

And he drew near and went with them

Fr Timothy Radcliffe

I feel deeply honoured to be invited to be with you for this conference. This is not an easy time for religious life in most parts of the world. The future is unsure for everyone. Many congregations are dying out. But it is especially hard for priests and religious in Ireland after the recent reports. And so I am happy to be with you today. It is a wonderful sign of friendship, especially to ask an Englishman!

I joined the Dominican Order in 1965. By a stroke of genius I managed to have chosen the worst possible moment in the history of the English Province since the Reformation. I had hardly unpacked my bags when the crisis broke. I had six novice masters in the course of one year, two of whom ended up married. We drove the others mad. One, a Geordie and a wonderful man, hated being stuck in the countryside. He once shouted ‘I hate the colour green. When I look out of the window, I don’t want to see bloody cows. I want to see buses!’ Those in formation dropped from 42 to 9 in a few months. One wag put a sign on the board which said ‘Will the last person please put out the lights?’

In those tough days, I learned one lesson which has shaped my life. Crises can be times of blessings. I saw the Province being slowly re-born out of the fire. As I told the Dublin clergy when I met them in December, just after the publication of the Murphy report, the whole of salvation history is just one crisis after another: Expulsion from Paradise, flood, the destruction of Babel, the Flood, exiles, the destruction of the monarchy. The history of Israel is one of being stripped of everything that gave her identity.

And yet every crisis led to a new intimacy. They lost the Temple, so as to discover God closer than they could have imagined, in the law. Now God was present wherever they were, in every act, even in exile. They lost the monarchy only to discover God as King of all the nations. And then this cross-grained man, Jesus, turned up and broke the law, and touched lepers, and cleansed the Temple. He seemed to put the axe to all that made God near. But this was so that God could be even nearer, in a human being just like us.

And then we have the worst crisis of all, the Last Supper, when it became clear that the disciples would lose him, that they would deny him, run away and their fragile little community would collapse. And in this darkest moment, when all seemed lost, then he gave them himself. ‘This is my body given for you’. So that is my first conviction I want to share with you, that crises are not to be feared. My American brethren gave me a T shirt which said ‘Have a good crisis.’ Unfortunately, it has inexplicably shrunk during the years and I can no longer get into it!

God comes to us in crises because that is how human beings flourish. We grow by one crisis after another: birth, weaning, adolescence, giving our lives away, and ultimately death. Each

is a crisis that may move us into deeper intimacy with God and each other. So this crisis can be a time of blessing and new life for religious life.

But it will only be so if we do not become obsessed with our own survival. Why should anyone join us so that we may survive? Survival is not a particularly Christian value. Jesus did not say 'I have come that you may survive' but 'so that you may have life and have it abundantly.' That means death and resurrection.

The Desert fathers and mothers responded to the crisis of the Church after the conversion of Constantine when bishops became lords and the poor were forgotten. Religious life began because the Church seemed to be slipping into compromise. St Benedict responded to the crisis of the end of the Latin Roman Empire, and the establishment of the Gothic Arian Kings when Catholic civilization seemed finished. The mendicant friars arose in the 13th century because the Church was out of touch with the new life and vitality of the cities and the universities. The crisis of the Reformation and the new individualism of the Renaissance produced the Jesuits, the Ursulines and the Capuchins. The crisis of the Industrial Revolution with the collapse of rural communities and vast new urban poverty produced most of the religious congregations around today. Nearly all our orders and congregations were in response to a crisis of society or of the Church.

So if we want to flourish, then we have to ask: What are the crises that shake our people? How do they hurt? How can we be with them now? If we respond to that, then religious life will flourish. If we try to recruit new members just to survive, then we shall not deserve to do so. I am often amused when I go to the Philippines and meet congregations opening new missions in a country which already has one of the highest levels of Catholic practice in the world! Do they go on mission or just to survive?

The organisers had a stroke of genius in choosing the story of the journey to Emmaus as the text for this conference. It is perfect. And so I would like to meditate on this text and see what blessings it promises for us today. I will alight on just a few passages which may challenge and illuminate us the way forward.

