

These are tough times to be a Catholic, let alone a principal in a Catholic school. Pat Coyle gave the final input at the Ceist AGM on Friday 28 September. In it she was attempting to chart a way forward in difficult times for members of the Catholic church. That way, she argued, had to be based on a return to the Christ of the gospels and His values, and on a spiritual consciousness that was akin to what theologian Karl Rahner SJ, calls mysticism. Below are the notes from her talk.

## THE POWER OF EVERYDAY MYSTICISM

### CONTEXT

Over the last 30 years at every level, institutions like the banks, the political establishment, and sections of the media have been discredited.

But most egregiously the Catholic Church as an institution has become a source of deep scandal particularly in the light of the clerical child abuse scandals and their cover up. Victims here and around the world are still waiting for atonement and justice. The institutional Church has still not delivered what they so deserve. And all Catholics are addressed by this issue.

It is painful to be in the firing line of the whirlwind of anger and outrage coming in the wake of so many scandals. We may even hold some of that anger and outrage ourselves. These are tough times to be a Catholic, let alone a principal in a Catholic school.

US theologian Ron Rolheiser in a talk he gave on faith ministry tells the story of what his somewhat overwhelmed Parish Priest friend said to him once. "When I retire and get out of this," he said, "I'm going to get myself a big rocking chair and sit in the porch... Then after about six weeks I'm going to start rocking!"

Sometimes it just feels like what Leonard Cohen says in 'Captain' "There is no decent place to stand in a massacre."

But we do need to stand somewhere, and as Christine Crawford said in her autobiography, charting her recovery from being lost in the pain and distress of mental illness and her journey back to Christianity, "Lost is a place too." Today I want to share my experience of finding a place to stand in the midst of loss, essentially based on my understanding of what I call 'everyday mysticism'.

Let me read something for you, written in 1906 by Pius X in his encyclical *Vehementer Nos*. It was written in the context of a new French law being passed, relating to the separation of the Church and the state: He believed the provisions of the new law were contrary to the constitution on which the Church was founded by Jesus Christ. And here's why.

"The Scripture teaches us, and the tradition of the Fathers confirms the teaching, that the Church is the mystical body of Christ, ruled by the Pastors and Doctors – a society of men containing within its own fold chiefs who have full and perfect powers for ruling, teaching and judging. It follows that the Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising

two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.”

What underpinned that statement was Church’s understanding or definition of itself as juridical, canonical, with legal structures and a hierarchical base. This was complemented by the laity’s self-acceptance as docile people, knowing their place, accepting Church wisdom and teaching from on high.

And in a certain way this still holds, e.g. the clericalism and legalism that Pope Francis has condemned in strongest of terms and which forms a basis for much of our problems today.

Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr speaks of how the Church was supposed to be a finger pointing at the moon, and over the centuries we were trained to be fixated on the finger, not the moon.

In another way, the vision of Church that Pius X articulated so starkly and confidently, is over. How many of you would say or teach this catechism refrain that was repeated often in Catholic schools down the years?

O my God,  
I believe in you  
And in all that your holy Church teaches  
I believe this because you have said it  
and all you say is true.

We’re in a difficult space today, a place full of tension and uncertainty, full of emotion, pain and conflict.

## **CHARTING A PATH**

So, what to do?

Over 60 years ago Karl Rahner SJ wrote prophetic words in his book, *Theological Investigations*, that may well be of help to us today. He writes, “The devout Christian of the future will either be a mystic, one who has experienced something, or [he] will cease to be anything at all.” (‘Christian Living Formerly and Today’)

I think this is key insight for our times and it holds true for both the individuals who make up the Church as the ‘people of God’, and the institutional Church (the administration). In total, what is called the ‘mystical body of Christ.’

Dare we become mystics as Rahner suggests? And what is mysticism anyway? Levitating, seeing visions or hearing messages, the preserve of a few holy if eccentric but blessed people? Or is it much more than that?

