

## **Discipleship and the Shape of Belonging**

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In addition to being highly honoured that you should have invited me to take part with you in this discussion of Discipleship and the City, I would like to say that I am personally both very grateful for the opportunity, and not a little nervous. Let me explain both the gratitude and the trepidation. The gratitude is because you give me a splendid opportunity to try to thrash out, in the accountability of public discussion, and with many better examples for me to learn from, something which I have been trying to think about for some years now.

I dare to call my work that of preacher, and teacher. My major undertaking over the last few years has been to try and come up with an adult introduction to the Catholic faith, an inductive, twelve-session course, following the thought of René Girard. I have been attempting to give an account of our faith in such a way as makes it both attractive and easier to pass on, one that is entirely orthodox, and yet fresh. In fact I have given this course, still in the process of development, in a number of different settings, and hope to do so again before long. And naturally, there would be no point to such preaching and teaching if it did not lead to some sort of discipleship in those who hear it. Discipleship not of yours truly, but of the One at the heart of the preaching.

One of the things which people who have either heard me teach, or read my stuff, sometimes say to me is: “We get the Christianity bit, and we even get the bit about which you are adamant, about how there’s no following Christ which doesn’t bring with it a certain ecclesial belonging. Now can you tell us how to survive the Church that is actually there! We notice that when people belong to anything, they can take seriously the bits that are to be taken seriously, ignore the silly bits, not be scandalized by the really bad bits. That is to say, they know how to love what they belong to and somehow grow in dignity and purpose through their belonging. But how do we do this in the Church nowadays, where the language of excommunication rains down so easily, and where some find

it so easy to qualify others as “not really Catholics”? How do we find both the sense of belonging and the capacity to relativize things, to get them in their proper perspective, which is the sign of adulthood? How do we make sense of the bizarre alternative, shrinking, universe of the clergy, the strange double-messages which emerge from the Vatican, or at least are fed to us as if emerging from the Vatican? How do we cope with the information overload which is supposed to be teaching us, and yet which tends just to flatten everything out so that war, contraception, the love of God, clerical celibacy, the death penalty, liturgical translations, and altar girls flow mind-numbingly by like a conveyor belt with game-show prizes which you get to take home if you remember them all? In short, what do we need to understand in order to read between the lines of Rocco Palmo’s *Whispers in the Loggia* and so work out what’s really going on?”

Well, this sort of question is one which anyone who hopes that the result of his or her preaching is discipleship is going to be faced with sooner or later. Any healthy ecclesiology must nowadays include not only the traditional questions of Church Order, and the life of the sacramental signs resulting from Christ’s foundation of the Church, but also some treatment of the structure of desire and imagination in the members with relation to the sort of institutional life which is their current Church order. And that, for me, is at the heart of the questions concerning discipleship at which we will be looking over the next few days.

However, I mentioned not only my gratitude for the chance to think about this, but also my trepidation. And this is because there is, of course, no realistic way of talking about our discipleship of Christ without being self-implicatory. All priests in the English-speaking world have passed down to us like an heirloom Chaucer’s pithy reminder of what a good priest is about in his portrait of the Parson. He received the highest praise any of us could aspire to:

But Cristes loore and his apostles twelve  
He taughte, but first he folwed it hymselfe.<sup>1</sup>

It would be lovely to be able to say, as St Paul could, “be imitators of me, as I am of Christ<sup>2</sup>”, but many of us, lay or clergy, are at least as much obstacles to the following of Christ as we are encouragements. And of course, by our preaching or teaching we are not merely supposed to be

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<sup>1</sup> The concluding lines of the Parson’s portrait, from *The Canterbury Tales*.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Cor 11, 1

passing on ideas, or information. We are attempting to get across that a Happening has irrupted into our world; that It matters; that we are at least beginning to find ourselves altered by exposure to this Happening; and that therefore part at least of the truth of what we are talking about should be able to be detected in the way we are undergoing something. This bearing witness to something by becoming a sign of it having happened, and which points towards it, often in ways of which we are not aware, but which other potential imitators can pick up, is rigorously inseparable from any talk about discipleship.

