

Befriending the vacuum: Receiving responsibility for an ecclesial spirituality

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One of the things which fascinates me, as a systematic theologian, and which I have a long-term yearning to understand better, is what is meant by the “giving” of the Holy Spirit. In John’s Gospel we are solemnly assured, at a certain point in Jesus’ ministry:

as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not glorified.¹

In other words, rather contrary to any notions of the Spirit as somehow ethereal, insubstantial, a-historical and so on, what we have is a notion of the Spirit as entering into the human realm in a quite specific historical circumstance and therefore being constantly and ever-after shaped by that circumstance. Later in John’s Gospel Jesus takes this further when he says that the Spirit:

“...will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you²”

What I would like to do with you today, if I may, is to attempt to understand something of what is going on here, and to do so with some help from St Luke.

My hunch is this: that Luke portrays Jesus in between Gethsemani and the Cross as deliberately retracing in historical form the route back from created reality, to being outside of and thus prior to creation. From his prayer of obedience and sweat “like clots of blood” in which he is fulfilling Genesis 3, 19³, so that the New Adam is able to get right what the old Adam had fouled up, he moves to the formless and dark void which is described at the beginning of Genesis, and once

¹ Jn 7, 39b.

² Jn 16, 14.

³ Lk 22, 42-44 The Genesis verse reads “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust and to dust you shall return” There are a series of word games hinted at here around the words for Adam, ground, and blood, the Hebrew of all of which have “dam” at their root.

again in the darkness and failed sun that accompanied the Crucifixion⁴. Then in breathing out his Spirit to the Father on the Cross, he is entrusting to the Father the concrete historical and human form of the bringing into being of the New Creation which he has opened up by going to his death⁵. It is from then until it is breathed upon us that the Spirit hovers over the vacuum.

Now I'm no believer in being able to make easy deductions about Jesus' subjectivity from the texts of Scripture. Those texts don't work like modern fiction, giving us glimpses of psychology. Nevertheless, there was a fully human psychological subject there, someone about whom a text like that in Hebrews could say

For the joy that was set before him, he endured the Cross, despising the shame...⁶

So I'd like to consider something of what this picture of Jesus going to his death means: it means that Jesus gave himself up to death, facing a vacuum, a "without form, and void", not knowing what the shape of what he was dying for would look like.

If I can explain what I mean at all, it is something like this: empowered by a joy at what he was bringing into being, but without any control at all over what that would be, Jesus was actively giving himself up to being a dead man who would become the condition of possibility of other people being able to live as if death were not. And thus that he would be held in being through what other people make of him.

I can scarcely say how much difference it makes to our understanding of the Eucharist if, rather than see Jesus giving us a goodness-pill, even an eternal goodness-pill, in the form of a host, we see him giving away his body into the hands of sinful humans so that we may become that body, allowing himself to become *what we make of him* and yet trusting that the Spirit which his self-giving has unleashed in his dying, and therefore which bears his form without being under his prior control, will make of him something that will give glory to his Father.

⁴ Lk 23, 44-45.

⁵ Lk 23, 46.

⁶ Heb 12, 2.

What I want to emphasize here, for reasons which I hope will become plain later on, is the enormity of this giving himself away into occupying the space of death. It is a fully human act. And of course humans cannot fully give themselves away into occupying the space of death with any certainty at all as to what the results of this will be. Or indeed, even as to whether it's a worthwhile thing to do at all. No surrender of control could be greater.

I'd like to look at how this impacts our understanding of Creation. In one sense it's easy, if we follow the imagery of the book of Genesis, to imagine God creating: he creates formless matter and then little by little orders it, and adds things here and there until he rests. We can imagine doing something like that ourselves with respect to clay. The one who does the ordering has, one assumes, a clear idea of what he'd like to make, and moves towards making it.

But the Christian account of creation is somewhat different from this. In the Christian creation story, the Defining Adam, the first giver-of-self-away-in sacrifice, the first priest, but also the first victim and the first sacrifice, appears in the middle of the story and, with enormous difficulty gets right what the also-ran Adams, Eves, Cains and Abels, who are all of us, have been getting wrong since the inception of our race, so that Creation really starts with and through the Defining Adam as a human story. And in the Christian account of creation, the Defining Adam is not a passive recipient of YHWH's breath, as the also-ran Adam of Genesis is⁷. The Defining Adam is YHWH as human, and it is YHWH's breath having become a human life story that is breathed into our nostrils so that Creation is in fact a human life story.

