

INSULARITY AND COMMUNION*

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The great comic classic of middle-English literature is the *Canterbury Tales* of Geoffrey Chaucer, written in the last part of the fourteenth century. A party of men and women set out together on horse-back from an inn in London to make the pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Thomas Becket. By a happy coincidence their route will bring them past the very spot where we are gathered today. They are a mixed group: some of them are presented to us as virtuous characters, like the Clerk of Oxford and the Poor Parson; some are figures of fun, like the drunken Miller; some are despicable hypocrites, like the Friar and the Summoner; and some are just ordinary lovable sinners, like the Wife of Bath. They agree to the suggestion of the Innkeeper that they should entertain each other on the way with stories, and that he should act as a chairman. In between the stories there are some interesting conversations; and it is with one of these, the Prologue to the Tale of the Wife of Bath, that I should like to begin.

To this group of mainly celibate male church officials she throws down the double challenge of women's rights and the institution of marriage; and she backs it up with a spirited defence of the kind of life she herself has led. She is rich, bejewelled, jolly good company, and four times a merry widow. She also takes advantage of her audience by making use of her considerable knowledge of Holy Scripture. She has recently heard a preacher say that Christ went only once to a wedding in order to teach us that it is wrong to marry more than once. If we are going to use Scripture like that, how do you explain Christ's words to the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4, 16-18)? He says that she has had five men, and the present one is not her husband. Why is this fifth man not her husband? Is there some limit on the number of husbands you can have? And if there is, how do you reconcile it with God's clear instruction to Adam and Eve to go forth and multiply? Did not Solomon have a thousand wives? And did not the Apostle say that it was better to marry than to burn?

This leads her into a discussion of some of the inconsistencies in Saint Paul, who

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is obviously not her favourite theologian. Is his advice about celibacy mandatory or optional? If it were mandatory, there would never be any celibates born in the first place. And so ...

advice is not commandment in my view.¹
He left it in our judgment what to do...

Then she moves on from Saint Paul to the words of Our Lord and makes a more serious point for the men to consider ...

But Christ, who of perfection is the well,
Bade not that everyone should go and sell
All that he had and give it to the poor
To follow in His footsteps, that is sure.
He spoke to those that would live perfectly,
And by your leave, my lords, that's not for me.²

In other words, there are two standards: one for the saints and those ascetical experts who can take literally the counsels of perfection, and another for ordinary Christians who have to interpret Our Lord's words metaphorically. I don't need to tell you that such a double standard has constantly been rejected: it was Luther's main criticism of the religious-life, and by now it has probably died out from ascetical theology.³

1 Nevill Coghill's translation of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, lines 66-7. The original is ...
"but counselling is no comandement;
he putte it in our owene judgment"

2 Ibid lines 107-112, The original is ...
"Crist, that of perfeccion is welle,
bade not every wight he sholde go selle
all that he hadde, and give it to the pore,
and in swych wyse folwe him and his fore.
Hee spak to hem that wolde live parfitly;
and lordinges, by your leve, that am nat I."

3 A weak version of the double standard might be read into Vat. Conc. II *Perfectae caritatis*, which constantly refers to those who follow the evangelical counsels. But such an interpretation is rigorously excluded by the dogmatic constitution on the church, *Lumen gentium*.

The Wife of Bath has drawn our attention to the inconsistency with which Scripture has been treated. Sometimes it can be treated literally: she gives the example of "Sell all you have and give it to the Poor", which was certainly taken literally by such a person as Saint Francis. But what about "Take up your cross and follow me"? Does this not have to be taken metaphorically nowadays? And how do we answer the good Wife's contention that we choose which interpretation to follow to suit our own convenience?

But it may be an error of method to try making an either-or choice. We may be using two types of discourse at one and the same time, both of which are required. This is because Christ, like Chaucer, was a poet, and his utterances were poetical. May I please remind you that the word "poet" comes from the Greek word for "making", and that (*vice versa*) the middle-English word for a poet is "makaris"? In poetic language and in parables we are in two worlds simultaneously, the natural and the spiritual, and God will speak to us from either or both. This interchange is what the New Testament means by the Kingdom of Heaven: by a paradox this spiritual kingdom is terrestrial, for it is the organisation of daily life by spiritual standards. But it is also the measuring up and scrutiny of daily life by spiritual standards. Thomas Morton says that "the monk is someone who takes up a critical attitude towards the contemporary world and its structures".

