THE SILENCE

Joseph Veale

Joe Veale, who died in October 2002, was an influential figure in English-speaking Ignatian circles. He had moved into the ministry of the Exercises and into Ignatian scholarship after some twenty years as a charismatic teacher of English in Dublin. One of his final articles was published in the Irish Jesuit Province's internal journal, **Interfuse**. *It can now be seen as his epitaph: it combines Joe's passion for Ignatius' central conviction with a concern for honest, direct language.*[1] *We had invited Joe to rewrite the piece so that it could be shared with a wider readership in* **The Way**, *but his death, sadly, intervened. What follows, by kind permission of the Irish Jesuits, is a guess as what Joe's response might have been. Even if what we read here must lack the incisive touches that only he could have provided, it can stand as a token of the gratitude that many, both directly and indirectly, owe to Joe. May he rest in peace.*

WE KEEP LOOKING IN THE WRONG DIRECTION. We keep asking sociologists, cultural analysts, pundits, to tell us about what is out there in the world we are meant to be evangelizing. In one way or another liberal-minded people in the Church have been doing this for the last thirty years. We have been over and over that ground so often. And we come back a few years later to much the same discourse from a different expert. We listen or read politely; we pay attention; we are stimulated by one or two new insights; we allow two or three familiar questions to surface. The answers are familiar too. Sometimes we have a lively discussion. We are good at that. But then we leave the meeting or put the book down and get back to whatever it is, our jobs, our capsule of responsibility. There is no follow-up. Has anything changed? Are we changed?

[1] In Joe's funeral homily, his rector, Noel Barber SJ, who had been both a pupil and a colleague of Joe's during his time as a teacher, told those assembled, 'I still am unable to use the word "very" without a tremor of guilt and without hearing him say, "'Very' does not strengthen, it weakens the proposition"'. A number of Joe's other pupils shared similarly vivid memories.

The Way, 42/4 (October 2003), pp. 106-117

Fairly rarely, someone speaks or writes from a deeper level of experience. They may be listened to respectfully. But sooner or later, the wider body turns to safer ground. The person is rarely responded to. The next contribution is often a conceptual statement that cuts across the possibility of a follow-up and knocks the tennis ball far outside the court. More or less consciously, the unacceptable has been sidelined. We continue, privately, to carry a dull feeling of unease and unsatisfactoriness, and a wan dismay in the face of indifference and irreligion.

There is a place for description and analysis. It is indispensable. But it cuts no ice until some other level of experience is stirred and attended to. Then the subsequent analysis can bear fruit.

Jadedness and Second-hand Language

There is a deadness in Western Europe, and it is there also in the Church and in the Ignatian family.

The institutional Church in Western Europe is by and large written off, even by the devout. Its language is no longer being heard. The Church institution (and religion in general) invites yawns or condescension or indifference or contempt. As soon as you open your mouth about God you have the handicap of being associated with a discredited Church. (There—I am falling into the trap of rehearsing most of those cultural analyses we have been reading for years.) But the very familiarity here can mask a pain we can all too easily deny, the pain of wondering how to speak of God from within the crumbling walls of a discredited institution.

The problem is that the language has gone stale. The only language that has any chance of getting through is first-hand language. The trouble with most attempts at religious communication is that they are couched in a language that is tired, in tired images, in a churchy idiom that is remote from life and has grown repulsive. (Do we not ourselves, honestly, find much religious talk repulsive? I do.) Many of our words about God are second-hand, third-hand, reach-me-down, ready-made.

First-hand words are those that come from a level of experience that is sensed to be in touch with God. Never mind how fragile, how filled with doubt or dread, how inadequate. People only hear words that are freshly minted, that come from intimacy and contact.

If a speaker has been given the gift (a kind of poetic gift) of discovering fresh images, that is good. But few have it. Even older words, older idioms, strike home when the speaker speaks from some core, where God is a familiar presence. Otherwise our words fall dead. It is no great matter—it is almost certainly better—if the contact with God is a wrestling and contention with God, a cry from a disbelieving ache, a groan of the spirit out of darkness. It can be heard because it is real. That God is real.

