

Does Europe need Missionaries?

The SEDOS Director, Peter Baekelmans, gave me this question: ‘Does Europe need missionaries?’ When I was a school boy learning Latin, we learnt about questions expecting the answer “Yes”. I am sure that if I replied “No”, Peter would be most upset! [smile]

Of course, Missionaries are needed everywhere, but why especially now in Europe? Firstly because of Europe’s pervasive secularism, of which Father Christian Tauchner has just spoken. God’s existence is no longer self-evident for Europeans, especially in the West but increasingly elsewhere as well. But how can we proclaim our faith when religion is usually considered to be a private matter between God and the individual? Certainly, in Britain, it would be considered very bad manners to try to convince anyone else of one’s faith. The reaction would be: ‘How dare you try to impose your beliefs on me!’ Some beliefs can be championed, for example veganism. Question: “How do you know if someone is a vegan? Answer: “Because they will tell you!” But in the case of religion one cannot...

There are conversions to Christianity, but usually because people knock on the door of the Church, and not because the Church has actively gone out to seek them. To do so would be considered proselytism, which is reckoned to be a sign of arrogance.

At the end of every Mass we are sent to proclaim our faith. But why? Firstly, because we believe it to be true. It belongs to our human dignity that we seek and share the truth. Truth is the basis of all human community. Human beings flourish in the shared pursuit of truth as fish do in water and birds in the air. Without it we perish and society disintegrates. To share what I believe to be most deeply true expresses my belief in the dignity of the other person. She or he is not just a consumer, or statistic, but someone made for the truth. The motto of the Order of

Preachers is Veritas, truth. It was this motto that drew me to the Dominicans even though I had never met a Dominican, which might have been just as well!

Our post-truth society has largely lost confidence in the possibility of objective truth even to some extent in science, so the task of the missionary is both necessary and difficult. It is necessary because the loss of the love of truth is filling the media with fake news and crazy conspiracy theories such as Qanon, which believes the world is run by a small elite of Satan worshipping paedophiles. Whereas we all know that it is really ruled by the Jesuits! [smile] In the USA and in Britain we have some politicians who seem to have lost all conception of the truth.

Today there is a battle within Russia, and it is over the truth. The Russian regime is ordering classes on the difference between truth and falsehood. It has declared that the truth is that there is no war in Ukraine. It has decreed that anyone who asserts otherwise must be silenced and punished. The greatest conflict in Europe in my lifetime is about the possibility of truth. George Orwell foresaw this in his novel 1984, published in 1949. He portrayed a world in which the government declares that war is peace; freedom is slavery, and ignorance is strength. That is Putin’s Russia. Yet that hunger for truth lies deep within our humanity and it cannot be entirely eliminated. A Polish Dominican, Pawel Krupa, made a TikTok clip. He enacts a dialogue in which someone asks him, “Have you got any message to the youth?” He replies, “You know. You happen to ask a priest, and even more specifically a priest of the Catholic Church. I have something for both young and old. Seek for the truth and the truth will set you free....” Within two or three days, there had been 5 million views. At the time of writing, it was up to over 10 million views and 1.7 million likes. Very few of the people who liked it even knew that Pawel was quoting

Jesus, but those gospel words touched a deep hunger, 'Seek for the truth and the truth will set you free.' So the missionary is impelled by the love of truth without which there is only bondage.

But we shall speak with authority only if we are seen to be deeply truthful men and women: truthful about our beloved but wounded Church, which has been so hideously damaged by sexual abuse and its cover up by the Church leadership. Why should anyone believe that our faith is true if we are not truthful about everything? We shall only be authentic witnesses if we are eager to learn from other people, and receive the gift of the truth that they treasure. A preacher is a beggar who begs of everyone what they can teach us. The French Dominican Marie-Dominique Chenu was one of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. Even when he was eighty years old, he was out every night meeting academics, trade union leaders, artists and poets. He was impelled to share his faith and learn from them. When we met for a beer in the refectory late every night, he would ask us, 'What have you learnt today?'. This great scholar always had 'a beginner's mind.'

