

# Sitting spirituality

## Where church and seeker meet

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UP TO THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL the sacraments, with their theologically-encoded rituals, were the preferred religious setting for celebrating the journey of human life – birth, reconciliation, healing, and relationship commitments. The type of self-conscious reflection on personal and corporate experiences, that today is singled out as the proper concern of spirituality, was rare. The *Handbook of spirituality for ministers*, edited by Robert Wicks in two volumes, is typical of the current focus of spirituality.<sup>1</sup> Trinity, grace, salvation and any particular sacrament are not treated. Instead, work, ageing, ecology, gender and suffering provide the umbrellas under which spirituality reflections gather. It could seem that the idea that spirituality has anything to do with ecclesial life and thought, let alone that it might be mediated through the churches, has been lost. Cut adrift from traditional organizing categories, what, one wonders, are the foundations for an ecclesial spirituality today?

Trends in three documents that emerged from the Second Vatican Council may give us a clue. *Dei verbum*, *Nostra aetate* and *Gaudium et spes*, all sharpen the focus on experience as the ground of divine revelation. *Dei verbum* is clear that in as much as the Church lives from revelation and faith it calls humanity to the experience of God. This document elucidates how it was through attending to the world they lived in that past generations came to know God. Growing in personal attentiveness and conversion is part of the structure of revelation.<sup>2</sup> In *Nostra aetate* the Council highlights how an experience of the Transcendent is also at the source of the other great world religions. It points out that each of them is characterized by a ‘certain awareness of a hidden power’ which ‘results in a way of life that is imbued with a deep religious sense’.<sup>3</sup>

One commentator on the Council, Roger Aubert, has observed that ‘(t)he great confrontation of the first session of the Council was not so much between conservatives and progressives, as between notionalists and existentialists’.<sup>4</sup> In the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, the choice made by the Council to follow the existentialist route is set before the Christian community as

the paradigm shaping the future of all aspects of ecclesial life, including spirituality. New social challenges, such as the changing nature of work and the all-pervasive influence of the media of communication, far from dismantling faith, are seen as catalysts, calling humanity to a more discerning sensitivity to God's action in our world. New questions need not be a threat but instead can cause us to take 'a hard look at all magical world-views and prevailing superstitions and demand a more personal and active commitment of faith'.<sup>5</sup> In being willing to experience from the inside the contemporary condition of humanity it is acknowledged that 'not a few have achieved a lively sense of the divine'.<sup>6</sup> It was almost inevitable therefore that in his closing speech to the Council<sup>7</sup> Paul VI would make a point of emphatically stating that the Council had the aim of fostering a renewed sense of God present in the experience of humanity.<sup>8</sup> For this reason he chose the parable of the Good Samaritan as the model for future ecclesial spirituality.

The language used subsequent to Vatican II also indicates a shift towards a greater attentiveness to the spiritual dimension of experience as a defining aspect of faith. Before the Council it was more common to speak of 'the spiritual life' than of 'spirituality'. The Council changed this and in the document on priestly formation, *Optatam totius*, issued a strong call for 'special training in spirituality' for seminary staff.<sup>9</sup> The 'spiritual life' perspective had tended to focus more on sodalities, devotions, sacramental celebrations – personal or communal. This turn to the word 'spirituality' indicates a shifting of attention to the entire range of experience that constitutes a life and to an increased awareness of how it is the script through which the story of continued divine presence is written.

To make this shift, the living of ecclesial spirituality in the future would seem to call for the Christian churches to imagine new ways of creating occasions where people may take the time to sit with life for long enough to be really attentive to the divine presence therein. The stories of Jesus 'sitting by the well' (Jn 4:6), Jesus sitting at the temple treasury (Mk 12:41), Mary of Bethany who 'sat at the Lord's feet and listened to what he was saying' (Lk 10:39) and the disciples who went forth to preach after the Spirit 'filled the entire house where they were sitting' (Acts 2:2), act as reminders of the key place of sitting in the biblical foundations of Christian spirituality. What directions might ecclesial spirituality take in the future if it was founded on these sitting stories?

