

The Triune God's Reply to Europe's Contemporary Cry

Looking back over European history there have been various outcries of anguish on this continent: the cry of alarm that "the world is ending" in the fifth century with the unprepared-for collapse of the Western Roman Empire; the cry of defiance in the eighth century in the face of Arab invasion halted by Charles Martel in 732; the cries of anger and misunderstanding during the tragic split between the Eastern and Western sides of Christendom in the first centuries of the second millennium. And of course, the wounded cries of the sixteenth century's religious wars. More recently, the outcries of revulsion at the awful events of the twentieth century's world wars initiated in Europe continue to haunt.

There is, however, a contemporary cry in Europe that pierces in an altogether new way. It is a multi-toned cry of indifference towards, rejection of or simply perceived painful absence of God as a comprehensive horizon. This results in what the German theologian, Eugene Biser, calls a "landscape of the cry" that can be seen not least in modern literature, philosophy, and psychology.¹ We could add it is audible also in many modern socio-political developments.

This experience of a "lack of God", "missing but not missed", as has been said, is not always explicitly adverted to in the hearts and minds of contemporary European men and women. Our culture, as Heidegger puts it, is so poor and distracted from thinking that it no longer recognises the lack of God as lack.²

Of course, we cannot but acknowledge with gratitude the great strides forward that have marked recent centuries. Each of us benefits from them. And yet we know that, for many, a nihilism operates in the background of day-to-day choices, activities and interpretations of life. People live "as if God did not exist."

Existence has been reduced to fragments without an overall horizon; it is understood for the most part as consumption of products, the doing of tasks in a race guided by media sound bites. We have increasingly become trapped within a history closed in on itself with all kinds of results, not least the collapse of the foundations of ethics, new outbreaks of racial intolerance, a diminishing of social solidarity, and rampant features of a "culture of death." At times we feel there's a faceless, technocratic power that risks enveloping us. The film, *The Matrix*, placed this before us.

¹ *Glaubenswende: Eine Hoffnungsperspektive* (Herder, 1987), p. 113.

² See "The Word of God "God is Dead"" in Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Translation and Introduction by William Lovitt (London: Harper Colophon Books, 1977), pp. 53-114

Nietzsche's words capture something of our current European socio-spiritual horizon: "Has it not become colder? Is it not night and more night coming on all the time?".³

Europe - A Culture without God?

In his work, *La troisième mort du Dieu*, André Glucksmann puts before us the phenomenon that God is dying. In Europe, indeed, he is already dead. Glucksmann then goes on to comment to ask: why Europe? Why only Europe? The only continent, in the whole world and in humanity's history to produce a civilisation without God?⁴

Theorists, of course, will debate the exact nature of the transformation of the European religious landscape. As the 1999 European Values Study noted, there is even a certain religious renewal in Europe with signs of a certain "new visibility of religion in Europe." Grace Davie notes this too but she describes it as a "believing without belonging." Lieven Boeve of Louvain summarises our situation in terms of "post-secular":

Because of detraditionalization, the impact of the Christian tradition on meaning and social life has faded away and, together with the growing consciousness of religious plurality and migration, this has led to a complex and ambiguous situation of religious diversity... Religion then can turn either into a vague religiosity - a kind of 'something-ism': 'there is something more' - or a vivid and profuse 'off-piste' religious imagination, which gives rise to new religious movements borrowing from Eastern religions, the renaissance of ancient Celtic religion, different kinds of syncretisms, etc."⁵

Certainly, it needs to be acknowledged that our contemporary situation also offers Christians new possibilities to tell about their God. On a long train journey some years ago I found myself sitting opposite an avid reader. When we struck up a conversation it transpired he had a passion for philosophy. Heidegger and Camus were recently discovered intrigues. At a certain point he turned to me and, while explaining his own inability to really believe in God and the Church, he said, "Who is God for you? Tell me about your God." It was a chance to share my experience of faith, what it means for me and how I try to live it out. He remained in contact afterwards.

