

FORMATION FOR NOT BEING AT HOME

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WHILE TAKING PART in a recent discussion of religious formation that closely followed a conference on refugees, I wondered idly how we might form people to be refugees. The question appears quirky, so far is it from our common experience of life and our understanding of formation. But it would presumably not be totally idle for the twelve million or so refugees throughout the world to have had helpful programmes of formation available to them as they entered on their changed way of life. Moreover, as limit questions can sometimes illuminate central truths, to reflect on the formation of refugees may help us to speak to some purpose of christian formation in its more conventional forms.

The bones of the refugee experience are familiar enough. To be a refugee is to be not at home. Refugees are separated from the place they call home—always from the place in which they would have chosen to live, and usually from the country where they were at home.

Although separation from the country and place of birth is painful enough, it is only the beginning of refugee life. For refugees also have little access to the ways in which we make a home. Most refugees live in a restricted space to which they have neither title nor security. They live together in tents or huts, crowded against one another with little space to grow food or express individuality. Neither are they able to earn the money to buy tools and materials that can transform living spaces into homes. They have been separated unwillingly from the familiar surroundings and activities which constitute a home.

At a deeper level, they are turned out of home when they move into a world in which their language has lost its efficaciousness. Power resides in the native languages of the soldiers and officials who control their lives. If their camps are serviced by western agencies, the languages of power will be French or English. Their own language will be useful for domestic arrangements, but cannot be used to discuss or resolve issues that affect their lives. Moreover, as their former customs, the ways in which they used to relate to structures of countryside and village, the patterns of business and

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of agriculture, all fall into disuse, the language which takes root in these things loses its power to give stability and predictability to the world.

Most deeply, however, to live as a refugee is to be deprived of the power to make a home. It is impossible to find shelter from the precariousness of life or to deny its unpredictability. To have a home is to mask the precariousness of daily life, to make patterns that appear to regulate life in its details, and to guarantee its continuance. This is denied to refugees. Their lack of power, moreover, does not touch only their own life, but also the lives of those for whom they care. They are often obliged both to face death and to let die, powerless to preserve either their own lives or those of the people whom they love.

The refugees' experience is also shared to some extent by those who live and work with them. They also live in unfamiliar surroundings among people with whose language they are not at home. But while they are surrounded by suffering in a situation where human dignity is disregarded in ways that should not be tolerated, they often find great happiness in their life there. They learn from the refugees to value people for what they are and not for what they possess, and see through the eyes of the refugees the defective values of their own society.

So the volunteers who work with refugees are usually blessed by the experience, as their friendships take them behind the masks of their own culture and daily lives. But they also share the experience of refugees in their powerlessness to preserve life. Some of the most difficult and poignant stories are told of the medical staff who are professionally committed to healing. The treatment of tuberculosis, for example, is difficult in places affected by war. To be cured, patients need to complete a course of treatment with the powerful drugs now available. To complete the course demands both commitment by the patients and stability in their situation. The stakes are high: if they fail to submit to the full course of treatment, they will relapse, and they will help the development of a drug-resistant strain of the disease. As a result, many other lives will be lost because other patients will be deprived of any effective treatment for their sickness. So the medical staff must decide upon a policy that seeks the common good; it may well be that responsible choice will lead them to refuse treatment where rigorous conditions cannot be met. As a result, patients who may have been saved must be allowed to die.

In this kind of situation, faced in less extreme forms by all those working with the marginalized, life deprives both refugees and those who care for them of the artifices by which we make a home

in a precarious world. It pushes them to be at home with death, and particularly with their own death. To the extent that they do not come to accept their own death, they will be prey to possessiveness, morbid identification with the suffering, apathy, and all the other joyless pathologies to which care for others is susceptible. To be a refugee is to live at the margins of life, whereas homes are built at its centre; to live well at the margins is to become at home with death; to follow others there demands the acceptance of one's own death.

