

First Synod Retreat Meditation with Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP

Oct 1st, 2023

Source: Vatican News

On Sunday morning, 1 October, Dominican Friar and former Master of the Order of Preachers, Father Timothy Peter Joseph Radcliffe, reflected on the meaning of 'Hoping against hope' with those who will participate in the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops set to begin on Wednesday, 4 October.

When the Holy Father asked me to give this retreat, I felt enormously honoured but nervous. I am deeply aware of my personal limitations. I am old - white- a Westerner- and a man! I don't know which is worse! All of these aspects of my identity limit my understanding. So I ask for your forgiveness for the inadequacy of my words.

We are all radically incomplete and need each other. Karl Barth, the great Protestant theologian, wrote of the Catholic 'both/ and.' For example, Scripture and tradition, faith and works. He is said to have called it the 'damned Catholic "And"', 'das verdamnte katholische "Und"'. So when we listen to each other during the coming weeks and disagree, I pray we shall often say, 'Yes, and.....' Rather than 'No!' That is the Synodal way. Of course, No is also sometimes necessary!

In the second reading at Mass today, St Paul says to the Philippians: 'Complete my joy by being of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing'. (Philippians 2.2). We are gathered here because we are not united in heart and mind. The vast majority of people who have taken part in the synodal process have been surprised by joy. For many, it is the first time that the Church has invited them to speak of their faith and hope. But some of us are afraid of this journey and of what lies ahead. Some hope that the Church will be dramatically changed, that we shall take radical decisions, for example about the role of women in the Church. Others are afraid of exactly these same changes and fear that they will only lead to division, even schism. Some of you would prefer not to be here at all. A bishop told me that he prayed not to be chosen to come here. His prayer was granted! You may be like the son in today's gospel who at first does not want to go to the vineyard, but he goes!

At crucial moments in the gospels, we always hear these words: 'Do not be afraid.' St John tells us 'Perfect love casts out fear.' So let us begin by praying that the Lord will free our hearts from fear. For some this is the fear of change and for others the fear that nothing will change. But 'the only thing we have to fear is fear itself.[1]'

Of course, we all have fears, but Aquinas taught us that courage is refusing to be enslaved by fear. May we always be sensitive to the fears of others, especially those with whom we disagree. 'Like Abraham, we leave not knowing where we are going (Hebrews 11.8). But if we free our hearts of fear, it will be wonderful beyond our imagination.

To guide us during this retreat, we shall meditate on the Transfiguration. This is the retreat Jesus gives to his closest disciples before they embark on the first synod in the life of the Church, when they walk together (syn-hodos) to Jerusalem. This retreat was needed because they were afraid of this journey they must make together. Until now they have wandered around the north of Israel. But at Caesarea Philippi, Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ. Then Jesus invites them to go with him to Jerusalem, where he will suffer, die and be raised from the dead. They cannot accept this. Peter tries to prevent him. Jesus calls him 'Satan', 'enemy'. The little community is paralysed. So Jesus takes them up the mountain. Let us listen to St Mark's account of what happened.

'Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves. And he was transfigured before them, and his clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah with Moses, who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified. Then a cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud there came a voice, "This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!" Suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one with them anymore, but only Jesus.' (9.2 - 8).

This retreat gives them the courage and hope to set off on their journey. It does not always go well. They immediately fail to free the young lad from the evil spirit. They quarrel about who is the greatest. They misunderstand the Lord. But they are on their way with a fragile hope.

So we too prepare for our synod by going on retreat where, like the disciples, we learn to listen to the Lord. When we set off in three days' time, we shall often be like those disciples, and misunderstand each other and even quarrel. But the Lord will lead us onwards towards the death and resurrection of the Church. Let us ask the Lord to give us hope too: the hope that this synod will lead to a renewal of the Church and not division; the hope that we shall draw closer to each other as brothers and sisters. This is our hope not just for the Catholic Church but for all our baptised brothers and sisters. People talk of an 'ecumenical winter'. We hope for an ecumenical spring.

We also gather in hope for humanity. The future looks grim. Ecological catastrophe threatens the destruction of our home. Wildfires and floods have devoured the world this summer. Small islands begin to disappear under the sea. Millions of people are on the road fleeing from poverty and violence. Hundreds have drowned in the Mediterranean not far from here. Many parents refuse to bring children into a world that appears doomed. In China, young people wear T-shirts saying, 'We are the last generation'. Let us gather in hope for humanity, especially hope for the young.

I don't know how many parents we have at the Synod, but thank you for cherishing our future. After a difficult time in South Sudan, on the frontier with the Congo, I flew back to Britain beside a child who screamed without interruption for eight hours. I am ashamed to confess that I had murderous thoughts! But what more marvellous priestly ministry than to raise children and seek to open their minds and hearts to the promise of life. Parents and teachers are ministers of hope.

So we gather in hope for the Church and for humanity. But here is the difficulty: We have contradictory hopes! So how can we hope together? In this we are just like the disciples. The

mother of James and John hoped that they would sit on the left and the right of the Lord in glory and so displace Peter; there is rivalry even within the closest circle of Jesus' friends. Judas probably hoped for a rebellion that would throw out the Romans. Some of them probably just hoped not to get killed. But they walk on together. So what shared hope can we have?

At the Last Supper, they received a hope beyond all that they could have imagined: the body of Christ and his blood, the new covenant, eternal life. In the light of this Eucharistic hope, all their conflicting hopes must have seemed as nothing, except to Judas who despaired. This is what St Paul called 'hoping against hope' (Romans 4.18), the hope that transcends all of our hopes.

We too are gathered like the disciples at the Last Supper, not as a political debating chamber competing to win. Our hope is Eucharistic. I first glimpsed what this means in Rwanda in 1993, when the troubles were just beginning. We had planned to visit our Dominican sisters in the north but the Belgian ambassador told us we should stay at home. The country was on fire. But I was young and foolish. Now I am old and foolish! That day we saw terrible things: A hospital ward filled with young children who had lost limbs through mines and bombs. One child has lost both legs, an arm, and an eye. His father sat beside him weeping. I went into the bush to weep, accompanied by two children each hopping on one leg.

We went to our sisters, but what could I say? In the face of such meaningless violence, one has no words. Then I remembered the words of the Lord, 'Do this in memory of me.' We are given something to do. At the Last Supper, there seemed to be no future. All that lay ahead apparently was failure, suffering and death. And in this darkest moment, Jesus made the most hopeful gesture in the history of the world: 'This is my body, given for you. This is my blood poured out for you'. This is the hope that calls us beyond all division.

One of my brothers in the east of Ukraine went to say Mass for some sisters who were moving. Everything was packed. All they could offer for the paten was a red plastic plate. He wrote: 'This was how God showed us that he was with us. 'You are sitting in a basement, in the damp and the mould, but I am with you - on a red child's plate, and not on a golden paten.'". This is the Eucharistic hope of this synodal journey. The Lord is with us.

The hope of the Eucharist is for what lies beyond our imagination/ The Book of Revelation: "Behold, an immense multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language. They all stood before the throne and before the Lamb, wrapped in white robes, and held palm branches in their hands. And they cried with a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb'" (Rev 7:9f.). This is the hope that the disciples glimpsed on the mountain in the Transfigured Lord. It makes the conflict between our hopes seem minor, almost absurd. If we are truly on the way to the Kingdom, does it really matter whether you align yourselves with so-called traditionalists or progressives? Even the differences between Dominicans and Jesuits pall into insignificance! So let us listen to him, come down the mountain and keep on walking confidently. The greatest gifts will come from those with whom we disagree if we dare to listen to them.

During our Synodal journey, we may worry whether we are achieving anything. The media will probably decide that it was all a waste of time, just words. They will look for whether bold decisions are made on about four or five hot-button topics. But the disciples on that first synod, walking to Jerusalem, did not appear to achieve anything. They even tried to stop blind Bartimaeus being cured. They seemed useless. When the vast hungry crowd gathers around

Jesus, the disciples ask the Lord 'How can one feed these people with bread here in the desert?'. Jesus asks them what they have, just seven loaves and a few fish (Mark 8.1 - 10). That is more than enough. If we give generously whatever we have in this Synod, that will be more than enough. The Lord of the harvest will provide.

