

THE REFUGEE EXPERIENCE

By WILLIAM YEOMANS

THE EXHORTATION—‘Be probable trapezists’, sounds like an invitation to take up a highly dangerous profession. And so it is. But the trapeze in question was the money-changer’s table on which he would bounce coins to test (that’s the probable bit, *probare* = to test) their genuineness by the ring they gave. The ‘trapezist’ needed a very true and trained ear to distinguish between the true and the counterfeit.

The homely image from ancient eastern bazaar life used to be a commonplace against the great Christian spiritual teachers when they spoke about discernment. And it is precisely what spiritual discernment is about. Only here we are dealing not with genuine and counterfeit coins, but with genuine and counterfeit movements of spirits. This ‘ability to distinguish between spirits’ (1 Cor 12,10) is one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, not given in the same measure to all, but given more abundantly to certain individuals for the benefit of all.

The presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts means that no one is devoid of certain basic elements of discernment. We all have a certain knowledge of the difference between right and wrong. But when we examine this knowledge it is revealed as very rough-hewn and by no means universal. In the course of history, good and evil have often been interchangeable according to differing social and political circumstances. The history of the ‘Christian’ attitudes towards war, slavery, the emancipation of women, the ethics of trade provide sadly abundant examples of a basic inability to distinguish between good and evil spirits. It is clear that there has been a great deal of pinchbeck circulating as genuine Christian coinage. And there still is. It is frighteningly possible that some of the people can be fooled all of the time. And if that ‘some’ are those in positions of social, political or religious authority, disaster is not far down the road. Accept without scrutiny that ‘it is to our good that one man should die for the people’ (Jn 11,50) and Jesus is nailed to the cross.

If we are going to think about discernment we must begin by admitting that the distinction between good and evil is not all that clear-cut. In each of us there is a certain spiritual colour-blindness

even when it is a question of what we regard as fundamentals: love and hate, peace and war, crime and punishment. Very often we discern in hindsight, which can be helpful in avoiding future mistakes. But what we need is a discernment that can lead us here and now along the way of truth through a maze of uncertainty where the paths of truth and falsehood are intertwined. If we are to discern the way of the Lord we must begin from the conviction that only God can search the heart. We are inscrutable to ourselves, how much more are the hearts of others hidden from us in their depths. I use the word 'heart' because that is the proper field of discernment. By heart I understand that whole wonderful kaleidoscope of emotions, feelings, affects, which is what makes us human and is the dynamic force behind my actions. I move and am moved by the complexity and interaction of my fears, joys, sorrows, loves that makes up what the bible and the best of Christian tradition knows as the heart. It is not concepts or ideas that form me and lead me along a particular path. I am formed, become, through the impact that ideas, concepts, have on my being of who I am. Also, it is my feelings that form and re-shape or distort my thinking. The thoughts that do not penetrate to my heart remain on the level of a purely intellectual exercise. They become inhuman. Conversely, the feelings that are not canalized into the way of the truth, dissipate and become 'the expense of spirit in a waste of shame'.

So, if discernment has to do with my inscrutable heart, one of the basic principles is that I do not take my feelings on their face value. I must understand that these 'doors of perception' must be cleansed. I must neither be buffeted about by my feelings like a leaf in the wind, nor must I attempt to suppress them and so deprive myself of the joy of being truly alive. This purification, refinement of my feelings is not a quick or easy process, nor is it without pain. It is a gradual, struggling growth that must go on for a lifetime. It is the effort to harness the dynamic forces within me to the service of the Holy Spirit of love who is their truth and the fullness of their expressions. Quite simply, I seek to feel with Christ, to fear, rejoice, sorrow, love with him. This is that battle of the heart which is the core of human living. The battleground is my own heart. I begin with myself. The protagonists are the Spirit of love poured into my heart and the deceitful, corrupt spirit of evil, of the 'world' in St John's understanding of that word. The battle is real and fierce and painful but the victory is assured: 'In the world you will have tribulation. But courage! I have conquered the world' (Jn 16,33).

There are two interacting processes: experience and reflection on my experience. Whatever situation I am in it is required of me

that I give myself to it wholeheartedly. There is no room for 'the cat i' the adage', (whatever that adage may have been). This wholeheartedness is the beginning and end of everything. Why? Because God is wholehearted and I can never really meet him unless I am wholehearted in what I am about. Better to be a wholehearted sinner than to attempt to play pussyfoot with the power of the Holy Spirit of love. I have to plough ahead without looking over my shoulder. This is one of the most difficult things in the world to do. It takes us out of the realm of certainty into the risk and hope of the kingdom of God. But it is the only way I shall find myself.

