

Out of Darkness Breaks

Speak a new language, so that the world will be a new world – Rumi

Conference Address by Br. Philip Pinto, cfc

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Dear Sisters and Brothers, I wish to start with three quotations that set the tone for my sharing today:

I thought that my voyage had come to its end
at the last limit of my power---
that the path before me was closed,
that provisions were exhausted
and the time come to take shelter in a silent obscurity.

But I find that your will knows no end in me.
And when old words die out on the tongue,
new melodies break forth from the heart;
and where the old tracks are lost,
new country is revealed with its wonders.

“The house of my soul is too narrow for you to come in;
let it be enlarged by you. It is in ruins. Do you restore it.” (St. Augustine)

We call out your name in as many ways as we can.
We fix your role towards us in the ways we need.
We approach you from the particular angle of our life.
We do all that, not because you need to be identified,
But because of our deep need,
Our deep wound,
Our deep hope.
And then we are astonished that while our names for you
Serve for a moment,
You break beyond them in your freedom,
You show yourself fresh beyond our utterance,
You retreat into your splendour beyond our grasp.

The late Russian dissident Andrei Sinyavsky once said, “Every self-respecting writer of any significance is a saboteur and, as he surveys the horizon wondering what to write about, more often than not he will choose some forbidden topic.”

As a Religious Brother I want to take my place among those others who have embraced Consecrated Life in order to 'keep alive the dangerous memory of Jesus', and therefore walk in the minefields of forbidden topics! "We are in a period in which public and even ecclesiastical approval must be second to the needs of those who look to us for both vision and voice." I wish to invite you into this space so that we might walk together.

Alan Paton wrote: "Literature will illuminate the road, but it will not lead the way with a lamp. It will expose the crevasse, but not provide the bridge. It will lance the boil, but not purify the blood. It cannot be expected to do more than this; and if we ask it to do more, we are asking too much."

We, on the other hand, joined religious life to undertake both sides of the equation. And what is more, we have to do it with all the odds stacked against us.

Religious Life as we have known it is rapidly dying in Ireland. Some of us have known this for a while now. Some of us have wished it were not so, and have been in denial about it. This is not to say that what is going on at present is not life giving or that those who live this way of life are wasting their time. But it is saying that we cannot expect this way of living religious life to continue into the future. If there is to be another way of living this life in generations yet to come, it will be very different. Some few of us are already living a new life somewhat less encrusted, 'like a lobster that has shed its skin and is for a time soft and vulnerable'. We are not the first generation of religious people to face such a death. There have been similar moments in the past when our way of life morphed into other forms. But we are the first to live consciously through such a change, a change so radical that it will require honesty and humility to recognise what might be born. We are willing to undertake this journey in all our vulnerability.

I remember Sr. Joan Chittister once saying that we would all inevitably die, but what was important was "what we were caught dead doing"! And so a good prayer for us at this time is that of Rainer Maria Rilke:

God, give us each our own death,
The dying that precedes
From each of our lives:

The way we loved,
The meanings we made,
Our need.

I would like to share with you what I think we should be 'caught dead doing'.

What do I notice happening in our world today that is changing the way I live my life? What do my brothers and sisters say to me that makes me question the beliefs by which I have lived in the past? What is energizing me and giving me hope in the midst of all the negativity around me? How am I naming the way I love, the meanings I make, and my and the world's needs?

I do not believe that we are living any more in a time of transition. That is too tame a word to describe the upheavals taking place. I believe we are in a time of chaos and more than ever we need to be aware of the action of the Spirit hovering over the waters and calling forth life. We know now that it took eons for that primeval life to emerge, and it will take great patience and waiting on our part for clarity to be revealed. "We must once again become attentive to the clear and powerful language of the spiritually charged presence."

A time of chaos demands risking. The only real 'sin' in such a time is that of inactivity, of waiting for the dust to settle before we do anything. The call today is to risk acting to the best of our ability, knowing that only this will allow the future to unfold.