Now anyone who takes some responsibility for this business of pointing another towards the way of Christ has to become aware that he or she can get in the way of the imitation, can get in the way of the discipleship, can become a scandal, a source of stumbling to the one who would follow Christ. And learning to avoid giving scandal to such potential followers is a great deal of what discipleship is about. Giving scandal is where I am not giving an example which will lead the person imitating into an uninterrupted following of the One who we are all called to follow: the One in whom there was no guile, no double-bind, the One who allows desire to become uncomplicated and untrammelled by fear and death. Instead of facilitating this, I am pointing someone down a route which will lead only to their confusion and unhappiness, their being locked into bumping their souls constantly into double-binds which paralyze them and lead them into fear and death.

So, given that you have offered me the privilege of participating in discussion of this subject in a Catholic University, I would like to issue the equivalent of one of those health warnings by which the Surgeon-General beautifies cigarette packets. Not, I hope, “This theologian can cause impotence if inhaled”, but rather: “This theologian occupies uncertain ground. Do not be quick to follow him.” I feel that I should say this since, just when the Pontifical Theological Commission is getting round to acknowledging the non-existence of limbo, I find myself occupying a place which is uncommonly like limbo, and I do so both as priest and as theologian. Let me explain.

I am a priest, but, as far as I can tell, am of no juridical standing. Which is an anomaly, since one is supposed to have juridical standing in order to function as a priest, some line of accountability. I wish I did have, but I don't. And I don't know where to start in finding a proper line of accountability. Then, I aspire to be a theologian, but effectively work as a freelancer. This too is an anomaly, since theology is an ecclesial discipline, presupposing structure, collegiality and oversight, so to be a

“freelance theologian” sounds to me very much like a contradiction in terms. However, that is my reality: I inhabit not one, but two non-places. And I would be loath to think that I am trying to persuade any one to imitate me in this. I am well aware that I am treading on what might turn out to be quicksand, and I don’t want to encourage anyone to follow me onto it until it’s pretty clear that it is part of the safe space, the rock on which to build, offered to us by the Gospel.

My reason for inhabiting these non-places, for beginning tentatively to build on what may be a dangerously firm-seeming crust rather than the rock I hope it will turn out to be, is fairly simple: I have come, after a long time of search, study and struggle, to believe that the current characterisation of gay people held by the Roman Congregations is not true. Although this is not in itself a very important matter, it is one which does go to the heart of the way the clerical set-up runs in our Church. In my case, it means that I have discovered that, since my vows and promise of celibacy were taken at a time when I was bound by a false conscience, I have no valid vows or promises, but am nevertheless validly ordained, and indeed, love being a priest, a preacher and a teacher. I’m not sure that I can properly make such promises or vows within the juridical context offered by the Church while it continues to insist on what I regard as a false characterization of the one making the vow or promise. Which is why I think that the Vatican was probably right to say the Church should no longer try to induce gay men into priestly life, since it cannot at this time offer an honest gay man a limpid context for vows or promises. I agree with them that we should not lead people into double-binds.

And the same is true with relation to being a theologian. I take very seriously that becoming a theologian, and especially a priestly theologian, is an ecclesial vocation, and indeed hope that I show signs of being ecclesial in my writing and teaching. I don’t want to make a living by being a theologian in a secular faculty, where being a priest would mean nothing, and where the mode of production and system of rewards is determined by the regard of the Academy, itself just as full of rules, anathemas, rivalry and ambition as any ecclesiastical set-up. Others less suggestible than I have shown themselves able to avoid these temptations, but I fear that in my vanity I would be unable to avoid the temptation to “make a career” and to “become someone” in the eyes of my secular employers and colleagues, making of them, effectively, my “Church”. And that would be the death of my vocation as a Catholic theologian.