## **MYSTICISM**

Firstly, mysticism is experiential. Rahner gives us this hermeneutic key which is broad and generous when he says the mystic is the one who has “experienced something”.

To expand on this notion of experience I want to reference the philosopher Eric Voegelin and an address in Harvard University in the '60's on the topic of 'Immortality: Experience and Symbol'.

In it he speaks of engendering experiences of the Transcendent (real and true but difficult to articulate) that can only be communicated through story and symbol.

The stories and symbols, because of their importance, are handed down from generation to generation. They become derivative truth, dogma, information that is transmitted to people but with the ensuing danger, in evidence today, that the original 'engendering experience' gets lost. And those who receive the 'dogma' or 'derivative truth' without having had the experience, either accept it blindly (fideism) or reject it totally (scepticism).

Have we Christians today lost touch with the engendering experiences articulated in the Gospels and in the life of Christ whom we purport to follow?

Our Good Friday liturgical celebration still draws a crowd and perhaps not surprisingly. The experience of suffering and carrying a cross is all too familiar for most people. But what does it mean to share in the experience of resurrection? Do we really feel we are a 'risen' people, one with the risen Christ? Again not surprisingly, smaller crowds fill the Churches at the liturgical high point of the Christian year, the Easter Vigil.

## **FIDEISM and SCEPTICISM**

A word on 'fideism': It's a type of blind faith that argues the truth about God is static and known in its entirety. It views the Church as the keeper of tradition, dogma and— above all — *unchanging* truth.

That Church then tries to embed itself in culture when it is happy with the prevailing state of affairs, (like the Christian fundamentalist in USA, happy with many aspects of the Trump administration). But it is ready to isolate and plump for the 'Benedict option' (small but pure Church of the true faithful) if necessary, believing that as a Church it is not part of the prevailing culture, that it is never impacted by it, and that it stands in proud counter-cultural opposition to it.

This fideistic Church is more aptly imaged as a museum with its keepers of antiquities, than as a living organism with an historical consciousness.

A word on skepticism: The extreme sceptic says 'a plague on all your houses and good bye to all this meaningless rubbish that masquerades as rational faith or intelligible theology.' It sees the Church, not

as a 'mystical body', but rather as a body of men, in an all too earth-bound organization. It can be the adopted position of lapsed or alienated Catholics, as well as atheists and agnostics.

Richard Rohr says it can also be the stance of the 'liberal', as opposed to 'conservative' Catholic who leaves the communal aspect of Church, saying 'I'll do my own thing with my own privatized religion'.

If we have lost touch with the engendering experiences of our faith we are sure to become a dry boned people who, to paraphrase TS Eliot, have had the experiences but 'missed the meaning', or never had the experience in the first place.

The people you encounter in your life and work, the parents, students, the society and world we are in, may fall into some of these camps. Maybe you have even identified yours.

## REMEMBERING

Can we recover the engendering experience? Can we do some 're-membering', 'anamnesis', as Voegelin calls it. That's part of the mystical path, remembering 'the dangerous memory of Christ' as theologian Johann Baptiste Metz puts it. Or as the poet Rilke challenges, can we put together the heart behind the dry images?

Work of the eyes is done, now  
go and do heart-work  
on all the images imprisoned in you; for you  
overpowered them: but even now you don't know them

(From 'The Turning')

Importantly, mystics, spiritual writers and theologians tell us that the 'experience' we are re-membering is relational. Rahner insists that God communicates not by sending a message, but by forming a relationship

This relationship is based on invitation. It consists of G-d's invitation to and our response and all are invited. The invitation is to hospitality. God offers the hospitality of the Kingdom to ALL. We are told clearly that the 'other' is no longer stranger but friend. We are all made in the image and likeness of God.

We see this clearly in the Old Testament. Three strangers visit Abraham, he chooses not to see them as threat but as friends. He can kill them or invite them home for tea in the tent. He chooses the latter and western religion is born.