I must stress this point that the poetic method of the parable, both verbal and acted, requires holding together the literal and the metaphorical. For instance, you cannot explain a parable by allegorising it, by saying that *this* stands for *that*; for if you did so, you would be abandoning one of the two prongs of a paradox. The kingdom of heaven is like a man seeking pearls; and a man seeking pearls is like the kingdom of heaven. Don't ask me why. Either you see it immediately, or you don't, and no amount of explanation will get you further. It seems to me that everything you can say about the religious-life tends towards paradox, and that it is our special vocation to deal with this, particularly in the words of our great poet Jesus Christ. It will not be an easy task, since the institutional church is generally inimical to poetry and most people are antipathetic towards it. But paradox is not only at the heart of monasticism; it is at the heart of Christianity itself, which lives in two worlds at one and the same time. One of these paradoxes is "Insularity and Communion". Most of us do not like paradoxes, and there are various manoeuvres for avoiding them. We might deny the existence of one or other of the paradoxical elements. (This often happens when we are dealing with moral problems.) Or we might alternate between the two, moving to suit our convenience at that moment.

(This often happens with liturgical matters and with theories of church government and ministry.) Or we might deny that there is any paradox at all and complain that it is obfuscating poets who are creating the problem. (This often happens in biblical studies or in dogmatic theology). Or, faced with paradox, we might become neurotic and break down. This generally means that we revert to earlier childish behaviour and attitudes which used to be successful when we were faced with problems, but which now are no longer appropriate. I am not a psychologist, and I am not qualified to follow up these lines. But I am sure that the poetic mind thrives on paradox; that Our Lord was a poet who used poetical methods like the parable; and that we can find here the pattern for the life of the monk. I also think that it is not surprising that it was the Wife of Bath who introduced this matter; for it is of the essence of comedy that it contrasts life as it is supposed to be with life as it really is, and the bogus clerics around her are living examples of this existential gap.

Before considering how we live our own particular lives, we must remember that the organisation of the monastic life is itself paradoxical. Consider, for instance, the eremetical life: what is called *solitudo pluralis*. St. Peter Damian says: "The Church of Christ is united in all her parts by such a bond of love that her several members form a single body and in each one the whole Church is mystically present, so that the whole Church universal may rightly be called the one Bride of Christ, and on the other hand every single soul can, because of the mystical effect of the sacrament, be regarded as the whole Church."⁴

A similar point may be made about the semi-eremetical life. It was said of the Carthusians that "their statuts recommend, not singleness, but solitude. Their cells are separated, but their hearts are united. Each one lives apart, but no one possesses anything apart. All live alone, and yet each one acts with the community."⁵

And for all of us who live in any sort of conventual or congregational life there is the constant effort of combining and balancing the sharing of everything with the human need for privacy and occasional withdrawal. There has to be a rhythm of insularity and communion.

4 PL 145 col 231 in "*Dominus vobiscum*". English translation in Patricia McNulty *St. Peter Damian: select writings on the spiritual life* (Faber, London 1959) 57.

5 PL 153 col 951 in *Vita Sancti Hugonis*

All of us are in some sense living protests and witnesses ...

“... before this strange disease of modern life,
with its sick hurry, its divided aims ...”⁶

Our life should provide an alternative to the divided and fissiparous secular world of our time. Nowadays people are herded into categories like separate compartments: baby-creches, old-people's homes, ethnic clubs and ghettos, language-determined nationalities, and the baneful tribal loyalties which are the curse of Europe today. Faced with this, the church can be Catholic, existing for all people at all times in all places, and Christians can be catalysts of unity.

But we are falling apart, not only socially, but also intellectually. Ortega y Gasset stressed the point that modern democracy and the fluidity of mass culture had exacted a severe price from humanity. “Liberty of the spirit,” he says, “that is to say, the power of the intellect, is gauged by its ability to displace ideas which traditionally were inseparable.”⁷

Let us give some examples of this falling apart. T.S.Eliot used the phrase “dissociation of sensibility”, by which he meant the disunion of feeling and thought which (in his opinion, but not mine) occurred in English poetry with Dryden and Milton. Feeling and thought (or, as Pascal put it, the heart and the reason) are two aspects of knowledge. We might study botany with our heads (that is to say, with thought or the rational faculty), and we should then know how to classify and to identify species of flora. But we should be wretchedly poor botanists if we are not able to *feel* the beauty of plants and flowers, to enjoy the smell of them, to enjoy

6 Matthew Arnold; *The scholar Gypsy* Lines 203-204. And one of the most celebrated lines of modern English poetry is in Yeats: *The second coming*: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold”.