Next to our priory in Baghdad is a home for abandoned children of all faiths, run by Mother Theresa's sisters. I shall never forget little Nura, about eight years old, born without arms or legs, feeding the younger children with a spoon in her mouth. One can wonder what is the point of small acts of goodness in a war zone. Do they make any difference? Aren't they just sticking plasters on a rotting body? We do small good deeds and let the Lord of the harvest give them the fruit he wishes. Today we gather on the feast of St Therese of Lisieux. She was born 150 years ago. She invites us to follow her 'little way' that leads to the Kingdom. She said, 'Remember that nothing is small in the eyes of God.'

In Auschwitz, Primo Levi, the Italian Jew, was given a share of bread every day by Lorenzo. 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.[2]' The small portion of bread saved his soul.

The last words of St David, the patron saint of Wales, were: 'Do simple things well.' Our hope is that whatever small deeds we do in this synod will bear fruit beyond our imagination. On that last night, Jesus gave himself to the disciples: 'I give myself to you'. During this Synod let us share not just our words and convictions, but ourselves, with Eucharistic generosity. If we open our hearts to each other, wonderful things will happen. The disciples gather all the fragments of bread and fish left over after the feeding of the five thousand. Nothing is lost.

A final point. Peter tries to stop Jesus going to Jerusalem, because it makes no sense to him. It is absurd to go there to be killed. Despair is not pessimism. It is the terror that nothing makes sense anymore. And hope is not optimism but the confidence that all that we live, all our confusion and pain, will somehow be seen to have meaning. We trust that, as St Paul says: 'Now I know in part; then I shall understand even as I have been understood.' (1 Corinthians 13.12).

Senseless violence destroys all meaning and kills our souls. When St Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador visited the scene of a massacre by the Salvadorian army, he came across the body of a young boy lying in a ditch: 'He was just a kid, at the bottom of the ditch, face up. You could see the bullet holes, the bruises left by the blows, the dried blood. His eyes were open, as if asking the reason for his death and not understanding[3].' Yet it was at this moment, he discovered the meaning of his life and the call to give it up. Yes, he was fearful to the end. His dead body was soaked in sweat as he looked at the man who was about to kill him. But he was no longer the slave of fear.

I hope that in this Synod, there will be no violence! But often we shall probably wonder what is the point of it all, but if we listen to Him and listen to each other, we shall come to understand the way forward. This is our Christian witness in a world which has often lost confidence that human existence has any meaning. Shakespeare's Macbeth asserts that life is but a tale, 'told

by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing[4].' But through our thinking and praying together about the great issues that the Church and the world faces, we witness to our hope in the Lord who grants meaning to every human life.

Every Christian school is a testimony to our hope in 'the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.' (John 1.5). In Baghdad the Dominicans founded an academy which has the motto, 'Here no questions are forbidden.' In the middle of a war zone, a school testifies to our hope that the nonsense of violence will not have the last word. Homs in Syria is a city largely destroyed by senseless violence. But there amid the ruins we discovered a Catholic school. Here the Dutch Jesuit, Franz van der Lugt, refused to leave despite death threats. He was shot sitting in the garden. But we found an old Egyptian Jesuit who was still teaching. He was training another generation of children to go on trying to make sense of their lives. That is what hope looks like.

So, my brothers and sisters, we may be divided by different hopes. But if we listen to the Lord and to each other, seeking to understand his will for the Church and the world, we shall be united in a hope that transcends our disagreements, and be touched by the one whom St Augustine called that 'beauty so ancient and so new...I tasted you and now hunger and thirst for you; you touched me, and I have burned for your peace.'[5] In the next session we shall look at another way in which we may be divided, by our understanding of what sort of home the Church is.

[1] Franklin D. Roosevelt

[2] 'Survival in Auschwitz' The Tablet 21 January 2006

[3] Scott Wright Oscar Romero and the Communion of Saints Orbis New York 2009 p.37

[4] Macbeth Act 5, Scene 5

[5] Confessions, Bk 7.27, breviary Reading for his Feast.

Watch the Vatican Media video recording of Fr Timothy's reflection:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=cGdxwE2KYgg

Tags: [Synod 2022](#), [Timothy Radcliffe](#), [Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP](#), [Dominican](#)

Second Synod Retreat Meditation with Fr Timothy Radcliffe OP

Oct 2nd, 2023

Source: Vatican News

On Sunday morning, 1 October, Dominican Friar and former Master of the Order of Preachers, Father Timothy Radcliffe's second meditation for those who will participate in the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops set to begin on Wednesday, 4 October focused on the theme: 'At home in God and God at home in us'.

We come to this Synod with conflicting hopes. But this need not be an insuperable obstacle. We are united in the hope of the Eucharist, a hope which embraces and transcends all that we long for.

But there is another source of tension. Our understandings of the Church as our home sometimes clash. Every living creature needs a home if it is to flourish. Fish need water and birds need nests. Without a home, we cannot live. Different cultures have different conceptions of home. The *Instrumentum Laboris* tells us that 'Asia offered the image of the person who takes off his or her shoes to cross the threshold as a sign of the humility with which we prepare to meet God and our neighbour. Oceania proposed the image of the boat and Africa suggested the image of the Church as the family of God, capable of offering belonging and welcome to all its members in all their variety.' (B 1.2). But all of these images show that we need somewhere in which we are both accepted and challenged. At home we are affirmed as we are and invited to be more. Home is where we are known, loved and safe but challenged to embark on the adventure of faith.

We need to renew the Church as our common home if we are to speak to a world which is suffering from a crisis of homelessness. We are consuming our little planetary home. There are more than 350 million migrants on the move, fleeing war and violence. Thousands die crossing seas to try to find a home. None of us can be entirely at home unless they are. Even in wealthy countries, millions sleep on the street. Young people are often unable to afford a home. Everywhere there is a terrible spiritual homelessness. Acute individualism, the breakdown of the family, ever deeper inequalities mean that we are afflicted with a tsunami of loneliness. Suicides are rising because without a home, physical and spiritual, one cannot live. To love is to come home to someone.

So what does this scene of the Transfiguration teach us about our home, both in the Church and in our dispossessed world? Jesus invites his innermost circle of friends to come apart with him and enjoy this intimate moment. They too will be with him in the Garden of Gethsemane. This is the inner circle of those with whom Jesus is most at home. On the mountain he grants them a vision of his glory. Peter wants to cling to this moment. ' "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here; let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."'. He has arrived and wants this intimate moment to endure.

But they hear the voice of the Father. 'Listen to him!' They must come down the mountain and walk to Jerusalem, not knowing what awaits them. They will be dispersed and sent to the ends of the earth to be witnesses to our ultimate home, the Kingdom. So here we see two understandings of home: the inner circle at home with Jesus on the mountain and the summons to our ultimate home, the Kingdom in which all will belong.

Similar different understandings of the Church as home tear us apart today. For some it is defined by its ancient traditions and devotions, its inherited structures and language, the Church we have grown up with and love. It gives us a clear Christian identity. For others, the present Church does not seem to be a safe home. It is experienced as exclusive, marginalizing many people, women: the divorced and remarried. For some it is too Western, too Eurocentric. The IL mentions also gay people and people in polygamous marriages. They long for a renewed Church in which they will feel fully at home, recognized, affirmed and safe.

For some the idea of a universal welcome, in which everyone is accepted regardless of who they are, is felt as destructive of the Church's identity. As in a nineteenth-century English song, 'If everybody is somebody then nobody is anybody.'^[1] They believe that identity demands boundaries. But for others, it is the very heart of the Church's identity to be open. Pope Francis said, 'The Church is called on to be the house of the Father, with doors always wide open ... where there is a place for everyone, with all their problems and to move towards those who feel the need to take up again their path of faith.'^[2]

This tension has always been at the heart of our faith, since Abraham left Ur. The Old Testament holds two things in perpetual tension: the idea of election, God's chosen people, the people with whom God dwells. This is an identity which is cherished. But also universalism, openness to all the nations, an identity which is yet to be discovered.

Christian identity is both known and unknown, given and to be sought. St. John says, 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.' (1 John 3. 1 - 2). We know who we are and yet we do not know who we shall be.

For some of us, the Christian identity is above all given, the Church we know and love. For others Christian identity is always provisional, lying ahead as we journey towards the Kingdom in which all walls will fall. Both are necessary! If we stress only our identity is given - This is what it means to be Catholic - we risk becoming a sect. If we just stress the adventure towards an identity yet to be discovered, we risk becoming a vague Jesus movement. But the Church is a sign and sacrament of the unity of all humanity in Christ (LG. 1) in being both. We dwell on the mountain and taste the glory now. But we walk to Jerusalem, that first synod of the Church.

