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Prayer and Asceticism

Gabriel Daly

The title of this paper is a comfortably loose-fitting one. That little word 'and' gives me considerable freedom of movement which I intend to take. From the outset I want to make two points which will have an important bearing on all I have to say. The first is a warning against narrowing down the scope and meaning of prayer. In this paper I intend to use the word prayer to describe an activity or state of mind which is wider than that covered by formal prayer, such as recitation of Office or periods of formal 'meditation'. I happen to think that most of us pray a good deal more than we perhaps suspect. Like the character in Molière's play who was delighted to discover that for more than forty years he had been talking prose, we may be encouraged to greater effort in prayer by the reflection that we are already praying more than we think.

My second preliminary point is this. Of all the possible senses in which my title can be taken I want to exclude only one, namely, thinking of prayer as an ascetical exercise. Let me explain. Some kind of asceticism is necessary as a prelude to the more formal kinds of prayer, since we have to overcome a natural tendency to laziness. A great deal of asceticism is needed if we are to put into practice some of the insights granted to us in prayer; insights about the attitudes and behaviour expected of a pilgrim on his way

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through life with a commission to pray and work for the coming of the kingdom. But prayer itself should not be considered as asceticism.

Prayer for the Christian is a necessity rather than a duty. Our western itch for regulating activities has had, it seems to me, a serious effect on our whole attitude to prayer. Our guiding principle has often appeared to be 'If it moves, regulate it, lest it become an indulgence.' We are always in danger of an undisclosed puritanism, by which I mean an unconscious assumption that if a course of action is smooth, perhaps even at times actually enjoyable, it is somehow less meritorious than the long slog. So we decide that it is better to speak of our *duty* to pray. Safer at any rate. That way we can legislate for it, make solemn pronouncements about the danger of not praying, give pep-talks about it as if its main purpose were to tone up our moral fibre.

Muscular Christianity is a peculiarly western thing. It flourished in Victorian England, especially among Broad Churchmen who were resolutely opposed to any leaning towards mysticism. In a school context, moral earnestness saw a simple solution for most problems in a few strenuous rounds of the football pitch followed by a cold bath. In 1933 a book of reminiscences about boating at Eton College was published. The author, referring to the visit of the two famous revivalists Moody and Sankey to the school in 1875, wrote this immortal sentence. 'As I have several times had occasion to observe, ecstatic religious emotionalism is destructive of good oarsmanship.' His theological language is a little imprecise, but he was clearly more concerned about the effect of prayer on asceticism than the other way round. Prayer could be fitted into this atmosphere of moral hygiene only with difficulty. Many hymns of the period are a rather horrible example of what happened. They were either hearty in a bluff sort of way or else they were appallingly sentimental. In either case there was little or no biblical or doctrinal sustenance behind them.

Nor did Catholicism escape this attitude. The term Jansenism is often loosely and inaccurately used to describe something similar. In this atmosphere will-power is all. As George Tyrrell once observed, 'Morality divorced from mysticism is a lean sort of religion.' My point is quite simply that you can make anything unattractive if you put your mind to it. One of the most effective ways is to harp on it as a duty. If you told schoolchildren every day that it was their duty to eat chips and ice-cream, and that

anyone who did not was a disgrace, you would soon find the more adventurous (and rebellious) proclaiming the virtues of boiled potatoes and milk-pudding.

I do not want to labour the point; but many of us grew up in an atmosphere which put prayer into a moral, canonical, and spiritual straightjacket. I am not going to indulge in a fashionable attack on the canonists. They merely codified an attitude which was implicit in the ecclesiology of the age. If the liturgists have now come into their kingdom, they were not entirely free of blame for the fact that many of us in our unreformed days took them for rubricians and thought them a little precious. Again it was the passion for the sort of minute direction which allows the actors little or no freedom of movement. It is not difficult to appreciate why there is a reaction today in the direction of informality.