When seen from this perspective, our original question—how we form people to be refugees—is more germane than it appeared, for what is true of refugees is true of all who live at the borders of life and of all who want to accompany them there. While the description of all formation as the preparation of people to be at home with death and so not to be at home in the world, may still appear morbidly paradoxical, nevertheless the group of people for whom it is apposite is large. It is also strongly represented in christian tradition.

The concept of formation for death as the strongest form of not being at home recurs throughout christian tradition in ways that suggest it to be less anomalous than we might think. The accounts of formation for being at home with death, however, are such as to bring formation as a whole into disrepute, for those undergoing it so often do less well than those deprived of the benefits of specific training. So while formation is concerned with helping people to be not at home and to accept death, the processes of formation prove inadequate. To accept a life in which we are not at home demands a transformation, whose connection with processes of formation is not at all clear.

These, at any rate, are the emphases of Mark's Gospel. For there Jesus travels towards death, and he forms his disciples to follow him there along his path of suffering. To take Jesus's path is to be an outsider and not to be at home with conventional wisdom. Jesus's formation of his disciples labours this point, as he emphasizes the way in which the ill-favoured respond to him while the favoured either misunderstand or reject him.

Jesus's attempt to form his disciples to be outsiders, however, faces the difficulty that any such enterprise courts. For the process of formation which brings the disciples together into the company of Jesus makes them insiders, so that they feel at home. As they feel themselves insiders, they paradoxically become real outsiders in the following of Jesus. So in the early chapters of the Gospel, Mark is at pains to show that those who seem to have a claim to be insiders are by that fact shown not to be true followers. Jesus's

family, natural insiders, are described as 'those outside', and show by their behaviour how alien the following of Jesus is to them. Moreover after Peter answers confidently the question about Jesus's identity, he is immediately shown not to understand Jesus's destiny. As a result he is pushed away from Jesus to show that he has become a real outsider. The disciples' formation cannot make them at home with Jesus's death because the closer they come to him the more they are shown to fear his death, and so are convicted of being real outsiders.

So the processes of formation represent a gradual disclosure of failure. For the reader, the story of the disciples' formation leads to a growth in understanding of what the following of Christ entails. But this understanding comes through the disciples' failure in understanding as they remain radically at home with the world and alienated from Jesus and from his destiny. The Gospel ends with the failure of formation underscored. By the time Jesus dies, his disciples have fled, the women remain 'at a distance', and only the centurion who has received no formation for his task, remains close enough to recognize God's hand in his death. The outsider outscores the favoured group. Moreover, even the women whose presence represents success of a kind are later overcome with fear and fail to proclaim to the disciples Jesus's resurrection. So the movement of the Gospel shows how little at home with Jesus's death the disciples are, and how grounded they are in the world. At the end the reader awaits their transformation by the power of the resurrection to make up for the failure of their formation.

Although Mark portrays discipleship in a distinctively stark way, the other Gospels also describe it as the movement from the familiar to the strange. We are drawn from the centre to the margins—to love the poor, to forgive enemies, to sit with sinners. To follow Jesus is to go out and be with those who have no home, and so to be at home with Jesus. In Jesus, God comes to us as strangers, and so we meet him in strangeness, especially at the point of death when we are made strange even to ourselves.

The focus on death recurs in later christian patterns of formation. The christian ideal of martyrdom was based on a life not at home in the world. The martyr was to have his home in the future and to be uncomfortable in this world. Origen states succinctly the conviction that to love God with all our hearts is to be ill at ease to some extent with life here:

I believe that those who love God with all their soul are people whose wish to be united with God is so great that they withdraw and keep their souls separated both from the earthly body and

from all that is natural. They can endure bodily pain without being upset or distressed when the time comes for them to die (*Exhortation to Martyrdom*, 6).

The life that forms an appropriate preparation for martyrdom is lived in a way that makes a home of the next life.