What on earth, then, was Jesus thinking? In this account, the relationship between the Spirit and Creation is subtly different from the previous account. Order is not something that comes from without, applied to a formless void. The creative act of both breaching the vacuum into existence and orchestrating its formless void is present simultaneously. If you like, all the energy and emotional push of bringing this project into being, not knowing what it is going to end up like, knowing only that it will zing with joy, has as its analogy not an outside agent moulding clay, but a human offering himself to stand in a place of shameful death so that thoroughly unsatisfactory, as yet incomplete, and often evil humans can ourselves become the agents of Creation, and can become the physical, historical body of which this human has agreed to despoil himself. It is through this that historical bodies can become the bearers of meaning and purpose pointing to a glory

⁷ cf 1 Cor 15, 45

beyond ourselves, rather than being vain vessels of flux, devouring our way from one sort of dust to another.

At the centre of this self-giving up to death is, naturally, the relationship between Creation and death. And again, what must Jesus have been thinking? We have only the benefit of hindsight here. How could a human have created the possibility of living as if death were not, thereby relativising the completely totalitarian grip which death has on our race? How could a human being transform a “destiny”, and an implacably inimical force which runs us far more deeply than we realise, into being merely the outward parameter of the condition of possibility of this sort of material, bodily thing, becoming able to take part in and rejoice in, God’s adventure? Well the answer is: if conceivably at all, only conceivably by a self-giving living-into that non-space which is death such that he occupied it without being run by it.

So we have Jesus solemnly going backwards through history and culture, occupying the space of each of the victims, the lambs of atonement and Passover, Isaac on Mt Moriah, Job, the Psalmist, David as he was betrayed on the hillside outside Jerusalem, Joseph and finally Abel so as to achieve the status of being the real Adam. And this of course means going backwards to occupy the space where before there is culture, and therefore sacrifice, there is murder. So it is not death in some abstract sense that Jesus is giving himself over into, but the full cultural human reality of death – murder, shame, being a loser, violence, mob-rule, false accusation, sacrifice, incompetence, mock innocence at the expense of another, apparent legality, political expediency, putative curse-by-God, - he occupies the space of all these, and in the midst of them his innocence as a victim is not primarily a technical legal matter, but the enfleshed self-giving harmlessness (which is what *in-nocens* means) symbolized by the lamb. Because of his harmlessness he is able to occupy the space of each one of those realities without being run by them. That is what the self-giving power of the Spirit that he is in the process of giving does: it detoxifies the apparent reality of death with all its out-runners by being in their space and not being run by them.

This, I think, is one of the great pivots of the cosmic change which has come upon us with the giving of the Holy Spirit: the non-rivalry between the self-giving of Jesus and all the panoply of the forces of death. Because the only conceivable thing (and it is to us scarcely conceivable) that could not be moved by the panoply of the forces of death is something that is prior to life as we know it, and able to hold it in being. In other words, the Spirit which in-formed Jesus’ enacted bodily life, and to which Jesus’ enacted bodily life gave form, is the

Spirit of the Creator, finally detached in our perception from any sort of mistaken identification with death.

Please hold onto this link between the Spirit being “given” and the deliberate and non-rivalrous occupation by Jesus of the space of death for a little: we’ll be coming back to it.

However now I would like to move from my necessarily impressionistic meditation on what Jesus was doing in the “giving” of the Spirit to looking at the Lukan account of how that “giving” of the Spirit was received.

We all know the account in Acts 2, nevertheless I would like to give a brief run through part of it to see what Luke is pointing towards:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴ All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. ⁵ Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. ⁶ And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

First of all, the event is linked to the Passover by occurring on Pentecost, the feast celebrated fifty days after Passover, so whatever happens, it can be seen as in some way completing Passover, with its liberation from Egypt. The apostolic witnesses are all gathered together, and there comes a sound like the rush of a violent breath - πνοή rather than πνευμα - the more personal form “breath”, as in: that which God breathed into Adam in Genesis 2 (and the risen Jesus into the disciples in John 20), rather than the yet-to-be made personal form which hovered over the abyss in Genesis 1.