The New Testament is replete with images of dining, feasting and banquets. In his parables, Jesus likens the Kingdom of God or the reign of God to a wedding and manages to incense many who hear them. The immeasurable, unconditional generosity of GoD is scandalous- the hall mark of Christianity.

I recently made a film about a new Catholic secondary school in Tyrellstown school which truly lives out that Christian ethos of hospitality. It welcomes children of 67 different nationalities and of all faiths and none. All are treated as special, made in the 'imago dei'. I am sure your schools do the same.

## LISTENING

If the Christian injunction to be charitable and hospitable is not enough in itself then there are good epistemological reasons for it too. In fact, as historian Dr Dermot Roantree has pointed out, a 'principle of charity' has frequently been invoked in discourse theory, either as an explanation or as a norm, with respect to the healthy critical engagement of parties that are out of agreement.

It has currency in the analytic philosophy of Quine and Davidson, in the continental tradition of Gadamer and Ricoeur, and in the critical theory of Habermas, Roantree tells us, adding, "and in none of these instances is it proffered as a theological principle."

What it means in essence is that when we enter into discussion with another person we are implicitly committing ourselves to understanding them. We don't put words into their mouths, we don't presume their bad faith, and we don't suspect ulterior motives. We suspend our impulse to disagree with them and we construe their arguments in as cogent and persuasive a way as we can."

Roantree says this principle of charity is purely for methodological purposes. It makes discourse fruitful. When we arrive at the point of making critical judgements we have a more textured sense of the issue, and we have stress-tested and refined our own arguments.

It often happens that we do not reach agreement but that is not the point. For at least we will have come, as best we can, to understand our opponents as they understand themselves. "If it does nothing else, this disposition enables us to be persuaded by the inner cogency, as opposed to the rhetorical vigour, of the strongest argument."

This is precisely what Pope Francis is calling for in the *Instrumentum Laboris*, written in preparation for the upcoming Synod on Young People. In it, he calls on us all to extend true hospitality to young people through a listening disposition.

True listening, he says, is being open to new things, with a courage to move outwards, resisting the temptation to reduce what is new to what we already know.

The stranger in your office tent or classroom may be bringing you whole new way of seeing the world, untold gifts, as the Sufi poet suggests in his poem 'The Guest House'.

This being human is a guest house.  
Every morning a new arrival.  
A joy, a depression, a meanness,  
some momentary awareness comes  
as an unexpected visitor.  
Welcome and entertain them all!

Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,  
who violently sweep your house  
empty of its furniture,  
still, treat each guest honorably.  
He may be clearing you out  
for some new delight.  
The dark thought, the shame, the malice.  
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.  
Be grateful for whatever comes.  
because each has been sent  
as a guide from beyond.

Jellaludin Rumi,

Pope Francis also asks, "Are we truly sensitive to young people? Do we understand their needs and expectations? Can we understand their need to have meaningful experiences? Are we able to bridge the distance that separates us from their world?"

## **SURRENDER**

The experience of relationship with G-d, based on invitation, is also a gift which calls for surrender. As Rahner puts it, "Like parents who give their life to their child, God gives the divine life to us... The Scriptures speak of this as the ability to be a child of God and a dwelling place of the Spirit."

Surrender is a hallmark of the mystical life. Ron Rolheiser talks powerfully about it in one of his Lenten reflections:

"The gospel is not as much about worthiness as it is about surrender," he tells us. "What G-d wants from us is not a million acts of virtue but a million acts of surrender...Nothing we have or can accumulate in this life – fame, fortune health good looks a good name or even moral virtue or religious fidelity, personal sanctity or the practice of social justice – tips God's hand towards us. What tips God's hand is helplessness, surrender in grace... Salvation is not about great achievements but about a great embrace. All we have to do is surrender."

Surrender is a word that reads easy and does hard. The wheel-barrow story conveys this well.

