THE REST OF THE WORLD
A personal reflection on lay spirituality

By MORAG FRASER

A WOMAN WALKED INTO my office recently to talk about her *barrio* in Bolivia. Australian, fair skinned, slender—an unlikely missionary—she has worked in South America for two years, learned Spanish for the purpose, gets by on a lacklustre diet (corn for breakfast, corn for supper, corn—but not much—in between), with inadequate medical supplies, no toilet paper, hand-me-down technology, and, worse, no library. We sat together in the lavish shambles of a book-littered corner of the Melbourne Jesuit publishing house in which I work, drank good tea, and traded experience.

As I listened to her, a niggling reflex was riding tandem with my concentration: 'Yes, this is real work. This woman is doing something. This is Commitment.' (I might have gone on to say 'Evangelization', but for a diffident lay Australian with a riddled sense of our colonial and religious history, the word is lead on the tongue.)

The romantic characterization was mine of course, not hers. She was perfectly matter-of-fact, had come to us simply to provide information and to ask for publicity and support, all of which we are in a position to provide. If there were definitional distinctions to be drawn between our separate labours they would be invented in my head not hers. And on cue, in a textbook piece of Pavlovian stimulus-response, they were. You might reasonably expect that a lifetime of close, often working acquaintance with religious would have shorn me of stereotypes, yet here was a refractory relic.

In fact what really happened was that we had the kind of conversation I would enjoy with any concerned and intelligent woman who knows the social and political circumstances of her chosen workplace. And in this case the workplace was exotic, therefore doubly interesting. In Australia, Bolivia is hardly headline news. I suspect it isn't news in Europe either, being of no strategic

importance to any declining or ascending great power. So her information, because usually hard to come by, was professionally valuable to us, coupling a broad view of South American politics, Church and state, with street *nous* about specifically Bolivian circumstances, problems and consolations.

We spent quite a time, for example, unravelling the ethical and political tangles associated with the current attempts to suppress the Bolivian coca industry. Coca is a staple in Bolivia, traditionally used by hungry people to blunt their appetite and give them a surge of energy—a kind of potent, peasant Mars or Hershey bar. In the West we are more familiar with coca in its derivative guise as the doubly costly stimulator of the nervous system. It is too easy, sitting in Sydney or Melbourne, London or Washington, to moralize about cocaine use, and to propose legislation which will ramify down the line and out of sight. On the ground in a Bolivian village the issues are not so clear cut, as I learned.

We also talked about companionship and loneliness, about the strain of living in a radically different culture, about the interplaiting of Christianity and indigenous American religions, about knots in that process, about ritual, about Bolivian music and dance, spiritual and secular (the categories seemed a little artificial), about language, how it is wielded in both countries, its tricks, its way of moulding concepts and beliefs.

She is an FCJ nun, living in a small community in an impoverished Bolivian *barrio*. I am an Australian journalist, married, with grown daughters, working on a vigorous experimental hybrid, a Christian/secular national magazine. She gets by on narrow rations—corn all too frequent. My pantry is stocked with wheat flour, oats, barley, rice, corn, lentils, beans—the mundane bounty of a rich country. She works in a religious community. So, to a degree, do I, but my chosen place is the secular world. She is religious. I am lay. What sense is to be made of these differences, this distinction? When is it appropriate to blur them, when deny them, when assert them as significant, when condemn them as dichotomizing and demeaning?

Our particular conversation in fact served to disguise or by-pass rather than reinforce difference—no shackling categories there. She was not offering cues for docile contemplation of religious dedication, rather the opportunity for some shared work. That is what made the conversation valuable. What made it memorable was its stripped-down spirit. We had a great deal in common as women who work,

and in a world controlled, to a degree we both perfectly understand, by men. I enjoyed her vitality, her realism about the limits of her agency as a welcome foreigner, but foreigner nonetheless, in Bolivia. And I appreciated the honesty of her replies to the sharp questioning of a sceptical journalist with an abrasive view of the politics of Church and state. But best of all, and at the heart of all our talk, was a tacit understanding of the fragile and comic dimensions of what we both do, an understanding that rippled out in laughter, the quirky raft of hope that lifts you, for a moment, clear of the mud.

