

Hope in the desert?
The International Eucharistic Congress
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This time a year ago, I was visiting Christian communities in Iraq, with an American Dominican, Brian Pierce. We wished to strengthen their hope. As so often, they were the ones who taught us what it means to hope. We were told that there are two Arabic words for hope: ‘amal’, which is human optimism. And ‘raja’, which is hope in God, the theological virtue. Our Iraqi brothers and sisters have almost no reason for ‘amal’. They have lost virtually everything; they are unsure that they will be welcome in Kurdistan for long. Most of the Christian community has now fled. They do not trust Western governments which they believe are only after the oil. All that seems to lie ahead is either life in the camps, or exile in a foreign country. And yet they hang on to their hope in God.

They can teach us what it means to hope in the most acute crisis of our time. Hope is the most profound challenge for humanity today. Western Enlightenment dreams of confident progress have largely collapsed after the most violent century in human history. Many countries, especially in Africa, remain trapped in poverty. In the Middle East, Nation States have collapsed or are tottering. There is a rise in terrorism, usually linked with religious fundamentalism. The United Nations reckons that there are more than 50 million homeless refugees¹, with tens of thousands dying every year seeking safety. Pope Francis has reminded the world in *Laudato Si* that we are facing a devastating ecological crisis, which we lack the political will to face. In the face of this global desperation, how can we share our Christian hope? Our brothers and sisters in Iraq can teach us.

Abide in me

First of all, they express their hope in God by remaining in Iraq when thousands have fled. This is not to criticise those who left, perhaps for good reasons. But simply staying put is a sign of hope in the Lord who has promised to be with us until the end of time (Matthew 28.20). Jesus says to the disciples in the face of his death: ‘Abide in me, and I in you.’ (John 15.4).

¹ UNHCR ‘World Refugee Day’ June 20 2015

That wonderful film *Des hommes et des dieux* ('Of gods and men') describes a small community of Trappist monks in Algeria in the 1990s who face a growing tide of violence. They must decide whether to stay or go. One of the monks says to Muslim neighbours: 'We are like birds on a branch, birds who don't know if they will fly away or stay on the branch.' The villagers reply: 'We are the birds; you are the branch. If you leave, we lose our footing.' The monks decide to stay even though it will cost them their lives.

Serge de Serge de Beauceuil OP lived alone in Afghanistan for twenty five years, usually the only Catholic priest in the country. Often he wondered what was the point of remaining there. But he wrote: 'Silent carriers of the Word, of a creative Word, incarnate and crucified, simply in being, simply in living here, simply in loving, simply in dying here, simply in celebrating the Eucharist here, I engage the future of a people in the Light.' (« Porteurs silencieux de la Parole, d'une parole créative, incarnée et crucifiée, simplement en étant, simplement en vivant ici, simplement en aimant, simplement en mourant ici, simplement en célébrant l'eucharistie, j'engage l'avenir d'un peuple dans la Lumière »².)

Rowan Williams, the former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury said : 'I'm not going away is one of the most important things we can ever hear, whether we hear it from someone at our bedside in illness or over a shared drink or at a moment when we wonder what's happening in our neighbourhood and society.'³ Abiding is a sign of our hope in the God who will never go away. We abide with the poor, with people who feel abandoned, with our congregations in tough times, as members of the Church, because God abides with us.

Do this in memory of me

The Christians of Iraq also express their hope by praying. Prayer, like hope, reaches out to the future. Above all they celebrate the Eucharist. In the middle of war-torn Baghdad and the desolate refugee camps of Kurdistan, they gather to remember what Jesus did on the night before he died.

By coincidence, I first visited Rwanda when the troubles were just beginning to boil, early in 1993. We travelled from Kigali to the north of the country and witnessed the desolation, the refugee camps and above all a hospital full of children who had lost limbs through land mines. That evening I went to visit our Dominican sisters and I wondered what I could say. I

² S. de Beauceuil OP, *Prêtres des non-chrétiens*, Paris 1968 p. 50. Cité par Jean Jacques Pérennès OP *Pierre Claverie : Un Algérien par alliance* Le Cerf Paris 2000 p.116

³ *The Times* Christmas Eve 2011

was silenced by the suffering. Then I remembered that there was something that we could do. We could remember how on the last night before his death, Jesus gathered his disciples together and gave them his body and blood. That last night before the crucifixion, there seemed to be no hope. The community was disintegrating. One disciple had betrayed him and another would deny him; most of the others would run away. Ahead lay suffering, loneliness and death. In this darkest moment of human history, Jesus performed an amazing gesture of hope. ‘This is my body, given for you.’ ‘This is my blood, poured out for you.’