It concerns Charles Blondin who, on 14 September 1860, became the first person to cross a tightrope stretched 11,000 feet (over a quarter of a mile) across the mighty Niagara Falls. People from both Canada and America came from miles away to witness this amazing deed.

He walked across, 160 feet above the falls, several times. Once he went across once in a sack, another time he was blindfolded.

The crowd were in awe of him, utterly and convinced of how wonderful he was, not least when he came back one time pushing a wheelbarrow holding a sack of potatoes. They shouted out their approval of him, praising his wonderful skill.

Suddenly Blondin stopped and addressed his audience: "Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?" he asked.

The crowd enthusiastically yelled, "Yes! You are the greatest tightrope walker in the world. We believe in you!"

"Okay," said Blondin, "Who wants to get into the wheelbarrow?"

## **SUFFERING and JOY**

The experience of God, hospital, inviting trust and surrender, is not however pain-free. Why would anyone surrender too quickly knowing another characteristic hallmark of the Christian only too well as did St Paul writing to the Corinthians.

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.

Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,

I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.

I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.

Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

(2 Corinthians 11: 22-28)

Paul was following in the footsteps of the Master who continually made it clear that suffering, for a follower of Christ, is a non-negotiable. "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let them take up their cross..." But that's not the whole story.

In our 21st century, the dominant narrative or story around suffering, how it is evaluated and made sense of, is one where there is no reference to God or a bigger, over-arching framework. Unlike previous generations, many younger people today have no 'meta-narrative' that can help create meaning. So, suffering is seen as futile, incomprehensible, and meaningless.

This is a huge change in our western world, with implications for our country, our society, our families and ourselves.

Christianity has a different narrative. It does not say that suffering is a good-in- itself or that God ever wills that we suffer. But it still acknowledges that suffering is a real and present part of the mystery of being human.

Jesus the skilled communicator, adept at using images and symbols that touch the heart with the ring of truth, also announces a deeper truth about the presence of God in human suffering. "Come unto me all you who labour and are heavily burdened and I will give you rest," He tells us. "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me. For my yoke is easy my burden is light."

Christianity holds that deep spiritual growth rarely takes place except in some context of suffering. It offers hope not wishful thinking. We know how the story ends and it's not with the crucifixion. Christ is risen, and all life is now understood in the light of it.

We are reminded of this by various theologians and perhaps most eloquently by Franciscan theologian Richard Rohr who says that as Christians we believe that we are saved by the death and resurrection of Jesus. "The key is to put both together."

Sickness, poverty, suicide, mental illness, relationships breaking down, the wear and tear of everyday life is all part of the mysterious wave pattern of human life wherein we live, die and rise, live die and rise, until our final dying and rising. This is the Christian meta-narrative. As Rohr puts it:

"We need to deeply trust and allow both our own dying's and our own certain resurrections, just as much as Jesus did! This is the full pattern of transformation. If we trust both, we are indestructible."

'Trust' is a key word here. Another essential ingredient in the understanding of mystical experience. Trust that the G-d we believe in is on our side, unceasingly working with us to "make all things work for our good", as the beleaguered St Paul confidently asserted.

Theologian and well know spiritual writer Henry Nouwen, in his last book, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, notes that the message the world communicates has accustomed him to living with sadness so that he has, "lost the eyes to see the joy and the ears to hear the gladness that belongs to G-d, and which is to be found in the hidden corners of the world..."

The danger is, in this world of mass communication where heads are more likely bent down into the smart phone than in prayer (especially mine), that we end up mesmerized with, if not paralysed by, the drama of never-ending news and negativity.

As Liverpool poet Roger McGough puts it in his short poem entitled 'Survivor.'

Everyday,

I think about dying,

About disease, starvation,

Violence, terrorism, war,

The end of the world.

It helps keep my mind off things.

Can we find joy in the hidden corners of life, no matter how painful it is or how powerless we feel? Can we say 'thank you' for all that comes our way? The dominant narrative will respond 'absolutely not,' claiming that happiness is the absence of pain. But mystical spiritual wisdom says joy and suffering and gratitude can be soulmates.

