OF NO ACCOUNT

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> The church is the community of people that Christ calls not only to live justly with each other and with the world, but to do so in a way that acknowledges him explicitly as the Lord. In this community the poor and deprived have a place of privilege. This privilege obviously does not consist of power or wealth. It is rather the special love that Christ has for those who are marginalised. This love is special in the sense that the universal love of God cannot tolerate the exclusion of anyone, and so has particular regard for those who tend to be excluded by the rest of us.[1]

BEING IN ACUTE MATERIAL NEED is a heavy burden, but feeling 'of no account' is one of the most devastating human experiences. Self-esteem, value and dignity need to be reinforced by others and are difficult to maintain if that exterior affirmation is withheld. This is not a reality peculiar to those who live on the urban margins, but it is one which they, in particular, graphically encounter on a day-to-day basis. In addition there is often a sense of powerlessness and incoherence which denies even the articulation of frustration.

It is relatively easy to acknowledge this situation at the intellectual level. But it is only when we attend with our whole person to the reality portrayed in these lives that we begin to experience a sense of what that condition may be like. At a gut level we recognize and remember in our own experience that sickening lurch of the stomach that means fear when life spins out of control. We recall the panic that can sweep over us when we feel that we have ceased to have a determining voice over circumstances for the next few hours, days or months. This sense of powerlessness is even more devastating for those of us who are used to exercising our gifts and skills efficiently and successfully. Yet our experience of that sense of disintegration and chaos can bring us, I have come to believe, to a deeper understanding, both of the lives of those who live on the margins of society and of the God who continues to nurture and sustain divine life amidst the messy irreducible diversity of humanity found there. True to Christian paradox, it is their deprivation and worldly powerlessness that can make them people who can teach us much about spirituality. Our openness to listening to and learning

from the marginalized can create the disposition for grace to work within us so that we come to a deeper understanding. But crucial to this possibility is our willingness to reflect on the people's experience and to allow it to challenge our understanding.

There are striking features about those who are marginalized. Very often these people are in a position where they are not actively involved in the central factors which determine their lives. As they are 'educated' or conditioned to believe that others will always know best, and that some 'professionals' in social security, or housing, or education, or local planning, or possibly anybody other than themselves, will have the next determining voice in their lives, dependency is an inevitable development. From the beginning, then, possibly in early childhood, they cease to be participatory subjects in life, but rather form objects of concern for one or another agency. Such a process constantly undermines the sense of value and self-worth which an individual may have and renders them progressively more and more inadequate to cope with life. Considered economically irrelevant, and increasingly impoverished, marginalized individuals and groups present a shocking discontinuity to mainstream society. In the UK this process has received added momentum under successive governmental regimes which have reinforced the idea that there is no alternative lifestyle for the 'inadequate'. Pushed to the margins by national and local government, maintained there by the attitude of police, social services and public media, these people discover that it takes an individual of great character to refuse to accept the negative connotations of marginality as the infallible criteria for life. That such characters proliferate on the margins may be evidence of something at work there beyond the dynamics of our consumer society.

My own experience has ranged across five British cities. In Birmingham, Bristol and Brixton I worked with teams of lay people and religious in fields as diverse as prostitution, race relations, unemployment and homelessness. In Glasgow I was employed in a drug rehabilitation centre dealing with both drug abuse and the inevitable problems of HIV and AIDS. In Wolverhampton I lived and worked with a community on a peripheral housing scheme endeavouring to assist community development. Now in the east of Scotland I am involved with people and agencies on an estate in West Fife. The locations change – the problems and difficulties that individuals face remain remarkably similar.

Reflecting upon my experience, I am conscious of God at work within marginalized groups and individuals in a way that often seems

embarrassingly direct and simple compared with our more complicated Christian formats. Most people I worked with had no specific religious tradition, and yet they demonstrated a spiritual aliveness, openness and capacity for exploration of real depth and quality which put to shame many of us who do live within such traditions. Since they showed no sign of being susceptible to conversion to a particular tradition, it occurred to me to ask: is there anything the tradition can offer them, and what, more importantly, can these people offer to us? To cite one example, when asking a group of residents on a peripheral housing estate what they thought of God I received the following responses.

