

# TRANSFIGURATION AND PAIN IN ORDINARY LIFE

By DERMOT POWER

IT WAS WITH NOT A LITTLE PANIC that I came to realize that perhaps the editors of *The Way* had asked me to write, not about transfiguration and pain, but in fact transformation and pain. By then it was too late to change course, because the whole direction of my seminal reflection had been in terms of anticipating light at the end of the tunnels of life which is the essence of transfiguration as an experience of hope. Transformation, on the other hand, evokes more the sense of hindsight, the finished journey, the serenity that comes from the heights of being able to look back and see so very clearly the threads of meaning and purpose which had been there all along. Transfiguration is more about fumbling in the dark, hoping to catch on to, and perhaps even to hold on to the threads of purpose that we hope are there. Transfiguration is not so distant from the experience of pain and darkness; it often accompanies us through these experiences. It can be there both before and after and is part of the unfinished business of living which most of us still find we are struggling with.

## *The 'vin ordinaire' of living*

The whole concept of transfiguration and pain in ordinary living is, at first glance, one of complexity. Contemporary spirituality evidences this when it presents us with its whole range of models of transfiguration, from the dark and sin-centred images of the apocalyptic which urgently calls for a rejection of the world in return for salvation to the bright lights of creation-spirituality and its equally urgent call to embrace the world and self in return for enlightenment and peace. Many of us however have yet to reach these peak experiences of the Spirit, and are somehow walking somewhere else down the road simply trying to make sense of, if not to find purpose in the painful paradoxes of living. We find ourselves not so much reaching plateaux, but too many culs-de-sac. What is spoken of often grandiosely as 'exodus experience' seems to evade us as we meet more and more 'No Exit' signs along the way. This present reflection on the theme of transfiguration and pain in ordinary life is set very much in the context of life's little nooks and crannies rather than highways and horizons.

There are two ways of walking around a city or town that is new and strange. One is by way of the tourist map, with the high points, places to go and places to see. Another is by way of the map that perhaps the milkman might use, taking in a different view of the city and of its sights, its landmarks, its people and its feel. Spirituality has its own way of locating itself on conceptual maps, and often can bypass life in the ordinary in its attempts to locate the remarkable and 'the best'. Where can we go to find the *vin ordinaire* of life, and how do we speak to it of transfiguration and pain?

Perhaps a better question would be, 'How do transfiguration and pain speak to us in the ordinariness of living?' 'How do ordinary people grasp this mysterious dimension in their lives?' The answer, I think, is that they just do.

*Where do people go with their pain?*

A clear illustration of this principle is the memory I have of a Catholicism that is fading, but which in the fifties among the working-class, largely Irish immigrant parishes in which I grew up, was very much alive. Part of its relevance to people's lives was that its primal images and language spoke to the dimensions of poverty and pain that were so much part and parcel of life. While it is true that the way in which these images were both interpreted and received often functioned to encourage passivity and a false sense of resignation, the fundamental insight of that tradition had to do with the value and dignity of life lived with hope and in love. The symbols of the cross, the Sacred Heart, and of Marian devotion provided a door that would lead through suffering to the hope and promise of heaven. While still in this vale of tears, the transfiguration of the pain of living was made possible by symbols which spoke of the nearness of God and of his solidarity, an experience which, while not necessarily making sense of much of what life can bring, gave a deep sense of purpose.

I remember as a teenager being brought to the parish mission by my parents somewhat against my will. It was being given by the Passionists. Every home in the parish was invited to have the consecration to the Sacred Heart. On our wall was solemnly hung a picture of the Sacred Heart. At school retreats, on the other hand, a new experience of Church had begun. These were heady days and the vanguard of the brave new world of Catholicism, far removed from the old, was offering a new language and symbol: the strains of the mission hymn, 'Sweet Heart of Jesus' by night, the strumming of 'Go tell everyone' by day. Growing up Catholic in the sixties, they say, was growing up guilty. It could also be growing up confused.

On the wall of our local and friendly young curate's study hung not the picture of the Sacred Heart that held pride of place in all our parents' living-rooms, but a poster which read: 'Life is like an onion: you peel off one layer at a time, and sometimes you cry'. He asked us to call him Larry and talked a lot about being free to be yourself. Straddled between two churches, listening to two different and at certain levels seemingly conflicting languages, it is no wonder that many people simply gave up trying to make sense of the ambiguities of life and its pain. And those of us who have tried to make a go of it have probably never quite got it together!