But above all, we shall only be credible witnesses to the truth if we open our hearts and minds to people with whom we disagree even within the Church, even within our own communities! We must transcend narrow party-political ideologies and refuse the poison of polarisation. Yves Congar, OP, said 'I have loved the truth as I have loved a person'. So, Europe needs missionaries, because it needs to fall in love with truth again. If it does not, before us lie conflict and division and the loss of all mutual trust. Already we see alarming signs of this within the United States of America, with the rise of violence.

We all contribute to this love of truth differently: academics, journalists who are facing prison all over the world, pastors and contemplatives: Isaac of Nineveh, the seventh century hermit, famously said, 'If you love truth, be a lover of silence.' We religious need

that interior silence in which the truth can greet us and set us free.

But why is the truth of our faith urgently needed in Europe today? Not all truths matter equally. I expect you know the story of a man who went up in a hot air balloon and drifted over the south of England. Eventually he came down in a tree, but he had no idea where he was. So he asked two passers-by: "Where am I?" They replied: "You are in a tree!". He said, "You must be Dominicans". "How do you know?" Because what you say is true but completely useless'. [smile] So why is the death and resurrection of a man in the Middle East two thousand years ago good news for Europe today? Why does it matter?

Contemporary Europe is afflicted by two great wounds. The loss of hope for the future, and a disbelief in the forgiveness of the past. These lay terrible burdens on our young. How can you live now if there is no future and you are crushed by the past?

Our young desperately need hope. An ecological crisis is looming. All over the world democracy is weakening and strong leaders, usually men, are claiming power. War has again broken out in Europe. Putin threatens the use of nuclear war. The daily lives of the young are filled with stress. Most find it impossible to afford to buy houses and have somewhere to call their own. Millions of migrants are on the move, seeking peace and security. So it is understandable that many young people do not want to have children. Why bring another human being into our doomed planet? The natality rate of Europe is plummeting, especially in Catholic Italy and Spain. So at the end of Mass we are all sent out to be missionaries of hope.

There are myriad ways in which we can do this, through words or deeds, explicitly or implicitly, through kindness and compassion, poetry or painting. Some of us even do it through writing! [smile] But SEDOS did not ask me to explore how we are to be missionaries, only why!

But let's look at the grounds of our hope. That might suggest both why and how we can share it. The secret of our Christian hope was unlocked for me personally in places in which

there seemed to be none. Above all in Rwanda during the genocide and then in Iraq and Syria.

One example: I visited Syria a few years ago. Our base was a monastery in the hills between Damascus and Homs. We were just three miles from the front line with Isis and we were kept awake at night by the artillery fire from a gun emplacement just fifty yards away. Actually I was delighted because it was the only thing that woke up the Anglican clergyman with whom I had to share a room and who snored like a pneumatic drill. [smile] Every morning, the monastery bell rang out defiantly, summoning us to the Eucharist. I wonder what the terrorists in their nearby trenches thought of its sound echoing across the small valley that separated us. There is nothing like being close to people who would take pleasure in cutting off your head for disclosing the hope of the Last Supper. Every morning, we were transported back to that last night when everything was descending into chaos. Judas had betrayed Jesus, Peter was about to deny him, and the others were getting ready to flee. All that lay ahead apparently was failure, suffering and death; the future had disappeared. It looked as if Jesus had totally failed. Then Jesus took the bread and broke it saying, 'This is my body given for you.' Every Sunday we gather to remember the worst of all crises, the Last Supper, when Christ gave us the sacrament of hope. The Eucharist is not a cheerful gathering of nice people who sing songs and feel good. It is an outrageous expression of hope in defiance of everything that could destroy it.

In our perilous world, many young people endure crisis, leading to self-harm, despair or even suicide. Why carry on? The Eucharist carries us back to the most terrible crisis that the world has ever known. Love Incarnate came to us with open arms and we hanged him on a cross, arms still open wide. But this crisis was fertile beyond anyone's wildest imagination. On Easter Day, the dead wood of the cross flowered. The Eucharist is our hope that however dead or barren our lives may seem to be, a flowering lies ahead. And so we need not fear a crisis. The American

Dominicans once gave me a T-shirt which read: '*Have a good crisis!*' [smile]

We witness to this hope by being unafraid of crisis. Many of your congregations are probably passing through a crisis at this moment in Europe, some with no vocations at all. Many of your communities will die, and perhaps also the beloved projects to which you have given your lives: your schools and hospitals. And of course, each of us must face our own deaths. All this we can do in joy and sorrow, which are woven together, because we trust that the Lord will grant some fruit that we cannot imagine and may never know. The authenticity of our witness to our faith is inseparable from the truthfulness with which we face all these sorts of death, our own and that of the institutions which we love.

