

Midwives to the Mystery

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Midwives to the Mystery

Eamonn Conway

Christians should be capable of providing a response to people who ask the reason for the hope that they have (1 Peter 3:15). A reason, whatever else it is, is meant to be *reasonable*. Something appears reasonable if it connects with our daily experience, if it helps us make sense of our ordinary daily lives. Part of the problem today is that to an increasing number of people Christian beliefs do not seem to make much sense. In what follows I would like to explore why this might be the case and in the light of this exploration suggest certain implications for Church ministry.

FAITH AND BELIEFS

Each religion has its system of beliefs. But a 'system of beliefs' is not exactly the same as 'faith'. Schubert Ogden helps us to make this important distinction. The essence of faith, he suggests, is a basic confidence in life's meaning and worth. Religious beliefs do not provide us with this basic confidence. Deep down, we either have (or, possibly, lack) such confidence already. The purpose of religious beliefs is to re-affirm and re-assure this fundamental conviction and to provide us with language and symbols to express it. Ogden suggests that it is only by means of this original faith in the meaning and worth of life that all our religious statements first become possible or have any sense.¹

The conviction about life's meaning and worth is not simply one conviction among others which we hold during our lives. We probably first realise how fundamental and powerful a conviction faith is in and through moments of pain, confusion and senselessness which we inevitably experience in our own lives and witness in the lives of others. Such terrifying moments come and go, and even threaten to crush us, but despite them we hold

1. Ogden, Schubert, *The reality of God*, 54.

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on to a conviction that love remains possible, goodness triumphs, and despair, fear, darkness and evil do not have the last word. At some stage we may come to acknowledge that even *death* is denied the final word in our world and in our lives.

Religious beliefs help us to interpret this conviction. They help us to recognize God as its source. Religions build up a profile of God and catalogue God's presence and activity in the world. In attempting to express, understand and respond to their faith, then, people are not left to their own devices. They do not have to rely only on their own personal experience. They have access to centuries of wisdom and experience in the believing community. Religious beliefs are necessary to nourish faith, to help account for it and live according to it in daily life. When faith is shaken religious beliefs are meant to carry, to reassure, and at times to challenge us. To define religious beliefs in this way is not, I suggest, to relativise them. It is to relocate them within the more fundamental context of faith without which they make hardly any sense.

FAITH AND CHRISTIAN BELIEFS

Christians understand their beliefs as originating in God's ultimate word of reassurance about life's meaning, the Word made flesh: Jesus Christ. There are two important ways in which their understanding of the relationship between faith and beliefs claims to be unique. Firstly, for those who already hold a conviction about the meaningfulness of life, a relationship with the person of Jesus Christ provides immeasurable breadth and depth to this conviction. This is why Christians still engage in mission, even to people who already have religious beliefs and seem to be living very good and worthwhile lives.

Secondly, while Christians understand Jesus Christ to be an extraordinarily good and holy person who had a very close relationship with God and a very strong conviction about the power of goodness and truth, they go further: they claim he is also God in human flesh. Because Jesus Christ is God incarnate all those who hold to their conviction about the goodness and worth of life are implicitly related to him. They may not of course see it that way themselves.

FAITH, YES – BELIEFS, NO THANKS

It is fair to say that most people remain convinced about the worthwhileness of life. Yet an increasing number of these no longer perceive Christian beliefs as offering the most profound, most articulate and most meaningful interpretation of their faith. So they seek alternative language, creeds and symbols. We are

tempted to be judgmental of such people and to assume that their decision not to practise Christian beliefs is the result of laziness or selfishness. Yet so many of them testify to their conviction about the worthwhileness of life by working generously and selflessly for others. The Second Vatican Council recognised that such people are a genuine challenge to Christians and suggested that

Believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism. To the extent that they are careless about their instruction in the faith, or present its teaching falsely, or even fail in their religious, moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God and of religion.²

CRISIS OF FAITH?

So far I have spoken of people who have an original faith in the meaning and worth of life but who do not find Christian beliefs helpful to express or nourish their faith. There are, I suggest, others, perhaps also an increasing number in our society, who are not aware of any inner conviction about the meaning and worth of life. We recall that it is only an original confidence in life's meaning which enables one to make sense of religious beliefs. To people who lack awareness of this conviction, a system of beliefs, a long list of doctrines and teachings, however wise, however accurately and cleverly articulated cannot make much sense either.