To return to the reasons for my exclusion of prayer as asceticism. Prayer is the articulation of faith. It stands or falls with faith. If we stop praying, the likelihood is that we have stopped believing. If I really believe, I shall feel the need to pray. Faith is the conviction that God is speaking through the murmur, or sometimes the uproar, of everyday events. His word has to be listened for as it comes to us from out of those events. Prayer, real prayer, presupposes an unconditional openness to the God who speaks. Pious self-deception is always a hazard in prayer. I say 'pious' because it is possible for us to enter on prayer with our minds made up on what God is going to say to us. Without realizing it, we simply lay down the terms which will govern our conversation. Some of us are very bad listeners. We are wired for transmission only. Hence, though I am refusing to treat prayer itself as a form of asceticism I want to emphasize the role of asceticism in the attitudes we bring to prayer, not least of which is readiness to listen.

In this respect our first preparatory act of prayer must be to make ourselves vulnerable to God's Spirit who breathes where he wills not where we think it would be more convenient for him to breathe. There is a certain passivity in prayer (and I mean 'ordinary' not 'mystical' prayer), analogous to that which we bring to great music. It is a creative passivity which lays us open to what the composer is going to say to us. For some of us this passivity, this seeming inactivity, may be a real penance. We can so easily regard prayer as an opportunity to justify ourselves to God and so to try to do all the talking. How seriously do we take Christ's remark that our heavenly Father knows perfectly well what our

needs are? This kind of asceticism is really a feature of faith. It is more difficult than we perhaps recognize to accept the very first premiss of the theology of revelation, namely, that *all* the initiatives lie with the Spirit. Faith is a response, not an initiative. We do not *put* ourselves in God's presence; we are already there; and prayer is simply our advertence to that shattering fact. Divine transmission never ceases, and it is this which makes, or should make, prayer the unifying force in our lives, cutting across the barriers we erect between the sacred and the secular areas in those lives.

Asceticism, then, precedes and accompanies our praying; and it has to be tailored to our individual personalities. There is little uniformity either possible or desirable here. How many Christians are secretly rather disappointed by the Lord's answer to his disciples' request that he teach them to pray? They had been watching him at prayer, they knew that John the Baptist had instructed his disciples in prayer, they did not want to be left out. So they asked him, 'Lord, teach us to pray.' And they got the answer, 'When you pray, say, "Father, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come".' It is no harm to allow ourselves to be taken aback by the sparseness of that answer. There is nothing about types of prayer, composition of place, reflections, affections, resolutions and all those other ingenious complications which spiritual writers used to think up to help us to pray. Instead we are catapulted straight into the Father's kingdom; that kingdom which is so seemingly ambiguous in the Lord's teaching, at times to be thought of as lying in the future, at times, in the present. 'Thy kingdom come.' Everything else in the Lord's prayer is subordinate to that heart-felt petition. All Jesus' teaching revolved around it. It was his master theme. Most of his teaching-stories bear on it. It pulls us in two directions. It bids us to attend to the present and press on to the future, and leaves us to work out the details. It is for this that God has entered human history, to establish a reign.

If prayer centres on the kingdom, it both indicates and calls for the qualities and attitudes inseparable from that kingdom. It accepts that life in the kingdom will be marked by the tension which is inherent in the kingdom itself. That tension is between present and future, between what is at hand now and what we have yet to make of it. The theme of pilgrimage, so prominent in the teaching of Vatican II, is the source of all true asceticism for Christians. Its message is summed up in the paradox: Become what you are.

It is now time to examine a little more closely what Christian tradition understands by asceticism. First of all the word itself. Why not use the word **penance**? The simple answer is that 'penance' is an ambiguous word. Its biblical meaning is conversion, change of heart and life-style. Its popular meaning is an act or acts of self-denial. It would be seriously misleading to confuse the two. Why then not use the phrase 'self-denial' or the word 'mortification'? The answer here is simply that the word 'asceticism' has a richer meaning than either 'self-denial' or 'mortification'. Mortification is a word that has picked up some overtones and associations which may not be truly Christian at all, and it is vitally necessary to distinguish the genuine article from its imitations, no matter how heroic these imitations appear to be. It is possible to respect the single-mindedness and sheer strength of will which some of the saints brought to the infliction of pain on their bodies. It is possible to respect, indeed to be in awe of, such activities while being acutely aware that discipleship of Christ not merely does not call for this kind of action but may actually discourage it. In former ages thoroughgoing Christians expressed their love and commitment in this way. It is the love which must excite our admiration.

