# Refounding

## Living in the middle time

*James Hanvey*

Between the exhilaration of Beginning . . .
And the satisfaction of Concluding,
Is the Middle-Time
Of Enduring . . . Changing . . . Trying . . .
Despairing . . . Continuing . . . Becoming.

*The middle time* Lona Fowler

REFOUNDING HAS BEEN A THEME MUCH DISCUSSED in recent years. The original context is the future of religious life but the debate has much wider implications for the Church as a whole. One side would interpret 'refoundation' as restoration. The other would see it as a call for reform. Often the two are thought to be synonymous. There is considerable moral force to a course of action if it can use one to legitimate the other. In fact, they are not necessarily the same. In general, restoration is conditioned by a particular vision of the past that, it is claimed, has been lost and needs to be regained. Usually, it is disguised as 'reform', namely, that there are abuses, or at least deficiencies, in the present state of things that must be corrected. But restoration is not necessarily corrective; in fact it may be the reverse.

In a similar way, the term 'creative fidelity' is a piece of mediating rhetoric deliberately elusive of definition. It attempts to describe an aspiration, intention, or disposition. However, Vatican II did not call for a reform or restoration but a recovery and renewal of the foundational charisms of religious orders and institutes. Before the Council, canon law had excluded any use of the founder's writings or materials that may express the charism of the Order or Congregation in the Constitutions and Rule. The intention was to preserve a strictly juridical document. The Council's call to return *'ad fontes'*, therefore, not only entailed a reappraisal of the sources of a charism but also signalled a subtle revaluation of the structures of the life. While it certainly intended a 'creative fidelity' it was necessarily naïve about the practical consequences.

It is an interesting indication of the nature of the problem that all attempts to capture, name, define or describe the process initiated by Vatican II should prove unsatisfactory. The question is why? It is not within the scope or the competence of this essay to attempt a complete answer to the question. It may, nevertheless, be possible to suggest the outlines of one. For the sake of clarity and succinctness I group our observations around the changing life of the Church, then sketch some of the features of modern culture that bear significantly upon the question. Finally, I conclude with some theological remarks in the light of the issues the discussion uncovers.

***Church within history and removed from history***

Vatican II represented a sophisticated construction of Catholicism. Officially, it understood itself as completing the work of Vatican I; hence the emphasis on ecclesiology. In reality, however, it was also practically reconstructing a Catholicism that had been shaped at Trent and gained confidence in the Baroque. While expansionist it was also defensive, not only in terms of the theological legacy of the Reformation but also the hostile secular culture that emerged from the Enlightenment.

Though it was a Church that celebrated its universality, it remained profoundly determined by the enormous cultural, intellectual, social and political upheavals that marked Europe in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Central was a subtle and nuanced vision of the meaning and purpose of human existence, both of which were articulated in a controlled but differentiated praxis of faith and liturgy. Whatever its limitations, this Church could effectively harness the huge energies of its members in a vast range of charitable, cultural and humane activities. At its heart was a sacramental understanding of reality which found concrete expression in the rhythms of the Church's liturgical life, especially in the Mass. It also cultivated a devotional life and practices which covered every level from the intellectual and adorational to the practical and social.

In his novel *Officers and gentlemen*, Evelyn Waugh articulates this experience, its attractiveness in a disintegrating social and personal world and its mysticism. While the war in the Middle East is caught in shambles and imbecilic incompetence the *Exsultet* is sung and the Easter bells are sounded throughout Christendom. It is a subtle and underlying theme that runs through the whole *Sword of honour* trilogy, representing the mystery and permanence of grace, the one coherent narrative of life and history. It is possible only because, whatever the

absurdities and contradictions of human conduct and international politics, the Church is sustained by a healing eternity. Complaining of the Church's failure to take a politically astute and courageous stand Guy Couchback faces his father's rebuke: 'My dear boy, you're really talking the most terrible nonsense, you know. That isn't at all what the Church is like. It isn't what she is *for*.' Later, in a letter to Guy, his father sets out his mystical but typically understated ecclesiology.

> But that isn't the Church. The mystical body doesn't strike attitudes and stand on its dignity. It accepts suffering and injustice. It is ready to forgive at the first hint of compunction . . . Quantitative judgements don't apply. If only one soul was saved that is full compensation for any amount of loss of 'face'.

Here is the axiom which at once locates the Church as the channel of grace within history and at the same time removes it from history's judgement. This is a Church that is robust in taking on a new crusade against atheistic communism and thereby legitimating the post-war order. This is the Church presupposed by Vatican II and within which it reads itself, an extraordinary creation that could make clear and extensive demands upon its members.