It all comes down to our image of God. That is the central piece of the jigsaw. Our image of God that has been handed down to us is undergoing cosmic change. The sad thing is that we are being discouraged, in the name of orthodoxy, from embarking on this journey by people who are afraid that the emerging image of God will demand huge changes in worldview and therefore behaviour – this will challenge and expose their vested interests. I can only remind you of the wisdom of the Sufi mystic Hafiz:

Dear ones,
Beware of the tiny gods frightened men create
To bring an anaesthetic relief to their sad days.

And so we set out to do the only thing we can do: we go to our founding stories to see how our ancestors acted in a similar situation. For us, people of the Book, we recognise that the time of Exile so eloquently described in the Prophets of the Old Testament was also a chaotic time, a time when all the signposts that had marked the journey pointed to nowhere. Every sign that they had cherished as a people destined to be the light of the nations was now destroyed: no Land, no King, and no Temple, and back in captivity once more. Now, truly destitute, they have to find meaning again. Isn't this so similar to what is happening in Ireland today? And this is not just in Church circles.

My own Congregation is struggling in the same depths. And it is out of these depths that we cry to our God as the psalmist urges us: "Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice". In Ireland we have seen our schools handed over to a Trust; our Brothers are aging; our reputation is in tatters; and the future looks bleak, even hopeless. So many of my Brothers hide in their monasteries, afraid of drawing attention to themselves. We are like the disciples locked away in fear in the Upper Room. Meaning, with the Master, appears dead. And I know that many of you here today can identify with that scene.

Our ancestors, suffering similar loss and shame, go back to their stories to discover which of their heroes can shed light on what they are going through. And they find one who best exemplifies what is happening: Elijah. Elijah lives in a time of chaos. The ancient way of life has given way to a new dispensation and the alternative society that Moses had urged on the people is but a distant memory. In such a situation, Elijah tries to take on the establishment and soon comes to realise his inadequacy. In mortal danger from the ruling elite, he flees.

We are familiar with the story. He travels to Horeb, the mountain of God, that sacred spot where his people had experienced the covenantal choice of God. He too will stand on that same spot and demand from that God an answer. 'Where are you? Everybody has abandoned you. I alone have tried to be faithful, and see what is happening to me!' We are aware of what happens when he stands outside the cave, waiting for God to speak. He witnesses the mighty wind that appears, but God is not in the wind. Neither is God evident in the earthquake, nor made manifest in the fire. Can one imagine the desolation felt by the prophet? And by us. I have remained faithful: faithful to my class and community, faithful to prayer, faithful to the Rosary and Daily Mass – does it all count for nothing?

It is salutary for us to remember that each of these manifestations was what had made God recognizable when the people had gathered with Moses, all those years ago. When the people saw these signs, the wind, the earthquake and the fire, they knew that Yahweh was present. But now these very signs mocked Elijah because God was absent.

And then something startling happens. In the last place he expected to find God, God's unmistakable presence is felt: the sound of sheer silence (bat kol), right in the depths of Elijah's being. And he knows that something new is happening within. The old way of making contact with God no longer satisfies. A new revelation of God is at hand. God is discovered closer than our jugular vein, as the Koran so beautifully puts it.

To a people in exile, suffering the loss of their Temple, this is indeed a profound experience of God's continued care for them. They know that they can still encounter the Mystery within the deepest recesses of their hearts and in the shared intimacy with one another. They don't need the Temple to celebrate God.

Every revelation of God demands a new way of responding, a new way of forming community, a new way of being disciple. In exile, the people of the Old Testament began to experience a new way of being the Chosen People. And we today are being introduced to a new understanding and experience of God. The French poet Rostand writes: "It is at night that it is fine to believe in the light; one must force the dawn to be born by believing in it".