I _____ That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

The disciples are not just going for a Sunday afternoon stroll. They are running away from Jerusalem. Jerusalem is the place where it all happens for Luke. The place where Jesus must die and rise, the place of the ascension and Pentecost, the place where the Church is born.

The disciples are giving up on the Church. It has hardly been founded and it is already a failure. Christ himself is the big disappointment. 'We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.' Instead he ended up in disgrace on a cross. The leadership of the Church has let everyone down. Peter the rock has denied his Lord.

So these disciples are disappointed, probably angry; they feel betrayed and so they are off. This may ring some bells with you! I had dinner with a delightful couple in the States

recently. Both of them were devout Catholics, until recently. The husband, Kevin, has been so shocked by the scandals of sexual abuse that he is not sure what he believes any more. He still comes to Mass with the family, but he does not say most of the Creed and he does not go to communion. Cathy is hanging in there, but she is angry and feels betrayed.

A lot of people in Ireland today probably feel like those disciples hot-footing it out of town. For a few, belief in God is no longer clear. More, perhaps, hang on to the Gospel, but feel that they have had enough of so-called 'institutional religion.' Yes to Jesus, but No to the Church. And a lot just hang in there, but are boiling inside. Some are walking to Emmaus.

II While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them.

Perhaps these are the most extraordinary words in the whole New Testament. They are running away from Jesus, they are giving up on the Church, and he comes close to them and goes with them. When they are running away from him, he is closer than ever. He does not block the road. He walks with them.

This crisis of the Church can be a moment of deeper intimacy with Jesus. And this is not because we draw nearer to him, but because he will come to us, and hear our anger, our frustration, our incomprehension in the face of everything that is happening.

I have a lot of sympathy with those who leave the Church at the moment. I am often angry at the Church myself. I detest all sorts of aspects of it; that it is often so unkind, so male-dominated, so centralised. But I could not leave it. On Good Friday, the community disintegrated and scattered. But on Easter morning they were gathered around the Lord again. This odd band of saints and sinners, of cowardly and half-hearted people were gathered into community again. That is the sign of the victory of the Resurrection over hatred and division.

And there in the middle has always been wobbly old Peter, the rock and the scandal. He is the weak and strong man. Only God could be crazy enough to make him the one who gathers us in unity. That is why whatever happens, I simply cannot walk away from the Church. The Church is stuck with me.

When people do walk away and want nothing more to do with the Church, then like Jesus we must draw close to them and accompany them. It is no good ticking them off, or hemming them in; we must walk with them wherever they go. As long as possible we must stretch out the Church to be big enough, Catholic enough, to include them, even in their anger. We are too afraid of anger. In the Old Testament Job gets really angry with God. He rails against him. He feels let down, abused. His voice is given a place in our Bible. We must let the angry have a voice in our Church.

As you know, St Augustine said that hope has two daughters: courage and anger. We must help people to have a hopeful anger, a fruitful anger. And that means listening without flinching, as Jesus did when he walked with them on the way to Emmaus.

One of my brethren in the United States ran an extremely flourishing University chaplaincy with two other brothers. I shall call him Ed. It was a place where everyone was welcome; the divorced and re-married, gay people, people with questions and doubts. And then six months ago the new hard-line conservative bishop removed it from the Order so that it could be given to priests who would follow his line. Ed is furious, incandescent. He has talked about leaving the Order, even leaving Christianity, giving it all up. At the beginning, I tried to put the counter-arguments but I discovered that it was too early. Ed could not yet engage with them. He must walk his way, even if it seems to mean away from the Church. We must walk with him, even if for the moment it looks as if he is walking away. Maybe there is nothing to be said at this moment. The moment will come as it does to Jesus.

III And he said to them, 'What is this conversation which you are holding with each other as you walk?'

