

FOLLOWING CHRIST IN WORD AND GESTURE

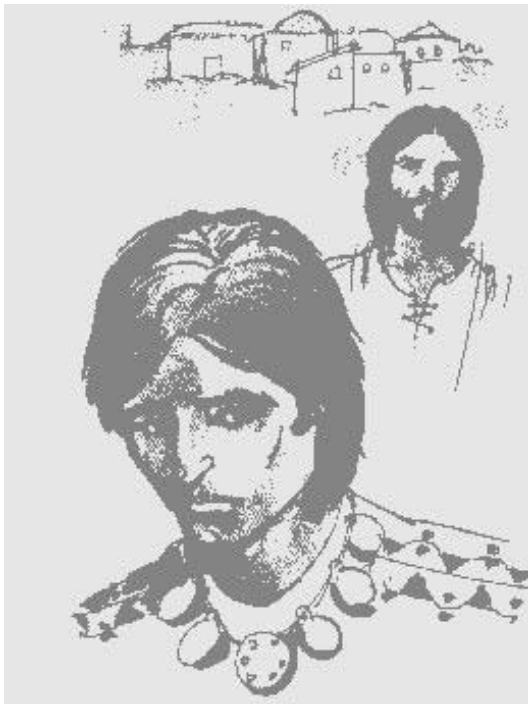
Karl Frielingsdorf

NOT LONG AGO I SPOKE WITH SOME RELIGIOUS who were responsible for formation, both initial and continuing, in their congregations. We were talking about what it meant to be committed to Christ. I was amazed by the many different views that seemed to be around. Some were coming from an experience of the Ignatian Exercises, and spoke about how the following of Jesus Christ should shape their way of life. Others emphasized the crucified and suffering Christ, in line with the biblical injunction: 'if any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me' (Mark 8:34). Then there were more sceptical voices, saying that this understanding of the following of Christ was in danger of falling victim to 'negative asceticism'; before we knew where we were, we would be back to religious life as it was before Vatican II, to disciplines and chains. The following of Christ is about making visible Christ's liberating, life-giving message; if there is any place for asceticism, it should be something to do with grace, a way of attuning ourselves to God's grace as it encounters our weakness.

Others still were nervous about too christological an account; they spoke about a danger that traditional devotion to Christ would get in the way of our finding our own path in life. We need something more in keeping with the way we understand life today, and with contemporary language. Commitment must take on a different form, in keeping with the changed situation of Christianity in our secularised society. This society is quite prepared to promote meditation, but there is no longer any necessary connection between such practices and a relationship with Christ. Our experiential culture takes its lead from what human beings say they need, and subordinates everything else, even religion, to the motto, 'live your own life'. Moreover, such expressions as 'Reign of God', 'Jesus Christ, Son of God and Saviour of the World' may once have been common coin, but have now long ceased to make any sense

to people, even those who are still going to church. Commitment today involves the challenge of leaving the Christian ghetto-world, and of embracing wholeheartedly the challenges raised by our time. We need to recognise how many of our contemporaries are seeking God even when they have lost touch with Christian resources such as the idea of discipleship; we need to experience in our own bodies the ways in which the 'divine' shows itself in people's everyday experience. Then again, others said: 'we are all searching together on the road. Jesus is for us an important model in our quest for God, and his human actions and ways of relating give us some important leads.'

There were also those who saw Christian commitment in terms of Jesus' challenge to give up all our possessions and live in poverty as an act of solidarity with the poorest of the poor—with those to whom



above all Jesus had promised the Reign of God. This way of thinking about poverty led to further reflections, especially that Jesus' challenge was directed towards liberating those who hold on to their riches and will not let go. Wealth involves a lack of freedom for God and for other people which goes against our simple baptismal commitments, and against the command to love our neighbour, ourselves, and our God. Christian commitment centres fundamentally around

relationships, as we see from the rich young man (Mark 10:17-22) who wants to follow Jesus, but does not want to give up his possessions. When he realises what commitment to Jesus involves, he goes away sad, because of his great wealth.