On the other hand, since I am open in my disagreement with what I take to be a third-order teaching in the Magisterium’s current hierarchy of

truths, it seems to me fair enough that until, and unless, there is a sufficient clarity that my opinion is one which can legitimately be held by Catholic theologians without causing scandal to the faithful, or until I can be disabused of my opinion by evidence that it is not true, I not be invited to teach in a Catholic theological faculty, even though that is what I aspire to. So, I find myself hoping that my ecclesial vocation as a theologian will bear fruit through my accepting being a non-person in the regard of the Church for the moment, rather than aspiring to become a “someone” through the regard of those outside it. But that is my hope, nothing firmer than that.

Well, excuse me for this detour, but it seemed to me that not to set out warning flags around the ground this presenter occupies would be a failure to take seriously the way in which any presentation on discipleship must implicate the presenter and challenge them to come into the light so that be it may be seen whether what they do is wrought in God<sup>3</sup>.

So, to the matter at hand: My guess is that when you heard the word “Discipleship” in the title of this conference, and of this lecture, you intuited, for however brief an instant, that it was “Christian Discipleship” or “Discipleship of Christ” that was to be discussed. And, at least as far as this talk goes, you were right. But isn’t it strange that a word which is in itself object-neutral has come to acquire a quick-flash association with Christ? In principle, at least, discipleship could be of any model at all: Ho Che Minh, Ethel Rosenberg, Marian Anderson or Saladin. What is odd is that because the followers of Christ are called his disciples, so discipleship has come to be particularly associated with him, as though there is a special form of religious following called discipleship which is an especially good thing and different from any other form of following. Well, my hunch is that when ordinary words become “religious”, it is time to take them to the laundry. Because what has usually happened is that they are being taken out of their normal field of application in interpersonal relationships and given a patina of specialness. This “special” quality then often mystifies at least as much as it illuminates.

So, let us go the inverse route. Let us look at the ordinary before we look at the special. I would like to suggest to you that there is no such thing as *not* being a disciple. Discipleship is not, in the ordinary run of things, a voluntary option. It is, on the contrary, a necessary precondition for being a viable, socialized adult human being. We are massively competent imitating machines, and from the very first time our mirror neurons get

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. John 3, 21.

fired in our infancy, which they do by adults doing things which we can see, we repeat, and imitate endlessly. It is others, whom we imitate, who induct us into gestures, into language, into developing a memory, and thus having the beginning of a sense of self over time. It is others who fire off in us what enables us to develop the very elaborate forms of social interaction which constitute human culture<sup>4</sup>. And, in fact, so advanced and successful are we as learners and imitators that we often do not perceive quite how many automatic responses to actions of others we engage in without in any way feeling that our autonomy is threatened. We avoid collisions in crowded spaces, we yawn when others yawn, our facial gestures communicate reactions which are quite non-deliberate, and over which we have limited control. In all these situations, the social other is prior to the self. It is not, if you like, that there is simply a stable “I” who am interacting with others from a position of freedom. Rather, the relatively stable “I” is a symptom of the massively successful prior social interactions which bring it into being and sustain it<sup>5</sup>.

This of course goes with something which seems counterintuitive, but as far as I know, is simply true about this species of ape which we are: what we call the “self” is in fact something received *through the eyes of others*. It is what we see reflected back at us in the eyes of another that calls us into being. And this is something which developed over many thousands of years among our pre-human ancestors: our eyes not only see the other members of our race, but these eyes of ours see *them seeing us*, and learn from what they pick up *reflected in them* who *we* are. Our “selves” are reflexive. Which means that what we call our “self” is not a given which grows inside us autonomously. It is, if you like, the making viable in this body of the one who is being called into being by the interaction of the social other with this body over time.