How are we to live this necessary tension? All theology springs from tension, which bends the bow to shoot the arrow. This tension is at the heart of St. John's gospel. God makes his home in us: 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.' (14.23) But Jesus also promises us our home in God: 'In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? (John 14.2).

When we think of the Church as home, some of us primarily think of God as coming home to us, and others of us coming to home in God. Both are true. We must enlarge the tent of our

sympathy to those who think differently. We treasure the inner circle on the mountain, but we come down and walk to Jerusalem, wanderers and homeless. 'Listen to him'.

So, first, God makes his home with us. The Word is made flesh in a first-century Palestinian Jew, raised in the customs and traditions of his people. The Word becomes flesh in each of our cultures. In Italian paintings of the Annunciation, we see lovely homes of marble, with windows open onto olive trees and gardens of roses and lilies. Dutch and Flemish painters show Mary with a warm oven, well wrapped to keep out the cold. Whatever is your home, God comes to dwell in it. For thirty silent years, God dwelt in Nazareth: an unimportant backwater. Nathaniel exclaimed in disgust, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth' (John 1.46). Philip just replies, 'Come and see.'

All of our homes are Nazareth, where God dwells. St Charles de Foucauld said: 'Let Nazareth be your model, in all its simplicity and breadth... The life of Nazareth can be lived anywhere. Live it where is it most useful for your neighbour.[3]' Wherever we are and whatever we have done, God comes to stay: 'Behold I stand at the door and knock. If you hear my voice and open the door, I will come into you and eat with you, and you with me' (Rev. 3.20).

So we treasure the places where we have met Emmanuel. 'God with us'. We love the liturgies in which we have glimpsed the divine beauty, the churches of our childhood, the popular devotions. I love the great Benedictine Abbey of my school where I first sensed the doors of heaven open. Each of us has our own Mt Tabor, on which we have glimpsed the glory. We need them. So when liturgies are changed or churches demolished, people experience great pain, as if their home in the Church is being destroyed. Like Peter, we wish to stay.

Every local Church is a home for God. Our mother Mary appeared in England in Walsingham, the great medieval shrine, in Lourdes, in Guadalupe in Mexico, in Czestochowa in Poland, in La Vang in Vietnam and Donglu in China. There is no Marian competition. In England, we say, 'The good news is that God loves you. The bad news is that he loves everyone else as well.' St Augustine said: God loves each of us as if there were only one of us.[4] . In the Basilica of Notre Dame d'Afrique in Algiers, there is inscribed: 'Priez pour nous et pour les Musulmans' 'Pray for us and for the Muslims'.

Often priests find the Synodal path most difficult to embrace. We clergy tend these places of worship and celebrate its liturgies. Priests need a strong sense of identity, an esprit de corps. But who shall we be in this Church which is liberated from clericalism? How can the clergy embrace an identity which is not clerical? This is a great challenge for a renewed Church. Let us embrace it without fear, a new fraternal understanding of ministerial priesthood! Perhaps we can discover how this loss of identity is actually an inherent part of our priestly identity. It is a vocation to be drawn beyond all identities, because 'who we are is yet to be revealed' (1 John 3.2).

God makes his home now in places that the world despises. Our Dominican brother Frei Betto describes how God came to be at home in a prison in Brazil. Some Dominicans were imprisoned for their opposition to the dictatorship (1964-1985). Betto wrote, 'On Christmas day, the Feast of God's homecoming, the joy is overwhelming. Christmas night in prison... Now the whole prison is singing, as if our song alone, happy and free, must sound throughout the world. The women are singing over in their section, and we applaud... Everyone here knows that it's Christmas, that someone is being reborn. And with our song, we testify that we too have been

reborn to fight for a world without tears, hatred or oppression. It's quite something to see these young faces pressed against the bars and singing their love. Unforgettable. It's not a sight for our judges, or the public prosecutor, or the police who arrested us. They would find the beauty of this night intolerable. Torturers fear a smile, even a weak one."

So we glimpse the beauty of the Lord in our own Mt Tabor, where, like Peter, we want to pitch our tents. Good! But 'Listen to Him!' We enjoy that moment and then come down the mountain and walk to Jerusalem. We must become in a sense homeless. 'Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.' (Luke 9.58). They walk to Jerusalem, the holy city where God's name dwells. But there Jesus dies outside the walls for the sake of all who live outside the walls, as God revealed himself to his people in the wilderness outside the camp. James Alison wrote: 'God is among us as one cast out[5]'. 'Therefore, Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his blood. Let us therefore then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured.' (Hebrews 12.12f).

Archbishop Carlos Aspiroz da Costa wrote to the Dominican Family when he was Master: "Outside the camp' among all those 'others' relegated to a place outside the camp, is where we meet God. Itinerancy demands going outside the institution, outside culturally conditioned perceptions and beliefs, because it is 'outside the camp' that we meet a God who cannot be controlled. It is 'outside the camp' that we meet the Other who is different and discover who we are and what we are to do.[6]' It is in going outside that we reach for a home in which 'there is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3.26).

In the 1980s, reflecting on the Church's response to Aids, I visited a London hospital. The consultant told me that there was a young man asking for a priest called Timothy. By God's providence, I managed to anoint him shortly before he died. He asked to be buried in Westminster Cathedral, the centre of Catholicism in England. He was surrounded by the ordinary people who came to that weekday Mass, as well as by people with Aids, nurses, doctors and gay friends. The one who had been on the periphery, because of his illness, because of his sexual orientation and most of all because he was now dead, was at the centre. He was surrounded by those for whom the Church was home and those who would normally never enter a church.

Our lives are nourished by beloved traditions and devotions. If they are lost, we grieve. But also we must remember all those who do not yet feel at home in the Church: women who feel that they are unrecognised in a patriarchy of old white men like me! People who feel that the Church is too Western, too Latin, too colonial. We must journey towards a Church in which they are no longer at the margin but in the centre.

When Thomas Merton became a Catholic he discovered 'God, that centre Who is everywhere, and whose circumference is nowhere, finding me.' Renewing the Church, then, is like making bread. One gathers edges of the dough into the centre, and spreads the centre into the margins, filling it all with oxygen. One makes the loaf by overthrowing the distinction between edges and the centre, making God's loaf, whose centre is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere, finding us.

One last very short word. Time and again during the preparation for this Synod, the question was asked: 'But how can we be at home in the Church with the horrible scandal of sexual abuse?' For many, this has been the last straw. They have packed their bags and gone. I put this question to a meeting of Catholic head teachers in Australia, where the Church has been horribly disfigured by this scandal. How did they remain? How could they still be at home?

One of them quoted Carlo Carretto (1910 - 1988), a little brother of Charles de Foucauld. What Carretto said sums up the ambiguity of the Church, my home but not yet my home, revealing and concealing God.

'How much I must criticize you, my church, and yet how much I love you! You have made me suffer more than anyone, and yet I owe more to you than to anyone. I should like to see you destroyed, and yet I need your presence. You have given me much scandal, and yet you alone have made me understand your holiness. ... Countless times, I have felt like slamming the door of my soul in your face-and yet, every night, I have prayed that I might die in your sure arms! No, I cannot be free of you, for I am one with you, even if not completely you. Then too - where would I go? To build another church? But I could not build one without the same defects, for they are my defects. '

At the end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus says: 'Behold I am with you until the end of time.' If the Lord stays, how could we go? God has made himself at home in us with all our scandalous limitations for ever. God remains in our Church, even with all the corruption and abuse. We must therefore remain. But God is with us to lead us out into the wider open spaces of the Kingdom. We need the Church, our present home for all its weaknesses, but also to breathe the Spirit-filled oxygen of our future home without boundaries.

[1] W. S. Gilbert, *The Gondoliers*, 1889

[2] *Evangelii Gaudium* para 47.