When our conversation finished, it was clear that we had talked about some important models for understanding commitment to Christ, models that can be found at various points in the tradition of the last 2,000 years. Vatican II has probably retrieved the most healthy aspects of the tradition in speaking of the universal call to holiness. From this it

follows that Christian commitment or discipleship is not restricted to any one particular state in life. Rather, it is based on each of us giving *our own* answer to an invitation, irrespective of the decisions about our lives to which the answer may lead. Even Paul points out how the call of all to discipleship can be lived out in different ways: in celibacy or in marriage; in community or on one's own. There are different spiritual gifts, ministerial services, and levels of authority.¹ Vatican II's *Lumen gentium* puts the point like this:

. . . all those who believe in Christ, whatever their condition or rank, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity. And this sanctity is conducive to a more human way of living even in society here on earth. To attain this perfection, believers should exert their strength in the measure in which they have received this as Christ's gift, so that, following in his footsteps and forming themselves in his likeness, obedient in all things to the Father's will, they may be wholeheartedly devoted to the glory of God and the service of their neighbour. In this way, the holiness of the people of God will produce fruit in abundance, as is clearly shown in the history of the church by the lives of so many saints.²

But what is all this supposed to mean in an age when churchy language has become virtually unintelligible?

Christian Commitment and Fulfilment

What do we need, psychologically and spiritually, in order to live out Christian commitment so that it leads to the fulfilment of our identity, to a life lived in abundance? Speaking theologically, a fulfilled identity is the logical consequence of a life well spent in Christian commitment; it involves a fundamental orientation towards God and gives the whole of our lives a new direction:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26)

¹ 1 Corinthians 12:4-30; 7:25-40.

² *Lumen gentium*, n. 40, translation based on that in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, edited by Norman P. Tanner (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990).

This teaching applies to the deepest levels of the human person. What is at stake here is not primarily a new ethics, but rather a new self-understanding. Life is not to be built on anxiety and on self-protection; rather, it should be a series of ever new beginnings in hope and trust. This implies conversion, letting go, dying and being reborn: 'no one can see the kingdom of God without being born anew' (John 3:3). And this has always been understood as the work of the Spirit, leading us from chaos to cosmos.

If this general vision is accepted, then it is very important how we have come to terms with our own life-history, and how far we are at peace with it. For example, women and men who have opted for the following of Christ through the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience in a religious order often find it helpful to become conscious of how their motivations for entering were rooted in their own life history. Thus they recognise both how they might grow and where their blocks are. In crisis situations, awareness of the patterns and the traps latent in their own life-situations can become an important step towards a solution. Quite often it is only after years of belonging to a congregation that unrecognised and unconscious motivation comes to the surface. It presses into the forefront of felt awareness, into our patterns of relating, and into our dealings with God. For example, a difficult community situation can trigger memories of a childhood vulnerability or a problematic family situation. Back then, the only solution seemed to be: 'get out of this wretched family, so as to find the security and love you need in a new one'. This kind of motivation has often led people to flee into religious life, in the hope of experiencing there what they never experienced in their childhood.

Another unconscious motivation can be fear of intimacy or of living as a couple. Quite often this arises from an unresolved set of problems about sexuality, or from the experience of having parents who did not get on: 'better to live alone than in the kind of relationship my parents had'. This kind of unconscious motivation can remain hidden or be given a pious legitimisation: it gets smothered by religious ideology about living in brotherly or sisterly love, or about the vow of chastity as a love exclusively directed towards God and Jesus. When this happens, people find it difficult to develop their personalities in freedom, and to develop their relationship with God. This dynamic can also arise when guilt feelings within a family are transmitted tacitly from generation to

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generation—for example regarding an illegitimate child, a suicide, a crime, or unacknowledged sexual abuse. Someone in a later generation may take the guilt on to themselves, and then unconsciously seek to ‘atone’ for it to God by following Christ in a religious institute.

When all these things happen, spirituality is dealing with ordinary human experiences, but without people recognising what belongs where. What is coming from one’s own unconscious desires and longings, rooted in wounds and hurts suffered long ago? And what can we ascribe to the call of God? Of course there is nothing which God cannot use to draw us into Christian commitment—nothing is in principle excluded from God’s action. And yet we must be very clear and discriminating as we try to recognise how God sets the divine call in specific human situations. This ‘discrimination of spirits’ is advisable whenever anyone is making a permanent decision as to a particular way of following Jesus. There are traps and temptations arising from our hurts and our limitations. More importantly, we need to discover what has come to be our own life through the course of our personal history: the possibilities and limits that this entails, the strengths and weaknesses, the painful experiences, and the sources of salvation hidden in our wounds. This is how the following of Christ leads to life in abundance. If we can say yes to our own life and to what it has become, this enables a reconciliation to happen. And this reconciliation lets us mature into the personal identities that God has placed within us.