Jesus joins in the conversation that they are already having. He does not at first challenge what they are saying. He lets them talk in their terms with their words. I am reminded of St Dominic, of course. St Dominic was travelling with Brother Bertrand to Paris and they came across a group of German pilgrims. Dominic was frustrated that he was unable to preach to them because he did not understand German. And so he said to Bertrand, let us pray that we must understand them so that we may share the good news with them. It is interesting that Dominic does not pray that the Germans may understand him, but that he may understand them.

The biggest challenge, if this is to be a time of blessing, is for us to learn to talk with each other openly and fearlessly. We must let each other voice what we think. People may get it wrong, and not express themselves clearly at first, but that does not matter. We need a culture of open conversation, which takes us where it may. In the Church there is too much silence. We bite our lips, hold back from what we really think, keep mum. We need to have the freedom to voice our anger and suffering and pain.

The Church is facing two crises, one of sexual abuse and another of cover-up. Many bishops and priests and religious, when faced with evidence of abuse, closed their eyes and hoped that it would go away. This was partly because, as Tony Bates explained to the clergy in December, there really was not an awareness of the terrible damage of abuse even among psychologists until the late seventies.

I think that it was also because we are often used to covering up what we really think. Do we really say what we believe to each other, to the bishops, to the Vatican? The great Cardinal Suhard of Paris said the first duty of a priest is to tell the truth. St Catherine said to the Roman Curia in her day: "Be silent no longer. Cry out with a hundred thousand voices. I see that the world is destroyed through silence."¹ If we are to be blessed by this crisis we must begin to tell the truth about everything and not just abuse. We need a culture of truth-telling.

¹ L?? 16

A friend of mine, Michael Heher, wrote a lovely book on priesthood called *The lost art of walking on water*. These are his words to the priests: ‘At a time of crisis, people often find the freedom to voice things they ordinarily would not express. A dying woman can give advice to her children; a soldier going off to war can tell his brother that he loves him dearly; a father can talk with his daughter about fear and worry and faith as he prepares for a dangerous surgery. As men who have suffered as many hits as we have in the last couple of years, we priests can pretty much talk about whatever we want and in whatever way we want to talk about it. We have earned the right.’²

We religious have earned the right. And we might as well begin in our own communities, learning how to speak openly, clearly, charitably but honestly. We may want to begin with getting out our anger, and maybe even admit that Emmaus looks a tempting destination at the moment.

We have to dare to open our ears to conversation with the abused. It is frightening. I have largely been spared it. Once in New York the local Provincial asked me to talk with a man who claimed that he had been abused by one of the brethren who had now died. It was the worst experience of my life. I had to listen. The man was my age. When it happened I had not even heard of the Dominicans. And yet he spoke to me as if I had done it personally. But I had to let him speak.

And we must dare to hear the abusers too. I was sent an article written by a young American Jesuit priest who appeals for us to listen to the 4,000 priests who have been, as he says, warehoused because of their abuse. But why did they do it? He wrote: ‘Are we capable as Church of reaching out compassionately to those 4,000-plus warehoused priests and including them as genuine members of the Christian community? Are we capable of listening to their stories and learning more about them, and perhaps more about ourselves? Are we capable of appreciating the unfathomable complexity of human desires and emotions and relationships, and of understanding how God is able and willing to penetrate and transfigure them all, if we only allow him to do so? If we are capable of these things, then we need to start acting now, for the time is short. Those priests will all be dead in a very few years’.

A true conversation cannot be controlled. It leads you where it will. You discover yourself and the other person as you talk. We find together the right words. In his marvellous book on Dostoevsky, Rowan Williams quotes Bakhtin: ‘Dialogue...is not a means for revealing, for bringing to the surface the already ready-made character of person; no, in dialogue a person not only shows himself outwardly, but he becomes for the first time that which he is – and we repeat, not only for others but for himself as well.’³

Think how marvellous it would be if the Church really became a place of such open conversation. Then people would begin to glimpse something of the eternal, free and loving

² 120 ??