## **LAUGHTER and the MYSTICAL**

Pope Francis in *Rejoice and Be Glad* says one of the ways of finding God is through laughter. He says the saints had to have a sense of humour and fun. Russian philosopher Michael Bakhtin makes an important claim for the power of laughter when he says it can give us access to a truth that reason cannot do.

I learnt that lesson some time ago whilst nursing my father. He had Alzheimer's and lung cancer and, along with my sisters and mum, we nursed him at home in his bedroom in Derry, calming him if he became distressed.

And we'd listen to NWCR, North West Community Radio, broadcast from a shop in neighboring Buncrana, Co. Donegal. It was the early days of local radio and we loved it not least for its rough and ready nature.

One day, the presenter of the afternoon show got very animated about a record request for local man Mickey who'd reached the amazing age of one hundred and eleven. "What an achievement", he enthused, and he repeated his age, "one hundred and eleven," several times.

After playing the record requested the presenter came back on air, his voice more subdued. "Ah Mickey's wife been on to us to clear something up – Mickey isn't 111 – he's ill!"

Well how we laughed, sheer joy filling the room of a very sick and suffering man, who laughed with us too. And for me, God was present in our laughter.

That presenter may well have gone home dejected about his on-air gaff, his embarrassing mistake. He wasn't to know the deeper story – the gift he was to three sisters and the gratitude they hold him in to this day.

In that small bedroom in Derry a truth greater than reason was affirmed.

## **CHERISHING our HUMANESS**

Surrender, suffering, joy, trust, gratitude all part of the mystical experience. So too is a profound sense of the importance of our humanity. As Heidegger names us, to be human is to be a 'being-in-time'. That's the reality, we can't be any other way.

Ron Rolheiser illustrates the point well in this true story of the little girl who was scared of the dark. She comes in to her mother from her bedroom, very upset. Her mother comforts her and then takes her back into the bedroom, assuring her that she's not alone as G-d is everywhere. "G-d might be everywhere", the little girl replied, "But I want someone with skin!"

And my former colleague, Aidan Mathews, poet, playwright and RTE producer, is unrelentingly adamant about our incarnational reality in this wonderful piece he wrote for a Lenten retreat. He had been asked to write three short sentences to help the reader get into a 'mindful' stance before continuing their prayer with the online retreat he had written!

"Stand on one leg and extend your left arm upwards in the shape of the spout of a teapot. Say to yourself out loud three times, first in Hebrew, then in Greek, and finally in Latin: "What on earth am I doing this for? It is ludicrous."

Now do something perfectly normal. Sit in the back of the bus over the engine where it's warmest in cold weather and stare out the window. Put your coffee-cup into the CD tray of your computer at work, and shuffle through the best photomontages of the week on MSN, catwalks and atrocities. Make interlocking circles on the counter of the bar you're perched at with the bottom of your pint glass. Start walking the pier and give up half-way for no good reason. Watch the children in the playground where you played as a child, but not for too long. Otherwise parents will ring the police.

It is not about robes. It is not about gongs. It is not about chanting matins or mantras. The time is never right, and the place is never perfect. Even the most righteous of rites can deteriorate into trickery and mere technique, for prayerfulness, which fumigates the wistful list above, is always, by definition, a precarious state. We can never coincide completely with ourselves, because, if and when we did, we would be with God and not in Christ, in the cold mosaic of eternity and not in the wet fresco of time.

But that is not necessarily bad news, and, if it is, it is also intermittently good news, even a kind of gospel truth, because it signals an event of – humane meaning, hurtful and healing at the same moment, in which the two conjunctions, 'and' and 'but', are not at all opposed. They are interchangeable. We don't consume the moment with the expert relish of the connoisseur in the manner of what has come to be called mindfulness, cleansing an educated palate with shots of sorbet between exquisite courses. Instead, we live in the cascade of the tenses, past, present, and future imperfect, and in the cataracts of the three grammatical moods, the indicative and the conditional and the imperative."