If you had asked me about lay spirituality before my conversation with our visitor from Bolivia, one of the first things I would have said is that it must be defined in its own terms. It can't be discovered in the shadow of the spirituality of religious life, although of course there is much traffic between the two. But before taking definitions and descriptions further I want to do some ground clearing by going back to that refractory reflex of mine, that residual assumption of spiritual amateurism which, I discover, dogs me and so many lay people, especially women. I want to go back to it because, like all reflex gestures, it must have some grounding in deeply held belief, in a well-learned sense of inadequacy or disqualification, which needs to be acknowledged and addressed before one can shift to recognition, let alone articulation, of the sources of spiritual energy and nourishment in day-to-day life.

If you are avowedly lay, which after all most of us are, then it takes a certain courage to confront that fact. It's easier to be lay by default, as it were, to slipstream in a tradition of religious spiritual expression, action, writing and example. But the tradition, whilst immensely rich, will not answer if one doesn't engage with it honestly and courageously, admitting its hollows and gaps as well as its plenitude, allowing for both snugness and slackness of fit with customary lay life.

It is not easy to do this. Much easier to evade responsibility, to follow. We are so used, I believe, at least in Western Christian culture, to straining our lay sense of what is sacred and holy and of the spirit through a net of potentially negative comparisons. 'This matters to me but is not really significant in any grand scheme of things . . . This doesn't measure up . . . This is naive . . . This is base or worldly . . . I am no St John, no St Teresa.' (Who is, or, more controversially, would want to be?) These fits and starts are not humility. Humility is no cringer. She is a woman whose wit mirrors back to others their own strength. These fits are spiritual debilitation,

one of the diseases that runs with the professionalization of access to the sacred, the vertical ranking of religious and lay life. When you are carrying responsibility for your own soul the old, implicit hierarchies of worth are heavy baggage.

It is difficult to write about loss without becoming strident in one's indignation, and stridency usually suggests a personal agenda. Perhaps it is best to declare mine: I resented that reflex demotion of mine, that automatic assumption of spiritual disenfranchisement. It was and is stymying. But the anger generated out of an experience like that is not purely personal and for that very reason not easily dealt with. I mind the stretching generations of lay people, women and men, whose sacred experience, whose work, whose stories, whose routine acts of love, whose growth and whose spiritual understandings have been relegated into silent privacy and hence lost to us, thought not worthy of record, by them, by anyone. Mute witness, maybe. But one could wish for more. In Australia we are gifted in mute witness, gifted in silence, gifted in self-depreciation. I don't undervalue these traits. In Australian painting, for example, they may be the only ports of entry to our austere landscape. In Australian writing we travel a long way on the laconic, the ironic. But it makes for a spare life. Sometimes one hankers after more lay spiritual verve, a resounding confidence, some lay declamation: this is how we live our lives, these are the wellsprings, this the nourishment, this the work, these the dark passages, the dead ends, the murk and failure, and these the clamouring splendours.

This wish points towards new ground so it is difficult to be theoretical here. Lay spirituality in Australia is almost uncharted territory and two hundred years is a short time for the accumulation of maps. To make things more difficult, we are tongue-tied by nature and history, short of words and images for describing or developing a sense of it. The vocabulary of the spiritual writers, mostly European, of the mystics, so many of them also European, and the language of what I have to call the professionals, might inspire, but does not easily translate or adapt. And sometimes it is a briar hedge. Take the word 'spirituality' itself. For an Australian, lay, white, female, Catholic Celt like me, it has the pastel tinge of the front parlour, or worse, it signals humbug. It shouldn't of course. But it does. My adult children wouldn't use the word. They have to find a language of deeds, or some metaphorical transference to render the transcendental. My Irish Australian uncle, who has devoted his later years to establishing a network of solidly good housing and services for older

people, would choke if you dubbed his efforts works of the spirit. We are not good at such talk. Even the professionals baulk at it. I was speaking recently to an Australian novelist who has just published a book of three stories in which she tackles spiritual experience directly. It is a risky venture for a writer whose literary reputation has been built on astringent social realism. She is a subtle and honest wordsmith, but 'Spirituality'? 'Yeah, it's iffy', she said. 'There are problems with the word, for us'. The 'for us' is telling of course. Maybe a future generation of Australians will be more at home in the language which is their heritage. But at the moment we simply are not.