Let us be quite clear on this. We are talking about the kingdom revealed by Christ not about a man-made construction like Sparta. Therefore the question is theological in the proper sense of that word (theology being the attempt to analyze what has been revealed to us and thus what we are called on to believe).

In the New Testament asceticism is a virtue which always points beyond itself and which has no specifically Christian value intrinsic to itself. Christ never speaks of it in isolation but always in connection with the kingdom. St Paul relates it to general Christian living. The overall New Testament picture is that of the need to take up our cross daily. 'For anyone who wants to save his life will lose it; but anyone who loses his life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it' (Mark 8:35). Those profound and mysterious words about readiness to lose one's life lie at the heart of all Christian asceticism. The dying seed is the condition of all growth in the kingdom and is the pledge of the harvest which belongs to the new creation. It is a denial of self-sufficiency, of the instinct to dispose of our lives in a way that would bring us security, the man-made security which comes of digging in.

Paul changes the metaphor but keeps the idea. Where the Lord

liked to express himself in the images of growing things, Paul prefers the image of the human body. He seems to have been fascinated by athletic prowess and training. He must have watched athletes at their training sessions and admired their single-mindedness and readiness to make sacrifices for the sake of a wreath of laurels. They for a perishable reward, we for an imperishable one. There you have the Christian origin of the word asceticism. *Askēsis* is exercise or training. We find this idea worked out in the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

For Christ Jesus 'I have accepted the loss of everything, and I look on everything as so much rubbish if only I can have Christ. . . . All I want is to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and to share his sufferings by reproducing the pattern of his death. . . . I am racing for the finish, for the prize to which God calls us . . . in Christ Jesus.' To the Corinthians he writes 'I treat my body hard and make it obey me' (1 Cor. 9:27); and to the Romans 'You should make every part of your body into a weapon fighting on the side of God' (Rom. 6:13). The letter to the Hebrews completes the New Testament picture. 'Think of the way he (Jesus) stood such opposition from sinners and then you will not give up for want of courage. In the fight against sin, you have not yet had to keep fighting to the point of death' (Heb. 12:3-4).

Those texts enshrine the New Testament teaching on asceticism, which is, or ought to be, normative for all of us. This then is what revelation has to say on the subject. It is up to us to apply it to the circumstances of our lives today. Let me summarize it briefly. To follow Christ involves a single-mindedness that is prepared to give up everything, every possession, every relationship, however good and precious, even life itself, when the furthering of God's kingdom calls for such renunciation; and we never know when that may be. Notice we are talking about a *readiness*, not necessarily the actual renunciation of all these things. Different things will be required of each of us. Being a Christian means being on call at all times for the needs of the kingdom. This readiness implies training, *askēsis*, a toughening of ourselves, a self-discipline of body, mind and emotions analogous to that undertaken by athletes. That training has to be geared to the ultimate demand, the final sacrifice, death.

'In the fight against sin, you have not yet had to keep fighting to the point of death.' What is for us a remote possibility was for the first Christians always a real and present likelihood, namely, martyrdom. It may seem rather impractical to speak of martyrdom

in twentieth-century Ireland; but no consideration of asceticism would be complete without some reflections on the meaning of martyrdom. The martyr is by definition a witness to the kingdom. Martyrdom is the prototype of Christian sanctity, because it concentrates human choice into a stark and dramatic essence. The martyr chooses Christ when the opposite pole of choice is life itself. The choice is thus one of perfect love. In martyrdom Christianity is stripped down to essentials in their most concentrated form. This is the highest, noblest and most extreme demand that the gospel makes, or can make, of the Christian. The grace which is given so that the Christian can meet the demand is the last and most triumphant gift of the Spirit; for by choosing death for Christ's sake the martyr allows the Spirit to complete, in the most perfect manner possible, his task of sanctification. All that Christ came to work in man is achieved in the martyr at the moment of his choosing death for Christ. Love is matched for love in so far as a finite being can match uncreated love. The mind of Christ has pervaded the mind of the martyr to the utter exclusion of all that is not Christ. The first Christian martyrs went to their deaths with joy in their hearts. One of them, St Ignatius of Antioch, has left us an exquisite description of how they saw themselves: 'God's wheat', he says, 'to be ground by animals' teeth into Christ's good bread.' They were heroes, but their heroism placed no distance between them and the living. They had faced the most crucial of all choices, and they had chosen well. In that age any Christian might be asked to do the same and could expect the grace to choose as they had done. They were, by very title, *martures*, witnesses to Christ. Indeed they had no other special title, since all Christians were *hagioi*, saints. The fact that all Christians were potential martyrs narrowed the gap between those who had suffered and those who might at any time be called upon to do so.