[3] Cathy Wright LSJ *St Charles de Foucauld: His Life and Spirituality*, p.111

[4] *Confessions*. Book 3

[5] *Knowing Jesus* p.71

[6] Letter to the Order on Itinerancy

Watch on Vatican Media's Youtube channel: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ABo48JNCdXI

Tags: [Synod 2022](#), [Fr Timothy Radcliffe](#), [St Charles de Foucauld](#), [Thomas Merton](#)

Third Synod Retreat Meditation with Fr Timothy Radcliffe: Friendship

Oct 3rd, 2023

Source: Vatican News

On Monday morning, Dominican Friar and former Master of the Order of Preachers, Father Timothy Radcliffe, reflected on the meaning of 'Friendship' with those who will participate in the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops set to begin on Wednesday, 4 October.

On the night before he died, Jesus prayed to his Father: 'May them be one as we are one.' (John 17.11). But from the beginning, in almost every document of the New Testament, we see the disciples divided, quarrelling, excommunicating each other.

We are gathered in this Synod because we too are divided and hope and pray for unity of heart and mind. This should be our precious witness in a world which is torn apart by conflict and inequality. The Body of Christ should embody that peace which Jesus promised and for which the world longs.

Yesterday I looked at two sources of division: Our conflicting hopes and different visions of the Church as home. But there is no need for these tensions to tear us apart; We are bearers of a hope beyond hope, and the spacious home of the Kingdom in which the Lord tells us there are 'many dwelling places' (John 14.1).

Of course not every hope or opinion is legitimate. But orthodoxy is spacious and heresy is narrow. The Lord leads his sheep out of the small enclosure of the sheepfold into the wide-open pastures of our faith. At Easter, he will lead them out of the small locked room into the unbounded vastness of God, 'God's plenty'[1].

So let us listen to him together. But how? A German bishop was concerned by 'the biting tone' during their synodal discussions. He said they had been 'more like a rhetorical exchange of verbal blows' than an orderly debate.'[2] Of course, orderly rational debates are necessary. As a Dominican, I could never deny the importance of reason! But more is needed if we are to reach beyond our differences. The sheep trust the voice of the Lord because it is that of a friend. This Synod will be fruitful if it leads us into a deeper friendship with the Lord and with each other.

On the night before he died, Jesus addressed the disciples who were about to betray, deny, and desert him, saying: 'I call you friends.' (John 15.15). We are embraced by the healing friendship of God which unlocks the doors of the prisons we create for ourselves. "The invisible God speaks to men and women as friends" (Vatican II, Dei Verbum, 2). He opened the way into the eternal friendship of the Trinity. This friendship was offered to his disciples, to tax collectors and prostitutes, to lawyers and foreigners. It was the first taste of the Kingdom.

Both the Old Testament and classical Greece and Rome considered such friendships impossible. Friendship was only between the good. Friendship with the wicked was considered impossible. As Psalm 26 says, 'I hate the company of evildoers and will not sit with the wicked'

(v23). The bad do not have friendships since they only collaborate for evil deeds. But our God was always inclined to shocking friendships. He loved Jacob the trickster; and David, the murderer and adulterer; and Solomon the idolater.

Also, friendship was only possible between equals. But grace lifts us up into the divine friendship. Aquinas says *solus Deus deificat*, 'only God can make us godlike.'^[i] Today is the Feast of the Guardian Angels, who are signs of the unique friendship that God has for each of us. The Holy Father said on the Feast of the Guardian Angels, 'No one journeys alone and no one should think that they are alone^[3]'. As we journey, we are each embraced by the divine friendship.

Preaching the gospel is never just communicating information. It is an act of friendship. A hundred years ago, Vincent McNabb OP said, 'Love those to whom you preach. If you do not, do not preach. Preach to yourself.' St Dominic was said to have been loved by all since he loved all. St Catherine of Siena was surrounded by a circle of friends: men and women, lay and religious. They were known as the *Caterinati*, the Catherine people. St Martin de Porres is often shown with a cat, a dog, and a mouse eating from the same dish. A good image of religious life!

There were no easy friendships between men and women in the Old Testament. The Kingdom broke in with Jesus surrounded by his friends, men and women. Even today, many people doubt the possibility of any innocent friendship between men and women. Men fear accusation; women fear male violence; the young fear abuse. We should embody the spacious friendship of God.

So we preach the gospel by friendships that reach across boundaries. God reached across the division between Creator and creature. What impossible friendships can we make? When Blessed Pierre Claverie was ordained the bishop of Oran in Algeria in 1981, he said to his Muslim friends, 'I owe to you also what I am today. With you in learning Arabic, I learned above all to speak and understand the language of the heart, the language of brotherly friendship, where races and religions commune with each other... For I believe that this friendship comes from God and leads to God.'^[4] Notice, friendship made him who he was!

It was for this friendship that he was murdered by terrorists, along with a young Muslim friend, Mohamed Bouckichi. After his beatification, a play about their friendship was performed, *Pierre et Mohamed*. Mohamed's mother watched the play about the death of her son, and kissed the actor who played him.

The good news the young await to hear from us is that God reaches out to them in friendship. Here is the friendships they desire and for which they search on Instagram and TikTok. When I was a teenager, I was befriended by Catholic priests. With them, I discovered the joy of faith. Alas, the sexual abuse crisis rendered such friendships suspect. More than a sexual sin, it is a sin against friendship. The deepest circle in Dante's *Inferno* was reserved for those who betray friendship.

So the foundation of all that we shall do in this Synod should be the friendships we create. It does not look much. It will not make headlines in the media. 'They came all the way to Rome to make friendships! What a waste!' But it is by friendship that we shall make the transition from 'I' to 'We' (IL A. 1. 25). Without it, we shall achieve nothing. When the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, met St John Paul II, he was disappointed that no progress towards

unity seemed to have been achieved. But the Pope told him to be confident. 'Affective collegiality precedes effective collegiality.'

The Instrumentum Laboris refers to the loneliness of many priests, and 'their need for care, friendship and support.' (B. 2.4., b). The heart of the priest's vocation is the art of friendship. This is the eternal, equal friendship of our Triune God. Then all the poison of clericalism will melt away. The vocation of parenthood can be lonely too and needs sustaining friendships.

Friendship is a creative task. In English we say that we fall in love but we make friends. Jesus asks the lawyer after the parable of the Good Samaritan, 'Which of these three people made himself the neighbour of the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' (Luke 10.36). He tells the disciples that they must make friends by the use of unrighteous mammon (Luke 16.9). In the Synod, we have the creative task of making improbable friendships, especially with people with whom we disagree. If you think that I am talking nonsense, come and befriend me!

This might sound awful! Imagine me bearing down on you with the grim determination to make you a friend. You will want to run away! But the foundation of friendship is just being with one another. It is the enjoyment of another's presence. Jesus invites the inner circle, Peter, James, and John, to be with him on the mountain, as they will be with him in the garden of Gethsemane. After the Ascension, they look for another to replace Judas, someone who has been with the Lord and with them. Peter said he should be 'one of those who accompanied us throughout the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among, beginning from the baptism of John until the day he was taken up from us.' (Acts 1.21) Heaven will be just being with the Lord. Four times during the Eucharist we hear the words, 'The Lord be with you.' That is the divine friendship. Sister Wendy Becket described prayer as 'being unprotected in the presence of the Lord'. Nothing needs to be said.

In his book on Spiritual friendship, St Aelred of Rivaux, the 12th century Cistercian Abbot, wrote "Here we are, you and I, and I hope that Christ makes a third with us. No one can interrupt us now... So come now, dearest friend, reveal your heart and speak your mind.' Will we dare to speak our minds?

In Dominican General Chapters, of course, we debate and take decisions. But we also pray and eat together, go for walks, have a drink, and recreate. We give each other the most precious gift, our time. We build a common life. Then improbable friendships spring up. Ideally, we should have done that during these three weeks of the Synod instead of going our separate ways at the end of the day. Let us hope that this will be possible at the next session of this Synod.

God's creative love gives us space. Herbert McCabe OP wrote: 'The power of God is pre-eminently the power to let things be. "Let there be light" - the creative power is just the power that, because it results in things being what they are, in persons being who they are, cannot interfere with creatures. Obviously creating does not make any difference to things, it lets them be themselves. Creation is simply and solely letting things be, and our love is a faint image of that.[5]'

Often no words are needed. A young Algerian woman called Yasmina left a card near the place of Pierre Claverie's martyrdom. She wrote on it, 'This evening, Father, I have no words. But I have tears and hope.[6]'

If we are with each other in this way, we shall see each other as if for the first time! When Jesus dined with the Pharisee Simon, a woman, possibly the local prostitute, came in and, weeping, she washed his feet with her tears. Simon is shocked. Doesn't Jesus see who she is? But Jesus replies, 'Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave me no water for my feet, but she has bathed my feet with her tears and dried them with her hair.' (Luke 7.44).