*Sitting at the well*

The Johannine account of the encounter between Jesus and a woman at a well in Samaria is usually understood by scripture scholars today to depict a scene, not from the historical ministry of Jesus but rather, from the mission of the Johannine community in Samaria.<sup>10</sup> The projection of the scene back into the ministry of Jesus by the Gospel writer fulfils many functions. One may be that a correspondence is being established between a style of ministry which was part of the practice of Jesus and that the community is finding effective as it brings the message of Jesus to new towns and cities. This is the practice of taking time to sit in conversation with people.

The story of the woman at the well in Samaria is a model for the process of effective evangelization. After all this is the first story in John's gospel where the phrase that acts as the Johannine icon of the divine, 'I am' (Jn 4:26), appears. Like others who are called, the woman leaves everything, symbolized by her water jar (Jn 4:28). The message, which this woman shared with her neighbours in Sychar, led many others to believe in Jesus (Jn 4:39). What is most interesting about this Johannine account of effective evangelization for ecclesial spirituality today is that it is introduced and concluded by the activity of conversation. Jesus initiates a conversation about her religious world-view with the woman when she arrives at the well. The woman in turn shares her story of spiritual awakening with her neighbours. The accumulated effect of the two conversations is that many Samaritans come to believe in Jesus.

The scene which is painted in some detail in the story of the Samaritan woman recurs several other times in John's gospel. Through Jesus' conversations with Andrew, Peter, Mary, Nicodemus, Martha and many others, God's power to heal and liberate becomes effective. In the history of Christianity the powerful apostolic effectiveness of conversation in ecclesial life was recognized in particular by Ignatius of Loyola.

Thomas Clancy, in his monograph *The conversational word of God*,<sup>11</sup> has performed an invaluable service in retrieving the place of the practice of conversation in the ministry and spirituality of the Church. In particular, he has shown the central place of conversation in the spirituality and ministry of Ignatius of Loyola, as well as in those of his companions Francis Xavier and Pierre Favre. When Diego Laynez, one of Ignatius' first companions, remembered the early days of the Society of Jesus in Paris he remarked that frequent visits to the various places where each of the new companions lived, and spiritual conversations,

helped them all a great deal.<sup>12</sup> But as well as the practice of conversation building the bonds in the community it also served as an effective practice in ministry. Indeed one of the distinctive emphases of the Ignatian spirituality ministry is the prominence it gives to conversation. Two aspects of Ignatius' instruction regarding conversation may be helpful to consider if conversational practice is to be retrieved as a means of awakening the sense of God today. He is clear that conversation must begin around the issues that are to the fore for people – we have to go in by our neighbour's door. Secondly, he encouraged those engaged in the ministry of conversation to take the time needed to really understand how things appeared from the other person's point of view. The other person's hopes, anxieties and desires are the motions of new life growing but are susceptible to being easily crushed in their fragility.

The practice of Jesus and the tradition of Ignatius may act as foundations on which an effective ecclesial spirituality, rooted in attentive listening, may be built today. In my own research with residents of inner-city Dublin about their personal religious convictions, interviewees spoke of a desire for a more conversational and less administrative style of ecclesial ministry.<sup>13</sup> While some stated this positively through their reference to the greater ease which the ministers of religion today seemed to have in chatting, others made the same point by pointing to its absence: 'I just find that they (church workers) have it all wrong and they should be more like the Legion of Mary, coming round talking to you or something like that.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed for one younger woman, developing the ability 'to sit down and talk openly' was the great challenge facing those who would support others on the spiritual journey in the future. She arrived at this conviction from an experience she herself had with a priest who had helped her through the death of her mother by sharing with her how he had experienced the loss of his own father.