Nevertheless, in the weakening of the impact of the Christian tradition in Europe, the situation is such that, as the French sociologist, Yves Lambert, has commented: "in Europe, God is neither as dead nor as alive as some now maintain."⁶ And this points perhaps not so much to a post-modern post-secularism as rather the final outburst of modernity.

³ See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, Third Book, Aphorism 258, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974) p. 125.

⁴ Paris: NIL, 2000.

⁵ See Lieven Boeve's paper at the Research Network convened by G. Ward and M. Hoelzl at the University of Manchester entitled: "The new Visibility of Religion in European Democratic Culture" (18-20, March 2004) reproduced as "Religion after Detraditionalization: Christian Faith in a Post-Secular Europe" *ITQ* 70 (2005), pp. 99-122, here at p. 108.

⁶ Y. Lambert, Director of Research at the "Groupe de Sociologie des Religions et de la Laïcité: A Turning Point in Religious Evolution in Europe", *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19/1 (2004), p. 44.

Today's "sacred", whatever its guise, is a Sacred that swallows up all absolutes. It is, as Giuseppe Zanghì puts it, a new form of nihilism that moves from being rooted in the Absolute that is denied to a Denial that itself has become absolute. All truth claims are negated. It is no longer humanity that denies the Absolute in order to affirm itself but ultimately the absolutising of Denial that cannot but end up denying humanity itself.⁷

But why Europe? Of all the continents, why has this occurred primarily in Europe only then to be exported elsewhere? Why Europe, the continent that shaped such a profound and original, spiritual and artistic, philosophical, scientific and political humanism in the light of the Christian Gospel?

This is our Question.

A Crisis within Christianity

I do not pretend to provide a simple answer but I would like to offer a possible reading of what is going on. While not denying "the mystery of iniquity" (2 Thes 2:7) that is always at work, we can also consider Europe's "crisis" of faith as a spiritual moment of maturity within the journey of Christianity itself.

This is the diagnosis of the current situation suggested by Pope John Paul II in speaking to the fifth Symposium of the Bishops of Europe on October 5th, 1982 when he observed:

these tests, these temptations and this outcome of the European drama not only question Christianity and the Church from outside as a difficulty or an external obstacle to be overcome in the work of evangelization...but in a true sense they are interior to Christianity and the Church...

Furthermore:

the crises of the Christian man are the crises of European man. The crises of European culture are the crises of Christian culture....

He goes right to the root of things when he concludes:

In this light, Christianity may discover in the adventure of the European spirit temptations, infidelities and the risks which are proper to man in his essential relationship with God in Christ.⁸

Speaking at a celebration in honour of John of the Cross, Pope John Paul II threw further light on what he meant by pointing to the mystical experience of, for example, someone like St. John of the Cross. He compares the cultural crisis we are going through in Europe with a dark night which is experienced in the spiritual life. One starts with enthusiasm and great light but then undergoes a period of darkness where one's faith is deepening and maturing.

⁷ See Giuseppe Maria Zanghì, "Una chiave di lettura dell'ateismo dell'Europa" in *Nuova Umanità* 27 (2005/5), pp. 625-652.

⁸"The Crisis of European Culture" in *Osservatore Romano* [English edition], 13 December 1982, pp. 6-7.

The crisis of faith today is like a dark night which has acquired an epochal dimension of collective proportions.⁹

And the Church is clearly caught up in this. Cardinal Connell commented in the Year 2000 Jubilee Pastoral Letter, *The Knowledge of Christ*, that the misperceptions of the Church is also part of this crisis of faith: "And when the Church itself is viewed as a purely human institution, a kind of bureaucracy or machine without compassion, it too is seen as a sign of the absence of God" (p. 25).

What I am proposing on the basis of Pope John Paul II's comments is that Europe's contemporary cry has something to do with the journey of Christian culture itself. This socio-spiritual and cultural "cry" conceals a call and a hope that something new is maturing painfully in the midst of the crisis.

Rediscovering the Triune God as our "living space"

Can we point to what it is that might be maturing in our understanding and living out of Christianity today?