> 'He's definitely not a copper.' 'Not racist.' 'He comes to us.' 'He's not stuck out from us.' 'He's not poor.' 'She's rich in love.' 'He guides us.' 'He's ready to roll up his sleeves.' 'I'm not sure there is one.' 'He's unwaged.' 'Why does he have to be he?' 'If there is a God he's an urban guerrilla, because look at the way life is, look at all countries. He can't be on the side of the powers.' 'Not a lot makes sense without God.' 'God means existence for me. If I didn't have God in my life I'd probably have been dead a long time ago.'

The different themes emerging were direct and unsophisticated: the non-racist God, who doesn't receive any money; who comes to the people, and who is not removed from them. There is the sense of a freedom of access to this God who is not demanding of formal church commitment. Also, there is an interesting ambivalence with regard to the gender of God, which gives grass-roots authenticity to the ongoing debate within more academic circles of the Christian community. In later interviews with individuals I asked for some general views about God, and the following is one of the replies which I received from a young black man in his mid-thirties.

> What does God mean to me, that's a complicated one really. There's theories that people see God as something like their father, in that case I would say God was a rough mean old sod, cos that's what my father was like, but I know that God's not quite like my father. He's strong, not wishy washy. One thing I like about God is his loyalty, if he says something he'll do it. I see him as a warm Lord, sounds good that doesn't it, but I like it. Sometimes he must be quite grumpy too. He's also full of love, and passion. I should say too that he's a God that's in a lot of pain.

These remarks convey poignantly a picture of God marked by features of common humanity. Though for this man his family relationships have lacked authentic affective depth, yet this has not resulted in

the repudiation of God. Rather, it has promoted the search for other, more creative and resonant images of God. Thus, in the expression 'warm Lord', the sense of comfort, well-being and affection become almost palpable, combining easily with the reverence that 'Lord' implies. The humour and humanity is paramount in the idea that sometimes God might be grumpy. Through his images this resident linked the consciousness of pain in God with the pain in the world, and expressed certainty that in some way God was intimately involved in this reality.

Very few of the people on this estate in the Midlands go to church. Indeed, there appears to be a considerable amount of alienation from the Church. Yet there is evidently a desire to pray and to come together to recognize and to celebrate the presence of God in their lives. This has led to the formulation of 'local people's' liturgies. They happen about once every two months and are planned and prepared by the local people in conjunction with a community of religious and lay women. They take place in a local centre on a Sunday afternoon. That the setting is local is very important: the celebrations have now become a regular feature of life on the estate, and individuals attend who perhaps rarely meet the Christian community, but who feel they want to be part of such a local gathering. Indeed, some of the local residents describe the celebrations as their church. A notable feature of these occasions is the great freedom of those participants who have not been conditioned by a particular tradition into expecting certain forms and responses in liturgy. This underlying freedom contributes significantly to all that occurs, especially in creating a certain atmosphere of anticipation, since no one is quite sure what might happen next. Although celebrations are well prepared, there is an irrepressible spontaneity of response amongst the people which undermines any residual restrictive formalism. These experiences have caused the leader of the community to comment that the people of the estate have much to teach the institutional Church about forms of worship that are more directly and informally participative.

For the members of the Christian community, the celebrations have had profound effects on their own understanding of faith and worship. One woman spoke of a particularly poignant moment during a celebration when those present were anointed by a local woman resident.

> I remember the time we had the anointing. It was a most moving time for me. If the person doing the anointing had been a priest I would not have been moved in the slightest. But because I know this

> woman, because I know some of the pain she has suffered in her life. I know too that she didn't study for five years in theology. It just touched me very deeply. I can't put it into words, I express it best through tears. Her anointing me was so deep and real for me, like God through her anointing me. That for me is what church is about. And watching a stream of people go up to be anointed. That was one of the many times when I have been touched by what goes on in a celebration.

Tussling in darkness with powerlessness and helplessness is another feature of life on the margins which inevitably confronts those who choose to work there. One religious sister who has lived fifteen years on a Scottish council estate expressed her own experience in the following terms:

> Fundamental to any spirituality is powerlessness and helplessness. It was only when I came to live here and when I'd been here some time, that for the first time in my life I realised what Christianity was about, and I didn't like it. I find it very hard to face powerlessness and helplessness. All my life I've some kind of control, some kind of support, some kind of security, and I still have it. I'm a sister and there's an order behind me . . . I live and work with people who are helpless at least in the system, not in person. What really is spirituality for me is how these people go on, going on, helping one another, are so caring, so cheerful, how they celebrate – not in church. But every little excuse we celebrate, and they have so little to celebrate with, but they do.