I understand Brendan Kennelly, in his introduction to his *Book of Judas*, as suggesting that an erosion of confidence in the worthwhileness of life is well underway in modern Ireland. His experience is that,

in the society we have created it is very difficult to give your full, sustained attention to anything or anybody for long, we are compelled to half-do a lot of things, to half-live our lives, half-dream our dreams, half-love our loves? We have made ourselves into half-people. . . . I believe our tragedy is the viability of our half-heartedness, our insured, mortgaged, welfare voyage of non-discovery, the committed, corrosive involvement with forces, created by ourselves, that ensure our lives will be half-lived. There's a sad refusal here.

A rejection of the unique, fragile gift (p. 11).

David Steindl-Rast, writing in his book *Gratefulness, the heart of prayer*, says that 'the more we come alive and awake, the more everything we do becomes prayer'. The opposite must also be the case. The more we half-live our lives, half-dream our dreams and

2. *Gaudium et spes*, 19.

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only half-engage in life's project, the less likely we are to be aware of encounters with God and require language and symbols to articulate such encounters.

It is interesting that Kennelly should see in this the rejection of a unique, fragile gift. For Steindl-Rast, to awaken is first and foremost to awaken from taking everything for granted. Fundamental to recognising the giftedness of what we have and what surrounds us is the capacity to be surprised, to wonder, and to give gratitude for what we have. Kennelly defines hell as 'the familiar all stripped of wonder'. As the arteries of wonder clog up, human life becomes impoverished and God's presence less and less felt. In his poem *Advent* Patrick Kavanagh writes:

We have tested and tasted too much, lover –

Through a chink too wide there comes in no wonder.
Christian beliefs and doctrines are meant to be the clearest and deepest expression of what we should experience even if indistinctly and ambiguously at some depth within ourselves. But if we lose a sense of God present 'where life pours ordinary plenty', teachings which should find some echo in our daily experience fail to do so.

COURAGE TO ASK QUESTIONS AND TO LISTEN

Maybe our most important task today is to give people the courage to ask questions. A modern technological society does not, according to *Veritatis splendor* (n.1), liberate people from the obligation to ask ultimate questions. According to John Paul II, the question posed by the rich young man in Matt. 19:16 ('Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?' 19:16) is 'an essential and unavoidable question for the life of every one' (n.8). The question is *essential* but I am not sure that it is *unavoidable* any more. Perhaps more energy needs to go in to enabling people, in the words of Plunkett's *Saint Augustine*, to:

Question the beauty of the earth,
the beauty of the sea,
the beauty of the wide air around you,
the beauty of the sky . . .
They will answer you:
'Behold and see, we are beautiful.'
Their beauty is their confession of God.
Who made these beautiful changing things,
if not One who is beautiful and changeth not?

Church documents such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and *Veritatis splendor* are providing profound answers to the most profound of human dilemmas. But they are answers to questions which many people are (unfortunately) not asking.

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In any case it is worth reflecting upon the extent to which the publication of such documents actually influences behaviour and effects change. Attentive listening usually provides a better basis for mutual understanding and subsequent dialogue. People who have proven themselves to be good listeners tend, in their turn, to be listened to more readily and to discover the language and gestures which facilitate communication. By listening we also acknowledge that we do not have a monopoly on insight and truth and have something to learn too.

MINISTRY TODAY UNDERSTOOD AS MIDWIFERY

The image of 'midwife' might be particularly helpful for those in ministry today. A midwife gives birth to a child already present in the mother. Similarly, the minister today is called to be a 'midwife' to God's mysterious presence in people's lives. Perhaps in the past we learned to see ministers as 'bearers' or 'dispensers' of God's presence, as if God was absent from people's lives until we approached them with the sacraments. Indeed many people saw ministers, and some of us learned to see ourselves, as somehow having 'God in our pockets'. Today we know that God is already present to people before we approach them. In their struggle to live life to its fullest, to be generous and self-giving, to grow in their original faith about life's goodness and worth, people are already responding to God. Often they do not recognize much of their ordinary daily activity as such a response. Sadly, neither do we and so we fail to affirm and support their faith. If beliefs and Church practice are to have any relevance to daily life there is a need to help people to recognize God present and active in their daily experience. It is this life which the sacraments ultimately celebrate.