The monastic ideal has widely been described as a withdrawal from the world. But the withdrawal was made only to fight more seriously the battle of the heart—to fix the heart on the next life in a way that leaves the monk ill at ease with the constraints of this life. The life of the monk was characterized by grief:

Once Abba Poemen was walking in Egypt and saw a woman sitting on a tomb and weeping bitterly. And he said, 'If she should be given all the pleasant things in the world, they would not deliver her soul from grief'. In the same way, the monk should always grieve within his heart (*Sayings*, 3,10).

Grief was a complex response, including sorrow for sin, a sense of lost innocence both of the monk himself and of the world, and alienation from the world, as it is experienced, that flows into nostalgia for the lost true home. Like a proper sense of sin which follows the joyful discovery of grace, grief flows from recognition of our true home and heightened desire for it. It expresses itself in the refusal to be comfortable in this life. The relationship between grief and homelessness is most vividly expressed in a story told of Bessarion, which contains hints of rivalry between the monks of the common life and the solitaries. The homely virtues of the common life are contrasted unfavourably with the solitary life of Bessarion, described in pauline terms that show him to be a true servant of the Gospel:

Abba Bessarion's disciples recounted that his life had been like that of a bird of the air, a fish or a beast of the earth. He lived his whole life without disturbance or anxiety. For he was neither obsessed with the desire for a fixed dwelling, nor dominated by an attachment to particular places, to fine food, to possessions or to a library. He seemed totally free from any physical craving, but was nourished by the hope of future goods, and lived by a secure faith. He was led over the earth like a prisoner, enduring cold and nakedness, and was burned by constant exposure to the hot sun. He passed, a wanderer, over the empty wilderness, and let himself be blown over the vast, uninhabited tracts of desert sand, as though over the sea. But if he happened to come upon a

more pleasant place where the brothers of the common life lived together, he would sit weeping outside the gate, and lament like someone thrown up on the shore after a shipwreck. Then when one of the brothers came out and discovered him sitting there like one of the poor beggars of the world, he would approach Bessarion and say sympathetically, 'Why do you weep, man? If you lack for any of the necessities of life, you will have them in so far as it is in our power. But come in; share our table, and relax with us'. Then Bessarion would answer, 'I cannot remain under a roof until I find my home where I belong. I have lost my property in different ways. For I have fallen in with pirates, and have suffered shipwreck; I have fallen from my noble state; once honoured, I am now dishonoured'. The monk would be moved by his words, and offered him a crust, saying 'Take this. As you say, God will restore to you everything else: country, honour and riches'. But Bessarion wept even more, and said with a deep groan, 'I do not know if I shall ever again be able to find what I have lost and now seek. But now I am even more distressed. I live in constant danger of death, subject to a never ending series of calamities. I must continue to wander in order to finish my course' (Migne, PG 65, 141D).

Monastic styles of spiritual direction also emphasized the strangeness of this world. The stories are often built around the disciple's surprise at finding called into question what he had taken for granted. The art of direction was to find the word appropriate to penetrate the walls which make our home in a precarious world. The disciple was confronted with the mystery beneath the world, which would forbid him ever to be comfortably at home. The greatest spiritual risk was to domesticate God, for the true God is always wild, and takes us beyond all the plans, conventions, assumptions and the other materials out of which we make a home.

This vision of the world was articulated most profoundly by Augustine. He commended a sense of the transitory and provisional character of the world in a rhetoric that was paradoxically rich and seductive. Because this world is an imperfect image of the next, life here is important precisely because we live it in the place where God prepares us for the next life, but we can never be fully at home here. The city of God always draws us. Augustine's thematic remark, 'Our hearts were made for thee, O Lord, and are restless until they rest in thee' summarizes his vision of life as pilgrimage. As a metaphor of the christian life, pilgrimage is often freighted with convivial and comfortable overtones. That Augustine's understanding was sharper-edged becomes patent

when we recall that he was constantly sea-sick. For him nostalgia was never far removed from nausea.

