

## Spiritual Essay

## CALLED TO BE FAITHFUL

By JOAN PULS AND GWEN CASHMORE

WE WERE AFRICAN, ASIAN, AMERICAN, EUROPEAN: a gentle bishop from South Africa; a pastor, ex-prisoner, from Korea; a Sri Lankan activist, a priest, committed to the liberation struggle, ministering in the slums of Sao Paulo; an Eastern European therapist, community leaders from the USA, a Greek Orthodox Monsignor, a Swiss environmentalist, a Lebanese social worker and others – an unlikely gathering of some seventeen disciples, meeting in Annecy, France, in December 1984, to explore the meaning of a spirituality for our times. For us it was a kind of initiation. Since that time we have not ceased exploring with groups and pilgrims of all persuasions.

We had been the planners of that mini global conference. We knew that it was *who we were* that was the major resource for our deliberations. No papers, only our stories, life-experiences, reflections. Everyone there was actively engaged in Christian witness in his or her particular circumstances. This was 'time out' to ponder the ingredients of a spirituality that could effectively connect the faith we profess and the life we incarnate, the world of politics and the realm of prayer, the whole inhabited earth, creation and its people (the *oikoumene*) and our specific bit of obedience and labour.

Perhaps the key to the exploration undertaken at Annecy and the guiding, driving force for our work since is that of faithful discipleship. The promise of the Holy Spirit that we so regularly read in John's Gospel – how is it fulfilled in our day? 'The Advocate, the Spirit of truth, will testify on my behalf. You also are to testify . . .' (15:26–27). A promise *and* a summons. What do we make in our day of Paul's words to the Thessalonians: 'Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil . . . The one who calls you is faithful' (1 Thess 4:19–24)?

Surely faithfulness is at the heart of discipleship. And discipleship, in both its personal and corporate expressions, is at the heart of spirituality. We are a people on a journey of faith. We are of different cultures and different traditions. Each of us has been called to testify to the truth and to minister to those given to us. There is no calling ourselves Christian if we do not willingly and faithfully accept that mandate. And it is within that calling and our response that we put flesh on the word *spirituality*. It is within that calling and our response that we give meaning to the phrase *ecumenical spirituality*. We cannot separate *church*, *ecumenism*, *spirituality*. They are threads of the same fabric.

Sanctify them in the truth. Your word is truth. As you have sent me into the world, so I have sent them . . . that they may be completely

one, so that the world may know that you have loved them even as you have loved me. (Jn 17:17, 18, 23)

Nor can we then separate the life of the Spirit from our daily life of work and worry, of relationships and responsibilities. Growth in God is growth towards the fulfilment of God's purposes for creation. Love of God is tested by our love of one another, for the least of our brothers and sisters. Unity with God is inseparable from the movement towards peace among nations and towards the healing of all our divisions. 'For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us' (Eph 2:14).

Our broad understanding of ecumenism and our insistence on an integrated spirituality are natural outcomes of our combined backgrounds and influences. Before Annecy there was Vancouver<sup>1</sup> and the experience of creating both a prayer cell among the local Christians there and Assembly worship for the representatives of the global Church. There were multiple learning opportunities working with the World Council of Churches, with its intercultural dynamic and its breadth of vision. There was Africa and many years of missionary engagement in Uganda and with the Ugandan Asian crisis, leading to work in racial relations in the UK. There was Vatican II and a personal investment in the renewal of religious life and in the major shift from a theology of consecration to a theology of mission with all that that implied. There was involvement in the justice and peace networks that crisscrossed the USA in the 70s and 80s in the shadow of Vietnam, civil unrest, and a growing consciousness of both a US underclass and a global pattern of exploitation and domination. There was travel to many countries, glimpses of need and of response. From that *mélange* and other less direct influences, our own lives and spirituality were reshaped and redirected.