Even more insidious, the professional wielding of words like spirituality can reinforce the old, alienating demarcation, the disjunction between the life of the world and the life in the spirit, the disjunction that once led the nuns who taught me to declare and believe that, in choosing a religious life, they were doing 'the more generous thing'. Sure, they were doing *a* very generous thing—who would begrudge them? Splendid, brave, hardworking women, many of them. But what a distortion and a waste to relegate married, sexually consummated lay life to some lower circle with its whiff of soil and second best. And that, for all the pious mouthings about the sanctity of family life, was what was done. I still get, across my desk every day, from religious organizations and institutions, evidence of presumptions about the difference in worth of religious and lay life, all done with due deference of course. It doesn't all come from Opus Dei, though some of it does. And it is breathtaking in its myopia, in its ignorance of the exploitable richness and energy of lay and secular life, its ignorance of the difficulties that shape day-by-day existence. It has the jargon of appreciation but not even the rudiments of real understanding. To discover the reasons for this we need, among other things, more analysis of the history of early Christianity and an aetiology of traditions of sexual renunciation. This is not the place for it, but such work will be fundamental to an understanding of the reasons why, for lay people in Australia, but also elsewhere, there is a problem of appropriate words, a problem of confidence about the owning and inhabiting of a vocabulary of the spirit.

The language imported from Eastern religion—and there is much of it—presents related problems for anyone concerned with authentic rendering. New Age religiosity has spawned a largely unhelpful and pre-emptive jargon. And then there is the whole minefield, in Australia, of Aboriginal language—visual and verbal—for spiritual

experience. I say minefield because so many well-meaning people blunder into the territory to cause only havoc, despoiling, exploiting, traducing. Australians must and will learn from their Aboriginal fellows, but the process cannot be simply one of expropriation.

Similar strictures apply, I believe, to the understanding of lay experience and initiative in the base ecclesial communities of South America. Of course there is much to learn from them, and not just because of their current international vogue. But the bald truth is that they are not a reality here in Australia and it would be a pointless, procrustean exercise to try to establish them. What we need to do is study the hows and whys—the unromantic specifics of these social experiments, and the source of the hope and energy embodied in them. In other words to use them as a spur rather than as a model for slavish and ultimately misleading imitation. And from that understanding, to make our own ways.

Australia is often described as a relentlessly secular society. The description can mean different things. Sometimes it is a way of saying that our prevailing culture is materialist. There is some truth in that. There is also some truth in the claim that our political ethos is predominantly secular, rationalist and materialist. But again, only some. And none of these partial truths takes account of the characteristically unannounced but vigorous way in which many lay Australians go about their secular work, incorporating into it values and concerns that derive from, intersect with their private religious and spiritual life. What they do, day by day, is often the product of a profound if inchoate wish to be of use, to see justice done. We come across a fair sample in the course of our daily soliciting for and putting together of a magazine which sets out to reflect the concerns and values of Australians from within and beyond the Christian community. And a wonderful, motley procession of contributors (in the broad sense) they are: ambulance drivers, High Court judges, young men and women on housing projects, people in prisons, teachers in schools, ex-politicians, serving politicians, trade unionists, academics, artists, cooks, solicitors in legal aid, writers, singers, print, radio and television journalists—all trying to effect change, to make their society more just, more communally congenial. No drum beating, though the commitment to something beyond personal advancement is patent. But because it is so normal, so uncoordinated, so untheorized, it escapes notice. Certainly it wouldn't be acknowledged formally as a proclamation of the gospel. If this patchwork of secular effort is prophetic, as we claim Christianity to

be, then the prophecy is muted. It works more through osmosis than clarion call.

Perhaps that is how it should work, though the danger in such random and self-effacing schemes of goodness is that the actors, in their isolation, will lose heart and give up. Being suspicious of structures and institutions, I do not know how you insure against this. Nor do I wish to sound panglossian about lay initiative in Australia. There are enough venal power brokers out there doing their best for themselves almost to counterbalance the efforts of the quiet brigade. But selflessness and goodness are always more surprising than banal cupidity. Let them have their day.