The Christian paradox is that every Sunday the community gathers to remember when it scattered. Its hopeful memory is of this moment of apparent despair. We begin the week by remembering what seemed like the end of everything. The paradox is deepened since we read the fullest accounts of that evening in the gospels. And many scholars believe that they were the fruit of another radical crisis, when Jesus did not return when he was eagerly expected, after the martyrdom of Peter and Paul, and the first crisis of persecution. In this second dark moment, when they were again tempted to despair, the disciples told again the story of the crisis of Maundy Thursday.

So we should not be afraid of crises. It is when everything appears to be finished, whether in our personal or communal lives, that the Lord appears in some new and intimate way. When I went on about this to my American brethren at tedious length, they gave me a T Shirt which said: Have a good crisis! In this moment when humanity is experiencing a profound crisis of hope, we Christians should have ears and eyes open for his coming in some new way.

Sacraments are signs. They express a hope for what is beyond our words, God’s coming. They point to a fullness of meaning which we can only express in gestures. A sacramental people should find creative gestures which express our hope.

Pope Saint John Paul was capable of brilliant gestures of hope. When he went to Jerusalem, many people thought that he could achieve nothing to break the stalemate of conflict. But he did something extraordinary. He took his place at the Wailing Wall, joining hundreds of Jews there, and read the psalms. It spoke of a hope for peace more eloquently than any document. Ever since his election, Pope Francis has made gestures which have turned the world upside down. When he washed the feet of prisoners, including a Muslim girl, that first Maundy Thursday, the world sat up. When he embraced a man whose body was covered with terrible tumours, the world loved him.

Here in the Philippines, he dropped a prepared speech when Glyzelle Palomar, weeping, asked the Pope: “Many children get involved in drugs and prostitution. Why does God allow these things to happen to us? The children are not guilty of anything.” The Pope embraced her and said: “She is the only one who has put forward a question for which there is no answer and she was not even able to express it in words but rather in tears.” Her tears were answered by his embrace. Sometimes you can only express hope by a wordless gesture.

John’s gospel is structured by Jesus’ signs which point ahead to the great sign of when he is lifted up and draws all people to himself (12.32). Our task is to make signs that will draw people to Christ, because they embody a hope beyond our words. At a meeting of Christian and Muslim leaders in the Vatican in December 2014, it was agreed that Christian and Muslim leaders should visit the refugee camps of the Middle East together. Think how powerfully that would speak of peace! Think of what it would say if bishops and religious accepted migrants into our homes. We need to do something slightly mad. If we just prepare the most wonderful documents, no one will notice. But a gesture is diffused around the world in seconds. Our ‘semiotic society’ is the ideal space for the Catholic sacramental imagination.

When Jesus gathered his disciples around him on that last night, they sang (Mark 14.26), as the Jews did at every Passover. In the camps in Kurdistan the most hopeful sound was that of my sisters singing the psalms in haunting Arabic. One of the ways in which human beings face suffering and death is by singing. I flew back from Jerusalem to be with my father when he was dying. I asked him whether there was anything that I could do. He asked me to bring his Walkman and the music of Mozart’s Requiem and Hayden’s Seven Last Words. When the brethren are dying, we gather around the bed to sing the Salve Regina, though sometimes he may open an eye and say: ‘Isn’t that a little premature?’

Last April in London, there was the world premiere of *Between Worlds*, an opera by Tansey Davies about 9/11. Some people were a bit shocked that there should be opera about such an awful event. Maybe it is the only way to endure its brutality. The librettist, Nicholas Drake, said: ‘Putting the transforming power of music at the heart of the drama, we thought, might allow us to weigh the tragedy of what happened on 9/11, and yet discover some kind of light in that darkness. Music even seems to have played a role in helping some people on that day. A security guard sang hymns to those descending the stairs, to give them courage. Some relatives, lost for words as they spoke to loved ones on the phone, sang together.’

Song breaks through barriers that divide human beings. When the German soldiers sang Christmas carols in the trenches during the First World War, the British soldiers joined in, and soon they left their defensive positions and met together to sing in harmony and play football. For a brief moment song demolished their enmity. Strangely the song that broke the silence of hostility was *Stille Nachte*, Silent Night!

A whole lecture would be needed to explore the relationship between hope and music. Let's just say that hope is the virtue of the pilgrim, and pilgrims sing as they walk. Song, like gesture, expresses a hope beyond our concepts. It offers a foretaste of the song of heaven in which all dissonance is overcome and harmony is discovered. On the last day of the liturgical year, we have a lovely reading from St Augustine: "So now let us sing, not to delight our leisure, but to ease our toil. In the way that travellers are in the habit of singing, sing, but keep on walking. Sing, and walk onwards."⁴

To do the good for its own sake

In Baghdad and the Kurdish camps, the future is profoundly uncertain. No one can guess what will happen. Christian hope is expressed just by getting up each morning and doing whatever good deed the Lord gives one to do that day. We are 'created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.' (Ephesians 2.10).