The social other which calls us into being is not simply an individual other, looking at us very hard until an individual self “takes” in us. We do, for the most part, have individual others, parents or guardians, who do look at us and talk at, and then to, us for a long time, and it is very hard work for them. But we are, if you like, far more absorbent, or promiscuous, in our learning than to be able to be formed by so few people. We pick up not only what people want us to pick up, but also far

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. the article on Mirror Neurons in *Scientific American Mind*, Vol. 17, No. 2, April/May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Henri Grivois “Adolescence, Indifferentiation, and the onset of Psychosis” in *Contagion*, Vol. 6, 1999 and his reference to Paul Dumouchel’s work *Émotions: essai sur le corps et le social* (Synthélabo: Le Plessis-Robinson, 1995).

more than what they know they are communicating to us, what they know they are hiding from us, and what they don't know they are hiding from us, about themselves, and about the world. We are, as a race, astoundingly adept at filling in the dots, at providing as known things we intuit between the gaps of what we see or are told. In fact, incredibly fast we become socialized into the whole pattern of desires which runs our wider social group, and of which our parents and guardians are themselves symptoms, symptoms who partially go with the flow, and partially react against it in an effort, which becomes increasingly vain as we become more viable, to protect us from its stormier waves. Our "self" is in fact an extraordinary exercise in negotiating the many different "others" which have formed it, and which are built into it automatically. The relation between that "other" which is the self, and the "others" which have formed it and are still imbued in it is of course absolutely vital to our health, stability, sanity and so on.

I hope this makes it clear why it is that we are all, and without thinking about it, prone to discipleship. "Show me who I am!" is not a stupid question, asked by the dumbest kid in the class who can't work it out for him or herself. "Show me who I am", whether spoken or not, is a driving dynamo of desire in all of us, and asking it is a sign that the ability to be a disciple has not yet got caught up in the adolescent fear of being noticed to be an imitator, when the really cool thing is to be "so not into imitating other people, their hairstyle, their fashions", cool like... Well, that's the give-away: the maximally cool person is the one who seems to be completely indifferent to the desires of others. But that maximally cool person is in fact entirely dependent on the others imitating him to keep up his apparent poise and self-possession, and will quickly come to have a contempt for those who imitate him, since he is half aware that there is nothing "there" beyond a negotiating ruse. The contempt itself will betray the dependence on the other. Or, should a bigger star swim into the galaxy, one capable of exercising a stronger gravitational pull, so that the regard of the others becomes redirected, watch Ms Cool's self-possession and poise disintegrate!

Please notice that I am speaking to each of you as if each one of us is not only an individual person, which we are – we are *this* body, with *this* life history over time – but also as though in each one of us the set of relationships between an individual and the crowd is already inescapably present. Each of us is a "we" as well as an "I", and in fact when we use the word "I" it is usually a particular inflection of the "we", a particular statement of the state of relations between the "We" and this body over time which is negotiating in their midst. None of us says "I am" in the

absolute. Each one of us is the space of negotiation over time of a multiplicity of different possible identities.

Now I would like to take this a step further, and say that this search for “Show me who I am!”, this “Notice me with approval!” is not only fundamental to all of us, but it guarantees both such stability as any of us enjoy, and our sense of “belonging”. In other words, discipleship, imitation in view of being given an identity by someone else, and belonging, are intimately linked. Someone *belongs* whose sense of being is peacefully dependent on the regards of those with whom they live. You cease to belong if you begin to feel the draw of a different regard, one from a different group, and especially one which is in some rivalry with your current group. You cease to play happily with other ten year olds when you start to feel the draw of a group of older kids whose regard teaches you to despise the kind of things you have been doing quite happily until recently, and teaches you to aspire to a new belonging, with new sorts of games. Or, you can cease to belong, if for whatever reason, the negative regard of the weathervanes of your belonging is turned on you. Your parents, in all innocence, bought you the wrong-coloured sports bag, or the wrong brand of jeans, and you know what this means: that the dis-approving regard of all those with whom you aspire to be will be directed at you, and you will be cast into outer darkness for ever.