While some arrived at their convictions around conversational ministry through their experience within the Church, others arrived at it through their experience of counselling and therapy. What seems to be happening is that while a growing number of people are struggling to deal with many issues in their lives, as part of their overall desire to bring their lives into a unity around the convictions they hold, they find they do not have the structures available to them in the Church to support the tasks of personal conversion on the spiritual journey. Many reasons may be adduced to account for this dilemma. Two of the most significant may be the prevalence in Christian theology of a dualist

anthropology which separates the body from the soul, with ecclesial ministry focusing itself on the latter. The fact that spirituality effectively became the preserve of religious life also resulted in the failure to develop an effective ecclesial ministry in the service of the universal call to holiness. This absence of a support structure in the Church for the personal dimension of spirituality has also been well illustrated by the Irish psychotherapist, Gerry Myers.<sup>15</sup> In the face of the absence of an ecclesial ministry of conversation he has suggested that counselling is now becoming the context within which issues of spirituality are being explored. Myers cites the example of the man whose wife died in a car crash:

At the time of her [the man's wife's] death, Church came to the fore; the Church is very good with death. He was comforted by his priest, he was helped with the planning of the Church funeral, he heard the sermon and saw the grave being blessed. All these things were deeply meaningful to him . . . And yet I have sat with many men and women like him who, in the years after a bereavement, have not adjusted to their loss, and I can honestly say that in the working out of their bottled-up grief Church has hardly featured in anything other than a marginal way.

The observation of ecclesial vacuum in dealing with the spiritual questions thrown up by the struggles of everyday life was also echoed in a comment in my own research by a community addiction worker: commenting on the ecclesial response to the street drug culture and the related spread of HIV in inner city Dublin she remarked:

The only time it seems to me – aside from individual religious who are involved – the only time there is any public outreach or acknowledgement of someone's dignity is when they're dead, which I think is off the wall. And even then there's a veneer put on the circumstances which led to the person's death. It's never mentioned. Whether the families want it or not there's no outcry, and I find that appalling. Supposedly as Christians . . . we're supposed to be a voice for situations like that. Most of the time we're up against silence around it. So we need a spirituality that unflinchingly looks at life and brings us to the edges of reality, from within us and not from outside.

### *Sitting at the Temple treasury*

The second Gospel sitting story, which may be foundational for considering the nature of a contemporary ecclesial spirituality, is the

Marcan account of the widow's contribution to the Temple treasury. It has often been preached as an example of the selflessness that characterizes the disciple and as an invitation to total trust in God. However, contemporary scripture scholarship is raising the question whether this story is really praising the widow or lamenting her act.<sup>16</sup>

This question arises from an analysis of the story that has been developed by attending to the context as well as the text. The story is found in Mark 12:41–44. The preceding context is a warning comment by Jesus where he says, 'Beware of the scribes who like to go about in long robes and have salutations in the marketplace and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at feasts, who *devour widows' houses* and for a pretence make long prayers.' The story of the widow follows smoothly as an illustration of how widows are being robbed by the religious tradition, rather than being enriched by it. A further element of the context is supplied by the verses that immediately follow the story. There, looking at the Temple, Jesus remarks, 'You see these great buildings? Not a single stone here will be left in place; every one of them will be thrown down.' Ultimately her contribution to the temple treasury was an investment in a future without hope.

How might these comments of Jesus apply to a current temples/ecclesial spirituality? It may be that the story of the widow's mite acts as an invitation to sit and reflect on how a religious tradition may contain within itself the seeds of its own destruction. The fact that the central character in this story is a woman may raise the question of how women who still attend public worship in their communities are being disempowered by its form. The praying of the sanctoral cycle may provide an illustrative example. This focus on the liturgical celebration of the saints is inspired by the work of the post-modern thinker Edith Wyschogrod who has argued for the significant place of hagiography in shaping moral theory and action.<sup>17</sup>

Pertinent questions in undertaking this task may be to enquire of ourselves if we have noticed how many women and which women are remembered in the sanctoral cycle? What is celebrated about the women who are remembered? Which women saints are omitted? Remembering has always been at the heart of Christian liturgy. In remembering, the liturgy seeks to reclaim the significance of past events for the present.