7 “La libertad de espíritu, es decir, la potencia del intelecto, se mide por su capacidad de dislocar ideas tradicionalmente inseparables. Disociar ideas cuesta mucho mas que asociarlas, como ha demostrado Kohler en sus investigaciones sobre la inteligencia de los chimpances. Nunca ha tenido el entendimiento humano mas capacidad de disociacion que ahora.” “*La rebelion de las masas*,” *Col. Austral* 66

A hundred years earlier in England Coleridge says: It is a dull and obtuse mind that must divide in order to distinguish; but it is a still worse that distinguishes in order to divide. In the former we may contemplate the source of superstition and idolatry; and in the latter, of schism, heresy, and a seditious and sectarian spirit.” (Aphorism xxvi) Compare also two pithy aphorisms: Maritain's “Distinguish, in order to unite”. and Tertullian's “Distincte non divise”.

giving them to girl-friends or putting them in front of shrines. True knowledge is a union of thought and feeling. But alas! modern people very often have had them divided in order to distinguish them, to use Coleridge's words. For a second example, we might consider how faith and morals must be inextricably held together. What we believe must be attached to how we treat each other, like the two sides of a coin.⁸ We may see the results of the separation of belief and morals, as also of thought and feeling, in what goes on in places like Beirut, Belfast, or Bosnia: strong beliefs allow for murder. And (*mutatis mutandis*) the reverse process bedevils our big cities: criminal behaviour is the breeding ground for aberrant ideas like xenophobia, anti-semitism, racism, or lunatic religious cults.

So, to summarise what I have said: we live by paradoxes and by the juxtaposition of the literal and the metaphorical; we must know which is which, but we must hold to both at once, for such is the spirit of poetry. Insularity and communion are to be distinguished without being divided. Their coexistence is of the nature of parable. And so now I should like to say something of how the monastic life might illustrate this.

Nowadays people find it very difficult to deal with being alone and having to keep quiet. Every day our world becomes more and more like an ant-hill; and yet people love to gather in crowds, and the success of any event is measured by the number of its participants. They dread being by themselves, bereft of entertainment. Nor can they deal with silence. There has to be constant noise as a background to life. It is ironic that the mobile headphone (or Walkman), so common nowadays, deals with the threat of silence by cutting you off from social intercourse with other people.

Solitude and silence ... modern culture cannot cope with them. And the modern church does not seem to value them highly either. It is more concerned with their opposites, community and communication. Now we can all agree that community and communication are good things in themselves: we esteem the ways in which we coinhere in Christ's Body and in which we give voice in praise and worship. We should think poorly of someone who refused social contact with his fellows

8 That instruction in faith and in morals are inextricably intertwined when someone is being prepared for admission to the church is very well insisted on throughout Saint Augustine's *de catechizandis rudibus*.

and who would not speak to anyone else. But nevertheless, the Christian tradition (and especially the monastic one) has always valued their opposites. Over and over again ascetical writers have told us that it is in solitude and silence that the Christian will hear the voice of God, will understand the real essence of things, and will experience that paradoxical enlightenment which arises from doubt, ignorance, and dereliction. It has been said: "If I enter the darkness of my own heart, I am entering the region of my being where I am ordinarily inaccessible to human beings. I am entering where God enters."

So monks and religious brothers and sisters have the privilege of taking upon themselves the burden (and from time to time the suffering) of this paradox. Their daily lives and their whole life-times should be examples of how Christians can at one and the same time be social animals and yet also enjoy solitude, and how they can join in words and music of praise and worship, and yet also enjoy silence. As well as silence and solitude, we might also consider darkness, another thing which modern people cannot bear: the monk can throw light on things for others by wrapping himself with delight in God's cloud of unknowing.

The monastic life, therefore, has to provide for solitude and for silence, whilst sharing in society and utterance. Sometimes a visitor will see small outward signs of this ambivalence. For example, he will notice that we come together into physical proximity for private prayer, for retreat, for keeping silence. These are corporate things. At the same time the conventual life must allow for privacy, for times alone, for one's hobbies, interests, and intellectual or 'artistic pursuits. Indeed, it must allow eccentricities: for there is no such thing as a natural monastic type.... God calls the most unlikely and difficult people to the life!

