

CONSECRATION AND THE SECULAR

By ANAND C. CHITNIS

Part I

SHARING OUR STORY', observes John English, 'is how we discover and communicate God's presence in our day-to-day experience.'¹ Sharing my story is my way of telling you what it means to be consecrated and inserted in the world. I came to my present responsibilities after more than twenty years in a 'secular' university: these responsibilities fall to me as the leader of a small Catholic institution (c. 2,100 students) in the university sector of the English education system. The College offers undergraduate and post-graduate degrees, professional qualifications and other advanced academic awards in education, humanities and the sciences. I believed the opportunity offered at La Sainte Union would enable me to use and expand my professional experience and develop my commitment to academic life and to my faith and, indeed, bring them together. After nearly five years, let me offer you a progress report on this engagement of the secular with the sacred.

Tomorrow, I am addressing a meeting of all the staff of the College. The meeting is the latest of several in months of concern about our financial position. I had to tell the staff in a letter they received last week that the salary costs of up to thirty academic and non-academic posts have to be saved if we are to be financially solvent. The problem was precipitated by the shortfall in recruitment last autumn of about a hundred students and our need to have sufficient funds in reserve to support effectively the academic provision we offer. In the secular world, a higher education institution cannot be found wanting on all three scores of recruitment, quality provision and financial health.

The underlying reason for our predicament has been the constantly changing public policy. First it set a target to increase markedly the number of students in higher education; that target was reached much earlier than expected, thanks to the magnificent response of institutions involved, including mine. However, the expansion was brought to a halt in 1992-1993 by the imposition of a rationing of the public funds available for fees and maintenance support, which led to the inevitable fall in student numbers. Higher education institutions are known to

have a record of major efficiency gains:² the increase in numbers of students has been dealt with by greater staff efficiency and workload, not a proportionate rise in staff numbers; and institutions have, for instance, absorbed all pay awards and sought to repay loans on capital development for building projects from income they have generated themselves.

Our relatively small institution has little scope left to absorb, for any significant period of time, all the additional financial savings expected of us. We believed in the strategy for expansion; we developed and began to offer a number of new degrees (the introduction of which has been facilitated by creating staff career opportunities), and now we have been caught by the sudden halt to the expansion in higher education owing to another change in public policy. We need to recoup our position in several ways: by reducing staff numbers in order to recover from what will otherwise be an inbuilt and accumulating deficit; by beginning to rebuild reserves depleted primarily by employing more staff for whom we now find we have inadequate fee and funding council income to pay; and by providing ourselves with a cushion to withstand the financial burdens and to take advantage of the opportunities that we know lie ahead.

The inexorable demand for 'efficiency gains' and the restriction on student numbers will continue until 1998 at least. We are dependent for some forty per cent of our students on the new Teachers Training Agency who also intend that there will be fewer publicly funded places for trainee primary teachers (one of our specialist areas) in the next few years. Our problems will by no means be over even when the staff reductions have been effected. Substantial and enduring sources of independent income have long been sought and have been achieved in a few areas of College life, but as yet they are not sufficient in the longer term and in general.

My colleagues and I now face a period of continued uncertainty. We need to go through a fairly broad consultation process (but not one that can involve even the majority of those affected) to apply certain principles such as strategy, quality and academic viability to the staffing of departments and courses. We also need to keep our core values at the heart of our deliberations. In November, a member of staff wrote to me:

The point is that, as long as management tries to bear the burden of difficult financial decision-making alone (which, I should admit, is to a large extent welcomed, as it takes some of the burden off us and lets us teach and do our research), the uncertainties end up deleteriously affecting people's lives.

A little later, my colleague went on to say:

My own experience of what makes a college Catholic would suggest that such decisions always be framed as pertinent moral questions, and not just as administrative or budgetary questions. Again my sense of a Catholic approach suggests that such moral questions ought to be discussed broadly, not simply decided. Moreover, I think that such discussions are not just a repercussion of a college being a Catholic college: they actually constitute our being Catholic.