Israel had longed to see the face of God. For centuries she had sung, 'Let your face shine on us and we shall be saved.' (Psalm 80). But it was impossible to see God and live. Israel longed for what was unbearable, the sight of the face of God. In Jesus, this face was revealed. The shepherds could look on him as a sleeping baby in the manger and live. God's face became visible, but it was God who died, the eyes closed shut on a cross.

In the Second Eucharistic Prayer, we pray the dead may be welcomed into the light of God's face. The Incarnation is God's visibility. An ancient theologian, possibly St Augustine, imagines a dialogue with the Good Thief who died with Jesus. He says: 'I made no special study of Scripture. I was a full-time robber. But, at a certain moment in my pain and isolation, I found Jesus looking at me and, in his look, I understood everything.[7]'

In these times between the first and second coming of Christ, we must be that face for each other. We see those who are invisible and smile on those who feel ashamed. An American Dominican, Brian Pierce, visited an exhibition of photos of street kids in Lima, Peru. Under the photo of one young kid was the caption, 'Sabem que existo pero no me ven.' They know that I exist but they do not see me. They know that I exist as a problem, a nuisance, a statistic, but they do not see me!

In South Africa, a common greeting is 'SAWABONA', 'I see you'. Millions of people feel invisible. No one looks at them with recognition. Often people are tempted to commit violence just so that people at least to see them! Look, I am here! It feels better to be seen as an enemy than not to be seen at all.

Thomas Merton joined religious life because he wanted to escape the wickedness of the world. But a few years of Cistercian life opened his eyes to the beauty and goodness of people. One day in the street, the scales fell from his eyes. He wrote in his diary, 'Then it was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts, the depths of their hearts, where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their being, the person that each one is in God's eyes. If only they could see themselves as they really are. If only we could see each other that way all the time. There would be no more war, no more hatred, no more greed.[8]'

Our world hungers for friendship, but it is subverted by destructive trends: The rise of populism, in which people are bound together by simplistic narratives, facile slogans, the blindness of the mob. And there is an acute individualism, which means that all I have is my story. Terry Eagleton wrote 'Journeys are no longer communal but self-tailored, more like hitchhiking than a coach tour. They are no longer mass products but for the most part embarked on alone. The world has ceased to be story-shaped, which means that you can make your life up as you go along.'[9] But 'my story' is our story, the gospel story which can be told in wonderfully different ways.

One last brief point.. C. S. Lewis said that lovers look at each other but friends look in the same direction. They may disagree with each other, but at least they share some of the same questions. I quote: "'Do you care about the same truth?' The [one] who agrees with us that

some question, little regarded by others, is of great importance can be our Friend. He need not agree with us about the answer.[10]

The bravest thing we can do in this Synod is to be truthful about our doubts and questions with each other, the questions to which we have no clear answers. Then we shall draw near as fellow searchers, beggars for the truth. In Graham Greene's *Don Quixote*, a Spanish Catholic priest and a Communist Mayor make a holiday together. One day they dare to share their doubts. The priest says, 'it is odd how sharing a sense of doubt can bring men together perhaps even more than sharing a faith. The believer will fight another believer over a shade of difference; the doubter fights only with himself.[11]

Pope Francis said in his dialogue with Rabbi Skorka: 'The great leaders of the people of God were people who left room for doubt...He who wants to be a leader of the people of God has to give God his space; therefore, to shrink, to recede into oneself with doubt, the interior experiences of darkness, of not knowing what to do; all of that ultimately is very purifying. The bad leader is the one who is self-assured, and stubborn. One of the characteristics of a bad leader is to be excessively normative because of his self-assurance.[12] (On Heaven and Earth, 52)

If there is no shared concern for the truth, then what basis is there for friendship? Friendship is difficult in our society in part because society has either lost confidence in the truth, or else clings to narrow fundamentalist truths which cannot be discussed. Solzhenitsyn said 'one word of truth outweighs the whole world.[13] One of my brethren travelling on a bus overheard two women in the seats in front of him. One was complaining about the sufferings she had to endure. The other one said: "My dear, you have to be philosophical about it." "What does 'philosophical' mean?" "It means you don't think about it."

Friendship flourishes when we dare to share our doubts and seek the truth together. What is the point of talking to people who already know everything or who agree completely? But how are we to do so? That is the topic of the next conference.

[1] Earliest use found in Thomas Bacon (1512/13-1567)

[2] The Tablet, Christa Pongratz-Lippitt 20 March 2023

[3] Homily for the Feast of the Guardian Angels, 2014

[4] Cardinal Murphy O'Connor, *A Life Poured Out*, p. viii

[5] *God Matters*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1987, p. 108

[6] Paul Murray OP, *Scars: Essays, poems and meditations on affliction*, Bloomsbury 2014, p. 47

[7] Quoted by Paul Murray OP, *Scars* p. 143

[8] quoted William H. Shannon *Seeds of Peace: Contemplation and non-violence* New York 1996 p. 63

[9] Terry Eagleton, "What's Your Story?", in *London Review of Books*, February 16, 2023 www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v45/n04/terry-eagleton/what-s-your-story

[10] P. 66

[11] Monsignor Quixote, New York: Penguin Classics [1982] 2008, pg. 41

[12] Bergoglio, Jorge Mario and Abraham Skorka. On Heaven and Earth. New York: Image [2010] 2013, p. 52, quoted in Marc Bosco, SJ, 'Colouring Catholicism: Greene in the Age of Pope Francis'.

[13] Nobel Prize Speech 1970 'One Word of Truth'

Watch Timothy's meditation at 48.50: www.youtube.com/watch?v=J1ZSX7JRoB4

Tags: [Synod 2022](#), [Fr Timothy Radcliffe](#), [Friendship](#),

Fourth Synod Retreat Meditation with Fr Timothy Radcliffe: 'Conversation on the way to Emmaus'

Oct 3rd, 2023

Source: Vatican Media

On Monday morning, Dominican Friar and former Master of the Order of Preachers, Father Timothy Radcliffe, reflected on the meaning of 'Conversation on the way to Emmaus' with those who will participate in the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops set to begin on Wednesday, 4 October.

We are called to walk on the synodal way in friendship. Otherwise, we shall get nowhere. Friendship, with God and each other, is rooted in the joy of being together but we need words. At Caesarea Philippi, conversation broke down. Jesus had called Peter 'Satan', enemy. On the mountain, he still does not know what to say but they begin to listen to him and so the conversation can begin again as they journey to Jerusalem.

On the way, the disciples quarrel, misunderstand Jesus, and eventually desert him. Silence returns. But the Risen Lord appears and gives them words of healing to speak to each other. We too need healing words that leap cross the boundaries that divide us: the ideological boundaries of left and right; the cultural boundaries that divide one Continent from another, the tensions that sometimes divide men and women. Shared words are the lifeblood of our Church. We need to find them for the sake of our world in which violence is fuelled by humanity's inability to listen. Conversation leads to conversion.

How should conversations begin? In Genesis after the Fall, there is a terrible silence. The silent communion of Eden has become the silence of shame. Adam and Eve hide. How can God reach across that chasm? God waits patiently until they have clothed themselves to hide their embarrassment. Now they are ready for the first conversation in the Bible. The silence is broken with a simple question: 'Where are you?' It is not a request for information. It is an invitation to step out into the light and stand visibly before the face of God.

Perhaps this is the first question with which we should break the silences that separate us. Not: 'Why do you hold these ridiculous views on liturgy?' Or 'Why are you a heretic or a patriarchal dinosaur?' or 'Why are you deaf to me?' But 'Where are you?' 'What are you worried about?' This is who I am. God invites Adam and Eve to come out of hiding and be seen. If we too step out into the light and let ourselves be seen as we are, we shall find words for each other. In the preparation for this Synod, often it has been the clergy who have been most reluctant to step out into the light and share their worries and doubts. Maybe we are afraid of being seen to be naked. How can we encourage each other not to fear nakedness?