***The realignment of grace and nature***

The real revolution contained within the Council does not lie in proposing a new ecclesiology and the reform of the liturgy. It lies at a much deeper level precisely in the realignment of understanding between grace and nature. It is this that informs everything the Council proposes and becomes the basis for the radical shift in our experience of the Church and the world. It was already announced in *Apologetics and theology*, a lecture delivered by Henri De Lubac when he took up his position in the faculty of theology at Lyon in 1929.[1] It signalled a move from a dualistic defensive apologetics, the Church *contra mundum*, to an intrinsicist theology which understood the world to be already implicitly graced. It was this theology which the Council adopted and it grounds the 'new' spiritualities and dialogue with other religions that have arisen since. It sets the stage for a return *ad fontes* for it provides a new context – a life hermeneutic – for retrieval. Such a hermeneutic is crucial for grasping the nature of 'reading' an event or a text.

The other element is our experience of authority in the Church. However, the location of the papacy within a theology of collegiality

and the foundational position given to the laity did not reckon sufficiently with the paper mystagogy of the Ultramontanist tradition that was part of the experience and praxis of the Catholic Church. The undervalued papacy of Paul VI exemplifies the contradictions: while recontextualising the Petrine office within a collegial and conciliar ecclesiology, the Council nevertheless required the absolutist power of the papacy to interpret and implement its vision. The necessary structures of checks and balances and the theological tradition of interpretation are not sufficiently developed to permit a new understanding and practice to emerge. Hence the tensions that have been apparent in the wake of the Council.

Everyone who attended the Council and all those charged with its implementation were speaking, thinking, writing and acting out of their experienced ecclesial life *prior* to the Council. We now stand in a new hermeneutical moment. The Church within which Vatican II read and understood itself is no longer there, neither is its memory. What is the context within which it must now be read? The answer to this question is critical for the Church's self-understanding and for the future direction it takes. Consciously or unconsciously the theological struggles that characterize ecclesial experience at the present are attempts to provide that context.[2] If, however, my thesis of the life hermeneutic is correct, these theological conflicts, though significant, are not the most important elements. To come to a full appreciation of the new context we must seek elsewhere.

### *A new moment of interpretation*

Adam Phillips, in his essay, *On translating a person*, argues that psychoanalysis is a type of translation, 'an art of redescription'.[3] In this way a person comes to clarify their identity through language and to modify their personality. Of course, not only is there a struggle to find a language of self-expression, there is also the struggle to break free of an imposed language. 'To redescribe someone without apparently requiring their confirmation, or caring about their response, is clearly a form of control . . .'[4] Phillips develops his point by suggesting that therapy is not simply a matter of helping a person find their voice or language but also to disclose a disconcerting freedom. It may be that there is no original text and hence no essential self, 'there are just an unknowable series of translations; preferred versions of ourselves but not true ones.'[5]

This provocative and stimulating essay opens up a deep cultural and theological chasm. Until comparatively recent times, Christianity

provided the principal language of self and reality for Western culture; the Church was the *Mater et magistra* of the language and hence the reality in which we lived and thought. Indeed, one of the central reasons for Christianity's success was its capacity to generate a new language, one that not only had a strong metaphysical coherence but one that also mapped, indeed created, an interiority and self-consciousness that was not available before.[6] To be a Christian is to be baptized into a new language whose fundamental grammar is the double translation and inscription of the hypostatic union enshrined in the Chalcedonian definition. Christ is inscribed in me and I am inscribed in him. This creates a richly modulated discourse of the self and of the world underpinned by the interplay of interior and exterior relations held in coherence by their christological reference. The polarities of theocentrism or anthropocentrism are no longer viable or necessary. The Church is the keeper of the language and thus mediates not only the mysteries of the Divine but also of the human. Liturgy is the school in which this process of translation and inscription is enacted and renewed. The power of Christianity has lain in its ability to provide the dynamic of translation through which meaning is generated and conferred. However, it no longer possesses this hegemony of language. Christian discourse and the world which it expresses is now one discourse among many. Increasingly, the translation which it offers is either rejected as untenable or injurious to the self.

At one point in his essay, Phillips quotes from Marx to the effect that a person only learns a new language completely 'when he forgets his original language while using the new one'.[7] There is a sense in which our modern and post-modern era has forgotten, or is in the process of forgetting, the language of Christianity. This is not simply forgetfulness about the content of faith, it is also a loss of the world contained in that language. Part of this is a transformation of our relationship to the past and the continuity of culture mediated through the experience of living in a tradition. Once again, this 'forgetfulness' is not simply an intellectual act changing the conceptual map or landscape in which we come to locate ourselves. It also happens at the level of the life hermeneutic, that complex nexus of relationships and 'habits of the heart' which are social and collective as well as personal. We can discern two aspects of this process as it influences the Christian self and the community within which it is located and from which it takes its meaning.