Passionate expressions of view have characterized the consultation. The letter exemplifies the tensions inherent in reconciling our Catholic character, which we feel calls for a particular concern for our staff, with the realities of ensuring the financial health of the institution. Were its financial health to be jeopardized further, the College would put at risk the livelihoods of many more of our colleagues, thus impairing its ability to offer the wide range of educational experience available here. Holding the balance between the consecrated and the secular is felt to be particularly complex in these areas, since striving to ensure that people can earn their livelihoods and creating the conditions in which their work can be fulfilling is integral to Christian living.

It has been an instructive lesson to try and discern my way through the distinction between person and task. For a Church college there can be a danger of being so preoccupied with caring for the person (for that, so it seems superficially, is a defining characteristic of the Christian as well as the Samaritan) that it loses sight of the fact that personal meaning and growth comes from addressing the task in which we are engaged. The promotion of learning is our task. The effective way of caring for and serving the people with whom I work is to encourage and enable them to face the challenges that arise from engaging in that common task. As a friend of mine has observed, if you carry someone for long enough they lose the use of their legs. Personal achievement, growth and the enhancement of self-esteem come from working through difficulties, a painful process but one that itself constitutes learning.

The mother eagle, after spending some time guarding, protecting and feeding her young, one day comes with an empty beak, dismantles the nest and hurls the fledgling, who does not yet know what its wings are for, from the rock edge to the abyss below. Then just as all seems lost, she sweeps down under it and carries it upward again on her outstretched wing. She then stands once again on the rock and, spreading her wings over the fledgling, waits until it too realizes that it has wings.

As a mother eagle teaches its young the meaning of freedom, so does God teach us, and in so doing shows us the strength of the divine eagle's wings or support system.³

The life of Jesus himself is full of occasions when the distinction between person and task was well drawn and people were given the opportunity to grow to freedom through challenge. The story of the rich young man is such an instance and the words 'Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him' are particularly poignant (Mk 10:17-22). The rich young man was not the only one left sad: he could not accept the challenge of selling what he owned despite the love Jesus had for him and continued to have for him thereafter.

I am referring to the active challenges that baptized people have to face in implementing their faith in secular occupations. They cannot remain uninvolved. The gospel story of Martha and Mary (Lk 18:38-42) illustrates the tension between the contemplative and the active. Mary stays close to Jesus' side, listening to his words; Martha, on the other hand, is no less close to Jesus but is ready to be involved in the necessary work that arises when a visitor arrives with followers aplenty. She is active among the hubbub at the heart of which is the incarnate God. Siting our city on a hill (Mt 5:14 and 15), placing our light on a lamp-stand (Lk 11:33), putting our talents to active use (Mt 25:14-30 and Luke 19:11-26), being one of the seventy-two (Luke 10:1-20) who leave Jesus' side to work for the reign of God in the open among our fellow human beings, and risking the consequences, are all part of being consecrated and yet secular.

Part II

Our College calls itself Catholic. There remains a wonderful journey of discovery to be undertaken which will explore what a Catholic higher education college can be on the eve of the twenty-first century. It is a journey that can go back to our roots, the roots of the Congregation that founded us, for instance, or of the entire Catholic higher educational tradition as it was established in medieval times and as it has developed since. It is also a journey that can involve pausing where we are now and looking around. At one level, that might mean learning from the thriving Catholic universities and colleges in the United States or Australia, discerning what makes for their distinctive Catholicity and considering the appositeness of their practice to our culture and traditions. At another level, it means considering the implications of the mass higher education which is beginning to take root in our land. For someone like Rodolfo Cardenal, however, the contemporary

agenda is rather different and challenging to say the least. He reminds us of the agenda of the reign of God and the task of the universities of the industrialized world to promote justice and care for the environment, to cultivate the perspective of the excluded third of humanity and the fair sharing of the world's resources, and to facilitate the preferential option for the poor. He even asks us to challenge our funding sources if they mask our Christian inspiration.⁴

It has not proved easy, in the 1990s, to articulate the rationale for a Catholic college of higher education in the UK, still less to show ourselves as invulnerable to the sort of criticism, quoted earlier, about how we live out our character and the values of the reign of God in practice. It is essential to be academically credible. Our standards and quality of provision have to be as good as or better than those in 'secular' institutions since our Catholicity can never be an excuse for mediocrity. To be of service to students, we are required to offer academic courses and facilities that compare with *any* other British higher education institution. That is among the reasons why, like everybody else, we have borrowed many millions to build halls of residence with study bedrooms, each of which has its own private bathroom. Overdrafts and *en-suite* halls of residence – they, too, point to the tensions inherent in who we are, a college striving for material standards *and* caring for individual needs.