This breath is described as βίαιος -violent or vehement - which takes us back to the strong east wind which God blew, opening up the sea before Moses and the people of Israel in Exodus 14, 21. It also points us to the “rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives” of Isaiah 59, 19, about which more anon. This sound *filled* the entire *house*, and of course those with scriptural ears will have been intrigued that these are the same words which occur in Isaiah 6,1

In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his glory (or train) filled the house (or Temple)

What makes this verse particularly significant here, is that apart from the perfectly ordinary words for “fill” and “house” being the same in both Luke’s text and the Greek version of Isaiah, the same word for “lifted up” has just been used, in the previous chapter of Acts (1, 9) to describe what we refer to as Jesus’ Ascension. In other words, the apostolic witnesses are those who are undergoing, over time, the fulfilment of Isaiah’s Temple theophany, seeing the Lifting Up of the Lord to his throne and undergoing his glory filling them, who are becoming the Temple.

Next we have the *divided tongues as of fire*. Apart from the fact that this seems to fulfil the promise that the new fire would be found in the restored Temple, the word translated by *divided* - διαμεριζομεναι - is interesting, since it is more accurately the word for distributing portions, as in the portions of a spoil, or the portions of a sacrifice. And it is the word which appears in a key prophecy in Zechariah 14, 1:

Behold a day of the Lord is coming when the spoil taken from you will be apportioned out - διαμερισθησεται - in the midst of you.

This follows on from a series of prophecies which were enormously important in Jesus’ own description to his disciples of what he thought he was doing, concerning the shepherd who would be struck and the sheep scattered and other passages, amply referred to in the Passion narratives. Immediately preceding this passage is the notion of “a third” who will be left alive, leading to “I will put this third into the fire and refine them as one refines silver, and assay them as gold is assayed”.

So we have an extraordinary concatenation of images at work here: the spoil who had been taken from the apostolic group is being apportioned out to them. This is of course what Jesus had acted out prior to his death in sharing the portions of himself with his disciples in the Last Supper, just as the High Priest gave portions of the lamb of atonement to the priests in the Temple. But simultaneously, with the fire resting on the heads of those who are receiving the portions, it is clear that they are not only priests in the new temple, but also living burning offerings.

It is now, I think, that it would make sense to go back and look at Isaiah 59, 15-21:

Truth is lacking, and he who departs from evil causes himself to be despoiled. The LORD saw it, and it displeased him that there was no justice. ¹⁶ He saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no one to intervene; then his own arm brought him victory, and his righteousness upheld him. ¹⁷ He put on righteousness as a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation upon his head; he put on garments of vengeance for clothing, and wrapped himself in fury as a mantle. ¹⁸ According to their deeds, so will he repay, wrath to his adversaries, requital to his enemies; to the coastlands he will render requital. ¹⁹ So they shall fear the name of the LORD from the west, and his glory from the rising of the sun; for he will come like a rushing stream, which the wind of the LORD drives. ²⁰ “And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression, says the LORD. ²¹ “And as for me, this is my covenant with them, says the LORD: my spirit which is upon you, and my words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart out of your mouth, or out of the mouth of your children, or out of the mouth of your children's children, says the LORD, from this time forth and for evermore.”

This is, evidently, a prophesy of redemption, though it has been fulfilled in a way that no one could have expected: it describes the Lord doing himself what no human seemed to be able to do, avenging, which was always one half of redeeming and atoning. And he is going to come to Zion as Redeemer like a vehement (our old friend βιαιος) stream driven by the wind of the Lord. This is linked with making a covenant and putting a spirit upon people which will issue forth in all speaking the words of the Lord.

What is striking of course is the contrast between this image of redemption with its language of vengeance, and the reality of the despoiled redeemer who was entirely without vengeance, much more in the line of the “suffering servant” prophecies earlier in Isaiah. But it is this despoiled redeemer who has become the *requital* for his enemies, which is also to be understood as “the one who has made peace”⁸, this one who is coming to Zion as Redeemer in a rushing wind.

⁸ The Hebrew word here translated “requital” has as its consonants מ ל ש and is linked to the word for peace, completion, settlement by sacrifice: it is one of those genuinely polysemic words surrounding the notion of sacrifice which should by no means always be interpreted as vengeful. My guess is that the τετέλεσται – “it is completed” – of John 19, 30 is the Greek version of a verbal form of this Hebrew word.