A religious movement is born out of a moment of radical insight. But all too often this movement is domesticated and trapped in a system of beliefs and regulations that produces an event to be celebrated rather than an experience to be lived anew. That is why Carl Jung said, "organized religion is a defence against having the religious experience." A favourite mystic of mine, Jalalludin Rumi puts it so well:

I used to go to the mosque
To throw myself on the prayer rug
And cover myself in devotion

But one day love entered the mosque
And spoke to me
"O wise one,
why do you stay stuck
inside this house of worship?
What you need to do is break free
From the bondage of self"

So many people are trapped in the past, living with regret about what might have been. Their hearts are full of yellow newspapers and old photographs, and they wish they could go back. This is foolish. Omar Khayyam's famous stanza says it all:

The moving finger writes, and having writ,
moves on; nor all thy poetry nor wit
shall lure it back to cancel half a line,
nor all thy tears wash out a word of it .

But escaping that prison cannot be accomplished by simple instruction. The personal prisons in which we live, trapped by feelings of deep insecurity and unworthiness, locked down by fear and guilt, cannot be unlocked by cleverness or by logic or by some cheerful, good advice. Escape from the prison of self is a response to God's offer to launch out into the deep in trust. We can't do it alone.

This is a time to beseech God to rescue us from the limited vision that we have grown accustomed to. This request is at the heart of our search for new life. My sisters and brothers, we need new eyes to see a new way of living that will allow us a freedom that we never knew before. This is the core of the Jesus vision and the Jesus teaching.

When Jesus comes into the synagogue in Capernaum and takes the scroll that is handed to him, the evangelist records the deliberateness of his actions: he stands up, takes the scroll, opens it, finds the passage in Isaiah, and then reads. This is great drama. And when he finishes, he rolls it up, gives it back to the assistant and then sits down. Then looking at them he announces that the text is fulfilled that day. We are all familiar with the text:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
For he has anointed me
To bring good news to the poor,
Liberation to captives,
New sight to the blind,
To set the oppressed free
And to proclaim the Lord's year of favour .

These five elements are finely balanced: the first with the fifth, the second with the fourth, and the third highlighted in the middle. Chiastic parallelism, they call it after the Greek letter χ . And this third element is not found in the text in Isaiah!

The same mission is repeated in the Fourth Gospel after the cure of the man born blind: "I have come into the world so that those without sight may see".

"To bring new sight to the blind" is the beginning of freedom. Jesus tells us that he has come to show us another way of living life, another way of relating to people, another way of standing in God's loving presence without fear – a way that is so different from that of the dominant culture under Caesar. And he calls this the kingdom of God. What would life be like if God, not Caesar were in charge. How things would change! And I want to tell you about this God that you do not have to fear or placate. The mischievous Hafiz puts it this way:

God was full of wine last night,
So full of wine
That he let a great secret slip.

He said:
There is no one on this earth
Who needs a pardon from Me –

For there is really no such thing,
No such thing
As Sin!

It is not that there is no sin, but that when God looks at us, God does not first notice sin! Our images of God keep us chained and locked up in superstition and fear. Have you ever wondered why the first commandment in the Old Testament concerns idolatry? "I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange Gods before me!" It is at the head of the list, because it is the sin that human beings are most prone to. The great enemy of religion is not atheism, but idolatry. We place idols in the place reserved for God alone. If we get our ideas of God more in keeping with how Jesus

revealed God to us, then we will live in greater freedom. The sad thing is that we have domesticated the God of Jesus and the message of Jesus.

One of the questions I put to my Brothers is to ask if they can name one thing they know about God that they did not read in a book or that someone did not tell them. Perhaps it is a good question for us now. And the amazing thing is that this one thing is the most important thing about God for me. I am constantly learning more and more about God, about this Mystery at the centre of my being. And if my image of God is static, then I am in relationship with an idol. If the image of God that governs my life today is the same as it was five years ago, then I am worshipping an idol.

