’. You don’t need lots of words. More likely is that as soon as you see the bellowing smoke you would yell: “Fire!” or “Help!” So it is with contemplative prayer. Beyond the prayers of Holy Church, the words of our liturgies, our Mass, our daily Offices, we need very few words in prayer. Perhaps just a single word repeated over and over again. The *Cloud* author urges (*Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. H. Backhouse, ch. 39, p. 64):

We must pray in the height, depth, length and breadth of the Spirit without many words but with one word of one syllable. That word must be best suited to the nature of prayer itself, and before we can select such a word we must first understand what prayer is.

Prayer is nothing other than a devout intent directed to God in order that one may gain goodness and banish evil. Since all evil is summed up in sin, either by cause or in being, we should pray for the removing of evil. But in this prayer do not waste time thinking about the subject. Do not say much. Use only this little word ‘sin’. If we pray for goodness, then let us cry, with word or thought or desire, nothing but that

one word 'God'. For in God is all good; he is its beginning and its existence.

Contemplation, meditation, prayerful silence are better experienced than talked about, so before we go any further I wonder if you would like to join with me in a short meditation? Rather than the *Cloud* author's monosyllabic prayer-word suggestions of 'God' and 'sin' I would like to break out into a radical two syllables! The ceaseless repetition of the name of Jesus is a form of prayer with broad historic catholicity. The Jesuit mystic, Anthony de Mello, has written a beautiful meditation on the Jesus Prayer, which I would like to share with you (De Mello, *Sadhana*, p. 121):

Begin your prayer by asking for the help of the Holy Spirit. It is only in the power of the Spirit that we can worthily pronounce the name of Jesus

Then imagine Jesus before you. In what form do you like best to imagine him? As an infant, as the crucified Christ, as the risen Lord ...?

Where do you imagine him to be? Standing before you? Some are greatly helped to imagine the Lord as being enshrined within their heart ... or within their head Choose the place that you find most devotional in which to imagine you see him

Now pronounce the name of Jesus each time you breathe in or each time you breathe out Or you may pronounce the first syllable of his name as you breathe in and the second syllable as you breathe out. If you find this too frequent, then pronounce the name after every three or four breaths. It is important that you do this gently, relaxed, peacefully

If after a while, you tire of pronouncing the Name, rest for a while, then take up the recitation again, somewhat as a bird does when it flaps its wings for a while and then glides for a while, then flaps its wings again

Pause for a short time of silent prayer ...

I wonder what Jessie Nicholson would be making of our evening thus far? I didn't know her, but I am sure that she was a woman of prayer, and from what I have read she was certainly a woman of action. She was faithful in worship, and I imagine that it was out of a prayerful contemplative wellspring that her works of mercy were inspired, especially her tireless visiting of the sick for which she was so renowned.

As a young woman Jessie came under the influence of the 'rebel priest of the East End' Australian-born Fr John Groser (1890-1966) one of the founders of the Christian Socialist Movement in England. I suspect that the bar for Jessie's 'Proper Priests' was set by this dynamic Anglo-Catholic Vicar of St George-in-the-East (see: www.stgite.org.uk/groser.html). While catholic spirituality undoubtedly has a strong contemplative element, it is equally transformative and active.

One of Fr Groser's heroes would have been Robert William Radclyffe Dolling (1851–1902) who has been described as the quintessential Anglo-Catholic slum priest. In his book *Ten Years in a Portsmouth Slum* (1896) Fr Dolling describes his introduction to the parish and the clear priorities that presented themselves to him when he first arrived (p. 17):

A very wise priest once said to me, 'Don't make plans for your parish, let your parish make plans for itself.' These six weeks [have been] invaluable, letting me hear the parish voices, and trying to discover its plans. Two notes were always making themselves heard; one was the poverty, the other was the sin. And surely they explained each other; they were sinful as a rule, because they were poor.

Another source of inspiration for Jessie Nicholson's Fr Groser would have been the second Anglo-Catholic Congress, which took place in London in 1923. It was a soul-searching gathering, and at the conclusion of the conference the Chairman, Bp Frank Weston, was tasked with summing up what had been learnt over the three

days. His closing words were a clarion call, to both clergy and laity, to keep the plight of the poor central to the mission of Anglo-Catholicism (see www.anglicanhistory.org/weston/weston2).