The link between martyrdom and asceticism is indicated by the Church historian Eusebius. Writing about the early Gaulish Christians, he speaks of two groups. One group 'made a full confession of their testimony with the greatest eagerness. It was equally clear that others were not ready, that they had not trained and were still flabby, in no fit condition to face the strain of struggle to the death' (*Hist. Eccles.*, 1:15). Notice the athletic metaphor once again. Asceticism is training in readiness for the most comprehensive demand that can be made of any man, namely, that he

should accept pain and suffering and lay down his life for the sake of the kingdom.

Later ages were to lose some of the clarity and vigour of the biblical and early Christian vision by importing elements from outside of revelation. Thus many early Christians were influenced by Stoicism with its ideal of *apatheia*, the elimination of all, even good, desire, and by the Gnostic condemnation of material things as inherently evil. Clement of Alexandria could write, 'It is impossible that he who has been once made perfect by love, and feasts eternally and insatiably on the boundless joy of contemplation, should delight in small and grovelling things' (he was not referring to sinful pursuits, by the way).

I want to take one further illustration from the early centuries before I attempt to draw some practical conclusions for our own contemporary lives. It is a rather important illustration for us today. As we have seen, asceticism was initially regarded as a training for martyrdom, which Origen called 'the normal culmination of the Christian life'. It prepared Christians to live in a hostile world where Caesar could be expected to persecute and murder Christ's followers. The lines were clearly drawn and the issues were unambiguous. Then quite suddenly at the beginning of the fourth century Caesar not merely stopped persecuting the Church: he sought entry into it, thus causing a spiritual crisis. It is difficult for us today to appreciate the traumatic effect this had on Christian consciousness. To many Christians then, it appeared easier to live a Christian life with Caesar as enemy than with Caesar as patron. According to Louis Bouyer, the problems posed for Christians by this imperial *volte face* 'have not been fully solved, even now, and they probably never will be'. Today we call it the problem of the sacred and the secular.

In that age some saw it as a powerful bid to seduce the Christian from his discipleship of Christ. They responded to the new situation by radically rejecting a world they regarded as doomed. They withdrew to the deserts of Egypt in search of a substitute for martyrdom and by doing so they created a problem which is still with us, as those of us know who have taken part in discussions on the nature of religious life. By their action they created a new compartment of Christian life. From now on it would be virtually impossible to avoid approaching Christian living on the basis of first-class and second-class citizenship of the kingdom. Forswearing the world as doomed, they drew up a new programme for the

following of Christ, and that programme had nothing to say to 'secular' Christians. In vain did men like St John Chrysostom protest that this programme made monks 'the spiritual rulers of the Christian conscience'. In vain did Chrysostom appeal to the monks to come and live in cities so that they might identify their lives with those of all Christian people and thus by their example contribute to the building up of the Church. These men resolved the tension between present and future totally in favour of the future. They took one pole of the Christian vocation, namely, concern for eternity, and they arranged their lives around it. Those lives had great beauty and nobility. As Helen Waddell put it, the Desert Fathers stamped infinity on the imagination of the West. They lived simple lives and worked for their living. They had no mystical ideas about the sanctifying power of self-inflicted suffering. They got on with as little food, sleep, and conversation as possible, and they aimed at the perpetual praise of God.