Relationship Taking Shape

We cannot talk about truly following Christ unless we have a relationship with Jesus that is quite personal and specific, dynamic, growing, maturing. When we are considering questions of vocation, we need to look at this personal relationship and to name it explicitly. How do I experience Jesus and speak with him? As Lord? As master? As saviour? As redeemer? As brother? As companion on the way? As friend? As lover? How is the answer to this question reflected in my vocation?

Over the past few years, as I have been running courses for training spiritual directors, I have developed the following exercise. It helps us look at these questions regarding relationship and vocation.

The person who wants to work on their relationship to Jesus chooses another member of the group, who represents their past life. A further person plays Jesus in the exercise. A fourth person is asked to observe and re-enact what happens later, so that the person doing the exercise can see the role-play from a distance. There are several steps.

The Call and the Turning to Jesus

The first phase of the exercise is about the initial call, and about how I first turned to Jesus. I start by standing in front of the person representing my past life. I try to express bodily whether, and if so how, I can accept what my previous life has been, and how far I am at peace with it.

Behind me stands Jesus, as represented by another member of the group. Jesus looks at me from behind and touches me gently on the shoulder. I turn my head and look at Jesus, while keeping the rest of my body facing my past life. Jesus says, 'follow me!' Then Jesus turns round. I am now being asked to take a decision. Either I stay with my life as it has been so far, with my past. Or I turn round and move towards Jesus in order to follow him. I look at my past and at everything that makes up life for me at present. If I feel the impulse to turn towards Jesus, I say goodbye to my past life and deliberately turn my back. I try to become aware of these movements in my body, to acknowledge them, and to notice how I react to them. I set off on my new way. I place myself behind Jesus.

Discipleship

In the second part, I am meant to notice how I stand behind Jesus, and to discover the most appropriate mixture of intimacy and distance. I notice in my body when and how I can come closer to Jesus. If I stand directly behind Jesus, I should stretch out first the right hand and then the left towards him, and try to touch him. I might touch Jesus' back, and try to feel who this Jesus is that I want to follow. Can I trust him? If I feel that I trust Jesus so far, and want to know more about him, Jesus turns towards me, looks at me lovingly, and says once again, 'follow me'.

At this point, there is another important decision for me to make. Where is this 'following' going to lead? Some stay behind Jesus, and follow him in the sense of following his footsteps as he moves on. They are always looking downwards. Others stay where they are for the time being; it feels right for them to stay where they are. Others again move

up by his side; they no longer simply follow behind. Still others may turn round at this point, and go back to their past life.

Companionship on the Way

Whatever step I take, Jesus looks at me and invites me again, if only by facial expression: 'follow me'. I decide what seems right at this point. Move forward? If so, then Jesus invites me to walk alongside him. I then opt to walk either on Jesus' right or left, once again working out the appropriate mixture of closeness and distance. People generally experience greater closeness and intimacy if they stand with their left side next to the other person. Once I have found the appropriate position by Jesus' side, we both move forward for a while as companions. If I can go further along the way, Jesus looks at me yet again, and comes closer to me. I work out whether, and how far, I can go along with this movement of Jesus, and I follow the movement for as long as seems right. If I am at the point of standing face to face with Jesus, then the person playing Jesus should try to use their eyes to express their relationship with me, and invite me yet again: 'follow me'. I work out whether, and how far, I can follow Jesus' eyes into a relationship. This eye contact can also lead to a dialogue or colloquy.

Friendship

If I am able and willing to take a further step in following Christ, Jesus then stretches out his left hand towards me, once again with the words, 'follow me'. I work out whether, and how far, I want to respond to this gesture of Jesus. If I want to go further, I stretch out my right hand towards Jesus until my fingertips are touching his. Then I put my right hand in Jesus' left. If it seems right, Jesus then stretches out his own right hand towards me, and I gently place my left hand, inch by inch, in Jesus' right hand.