Concomitant with this, there has to be reflection on my experience. Reflection not judgement. That is the first trap—judgement. Reflection is the prayerful searching of my heart, facing up to my emotions and testing their worth in terms of how far they are creative or destructive forces in what I am about. What refining do I need? What is lacking? What is really going on in the unseen depths of my heart? All this has to take place in prayer, in the context of my lived relationship with God. Only in his light shall I see the true light, which will always be the light of the love of the Holy Spirit. It is that interior knowledge, the heart's way of knowing that I seek, the creative insight of the artist, not the rational analysis of the philosopher, be that never so brilliant and even compelling. It is the knowledge of a heart being formed and informed by the spirit of God. All too often one hears the crude phrase 'My gut reaction is . . .', uttered as if this put an end to further discussion, when in fact it reveals something radically wrong with the speaker's 'gut'.

I emphasize again that discernment is a gift of the Spirit. All are gifted to a greater or less degree. Few there are who are gifted pre-eminently, the rest of us need their insight and guidance. We need a teacher and how difficult it is to find one. This realization should make us very cautious. The most hideous and often most insidious harm is wreaked by blind, but often plausible guides. The promise that the Holy Spirit will lead us into all truth does not exempt us from seeking out a guide who is capable of leading us to the Holy Spirit. For sure, we will never be left orphans, but, for equally sure, we are sometimes going to feel that we have been so abandoned. This is one of the most testing, most perilous and most formative of spiritual experiences. It is also one that we instinctively flee. But in the measure in which we seek to avoid we distance ourselves from the dying Jesus, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mt 27,46), and from our salvation. Without it we may, like Talleyrand, survive but we shall never know the joy of a lived salvation, a living saviour.

Perhaps, gentle reader, if you have persevered this far, you are wondering when we are going to get down to the title of this article—*The refugee experience*. Horrible title (*pace* the editor)! What do I know of the 'refugee experience'? Nothing. I have never been a refugee. What do I know about refugees? Something. I have been working with them for about seven years now (July 1988), in Africa and South-East Asia. I am not sure what effect that has had on the refugees but it has certainly had a profound effect on me. Let us see if I can put down some constructive reflections.

Generalizations are always dangerous (a good generalization!) and when they are used about refugees they are positively harmful. An indication of this is the simple fact that each refugee camp has its unique spirit, its own feel. It is vital that those who work with refugees become sensitive to this. That takes time. I go to work with the refugees not as one who is bringing something to them, but as one who has first of all to learn what I should bring. In initial emergency situations it is clear that food, shelter, medical attention are major needs and must be met as soon as possible. That would seem obvious and simple. It is not. People who are starving, homeless, friendless so easily lose the sense of their human dignity. It is not enough to give them what they need. I must give in such a way that my giving restores their self-worth, their human dignity. In such a way that their hope and trust in humankind are re-kindled. This gives a whole new understanding of why Jesus insists so vehemently in word and gesture that he is the slave of all. Even as a teacher he is slave. He gives as if he were receiving. Working with refugees I realize more and more that unless I give myself it would be better that I gave nothing.

There is a world of difference between self-indulgent pity which makes me feel good and the compassion of Christ which makes me realize that I am an unworthy slave. I am only doing what I ought to do. One of the worst crimes I could commit against the refugees is to expect them to be grateful.

On the other hand we must make a clear distinction between help, service given in the spirit of the compassion of Jesus and a subconscious attempt to salve my own guilty conscience. That demon of guilt—'It's my fault!', 'I'm to blame!' (without which the American soap operas could not exist)—how it can vitiate the noblest of enterprises. When I work out of guilt, I try to put distance between myself and those I work for. They are a reproach to me and I must eliminate that reproach. But when I work out of the compassion of Christ I draw nearer and nearer to those I serve, as Jesus became the sinner to save the sinner. I remember parties where we had a couple of fruits and a handful of candy

and lots of song and laughter. What a blasphemy (I choose the word) it would have been had I turned up with all sorts of goodies so that we could have a 'real' party.

When refugees first became news there was a great worldwide surge of emotion, pity, outrage, indignation. This gave rise to a flood of aid in material and personnel. At present the current phrase is 'compassion burn-out' applied to individuals and organizations. The refugee phenomenon is no longer dramatic. In some situations the challenge seems to have disappeared. The refugee worker has been stripped of the tawdry heroism with which the media had tried to clothe him. The refugees have become a nuisance to governments of some 'host' countries. They are a 'problem' for which there is no foreseeable solution. Very often, as for example, with the Khmer from Kampuchea and the refugees from Laos, the political situation prevents their return to their own country. In addition, many do not qualify for acceptance in a third country. What is going to happen to them? A prolonged stay in a refugee camp is literally soul-destroying. I give one example which could be multiplied.