After the Resurrection, the silence of the tomb is again broken with questions. In John's gospel, 'Why are you weeping?' In Luke, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead?' When the disciples flee to Emmaus, they are filled with anger and disappointment. The women claim to have seen the Lord, but they were only women. As today sometimes, women did not seem to count! The disciples are running away from the community of the Church, like so many people

today. Jesus does not block their way or condemn them. He asks 'What are you talking about?' What are the hopes and disappointments that stir in your hearts? The disciples are speaking angrily. The Greek means literally, 'What are these words that you are hurling at each other?' So Jesus invites them to share their anger. They had hoped that Jesus would be the one to redeem Israel, but they were wrong. He failed. So, he walks with them and opens himself to their anger and fear.

Our world is filled with anger. We speak of the politics of anger. A recent book is called *American Rage*. This anger infects our Church too. A justified anger at the sexual abuse of children. Anger at the position of women in the Church. Anger at those awful conservatives or horrible liberals. Do we, like Jesus, dare to ask each other: 'What are you talking about? Why are you angry?' Do we dare to hear the reply? Sometimes I become fed up with listening to all this anger. I cannot bear to hear any more. But listen I must, as Jesus does, walking to Emmaus.

Many people hope that in this Synod their voice will be heard. They feel ignored and voiceless. They are right. But we will only have a voice if we first listen. God calls to people by name. Abraham, Abraham; Moses, Samuel. They reply with the beautiful Hebrew word *Hinneni*, 'Here I am'. The foundation of our existence is that God addresses each of us by name, and we hear. Not the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am' but I hear therefore I am. We are here to listen to the Lord, and to each other. As they say, we have two ears but only one mouth! Only after listening comes speech.

We listen not just to what people are saying but what they are trying to say. We listen for the unspoken words, the words for which they search. There is a Sicilian saying: "La miglior parola è quella che non si dice"[1] 'The best word is the one that is not spoken'. We listen for how they are right, for their grain of truth, even if what they say is wrong. We listen with hope and not contempt. We had one rule on the General Council of the Dominican Order. What the brethren said was never nonsense. It may be misinformed, illogical, indeed wrong. But somewhere in their mistaken words is a truth I need to hear. We are mendicants after the truth. The earliest brethren said of St Dominic that 'he understood everything in the humility of his intelligence'[2].

Perhaps Religious Orders have something to teach the Church about the art of conversation. St Benedict teaches us to seek consensus; St Dominic to love debate, St Catherine of Siena to delight in conversation, and St Ignatius of Loyola, the art of discernment. St Philip Neri, the role of laughter.

If we really listen, our ready-made answers will evaporate. We will be silenced and lost for words, as Zechariah was before he burst into song. If I do not know how to respond to my sister or brother's pain or puzzlement, I must turn to the Lord and ask for words. Then the conversation can begin.

Conversation needs an imaginative leap into the experience of the other person. To see with their eyes, and hear with their ears. We need to get inside their skin. From what experiences do their words spring? What pain or hope do they carry? What journey are they on?

There was a heated debate on preaching in a Dominican General Chapter over the nature of preaching, always a hot topic for Dominicans! The document proposed to the Chapter understood preaching as in dialogical: we proclaim our faith by entering into conversation. But some capitulars strongly disagreed, arguing this verged on relativism. They said 'We must dare

to preach the truth boldly'. Slowly it became evident that the quarrelling brethren were speaking out of vastly different experiences.

The document had been written by a brother based in Pakistan, where Christianity necessarily finds itself in constant dialogue with Islam. In Asia, there is no preaching without dialogue. The brethren who reacted strongly against the document were mainly from the former Soviet Union. For them, the idea of dialogue with those who had imprisoned them made no sense. To get beyond the disagreement, rational argument was necessary but not enough. You had to imagine why the other person held his or her view. What experience led them to this view? What wounds do they bear? What is their joy?

This demanded listening with all of one's imagination. Love is always the triumph of the imagination, as hatred is a failure of the imagination. Hatred is abstract. Love is particular. In Graham Greene's novel *The Power and the Glory*, the hero, a poor weak priest, says: 'When you saw the lines at the corners of the eyes, the shape of the mouth, how the hair grew, it was impossible to hate. Hate was just a failure of imagination.'

We need to leap across the boundaries not just of left and right, or cultural boundaries, but generational boundaries too. I have the privilege of living with young Dominicans whose journey of faith is different from mine. Many religious and priests of my generation grew up in strongly Catholic families. The faith deeply penetrated our everyday lives. The adventure of the Second Vatican Council was in reaching out to the secular world. French priests went to work in factories. We took off the habit and immersed ourselves in the world. One angry sister, seeing me wearing my habit, exploded: 'Why are you still wearing that old thing?'

Today many young people - especially in the West but increasingly everywhere - grow up in a secular world, agnostic or even atheistic. Their adventure is the discovery of the gospel, the Church and the tradition. They joyfully put on the habit. Our journeys are contrary but not contradictory. Like Jesus, I must walk with them, and learn what excites their hearts. 'What are you talking about?' What films do you watch? What music do you love? Then we shall be given words for each other.

I must imagine how they see me! Who am I in their gaze? Once I was cycling around Saigon with a crowd of young Vietnamese Dominican students. This was long before tourists became common. We went around the corner and there were a group of western tourists. They looked so big and fat and a strange ugly colour. What odd people. Then I realised that was what I looked like too!

As the disciples walk to Emmaus, they listen to this stranger who calls them fools and contradicts them. He is angry too! But they begin to delight in his words. Their hearts burn within them. During the Synod can we learn the ecstatic pleasure of disagreement leading to insight? Hugo Rahner, Karl's younger brother (and much easier to understand!) wrote a book on *homo ludens*, playful humanity[3]. Let us learn to speak to each other playfully! As Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well do in John 4.

In today's first reading, we hear that in the fullness of time, 'The city shall be filled with boys and girls playing in its streets.' (Zechariah 8.5) The gospel invites us all to become children: 'Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.' (Matthew 18.3). We prepare for the Kingdom by becoming playful, childlike but not childish.

Sometimes we in the Church are afflicted by a dull, joyless seriousness. No wonder people are bored!

On the night of the new millennium, while I was waiting in Cote d'Ivoire to catch a flight to Angola, I sat in the dark with our Dominican students, sharing a beer and talking easily about what was dearest to us. We delighted in the pleasure of being different, of having different imaginations. The delight in difference! I feared I would miss the plane, but it was three days late! Difference is fertile, generative. Each of us is the fruit of the wonderful difference between men and women. If we flee from difference, we shall be barren and childless, in our homes and our Church. Again, we thank all the parents in this Synod! Families can teach the Church a lot about how to cope with difference. Parents learn how to reach out to children who make incomprehensible choices and yet know they still have a home.

If we can discover the pleasure of imagining why our sisters and brothers hold the views we find odd, then a new springtime will begin in the Church. The Holy Spirit will give us the gift of speaking other languages.

Notice that Jesus does not attempt to control the conversation. He asks what they are talking about; he goes where they go, not where he wishes to go; he accepts their hospitality. A real conversation cannot be controlled. One surrenders oneself to its direction. We cannot anticipate where it will take us, to Emmaus or Jerusalem. Where will this Synod lead the Church? If we knew in advance, there would be no point in having it! Let us be surprised!

True conversation is therefore risky. If we open ourselves to others in free conversation we shall be changed. Each profound friendship brings into existence a dimension of my life and identity that has never existed before. I become someone I have never quite been before. I grew up in a wonderful conservative Catholic family. When I became a Dominican I became friends with people of a different background, utterly different politics, which my family found disturbing! Who then was I when I went home to stay with my family? How did I reconcile the person who I was with them and the person that I was becoming with the Dominicans?

Every year I get to know newly joined Dominicans with different convictions and different ways of seeing the world. If I open myself to them in friendship, who will I become? Even at my advanced age, my identity must remain open. In Madeleine Thien's novel about Chinese immigrants in the USA, *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, one of the characters says, 'Don't ever try to be only a single thing, an unbroken human being. If so many people love you, can you honestly be one thing?'^[4] If we open ourselves to multiple friendships, we shall not have a neat, tightly defined identity. If we open ourselves to each other in this Synod, we shall all be changed. It will be a little death and resurrection.

A Filipino Dominican Novice Master had a notice on his door: "Forgive me. I am a work in progress." Coherence lies ahead, in the Kingdom. Then the wolf and the lamb within each of us shall be at peace with each other. If we have closed, fixed identities written in stone now, we shall never know the adventure of new friendships which will unfold new dimensions of who we are. We shall not be open to the spacious friendship of the Lord.