And I worship an idol every time I refuse to allow change into my life. If my daily schedule is the same now as it was five years ago, I am probably stuck in my relationship with God as well. If the sort of spiritual books I now read have not changed in the last five years, I should be getting worried about my image of God. If as a congregation, we continue to elect the same people to leadership roles, then our image of God is stagnant. A member of my Team asks the question: "When was the last time that I did something for the first time?" I remember asking a brother once what he thought about some controversial issue and he replied: "I don't think. I let the Pope do my thinking for me"! I was so sad when I heard that, because it has nothing to do with loyalty but everything to do with an abdication of responsibility.

What would it mean to be radical disciples of Jesus today? We know that Jesus wanted followers, not fans! He did not call disciples to worship him, but to follow him. It is not about worshipping Christ so much as following Jesus. Can we be as radical in our time as the first followers were in theirs? What if, for example, baptism meant that you could no longer be a soldier – because you could not kill? What if following meant opening our communities as places of real hospitality to those who have no one to hear their story? What if following meant an anti-imperial way of living so that we share from our substance in these difficult times and lend money without taking any interest? What if we gave everyone the benefit of the doubt and learned to live non-violently? What if discipleship was taken seriously as we fought against losing our soul in a consumerist society? What if women were truly equal? What if a contagious joy was the hallmark of our assemblies or community meetings? What if our communities were truly safe places where we realise that we all need one another just as we are without any need for protective masks? What if we consciously allowed our cultural barriers and sense of self to be questioned and challenged and extended, so that we really knew and valued those we label 'the stranger'?

Listen to the familiar text at the end of Mathew's Gospel:

Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life,
marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you.
I'll be with you as you do this, day after day after day,
right up to the end of the age."

Can we hear it not as a command to change other people's thinking so that it matched our own, but to move to people beyond our cultures so that together we might move out of our small worlds?

In Jesus we find one who is constantly calling on us to break out of the boundaries that we find ourselves in, or should I say we bind ourselves in. We are prone to fix ourselves within boxes that have labels like 'mine' and 'yours'. We organise things into neat categories and draw lines around what is acceptable behaviour. And the poor and disadvantaged are always the ones outside the boundaries and separated by the lines we draw. People must know their place, we say. And it is always said by those on the right side of the line, those with something to protect. The story is told

about the husband of a suffragist, who when women were given the vote and knowing that his world was falling apart said, "Where are we going to draw the line?" To which his wife replied, "Who gave you the pencil?"

I know the time in my life when I lived in India and just did not see the poor. The reason: my world was circumscribed by the school in which I taught and where I drew a line. I was like the rich man who just did not notice Lazarus outside his gate. Jesus, as Robin Meyers says, comes along 'like some cosmic eraser', taking out this line, and then that one, until a kind of panic sets in: the man is taking out all our lines. He forgives people as if they didn't need to be taught a lesson first. He hangs out with Gentiles, he speaks to women, and he has beggars throwing away their crutches to follow him. Now we've got a real problem. Nobody is staying in his or her place. So we crucified him. You've got to draw the line someplace.

Barbara Brown Taylor said once: God is not interested in religion; God is interested in human beings, and particularly in the demolition of our illusions: that we can hold ourselves apart from one another; that we are not related to one another; that some people are simply destined to be winners and others to be losers and that there is nothing to be done about it, except perhaps to build some walls and install some security systems and relocate some neighbourhoods in order to keep the one from spilling over into the other.

Robert Frost was right. There is something in God "that doesn't love a wall; that wants it down." The Mystic Rumi says it so well: "You were born with wings. Why prefer to crawl through life?" And again, "Why, when God has given you this wide and wonderful world, do you choose to live in a prison of all places?"

For so long we have based our religious observance on beliefs and propositions. We worry about the real presence and the virgin birth, on the two natures in Christ and the infallibility of the Pope, about Transubstantiation and the Immaculate Conception. But when one reads and reflects on the Sermon on the Mount, the heart and soul of the Jesus vision, what the early Christians referred to as The Way, we find nothing about what to believe but an alternative ethic, a way of behaving, a way of living life. Jesus was telling us that there was another way of living life, another way of relating to people, and he called us to change the world from the inside. It is about behaviour rather than belief. We are invited to embrace what is truly eternal. And what is truly eternal is love!