But mostly, there is a certain stability to belonging. The stability is actually a constantly shifting stability, and it requires constant energy to stay still, but we know how it works. We imitate, and then we fall out, we find new models to imitate, or people imitate us. We learn the rules of surviving in the group, and they are really quite simple. We can sum them up normally in one word: reciprocity. I give, and I expect to be given. I invite, and I expect to be invited. If I do something hostile, I expect hostility to be meted back to me, so I take measures to avoid it, or shift responsibility somewhere else. There is in fact a constant circle of reciprocity going on in any form of belonging. Even negative reciprocity is a kind of belonging, and groups can form, like Montagues and Capulets, whose negative reciprocity is very important for their belonging. And in fact, take them out of each others orbit, and they will collapse into meaninglessness, since their belonging depended on having the other who was a sign of what “not belonging” meant, being near at hand. If one can talk of a golden rule of belonging in this sense it is: don’t break reciprocity, and don’t allow the exchange of favours to be transformed into an exchange of blows; but if it looks as though it’s going to be, anticipate the change of wind and get your strike in first. Or, in other words: do unto others as they do to you, and only very occasionally,

and when you're quite sure you're among friends, stand back and wonder what it is that you would like them to do to you, and do that to them instead, in an effort to create a more positive reciprocity.

The ideal person in this sort of world would be the person who could switch on and off their imitative capacity at will. They would be able to imitate, which is how they would learn an enormous amount very fast, and so be enabled to belong, become socialized, learn how to play the game. And yet, at the first sign of the cycles of reciprocity turning nasty – which means the threat of vengeance – they would be able to turn off their imitative capacity and no longer be run by such revenge and rivalry. Imitation would always be for learning and never for rivalry. But in fact there are no such ideal persons. For in exactly the same way as we imitate, we find ourselves sucked into rivalry without, as far as we can tell, ever doing anything wrong. It only needs the tiniest hint of disapproval in the eye of a much-admired model for us to redouble efforts to please, and end up imitating them so well as to be seen as a threat: imitation will be interpreted as rivalry which means that the whole of the reciprocity will turn negative, and the exchange of favours will become an exchange of slights, a mutual casting out into the outer darkness with each party being convinced that it was the other who started it.

As a general rule, we humans are pretty good at setting up the rules to protect ourselves against ourselves within this sort of belonging. We come up with laws to limit the right to revenge to what is strictly proportional to the damage done. And we seek to avoid the immediacy of vengeance by the sleight of hand of having relatively impartial law enforcement agencies whose job it is to ensure that the heat of reciprocity is slowed down by introducing ever less partial seeming ways of determining what happened, whose fault, if anyone's, it was, and how compensation is to be adjudicated. We have a knack of making sure that the sort of people who get it in the neck are the sort of people who won't have the power to retaliate. And thus, most of the time, in most cultures, do we keep the peace, and have forms of belonging which keep us, if not happy, at least engaged in relatively harmless-seeming games of prestige, dignity, and respect, the bitterer edges of which we are very good at ignoring in as far as they do not bite too close to home. As King Lear says in an idyllic moment, thinking of an imagined retirement with his daughter before the final fury of the play turns all such hopes to bloodied dust:

so we'll live,  
and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh

at gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
talk of court news, and we'll talk with them too –  
who loses and who wins, who's in, who's out...<sup>6</sup>

Well, into this world of relative stability, of mostly controlled imitation and rivalry, hospitality and vengeance, Christ comes crashing like a comet which has strayed out of some distant galaxy. And his invitation to discipleship is a terrible gash, forever ruining the relative stability of the party. If I have taken my time to get around to talking about discipleship of Christ, it is because I wanted to bring out just how weird a thing it is. For its key feature is that it undoes the central rule of logic which governs all induction into belonging: it undoes reciprocity.

Let us start from the end, which is in itself odd. Mostly we imitate people who are, just as we aspire to be, “on the way up”, growing, becoming more successful, more beautiful, richer, stronger, more prestigious and so on. By definition most of these people are not yet “at an end”. It is their glamour, not their cadavers, which we imitate. In the case of what Christ is offering us, it is just the reverse, for the central thing which he is offering is living without death, something which no one else, before or since, has ever offered or made available. And the form of this offer is not to push his contemporaries towards some heroic act of sacrifice, assuring them of celestial rewards, while quietly watching from the sidelines. It is to have undergone death in advance for us in quite specific circumstances so as to remove for ever the fear of it, and the way it drives us. It is, if you like, to create spacious mansions of being indwelt by the living God, there where others would see only death and loss.