*Enough light to go around*

What possibly can a picture of the Sacred Heart and an Argos poster have in common? Is there any common ground between spiritualities that speak of reparation and sacrifice and those that speak of affirmation and discovery of self? The common denominator is precisely the search in ordinary people's lives for the transfiguration of the painful dimensions of their experience. In ordinary life we do not usually scrutinize too closely what gives some hope and some light on our situation. Moments of transfiguration, if and when they come, are always welcome and are looked back on like the happy days of childhood or of the good Christmases that we once enjoyed. Most people who live life in the ordinary would say that they know more about perseverance than about transfiguration and whatever image or symbol, religious and otherwise, sustains that perseverance is certainly worth placing on the wall or on the mantelpiece. This is especially so of truths that speak to us of hidden glories beneath and beyond the routine and the pain of so much of our living. Such transfiguration is the kind that is worth holding on to, and that is why ordinary people cherish the symbols which give them hope. Polarization of the diverse models and images of transfiguration is therefore both unnecessary and unhelpful. There is often too much pain in people's lives anyway for them to worry about what helps others come to terms with theirs. If transfiguration is authentic and true, the one transfigured will be only too grateful that there was enough light to go around.

As well as the continuity of and fidelity to the religious and cultural traditions that help sustain purpose through the pain of living, there are for ordinary people the great moments of intense love or grief, faith, suffering, wonder and joy which make transparent the possibilities of a final transfiguration of life. Recently a young woman spoke to me of a new freedom and an intense joy. Recovering slowly from drug and

alcohol addiction she was now able to live at home with her two children. In the morning, free from the terror of irrational fear and relentless addicted pain, she was able to sit in her kitchen and drink tea knowing that shortly she would be sharing breakfast with her children before kissing them goodbye, no longer in the lobby of the local court but on their way to school. For her each moment, however small and passing, was now almost an eternity of joy because she had passed from darkness to light. The widower, for whom an empty pillow becomes a place of loneliness and despair, enters through the door of his grief into a new way of living. Much of it has to do, he told me, with keeping the wound of love open and not trying to shut it down. Again the experience of finding new reasons in life when the old ones will not do any longer is an inevitable and painful dimension of all relationships of love and commitment. The words of the Preface for the Dead come to life: 'Life for your faithful people, Lord, is changed but not ended . . .'. This is very much the story of ordinary people's lives. It is where transfiguration and pain transect.

### *Tabor and Gethsemane*

The themes of transfiguration and pain in the New Testament come to poignant expression in the juxtaposition of Tabor and Gethsemane. Tabor experience is highly sought after: it is a moment of disclosure and it is good for us to be there. The disciples would like to have built on the foundations of this experience, but Tabor was to be transitory. They would have to come down from the heights and continue to be with him in the depths, to be with the one who had yet to suffer grievously. Just as the Lord had taken Peter, James and John to Tabor, he had yet to take them into Gethsemane. Tabor and Gethsemane, transfiguration and pain, is the continuing paradox of both Christian and human experience.

Many of us find that our lives move consistently between these two 'moments' of encounter with God; never quite making transformation which comes mainly with hindsight, we reach only towards transfiguration which anticipates a glory still beyond the reach of our pain. This marks the spot where the journey of faith tends to lead us and often, indeed, to leave us. It is hard for us to hope that we should glimpse very much glory from this place. And yet we are told that this place is holy. At the heart of both the accounts of the transfiguration and of Gethsemane is the image of the praying Christ. Transfiguration and pain, contemplation and surrender, solitude and compassion are therefore woven together in these earliest traditions of Christian spirituality. The scholars

tell us that these Synoptic accounts are concerned with the proclamation of Christian hope. The glory that is always there in the one who takes the form of a slave is manifested: 'His face did shine as the sun; and his raiment was white as the light' (Mt 17:2). This is also the one of whom scripture says: 'There was no beauty that we should desire him; a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief'.

We are not called to illumination, therefore, except by way of purgation; the restoration of our humanity in Christ is both a joyful and a sorrowful mystery, and it is in the integration of and not the escape from this mystery in our lives that the promise of glory consists.