In a very brief tractate, *De raptu* in *Quaestiones de Veritate*, Thomas Aquinas, in commenting on how in particular experiences of new communion with God, seems to indicate that God provides words in which a person can say what it is he or she is living and understanding – either by revealing to that person depths not yet reached in the words already used or by suggesting new words to him or her.¹⁰ In the light of this, could it be the case that God is today leading Christians in Europe to understand words we already use but have not fully grasped? Or, indeed, is opening up new insights into Divine Revelation as explained by Vatican II's document on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, n. 8?

Here I would like to refer briefly to one specific example – the central doctrine of our faith: the Triune God, the Trinity.¹¹ It's as if today God is responding by bringing us to rediscover him as a divine community of love.

To speak of the Person of Christ is to speak of the Trinity. We have great dogmas concerning Christ and Trinity. But how far have we let ourselves, our thinking, our acting be informed and penetrated by these mysteries? How far have these truths of faith managed to become what they deep down are: also anthropological truths, truths that are historical and social, to be "done" in charity?

Perhaps the current crisis is opening up for us a deeper, living articulation of these truths. We know that at the origins of modernity, Immanuel Kant considered the Christian doctrine of the Trinity as a piece of useless speculation.¹² The Italian theologian, now Archbishop, Bruno Forte writes of

⁹ Homily given during a celebration of the word in honour of St. John of the Cross at Segovia (*Oss. Rom.* [Italian edition] 4 November 1982).

¹⁰ See Thomas Aquinas, "Rapture" in *Truth II: Questions X-XX*, Trans. James V. McGlynn Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1954, pp. 180-206.

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. n. 234.

¹² See Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

centuries which suffered an "exile of the Trinity."¹³ Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar and others point to the shocking observation that what we claim to be the central doctrine of our faith, the Trinity impinges hardly at all on our understanding and our everyday living of the faith:

We must be willing to admit that, should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.¹⁴

And yet, the Trinitarian horizon is central to our faith! In Jesus Christ we discover a whole anthropology of communion, a Trinitarian anthropology, a way of living that is modelled on the Trinitarian relationships that God lives in himself. The Triune God is nothing less than our true "living space."

"Living the Trinity"

A priest I know told me of how some years ago at a moment of crisis in his life he met a group of young people who were trying to really live out their faith. He was struck by their life. To his question: "What do you do?" one of them answered, "We live the Trinity." This response amazed him and began his journey out of the crisis.

It's as if today, Europe, like Job, is struggling as a continent not simply with an abstract notion of God but with the revelation of the triune God in Jesus Christ. Or is it also the case that God today "struggles" with Europeans to make his life of communion, dialogue and Trinitarian *perichòresis* be welcomed more deeply by them in order to welcome them more deeply into himself, so that we might "live the Trinity" at all levels?!

What are the signs that there is a new discovery of this true triune face of God? Well, firstly, it is not by coincidence that there has been a huge blossoming of theological and spiritual writings concerning the Trinity in all traditions. Some names of theological and spiritual writers on this theme spring to mind: Sergius Bulgakov, Yves Congar, Anne Fatula, Colin Gunter, Eberhard Jüngel, Anne Hunt, Chiara Lubich, Jürgen Moltmann, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Adrienne von Speyr, Simon Weil and John Zizioulous.

Most authoritatively we read in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* written after the 1999 Synod to which Cardinal Connell contributed: (the Church) has the task of reviving faith in the Trinity among the Christians of Europe, knowing full well that this faith is the herald of authentic hope for the continent. Many of the great paradigms of reference..., which are at the core of European civilization, have their deepest roots in the Church's trinitarian faith. This faith contains an extraordinary spiritual, cultural and ethical potential which is also capable of shedding light on some of the more important questions discussed in Europe today, such as social disintegration and the loss of a meaningful point of reference for life and history. Hence the need for a renewed theological, spiritual and pastoral meditation on the mystery of the Trinity (n. 19).

¹³ See *Trinity as History: Saga of the Christian God* (New York, 1989), pp. 3-4.

¹⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London, Burns & Oates, 1970), espec. pp. 10-15; Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord Vol V* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), p. 23. See also John O'Donnell, "Revelation and Trinity", in *The Mystery of the Triune God* (London, 1988), pp. 17-39.