³ *Dostoevsky: Language, Faith and Fiction* London 2008 p. 133.

conversation which is the Trinity, the life of God. So that is the challenge of the moment, to begin to talk freely, charitably, maybe tentatively and courageously. If we do that, then we shall witness the birth of a new Church.

IV And then the disciples say: 'Moreover, some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels, who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but him they did not see.'

'Him they did not see.' The irony is that it is him they are looking at, at that very moment! These disillusioned disciples have plenty of witnesses. They have the women. But they do not believe them.

At this moment when so many people in the Church are so discouraged, disheartened and even tempted to be disbelieving, we have crowds of witnesses. We have women who testify to our hope in Christ; we even have men; we even have bishops. But do we believe them?

In Britain, the media is relentless in attacking the Church. Often it protests against us with good reason. If the media had not stuck to their guns then maybe we would never have faced the issue of sexual abuse. But every day there is verbal abuse, distortion, innuendo. I used to love reading the papers, but now I dread turning the page because of what I might see: more contempt heaped upon the Church which I go on loving, despite everything.

And herein lies a problem. Everyone knows that the media is often untruthful, that it twists, wrongly accuses, denigrates. So why is that we go on letting media dictate how we see the world? I suspect that our culture believes that something is only real if it is in the papers or on the TV. We are fascinated by it.

So there is a real challenge for religious life here, which is to be counter-cultural. To resist the distorted view of the world that we find in the media. In a world of "flat earthers", we go on trying to insist that the world is a globe.

We all know that there are hundreds of thousands of witnesses to God's grace around the world, perhaps most of them are women religious. If you go to any barrio, any favella in Latin America, Africa and Asia and meet the poorest of the poor, you will find religious sharing the lives of the poorest, fighting for their rights, standing up for their dignity. They have been to the tombs in which society has buried the dead and found them empty. Often they have been killed. There were more martyrs in the twentieth century than in all of the previous history of Christianity: think of Sister Dorothy Stang, the Jesuit martyrs in El Salvador, the Dominican bishop, Pierre Claverie in Algeria, the Cistercians of Tibhirine. These are our witnesses who tell us that despite all of our failings and sins, that love has the victory. They tell us that despite all its failings, the Church is still a place of holiness. We need to hear them time and again.

But the disciples running away from Church are not yet ready to hear those women. They need to take a first step, and maybe we do too.

V And he said to them, 'O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary for that the Christ should suffer these things and enter his glory?'

They simply have not been able to grasp that the Christ must endure humiliation and death. They are stuck with the idea of a glorious Christ, probably a warrior who will boot out the enemies of Israel. They still want someone who looks like a King. And maybe that is why we still find it hard to understand Jesus. Sometimes people still want priests and religious and bishops who look like important people, with lots of status and power. Like the disciples we can be foolish and slow of heart to understand our humble Lord.

As I told the Dublin clergy, humble is not a word that one usually associates with the Catholic Church. I have visited the Church in more than a hundred countries, and met literally thousands of priests and religious, and hundreds of bishops. The vast majority have been humble people. But they have to hang on to that simplicity in the face of a system that stresses rank and power. I once attended an ecumenical meeting in Bari and a very grand archbishop of another Church came up to me, dressed in glory. And he asked me what titles I bore: 'Your Serenity? Your Beatitude? Your Magnificence?' In a moment of naughtiness, I said that if the brethren wanted to be very formal, they could call me 'brother.' And then he asked what were the symbols of my authority as Master of the Order. Did I have a special hat? A crosier? And when I replied that I had none at all he walked away thinking that clearly I was not worth talking to.

When I published an article in The Tablet saying all of this and more, I got hundreds of letters from people saying, 'Thank you Timothy for attacking clericalism. Good old Timothy, keep on fighting.' But that is wrong. I was not attacking anything. That is the game of the media, to attack and accuse, to shout Hurray or Boo! I am trying to *understand* where we are at. I believe that this crisis of sexual abuse is the symptom of a deeper crisis, which is that of the Tridentine Church. After the crisis of the Reformation, we needed this new model of the Church, with a new spirituality, a new understanding of priesthood and religious life, otherwise Catholicism would have collapsed.