Like most movements in the Church the flight to the desert produced its extremists, its lunatic fringe, men who began to concentrate on ascetic feats as an end in itself. Records were kept – so many days without food and drink, so many years without speaking. The ultimate absurdity was reached in the exploits of the Stylites who lived on pillars and were held in admiration far and wide. Whereas the early Desert Fathers had summed up their convictions by such noble remarks as 'The man who has death ever before his eyes will conquer meanness of soul', these later characters were inclined to say ludicrous things like 'Man is the work of God down to the waist and the work of the devil below'. Not unnaturally these ascetics began to be a source of worry to bishops, since they were held in considerable honour. It was becoming very clear that there are limits to one's rejection of the world which God created.

This kind of asceticism reflected adversely on the goodness and sovereignty of God. It also has serious human repercussions. The whole drive towards *apatheia* was called in question by St Augustine, and his words have a curiously contemporary ring about them. 'If some people . . . have become enamoured of themselves because they can be stimulated and excited by no emotion, moved or bent by no affection, such persons so far from gaining true tranquility *simply lose all humanity*.' Here he puts his finger on the crux of the matter. The following of Christ is not a denial of humanity. On the contrary it calls for the fullest humanity. Yet in

spite of this seemingly elementary truth there is a long history of its denial or at least of its neglect in some examples of Christian spirituality. There were men and women great enough to triumph over inherited ideas. On Carmelite territory it is appropriate and pleasant to remember the latest Doctor of the Church and her humanity, together with that of her confrère St John of the Cross and their disciple St Thérèse of Lisieux. They called the attention of the whole Church to its mystical inheritance and to the true role of asceticism in the service of the kingdom. Yet in spite of their lives and teaching much spiritual biography down to our own time persisted in treating sanctity as something evidenced by the performance of miracles and the self-infliction of extravagant penances, all of which had the effect of removing the saints from the normal human scene altogether.

Today we are witnessing a widespread and overdue reaction to such preoccupations. The Church in Council has called us to a new attitude towards, and relationship with, the world which the Church has been commissioned to serve and in which she has the task of witnessing to Christ. That word 'witness' is a key to our present approach to asceticism. It is also a call back to the vision of the New Testament and the conviction of the early Church.

Self-centredness and selfishness remain the enemy; but we are becoming increasingly aware that they manifest themselves in more subtle ways than through the enticements of sensuality. One could lead a life of strictly disciplined sensuality and still be a most un-Christ-like person. Lest I be misunderstood, let me say once for all that I take as read our need to keep a rein on sensuality, and that if we fail to do so we are in danger of what Eusebius called spiritual flabbiness. Having said this, however, I want to turn to more serious aspects of asceticism in the contemporary world.

One guiding principle which perhaps is not always sufficiently recognized is that asceticism must be tailored to situations and persons. People differ, as do the jobs they must perform. The Christian has the opportunity and grace of transforming what might be a lack-lustre performance into the dedicated service of others. That transformation calls for both prayer and asceticism brought to bear on such activities as nursing, teaching, parish visitation or the preparation of a decent sermon. If our work is governed by a sense of dedication to the needs of others, and is not merely a series of routine tasks carried out adequately but without enthusiasm, we shall find scope for asceticism in plenty. Each of us

differs from the other in temperament. Some find action, meeting people, organizing functions and so on, congenial; while an hour behind a book or some moments of formal prayer may be for them a much more difficult assignment. Again, there are others who may enjoy study and reflection while finding it difficult or uncongenial to meet people. Asceticism which is task-orientated and realistic about temperament will be of more use to the kingdom than any artificially contrived mortifications.

In other words, in order to practise asceticism in a way which is profitable to the kingdom it is necessary to know ourselves. For priests and religious in particular there can be hardly any doubt that the occasion for that knowledge is prayer where we can meet Christ and ourselves at the same time and so ensure that self-knowledge does not discourage us. Asceticism has sometimes been presented as a kind of self-hatred, as if hatred of oneself could be a virtue. We should be careful in our use of the term 'self-love'. The Lord's command is to love others as we love ourselves. Self-acceptance, which involves a clear-sighted awareness of our qualities and talents as well as of our defects and faults, is indispensable for a joyful and fulfilling apostolate. Maturity has been loosely described as a realistic awareness of our abilities coupled with a realistic assessment of our defects. With regard to the latter, the role of asceticism must be to try to change what can be changed, and to accept what cannot. Self-acceptance may well be the hardest task of all. Or perhaps there is one harder: acceptance of our existence in the world and Church of our time.