One of our brethren said to us: 'Hope means that I live now, whatever may happen tomorrow.' The Sisters of Charity care for disabled kids who had been abandoned by their families. I cannot forget the grave face of Nora, born with no legs or arms, and who feeds the youngest children with a spoon in her mouth. We had great joy in a home for women of all faiths abandoned by their families which is run by two consecrated virgins. In the camps we met a woman who had owned three pharmacies until the dreadful night when ISIS came. Now she works as a volunteer, dispensing what few medicines they have. She said: 'I have lost everything, but I have learnt gratitude for the little that remains. This is why I come.'

These are good deeds done for their own sake, and not as steps towards the Kingdom. They are not means to an end. Primo Levi met an Italian called Lorenzo in the concentration camp of Auschwitz who gave him part of his ration of bread every day. He wrote: 'I believe it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid as for his

⁴ Sermo 256, I.2.3.: PL 38, 1191-1193 is used in the Roman Office of Readings for Saturday in the 34th week of ordinary time.

having constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still exists a world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage...something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good but for which it was worth surviving. Thanks to Lorenzo I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.⁵

We feed the hungry and clothe the naked because it is good to do so, whatever the consequences. Such acts have been called ‘concrete parables or anticipations of God’s Kingdom, the new creation, under the conditions of this world.’⁶

The opposite are actions which are done because they are ‘expedient’, means justified by an end. In John’s gospel, Jesus is crucified because the high priest, Caiphas, said ‘it is expedient for you that one should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.’ (11.50). Expedience is used to justify evil deeds. Expedience was the justification of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki with hundreds of thousands of civilians burnt to ashes in a moment. Expedience was the reason for committing terrible acts in the Vietnamese war. Famously it was said: ‘We had no choice but to destroy the village to save it from the communists.’ Expedience was the justification given for Guantanamo Bay and ‘special renditions’, which meant torture.

But good deeds done for their own sake are signs of hope in God who will bring us to the Kingdom along paths that we cannot imagine. Oscar Romero said ‘God is the protagonist of history’. (‘Dios es el protagonista de la historia.’). Because we hope in God we do not resort to terrible means to attain the end. We can leave things in the hands of God, not because we are passive but because we are free to do what is good, however little that seems to achieve.

We witness to God’s rule but not trying to control everything. Stanley Hauerwas said that a Christian life ‘is out of control’: ‘To live “out of control” [...] is to renounce the illusion that our task as Christians is to make history come out right.’⁷ God’s rule will do that. We witness to that by doing what is right, not knowing how these deeds will or will not contribute to the coming of God’s rule. Charles Taylor has plotted the rise of ‘the culture of control’, which is the foundation of secularism. Our hope is in God’s Spirit which hovers over the mess and chaos of our lives, bringing forth a new creation. And so Pope Francis tells

⁵ ‘Survival in Auschwitz’ *The Tablet* 21 January 2006

⁶ Richard Bauckham and Trevor Hart *Hope against Hope: Christian Eschatology in Contemporary Context* Darton, Longman and Todd London 1999 p.182

⁷ ‘The Servant Community’ in *The Hauerwas Reader* ed by John Berkman and Michael Cartwright Duke University Press Durham NC 2001 p.381. Quoted by Ben Quash *Abiding* Bloomsbury 2013 p.136

us not to be afraid of mess. He said during the World Youth Day in Rio, after the downpours of rain, ‘I expect a messy World Youth Day. But I want things messy and stirred up in the congregations.’ Our hope is that out of the mess, something new will be born.

The ultimate loss of control is the deaths of martyrs, and so the ultimate witness to our hope in God’s rule. They are in complete contrast to the deaths of the sad suicide bombers who are what Marie-Françoise Baslez calls ‘the martyrs of despair’⁸.

Why?

The most surprising witness to hope in Iraq is the commitment of Christians to study and teach. In Baghdad our brethren and sisters run schools and an academy. In this war torn city, they educate the young, especially Muslims. We have a periodical called ‘Christian Thought’ which has thousands of Muslim readers. In Kurdistan, in the middle of the camps, Babel College teaches theology. Two of our sisters there have recently received doctorates in Scripture, from Oxford and Notre Dame. In our camps, the refugee children are taught by refugee teachers. One might think that when one’s world is collapsing, scholarship would be the last thing on anyone’s list! But it is a beautiful expression of hope.