When they reach Emmaus, the flight from Jerusalem stops. Jesus looks as if he wishes to go further but, with glorious irony they invite the Lord of the Sabbath to rest with them. 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is nearly over.' (Luke 24:29). Jesus accepts their hospitality as the three strangers in Genesis 18 accepted the hospitality of Abraham. God is our

guest. We too must have the humility to be guests. The German submission said that we must leave 'the comfortable position of those who give hospitality to allow ourselves to be welcomed into the existence of those who are our companions on the journey of humanity'.

Marie-Dominique Chenu OP, the grandfather of the Second Vatican Council, went out most evenings, even when he was eighty. He went out to listen to trade union leaders, academics, artists, families, and accept their hospitality. In the evening we would meet for a beer and he would ask, 'What did you learn today? At whose table did you sit? What gifts did you receive?' The Church in every Continent has gifts for the universal Church. To take just one example, my brethren in Latin America taught me to open my ears to the words of the poor, especially our beloved brother Gustavo Gutiérrez. Shall we hear them in our debates this month? What shall we learn from our brothers and sisters in Asia and Africa?

'When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognised him and he vanished from their sight.' (Luke 24:29). Their eyes were opened. The previous time that we heard that phrase was when Adam and Eve took the fruit from the Tree of Life, and their eyes were open and they knew that they were naked. This is why some ancient commentators saw the disciples as Cleopas and his wife, a married couple, a new Adam and Eve. Now they eat the bread of life.

One last small thought: When Jesus vanishes from their sight they say, 'Did not our hearts burn within us, while he talked to us on the road.' (Luke 24:32) It is as if it is only afterwards that they become aware of the joy they had as they walked with the Lord. St John Henry Newman said that it is only as we look backwards at our lives that we become aware of how God was always with us. I pray that this will be our experience too.

During this Synod, we shall be like these disciples. Sometimes we shall not be aware of the Lord's grace working in us and may even think that it is all a waste of time. But I pray God that afterwards, looking backwards, we shall become aware that God was with us all the time, and that our hearts burnt within us.

[1] "La megliu parola è chiddra chi nun si dici"

[2] 'humili cordis intelligentia'[2]

[3] Man at Play or Did you ever practice eutrapelia? Translated by Brian Battershaw and Edward Quinn, Compass Books, London, 1965

[4] Granta, London, 2016, p. 457

Watch on Vatican Media's Youtube channel: www.youtube.com/watch?v=QQr8x4iV-N0

Tags: [Synod 2022](#), [Fr Timothy Radcliffe](#), [Conversation on the way to Emmaus](#)

Fifth Synod Retreat Meditation with Fr Timothy Radcliffe: Authority

Oct 3rd, 2023

Source: Vatican Media

On Tuesday morning, Dominican Friar and former Master of the Order of Preachers, Father Timothy Radcliffe, reflected on the meaning of 'Authority' with those who will participate in the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops set to begin on Wednesday, 4 October.

There can be no fruitful conversation between us unless we recognize that each of us speaks with authority. We all are baptized into Christ: priest, prophet, and king. The International Theological Commission on the *sensus fidei* quotes St John: 'You have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge', 'the anointing that you received from [Christ] abides in you, and so you do not need anyone to teach you', 'his anointing teaches you about all things' (1Jn 2:20, 27).

Many lay people have been astonished during the preparation of this Synod to find that they are listened to for the first time. They had doubted their own authority and asked, 'Can I really offer something?' (B.2.53). But it is not just the laity who lack authority. The whole Church is afflicted by a crisis of authority. An Asian archbishop complained that he had no authority. He said: 'The priests are all independent barons, who take no notice of me.' Many priests too say they lost all authority. The sexual abuse crisis has discredited us.

Our whole world is suffering a crisis of authority. All institutions have lost authority. Politicians, the law, the press have all felt authority draining away. Authority always seems to belong to other people: either dictators who are coming into power in many places, or the new media, or celebrities and influencers. The world hungers for voices that will speak with authority about the meaning of our lives. Dangerous voices threaten to fill the vacuum. It is a world powered not by authority but by contracts - even in the family, the university, and the Church.

So how may the Church recover authority and speak to our world which hungers for voices that ring true? Luke tells us that when Jesus taught, 'they were astounded at his teaching, because he spoke with authority.' (Luke 4.32). He commands the demons and they obey. Even the wind and sea obey him. He even has the authority to summon his dead friend to life: 'Lazarus, come out.' (John 11.43). Almost the final words of Matthew's gospel: 'All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me.'

But halfway through the synoptic gospels, at Caesarea Philippi, there is a massive crisis of authority, which makes our contemporary crisis look like nothing! He tells his closest friends that he must go to Jerusalem where he will suffer, die, and rise again. They do not accept his word. So Jesus takes them up the mountain and is transfigured in their sight.

His authority is revealed through the prism of his glory, and the witness of Moses and Elijah. It is an authority which touches their ears and their eyes, their hearts, and their minds. Their imagination! Now at last they listen to him!

Peter is filled with joy: It is good for us to be here. As Teilhard de Chardin famously said, 'Joy is the infallible sign of the presence of God'. This is the joy which Sr Maria Ignazia talked about this morning, Mary's joy. Without joy, none of us has any authority at all. No one believes a miserable Christian! In the Transfiguration, this joy flows from three sources: beauty, goodness, and truth. We could mention other forms of authority. In the Instrumentum Laboris, the authority of the poor is stressed. There is the authority of the tradition and of the hierarchy with its ministry of unity.

What I would suggest this morning is that authority is multiple and mutually enhancing. There need be no competition, as if the laity can only have more authority if the bishops have less, or so-called conservatives compete for authority with progressives. We might be tempted to call down fire on those we see as opposed to us, like the disciples in today's gospel (Luke 9. 51 - 56). But in the Trinity, there is no rivalry. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit do not compete for power, just as there is no competition between our four gospels.

We shall speak with authority to our lost world if in this Synod we transcend competitive ways of existing. Then the world will recognise the voice of the shepherd who summons them to life. Let us look at this scene on the mountain and see the interaction of different forms of authority.

Beauty

First, there is beauty or glory. The two are virtually synonymous in Hebrew. Bishop Robert Barron said somewhere - and forgive me, Bishop Bob, if I am misquoting you - that beauty can reach people who reject other forms of authority. A moral vision can be perceived as moralistic: 'How dare you tell me how to live my life?' The authority of doctrine may be rejected as oppressive. 'How dare you tell me what to think?' But beauty has an authority which touches our intimate freedom.

Beauty opens our imagination to the transcendent, the homeland for which we long. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins calls God 'beauty's self and beauty's giver'.^[1] Aquinas says that it reveals the final end of our lives, like the target at which the archer aims^[2].

No wonder that Peter does not know what to say. Beauty carries us beyond words. It has been claimed that every adolescent has some experience of transcendent beauty. If they do not have guides, as the disciples had Moses and Elijah, the moment passes. When I was a 16-year-old boy at a Benedictine school, I had such a moment in the great Abbey Church, and I had wise monks to help me understand.

But not all beauty speaks of God. Nazi leaders loved classical music. On the feast day of the Transfiguration, an atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima in a hideous parody of the divine light. Beauty can deceive and seduce. Jesus said: 'Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness.' (Matthew 23. 27).

But the divine beauty on the mountain will shine outside the holy city when the glory of the Lord will be revealed on the cross. God's beauty is disclosed most radiantly in what seems most ugly. One must go to the places of suffering to glimpse the beauty of God.

Etty Hillesum, the Jewish mystic drawn to Christianity found it even in a Nazi concentration camp: 'I want to be there in the thick of what people call "horror" and still be able to say, "Life is

beautiful".[3] Every renewal of the Church has gone with an aesthetic revival: Orthodox iconography, Gregorian chant, Counter-Reformation baroque (not my favourite!). The Reformation was in part a clash of aesthetic visions. What aesthetic renewal do we need today to open a glimpse of transcendence, especially in places of desolation and suffering? How can we disclose the beauty of the cross?