Finally (and I neither aspire to exhaust nor have exhausted the possibilities which St Luke is pointing to), this Spirit, flowing from the self-giving despoliated victim which is giving words to people fulfils what the Genesis story of Babel was about and undoes what happened there, but again in a surprisingly gracious way. For at Babel people had only one language until God confused them and scattered them. The Greek word for Babel in Genesis 11 is Συγχυσις, which means Confusion, or bewilderment. It is clear, then, what is going on when at the sound from the room where the apostolic witnesses were, devout Jews from every nation under heaven became a crowd that *gathered* (so becoming one) and was *bewildered* (or confused) where the Greek of Acts 2, 6 is συνεχυθη - the same derivation as Babel. Astoundingly a new sort of unity is being made available which is the reverse of the totalitarian gathering together into one which had made Babel. The collapse of that unity had led to a world in which people could not understand their neighbour's speech. But here the reverse is going on – a unity which is completely respectful of the native language of each: neighbour could at last speak to neighbour.

To recapitulate a little: Luke gives us criteria for what the giving of the Spirit is about. It is the glory of the ascended Lord in a lived-out, three dimensional Temple vision which is simultaneously the inauguration of Creation, the definitive Passover where it is not the Red Sea, but Death that is passed over, the self-despoiling presence of the Redeemer, the transformation of ordinary people into the new Temple where they will all be self-giving priests and the first signs of a gracious new human unity not achieved over against someone, but flowing from the self-giving victim whose words are able to reach the hearts of each.

Thus, and I can't emphasize this enough, Luke is pointing towards, bearing witness to, a huge and genuinely anthropological earthquake being promoted by a Spirit which hadn't been available before, and which Jesus had made available. This huge genuinely anthropological earthquake has quite specific features: a completely new form of unity for humans is being made available at the instigation of a forgiving human victim who lived as if death were not. This completely new form of unity is universal, it is able to be entered into by people of any nation under the sun, and is in principle not over against any race at all (the final step to this is taken after Peter's interaction with Cornelius in Acts 10). From this Spirit a new form of holiness emerges which is nothing to do with the sacred structures of old, but in which what is truly central is the kenotic self-despoiling living-out of being a priest in the New Temple. This Temple is understood as a new corporate being-together of human bodies. It is human living

out of this which is what enables Creation to be fulfilled and to zing with a lasting joy. All of this has happened in the midst of, and through, a quite specific, historical bunch of people, the apostolic witnesses, in a normal, non-magnificent, non-liturgical house and is made available through their spoken words.

Now, why have I gone on for so long to get to something as simple as saying that the Church is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, which you all know anyhow? And the answer is because I'm afraid that we are so used to hearing those words with an ecclesiastical tinge, that we forget the anthropological earthquake which produces ecclesiality, and of which the ecclesiastical is the necessary but sometimes severely dysfunctional carapace. And it is easy for the word "spirituality" to become a more or less Gnostic way of abstracting from the corporate, anthropological, historical bringing into being of a new humanity in the face of death which is the indispensably ecclesial dimension of the protagonism of the Spirit.

It is just here, I think, that it is going to be increasingly important for us to think in terms of the creative protagonism of the self-giving dead person. And I mean this somewhat literally. If the picture I have begun to sketch out for you is true, then the gift of the Spirit is already the gift of a certain peaceful, unshaken, unmoved, un-driven being able to occupy the space of death creatively. I'm afraid that I think in silly pictures, but the picture I have which corresponds to my own occasional sense of dwelling in this space, is that of walking chest-deep in water, with my awareness that the part of me underwater is quite untroubled by what goes on above, and is therefore able both to lose without fear, and also, occasionally, be able to make tiny, creative, non-reactive movements above the surface.

Now this sense of being held and empowered by a very great peacefulness (the pre-dead, held-in-life quality which I'm assuming is co-terminous with what belief in God and life in the Spirit are about) is what enables my heart and my head, above the surface, as it were, to be becoming unravelled from the ways in which they are driven by life above the surface. So little by little I can find myself given spiritual longings. And by this, I don't mean ethereal gasps, I mean the stirrings of heartfelt desire for imperishable good to be born in the midst of so much violence and inchoate futility. And maybe even the courage and the imagination to be able to make a first few steps towards bringing such as-yet-unimagined good into being.

