

"Be ready to speak of the hope that is within you": the joy and the urgency of Jesuit religious wisdom'

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"Without vision, the people perish." The current worldwide and European political situation is one of deep crisis. The powerful vision of a post-war co-operative world order is now being questioned, to be replaced by ancient and new tribalisms. How are we to read these challenges? What contribution can Christians make, to the task of repairing and transforming public life?

I.

My title proposes that there is a 'Jesuit religious wisdom'; that this wisdom is both *joyful* and *urgent*; and that this wisdom should be at the core of the hope which sustains us, as educators, and as men and women responsible for a unique style and vision of education (I refuse the word 'brand'). I will make clear what this wisdom is, and why it is joyful and urgent, in three steps, which are really three concentric areas of concern.

I will identify, firstly, an ethical and political level, in the light of the current crisis of truth and of liberal democracy. The return of fascism, in other words. Secondly, and obviously related to this, there is the religious situation, as Christianity in Ireland and elsewhere recedes in influence, due to rapid processes of secularisation. Thirdly, there is the Jesuit or Ignatian dimension, where we will think about the religious wisdom that the Society of Jesus has to offer – the care of which has been entrusted to the people in this room.

The first two themes will be largely familiar to you, so ... I suggest you have a sleep while I run through these, and I will wake you up for the important third bit, which concerns you.

A political/ethical crisis has been building up for a while, which we might sum up with reference to a particular date: 2016. This is the year which gave us Brexit and the Trump presidency; two events which are symptomatic of a general collapse, not just of the post-war liberal world order, but even of basic

shared values and norms of truth, abandoned in the face of new tribalisms. I do not think it is alarmist to describe this as a return of fascism.

Depending on how you count, this crisis has been fifty or a hundred years in the making. We are speaking of a 'postmodern' intellectual culture, with its allergy towards grand explanations; a resistance to the claims of authority; a pessimism, even cynicism, with regard to the possibility of a shared vision for our communities. Instead, the over-riding moral imperative is to assert one's individual autonomy in the name of 'authenticity'. The philosopher Charles Taylor refers to the 'buffered self', and the cocoon of protective invulnerability which the modern subject spins around herself.

I witnessed the 'buffered self' the other day, on the 46A bus, to Dun Laoghaire. I was sat near a teenage girl who was chatting away on her phone throughout the journey. There was a long hold-up on the Stillorgan Road; what turned out to be a serious traffic accident. The girl complained to her friend on the phone, and as we finally passed the crash scene she automatically took a photo with her phone. I found the moment upsetting. Where any of us would have offered a silent prayer for anyone who had been injured or worse, I saw in the girl's action no hint of compassion, no awareness. The Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt famously wrote about evil as 'thoughtlessness'. Even the evil of those who had helped to administrate the Nazi death camps was, in essence, a lack, an absence of awareness of others and their well-being.

I do not want to overstate this, and I certainly don't want to sound like a whinging old codger. There are many ways in which people (including young people) show great generosity and idealism. But I flag this up to highlight how odd our Jesuit and Ignatian slogans resound in the age of the 'buffered self'.

What does it mean, in the age of the 'buffered self', to be a "man (or woman) for others"? I don't much like the term 'counter-cultural', but it is certainly the case that we are asking our young people to struggle against deeply-sedimented attitudes. Would our students in our colleges regard the behaviour of the girl on the bus as unsettling? Perhaps they would see it as normal, or ordinary. Perhaps they would do exactly the same. In which case, are we asking them to do something different? And are we asking too much?

I don't know how we go about this, but I will repeat one point, which I have written about elsewhere. I am taken by a diagnosis from the British philosopher Gillian Rose, who describes 'postmodernism' as a kind of mourning, a grieving process which is not going well. We are grieving badly, because we are not sure what it is that we are grieving for... Some perfect society or state of affairs, which existed in the past but has now disappeared?

A nostalgia for lost certainties- but if those certainties were, in fact, nothing of the sort, where does that leave us?

I think Gillian Rose is onto something, because this diagnosis explains (for me) the range and intensity of the negative emotions which are around. Psychologists speak of the stages of grief: anger, denial, bargaining etc. Where has the hatred come from? The tribalism, the trolling, the name-calling, the fake news ... in Britain and in the US, and elsewhere, our young people are being asked to sweep up the fragments of a shattered civic and political culture, and it is not at all clear to me how and where to begin.