In my own experience I have found it difficult sometimes to explain to people that my membership of my Society provides the means whereby I can be free, creative, and adventurous. Many outsiders think that we have voluntarily put ourselves under some sort of spiritual tyranny and are concerned about keeping rules, observing prohibitions, getting permissions, and even receiving punishments. The monastic life appears to them as a complex of negative or binding restraints. But the paradox here is that we are concerned with freedom: the monastic life is liberating and provides the scope and opportunities for expressing one's desires and one's personality. But freedom is a burden which few men and women can bear. It can be a threat. There is a wonderful treatment of this idea in Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: the character Ivan has written a poem called "The

Grand Inquisitor”, in which Christ appears in Seville in Spain at the time of the Inquisition, and is brought as a prisoner before the Grand Inquisitor. The Inquisitor blames Christ for burdening men with freedom instead of satisfying their basic needs. He says: “That was the meaning of the first question in the wilderness, and that was what you rejected in the name of freedom, which you put above everything else ... but Man, so long as he remains free, has no more constant and agonising anxiety than to find as quickly as possible someone to worship. But man seeks to worship only what is incontestable, so incontestable indeed, that all men at once agree to worship it all together.... For the sake of that all-together-worship they have put each other to the sword.... You rejected the only absolute banner, which was offered to you, to make all men worship you alone incontestably: the banner of earthly bread, which you rejected in the name of freedom and the bread from heaven.” The inquisitor patiently explains to the visiting Christ that the Church has set about correcting his work by replacing freedom with miracle, mystery, and authority. He warns Christ that on the next day the people will help burn him at the stake for coming to meddle with the Church.

Dostoevsky was a dangerous radical (until he grew into an old stuffy conservative) and he held heterodox opinions; but he lived in a land of monks and staretzes, and he had a deep devotion to folk religion. He saw clearly that the Spirit was in the physical world, that the spirit was the Spirit of truth, and that the truth would set us free. But, as he says elsewhere, “people cannot bear to be free”, for it carries responsibilities and risks. It also brings doubt, ambiguity, uncertainty, and darkens (not to speak of solitude and silence). Freedom is the great paradox. And this paradox has to be lived.

You may well have been expecting me to talk about the Anglican Church. Or about the polarities of being people of an island who are coming to terms with being Europeans. So perhaps I had better end with some remarks about paradox in the macrocosm. You will need to be patient and forgiving with *dementia Anglorum*. We claim to be an autocephalous Catholic Church, separated from the Roman Church in the sixteenth century. There are many things wrong with us and our weaknesses are obvious. It is just possible that God wants us to die out or be subsumed into some greater communion, and His will is more important than the survival of ecclesiastical organs. If it is true of individuals that unless they lay down their lives for his sake and for the gospel, they will never gain his kingdom, then it is also true of institutions. In the meantime, before we are called to such a death, I am proud of the paradoxical nature of my Church and my tradition. We do not (to use Coleridge’s

words) distinguish in order to divide. On most contemporary matters we have to stand alone, keep silence, and remain in darkness. We are condemned by others for being doubtful, vague, open to differing opinions, and shying away from certainty. I am quite happy for others, if they so wish, to revel in gregarious strength, to have an authoritative voice to obey, and to enjoy that clarity and happiness which comes of thinking that you possess certainty. All these I gladly exchange for freedom. But I must bear in mind that if one is in Christ, then this may turn out to be a freedom to suffer and to die.

There is a wonderful poem by Saint Teresa of Avila in which every stanza ends with the line "Muero porque no muero", which I take to mean "I'm dead because I won't die". And it echoes the ultimate paradox of the Christian religion, of the Catholic faith, of the teaching of our Lord: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit". (John 12,24)

Now the movement from the individual and from personal piety to the church and the nation, from the microcosm to the macrocosm, is something which Christians may have learnt from Jews. There has always been a pious tradition among Jews that the life-story of the individual man is a telescoped version of the history of the whole nation (from Abraham to the holocaust), and that in reverse Jewish history is a large-scale version of the normal experiences of the devout Jew. What binds them together is the life-story of the Messiah: the three sections of the book of the prophet Isaiah show him as the child born into a royal family as Prince of Peace, as the suffering servant, the man of sorrows who is acquainted with grief, and finally as the light which lightens the Gentiles, the Catholic Christ. These three, the individual Jew, the Messiah, and the nation, fit into each other like a set of Russian dolls. And similarly the life-story of the Christian, of the whole Church, and of their Christ should fit together, all three as versions of the same pattern. If there is a theology of one of these, then it should apply to the other two also. And so the dogmatic paradox of the two natures of Christ fits in with the existential paradox of the monastic life and the even more wonderful one of the whole Church: a communion of isolated holy sinners who are also holy saints.

St. Anthony's Priory
Claypath, Durham

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