I have already remarked that Australian lay spirituality is not a subject that lends itself easily to theory. Religious life, even in its current upheavals, has structure, system, a set of articulated rationales. If they provided no more than a point for departure they are at least formulated. Most of us, by choice, live in the rest of the world and gather around us what system and structure we can. There are the abiding matrices: family, work, community. My generation, the sometime arrogant and triumphantly rationalist post-war brood (these are not terms of dispraise entirely), has experimented with all three, pushing them in and out of shape, and in the case of work, pushing it finally out of the reach of many. Now, on a turn of the wheel, ageing, looking for roots, facing death in family and amongst friends, we are scratching, sometimes seriously excavating, for a sense of purpose, of significance, of spiritual worth. If I make us sound dispossessed of an enabling Church tradition and structure that would sustain, even draw in and use such energies as we have, it is because it is difficult at the moment to be wholeheartedly absorbed in an institutional Church which, among other things, so resolutely disregards or trivializes the full capacities of its women, and which hammers so frequently and exclusively at the same specific issues of morality while, all around, people struggle. It is also difficult to feel part of a Church which, in Australia, ducks the responsibility of leadership while simultaneously clutching to itself the skirts of its powers.

So one leaves, or learns a kind of pragmatic opportunism, consorting with fellow lay and religious workers who also negotiate the territory of compromise. Fortunately there are many, certainly enough for the building of networks. And there is, amid dismay, great good will and a degree of solidarity. Maybe it has always been thus. Maybe institutional security is a complacency Christianity cannot afford.

About families—the most important lay matrix—I don't want to say much. Others will say plenty. Certainly I don't care to add to the weight of prescription, wishful thinking, alarm or sentimentality that squats over the family as we construct it for the vested interests of religion or politics. But I will say this: family life, more than any other circumstance, can yield hard truths told by people who love you. Truths not told by visitors in your life, not by friends, not by superiors, not by counsellors. Truths told you by people who share your flesh, genes and blood, who cannot afford the luxury of dispassion. Truths which shape you, sometimes put you out of joint. We have a secular literature which explores this wonder and severity. But we haven't really developed a way, in secular religious life (I need the verbal conjunction) of acknowledging, incorporating, accessing its richness. Which is ridiculous really. The transaction is essentially spiritual, begun in the intimacies of flesh, fixed there, but always pointing beyond. Yet we keep it private. We do so, I would hazard, because the energy of human sexuality remains so problematic, not least for the churches and the people in them.

In Church and parish life we do have lay-initiated groups in Australia which meet to discuss marriage and to help with the pathologies that accrete around family. I have no personal experience of such initiatives so can only report the positive reactions of those who do. But even they do not provide the key to the locked possibilities I have sketched above.

After such dour analysis why not end on an upbeat? Those Irish nuns who, in their generosity, tried to turn me into an Australian lady with accomplishments, left a raw girl and many of her quite unspiritual lay companions with one precious and dynamic spiritual inheritance. And again it's not something about which one can be theoretical because it depends upon chance, the idiosyncracy of genes, and the equally idiosyncratic placement of musical nuns in the Brigidine order. They taught us to sing. And they drilled into our pre-Vatican II schoolgirl brains every plainchant mass, every plainsong, every overripe nineteenth-century pious four-part parlour and concert piece and every Irish melody adapted for spiritual use. We even got to Bach. Since school, many of us have found, sometimes founded, small musical communities, in and out of church but mostly in. It would not be an exaggeration to say that sometimes the music and the stern discipline of working together to generate good liturgy has been the motive force behind our staying in. Choirs and *scholae* are in some ways analogous to those occasional concerts or solo pieces

of lay initiative I was describing above. They form, perform, disband, reform. Sometimes there is continuity, sometimes substantial interaction with religious, sometimes not. When they are good (and despite all the criticism of post-Vatican II musical liturgy, they have often been very good indeed) you learn more than notes. It is difficult to lie when you are singing good music, and it is difficult, though not impossible, to sustain the animosities of competing egos when the quality of the music and the liturgy is at stake. To get it right the projection must always be beyond the self. It teaches the indispensability of ensemble, not a skill Christians always learn when they are scouring away at their individual souls. Music also gets Australians around the thorny problem of diffidence and of appropriate language. It is one of the more useful masks through which you can give adequate voice to the essays of the spirit. It is expansive and inclusive and it is one of the few ways I know through which diverse energies and even contradictory beliefs can be held in symbolic, sometimes even actual, reconciliation. And in Australia music and liturgy is now very much the domain, and an expanding one, of lay musicians, of lay singers, amateur and professional, of lay women, men and children from every walk of life. It is a meeting place for the potent energies of composers and writers, of artists—those free variables of whom the Church has so often been suspicious—and for the indispensable and sturdy efforts of the laity who simply want to join and lend their voices to songs of praise, to seasonal celebration and to the rituals of passage which console and shape a religious people.