Objective data to ground our reflection on these questions may be obtained by ascertaining how many men and how many women are remembered on solemnities, feasts and obligatory memorials in the sanctoral cycle. This data reveals that while seventy-five men (not

including companions for saints like St Paul Miki) are commemorated, only fifteen women (not including Mary, the mother of Jesus) are remembered over the course of the liturgical year. With the exception of Saint Barnabas all biblical male saints have either a feast or a solemnity. The two biblical female saints, Martha of Bethany and Mary Magdalene are obligatory memorials. Then there is the question of those who have been omitted. One of the noticeable categories is foundresses. While Vincent de Paul, John Baptist de la Salle and Ignatius of Loyola, to mention but a few examples, have been included, the failure to acknowledge the equivalent female contribution in such characters as Mary Mazzerello, Madeline Sophie Barat and Louise de Marillac is remarkable. Noticeable too is the fact that, apart from Doctors of the Church, many men have been included because of the learning they brought to the theological discussion of their day, men such as Cyril and Methodius. Similar female contributions were made by Hilda in her influence on the dating of Easter at the Synod of Whitby and Hildegard of Bingen in her prolific writings; but these have been ignored.

When we turn to look at how those women are remembered, the first noticeable characteristic is that nine out of the fifteen with obligatory memorials are designated as 'virgins'. Rosemary Radford Ruether has pertinently pointed out that the price paid for the extolling of virginal women has been the 'despising [of] all real physical women, sex and fecundity and [of] wholly etherealizing women into incorporeal phantasms'.<sup>18</sup> Saints Agnes, Agatha, Cecilia and Lucy, as well as being virgins are also martyrs. Saints Perpetua and Felicity are exclusively martyrs. While almost half of the women in the sanctoral cycle are commemorated for dying for what they believe in, this is only true for less than one-fifth of the men (fourteen out of seventy-five). Much has been written on the need to attend to a gender differential in theological reflection on sin and virtue. The life patterns celebrated in the sanctoral cycle can oppress in the same way as the widow in Mark 12 was disempowered by the ritual practices of her day. Women, it is implicitly suggested, are closer to God in laying down their lives than in taking them up for a just cause.

### *Sitting at the feet of Jesus*

A third perspective from which to ponder the alienation of contemporary spirituality from ecclesial life might be offered by the story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38–42. The two main characters each reflect a side of the current dilemma. Martha is busy doing her

familiar work. She may be considered as a representative figure of the Church facilitating the encounter with God through its sacramental celebrations. The fact that Martha is 'distracted with much serving' may be replicated in situations where there are efforts to provide the same level of sacramental services as were provided at a time when congregations were much larger. Mary is choosing another way, an unfamiliar one. She is sitting at the feet of Jesus. She may at first seem to be doing nothing. However, the author is careful to note that she is 'listening' to the teaching of Jesus.

In her attentiveness to Jesus Mary reflects a divine attitude. In the Hebrew scriptures a style of conversation with God that was marked by confidence in God's attentiveness prevailed. This type of confidence underpinned the psalmist's trust that God would listen, hear and answer.<sup>19</sup> Indeed the focus on hearing was one of the contrasting points between the Hebrew and neighbouring mystery religions. Devotees of the latter gave most attention to vision. By turning to hearing as the organizing metaphor for the relationship between God and humanity Hebrew religion was highlighting the dynamic interactive character of spirituality since obedience (*obauditio*) is the correlative of hearing (*auditio*). Thus inward-looking approaches to spirituality which only attend silently to the divine life in the inwardness of being will not facilitate the spiritual journey of people who want to cry out to God about the death which surrounds them in the external circumstances of life today. When a community gathers to pray it may not do so to become neutral or to put a space between itself and the horror which is around it. Christian liturgy may not simply be an ecclesial practice within which the sacramental rites are celebrated as personal moments of encounter with God. Mary of Bethany, who sits listening to Jesus, raises the foundational question of how moral conversion is facilitated in contemporary ecclesial worship.