But often this new militant Church was too structured by power and rank. Its understanding of spirituality was too disembodied, too remote from ordinary human experience. Our humanity sometimes got lost. Often it gave the impression that we were sexual eunuchs, asexual beings. Children speculated as to whether nuns had legs under those long habits or glided around on wheels. Once when I was preaching in the open air, standing on a soap box, I heard a child say to his mother: 'Mummy, why is that man wearing a skirt?' Much to the distraction of my hearers. Then a small hand lifted the bottom of my habit: 'It's alright Mummy. He's got trousers on underneath.'

Maybe this present crisis is the symptom, then, of a deeper one, of that Tridentine Church. It was exactly what we needed for that time, but perhaps that time is passing. And we need a humbler, simpler and more humane Church, so that we?? might get a little closer to our humble Lord. This is a moment of humiliation of the Church. If we live it as an invitation to be more humble, then it may be the beginning of a vast renewal.

VI Time is running out and so we must zoom to the end of the story: When he was at table, he took the bread and broke it and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognised him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” And they rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem.

They recognised him in the breaking of bread. They recognised that this was the person who gathered together tax collectors and prostitutes and ate and drank with them. He was the one who welcomed sinners. And he was the very same person who shared the Passover with the disciples who were about to betray him, deny him and run away.

They too had run away. They had fled Jerusalem. They had given up on Jesus; they wanted nothing to do with those other miserable and despicable disciples. But Jesus had drawn close to them even as they fled. And so now they could turn round and go back and rejoin the community. They could go back to that unimpressive, fragile little community of sinners that was Jesus’ community. It always had been. He came to call sinners. And it is still his community today.

When people feel tempted to run away from the Church and to want to have nothing to do with it because it is so corrupt and fragile, then we must not blame them. We too must walk with them, let them explode with their anger, and then perhaps, with the grace of God, we may offer them a sign of love that welcomes them back.

42 years ago, when I was a very young friar, the famous Charles Davis left the Church because it was ‘plainly corrupt.’ Herbert McCabe wrote a brilliant editorial for *New Blackfriars* agreeing with him entirely but arguing that was no reason to leave the Church. Rome was furious. Herbert was sacked. On a plane to the States, someone who discovered that he was a Dominican asked if he knew Herbert McCabe. He replied, ‘philosophically that is a very difficult question to answer.’ The English Dominicans decided that though he had been sacked by Rome, nothing was said about him not being re-appointed, which he duly was, beginning his first editorial with the words, ‘As I was saying before I was so oddly interrupted.’

Of course, we resist corruption. We cannot be complacent, but if we are to grow in intimacy with Jesus, then we shall have to belong to his friends too, and some of them are rather unsavoury. And that is why there is a place for us too.

H. G. Wells wrote a short story about the Last Judgment. A terrible sinner, King Ahab, Elijah’s old opponent, is placed in the palm of God for judgment. And he squeals and tries to

flee as the recording angel reads out all of his sins, until finally he flees up God's sleeve and finds refuge. And then a saintly prophet comes, probably Elijah, and he sits in the palm of God too and listens complacently as his good deeds were read out. And then the Recording Angels get to some unsavoury stuff: 'It seemed not ten seconds before the Saint also was rushing to and fro over the great palm of God. Not ten seconds. And at last he also shrieked beneath that pitiless and cynical exposition (of the recording angel), and fled also, even as the Wicked man had fled, into the shadow of the sleeve. And the two sat side by side, stark of all delusion, in the shadow of the robe of God's charity, like brother. And thither also I fled in my turn.'

For the disciples who fled Jerusalem on Easter morning, it felt as if it was still Good Friday. They were still living in the middle of the crisis, and so they could not see the Lord who walked with them. For religious life in Ireland, it probably still feels like Good Friday. But it can be the beginning of Easter too, if we resist the temptation to protect ourselves and think mostly of our own survival. It can be the beginning of a new, perhaps more modest, springtime too.