This is the mystical, the paradoxical truth. The ineffable, unknowable, unspeakable G-d became flesh, sent us the Son, told us that we too were sons and daughters.

The incarnation makes all the world and all that's in it, graced by G-d. As theologian Karl Rahner says, we don't reach G-d by leaving the created world or abandoning space and time and history. G-d can be reached concretely. right where we are in our flesh and blood. In a general way Christian existence itself manifests a sacramental character, according to him.

## EXISTENCE and SACRAMENT

I experienced what Rahner was saying when visiting an IRA prisoner in the Maze prison. He was wrongly charged and convicted of murdering a police woman after he gave himself up for bombing a barracks. He'd seen me on a religious TV programme and started writing to me, and I visited him over his 13 years in prison.

Each visit I was led into a small cubicle with a prison officer on guard. And always my fellow Derry man would appear from his cell block with a little brown paper bag from which he pulled out a kit kat and a can of coke. He broke the kit kat and we ate it, he poured the coke into his one plastic cup we drank it. One day, as we shared, I was struck by the sacredness of the moment. It was like the eucharist – sacramental. God's grace was present.

## CONCLUSION

Work of the eyes is done, now  
go and do heart-work  
For there is a boundary to looking.  
And the world that is looked at so deeply  
wants to flourish in love.

(From 'The Turning', Rilke)

This is the real challenge of Christianity. To help bring about the reign of G-d by helping the world flourish in love.

It's not about a cosy one-on-one relationship with G-D. it's about community of equals – race, colour, creed, gender – as St Paul so wonderfully put it in his letter to the Galatians and with our historical consciousness today we can add -sexual orientation.

That's the real living of the mystical life – the action that pours forth when we continually reorient ourselves. Make mistakes indeed, for it is about progress not perfection. Forgive ourselves, have a laugh, accept that it is not all about us but certainly all about G-d.

When I get too serious or deflated or disheartened or self-critical of myself and others there's a story I love to remind myself of.

It concerns Pope John XX<sup>111</sup> and a revealing story his secretary tells about the Pope's night time ritual.

It was during the time of the second Vatican Council. Huge upheavals were going on within the Church and millions of Catholics were wondering what was going to happen next? Political instability, wars, and cold wars were the order of the day in the wider world, and John was painfully isolated from his Curia. Each night, he would kneel down on the prie-dieu in his little chapel but only for a very short while. "What prayers do you say?", his secretary, picking up his courage, finally asked him one night as he rose up. To which good Pope John replied: "I say, 'God, it's your church, look after it, I'm going to bed'"

To end where we started (mysticism is redolent with circular imagery):

We live in a troubled age, a challenging age, and above all God's sanctified age. We're called to go deeper, become mystics, like the great Leonard Cohen, whom I began by quoting.

His last album features the wonderful song 'You want it darker.' It sounds like his 'nunc dimittis'. In it, Cohen holds together, in music and poetry, all the tensions of being a human being in this world.

He talks about the darkness of God, (the 'You' in 'You want it darker') linking that G-d perhaps to the suffering of the Jews – 'a million candles burning for the help that never came'. And to the midrash on G-d in the Old Testament who says, 'I want it darker'.

And yet there is a deeper current in the song. Beneath Cohen's moody complaints and sardonic rebuffs is the beautiful gravitas and restraint of the "Hineni, hineni" refrain, sung by a synagogue choir and cantor. "Hineni, hineni" – "Here I am; I am ready", signifying, each time it is used in the Hebrew Bible by Abraham or Moses or Samuel, a readiness to do or to accept the will of God.

There may indeed be "no decent place to stand in a massacre", but there is a profound response to be made, an attitude of unwavering courage to be adopted: "Hieni, hieni' Here I am: I am ready."