The one great thing [we need] to learn is that Christ is found in and amid matter—Spirit through matter—God in flesh, God in the Sacrament. But I say to you, and I say it to you with all the earnestness that I have, that if you are prepared to fight for the right of adoring Jesus in his Blessed Sacrament, then you have got to come out from before your Tabernacle and walk, with Christ mystically present in you, out into the streets of this country, and find the same Jesus in the people of your cities and your villages. You cannot claim to worship Jesus in the Tabernacle, if you do not pity Jesus in the slum. Now mark that—this is the Gospel truth ... You have got your Mass, you have got your Altar, you have begun to get your Tabernacle. Now go out into the highways and hedges where not even the Bishops will try to hinder you. Go out and look for Jesus in the ragged, in the naked, in the oppressed and sweated, in those who have lost hope, in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus. And when you see him, gird yourselves with his towel and try to wash their feet.

I don't know if Fr Groser was a fan of Edward Bouverie Pusey (1800-82), Regius Professor of Hebrew at Christ Church, Oxford, for more than 50 years; I imagine he was. Dr Pusey's writing, his teaching and preaching, his tenacity in bringing about change, truly came out of a wellspring of prayer. The great Anglican mystic, Evelyn Underhill, sums up Pusey's life in this way in her book *Worship* (pp. 331-2):

Pusey, the true prophet of the [Tractarian] movement, was by temperament an ascetic and contemplative. His inner life, disciplined by much suffering, was nourished by the writings of the great Catholic mystics, whose influence can constantly be detected in his sermons, and sometimes breaks out in passages of sustained splendour. Indeed, the modern recognition and restoration of the mystical element in religion ... began with this scholar-saint. Further, his

Spiritual Letters reveal Pusey as a great director of souls, devoted, wise and gentle; the first in a series of teachers who have brought back into the [Anglican] Church the secrets of the interior life of prayer.

The Oxford Movement, from the very beginning, was not about setting up a church-political party or a religious club for people to belong to; it was transformative. It was about going back to basics and rediscovering the life-changing fundamentals of the Christian faith. It was a revival movement, seeking to breathe fresh life into the dusty bones of the nineteenth-century Church of England. Historian and Episcopalian Rector, John Alexander SSC, notes (<http://anglicanhistory.org/alexander/alexander3.html>): 'From its inception ... the Oxford Movement called Anglicans to the pursuit of holiness. And one feature of genuine movements of Christian renewal is that, sooner or later, they inspire some of their adherents to seek to give up everything in order to follow the Lord. The Oxford Movement proved no exception'.

A good example is the story of Marian Hughes, who indeed gave up everything to follow God when her spiritual director, Dr Pusey, heard her profession in 1841 as a nun. I'm sure you know the story. Mother Marion's profession was the first in the Church of England for 300 years, since the dissolution of the monasteries by King Henry VIII. Pusey and Mother Marion had made a transformative move, and a slow but steady flood of professions followed, first of women and then of men, as new religious communities began to form: the Community of St John the Baptist, the Society of the Holy Cross, the Cowley Fathers, the Mirfield Fathers, the Kelham Fathers, and in due course the Anglican Benedictines and Franciscans.

At the same time this flourishing of transformative contemplative catholic spirituality was taking place in England, Henry Hewett Paulett Handfield (1828-1900), vicar of St Peter's Eastern Hill, was encouraging Emma Silcock in her vocation to serve the poor of the streets and lanes of Melbourne. I'm sure you know this inspiring story too. Emma had been a novice in one of the new

religious communities in England, the Community of St Mary the Virgin at Wantage, and soon after taking up her pioneering position in Melbourne in 1888, started calling herself by her religious name, Sister Esther. This alone was a transformational move, as the Church of Australia was a long way off agreeing to the new Tractarian practice of establishing religious orders. It took more than five years before Sister Esther's profession was formally received, and then it had to be in the Diocese of Ballarat. Only in 1912 after twenty-four years was the Community of the Holy Name recognised by the Diocese of Melbourne, under Archbishop Henry Lowther Clarke (see S. Dunlop, *Some Suitable Women*, pp. 37-58).