When I was elected Provincial, my first duty was to visit a Dominican monastery of contemplative nuns, called Carisbrooke. I went with the previous Provincial, Peter. They had reached the end of the road and had to face closure. One of them said to me, "But our dear Lord would not let Carisbrooke die, would he?" To which Peter replied: "He let his own Son die." So we are missionaries of a hope for a future which we cannot imagine but we trust the Lord will give. We shall be so if we face death with joy.

Here is a question to which I do not have a clear answer. Each community must answer it in their own way. If our congregation or community is dying in Europe, how do we live this in hope? Do we spend lots of money in ensuring that our aging brothers or sisters have the greatest comfort and security, often way beyond what most people could afford? Or do we give everything that we can, even at the cost of our own comfort, to support young people who struggle for the future, or communities in other continents which will be the future? That is a tough question! Somehow, we must live this moment with the insane generosity of Jesus at the Last Supper. What will that mean for you? How much insecurity can we embrace in hope?

One expression of this hope is just getting up each morning and doing whatever good deed the Lord gives one to do that day. St Paul says

that we are ‘created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.’ (Ephesians 2:10). Terry Eagleton writes: ‘The most flourishing acts are those performed as though they were one’s last, and thus accomplished not for their consequences but for their own sake.’

Again it was in the war-torn Middle East that I saw this most beautifully. One of our brothers had been reluctant to come back to Baghdad. He had been afraid but now he was happy to be there. He said to me: ‘Hope means that I live now, whatever may happen tomorrow.’ The Sisters of Charity care for disabled kids who have been abandoned by their families. I cannot forget the grave face of Nora, born with no legs or arms, and who feeds the youngest children with a spoon in her mouth. We had great joy in a home for women of all faiths abandoned by their families which is run by two consecrated virgins.

I also found hope in the good deeds that Muslims did for Christians. Just below the monastery in Syria at which we stayed, lies the village of Qara. A few years ago it was captured by Daesh or ISIS. The icons in our churches were defaced, the graves in the Christian cemetery dug up and the bodies scattered all the place. When the village was recaptured, the Christians had nowhere to celebrate Christmas, and the imam said: “Come and celebrate it in the mosque.”

These are good deeds just done for their own sake, and not as part of a political program. They are not means to an end. The Italian Jewish writer Primo Levi met Lorenzo in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Lorenzo gave him part of his ration of bread every day. He wrote: ‘I believe it was really due to Lorenzo that I am alive today; and not so much for his material aid as for his having

constantly reminded me by his presence, by his natural and plain manner of being good, that there still exists a world outside our own, something and someone still pure and whole, not corrupt, not savage...something difficult to define, a remote possibility of good but for which it was worth surviving. Thanks to Lorenzo I managed not to forget that I myself was a man.³¹’

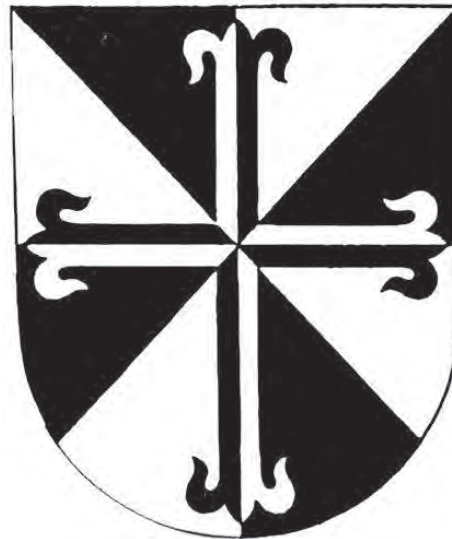
Thomas Merton wrote to a friend who was discouraged by the failure of their peace campaign to produce any results: ‘Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on...you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even

achieve no results at all....As you get used to this idea you start more and more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself.³²’ So to live in hope is to do the good deeds the Lord puts before one, not knowing what fruit they will yield. The Lord knows. He is the Lord of the harvest.