Here is where I think it very, very important that we not be in rivalry with the ecclesiastical. The guardians of the edges are by no means always the enemies of

the Kingdom, though the temptations for them to identify the edges with the Kingdom are often very great indeed. But the lovers of that anthropological project in ecclesial form which is the Kingdom do not receive their identity from the guardians of the edges, and they certainly do not receive their identity over against the guardians of the edges, by rivalrous or contemptuous contrast with them. They receive their identity alongside the guardians of the edges from the unique protagonist of the project.

It is, in my experience, very, very difficult indeed, at least for someone as temperamentally conservative and frightened as myself, to do without human approval. There would be something marvellously irresponsible about being able to forego the hard work of discovering oneself approved by God as a Son or daughter upon whom his fondness rests by delegating that need for approval to someone else, from whom it might be more easily grabbed. And in as far as such things school us in avoiding rivalry, they may indeed be helpful for a time. However, ultimately, the delegation of approval, or disapproval to others, who in the last resort usually cannot give an approval that they do not themselves have, is a failure to accept the fullness of responsible involvement for bringing into being the project.

In other words, it is a failure to be dead enough to receive the creative longing of Christ.

However, if we are dead enough, and are thus unconcerned about success, reputation, able not to resist our being despoiled of these apparently life-giving things, then it is conceivable that we will be able to think big enough, think long-term enough to glimpse the ecclesial form of how the Spirit is befriending the vacuum and bringing Creation into being, and so become the fingertips of its protagonism.

I'd like to conclude with a contemporary example of what I mean, corresponding to elements from two of the "notes" of the ecclesial project which I mentioned before – its apostolicity and its holiness. Central to the notion of apostolicity, following on the imagery of Acts 2 which I developed with you, is the link between word and witness. A certain way of speaking is described, which bore witness to something having been experienced over time, and was picked up by the listeners as something inside them, such that they were able to relate to it, and to its authority from within, from their own starting place. This speaking and listening *of itself*, as a sign of the Spirit which empowers it, both separates the listeners out from being a crowd, and freshly individuates them by making them

symptoms of a new sort of unity. We are talking here about a certain sort of anthropology of communication.

Now one of the things which the last five hundred years have seen, and has advanced dizzyingly in the last few decades, has been an astonishing series of changes in the public use of the word. From typesetting to twitter, from Papal bulls to popular blogs. And of course, the guardians of the edges (whether secular or religious) are accustomed in this sphere, as in all others, to conserving the forms of the old long after the new wine has burst out and run away. If we just think of the Holy See's communication mishaps over the last few years then it should become clear how a certain ex-abrupto teaching style which always included canonical consequences for public disagreement has become unviable. For myself, I should say that I far prefer the Ratzinger-Lombardi low key style in which the human frailties, bureaucratic incompetence and sometimes nutty presuppositions of those involved become clear. This seems far more genuine than the Wojtyla-Navarro Valls PR smoke and mirror show. Nevertheless, where, thanks to the internet people can read things for themselves, disagree with them publicly, find out how others are reacting to them, mock them (often being right to do so) and get an interactive audience, then what it means to speak with authority – from the place of the “*Auctor*” - the one who brings things into being – has changed out of all recognition.

And this means, regardless of how conservative or liberal, ultramontane, orthodox or protestant you are, the anthropological shape of being given the words to bear witness to God has shifted, and is shifting enormously. A consequence of this is that how we take ecclesial responsibility for the apostolicity of the Word, the relation between word and witness, is going to be of huge importance in the future.

I want to make it quite clear that I'm attempting to make an anthropological point here, one concerning a sphere in which our current ecclesiastical set up is but a single symptom among many. Think what life in an ancient city was like: no newspaper, no radio. Everywhere gossip, rumour, reputation up for grabs. Objective facts very hard to come by, opinions circulating from royal heralds, priestly spokesmen and licensed thugs, whom it is often difficult to tell apart. Often a swirling mass of misinformation abounds, seething conspiracy theories and so forth⁹. Then think what an extraordinary eruption into this world the

⁹ I am very grateful to my friend Andrew McKenna for this quote from **A Woman in Berlin: Eight weeks in the Conquered City** (Anon, trans. Philip Boehm, New York, Picador 2005 pp110-111): “So the bookseller stitches away and recounts what she knows. Rumor – the goddess Fama. I've always

advent of the written word must have been, and with it, little by little, an apparent objectivity of learning, of truth. Then think of the importance of designated interpreters of the word, and the changing shape of their link with what we now call political and religious power as cities, sanctuaries and empires rose and fell. All this in a world in which the vast majority of the people couldn't read.