I want to stress this, since it is really what is absolutely central about the discipleship of Christ. He makes no demands from us until he has created something for us first, and it is only then that he asks us to imitate him: “As I have loved you, so love one other”<sup>7</sup>. This means that never, at any stage, will we be in rivalry with him, or with anyone else in order to survive, since survival is not what it's about, nor do we get anywhere by trampling on anyone else. There is nowhere to get to, since the whole purpose of the imitation is to undergo death in advance of our biological finitude, so as to live thereafter as if death were not, or, in the phrase of my friend Sebastian Moore, “with death behind us”.

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<sup>6</sup> *King Lear*, Act 5, Scene 3.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. John 13, 34; 15, 12.

So, the first rule of reciprocity is already pre-broken. Gratuitous benevolence has started to turn reciprocity on its head. He has done something for us which no one could ever repay, or return. And he is not remotely interested in our repaying or returning it anyhow. What he asks us to do is to multiply the gratuity, by doing other gratuitous things to and for others without any hope of repayment. Notice what this looks like: a command to create gratuity rather than expect reciprocity, so:

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your kinsmen or rich neighbours, lest they also invite you in return, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.<sup>8</sup>

and also, the reverse of that, a command not to engage in expected negative reciprocity, but instead to be gratuitous:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil... You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

And of course this is massively destabilizing to any form of human belonging. In fact, it reveals quite to what an extent all our discipleships and all our belongings, all our constructions of identity are based on, dependent on, - which means secretly run by -, death, and its fear. But this is where we start in discipleship of Christ: we start from death having been rendered moot as a factor in our construction of identity by Jesus having occupied the place of shame and death without being run by it, and having been witnessed on the third day and thereafter as being a dead man who, without ceasing to be dead, was alive.

Discipleship of Christ is the process by which that protagonism of gratuity which he inaugurated by going to death for us, and which we sometimes call the giving of the Holy Spirit, reaches us and enables us to start to live as if death, fear, ignominy and shame were not. Which means that it first reaches us, and can only reach us, as a certain rupture of our stability, a certain enabling us to stand loose from our previous belonging, and a certain breaking of heart which usually goes by the name of “the forgiveness of sins”. Discipleship of Christ presupposes us being in the process of being forgiven as our access to being re-created.

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<sup>8</sup> Luke 14, 12-14.

<sup>9</sup> Mt 5, 38-39a; 43-45.

Now, I'm aware that I don't have time to do this properly, but I'd like to look briefly at four different moments in the process of our becoming disciples. I call them "moments" rather than "stages" since I'm not talking about chronological succession, indeed elements of these moments can be simultaneous. I mean something more like: four different dimensions of a process of Life in the Spirit which does develop through time. I call these four moments "stripping away", "spluttering creativity", "turning" and, finally "belonging".

"Stripping away" is the process of loss of reputation and being held in the regard of others. Without this stripping away, there is, as I see it, no discipleship of Christ. The most difficult thing, I think, for any of us to be weaned of, is the need for the approving regard of others in order just to be, and to belong. Jesus teaches this quite clearly when he teaches on prayer. In order to receive rewards from our Heavenly Father, which is to say, in order to receive that "well done, I'm sooooo pleased with you" which is what we all want so desperately to hear (and which in Latin is "Magna cum laude notitia", and is St Augustine's definition of glory in heaven), we need to learn to let go of all the forms of reputation and regard, good or "wicked" which we struggle so hard to get and to keep. So, we are not to do our good deeds, or say our prayers, so as to get a good reputation from others, since the trouble is that if we do that, we will be too easily satisfied: we *will* get a good reputation from them, and then we'll be run by them, and will play any number of games of hypocrisy, violence and treading on others to keep that good reputation, because in that reputation is our identity. So, we must pray in the one room<sup>10</sup> in the house where no one can see us, not because we are essentially private individuals, but because we are essentially public puppets, and are run by the desires of others, and need to spend a lot of time in detox from the desires, voices, patterns of reward and expectation from those others in order to begin to hear the voice of One who is totally outside reciprocity, and is totally gratuitous.