First of all, and most obviously, because it is the long term response to the growing tide of fundamentalism which is consuming the Middle East. The Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences, founded in 2012, has as its emblem the Dominican Shield with a large question mark. Ultimately the only response to the rise of ISIS is to encourage people to think. A famous Dominican novice master at the beginning of the last century used to say to the novices: ‘Think; Think of anything, but for God’s sake think!’⁹

Thinking, especially in the middle of crisis, expresses our hope that in the end everything will make sense. Appalling suffering may tempt us to doubt whether anything has any meaning. When Blessed Oscar Romero visited the scene of a massacre by the army, he came across the body of a young boy lying in a ditch: ‘He was just a kid, at the bottom of the ditch, face up. You could see the bullet holes, the bruises left by the blows, the dried blood. His eyes were open, as if asking the reason for his death and not understanding’¹⁰.’ Despair is the collapse of

⁸ Jean-Michel di Falco, Timothy Radcliffe, Andrea Riccardi *Le Livre noire de la condition des chrétiens dans le monde XO* Paris 2014 p.66

⁹ Anniversary Sermon for Fr Vincent McNabb’ by Hilary Carpenter OP in *A Vincent McNabb Anthology: Selections from the Writings of Vincent McNabb O.P. ed F.E Nugent London 1955 p.ix*

¹⁰ Scott Wright *Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints* Orbis New York 2009 p.37

any hope of meaning. Vaclav Havel, former playwright and President of the Czech Republic, asserted that ‘hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.’¹¹

Of course we shall never succeed in understanding the meaning of terrible suffering. We can never give a sense to the obscenity of genocide, to the pointless destruction wrought by suicide bombers, or to the death of the young. Faced with the mystery of evil all that we have is the deeper mystery of Easter Sunday. But when we struggle to understand, we may get tiny glimpses of the ultimate meaning of our existences. Study in the camps of Iraq prepares us for that ultimate revelation which will be offered when we see God face to face. St Paul says: ‘Now I know in part; then I shall understand even as I have been understood.’ (1 Corinthians 13.12). Study is an anticipation of that final revelation, when all will be understood.

‘Let the children come’

Whenever we appeared in the camps in our white habits, children came rushing up excitedly. They had been chased from their homes by strangers who came in the night. Some of them had not escaped. One woman told us of how her child had been snatched from her arms by an ISIS terrorist as she fled. And yet these refugee children were happy to see us. In Baghdad we visited the maternity wards in the two hospitals run by the Dominican sisters; rows of newly born babies lying beside each other, Christian, Muslim and Yazidi. One sister who is a midwife has presided over generations of children and is nicknamed ‘the Mother of Iraq.’

Just before communion in the Chaldean Catholic rite, two children come up to the altar to receive the sign of peace from the priest which they transmit to the congregation. Perhaps these children are the messengers of hope for the future, even if now we cannot imagine what form this might take.

Aquinas wrote that ‘Youth is a cause of hope. For youth the future is long and the past is short.’¹² For Charles Peguy, hope is symbolized by his nine year old daughter:

‘That absolutely nothing at all
Holds except because of the young child Hope,
Because of she who continuously begins again and who always promises,
Who guarantees everything,

¹¹ quoted by Seamus Heaney *Redress of Poetry*. London New York 1995 p.4

¹² ST II II 40.6

Who assures tomorrow to today, and this afternoon and evening to morning
And life to life and even eternity to time.¹³

A Church which hopes has children and cares for them, which is why collapse of the birth rate in some countries may be a form of despair, and the abuse of children is so terrible. We form children to do what we cannot do, and to be what we cannot yet imagine. Teilhard de Chardin said that ‘the future belongs to those who give the next generation reason to hope.’¹⁴

Conclusion

No doubt the Christians in Iraq often do not *feel* hopeful. And yet how they live embodies a hope which runs deeper than feeling, emerging sometimes in exuberant joy, but often running underground like a hidden river. It is shown in the fact that they remain there, just as we are called to abide in the most desolate places. It appears in doing ‘the good works which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.’ (Ephesians 2.10). It shines out in their education of the young who may do wonderful things that we cannot imagine. The Church is in fact the great teacher of youth in every country of the world. May the Lord keep that hope alive in us all.

¹³ *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope* translated by D.J. Schindler Jr.. Edinburgh 1996 p.63

¹⁴ Quoted *New Generations of Catholic Sisters: The Challenge of diversity* by Mary Johnson, Patricia Wittberg and Mary L. Gautier Oxford 2014 p.24