***Modern and post-modern – the radicalizing of 'freedom'***

First, faced with a culture that is not only actively hostile but also indifferent, the community will have to struggle to retain its own memory and the language that sustains it. This will generate considerable tension because the Christian understanding of the human, the reality in which and through which what is human is sustained, expressed and generated, carries a totalizing dynamic.[8] Its concern with completeness and universality will resist being relativized or made partial, for to accept this would be to accept an undermining contradiction. Yet the very culture in which a multitude of discourses are available makes it increasingly difficult for this totalizing dynamic to be effectively maintained or to succeed. What is at issue here is a particular perception of freedom.

This introduces the second aspect. The attention to discourses and translations is not a mere rhetorical device; it expresses a structure of the way in which we come to articulate the self through a range of choices. It embodies the notion that there is no original text of the self, languages are either chosen or imposed. One way of seeing the distinction between modernity and post-modernity lies in the radicalization of 'freedom'.

Modernity can be understood as the advent of the power of personal choice which is seen as the expression of individual autonomy. There is a concentration on the individual as an entity in his or her own right, without reference to the past or future except as the realm of choices which express self-determination.

> One chooses among the widest possible field of possibilities, without any of the possibilities defining who one is. New roles are to be created to meet new needs or overcome old oppressions. The community in which one lives is to respect choices and act in a largely procedural way to keep possibilities open.[9]

Like Christianity, modernity has some notion of an 'original text', an agent self. It is part of the programme of a secular modernity to break the hegemony of the Christian text not only in claiming a greater veracity for its own version but also arguing that it offers a greater freedom. What is of interest is that Vatican II enshrines the Church's response to modernity. It embodies a highly nuanced and sophisticated articulation of the Christian understanding of this original text. It achieves this by an act of retrieval of those aspects within the tradition which act as a resource for the issues modernity presents. This is a

necessary strategy for the Church to maintain its own self-understanding predicated upon the notion of an abiding and universally valid revelation. However, it is a retrieval already conditioned by modernity and its questions.

Post-modernity radicalizes the project of 'freedom' by rejecting this presupposition and the foundationalism that it entails. For postmodernity what presents itself as an 'original text' is not the product of some inviolable essence but of power. Seen in this way, each text has to be scrutinized. As we noted, translations may be imposed upon us by a dominant class or group; the notion of 'original text' then comes to serve the power-interests of those who wish to assert its existence. The refusal to accept an 'original text' is seen as the only strategy for preserving our freedom and our power. It is a necessary resistance through which we exercise our self-determination; we are free to choose who we will be, we make it up as we go along.[10] This strategy has demonstrated its value in the way it has proved an effective critical tool for liberating silences and suppressed voices, the obvious example being that of women. It is also now part of the intellectual and cultural arsenal of all oppressed and marginalized groups.

Whatever the question we have about this critical strategy, it is now part of our life hermeneutic and thus part of the way we hear and receive the language the Church uses to express our sense of self and identity. The fact that it is part of our culture means that ecclesiastical language will also be subjected to a scrutiny of its power interests and oppressive effects. Though we may listen to the discourse the Church employs to express us, it will not be the only discourse we use or choose. That will be determined by many other factors, not least its power to express the truth we recognize about ourselves and the capacity of the discourse to heal, free, and generate new possibilities for self-understanding. Thus even within Christian discourse there is a conflict which goes to the heart of faith itself. Living in the Church is as much an experience of conflict of discourses as is the culture we live in.

### *Post-modern insecurity*

If Waugh captures the ontological security of a pre-Vatican II world, in his novel *Miss Wyoming*, Douglas Coupland expresses the ontological insecurity, the fluidity and deracination of postmodern life.