How do we influence the institutional Church to become more like the hospitable, vulnerable community that Jesus modelled; to honour the gifts and the searching of those without power or position, be they unrecognized laity, marginalized women, pioneering communities, non-western churches, the poor in our very midst? How do we broaden our understanding of mission to embrace the healing of creation and the reconciliation of all disputes, historical, doctrinal, personal, and then localize that mission where we are? How do we deepen our understanding of prayer and discernment and thereby enter more faithfully into the dynamic of action and reflection, inner growth and outer availability, self-knowledge and concern for others? Who are our guides and which schools can teach us the patterns and the parables of spiritual life in our century, our contemporary context?

Those were and are our questions as we have jointly journeyed, shared a prayer discipline, linked insights with fellow-pilgrims, and pioneered a project in ecumenical spirituality. The Ecumenical Spirituality Project is much bigger than the two of us. It includes all those who travel with us, in ecumenical communities, in local ecumenical projects, in church communities striving to

be open and to cross boundaries. It includes individual seekers who live and minister on the fringes of the institutional Church, and Christians in other places with whom we have met and with whom we continue to exchange insights, stories and hope.

In these recent years we have met Christians throughout the UK as well as in other parts of the world, for whom church, ecumenism and spirituality have been lifted out of their narrow definitions and restricting limits. We have faced head on the difference between the slow, gradual movement of church leaders and interchurch bodies towards dialogue, co-operation and commitment and the impatient, frustrated yearnings and efforts of people to taste more fully the promise of the Holy Spirit that all will be one. We have experienced the divide between clergy and laity and seen the obstacles that some clergy place in the path of gifted and graced lay members. We have gritted our teeth over the narrow and embarrassing agendas of some church institutions: inwardly-directed, heavy with nostalgia, unwelcoming, and seemingly unaware of the Lazarus figures on the doorstep. We have rejoiced in the breakthroughs initiated by clergy *and* laity, in community-building, in risk-taking, in liturgy-creating, in work for justice and reconciliation. We have been nourished by the stories and the witness of Christians in 'hard places', some facing the possibility of martyrdom or prison, some sharing fully the burdens and the pain of those whom they accompany. We have been nourished as well by the solidarity and companionship of fellow-pilgrims, many uncertain of their route, all of them convinced that justice and peace and the calls of creation are integral to their discipleship and that spirituality is a total response to the gospel and embraces all their relationships, with God, one another, the whole inhabited earth. They have helped to teach us the importance of balancing breadth and depth, a big enough vision with a depth that can sustain us for the long haul. For these seekers there is a major shift occurring in the meaning of church and ecumenism and spirituality.

Church is less and less the institution which offers membership and to which they owe dues and loyalty. It is less and less the denominational family into which they were born or accepted. It is more and more the communities with whom they worship (and they may be multiple). It is the company of those who share a vision, the movement of which they are part, crossing geographical and traditional borders, and holding in one context faith and life, the personal and the corporate, the local and the global. It is the community in which and with which they feel they are encouraged and strengthened to be faithful.

Ecumenism for many has lost its appeal, ecumenism, that is, viewed simply as relationships between churches. Many people feel that denominational differences and doctrinal debates are not the front on which they want to expend themselves. The urgencies of life, conveyed daily in news reports, and the urgencies of family and business matters, put into perspective the in-house discussions that are the usual fare of ecumenists. Church unity is but one dimension of a much broader concern, that of reconciliation wherever it is needed. There is a sense that the issues we must confront: discrimination,

poverty, violence, conflict, alienation, demand the attention and concerted efforts of all Christians and that when we so unite to reflect and respond, our differences dwindle. We can transcend what has separated us. We must together testify to God's healing power and the openness of God's embrace. Ecumenism as church unity *can* be left to the 'professionals'. But let us, we hear constantly, get on with the work of 'the church'. By all means let us pray and search Scripture together and persevere in doing so. And when we do, let us break bread together because we *are* one, not institutionally, but in the Spirit. We believe in that promise and we are ready to testify to its fulfilment, however imperfectly and in whatever glimpses and moments. Do not let doctrine or discipline deflect us from what is real and true in our discipleship.