To be academically credible means welcoming the many audits of our academic provision or of our management information systems and finance, and conforming to the standards that are expected of us by our 'stakeholders', that is, those who have invested public funds in us. Our mission statement, which was devised through a process involving the whole staff in 1991–1992, and which we believe is distinctive for the values it proclaims, is used by academic auditors when they test our departments for quality. For instance, our mission statement says:

At LSU learning is seen as a continuous process of growth that lasts throughout life involving a search for truth in a spirit of free inquiry, and at its most valuable when based on independent, critical and creative thinking. Furthermore, the pursuit of knowledge is seen to involve facing up to questions of value, and the challenge posed by such questions as integral to study.

Our academic departments can be expected to show how these assertions are actually implemented in specific academic units and courses. There is considerable potential in this 'value for money' dialogue for the sacred to be found in the secular, whether it be materials of study or the teaching process.

Catholic educational institutions are committed to an incarnational activity, and the question we need to ask all the time is: in our work in the sphere of higher education, what are the implications of our values and framework for looking at the world? Our Catholic dimension is a way of always being able to take a critical view of society (as does Cardenal) *and of what we ourselves do*. We seek a transcendent stance so that we can engage in the necessary critical self-evaluation. A Catholic institution has to keep alive a preparedness to submit what it does to the scrutiny of other than purely secular values, values that are to be found in, among other places, the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures and theology. The scrutiny brought about by the faith dimension of our institution may be especially pertinent in the near future. The likely move by our society into the post-market era will call for an educational philosophy to which we believe our Christian faith and hope can usefully contribute.

Our mission statement includes some other matters that might be of interest. First, it stresses the community that LSU has traditionally been and seeks still to be, even though it has more than doubled in size since 1990. Intimacy is a casualty of the advent of the mass higher education scene. It is indeed a challenge to us to retain an intimate academic community, for the purposes of learning and for the task of accompanying each other in all the facets of personal growth or the great events of life, births, illness or death (even death by suicide). The consecrated are called to walk with others. When such social space as the bar has not increased in size since the College was one-third its present size, the challenge to live up to our proclamation is clear. Yet, if we had not grown in size and had resisted playing a part in the then public policy of increasing the number of students in higher education, we would have been starved of funds and might not now exist.

Second, we proclaim that we welcome students and staff irrespective of religious tradition or even if they do not subscribe to any faith. To some this is an admirable stance: contemporary Catholicism is committed to ecumenism and inter-faith dialogue. Hence we are challenged to ask if we do actually engage to the full in the communal exploration and engagement that such a community can foster. We say, moreover, that we are 'a contemporary Catholic institution', coded wording for adherence to the spirit and significance of the Second Vatican Council and to the belief that God continues to act in the world through contemporary life and knowledge. There are several practical implications of this stance: Catholic schools can feel that their students should and do not receive preferential treatment from the allegedly Catholic

college; Catholic students who do attend feel that we do not recruit enough Catholics to create a group of a sufficient size to permit an exploration of their faith together. There seem to be a number of staff who either belong to another Christian tradition or who do not profess any faith, yet who really value being part of a Catholic institution and contribute to it in many invaluable ways. Defining their experience is difficult, yet it may be both important and affirming to take the trouble to do so.

Third, space. Numerical growth has had enormous implications for space, but in the context of the theme of consecration and the secular, it may be helpful to focus on two matters. In order to create a lecture theatre large enough for some of our largest classes, some three years ago we divided the chapel at the top of the nave with a theoretically soundproof screen. This created a large lecture theatre in the chapel and yet left an adequate space for daily liturgical use beyond the screen. We had the facility for opening up the whole chapel on those occasions when we needed all the space for a dedicated activity, such as Graduation or the carol service. What happens when the Head of Art and Design asks if the Chapel Lecture Theatre can be used for human still life drawing classes? What happens if another member of staff, feeling stymied for space elsewhere in the College, asks if the chapel itself can be used as lecture space? This is consecration confronting the secular with a vengeance!