These steps require a sensitivity to the appropriateness or otherwise of individual movements. It is therefore important that the process be slow and careful. One technique that can help people decide about appropriateness is that of asking various parts of their body, focussing on various parts of the body and asking them—eyes, left hand, or whatever—'what do you think?'

Love

If I want to go even further, then Jesus moves a step closer to me and says, yet again, 'follow me'. With this, Jesus' hands move up my arms to my shoulders, and I must then reflect on what to do next. This movement leads me even closer to Jesus and to a heartfelt embrace. When the significance of the gesture has been fully felt in all its richness, Jesus gradually releases the embrace, lets go, steps back and looks again at me. I receive the look, and let it sink in. Then Jesus lays a hand on my heart, while I decide what would be an appropriate response. Then I try to place my head on Jesus' heart, feel his heartbeat, and let this contact with Jesus' heart have its effect on me. This helps me to see that Jesus has a heart for me, that Jesus' heart is beating for me. Again, a dialogue may express what is going on.



After a while, once this phase of close relationship seems to be coming to an end, Jesus breaks the bodily contact and frees himself. He looks at me; I receive the look and answer with whatever gesture seems right. It can help at this stage if I place my hands on my own stomach, and follow through the intense encounter, relishing it, appropriating it in my body and in my emotional memory. I can perhaps express this verbally: 'Jesus cares about me; Jesus loves me'. When I am ready to do so, I let my hands fall to my sides. Jesus looks at me and then turns his gaze towards other people, towards the world that is now opening up to the two of us.

Mission

Then Jesus stretches out his right hand, and points to where his people are. Jesus sends me into the world, to other people, so that I can bear witness to what they have experienced of the love of God. I take up this invitation, feeling the relationship to Jesus that still lies within, and its latent power. Then I turn my gaze away from Jesus, turn right round, and go to the people in the power of this personal relationship with Jesus, in order to share God's love with them and to proclaim the Good News to them. It is always important for me to be turning back towards my personal relationship with Jesus, and drawing on its power for the mission that flows from my being called by him.

This dramatic exercise in discipleship and personal relationship can help us to recognise the different steps on the way, and to see where we currently stand, where our next step is. The physical enactment, and the time taken to feel what is happening and what is appropriate, can help us represent our relationship with Jesus more authentically and integrally. As the bodily experiences are expressed verbally, the content takes flesh, and becomes more earthed. These experiences demonstrate the particular contours of my relationship with Jesus. Moreover, my blocks and my yearnings can be more purposefully expressed, and I can move forward with them appropriately.

The Fruits of this Exercise*Personal Encounter*

Without a personal encounter with Jesus, in which God's intentions for me become something I can feel—the fact that God has placed the divine Spirit, the divine love, the divine word in my heart—the following of Christ is impossible. Without this personal encounter, we are in danger of living our vocations and proclaiming the Gospel only in our own strength and out of our own resources.

Thus there is an important significance in how I stand behind Jesus, how I come alongside him, how I turn my body towards him so that we can meet face to face. I can only proclaim Jesus' Good News to other people when I have interiorised it for myself in encounter with Jesus.

As we grow spiritually, this encounter can become deeper and more intimate, to the point of a heartfelt embrace. If I stay behind Jesus in his shadow, or if I only pay passing respect to him before running off to

other people in order, allegedly, to proclaim him, there is something important lacking: the lived encounter with Jesus, through which his word 'becomes flesh' in me, and makes its home in me. And it is on this that a living proclamation depends.

A Dynamic Way

The exercise shows that Christian commitment, following Jesus, is a constantly changing way. It depends on constantly new personal encounters with Jesus. There is always scope for returning to Jesus in order to draw new strength and for letting my proclamation be deepened in him and through him. This is what happens at times of recollection, in retreats, and in daily prayer and meditation.

When we are threatened or in doubt, when we are in vocational crisis, we can sometimes need to get back behind Jesus in order to feel anew his humanity, his turning to us, his kindness. Then a new and deeper encounter and mission can emerge. It is important at times of crisis not to let Jesus out of our sight, not to take any over-hasty steps, and to discern the spirits well.