Let's recall for a moment the central truth in the New Testament's teaching on asceticism. The Christian has to follow Christ by taking up his cross daily. Christ underwent suffering and death in obedience to the Father. Sometimes pious literature has represented Jesus as *seeking* suffering, almost for its own sake. There is no hint of this in the gospels. He accepted without reservation, though not without repugnance, the suffering that came to him as a consequence of his preaching of the kingdom. He accepted what is for us the mysterious presence of suffering as a factor in our redemption. It was the obedience which gave the suffering its value, as the Father's will was made clear in the unfolding events of history. Christ's prayer was apparently a continuous meditation on the concrete historical implications of his mission. St Paul is quite explicit: God 'did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all' (Rom. 8:32). In a word, the Father handed the Son

over to the harsh course of ordinary human history which was shaped by the craftiness and cynicism of politicians, the brutality and violence of soldiers, and the arrogance and self-righteousness of priests. With the foreknowledge of God Jesus was tortured and murdered by men operating within the historical circumstances of Church and State in first-century Palestine. Jesus' obedience was learned in prayer, a prayer which made clear the will of the Father as it bore upon the concrete historical events of the third decade of the first century.

The lesson for us is clear. Jesus took up his cross from out of the historical circumstances of his time. Following him means quite simply that we must do the same. We did not ask to be born into the twentieth century nor to undergo its particular agonies. But in it we are, and we are not free to look for our cross elsewhere. Prayer teaches us to look for and find the cross not where we might like to find it but where God has actually put it. The cross comes with God's revealed will and, as Vatican II has reminded us, that will has to be sought in the 'signs of the times'. Life in a changing Church and world is not comfortable. We have the difficult task of changing what needs to be changed and at the same time of holding on to the faith once for all delivered to the saints. It is quite plain that in the Church today there are some who are careless of what needs to be preserved, and there are others who are managing to ignore the call to reform and renewal. Both are failing to take up that cross which is specific to the age we live in. By and large, I would suggest that in Ireland we are in greater danger of the latter, of failing to respond to the demands of renewal and reform. Irresponsible radicalism is easily spotted and condemned. Irresponsible conservatism is not so easy to spot because it can be all too easily camouflaged as virtue.

To take an illustration which I hope will not be considered too controversial, there are still many priests who are suspicious of what is loosely called 'the new theology'. Most of the suspicion is, I believe, based on misunderstanding. Frankly I do not know what the answer is to the problem of theological updating for priests who were ordained more than ten years ago. There are no short cuts – a fact which has been discovered by those who thought that a brisk canter through Abbott's edition of the *Documents of Vatican II* would do the trick. Courses can help if they lead into a serious and sustained programme of reading which many busy priests would regard as a practical impossibility. Those who have

undertaken such a programme have been delighted to discover how pastorally-orientated modern theology has become. Much of the freshness and sense of discovery comes from the realization that Aristotle and Plato were not among the twelve apostles and that biblical theology is a good deal more preachable than scholasticism. I mention this matter in the context of asceticism because I know how difficult a return to study can be for those who have got out of touch.

I have two more points to make before I close. The first is about the relationship between faith and asceticism. I had almost decided to omit this question because it is really too large for brief treatment; but no consideration about prayer and asceticism would be complete without it. Belief today is one of our major crosses, and theological upheaval is only the reflection of a deeper problem. We easily come to think of faith as the acceptance of God's existence. Christian faith is a great deal more than that. It is the recognition that God is speaking, addressing us, calling us to wrestle with his word to us as we try to make it bear on the world we live in. Faith has never been easy, but it is particularly difficult today; and no good can come of pretending to ourselves or to others that this is not so.