Against such thoughts we protect ourselves. All too easily we say: 'Yes, yes, of course. We should all be more prayerful. (And stop making me feel more guilty about it.)' But we know that. We've been told it. It serves as a conversation stopper. It allows us to turn to more manageable levels of discourse that we find easier. Nothing happens. The talk turns to the palpable, to what our education has made us good at, to more words, to the intellectual analysis of a culture or a situation.

But the focus needs to be elsewhere, on our own unbelief. If we were able (not just once, but continually) to come clean, to share the anxieties and denials of our fogged sense of belief, of our unbelief, we might begin also to grasp what is ill in the private and public life of the West. Immersed as we Christians are in our culture, we ourselves may be the best laboratory specimens for examination. It is easy to make general statements. General statements are not wholly useless, God knows. But what cuts the ice are the particularities, the differences, of our personal experience. If we can explore these, perhaps together we might begin to get in touch with what is happening in Europe.

The focus needs to be on our own unbelief

Are we ready yet to begin to answer the questions put to Europe by the events of 11 September 2001? The clear question about the spiritual contamination Islam experiences from the West? One of the strengths of Islam is its unselfconscious ability to say the simplest things about God in the simplest way. The average devout Muslim is not lumbered with a baggage of theological debris. What they have is a daily, familiar, taken-for-granted relationship with God, an easiness (rare among equally devout Catholics that I know) with spontaneous words to speak of God.

Desolation

Another way of perceiving our present apostolic experience is to see it as desolation. To rehearse the obvious: desolation is a movement of the spirit in a direction away from God. Or shuttered from God. Desolation moves inward. It gets trapped in the self. It likes privacy. ('Don't tell anyone'—Exx 326.) Desolation is confused, in the dark, in twilight, in avoidance. It is dispersed; its single focus has been lost. It wriggles so that it can escape facing reality. The mechanisms of avoidance include escape, escape into words, into semantic parsing and analysis. Impeccable reason is its stoutest ally. Avoidance will do anything so as not to make a decision. It marks time. It postpones the pain of giving up, of giving in. It clings to the dull discomfort of its condition, rather than facing the sharp pain that may liberate it into peace. Its fruit is lassitude. It feels there is no point to doing anything. It is good at masking torpor with an energetic semblance of vitality, with business. It is busy about good works. Good works are an effective cushion between the spirit and God. Desolation thrives on faction and division.

The individually directed retreat over the last thirty years has (we hope, but we do not know) helped many individuals to a deeper conversion. But that has failed to flow over into a revitalised and shared sense of mission.

A British Jesuit admonished me some years ago, and told me I should not be so hard on the people closest to me. There were plenty of good reasons why they could not be more active. The Irish Church itself was in trauma. Vocations, at least in the conventional sense, had dried up. He may have been right. If he was, the desolation he picked up in me will remain so long as it is not attended to, not acknowledged. But at the same time, those external realities could be experienced in consolation. What has to change for that to come about?

Dispersed Focus

Church institutions keep trying to plan. We come up again and again with more or less the same priorities. They are diverse; there is no cohesion. There is no one focus that would alert or excite or unite us. There is nothing there to fire the belly, nothing that would send us to the barricades. We lack passion. Diffusion and confusion are signs of desolation.

In the 1970s, many were inspired by liberation theology to strive for the promotion of justice. They hoped that the Church might become excited, united around one objective. All that certainly had positive fruits: there was a shift towards the poor, the oppressed, the demeaned. But we need to assess the deficits too. Talk of justice was also divisive. More recent shifts in emphasis surely indicate some unease with how it all worked out in practice.