ESTABLISHING OUR CREDIBILITY

A midwife has to earn the confidence of a mother if she is to help give birth to her child. We also have to establish our credentials if we are to be helpful in such a personal dimension of other people's lives as faith. To be credible means to be quite visibly people of faith ourselves. Sometimes we put ourselves under enormous pressure to be people of knowledge – people with all the answers. We are required to be people of faith but not of knowledge. And that is harder. To admit that we don't have all the answers, to admit that we are also struggling with questions, is to admit vulnerability. Yet to be credible today demands vulnerability – it requires leaving ourselves open. It means exposing to others our own often very fragile experience of God, our own struggle to make sense of this fragile experience, our

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sometimes painful experience of God's apparent absence or confusing presence. It means that we open ourselves to others so that, seeing our courage to share with them our fragile experience of God, they discover the courage to do some exploring for themselves in the hope of discovering traces of God's presence.

Despite all the security and comfort our modern technological world has to offer people still need the support and encouragement of others to make an inner journey. The Christian minister today needs to be a kind of *sherpa* for the inner *sanctum* who can convince people that the inner world is both safe and worth exploring. And Christians who are prepared to be open about their own faith journey can take people significantly further than other *sherpas*, for they can show that the conviction about life's meaning and worth is rooted in the extraordinary love of God who held nothing back and continues to stretch out in total self-giving.

We do not have to be people with answers. We do have to show that we have the courage to grapple with the eternal questions. This means we also need the courage to share with others our questions and our doubts. If we are people of knowledge, then it is of faith-knowledge. We know the road. Our own courage to walk it, our stamina, is an encouragement to others. We cannot walk the road for people. Nor will we be of much encouragement if we give the impression that we are miles ahead or have our faith journey completed years ago.

Most Christians today, I believe, are more encouraged and convinced by a priest they perceive as struggling rather than by one who appears to have it all worked out. They *know* we are struggling. God knows they have enough painful reminders of it. At times perhaps they recognize our vulnerabilities better than we do. We are even more vulnerable and less useful when we try to hide them.

BEING MINISTERED TO

As fellow-travellers ministers also need food for the journey. Having ministered even for a short while I realize that it is the faith of those to whom I minister which provides me with much of my daily spiritual nourishment. I know I always feel empty inside when people thank me for helping them. I can never find the words to let them know how much they have helped me by *allowing me* to help them. For whenever we help people to get in touch with God present in their daily lives, we are touched by God ourselves in a unique and refreshing way. In order to re-establish our credibility and to create opportunities for our own

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faith to be nourished, more opportunities for effective faith-sharing between people and priests are needed.

THE NEED FOR COURAGE

Most of us experience God's presence in a fragile, brittle and even frail way. We need a lot of courage, therefore, to be 'midwives' to what we ourselves experience only weakly. We also need a lot of patience and hope. Rahner says that it is Christian hope which empowers us to have trust enough constantly to undertake anew an exodus out of the present into the future, out of structures, which may have become 'petrified, old and empty' in search of new structures.³ Hope gives us the courage to make the faith journey and share it with others; to leave behind what is comfortable and safe, yet superficial, and be open to what is strange, new, and, surely, wonderful. The missionary, Vincent J. Donovan writes:

. . . do not try to call people back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.⁴

What I have said about earning credibility, the need to be ministered to and the need for courage, applies to Christians individually but also to the Church as a body. The Church is called to be 'an expert in humanity' but it is not that yet. We belong to a journeying Church, a *pilgrim* Church as the Second Vatican Council put it, a Church struggling all the time to be a better re-presentation of Jesus Christ. Is it not to be expected that a pilgrim Church would possess a pilgrim theology and even a pilgrim magisterium? A Church that is less certain yet more hopeful and trustful, confident to explore questions in an honest and enthusiastic manner, is more likely to appear credible and therefore more likely to succeed in its mission.

3. On the theology of hope, *Theological investigations* 10, 258.

4. *Christianity rediscovered*, p. vii.