This sketch of some of the ways in which christian tradition has emphasized not being at home in the world could be extended to include later movements, like the *Bona Mors* devotion established by Vincent Carafa in the seventeenth century. Within this approach to the christian life my initial question, 'How do we form people to become refugees?' would have seemed a natural, if rhetorical, way to reflect on the christian life.

To say that it is central, however, is not to justify the tradition. It has been attacked on two broad grounds: as the product of a neoplatonist reading of Christianity in which the material world is opposed too strongly to the spiritual, and as a psychologically warped vision in which positive christian values are read through the lens of a repressive understanding of what it means to be human. Both Augustine's history and his intellectual background have been combed for evidence to support the charges.

These criticisms point to the distortions to which an emphasis on not being at home is liable, but they do not destroy its claim to be taken seriously. Critics who reject the opposition they see drawn between spirit and matter rightly point to the importance of celebrating the goodness of this created world, but the candles used for christian celebration draw light from eternity. Thus, we can speak properly not merely of conducting a funeral but of celebrating it, because our hope extends beyond this life.

Secondly, critics who emphasize the part that full human development plays in the christian vision and who criticize an obsessive pre-occupation with death as rooted in fear of the world, are also correct to claim that a simple rejection of the world is a destructive form of alienation. The tradition of pilgrimage, however, has not only to do with loss; it rests on discovery. The parable of the pearl whose beauty attracts its finder to sell all else to buy the pearl is the pattern of this form of asceticism. Life, not death, is sought; the company of Jesus, not homelessness, attracts the disciple. The spirituality of not being at home does not simply encourage us not to be at home in this world: it commends being at home with not being at home. The force of the distinction rests on the discovery of mystery in the world, which discloses the shallowness of conventional ways of living there and estranges us from them. But the mystery discovered draws us so strongly that it enables us to live comfortably with a measure of estrangement. The truth about the world is found not to be what we unreflectively believed and sought. When we recognize it, however, we find the truth to be liberating. We see that we do live in a desert, but there we find

intimations of a more complete home. This double aspect of discovery—of the defective quality of the life we take for granted and also of a life beyond our hopes—is characteristic of christian conversion. We realize that we are sinners and yet called to follow Christ, that we are transient and yet destined for eternity, that we are enslaved and yet are set free.

The situation of the refugee is of central christian interest because like other instances of marginal life, it forms a telling metaphor of the christian calling. So we cannot leave this aspect of Christianity out of mind. Any formation that is concerned simply with coping with life as given is deficient. But the question remains: is it possible to form people to be comfortable with not being at home and with the dying involved in it?

Preparation for death is the limit case. If it is reasonable to speak of formation for dying, it will be reasonable to speak also of other ways of not being at home. Mark's Gospel proves that such formation is not enough—Jesus's disciples needed ultimately to be transformed. But some measure of formation is possible. For if we reflect on the way in which people of different cultures approach death, it becomes clear that we are in fact formed to die. We need think only of the elaborate deathbed scenes in nineteenth-century literature to realize that death is something which we not only suffer, but also do. Deathbed scenes make such splendid theatre because they are full of drama as well as of passion. The different ways in which President Reagan and Pope John Paul II are reported to have acted after potentially fatal shootings a few years ago make the same point: the president with a joke reminiscent of the films in which he had acted, and the pope in prayer. The ways in which people meet death reflect the ways in which they act in life—they embody a set of beliefs about what life is, how it encompasses its ending, and how it is linked to rituals of everyday life. The rituals of asceticism, of receiving the ashes for Lent, the style of Francis Xavier who found half an hour in which to pack his few possessions an adequate preparation for journey to India, are all part of formation for not being at home, the more effective for being unnoticed.