Vatican II was, in fact, quite preoccupied with atheism, and Paul VI gave the Jesuits a formal mission to address it. I do not think we have looked plainly at our response to Paul VI's mission. We walked away from it. We did not know what to do with it. Perhaps that avoidance was a silent or submerged acknowledgement of an unbelief in ourselves? If so, then the concern with justice in the 1970s was perhaps itself an avoidance mechanism, a makeshift? We could pretend that this was the *real* response to atheism. We could turn in relief from the discomforts of not knowing what to do about the unbelieving world, the West. (Where the East and the South are not yet contaminated, God is there. Palpably.) Justice was mercifully concrete, manageable; it promised visible results; you could *do* something about it.

None of these reflections are offered in a dogmatic spirit. But the question is there to be looked at. Have we ever seriously faced it? It may be the wrong question. Even so, to stay with it might throw up insights that we are not seeing.

Since 1970 the clerical Church in Europe has been crumbling. There is nothing new in that, goodness knows. It has been shedding credibility. For thirty years there has been a visible haemorrhaging of faith. Meanwhile many believers have been investing a great deal of their energy and talent in justice—not an enriched justice that is seen to be rooted in a personal faith, but rather an impoverished concept of economic justice. The faithful listen, take in the message, assent to it, but are ultimately unimpressed.

Good has come of the commitment to justice. But the field has now long since been won. Many who count in the Church are long since converted. Equally, committed people outside the Church have no need of Christians to alert them to concern for the poor. But during all those thirty years and more we have been doing nothing about the haemorrhaging of faith.

Mission and Maintenance

Over the last thirty years I have met many well-intentioned people in a variety of countries. Most of them have been and are competent, more than competent, at maintenance. Within that rubric they are active and creative. But not in mission. We have been good at what we are good at, and are comfortable with the ministry to the believer. But there have been no new, creative risks, no bold assertions of God. God for the committed Christians I know became what God was rapidly becoming in European culture more generally: the loony relative always kept in the kitchen and never mentioned to the guests.

And perhaps that provokes a wider question. Where was the effort to look together, unblinkingly, at the areas of fading faith? At the growing numbers for whom contemporary Western religion was becoming incredible, unworthy of trust, an intolerable burden on the spirit, ringing false? We had articulated the ideals all right in the 1970s. The Jesuits, for example, were 'by a creative effort of faith . . . to find a new language, a new set of symbols . . . and that for our own sake just as much as for the sake of our contemporaries' (GC 32 d.4 n.26). But we had missed the urgency. Might we attempt now to wonder together how that was so, how we were so uncreative in addressing waning faith? So unaware, really, of that question at all? Might that cast some light on how our own faith has dimmed?

Calls from Scholars

Three eminent scholars have drawn on the *Spiritual Exercises* to challenge us. In 1978 Karl Rahner adopted the persona of Ignatius in order to speak to the Jesuits of his time:

> I should now say more expressly—particularly for you repressed, covert atheists of today—how a person can meet God. . . . As you know, I wanted—as I used to say then—to 'help souls': in other words, to say something to people about God and God's grace, and about Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen one, that would open up and redeem their freedom into God's. . . . Why? I was convinced that I had encountered God, at first incipiently during my sickness at Loyola and then decisively during my time as a hermit at Manresa; and I wanted to communicate such experience to others as best one could.[2]

John O'Malley, coming at the same reality as a historian, finds the same focus of desire in the early Jesuits. They saw all their pastoral work as a ministry of consolation. They 'wanted to live according to such consolation themselves and to help others to do the same' (p. 82). It was the dominant conviction governing their whole 'way of proceeding'.

> They sought to be mediators of an immediate experience of God that would lead to an inner change of heart or a deepening of religious sensibilities already present. With varying degrees of clarity, that purpose shines through all they wrote and said as the ultimate goal they had in mind when they spoke of helping souls.[3]

Cardinal Martini sees a similar need in our own world. It has to do with freedom. Commenting on the text of the Two Standards, Martini hears Christ saying, 'help all without exception, liberate them, free them . . . loosen them from their chains'.