A serious obligation lies on the shoulders of us priests and religious in this matter. We have to see to it that our preaching and teaching does not unwittingly promote unbelief by our failure to deal with the questions that people are asking. We have obligations, serious obligations, towards those members of our congregations and classes who are asking searching questions. To regard such questions as an attack on the Church's authority would be a serious misreading of the situation. These questions go far deeper than that. We can, of course, continue to preach only to those of untroubled faith. It will save us a lot of trouble. This is precisely where asceticism comes in; for we may unconsciously suspect that attending to the unbelief of others will stir up in our own hearts and minds an answering chord of unbelief from which we intuitively shy away. The fact may well be that we do not really want to face the possibility that belief, real belief, involves a lot more than the acceptance of a list of doctrines. It is possible to accept the Church's teaching as one would the membership rules of a club, but this would not be faith. Such an attitude could even protect us from the *askēsis* of real faith. Indeed our temptation may be to try to 'protect' our faith by avoiding the questions which

life today poses for faith. If we do this, we are like the man in the parable who buried the talent in the ground until the Lord's return and earned for himself one of Christ's sternest rebukes. Our faith is given not to be locked away from prying eyes but to be put into circulation for the good of all God's people. We are not free to contract out of the struggle for relevance, precisely because we are ambassadors for Christ who makes his appeal through us. It is not permissible for us to hoard our own faith while glumly reflecting on the decline of faith in the world at large and moralizing about the permissive society. Our commission is, after all, to go to that world and preach Christ crucified with joy and enthusiasm. Faith is the joyful denial of atheism.

It may seem, at first sight, strange to speak of preaching and teaching religion in the context of asceticism; but there is growing evidence for the need to do just that. Headmasters and headmistresses report that it is becoming increasingly difficult to find people, including priests, brothers, and nuns, willing to take religion periods. While in ordinary parish life many priests find preaching the most exacting and least gratifying of their priestly activities. I am not speaking about the bother of preparing a sermon or class, or of the fact that we feel we are not effective public speakers. It is something far deeper altogether, and I submit that it can be met only by an asceticism which goes to the roots of our being as believers. We priests are perhaps slower than other members of the Church to admit the possibility of a resistance to preaching and hearing the word of God, a resistance to be found in ourselves as well as in others; a resistance more deep-seated than any mere sense of inconvenience or sloth. We may regret the passing of an age which took faith and religion without question because it left all the thinking to the clergy. We may secretly resent the fact that our people no longer take what we say uncritically. Those who teach religion in schools already have a fair idea of how things are shaping. The situation at present developing in Ireland is unique in this respect. We are a believing people passing quite suddenly from an easy-going acceptance of life, including religion, into the fast-moving technological and electronic age. The challenges before us are enormous. Complacency, or living off the spiritual capital of the past, could mean the frittering away of the spiritual reserves left to us by our ancestors. What a tragedy it would be if we began to take reform and renewal seriously only

after we had noticed a serious decline in religious practice among our people.

The questions our people are beginning to ask are too far-reaching to be met by stern appeals to authority. The real problems are not about the finer points of dogma but about something much more fundamental – man's relationship with God.

Owing to many of the cultural features of our age it is becoming ever more common to experience a sense of the absence of God. The more seriously one takes faith and religion the more painful this experience is. It is as if God were trying to purify our faith by a sort of corporate dark night caused by a withdrawal of the sense of his presence, at least of the sort of presence that former ages were able to experience. Indeed it can bring prayer and asceticism into a close relationship, but in a radically different way from the sort of relationship between the two which I excluded at the start of this paper. This testing experience has been traditionally treated as belonging to the further reaches of mystical prayer, not to be referred to Christians still wearing their L-plates. Though I have no time left to substantiate this thesis, I submit that something analogous to the dark night is becoming a feature of Christian faith today and that we are being led by the Spirit towards a deeper and purer idea of the mystery of God and the expression of that mystery in the mystery of Christ as it bears upon history and our daily lives.

My last point arises out of Paul's first letter to the Christians of Corinth. Christ 'must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death' (1 Cor. 15:25-26). Death, the last enemy, the sign of contradiction, the source of man's deepest fears and of his most hidden resentment, is the occasion for the Christian's last and most critical acts of faith, hope and love. This is the moment towards which all asceticism is directed. This is where we meet the risen Christ, the second Adam who has robbed death of its sting, of its power to hurt or frighten. This is where we strengthen ourselves with the reflection that he has been through it all and has come back along the road to assure us that everything will be well, that we have simply to trust in the power and love of God as we embark on the greatest adventure of all, in which the seed finally dies in order to become the harvest of eternity.