We are all aware of the 'boom' in spirituality and its varied expressions. The popularity of retreats, the abundance of books and resources, the upsurge in requests for spiritual direction, the varieties of prayer experiences on offer, the attractiveness to some of 'New Age' practices, and the ongoing interest in pilgrimages to sacred places, all demonstrate that spirituality is alive and well. But more and more people are asking the question: whom do these resources and opportunities benefit? How do we balance personal taste and personal growth with the corresponding responsibility to *act*, to be political, to be just citizens in our local and global settings? Like community, spirituality is not only for oneself. It is meant to spill over and to transform our surroundings. There is an 'outer' dimension to the 'inner' journey and without it the search for holiness can be selfish and escapist. One glance at the directory of the Cairns Network<sup>2</sup> shows a balance of interest in creativity and contemplation with intercultural issues, peace and missionary concerns. The Iona and Corrymeela communities are outstanding examples (and resources) because they so fundamentally incarnate this balance. We have learned a lot from the base communities, wherever they exist, from groups like Sojourners or the Catholic Worker, churches like St James, Piccadilly or Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes, from gathered occasions such as the conference in Dunblane on 'Thirsty in a Thirsty Land', from writers such as Dorothee Soelle, Ken Leech, Richard Rohr, Walter Brueggemann, to name a few.

In each of these instances of a shift in scope and meaning, the issue is one of *enlarging* our identity rather than restricting or diluting it. We become Christians together, persons of faith, global as well as earthed citizens, planet-dwellers, horizon-watchers. Surely that is characteristic of a gospel response: breaking barriers, crossing over to the other side, turning upside down, opening up new questions, including and embracing. An identity that is open to enlargement will bring its own discomfort and dilemmas. Gone are the certainties and the clearly defined guidelines. Gone are the assurances of limits and safeguards. We enter new territory. We become boundary-dwellers.<sup>3</sup> We know a certain insecurity and risk.

An illustration is in order. There is a debate going on in the institutional Church at large about the appropriateness of a new genre, namely, ecumenical worship, in contrast to denominational or confessional worship. There has

now been considerable experience at the level of both global and regional or local gatherings of a new style of praying and worshipping together. For the most part, these have been acclaimed as grace-filled occasions: Canberra, for example, or Basel, or San Antonio.<sup>4</sup> But a concern and a caution is being registered. Are these not watered-down, diluted expressions of Christian worship, not in any particular tradition, but mixing hymns and prayers and practices of various traditions into a blob of worship called ecumenical? A certain 'retraction' therefore has taken place. While there may be one event at a CCBI<sup>5</sup> Assembly, for instance, of this 'mixture', the tendency is to offer throughout the days of meeting confessional liturgies, which the representatives ecumenically attend. Today an Anglican Communion, tomorrow a Quaker service, tonight a black-led evening prayer, tomorrow night a Methodist or URC evening service. In our view, this is a 'retraction' not only of a movement towards a more creative and integrated style of worship, but an implicit retraction of an ecumenical *identity*. It seems entirely appropriate that we take on a new identity when we 'actualize' our relationship with one another. Everyone who crosses boundaries does so: a new name, a new language, a new rule of life, new rituals. If our ecumenical relationship is real, does it not mean we have a new identity, as united Christians? Of course we have retained our old identity as well. (Joan is still a Puls even though she is also a Franciscan.) If we have a new identity, will that not be expressed in worship? In fact, *must* it not be expressed? That does not mean that we should opt for a mishmash, a carelessly contrived combo, but that we work toward a true and creative expression of our new reality as we gather in prayer. Ecumenism, like all genuine boundary-crossing, cannot be facile, but neither can it remain at the level of exchanging our practices and devotions. It requires a long look at who we are and who we are becoming: something, someone, different from who we have been. And that newness of necessity we will want to celebrate and concretize in our common worship.

One of our tasks has been to note the 'pointers', the signs that help us to see where the wind of the Spirit is blowing, where the call to be faithful is couched in concrete and compelling terms. We conclude this essay with a few glimpses at some of the more evident and urgent signs.

Richard Holloway describes a 'new ecumenism'.