> Ryan fiddled with the rearview mirror outside the passenger door. 'You know, John, when you grow up these days, you're told you're going to have four or five different careers during your lifetime. But what they

> don't tell you is that you're also going to be four or five different people along the way: In five years I won't be me anymore. I'll be some new Ryan. Probably wiser and more corrupt, and I'll probably wear black, fly Business Class only, and use words like "cassoulet" or "sublime". You tell me. You're already there. You've already been a few people so far.
>
> 'But for now – for now me and Vanessa really do love each other and maybe we'll have kids, and maybe we'll open a seafood restaurant. I don't know. But I have to do it now – act quickly, I mean – because the current version of me is ebbing away: We're all ebbing away: All of us. I'm already looking backward. I'm already looking back at that Ryan that's saying these words.'[11]

Here is a world in which the translation of the self has become the tyranny of production and invention. It is a hollow freedom for it brings no fulfilment. Yet Ryan's voice while one of acceptance is also one of resistance. Buried in the endless disposability of roles is the search for love that ties us to another; the search for a relationship that will anchor us in the flux. To gain any foothold here Christian language will have to demonstrate that its claims are not against freedom, its translation is not the imposition of a version of self but the very means of giving the self its own uniquely personal voice.

This is not an easy task, and it remains to be seen if Vatican II with its translation of modernity can provide the resources for the new challenge. It cannot do this by a purely essentialist understanding of self that has no historical context or memory and is disembodied from community. The self that I am is not some abstract *esse*, or simply continuity of self-consciousness in personal memory. The 'I' that I am is an open project but also shaped by a context, a tradition, both personal and communitarian, of languages and readings within which and through which the 'I' becomes 'me'. Freedom too must have a context for it is relational reality that comes to existence in agency. The version which suppresses or erases the historical reality of existence, that offers forgetfulness as a condition of freedom, leaves the 'I' vulnerable and exposed to other tyrannies, has no effective way of sustaining itself beyond the 'now' of its choices: it is compelled to choose in order to be. It can neither escape the tyranny of performance nor the control of those forces that provide the menu of 'choices' at life's banquet. The 'self' has become part of the logic of late capitalism and is now produced for consumption.

***The geography for 'creative fidelity'***

In describing this changed context, I have tried to indicate some significant features of the landscape that lies below the surface of the Church's life. This is the geography within which the impetus for 'refounding' or 'creative fidelity' is played out. The Council is no longer read within the experience of a Tridentine Church's accommodation to modernity, but as a post-Vatican II church caught in a postmodern culture. It is a much more fissiparous internal culture than we are prepared to recognize.

As well as the movements that come from the secular world, there is an intense awareness of cultural difference and its importance within the Church itself. The community is now involved in a constant act of translation. This in turn has made the community much more conscious that its universalism cannot mean a uniformity. Each culture will present different problems of translation and emphasis; for some, it may be the question of justice and poverty, for others the possibility of an absolute and universal truth and for many it will be the very existence of other totalizing formative cultural languages, religious and secular. From the many discourses that are present, the Church also learns new ways of speaking and hence a new self-understanding.

The task of being a Christian cannot be the silencing of other discourses in favour of one 'authorized version'. Such a move is not only impossible but a misunderstanding of that incarnational grammar that empowers Christian speech. The nature of Christian discourse with its totalizing drive is not a monologue that is imposed but a creative translation which sustains polyphony. Essentially, the discourse of the Church is always 'glossolalia'. To grasp this has far reaching implications for epistemology and engagement with the society in which we live. Glossolalia is able to maintain a variety of discourses without falling into relativism or weakening the communication of Christian revelation. It is a work of translation and understanding at its most generative because it is not a forgetting but a constant *anamnesis* of the Christ-event in every discourse.[12] Although not exclusively located in religious life, as a charism and mark of the Spirit, it is found there. This appreciation is central to the work of refounding; it is also pivotal to understanding something about the nature of the Church itself. To this we now turn.

***Refoundation and creative fidelity***

Marx's argument that one can only express oneself freely in forgetting the original tongue is part of an argument about the nature of

revolution. Revolution is a sort of rupture with the past but this is only made possible by simulating continuity. The implication is that the revolution is complete when this strategy is no longer needed. But this, of course, is precisely what is ruled out in the life of the Church and its understanding of tradition. It is ruled out because the Christ-event is permanently generative. The relationship is not to a historical past but to a Christ present and represented in every movement of history. The Church is not a remembering of a past Christ but a remembering of *itself* in the presence of the Risen Lord. In so doing the Church is constantly a becoming through remembering and hence establishes itself in history as witness. For this reason, the Church is constituted in the command, 'Do this in memory of me.' Remembering in obedience to the Lord's command is to come into a present not to reconstruct a past. However, this *anamnesis* must necessarily be an entering into the 'the presence of the past' also; it is not absent or silenced for it is there, precisely as that act of testimony to the abiding presence of Christ, which makes the present of the community possible.[13] This is why any movement in the Church which seeks to return to 'original text' in the sense of a point or moment of primal purity is essentially a falsification of the Church's memory. There is no 'original text' to which we can return apart from that which is constantly being written by the present and Risen Lord through the witness of his Spirit.