I agreed with Brian Flannery that I would say something about Brexit, which I'm happy to do. I speak as someone who, at the age of nearly sixty, is leaving behind the country of my birth. If the frenzied disarray of the British political scene is a symptom of what's happening more generally, one might say that it is about the difficulty – for some – of handling multiple identities. One must be British, or European, but one cannot, it seems, be both.

I am persuaded that this is complicated, in the British case, by a tragically unresolved post-imperial history. If we are not a mighty, autonomous imperial power, then we must be a colony. We have to tick one of only two boxes: 'Master' and 'Slave'. Hence the distorted accounts of sovereignty as a zero-sum game: either we 'take back control', or we are a 'vassal state'. The idea of cooperating as equals is not on the radar. One astute commentator has observed that the EU is made up of small states, and states which have not yet realized that they are small states ...

Here is grieving a-plenty, and it is not going well. Beyond that, I will say that Brexit, as well as being a massive act of self-harm, has been an astounding and frightening expression of collective narcissism and selfishness. Just about all of the discussion around Brexit from before the referendum to the present has centred on British interests and advantages. The idea of Europe as an inspiring, if imperfect, political project involving 500 million people, to which Britain has a contribution to make and obligations to honour, has been totally eclipsed. The ignorance and condescension towards Ireland, which was not mentioned at all in the referendum debates, is only the most dramatic example of this political autism.

"Without vision, the people perish." Britain is in process of becoming a failed state. But there is no reason to think that any state – Ireland included – is immune to the same centrifugal forces which are pulling nations apart. While all this is true enough, there are I think deeper theological considerations which have also been largely ignored, and to which I shall return.

II.

This is the 'outer circle' of the crisis, the intellectual and cultural atmosphere which is so corrosive, pervading our lives like acid rain. The 'second circle', more directly concerns the place of religion, especially within western societies which have been secularizing dramatically and at astonishing speed. Ireland is a distinct case in many ways, but the basic trajectory is the same as that of Britain, Netherlands, Belgium, and so on. This is experienced by many church-people in Ireland as a dismal narrative of humbling retreat, symbolized perhaps by the exchange between Leo Varadkar and Pope Francis in August 2018. Here was a picture of the Church on the back-foot, being called to play a humbler role in society than has been the case historically. While there was indeed recognition of its contribution in the past, 'New Ireland', we are told, requires a different kind of relationship between Church and State.

I will not comment in detail on this conversation, but this is where it is important for Ireland not to be turned in on itself, but to see what is happening in other countries and learn from them. The Church can survive, can even thrive, as a minority. Many people would say that the Catholic Church in England and Wales has benefitted from being a minority voice, that from this position it can make a healthier contribution. In France, the Church has experienced over two centuries of *laïcité*, of official exclusion from an explicitly secular political order. Such a situation has required the Church to be creative in its life and organization. Above all, I would point to examples of fruitful conversation between faith leaders and non-believers; conversations which stress the continued and indispensable importance of religious faith for the well-being of society. The prime example would be the dialogue, in 2004, between Joseph Ratzinger (before becoming Pope Benedict), and Jürgen Habermas, the most significant social philosopher in Germany and in Europe in the twentieth century.

There is no need for you to read Habermas – that really will put you to sleep! – but suffice to say that this famous secular thinker discussed with Ratzinger the question of whether a secular society is sustainable, over time, without the ethical commitment and energy of communities of religious believers. We can imagine a political order being founded on secular lines – but can that society continue to function over the long-term? "Without a vision, the people perish".

Perhaps, Habermas admits, we are entering into an age of post-secular societies. I will repeat that: perhaps we are entering into an age of *post-secular* societies, where the systematic exclusion of religion from the public sphere is increasingly being recognized as misguided. Without some vision of transcendence, something to pull us outward from themselves, any society is

in danger of collapsing in upon itself. The playwright Peter Schaeffer writes thus: "Without worship, you shrink: it is as simple and as brutal as that".

If I may be permitted a final blast at Brexit Britain: the Cambridge academic Nicholas Boyle, a Catholic, has offered a brave but disturbing reading of British history. He refers to the Reformation (what some commentators have called "the first Brexit") as the moment, to put it bluntly, when England stopped worshipping God and started to worship itself. Boyle traces this through cultural and economic self-dramatizations of "England", from the Tudors, through the ideology of Empire, to Rupert Brooke, and finally to James Bond. The myopia and hysteria of the Brexit debate are merely the culmination of a people's self-worship and self-absorption, desperately seeking who they really are.