I cannot resist mentioning one activity in which the passion for truth and hope

for the young perfectly coincide: teaching. It recognizes their dignity as seekers after the truth, whether one teaches science, literature or religion. It embodies our hope for their future. Every school is a sacrament of hope. When I visited Homs in Syria, the city was virtually destroyed. We found a small school where children with disabilities are taught. Here it was that the Dutch Jesuit, Franz van de Lugt, had been assassinated. We prayed at his tomb, and then in a class we found an old Egyptian Jesuit still teaching. He was there because these children were made for the truth and because they are our unknown future.

True teaching is a rejection of the blind fundamentalism which is consuming the



³¹ ‘Survival in Auschwitz’ *The Tablet* 21 January 2006

³² *Hidden Ground of Love* p.294.

world. The Baghdad Academy of Human Sciences, founded in 2012, has as its emblem the Dominican Shield with a large question mark. Here, they say, no questions are forbidden! Ultimately the only response to ISIS is to encourage people to think! A famous Dominican novice master at the beginning of the last century used to say to the novices: 'Think; Think of anything, but for God's sake think!³³'

So we proclaim our faith because we believe it to be true. And the truth of our faith embodies the hope for which the young long today. They also need the liberation of forgiveness, freedom from the chains of the past. The cup blessed at that Last Supper was 'the new and eternal covenant poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins'. Judaism and Islam both believe in a forgiving God, but it is the heart of Christianity as of no other faith. Without forgiveness, Christianity would be nothing.

But here is the dilemma. We are representatives of a Church which is tainted by the horrible scandal of sexual abuse of minors. Who are we to tell other people that their sins are forgiven? This could sound like a refusal to face the horror of what has happened. Forgiveness might seem to trivialise the failures of the Church. Secondly, the young are deeply uneasy with the whole language of "sin". Sin evokes the world of 'Catholic guilt', of people crushed by scruples especially about sex. The Irish writer Brian Moore begins one of his early stories with the sentence: 'In the beginning was the word and the word was NO.' I hardly ever use the word 'sin' when I talk about my faith. One of the criticisms of Pope Francis by his enemies is that he does not tell people often enough that they are sinners who should repent, especially the divorced and remarried and gay people!

People often complain that the young have lost their sense of sin. I believe that this is profoundly untrue. It has shifted. Our young do indeed have a high moral idealism. They

are far kinder and more tolerant than my generation ever was. There is a deep sense of the equality of all men and women. Prejudice against people on the grounds of their colour or their sexual orientation is abhorred. There is an acute sense of the damage we are doing to the environment and of the horror of sexual abuse. When has there ever been a generation with such high moral idealism as the young of today?

But this very same idealism can be crushing. How can they bear that there is no forgiveness for all of our failures? We say in Britain that today 'everything is permitted but nothing is forgiven.' The atmosphere of our society is heavy with accusation. The world is divided into victims and perpetrators. Social media records every transgression. Google remembers everything and forever. We are tainted by any association with the wrong doings of our ancestors. Any connection with slavery is intolerable. So statues are torn down, schools and buildings and roads are renamed. Heroes, like Mahatma Gandhi and Aung San Su Kyi are vilified. Because we must be pure, untainted, uncontaminated. This is called the 'purity spiral'. People work ever harder to disassociate themselves from the impure, the offensive. One test case for moral purity at the moment is the right of transgender people to self-identify. So secular Europe, heavenly burdened by accusation, is in urgent need of the scandalous news of forgiveness.