Perhaps it makes more sense to imagine why people should have fled to the desert for holiness in such times, for how else could you begin to step outside the seething spirit of the mob which could so easily run you? In the midst of the flux of words and opinions, so violent and so meaningless, so detached from truth, the time of detox spent in silence, the ability to receive an identity from One who was not part of the seething mass must have seemed an extraordinary freedom.

Then consider how after a long, very long period of attempting some form of publicly available objective truth, through philosophers, academies, libraries, monasteries, Cathedrals, eventually universities and ultimately the printing press, the written word started to become hugely widely available, and literacy a basic requirement for adult participation in life. Then consider that town criers and royal proclamations yielded to newspapers, and once again the appearance of objective truth in the public sphere seemed to grow. Even more with radio, and then television.

However, I wonder whether we haven't entered a new sphere in which the easy interactivity of the published word, the viral spread of information has severely undercut all the pretensions (for that is all they were – though often enough decent, protective pretensions) of the objectivity of the truth proclaimed by the public holders of the word. I'm not sure whether this is merely a subjective and partisan perception, but I can scarcely begin to fathom the depth of the shock to the possibility of public truthfulness wrought, in the English-speaking world at least, by the eight years between the Florida election of 2000 and the end of the Bush era. I don't merely mean the objective evil wrought by particular individuals within or around the Bush administration and the other governments infected by their lies, or indeed the farcical nature of newspaper and television reporting surrounding these events, or, indeed the systemic mendacity of Church authorities which also emerged as never before during this period. I mean the wholesale way in which it became clear that the apparent public bastions of

pictured her as an old woman all shrouded up and murmuring away. Gossip. We feed on it. In the old days people got all their news through hearsay and word of mouth. It's impossible to overestimate how this affected ancient cultures, how unclear and uncertain their view of the world must have been – spooky, nightmarish, a swamp of murmured horrors and fears, of malicious men and resentful gods.”

possible truthfulness were little other than factional cheerleaders, champions of convenience, cowards, shameless masters of thuggery and cover-up. This, of course, may always have been the case, to greater or lesser degrees: the anthropological novelty is elsewhere.

What is new is that the advent of a non-traditional, interactive, internet based media means that alternative voices become available with astonishing rapidity – so that official lies can be “called”, however ineffectively, and people can see the shamelessness of liars as they live out their lies, but also that a welter of gossip and conspiracy theory can develop. In other words, what is dramatically altered is not necessarily the amount of truth that is available; however the *illusion of authority* of certain forms of communication is entirely relativised, which means, undermined.

Now this, the sense that we may be heading back into being something much closer to an ancient city, riven by misinformation, gossip and factionalised mobs, but with enormous technological advances, cannot but be of huge significance for anyone who is interested in what is meant by the protagonism of the Holy Spirit. For part of that protagonism lies in giving us the ability to speak the words which come from the self-giving victim who is inaugurating a new way of being human, such that they can be heard by our sisters and brothers as coming from within themselves, in their own native languages. What is in question is the anthropological shape of authoritative truthfulness in the public sphere.

A number of significant voices – for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre¹⁰, Pope Benedict, and most recently David Bentley Hart¹¹, have indicated the importance of some sort of rediscovery of monasticism as the key to keeping the flame of truthfulness alive – not necessarily a formal monastic movement in a physical desert, but maybe so.

I wonder about this myself, both in the sense of asking myself whether they are right in the negativity of their evaluation, but also in the sense of trying to consider and face up to the same reality that they are describing. I wonder what shape will be taken by the visible signs of the protagonism of the Spirit that we are to birth in modern western cities, as we undergo the collapse of the illusion of authority, and learn how to create ecclesiality without entering into rivalry with the ecclesiastical carapace? I wonder what structures will be required for us to take the time and the energy and the patience to be able to imagine together and

¹⁰ At the end of **After Virtue**.

¹¹ At the end of **Atheist Delusions**.

bring into being an imperishable good for the most vulnerable of our brothers and sisters? I wonder how *will* we live out that deferment of gratification, of recognition and approval, accompanied by the loss of reputation, prestige and power which is the sign of the one who is being empowered to live in the midst of death without being run by it? And, with enormous difficulty, I try to move beyond wondering, praying that the Spirit will show us our way into the practical charity of befriending the vacuum.

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