Our Lord says very much the same thing again in an entirely different set of circumstances: talking to a group of religious leaders he says:

How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Mt 6, 6.

<sup>11</sup> John 5, 44.

The group identity that is built up by mutual regard is impervious to the regard of God. Or, stated differently, reciprocally given identity is a closed system, and it is only through undergoing a loss of reputation, which means a loss of identity, which means a certain form of death, that a gratuitously given identity can break through.

So, please notice, the link between reputation, identity, and death. Learning to let go of depending on the approval, or disapproval, of others as part of discovering who I am is an immensely painful exercise of stripping away of identity, and risking not being anyone at all so as to trust that an “I” not yet known to me will be called into being by the regard of God. This is, and can only be, experienced as a certain form of dying. And it is able to be gone through because the one we are learning to follow was able to occupy this space of shame, loss and bereftness without being run by it.

The second moment is what I call “spluttering creativity”. It is an infantile place. Part of the process of dying is giving up deriving identity over against anyone else at all. No longer reacting against them, or provoking them. Cheap shots of meaning, bits of junk identity, can always be got by reacting and provoking, by taking up “positions” over against others. But this is futile, and there is nothing creative about it. What is odd is that when the old “self” has finally given up the struggle, finally died, there is the curious sensation: “Well, how on earth am I to be creative of anything, if there is no longer anything for me to be over against? What on earth does it mean to be creative *out of nothing*? For it is only the things which are created *out of nothing* which have real meaning, stability and being. Anything created reactively is entirely dependent on what is already there, and is going out of being. But how long am I to be stretched over this abyss of nothing, during which I hope to find myself called into being out of nothing through being given a creative project out of nothing, but where I am spluttering around somewhat frustratedly and not seeing what on earth I could actually do, or what indeed it would look like to love?” Well there is, I think and hope, a certain moment of what I call “faffing around” trying to be creative that precedes one actually finding that one has been called without knowing it into doing something, and that something out of nothing has already started to emerge. It is part of learning that time is not my enemy, but is very spacious, and I don’t need to succeed immediately, or to order, because it is eternal life that is behind the hints of creativity which are being born.

Again, the direct opposite of this is pointed out by Our Lord, describing a normal form of religious discipleship:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell as yourselves.<sup>12</sup>

The “normal” form of discipleship works by people eagerly looking for others to be like them, to join their group. And when a convert joins the group, of course the first thing they want to do is become as much of an insider as possible: there is a massively thirsty “Daddy, daddy, tell me who I am, and tell me quickly”. Now the easiest thing to imitate in a group are the distinctive things, the things which make us “us” and not “them”, and so it is no surprise that a new convert quickly becomes the most ardent exponent of every one of the group’s “over againsts”: he or she picks them up in a fantastically hungry absorption or osmosis. This means that such proselytes too are being infantilized into becoming simply a function of the worst features of the group, creative of nothing. If the group is of any worth at all, then there will also be wiser heads that are embarrassed by this cheap identity, and who try to get the convert to see that in time he will discover for himself how much like other people and other groups they all are, really. But that wiser head will have to be grounded on something other than group identity if that is to work.

The third moment is the one I call “turning”, and I use this word deliberately with its connotations of the Hebrew שׁוּב which can translate return, turn back, repent. But I think I’m referring to something rather odd here. It is as though the self is being turned round and sent *back* to the world of previous belonging, but with the whole internal wiring system being run in reverse. This is not at all the same thing as a stripping away, but it is a strange sense of being run by somewhere else, and so being able to start to return to life in the places and even groups of the old belonging without being frightened by them, or feeling reactive to them, or having to survive them. I think that it is here that the whole running of one’s body starts to acquire a new dynamic, so that, for instance, property I may have becomes something which is mine, but as if it were not mine, able to become part of a gratuitousness towards others. My sex life becomes something which is no longer agitated, moved, by the pushes and pulls of others, and so becomes part of a way I might give myself to someone else, or not, over time, put peacefully and sensitively to their needs, my body for them, not theirs for me. I rather think that it is this