You and I are called to be the agents of change. We are not here to conquer the world but to illuminate it – new sight, salt of the earth, light of the world. A bland Christian or a bland religious is a contradiction in terms! If salt loses its saltiness, of what use is it? Albert Schweitzer when asked who was the greatest person living at that time, said: The greatest person in the world today is some unknown one, in some obscure place, who has gone out in love to someone in need.

This is what Jesus called the kingdom of God: the sort of way we would live life if God, not Caesar, were in charge. That is why when Pilate asked him: "Are you a king then?" Jesus says: "my kingdom is not of this world". We have used it to say that he belonged to heaven. But what he was saying is reflected in the next line: "If my kingdom were of this world, my men would have fought to prevent my being surrendered to the Jews." That is the way of the kingdom of this world where Caesar is in charge. But in the alternative kingdom, there is no violence. There is another way of acting. How far we have betrayed the Jesus vision! And we continue to betray the vision every time we interpret Jesus' teachings as centering on life after death. Jesus was always about life before death, life in the here and now.

And so, in a time when our numbers are rapidly decreasing, when our ministries are being taken over by lay people who (hopefully) are giving them new shape and spirit, when our presence is

almost invisible in society, what are we being called to be and do? It is as if God is saying to us that in our present state we are irrelevant to our world. Are we then the equivalent of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago? Must we die so that something else can be born?

I believe that the apostolic nature of our calling as seen in our public ministry is being very adequately taken over by lay people. It is very clear to me that now our primary role is to witness to the radicality of the Gospel through the search for God and through sharing that search for God with others.

I have been amazed by the thirst of people, particularly young people, for someone to share with them the spiritual journey. They want it to be given to them in new language, not the tired language of the pulpit. They have been voting with their feet for some time now, but we only choose to see it as the signs of an idolatrous generation who have forsaken God. We do not see it as a work of God calling us to relevancy and to notice the new revelation screaming to us all around? Why can we not trust the Spirit given to us over the years and open our communities to sharing the spiritual search with others? Why are we so afraid? What are we afraid of?

People around the globe have begun to recognise that we are called to a new way of being on earth. There is a growing movement of people who are connected in a common love of the planet and its creatures, a movement of farmers, artists, school children, scientists, industrialists, politicians and religious leaders. Pope John Paul II has said we are all being called to an ecological conversion. How is this change of heart and mind linked to our faith in Jesus? What does it have to do with our redemption in Christ? How does it connect to our celebration of the Eucharist in our Christian Communities?

Fred Craddock, the evangelical preacher, tells the story of going out for a walk one day and seeing in his path a 9-pound sparrow walking. He watched it for a while and then said, 'Aren't you a bit heavy for a sparrow?' The sparrow looked at him and replied, 'yeah, tell me about it! That's why I am out walking.' 'Why don't you fly?' asked Craddock. 'That will get rid of your weight problem.' 'Fly?' said the sparrow. 'Are you crazy? I could get hurt!' 'What is your name?' Craddock asked the sparrow. The sparrow said, 'I am called church!'

Is this also descriptive of religious life today? Have we forgotten how to fly because we play it safe? I have often felt that religious life is failing and dying because leaders are failing it. We are too timid, too careful, and too passionless. If only we could be like the Hindu mystic, Mirabai, who when she was asked to return to loyalty to orthodoxy, retorted:

I have felt the swaying of the elephant's shoulders,
And now you want me to climb on a jackass!
Try to be serious.

We are called to be a new type of Church, one truly centred round the radical and disturbing vision of Jesus. At our best we know what it is. It is the only way to ensure a future full of hope.

Transcendent God in whom we live,
The Resurrection and the Light,
We sing for you a morning hymn
To end the silence of the night.

When early cock begins to crow
And everything from sleep awakes,
New life and hope spring up again
While out of darkness colour breaks.