"Without worship, we shrink: it is as simple and as brutal as that". If this is true, then Christian faith cannot, after all, be simply a matter of individual and personal choice; a lifestyle preference, like following rugby. If we are indeed in a *post-secular* age, then it is a matter of urgency that we assert and argue for the continued social importance of Christian belief, and religious belief in general. To give an obvious example: the world will not survive the crisis of anthropogenic climate change without mobilization of the major world religions. Christians are 31% of the world's population (2.3 billion); Muslims count for 24% (1.8 billion). Those unaffiliated to any religion are only 16% of the total. If we are indeed to be saved from environmental catastrophe, where will the energy and creativity come from?

III.

Which brings us to the final part of the presentation. Here I need you to be awake, because this concerns our roles as heirs to and guardians of a unique and exciting educational legacy. The previous section argued for the future of religion and the hope, energy and creativity that only faith traditions can provide (when religious people are not blowing each other up, of course). If our societies are 'post-Christian', they are just as surely 'post-secular'. Our longing for the sacred and for religious meaning, has not gone away, but it has taken new and diverse forms.

What can be offered from the store-houses of 'Jesuit wisdom'? Each of you will have some notion of what such a term might mean, and some familiarity with the spiritual and educational vision of the Jesuits. What I am trying to argue for is an extraordinary flowering of a Christian Renaissance humanism, which emerges at the beginning of the modern period, during a time of immense creativity and discovery.

Like the Renaissance in general, this vision was optimistic about human beings and their capabilities: the cultures of Greece and Rome were seen as repositories of wisdom about how to live ethically and well; how to search rigorously for truth; how to conduct political life honourably; how to transcend ordinary life through art and literature. The earliest Jesuits immersed themselves in these studies, in which they first learned to appreciate the goodness of a civilization that did not know Christ. And it is this appreciation, this loving sensitivity toward the human, that led them to engage with other world cultures, in order that these cultures might be completed and enhanced by the gospel.

The Jesuits who went to China, Japan, and Ethiopia, were convinced that if they were to thrive they had first to learn the language and the customs, and to respect the traces of God already present there. A loving respect for all that is human; this missionary attitude is leaned and fostered first and foremost in the Jesuit schools, colleges, and universities.

It is important to stress that there are two wings to this vision. The schools and colleges were the source and seed-beds of fantastic missionary endeavours, in which Jesuits travelled, suffered deprivations, torture, abject failure, in order to spread the gospel message. The Jesuits who sailed from Portugal to Brazil had emblazoned on their sail: 'One World is Not Enough' (if there had been space ships, they would have been first on board). The educational institutions and the missions fed off one another. At no stage in its history did the Society ever downgrade one in order to build up the other.

This umbilical connection between the work of education and the work of mission is expressed in the modern age by schools which seek to cultivate the whole person, at the same time making that person 'a man or woman for others', conscious of the needs of the poor and the demands of social justice. Insofar as we keep these in balance, we are being faithful to the vision and legacy of the Jesuits.

What is challenging for all of us, however: how to speak of God effectively and convincingly. In our schools, but also in wider society, we need to reckon with a widespread resistance toward official religion, and therefore to the God who is brokered by the Church. So ... how to speak of God to those who seem to be allergic to Him? If there is a modern equivalent to the 'Jesuit wisdom' we have been talking about, it can be found in the prominent theologians who have shaped the lives and thoughts of many Jesuits and others, in Ireland especially. I am thinking primarily of the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan, and the German Karl Rahner.

Rahner is noted for his argument that God's presence is so pervasive in the life of every human being, that it may easily go unnoticed ... but is no less real for that. Two goldfish are swimming in a pond: they encounter an older fish who says to them, "the water's very cold today". As they swim past, one says to the other: "what's water?" It is told that Rahner was in conversation with a person who claimed never to have had a religious experience. Rahner's reply? "I don't believe you". All of us have experiences of God, which not all recognize as such. By virtue of our capacity for *knowing* and our capacity for *loving*, we are present to God, and God is present to us ... regardless of whether we attend Mass regularly. To quote Hannah Arendt (again): when she told her rabbi at the age of fifteen that she was losing her faith, he shrugged and said "Who's asking you for it?"

I am in great admiration for the work done by RE teachers. Nevertheless, the English educational theorist Sean Whittle has used Rahner's ideas to suggest that the important religious education in our schools may not be happening in RE classes, but in philosophy ... or literature ... or chemistry. When the student is led out of himself (*e-ducare*), stretched by love and by the search for truth, as well as the call to justice – *Deus ibi est*. This is a hopeful, even celebratory, view of the human person, and his or her capacities.

The Church has not always presented such a hopeful view. Perhaps we need to (re-) learn how to do so.