> In other words, make them live like me; make them live the Sermon on the Mount; teach them that true liberty of heart which all

[2] Karl Rahner, 'Ignatius of Loyola Speaks to a Modern Jesuit', in *Ignatius of Loyola* (London: Collins, 1979 [1978]), pp. 14, 11. Translation taken from a new version by Philip Endean for publication in the Orbis Books *Modern Spiritual Masters* series.

[3] John W. O'Malley, *The First Jesuits* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard UP, 1993), quotations from pp. 83, 19; see also pp. 370-375.

> need—the baptized and the non-baptized, the practising and the non-practising, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists as well as atheists, agnostics, progressives, conservatives and the indifferent. Because all are called to enter into the liberty of Christ.[4]

'Into the liberty of Christ.' It is clear the Cardinal is not speaking of corralling into a Church. That is the task of the Holy Spirit, something for the Spirit's timing.

The first Jesuits had a focus. Whatever they were doing they had a clear desire and the same objective. Karl Rahner has St Ignatius say that the Exercises were not for an elite:

> I certainly didn't think that the grace of Manresa . . . was a special privilege for a chosen, elite individual. That was why I gave exercises whenever this kind of offer of spiritual help looked as if it might be accepted. I even gave exercises before I'd studied your theology and had managed with some effort (I laugh) a masters degree from Paris. And also before I had received priestly and sacramental power from the Church. And why not? The director of the Exercises is . . . just giving (when they can) support from a distance, very circumspectly, so that God and humanity can really meet immediately. . . . God is able and willing to deal immediately with His creature; the fact that this occurs is something that human beings can experience happening; they can apprehend the sovereign disposing of God's freedom over their lives . . . [5]

One Aim, One Focus

Cardinal Martini sees the Sermon on the Mount as the disclosure of freedom. That is what the Exercises are about too. Karl Rahner sees the disclosure of God's sovereign freedom as the unifying focus of all our scattered enterprises, of all our scattered selves:

> . . . your pastoral care must have this goal in sight always, at every step, remorselessly . . . the awakening of such divine experience is not in fact indoctrination with something previously not present in the human person, but rather a more explicit self-appropriation,

[4] Carlo M. Martini, *Letting God Free Us: Meditations on Ignatian Spiritual Exercises*, translated by Richard Arnandez (Slough: St Paul, 1993 [1992]), p. 112.
[5] Rahner, 'Ignatius of Loyola', pp. 13-15.

> the free acceptance of a reality of the human constitution that is always there, normally buried and repressed, but nevertheless there inescapably. . . . This realisation I wanted to pass on to others through the Exercises that I gave. . . . Do you understand me now when I say that the central task for you Jesuits, around which everything else is centred, has to be the giving of the Exercises? Of course this doesn't mean beginning with official and organized ecclesiastical courses, given to many people at once—still less is that the main point. Rather it means *mystagogical* help, so that others don't repress God's immediacy but come to experience it clearly and accept it.

'The central task for you Jesuits, around which everything else is centred, has to be the giving of the Exercises.' Neither Rahner nor, in his ventriloquist's voice, Ignatius, is saying that 'the giving of the exercises' means 'retreat houses'. All these voices, rather, are pointing us towards a streetwise ease in using our bread-and-butter familiarity with the experience of the Exercises to create a pedagogy of freedom. When love is liberated at a profound level, then God is found to have been there all along. You don't have to 'give retreats' to engage in that ministry. It is what the Exercises are about.

There is thus no question here of our abandoning the other good things which the Church does. As Rahner's Ignatius puts it:

> I'm also not devaluing all the other pastoral, academic and political enterprises that you've thought you needed to try in the course of your history. But all this other stuff should really be understood as a preparation for, or as a consequence of, the ultimate task, a task which must remain yours in the future: helping people towards the immediate experience of God, the experience where it dawns on a human being that the mystery all grasp that we call God is near, can be spoken to, and enfolds us with blessing precisely when we don't try to make it something under our control, but hand ourselves over to it unconditionally. Everything you do you should be constantly testing to see if it serves this goal. If it does, then a biologist among you can also investigate the mental life of cockroaches.[6]

[6] Karl Rahner, 'Ignatius of Loyola', pp. 15, 16. At the end, Rahner is referring ironically to the work of his colleague, Adolf Haas, a notable biologist and also a significant Ignatian scholar.