When the Dominicans who first arrived in Guatemala in the sixteenth century, beauty opened the way for them to share the gospel with the indigenous people. They refused the protection of the Spanish conquistadors. The friars taught the local indigenous merchants Christian songs, to be sung as they travelled in the mountains selling their goods. This opened the way for the brethren who could then ascend safely into the region still known as Vera Paz, True Peace. But eventually the soldiers came and killed not just the indigenous people but our brethren who tried to protect them.

What songs can enter the new continent of the young? Who are our musicians and poets? So beauty opens the imagination to the ineffable end of the journey. But we may be tempted like Peter to stay there. Other sorts of imaginative engagement are necessary to bring us down the mountain for the first synod on the way to Jerusalem. The disciples are offered two interpreters of what they see, Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets. Or of Goodness and Truth.

Goodness

Moses led Israel out of slavery into freedom. The Israelites did not wish to go. They hungered for the safety of Egypt. They feared the freedom of the desert, just as the disciples feared to make the journey to Jerusalem. In *The Brothers Karamazov* by Dostoevsky, the Grand Inquisitor asserts that 'nothing has ever been more insufferable for humanity and society than freedom ... In the end, they will lay their freedom at our feet and say to us; "Better that you enslave us, but feed us."'"

The saints have the authority of courage. They dare us to take to the road. They invite us to come with them on the risky adventure of holiness. St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross was born into an observant Jewish family, but became an atheist when she was a teenager. But when by chance she picked up St Teresa's of Avila's autobiography, she read it all night. She said, "When I had finished the book, I said to myself: This is the truth." This led her to death in Auschwitz. That is the authority of holiness. It invites us to let control of our lives and let God be God.

The most popular book of the twentieth century was *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien. It is a deeply Catholic novel. He claimed it was the romance of the Eucharist. The martyrs were the earliest authorities in the Church, because boldly they gave everything. G. K. Chesterton said, 'Courage is almost a contradiction in terms. It means a strong desire to live taking the form of readiness to die'[4] Are we afraid to present the dangerous challenge of our faith? Herbert McCabe OP said, 'If you love, you will be hurt, perhaps killed. If you do not love, you are dead already.' Young people are not attracted to our faith if we domesticate it.

'Perfect love casts out fear.' (1 John 4.18). Brother Michael Anthony Perry OFM, former Minister General of the Franciscans, said: 'In baptism, we have renounced the right to have fear.[5] I would say we have renounced the right to be enslaved by fear. The courageous know fear. We shall only have authority in our fearful world if we are seen to risk everything. When our European brothers and sisters went to preach the gospel in Asia four hundred years ago, half of them died before they arrived, of disease, shipwreck, piracy. Would we have their mad courage?

Henri Burin de Rozières (1930-2017) was a French Dominican lawyer based in the Brazilian Amazon. He took to court the great landowners who often enslave the poor, forcing them to work on their vast estates, and killing them if they tried to escape. Henri received innumerable death threats. He was offered police protection, but he knew that they would most likely be the ones to kill him. When I stayed with him, he offered me his room for the night. The next day he told me that he could not sleep in case they came for him and accidentally got me!

So the authority of beauty speaks of the end of the journey, the homeland we have never seen. The authority of holiness speaks of the journey to be made if we are to arrive. It is the authority of those who give their lives away. The Irish poet Pádraig Pearse proclaimed: 'I have squandered the splendid years which the Lord God gave to my youth - in attempting impossible things, deeming them alone worth the toil. Lord, if I had the years, I would squander them again over. I fling them from me.'[6]

Truth

Then there is Elijah. The prophets are the truth tellers. He saw through the fantasies of the prophets of Ba'al and heard the still small voice of silence on the mountain. Veritas, Truth, the motto of the Dominican Order. It drew me to the Dominicans even before I met one, which was perhaps providential!

Our world has fallen out of love with the Truth: Fake news, wild assertions on the internet, mad conspiracy theories. Yet buried in humanity is an ineradicable instinct for the truth, and when it is spoken, it has some last vestiges of authority. The Instrumentum Laboris is unafraid to be truthful about the challenges we must address. It speaks openly about the hopes and sorrows, the anger, and the joy of the People of God. How can we draw people to the One who is the Truth if we are not truthful about ourselves?

Let me mention just two ways in which this prophetic tradition of truth-telling is needed. First of all, in speaking truthfully of the joys and sufferings of the world. In Hispaniola, Bartolome de Las Casas, had been leading a life of mediocrity, when he read the sermon preached by Antonio de Montesinos OP in the Advent of 1511, confronting the conquistadors with their enslavement of the indigenous people, "Tell me, by what right or by what interpretation of justice do you keep these Indians in such a cruel and horrible servitude? By what authority have you waged such detestable wars against people who were once living so quietly and peacefully in their own land?". Las Casas read this, knew it was true, and repented. So in this Synod, we shall listen to people who will speak truthfully about 'the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time' (Gaudium et Spes 1).

For truth, we also need disciplined scholarship which resists our temptation to use the Word of God and the teachings of the Church for our own purposes. 'God must be right because he agrees with me!'. Biblical scholars, for example, bring us back to the original texts in their foreignness, their otherness. When I was in hospital, a nurse said to me that he wished that he knew Latin so that he could read the Bible in the original language. I said nothing! True scholars oppose any simplistic attempt to enlist the scriptures or tradition for our personal campaigns. God's Word belongs to God. Listen to him. We do not own the truth. The truth owns us.

All love opens us to the truth of the other. We discover how they remain, in a sense, unknowable. We cannot take possession of them and use them for our purposes. We love them in their otherness, in their uncontrollable freedom.

So on the mountain of the Transfiguration, we see different forms of authority are invoked to lead the disciples beyond that great crisis of authority of Caesarea Philippi. All of these and others are necessary. Without truth, beauty can be vacuous. As someone said, 'Beauty is to truth, as deliciousness is to food.' Without goodness, beauty can deceive. Goodness without truth collapses into sentimentality. Truth without goodness leads to the Inquisition. St John Henry Newman spoke beautifully of the multiple forms of authority, of governance, reason, and experience.

We all have authority, but differently. Newman wrote that if the authority of government becomes absolute, it will be tyrannical. If reason becomes the sole authority, we fall into arid rationalism. If religious experience is the only authority, then superstition will win. A synod is like an orchestra, with different instruments having their own music. This is why the Jesuit tradition of discernment is so fruitful. Truth is not arrived at by majority vote, any more than an orchestra or a football team led by voting!

The authority of leadership surely is ensuring that the conversation of the Church is fruitful, that no one voice dominates and drowns out others. It discerns the hidden harmony. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, wrote. 'In turbulent times, there is an almost overwhelming temptation for religious leaders to be confrontational. Not only must truth be proclaimed but falsehood must be denounced. Choices must be set out as stark divisions. Not to condemn is to condone.' But, he asserts, 'a prophet hears not one imperative but two: guidance and compassion, a love of truth and an abiding solidarity with those for whom that truth has become eclipsed. To preserve tradition and at the same time defend those others condemn is the difficult, necessary task of religious leadership in an unreligious age[7]'.

All power comes from our Triune God, the one in whom all is shared. The Italian theologian Leonardo Paris asserts, 'The Father shares his power. With everyone. And he configures all power as shared It is no longer possible to quote Paul - "There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28) - and appeal to synodality without recognizing that this means finding concrete historical forms so that each one is recognized as having the power that the Father has willed to entrust to him or her.[8]'

If the Church becomes truly a community of mutual empowerment, we shall speak with the authority of the Lord. Becoming such a Church will be painful and beautiful. This is what we shall look at in the last conference.

[1] 'The Golden Echo'

[2] ST III. 45

[3] *An Interrupted Life: The Diaries and Letters of Etty Hillesum 1941 - 43*, Persephone Books, London, 2007, p. 276

[4] *Orthodoxy* London 1996 p.134

[5] Benotti p.66

[6] Quoted by Cardinal Murphy-O'Connor, 'Fiftieth Anniversary of Priesthood', in Daniel P. Cronin, *Priesthood: A Life Open to Christ* (St Pauls Publishing, London, 2009), p. 134.

[7] 'Elijah and the Still, Small Voice',

www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/pinchas/elijah-and-the-still-small-voice

[8] Leonardo Paris, *L'erede. Una cristologia*, Queriniana, 2021, pp. 220-221. Soon to be published in English by Brill, with a Foreword by Massimo Faggioli.

Watch on Vatican Media's Youtube channel: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HHKi3msy5SQ

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