[It is] not the present ecumenism of diplomacy and cordial relations between sovereign states, but a new prophetic ecumenism that will challenge current ecclesiologies to recognise that there has been a parallel movement of globalisation in the Christian community, and that Christians, particularly lay Christians, no longer think of themselves as subjects of particular allegiances, but as members of a new humanity in Christ that transcends the old order.<sup>6</sup>

Here are questions of *identity* and implications for *the way we worship* and *the way we act together*, as 'the church in Cardiff' (or Bristol or Sheffield or . . .) and as living cells of the world Church.

Jim Wallis, in a 1993 issue of *Sojourners*, described the 'new way' in which Christians are joining forces, linking in with an observation of his that: 'The institutions of established religion are in crisis at the same time as the real issues of society are being revealed as essentially religious'.<sup>7</sup> This 'coming together' is by way of a series of horizontal relationships and networks (rather than from the top down). It is characterized by its biblical, but not fundamentalist, orientation, its integrated spirituality which does not withdraw from the world but joins politics and prayer, its roots in *action* which are sustained by reflection, and its evangelical *and* catholic outreach. There are signs of a similar 'coming together' in these islands. What does it mean to be human, surely a religious question, in the midst of mounting tribalism (Bosnia or Rwanda), a worldwide refugee-crisis, violence in our cities, on TV, towards children, towards our planet, and unbelievable discoveries in genetics? What does it mean to be Christian in the face of the fragile movement towards peace that is creeping across the globe, in the face of the terrible pressures that families and vulnerable individuals face in our society? How are we faithful, amid these concerns, to a God who is hospitable and inclusive, a God of *life*?

From multiple sides and sources we are being put in touch with the need for a spirituality, a life of prayer, that is deep enough to sustain the interface with our political and economic systems, our deteriorating environment, the world's pain. As one person has expressed it: 'We need to help people to a combination of campaigning and prayer that measures up to the intensity of the situation'. How do we learn to pray in a way that changes *us* and makes us agents of change and transformation? Prayers alone are not enough; *prayer* as presence and as exchange, prayer as grounding, contemplating, delighting, listening, resounding.

Perhaps our images of God are key to all the above. God can no longer be contained, as so many women are telling us, in patriarchal, powerladen, exclusively transcendent images. What will happen to our spirituality when we allow God 'out' and we discover a powerless, a vulnerable, a suffering God? In Vanstone's remarkable verse:

Drained is love in making full;  
Bound in setting others free;  
Poor in making many rich;  
Weak in giving power to be . . .

Thou art God; no monarch Thou  
Thron'd in easy state to reign;  
Thou art God, whose arms of love  
Aching, spent, the world sustain.<sup>8</sup>

These are some of the directions in which we perceive people to be heading and some of the questions they are asking. Our experience is of small bands of people faithfully journeying without clear maps, grateful for nourishment

whatever its source. The world Church continues to provide inspiration. Fortunate are those who have found companionship on their way. There is a persistent belief in the promise of the Holy Spirit and there is rejoicing when it is fulfilled even amid the stumbling and the searching. 'The one who calls us is faithful.'

For so long the institutional Church has referred to 'the faithful' within its fold. Often that has meant those who are willing to conform and to be loyal to the requirements of the institution. Perhaps now that term too, 'the faithful', is being enlarged! This presents new challenges to all of us.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The VI Assembly of the World Council of Churches held in Vancouver, B.C. in the summer of 1983.

<sup>2</sup> A UK network 'of people who are committed to the earth, wrestling with faith, daring to contemplate, being creative, seeking, pioneering, digging deep . . .'

<sup>3</sup> 'Boundary-dwellers' is adopted from an article in *The Way* (April 1993) by Hannah Ward.

<sup>4</sup> Sites of the VII Assembly of the WCC in February 1991, the European Ecumenical Assembly, 'Peace With Justice', 1989, and a WCC Mission Conference in 1989.

<sup>5</sup> CCBI: Council of Churches for Britain and Ireland.

<sup>6</sup> Richard Holloway, *The stranger in the wings* (SPCK, 1994), p 86.

<sup>7</sup> Jim Wallis, 'Renewing the heart of faith' (Feb-March 1993), p 12.

<sup>8</sup> W. H. Vanstone, *Love's endeavour, love's expense* (DLT, 1977), pp 119-120.