Although we do form ourselves silently for not being at home, it is much more difficult to establish systematic programmes of formation. The difficulties come to light when we reflect on past programmes. Take, for example, one fashion of forming religious, largely superseded now, whose patterns revealed the high value placed on not feeling at home in the world. In it practices such as moving rooms regularly and coming together with bags packed to hear the annual moves, as well as the discouraging of close

friendships, the enacting of obedience in every detail of daily life and rigorous separation from family, were all calculated to initiate the religious into not being at home. Yet this kind of formation has now generally disappeared because, apart from other inconveniences, it was not effective in its own terms. The test of effectiveness would be its ability to engender readiness to go anywhere at short notice, to undertake any kind of work, and to accept cheerfully the pain of departure from familiar places and people. By these standards it did not seem more notably effective than styles of formation based on different premises. While the strong emphasis on obedience could almost always secure compliance, the cost both to superior and subjects could be so high when people were moved from places on which they had become dependent, that in practice flexibility was lost. The outcome illustrates the point made by spiritual writers of every school—that lack of possessions and of a secure home do not necessarily lead to lack of attachment. They can engender an attachment that is the more tenacious for having few objects on which to fix. Formation must go beyond the external circumstances to touch the heart.

So what kind of formation will serve? To answer this question it may be illuminating to ask what does in fact help people to live well as refugees, and how we can build these qualities into our programmes of christian formation.

In general refugees find help in anything that encourages them to maintain their hope without fixing it on goals that are too narrowly defined. They are blessed by finding life itself a gift independently of its qualities. The things that contribute to this vision differ sharply from those emphasized in the style of religious formation referred to above. For refugees are most blessed by the capacity for deep friendship that leaves them able to accept wounds in transcending their narrow interests. Many find friendship in marriage. The cycles of doubt and reassurance, and the capacity to embody their hope to transcend the limitations and hardships of the present by giving birth to another generation, form people to live without a home. In a marriage where fears and hopes are shared, many people are able to be at home with not being at home and to face the prospect of death, even though love makes it more painful to face the death of others.

The refugee experience also suggests the importance of open friendships. A sympathy restricted to people of the same class or group cannot easily survive the destruction in the camp of the basis of such distinguishing marks. Friendship which accepts people without respect to their accomplishments or possessions moves us quickly into areas where we are not at home, and enables us to

be at home with precariousness and uncertainty. Such friendship reckons with the possibility of loss and opens us to live a life whose details lie beyond our control and in which we can never be fully at home.

If friendship is a favoured way of formation, processes of formation become of secondary importance. For friendship itself eludes programmes, and it leads in imperceptible and unpredictable ways to a vision of the world as mysterious, where despite all the contrary evidence the mystery is held tenaciously to be benign. Processes of formation, as in Mark's Gospel, lead us to a point at which we need to be transformed. The goals of formation are asymptotic to its processes.

The christian vision of the world in its best expressions has always seemed simple but unattainable. The tensions between hope and experience, love and loss, solitude and friendship, celebration and expectation, all appear in the quotation with which I shall conclude. It is taken from the preface to *Cambodge, veilleur où en est la nuit?* a collection of elegies written by Chuum Somchay on the death of his eight children during the Pol Pot years. He was also later executed, and the preface is written by his wife, then in a refugee camp:

With this book I have given you what was dearest to me. My life is not easy now, but I am not in despair. I hope in God; I believe that he is my Father and that he will not desert me. One day I shall again join my husband and my children. We shall again all be together.

Ten of my children died, my husband was killed, but I do not blame anyone. I bear no grudge against anyone at all. My husband did not hate the Khmer Rouge, nor did he want to avenge himself for the evil they had done. I am like him. If I meet the man who killed my husband, I shall not hate him, because I have no hatred in my heart. I have accepted being stripped of everything.

In any case I am not the only person who has suffered: a whole people, an entire country is also suffering. One day, however, I am sure that Cambodia will again know happiness.

What I would like to tell you, my christian brothers and sisters of the world, is that if you have hope you can keep trusting in God whatever happens. Hope will not be deceptive. That is what gives me courage.

This book which you are about to read is all the wealth I have. I entrust it to you.