The culmination of the conflict about space based on the 'consecrated' and the 'secular' came about when we were successful in two highly competitive bids for funds, one to permit us to convert the former Community House into an extended Library and Learning Resources Centre, and the other to permit us to establish a Centre for Enabling Learning Technologies (CELT) for the handicapped. A side effect of the first development permitted a space for a fifty-seat lecture theatre to be freed elsewhere on campus so that the Chaplaincy could be moved near the chapel, with consulting rooms, a social space and two other rooms. Then we heard we had been successful, too, with our bid for the CELT. After much searching, the only way we could accommodate CELT was in space that had originally been intended for the Chaplaincy.

LSU and all involved with her are on a pilgrimage in search of meaning. For some of what we are about is known, the rest is to be explored. Catholicism is a way of thinking about all educational values. If you look for it, however, it will be hard to find because it is woven into our being as an educational institution. Increasingly, however, 'the

world' is requiring that we demonstrate openly our inner core, perhaps our private self. Our faith and hope in the reign of God is not an added value, let alone an added extra. We have a history that alerts us to what we have lost (though we need to be aware of an unreal nostalgia) and equally alerts us to our need to be relevant in the new context of our times.

Part III

In an editorial introducing a recent *Way Supplement*, Philip Endean observed:

Let it simply be said that the theoretical diversity of this collection matches what Christianity must claim about the untidiness of God's action among us. Christianity is not Jesuanity; the language of scripture and church makes proper sense only when seen as pointing towards a reality in process, towards the reality of God's Spirit sustaining, healing, and indeed confronting the whole creation. We cannot see more than fragments of this reality and the signs are ambiguous and unstable.⁵

The quotation also reflects my experience of being consecrated and secular. I can sense that the Spirit sustains, heals and confronts creation, but only fragments of this action are to be seen in daily life, and the signs are indeed ambiguous and unstable.

The power of the Holy Spirit that comes to us in baptism and confirmation is that same Spirit to which Luke refers at the start of Jesus' Galilean ministry (Lk 4:14). Consecration is intimately connected with bringing about the reign of God. As Jesus begins his ministry he reads Isaiah in the synagogue at Nazareth (Isai 61:1-3) with its references to bringing good news to the poor, binding up broken hearts, proclaiming liberty to captives, freedom to prisoners and comforting those in mourning. To enable us to play a part in bringing about this reign of God, 'always the same Spirit' works in different ways through our individual giftedness (1 Cor 12: 4-11).

Yet it is clear that, despite this strong belief, I have been describing a desert experience. It takes several forms: the experience can be one of feeling forsaken, especially after a period of some success and marked achievements in earlier years. I have frequently felt the urge to cry out with the psalmist, 'O God, come to my aid, O Lord, make haste to help me' (Ps 40:13), only to go back to work and find some awful new twist to our difficult and ongoing tale. I am left wondering where God is in all of this, since I have not often felt the Spirit praying within me nor

the peace of the Spirit as I try to deal with all the complexities of the situation.

On the other hand, I am aware of another form that desert experience can take. In the Gospels, John the Baptist and Jesus found God in the wilderness; the desert was a place of prayer and preparation. For me, being called into the desert on retreat, for instance, may be a source of affirmation and consolation, a re-hearing of the voice of the Shepherd with all the reassurance that it brings. In the desert of the retreat house it may seem easy to believe how we will respond when we return to the 'marketplace' (a key word for the writer on spirituality, Thomas H. Green), but we are soon brought back to reality in more ways than one when we resume our normal lives. The place of the retreat is to lay the foundations of a process that can be consolidated and deepened 'in the midst of life' for many years to come.⁶ As a friend said to me recently, we know how uplifted the apostles felt on the feast of Pentecost, but we are not told how they came to terms with that Whit Monday, day after, feeling. Making sense of consecration, reconciling the experience of the divine call and the business of living in the world as it is, remains the task of a whole lifetime.