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<sup>12</sup> Mt 23, 15.

sense of being sent back, empowered by the gift of self-control which is the way we are given back our bodiliness, so no longer run by fear and necessity, that enables us to find that we are being turned into “Ambassadors for Christ” – emanations of a different power, being sent into the midst of the power of this belonging and its identities and rivalries, but in the disguise of nothing at all special. What *is* special is that we have been “turned” and are approaching the whole of what we face empowered by a spaciousness which does not know death, and thus we are unwitting creators of signs of the power we represent. It is here, I think that we start to find ourselves actually loving and liking people, groups, things, with the eyes which are being given to us by One whose love is not run by the need to succeed, to get things right, to perform to order. This new loving regard is being born in us by our being stretched towards that from which before we would have run away.

My fourth and final “moment” is “belonging”. And this is very definitely a continuation of the previous moment, the sense of someone else gently turning you, rewiring you, and sending you back. Interestingly, if you go to the Greek New Testament and look up all the places where you expect to find a verb corresponding to the English “belong”, you will find nothing of the sort. The Greek invariably says simply “am of” or “is of”. And this is, I suppose, straightforward and clear. When *we* talk about “belonging” we usually refer to some comfortable sense, of being “at home”, or of feeling “OK with our surroundings”. But if we strip away the sentiment, what we are left with is something pretty naked: who are you of? Of whom are you? You belong to whom? Who owns you? There is no belonging without a “to whom”. So our normal sense of belonging is something much more like “I’m comfortable with being run by this lot”. But please remember that this “I” that feels “comfortable being run by this lot” is the space of negotiation with the others, interaction between whom and this body causes “me” to be. And it is, as we have seen, this “I” that is stripped down and rendered dead by the loss of regard of significant others during our induction into the discipleship of Christ.

One of the things which the apostolic witnesses are absolutely clear about, and I am thinking particularly of John and Paul, is that the “I” that is reborn out of the rubble of that stripping down, and is called into being by an entirely new form of interaction and negotiation with the others, a creative, gratuitous, untroubled, unhurried, spacious, “I”, this “I” is quite literally, the “I” of Christ<sup>13</sup>. His going to death enables his “I” to be born in us, through our being conformed to him over time in our being sent out

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<sup>13</sup> “...it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me...” (Gal 2, 20).

into doing the same as he did “and greater works than these<sup>14</sup>” because it will be He who is doing them, and there is no rivalry between the one who made the space available and the spaciousness which erupts from it.

Now this form of belonging is not the “jealous ownership” of the owner who ties you down and makes sure that you don’t do anything wrong, so that you don’t show him up. He does not want to possess you to diminish you. On the contrary, it is much more like the sort of ownership of one who doesn’t care about being seen in himself at all, but wants to be recognised in the ones he has made vibrantly alive, creative, and caused to flourish. This is the sort of ownership by which an excited parent publicly owns their child who is excelling in the school swimming race, pointing out excitedly to other parents “that’s MY child!”. This parent has a vested interest in the excess glory of the ones he owns. And it is because that owning “I”, the “I” of Christ, is indistinguishable from the “I AM” of the One who makes all things out of nothing and holds them in being, that we know that the culmination of our discipleship of Christ is to find that our being “of Christ”, publicly owned by him, rather than publicly shamed by him<sup>15</sup>, will reveal us as interior to the “I AM” that is God, and so equipped to discover that everything, everything at all, belongs to us.

I want to apologize at this point for running over. This has been a kind of discipleship 101 course, and I haven’t been able to get to the 201 section, where we would look at how this gratuitous inaugurator of a new discipleship enables us to live together as sisters and brothers who have no other Master or Rabbi than he; and what is the shape of the sign of that living together and encouraging each other in discipleship which we call Church. So, I thank you for your patience, and hope and pray that hints of the 201 section will emerge in the days that we will spend here together at Villanova.

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<sup>14</sup> John 14, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Matthew 10, 32-3.