### *Light from Christ*

This process of transfiguration that takes us first into the darkness is not a denial of the presence and power of Christ, but is in fact the fulfilment of his promise to be there with us always. It is what Hans Urs von Balthasar speaks of as the beginnings of the vision of resurrected love which has entered into the very heart of human tragedy and pain. Such vision enables us to see the world with all its fragmentation and pain as never without grace. Jesus' own unique experience of the dark night of the cross and the empty silence of his Holy Saturday descent into hell becomes a paradigm of hope for human existence in need of transformation and reconciliation. The triumph of divine love is in fact not a question of overtrumping what is lost and hopeless through a poetic or legislative transcendence, but of entering fully into the inner structure of limitation, pain and death. By entering into the depths of what is lost and hopeless, Jesus opens up a way for us through those very powers that would otherwise have destroyed us. This is no mere forensic pronouncement of hope over a broken world, but a complete solidarity that breaks open from within the vicious circle of pain and defeat.

The word descends vertically from the highest height, deeper than any mere human word can descend, into the last futility of empty time and hopeless death. This word does not prophetically transfigure death, playing around it: He bores right through it to the bottom, to the chaotic formlessness of the death cry (Mt 27:50), and to the wordless silence of death on Holy Saturday. Hence he has death in his grip; he dominates it, limits it and takes from it its sting.<sup>1</sup>

For Balthasar even the cry of abandonment of Jesus on the cross is one that heralds the possibilities of transfiguration: 'As Omega this cry becomes Alpha, the cry of birth with which the new man breaks through to the light of the world'. Thus within the most profound depths of

christological tradition we find a language that illumines the darkness of our lives with all its pain and fear. Contemplating this path between cross and resurrection can help us live creatively through the inevitable temptations to escape its terror and pain.

*The challenge of the ordinary*

The challenge to us, of course, is to be able to see this process of transformation unfolding in the ordinariness of our lives. Carlo Martini speaks, for instance, of Paul's life and ministry as a process of transfiguration that was the product not necessarily of its one or two peak moments, but rather of 'the long journey of trials, sufferings, incessant prayer and trust constantly renewed'.<sup>2</sup> In particular, Martini identifies the conflicts that occurred in Paul's ministry, that with Peter in Antioch and his painful break with Barnabas. He points also to Paul's experiences of loneliness, his humiliation at Athens and his perpetual agonizing over the fate of Israel. It was the whole ambit of such experience that allowed Paul to grasp so fully the doctrine of the transformation that awaits us all, 'when all of us with our unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord are being transformed into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory'. When Paul in 2 Corinthians speaks about this mystery as 'treasure in earthen vessels', he tells us that his own experience of this includes being subjected to hardship, being knocked down and often seeing no way out. These are very much characteristics too of the *vin ordinaire* of Christian living, where much of faith has to do with simply finding a way through and discovering that what makes the difference is the mercy of God tipping the scales of life in our favour.

This is particularly and often quite painfully challenging to those of us who might be termed 'religious professionals', who often have come to identify holiness with a stylized way of life, where sacred has often come to mean merely a status and where we have felt that transfiguration somehow meant becoming less ordinary and 'more holy'. Behind this sad view of patterns of Christian holiness lies the presupposition that to be ordinary means necessarily to be mediocre or lukewarm. It is very painful to be stripped of these illusions and to be brought back to the hidden heroisms of life, love, faith and hope in the ordinary. Often we are left with little but our humanity and it is hard for us to interpret this experience as possibly the high point of our spiritual and personal development. It is in fact both a Tabor and Gethsemane experience, and it is where many of us find ourselves. It does not feel 'special' or in fact sacred, as did the first day we entered our novitiate or our seminary;

frequently it is accompanied by a turning towards a world that we once felt we had to deny. It is what Thomas Merton experienced toward the end of his life of contemplation and solitude as a road to compassion. It is when we look at the world and ourselves with eyes of compassion that we truly experience the transfiguration of reality, because we discover in truth that grace is indeed everywhere.

But like all ordinary people there are days when we can really say from our hearts: 'That was enough pain for one day'. I am sure that not many of us have been able to say the same thing about transfiguration.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar: *Man in history* (London, 1968), p 283.

<sup>2</sup> Carlo Martini: *The testimony of St Paul* (Slough, 1981), p 75.