One of the most difficult aspects of the specific situation which I have described has been the diversity of views expressed on the key issues at stake. There is no doubt that the staff of the College are dedicated to its welfare and are consciously or unconsciously living out their own consecration in the work that they do. When faced with our dilemmas, a range of opinions are expressed with great integrity. During our difficulties this year, there have, for instance, been those who adopted an almost fundamentalist attitude to our mission statement and those who saw that only an emphasis on financial health permitted us to have a mission statement at all. There have been those concerned with seeing the issues before us as moral questions and those who felt that the financial situation was so grave that posing moral questions was an indulgence. Even on the issue of justice there might have been a difference between those who believed that the way in which we dealt with our difficulties demonstrated a commitment to justice and those who felt that to make anyone a victim of the situation at all might be unjust. I suppose the question Pilate asked (Jn 18:38) came powerfully to my mind when I realized that many of those with whom I felt I had the closest affinity at work frequently adopted a stance different from my own. Where *was* the truth to be found? Which of us was right? The Gospel tells us that 'who was in the right' would be revealed by the Spirit (Jn 16:8). Yet, as we have seen, our human

limitations mean that we experience the Spirit's action as fragmentary, ambiguous and unpredictable; so the grace of discernment is much needed.

Discernment is needed, too, in the other main debate: what it means to be a Catholic higher education institution today. In our college, this debate has also been conducted with integrity. Different people stress different parts of the mission statement; there are diverse approaches to the recruitment policies for staff and students, the links between our faith tradition and our curriculum, the pastoral care for students and staff, employment policies, and the emphasis on ways in which we can serve the Church and its mission. Clearly the disposition of resources is an additional area of legitimate debate as I indicated earlier in the references to the allocation of scarce space.

To live with the challenges of our daily lives is to experience the purification process. It is to begin to die to ourselves, our securities and our sense of control, and admit instead the ways of God. Even organizations that appear to be self-evidently devoted to working for the reign of God find the going tough. God clearly has no favourites! We are not spared the dilemmas that come from having to reconcile insertion in the world, with all its demands, and being faithful to the gospel. We are not spared the contest of contradictory opinions and approaches between people inspired by the same faith or cause. The pilgrim journey to be taken by the institution and all who identify with it has this year traversed the route to Calvary. Even in happier times, it is less than clear exactly what church colleges in university education are actually about. Hence our faith and our hope are constantly tested and we are challenged to pray with confidence: 'The poor called, Yahweh heard and relieved them from all their distress' (Ps 34:6).

Those of us who are 'consecrated' and living and working in the 'secular' environment in our giftedness are inevitably confronted with the challenge of applying gospel values to real life situations. We live with the feebleness of our human condition when it comes to responding adequately to the challenge. As Julian of Norwich observed: 'He did not say, "You shall not be tempest-tossed, you shall not be work-weary, you shall not be discomforted". But he said, "You shall not be overcome".' God wants us to heed these words so that we shall always be strong in trust, both in sorrow and in joy.⁷ We often learn by painful experience that the reign of God can more likely be brought about by a surrender to the God who is mystery than by our own activity (Mk 4: 26-29).⁸

NOTES

- ¹ John English SJ, *Spiritual intimacy and community* (Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992), p 60.
- ² National Audit Office: Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General, *The financial health of higher education institutions in England* (London: HMSO, 1994), p 71.
- ³ Taken from Maria Evans, 'On eagle's wings', *Focus* (British Christian Life Community Newsletter, June 1995), p 1.
- ⁴ Rodolfo Cardenal SJ, 'The role of the university in establishing a just society' in Mary Grey (ed), *Reclaiming vision: education, liberation and justice* (Centre for Contemporary Theology, LSU Southampton, 1994), pp 10-11.
- ⁵ Philip Endean SJ in *Spirituality, imagination and contemporary literature* (*The Way Supplement* 1994/81), p 3 (editorial).
- ⁶ Thomas H. Green SJ, *Drinking from a dry well* (Ave Maria Press, 1991), p 104.
- ⁷ *Enfolded in love: daily readings with Julian of Norwich* (Darton, Longman and Todd, new edn, 1994), p 39.
- ⁸ Thank you to those who kindly assisted at the birth of this article, especially Bernice, Tom, Roisin and Penny.