Many who have no choice but to live on the margins become trapped in a cycle of fear and alienation. Within the normal dependencies, or interdependencies, which are common to all people, the marginalized may become further dependent to a pathological degree because so many choices relating to their own lives are removed from them. The power of choice is basic to human freedom. The extent to which we have the power to make choices divides us, and communion in a truly shared spirituality will necessitate a genuinely shared and equal exercise of power over destiny. This ties in with contemporary work on the theology of weakness, brokenness, vulnerability and failure – the cross. The gospel story witnesses to the power of God situated squarely within the reality of powerlessness. The paradox of cross and resurrection, death and life, defies manipulation and challenges evasion. In this paradox we encounter the meaning of Christian hope and simultaneously the stark reality of human suffering. As one sister working with prostitutes stated:

> Learning not to run from pain is a process for me. I'm aware, as I listen to others speaking, of their life's pain, of the sense of helplessness. This is what I notice most, when I'm helpless, I am vulnerable; somehow then the pain can be absorbed, integrated, productive, if I give it time, gentleness, and patience.

The gospel calls us to new ways of understanding and experiencing the reality of power. This may involve a trusting vulnerability, which of its nature transforms everyday situations, releasing the possibility of change and growth. It may be a presence which exists and suffers with the people. Love in presence is characterized above all by the offer of self to the other person in ways that often override the cold conceptualizations of language. Indeed, God's incarnate love knows no boundaries, and the body of Christ is alive in the most unexpected places, where humble service meets human need. And perhaps this is poetically described by one man who has lived all his life on the margins:

> There's a power in weakness as though God's made some gentle folk weak but as though he's given them a little magic dust for emergencies. It's a beautiful thing. They've got a hidden supply. Even though they appear to be weak and don't trouble anyone, should an emergency come, they've got the strength. That's what God wants us all to be, I think, weak in that sense – that the niceness comes out. The strength is really in the weakness.

It has become evident to me that in the lives, words and actions of people on the urban margins the presence of God is at work. It appears that, by virtue of their own discovery of the transcendent, people are celebrating what we would call God's grace, but they have come to this discovery and celebration in and through the sacrament of their own lives. For those who work with them, this has profound consequences: this evidence of grace palpably at work within the lives of the marginalized shifts our thinking on grace from the realm of abstract theory to the reflective consideration of praxis. The mystery and wonder is that human beings are able to grasp that the incomprehensible really exists and is active in the everyday situations of their lives. It is precisely in these situations that the 'good news' breaks through into the lives of communities who live and work on the margins. It is also at this level that the working of grace presents a challenge for reflective evaluation at all levels within the churches. It is precisely in this dynamic that the institutional Church, in its actual pastoral practice,

may be an obstacle to such experiences of God. Here it is important to acknowledge the fallible nature of the Church in its institutional form (which is called always to conversion and holiness), and its need to incorporate into its theological reflection the reality of past failure in order to bring about better responses to contemporary needs.

Where time is spent listening to the experience of those who live on the margins, the possibility of reciprocal transformation exists. A marginalized individual begins to experience life where she or he is heard and sustained, rather than undermined, in ordinary daily contacts. As a consequence the growth in self-worth, self-confidence and the ability to articulate experience of God becomes more evident. At the same time those who have come to listen and hear are aware of being evangelized themselves, as they recognize God working amongst the people in ways very different from those they have traditionally encountered or been taught to anticipate. The mode of this listening which fuels so much of what I have experienced in working among the marginalized is very simple: an easy and normal engagement with people in the affairs of their daily lives in ordinary conversation and dialogue. Simple it may be, yet it appears to be a vital ingredient, if there is to be a real possibility of a shared spirituality on the urban margins.

This listening involves ongoing engagement in dialogue through conversation. Dialogue implies a mutual exchange of views between parties who do not fully agree, but who respect each other and are prepared to learn from one another. Indeed the presupposition is openness to the possibility of modification of views through the dialogue. Unless it is to become abstruse discussion, dialogue assumes real conversation, and such conversation presupposes the ability to listen in a profound and critical way. The listening needs to be critical so that a priority or option for the poor, which is meant to transform all participants in the exchange, does not harden into an ideology which may distort and exploit the very basis of the exchange.