The problem that faces so many refugee workers is—'What can we do about this situation?' Politically we are impotent. Any attempt to make waves is usually quelled by the withdrawal by the 'host' country of the wave-maker's visa. Nationals of the 'host' country tend not to cause waves for obvious reasons. So, the question comes back, 'Where do we go from here?'

The humdrum of routine is a crossroads. One road could lead to another camp which often is merely an exchange of routine. Another road leads, all too easily, to a rationalized discouragement in one form or another. The apathy and lethargy, even loss of hope, so many long-term refugees' experience can seep insidiously into the spirit of the refugee worker. We work without joy which is worse than not working at all.

A third road invites us to go beyond the slough of despond, to go into and through to a renewed and refined and more realistic hope. It is the road that leads to the realization that the best possible service we can give the refugees is to be with them, to stick it out with them, to hope against hope for them. This road leads into a whole new dimension where material aid, teaching and so on, are justly relativized and lived spiritual values find their true place. What do you do for the refugees? You share pain and sorrow, you hope joyfully, you believe in them, even the thieves, thugs and liars, you love them. The rest is incidental.

Those who have worked long with refugees understand that it is a work that invites us continually to go beyond. (I owe this

valuable reflection to Fr Louis Robert S.J. who works for the refugees in one of the toughest situations, Hong Kong). The refugees invite us to re-assess our own values radically. They are not a problem exterior to our cosy affluent society. They are a question mark aimed at us because we have created it.

A well-known slogan of a High Commissioner for Refugees, (I forget which), proclaims—‘The fact that there is a refugee is not your responsibility. But the fact that he remains a refugee is’. All well and good and comfy. But have we the courage to go beyond, to say, ‘If there is a refugee in this world, it is my responsibility’? It is my responsibility because I am part of and profit by the political and economic manoeuvrings of the great industrialized nations who are ultimately responsible for the fact that there are refugees. The refugee is not a problem. He brings to the surface of my consciousness a very uncomfortable question—‘what sort of a society do I belong to?’ That is my problem. The presence of millions of refugees in Africa, South-East Asia, Central America and of more millions in ‘host’ countries should bring me back continually to the need for a global view of the world. The presence of refugees invites us to open, not merely our purses, but the frontiers of our hearts to the whole world.

The ambition of each Christian is to make the dream of Jesus come true in his own life—your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. This prayer should teach me to search for the macrocosm of God’s activity in the microcosm of my own life. Discernment is a spiritual endeavour, seeking the will of God. The more I expand my mind and heart in loving awe before the vast mystery of God’s designs the better prepared am I to perceive in my own life the path along which the light of Christ would lead me. In his light, the light of the world. Only in his light shall I see the light that is to illumine my own steps. But I shall always progress step by step. I shall always be like someone crossing a river on stepping-stones in the darkest of dark night, where a light shines only on the next stepping stone. Once I have the courage and faith to step on that firmly the next one will be illumined. But that is enough. Discernment seeks the next step. I must not demand of God a clear map of the route of my life. It would be the worst gift he could give me.

Reflecting on the life of the refugees is a continual and salutary warning against imagining that I know where I am going. They do not. Those who know they are going to America, Canada, Australia have not the slightest conception of the world they are entering. They are given acculturation courses before leaving South-East Asia but these do little to lessen the brutal shock of

the reality. Each step for them in their new world is a step into the unknown. And I wonder how often I stray from the path of Christ by choosing the known and predictable when he would lead me along unknown paths.

As I have said earlier I cannot enter fully into the minds and hearts of the refugees I serve. But I can and do, I hope, learn from them. Each camp is unique. And in each camp you can find the sublimest of human values and the vilest of inhumanity. Kindness and cruelty grow together and we who try to serve the refugees must learn to wait in joyful hope for the harvest.

The words 'to wait in joyful hope' in the final sentence here are a fitting epitaph for Bill Yeomans, who died on 8 January 1989 in London, aged 63, not many months after sending this article to us from Thailand. Some readers will remember that he was one of the founders of The Way and co-editor from 1961 to 1970. His wide-ranging gifts and activities mean that many people throughout the world will mourn for him. May he rest in peace.