The Church that speaks out of this remembering is always being translated for it is not we who translate Christ but he who translates us. This is both subversive and generative. It resists our attempts to impose a fixed translation or version and in doing so it opens up the possibility of new discourses. Both refounding and the possibility of a creative fidelity arise out of this fundamental action of the Church. They are modalities of *anamnesis*. Religious founders are those who have allowed themselves to be translated. Through this inscription of Christ in them they in turn reinscribe Christ in their culture and epoch. But this prophetic *anamnesis* is only possible if founders and their congregations have Christ at their core. Only in the living text, the discourse that continues in history and shapes it, can the process of witness and inscription take place.

In this sense 'refoundation' is an invitation to enter into this space not, as we have said, for reform or restoration as such, but to become part of the process of remembering; to be retranslated. It is a moment of encounter with the ever-active Spirit whose work it is. In opposition to Marx, Christian radicalism lies in the refusal to forget the mother tongue. It is out of *anamnesis* that the constructive work receives its

energy. As I have argued this is not a movement of restoration, a return to a past form, but a movement into an open, unpredictable and uncontrollable future. It is an experience of our poverty and our freedom to allow ourselves to be translated. In this the work of refounding arises and, in our refusal to forget, it is accomplished in creative fidelity. This is the pilgrimage of living in the middle time by which we are inscribed in Christ.

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NOTES

1 'Apologetics and Theology' in *Theological fragments* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1989), pp 91–104.

2 See the lecture of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 'Sobre la eclesiología de la "Lumen gentium". Pronunciada en el congreso internacional sobre la aplicación del Concilio Vaticano II. Organizado por el comité para el gran jubileo del año 2000' (also in Italian). Ratzinger is critical of interpretations given to the Church as 'The People of God' and argues for 'Communio'. He is also concerned to explicate Vatican II's understanding of the Church subsisting in the Catholic Church.

3 Adam Phillips, *Promises, promises* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p 131.

4 *Ibid.*, p 140.

5 *Ibid.*, p 143.

6 Averil Cameron, in her stimulating and persuasive work *Christianity and the rhetoric of empire: the development of Christian discourse* (University of California Press, 1991), argues that the success of Christianity in the Empire lay in its ability to generate a powerful and coherent discourse, a systematic world-view which eventually became both the framework for understanding the world and describing it. She argues that it begins 'from a situation of openness and multiplicity, its spread produced a world with no room for dissenting opinion. It was not an intrinsically more religious or more spiritual mentality that enabled Christianity to prevail in the medieval culture of Byzantium and the West, so much as the fact that the Christian church and Christian discourse had achieved the position of chief carriers and arbiters of culture.' p 221.

7 The quotation is from *The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. It may be found in the Marx-Engels *Werke* (East Berlin, 1957) vol 8, pp 115–123, and in *The portable Karl Marx* (Penguin, 1983), selected and translated by Eugene McKenna, pp 287–323.

8 See Cameron, pp 220–221.

9 David Kolb, *The critique of pure modernity: Hegel, Heidegger and after* (University of Chicago Press, 1986), p 6.

10 Of course, there are inherent problems with this: 'who is the agent that chooses?' No matter how hard we try it seems literally a self-contradiction to maintain that the self is a purely linguistic phenomenon. There is something resilient in the sense of self and its irreducibility.

11 Douglas Coupland, *MissWyoming* (Flamingo, 2000).

12 We should not forget the christological form of understanding that takes place in the event of the *glossolalia* at Pentecost, which makes it more than a commentary on Joel 3.1–2. For a discussion of the whole structure of the event see Max Turner, *Power from on high: the Spirit in Israel's restoration and witness in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), pp 267–315.

13 Recent theology has brought the importance of memory as constitutive of the Church to the fore. The work of J.B. Metz is of particular significance in this regard. However, the *memoria passionis* that Metz advocates in *Glaube in geschichte und gesellschaft* (Mainz, 1977), needs to be understood as a soteriologically effective act if it is the making present not only of the crucified Jesus but the resurrected Lord. It is this that ensures that the *memoria passionis* is a pneumatological event not a cultic act of remembering. For a discussion of the significance of Metz's work in this regard see Bruce T. Morrill, *Anamnesis as dangerous memory* (Collegeville, Minnesota, 2000); for an important theological statement on the soteriological action of the Church in healing the memory of history see *Memory and reconciliation: the Church and the faults of the past* (Vatican, Rome: International Theological Commission, December 1999).