The revival of Anglican religious orders was more established in 1933 when another vicar of St Peter's, Farnham Edward Maynard (1882-1973), invited the newly formed Brotherhood of St Laurence to take charge of St Mary's Mission Church, in the Fitzroy end of the parish. It was the height of the depression and the Brotherhood's founder, Gerard Kennedy Tucker (1885-1974), in good slum-priest fashion 'declared war on the slums'. His religious order caught the interest of other young men wanting to make a difference, and the old school at St Peter's, Keble House, was turned into a training centre. By the end of 1934 there were nineteen members of the Brotherhood. It was a life of prayerful priestly formation for those who lived there. They would rise at 6.30am and begin the day with fifteen minutes of meditation. Matins would be said at 7.15am followed by Holy Communion and then they would breakfast in silence. After their studies and morning lectures the students would go to the chapel again at 12.15pm for prayers before lunch, and then following the afternoon activities evening prayer would be said at 5.30pm before dinner, and the day would be rounded off with compline at 9.15pm (See J. Handfield, *Friends and Brothers*, pp. 117-18). Although the Brotherhood went through many ups and downs, it was these seeds of contemplation and transformation that grew into the Anglican social service agency we know today.

Our challenge today, is perhaps not dissimilar from that faced by Dr Pusey, Mother Marion, Mother Esther and Fr Tucker. Our beloved Church feels a bit dusty and in need of new life, but it will not change if we try to push it in our own strength. Transformation will only come from a place of profound personal and communal conversion and commitment to God. This is a painful place, a costly place that demands our all; a place well known to the great contemplatives, mystics and reformers of our tradition. There are no easy answers, but equally we must not shrink back and hide from the task.

I would like to close with another meditation. The French Catholic priest and theologian, Michel Quoist, is perhaps best known for his little devotional book *Prayers of Life* (1965). He encapsulates powerfully the cost, but also the blessings of a contemplative transformational calling (pp. 90-91):

Lord, why did you tell me to love all [people], my brothers [and sisters]? I have tried, but I come back to you, frightened ... Lord, I was so peaceful at home, I was so comfortably settled. It was well furnished, and I felt cozy. I was alone, I was at peace. Sheltered from the wind, the rain, the mud. I would have stayed unsullied in my ivory tower. But, Lord, you have discovered a breach in my defences. You have forced me to open my door.

Like a squall of rain in the face, the cry of [the other] has awakened me. Like a gale of wind a friendship has shaken me. As a ray of light slips in unnoticed, your grace has stirred me ... and, rashly enough, I left my door ajar.

Now, Lord, I am lost! Outside [they] were lying in wait for me. I did not know they were so near; in this house, in this street, in this office; my neighbour, my colleague, my friend. As soon as I started to open the door I saw them, with outstretched hands, burning eyes, longing hearts, like beggars on church steps. The first ones came in, Lord. There was after all some space in my heart. I welcomed them. I would have cared for them ... my very own little lambs, my little

flock. You would have been pleased, Lord, I would have served and honoured you in a proper, respectable way. Till then, it was sensible ...

But the next ones, Lord, the [others], I had not seen them; they were hidden behind the first ones. There were more of them, they were wretched; they over-powered me without warning. We had to crowd in, I had to find room for them. Now they have come from all over, in successive waves, pushing one another, jostling one another. They have come from all over town, from all parts of the country, of the world; numberless, inexhaustible. They don't come alone any longer but in groups, bound one to another. They come bending under heavy loads; loads of injustice, of resentment and hate, of suffering and sin ... They drag the world behind them, with everything rusted, twisted, or badly adjusted. Lord, they hurt me! They are in the way, they are everywhere, they are too hungry, they are consuming me!

I can't do anything any more; as they come in, they push the door, and the door opens wider ... Lord! My door is wide open! I can't stand it any more! It's too much! It's no kind of life! What about my job? My family? My peace? My liberty? And me? Lord, I have lost everything, I don't belong to myself any longer. There's no more room for me at home.

Don't worry, God says, you have gained all. While [they] came in to you, I, your Father, I, your God, slipped in among them.