To subsume all our energetic and efficient apostolic enterprises under that overarching aim would focus our mission and harness our diverse employments.

But what the Ignatian tradition challenges us to do really is embarrassing. You have to talk about God. You cannot enter with your partner in conversation (Muslim or Jew or recovering Catholic or agnostic or whatever) at that level, unless your own experience of God is alive. Nothing else will do. Your experience is alive if it is in pain, in aridity or darkness or despair. And of course it can be alive if it is freed from that agonizing or dismay. But it is not alive if it is in desolation.

The Silence

None of this has anything to do with political or ethical questions. It touches all of us who are believing Christians today, wherever our integrity asks us to stand, on the left or on the right, as a traditionalist or as a progressive. These are no more than labels which the media have conditioned us to use as a way of seeing our own reality.

We need to help each other, wherever we stand. We need to emerge from a strange blanket of silence. We need to wonder about the great silence of these last thirty years. To speak simply about God. We are good at talking *about* faith. We are not good at *expressing* faith. We may, rightly or wrongly, feel that the word 'God' cannot be used any more, because it has been so cheapened by its pious users. We may feel the same about most of the language of our religious ghetto. That vocabulary may carry with it so black a cloud of attendant woes, and remind recovering Catholics of so much intolerable guilt or religious boredom, that we cannot stomach it ourselves. Do we listen, ever, to contemporary religious talk and recognise how boring it is?

Yet the word 'God' is not a dead word. We have all heard it luminous and alive when the simplest believer (who may be Muslim or Jewish or whatever) speaks limpidly of a

person, of persons, of a familiar presence, and in speaking has no designs on the hearer but is just voicing the reality that cannot be contained. It is not the vocabulary (primarily) that is faulty. It is the people who use it. It would serve the Kingdom of God if religious people would simply place an embargo on themselves and refuse to say words they do not mean, to voice sentiments they do not believe.

Nevertheless, there remain questions about our public utterances. Can we ask why we try so hard to be inoffensive? Is it that we are trying to keep our voices down in the presence of our betters? Do we secretly feel that the secularisers know better, that they are more intelligent than we are? Do we feel we're not up to them? Browbeaten? Do we baulk at being labelled by the media as belonging with the extremes of right or left? Is it time to speak out? To be heard again? To help, with many others, to discover a fresh gospel language that attracts? A language that rings true?

To be Met with Silence?

And suppose no one pays the slightest attention? Just a shrug and an amused turning away? Suppose we emerged from silence and encountered another great silence? Our words not even heard? Does it matter? Is effectiveness always a measure of God's will? There are times—and perhaps our time is one of them—when it is enough to say the truth. The truth may or may not strike home. But at least God would have been let out of the kitchen and shown to the guests. The effect is not our business. The Exercises and our mission call us to be free from the need to see results. You do what God wants you to do and stand free from the need to be effective. The results are God's business.

Never mind the words. They may be freshly minted, or they may be old and tired. If they come from a God who is a familiar, experienced reality, they will be first-hand, new enough to disclose in those among whom we are thrown an affinity that is already there before we open our mouths, a presence of the Word already operative in whomever we encounter.

These days Church people often talk about the gap between faith and culture. We wonder about our faith and about the resistance of so many to the words we use. But is it unjust to think in terms of we who have it, as opposed to those out there who do not have it? Us and

them? It is clear that there is no us and them. We are in it together with them. The gap is not between dumbfounded Ignatian disciples and clever infidels. Or between those who have made the Exercises and the switched-off devout. The gap is within ourselves. The gap is between the spiritual famine and our own incapacity to speak to the hunger.

We stand there disarmed, unmanned, speechless. All that is needed is something very simple.

Joseph Veale SJ, a few weeks before his death