The Second Vatican Council clearly underlined the Trinitarian mystery of the Church. The words and deeds of our recent Popes of the Council - Paul VI, John Paul II and now Benedict XVI have echoed this in many different ways. They do so by underlining how contemplation of the Trinity has direct implications for the Church and our living of the Gospel in society.

Most recently, in his encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict has underscored charity in every aspect of the Church's life (Interestingly, Cardinal Connell's first pastoral letter as Archbishop was "Witnessing to God's love"). The Pope quotes Augustine in a wonderful summary: *si vides caritatem, vides trinitatem*. If you see love, you see the Trinity:

"If you see charity, you see the Trinity"... The entire activity of the Church is an expression of a love that seeks the integral good of man... Love of neighbour, grounded in the love of God, is first and foremost a responsibility for each individual member of the faithful, but it is also a responsibility for the entire ecclesial community at every level: from the local community to the particular Church and to the Church universal in its entirety. As a community, the Church must practise love (n.19-20).

In this setting, we might also recall Pope John Paul's blueprint for the third millennium, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* n. 42:

To make the Church the home and the school of communion (*and here Pope John Paul was referring to what he called "living the Trinity" cf. NMI, n.29*): that is the great challenge facing us in the millennium which is now beginning.¹⁵

To create lively pockets of true, living communion requires, however, promoting a spirituality of communion. And what is this spirituality of communion? Pope John Paul provides its contours:

It is our "heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us."

It means 'an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as "those who are a part of me".'

It makes us "able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship."

A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a "gift for me".

A spirituality of communion means.. to know how to "make room" for our brothers and sisters, bearing "each other's burdens."

Centuries ago, Pachomius, a Roman soldier, returning after a battle, was struck by people he saw coming out of their houses and taking care of the wounded. He asked who they were and in discovering they were Christians, he converted. It's up to us now to manifest moments of mutual love, genuine spheres of communion that are transparent to the Triune God of mutual love in whom we believe.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n.43.

Laboratories of Communion

Vatican II, the teaching of the Popes, the social doctrine of the Church as well as theological and spiritual writers are all pointing us in the direction of rediscovering and living the Trinity. But it is also true that the Triune God has not only responded by underlining this doctrinally. He has also responded in another way too. Through the Holy Spirit, new charisms have emerged that have given rise to new communities, movements and groups.

These are also helping the Church to underline how Christianity is a communitarian reality. They are like creative laboratories of this programme.¹⁶

The Holy Spirit has aroused in men and women of our time new and relevant experiences of the Gospel of Jesus that open up windows for us onto the Gospel. The history of the Church is full of similar examples as the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger highlighted in 1998 at a congress of these new communities and which now as Pope he is underlining again as he calls these movements together at Pentecost this year (2006).¹⁷ There have been interesting developments too between Catholic movements and communities and movements of other churches as seen in the large European gathering of Stuttgart in 2004 and again this will be repeated in 2007.¹⁸

In the past, when there arose outcries on this continent of Europe, new communities came to life around figures such as Benedict, Francis, Dominic, Catherina of Siena, Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola. They provided extraordinary impulses in their times. Perhaps God has not forgotten our times, but it is important we be attentive to what "the Spirit is saying to the Church" (Rev 2:7).

The Mysterious Cry that answers our Cry

So far we have proposed a reading of what might be maturing within Europe's Christian culture. But Europe's cry is answered most poignantly, perhaps, in another cry – that of Jesus on the Cross who himself cried out "why". This cry is what John Paul II called the "mystery within the mystery" of Christ.¹⁹ It is the cry that paradoxically reveals the most the very life of mutual love between the Persons of the Trinity because it is when Jesus is loving the most in fidelity to his mission towards the Father and towards us.

It is again significant that in our time artists, literary writers, psychologists, theologians and spiritual writers have drawn our attention to that moment of the Cross where Jesus cries out his sense of being abandoned by the Father. The work of the artist, Francis Bacon, comes to mind. It is the cry that opens

¹⁶ See Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Movements in the Church*. Vatican, 1999.