If human beings in their very essence have the capacity for transcendence which leads them towards mystery, this capacity must operate when individuals engage with each other. For Karl Rahner the profound choice with which everyone is confronted is whether they will try to ground their own lives and cling to their own securities solely by their own efforts, or whether they will surrender their lives into the silent and often terrifying dark Mystery whom we call God. This choice is also one which faces the Church in its dealings with those on the margins where God may often appear to be at work in a disconcertingly novel form. Here the question arises: will the institution continue

to cling to its own familiar, fixed ways of relating to those on the margins, ways which actually serve to alienate rather than include? Or will the Church risk a new understanding of its spirituality by listening attentively to its members who already have established contacts on the margins? In so listening, will those in authority within the Church allow the possibility of transformation and policy modification by virtue of that experience – an experience which is not their own?

As a Church we are conscious of the urgent need to undertake the painful task of correcting our inadequacies and failures in living out the gospel commitment of Christ. As I have explained, one of the readily available sources of contemporary understanding is the experience of those Christians who are already involved among the marginalized. It is well established that a theology which is drawn out of people's own experience by sensitive facilitation helps to set them free to be fully Christian, fully human, fully alive. Christians working with the marginalized have discovered this to be true both for themelves and for the others. But the question arises as to whether those who hold authority in the Church are prepared to trust the experiences of the marginalized and those who work with them. Are these leaders prepared to give a concrete commitment to learn from them and to include their experiences willingly in the reflective and evaluative processes of the Church?

Christians who work on the margins of society are called to wait attentively, listening carefully to those with whom they work before embarking on the task of discerning appropriate action. Similarly, the institutional Church needs to adopt a waiting stance so as to perceive the divine initiative at work in its members engaged on the margins, and to receive back from those members the fruits of their experience. Within such a dynamic, there might indeed come about a deepening solidarity of the Church with the marginalized members of society. A Christian community that really reflected Christ's *kenosis*, or self-emptying, might find itself in a truly creative dialogue with those whom 'the world' has emptied out onto its margins.

This requires the dimension of listening to develop a new depth and ever finer attunement, a dimension likely to impel towards a level of darkness, powerlessness and helplessness. A deepening contemplative stance is vital to this deeper listening, if there is to be a real attunement to what is emerging from the experience of the marginalized. In order to be able to listen at such depth, it seems that we must be prepared to risk the ongoing darkness of our own inner depths. Here, as we acknowledge the reality of our own incoherence before the mystery of

God at work, lies the foundation for deeper involvement with God and with other human beings. From that position of essential vulnerability and powerlessness in our own contemplative depths, the clarity of resonance with others – particularly the marginalized – is peculiarly powerful. Indeed, before God, and in the face of the reality of the cross, the darkness of much that appears a chaotic void on the margins begins to have some inchoate and faintly conscious form.

In this context, too, the Christian spiritual tradition has rich resources to draw upon. Here may be found encouragement for those wrestling with the darkness of powerlessness, despair and the need for discerned action. The Christian tradition consistently affirms the integration of contemplation and action. There is abundant evidence that the deeper individuals are drawn into their own contemplative depths the more empowered they are for authentic and effective ministry. Indeed unless there is a more profound human understanding derived from that exploration of the inner ground of human existence, loving activity will tend to be superficial and deceptive. Thus there is a direct correlation between the deepening of an individual's interior life and the expansion of the capacity to understand and serve others, particularly the most marginalized. The interior journey, followed to its heart, leads to a new opening on risky involvement with others, but with an enhanced ability to listen and respond to the presence of God at work amongst the people.

> Christianity . . . had its roots in humanity and is consequently human. Ah yes; it had its roots in humanity. But where does humanity have its roots? It is human, precisely because there is in humanity something of the divine. And if there is something divine in humanity, under what conditions and in what manner is it to be found there? There you have the question that must never be lost to sight.[2]

NOTES

[1] Hamilton, T., *Solidarity: the missing link in Irish society* (Dublin: Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 1991), p 61.

[2] Laberthonnière, L., cited in Daly, G. *Transcendence and immanence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), p 231.