### *Sitting in wait*

The final biblical scene of people sitting, to which we turn in this reflection on the ecclesial foundations for a contemporary spirituality, is the coming of the Spirit in Acts 2:1–4. This final sitting scene can serve to suggest that the present turn to spirituality has the potential to be a new Pentecost for the churches. At the moment there may be some confusion about where to go next. Perhaps the hope had been that liturgical renewal in itself would address what is being sought in new soul practices. As at the first Pentecost a new language of energy, colour and consciousness is being employed. What should the churches do



about these sometimes ecstatic utterances? How are they to understand the relationship of this new spirituality to the structures that carried the personal religious journey of people in the past? Perhaps the choosing of the deacons in Acts 6 offers a model for an ecclesial response. It shows how, when a new pastoral need emerged in the early Christian community, a new structure is put in place to meet it. Just as certain criteria were employed by the community to discern who might best serve the community in this new way, so the sitting stories above might provide criteria for the development of the ministry of spirituality today. It will be rooted in the practice of conversation. It will be gender sensitive in its forms. It will not neglect nurturing right relations, justice and solidarity. As in Acts, it would seem that the task of putting in place a ministerial structure to serve the soul quest of people today need not be a threat to other ministries but rather a necessary diversification of ministry to serve the changing needs of today's church membership.

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#### NOTES

1 R. Wicks (ed), *Handbook of spirituality for ministers*, two vols (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995/2000). This comment is merely indicative of a trend and in no way devalues the excellent articles in these volumes.

2 *Dei verbum*, 8.

3 *Nostra aetate*, 2.

4 This comment of Roger Aubert is quoted in H. Carrier, 'The Contribution of the Council to Culture', in R. Latourelle (ed), *Vatican II: assessment and perspectives*, vol 3, pp 442-465, quotation at p 446.

5 *Gaudium et spes*, 7.

6 *Ibid.*

7 'Discours prononcé par S.S. Paul VI lors de la session publique du 7 décembre', *La documentation catholique* 142 (1966), pp 59-66.

8 He referred to the Council's turn to experience as 'une observation capitale' (a fundamental observation), *ibid.*, 62.

9 *Optatam totius*, 5.

10 R. Brown, *The Gospel according to John*, two vols (Garden City/New York: Doubleday, 1966, 1970), vol 1, pp 175-176.

11 T. Clancy, *The conversational word of God: a commentary on the doctrine of St Ignatius of Loyola concerning spiritual conversation, with four early Jesuit texts* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978).

12 *Ibid.*, p 12.

13 B. Flanagan, *The spirit of the city: voices from Dublin's liberties* (Dublin: Veritas, 1999).

14 On 7 September 1921, Frank Duff founded the Legion of Mary. The members were originally engaged with visiting the cancer wards, but with increasing membership a second outreach was established to women involved in prostitution. By his death in November 1980 Frank Duff had succeeded in raising the consciousness of countless people to the possibility of bringing the good news of the Gospel into the lives of many who were poor or suffering, through the ministry of conversation.

15 G. Myers, 'Sign and reality: searching for the sacramentality of the Church', in S. MacRéamoinn and S. MacRéamoinn (eds), *The Church in a new Ireland* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1996), pp 41–53.

16 A. Wright, 'The widow's mite: praise or lament – a matter of context' in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 44 (1982), pp 256–265.

17 E. Wyschogrod, *Saints and postmodernism: revisioning moral philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990).

18 R. Radford-Ruether (ed), *Religion and sexism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1974), p 179.

19 Ps 3:4; 4:1; 18:6; 20:1, 6, 9; 22:2; 38:15; 55:2; 60:5; 69:13, 16, 17; 86:1; 118:21; 119:26, 145; 129:1; 143:7.