But who are we to proclaim this when the authority of the Church is so compromised? How can we preach what is the very heart of our faith, the forgiveness of sins? I do not really have an answer but I can offer two principles which may suggest a way forward. Neither victim nor perpetrator should be defined forever by what they have done or suffered. Both are human beings made for the eternal joy of God's kingdom. Both are children of God who need healing. My most beloved example of this is an American

³³ Anniversary Sermon for Fr Vincent McNabb' by Hilary Carpenter OP in *A Vincent McNabb Anthology: Selections from the Writings of Vincent McNabb O.P.* ed F.E Nugent London 1955 p.ix

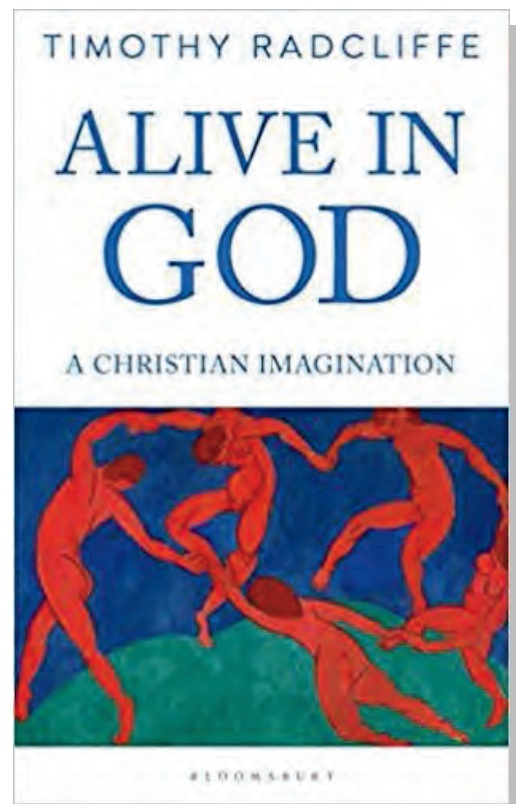
fraternity of Lay Dominicans whose members are mostly people in prison for murder. They are our brothers and sisters. They may have committed murder but they are not forever imprisoned by the definition, ‘murderer.’

I also think of Southdown near Toronto, a place for the healing of priests and religious who have committed sexual abuse or have been swallowed up by alcoholism or pornography and so on. I visited Southdown at the request of the then Director, a Dominican sister, Donna Markham. Actually, I was supposed to give talks at the leadership center there, to Canadian bishops but I was accidentally delivered to the other side, and almost could not get out. [smile] Donna asked me to stay on for a day and give a day of recollection. I noticed an image of Christ hanging from the ceiling of the chapel. But there was no cross. Donna explained that everyone brought their own cross which Christ shared. So that is the first principle. We are all marred and wounded human beings and so we dare to associate with each other. No one is to be imprisoned for ever by the definition of victim or perpetrator. We can go out with each other without taking purity checks.

The second is that it can take a long time before one is able to forgive. We pray every day, ‘forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us’, but we cannot demand of other people that they forgive. That would be another form of abuse. When people are lost in in what Stephen Cherry calls ‘the wilderness of hurt’³⁴, they must have time for forgiveness to emerge. The people of Northern Ireland understand this well. The wounds of centuries cannot be healed at command, any more than can our wounded bodies. My surgeon tells me it will take 18 months for the wounds of my last operation to fully heal. Think of the vast time that will be needed before the Ukrainian people will be able even to contemplate the forgiveness of those who are even now bringing about its appalling suffering. Forgiveness is inseparable from patience.

But here is a tough question: how can we forgive priests and religious who have committed sexual abuse and those who covered it up? To forgive them would be one scandal; not to do would be another. There must be forgiveness. But what form can it take? What are your congregations learning about forgiveness today?

So does Europe need missionaries? Yes, because we believe that our faith is true, and to fail to share the truth of the gospel with others would be to treat them with contempt. Secondly, because the young desperately need hope. And thirdly, because the heart of Christianity is forgiveness. The young have such high moral ideals, but this can be crushing. The atmosphere is heavy with accusation. The good news is that “the accuser of our brothers and sisters [...] has been thrown down.” (Revelation 12:10). How can we embody that?



(New book of Fr. Timothy on the theme of secularization in the West)

³⁴ *Healing Agony: Re-Imagining Forgiveness*, Continuum, London and New York,

2012, p. 190 et passim.