¹⁷ See Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, "The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements", *Communio* (Fall, 1998), pp. 480-504.

¹⁸ See *Together for Europe*. Rome: Città Nuova, 2004

¹⁹ Cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n.25.

up for us our entrance into the Triune life of God as Cardinal Connell wrote in *The Knowledge of Christ* (p. 22):

Jesus' cry on the Cross: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46)... "At that moment he felt as if displaced and evicted from the depths of his being: he knew what it was to feel cut off from home. And to what purpose? That he might return home with us."

Heidegger once wrote that a turning point will only come if we recognise the abyss. But for this to happen there have to be people to reach the abyss.

Jesus on the cross cries out in abandonment. He is THE MAN who has touched the deepest and most desolate roots of our human creaturehood, right to the point of abandonment by God. He felt distance, confusion, lack of belonging. His too was a cry of uncertainty, weariness and darkness. But Jesus Crucified and Forsaken is GOD who has reached humanity in the depths of being deprived of light in order to open us and bring us to the light.

So, in Jesus Crucified and Forsaken, we can re-read our current situation. Yes, the "negative" of Europe's contemporary cry is certainly negative - I cannot deny darkness is darkness - but it is also the "promise" of a novelty of life - of a resurrection - as big as is the crisis.

Each of us, however, feels the wounds of our time and culture. We all participate in that existential angst. Each of us has a sense of being at times on the knife-edge of the cultural crisis that touches deeply in our own personal lives. And that is why each of us is called to recognise, name and love Jesus Crucified and Forsaken because, in so doing each of us, and all together, can contribute to the emergence of a culture of the Resurrection for today.

It requires we be people who hear the contemporary cry of our culture with one ear but with the other ear hear the cry of the Crucified and Forsaken Christ. As one spiritual writer of our times, Chiara Lubich, puts it, Jesus Crucified and Forsaken is:

speech for the mute, the answer for the unknowing, light for the blind, a voice for the deaf, rest for the weary, hope for the despairing, satisfaction for the hungry, reality for the deceived...victory for the failure, certainty for the uncertain, normality for the strange, company for the lonely... He assumed forsakenness by God; therefore God is close even when we think we have been forsaken by him.²⁰

Conclusion

I stared of by noting Europe's cry of theoretical and practical atheism. In his 1993 Pastoral Letter, *Christ our Life* (p.113) Cardinal Connell noted how the 1991 Synod on Europe recognised this. He quoted the Synodal Declaration: "(Jesus') entire life, culminating in the Easter mystery of his Death and Resurrection, proclaims the truth: God loves you, Jesus Christ came for your sake."²¹

²⁰ Chiara Lubich, *The Cry* (London: New City, 2001) pp. 48-50.

²¹ Declaration, Synod of Bishops, Special Assembly for Europe (1991), n. 3.

I have proposed that this proclamation involves the rediscovery of the Trinitarian face of God who is Love, Mutual Love and so also our living out a spirituality of communion.

All of this is made possible for us, however, if we nourish ourselves on the Eucharist, the great gift from heaven that Cardinal Connell never ceased to proclaim. In the Eucharist we meet Jesus Crucified and Forsaken who brings us into the new life of mutual love in the heart of the Father.

In his Jubilee Pastoral Letter, *The Knowledge of Christ*, the Cardinal provided us with a wonderful meditation on the link between friendship, love, knowledge of Christ and the Eucharist. In 'the "today" of Christ's life in the Church' the Cardinal wrote, we are invited into 'our imperishable dwelling with the Father "in the unity of the Holy Spirit" at the heart of the Church' (pp. 19-21).

Oliver Clément, the contemporary Orthodox writer has written: "I am really convinced that Christianity is still young; the world hasn't seen anything yet."²² The Church has always being rejuvenated by the Holy Spirit. And the "today" of the Church is no exception. The words of the prophet Isaiah provide a conclusion of hope: No need to recall the past, no need to think about what was done before. See, I am doing a new deed, even now it comes to light...(Is 45:18-19).

²² See R. Migliorini interview with Oliver Clément in *Avvenire* (1 October, 2003), p. 24.