The Varieties of Letting Go

In the first phase, that of letting go of the past, and of saying goodbye to my past life, various things can happen. In the exercise described above, it is a member of the group who represents my past life; but a chair can also be used for that purpose. Some people just sit in the chair, look at Jesus' back, carry out their spiritual duties, and proclaim the Good News from that sitting position. They lack the courage to make the breakthrough, to move forward in an Exodus away from life as it has been. If Jesus taps me on the shoulder from behind with his left hand while I am still enmeshed in my past life, and looks at me lovingly, then I am being invited to make a decision, like that of the rich young man. Am I prepared to let go of my past life? Am I prepared to accept it for what it is and has been, and not just stare at it or try to correct something in it, not try to make up for what I have not had or lament my wounds? I am being invited to accept my life as it is, and then turn my attention to Jesus and follow him. The question is: am I ready for conversion, for a breakthrough, or do I stay in my chair? I might perhaps take hold of my life and move towards Jesus, but then place this past life between myself and him, so that no direct encounter is possible.

I need to work through my past and through the wounds I have inherited from my parents; otherwise I am in danger of transferring unconsciously the anxieties, resistances, and old relationship patterns onto Jesus. Jesus is different from my mother and father. What he says is affirming, liberating. This is why the moments of loving, trustful contact with Jesus are so significant.

Let me give a few examples. If I have a mother who has beaten and humiliated me, then I need to feel Jesus' right hand, and sense that his hand is not going to hit me as hers did. If I was somehow 'got rid of' as a child, I need to have a good look at Jesus' feet, and see whether or not he is going to kick me out as my father did. If I was emotionally or sexually abused, it can be helpful to feel Jesus' heart, and see whether I can rely on it, and check out whether Jesus might not be different from my parents, whether Jesus is reliable, whether his heart is open to me. If my mother constantly cold-shouldered and neglected me, it is good to see what Jesus' heart and shoulders are like. It is only when I have felt and touched a Jesus who is quite different from my parents that I can dare to trust his gaze and move alongside him, and indeed draw near to him in a genuine encounter.

Patterns of Following

In the different courses in which I have used this exercise, certain patterns of relating have repeatedly surfaced. Some people take the idea of 'following Christ' literally, and simply remain behind him. Generally they look downwards; they walk in his footsteps. They do not look ahead, or think about what the next step might be. They never leave Jesus' shadow. They may speak of a hesitancy about trusting their own impulses, or about taking on responsibility; of their habit of holding back and adapting to others; about fear of personal encounter and of too much intimacy with Jesus; about their doubt that this relationship should be happening; about how they cannot feel loved; about their fear of being rejected and sent away as so often before. Here it is important to go back to wherever they have felt some sort of confidence about trusting what is in them, and to take the next step from that position.

Others go through the whole process, right through to mission, like wildfire. They do not reflect on the various stages, or shape the next step according to what has gone before. Even when they stand behind Jesus, they touch Jesus' back, and move away behind him. They cast a

quick glance at Jesus and then run past him to other people, without having really encountered him. Yet encounter with Jesus, and a mature personal relationship are quite essential elements in mission. If these are neglected, or dealt with only perfunctorily, there will be a danger of burning out. Words about the love of God in Jesus will be empty, because the fire burns only when the relationship is alive.

For others it is difficult to let go of Jesus' embrace. They want to stay in the embrace of Jesus' heart, with their eyes closed. They cannot make the step into a specific mission, into the proclamation of the Good News, into bringing forth fruit. Often this indicates a worry that Jesus will not love them any more if they let go of him, or else a nervousness about taking responsibility.

Avoiding Judgment

As we feel our way forward, and shape our own path in the following of Jesus, evaluative judgments—is this good or bad, true or false?—are out of place. The only criterion we will ever need is whether or not the step 'fits'. Then we can ask: 'How are we trying to shape our relationship by making this step? What is holding me back from shaping it as I would like to? What do I still need if I am to shape it as I would like to?' For everyone is called to set out on this way of following Christ quite personally, and to map out their own way. They must respond to the gifts of grace that fall like seedcorn into their life, with all the opportunities and limitations of that life history as it has been so far. Then they grow, ripen, and bear fruit. It is in this context that the exercise in discipleship takes on its full significance. It helps us to discern the spirits, to decide where we take our place in our own discipleship of Christ here and now, and to work out the next steps along the way of spiritual growth.³

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