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Emerging Christianity

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In our world today there is a movement to rebuild Christianity from the bottom up. This movement is gathering momentum across all the Christian Churches. It is referred to by people like Richard Rohr as Emerging Christianity. Emerging Christianity is the recognition that Christianity is more than a belonging and belief system. It is primarily a spiritual path that is the way of Jesus. Emerging Christianity is rediscovering a truth that seems to have been forgotten – it is not just enough for us to have faith in Jesus we also need to have the faith of Jesus. In other words, with St Paul, we need to put on the mind of Christ (see I Cor 2:16). One of the leading figures in the Emerging Christianity movement is an American pastor and author called Brian McLaren. This is how he articulates the search for a new kind of Christianity:

“We are on a quest for a new kind of Christianity – a faith liberated from the institutional and dogmatic straight-jackets we inherited, a way of life that integrates the personal and the social dimensions of spirituality, a practice that integrates contemplation and dynamic action.”¹

In this article I would like to attempt to offer a description of this new movement within the Christian tradition. It is a description that seeks to be as concrete as possible. It seems to me that Emerging Christianity is a way of life that includes among its values contemplative practice, compassion, companionship and care for the earth.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE

In response to the call of Jesus, Emerging Christianity recognises the need for personal transformation. Contemplative practice has a major part to play in this transformation process. Contemplative

1 Brian McLaren, “Emerging Christianity: How We Get There Determines Where We Arrive,” *Radical Grace*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Centre for Action and Contemplation: 2010), 4-5.

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practice is a way of praying that allows us to receive, to listen, to let ourselves be loved, to accept the gift that has already been given to us. In the words of the late Michael Paul Gallagher it is “relaxing into the reality of being loved.” There are many reasons why contemplative practice is so necessary for those who wish to live like Jesus. Here I would like to focus on what I believe are the two more important ones. Contemplative practice is a form of divine therapy that breaks the power of the ego or false self and heals the wound of conditional love. It also helps us to recognise and accept that our deepest belonging is in fact to God.

TAMING THE FALSE SELF

The false self is created by the childhood wound of conditional love. At some stage in childhood most of us started to feel that our parents did not love us as we were. The pain of this was too much for us to cope with at that very young age. We became wounded and were unable to remain true to ourselves. Sooner or later two things happened: (1) our true selves went into hiding in order to protect themselves; (2) another self developed around the demands and expectations of our parents. This other self was an acquired self, an idealised self, a false self. Because of the false self we need to own something, do something or be something in order to feel worthy of love. The false self has us invest, often heavily, in what I like to refer to as the three A's: accumulation, achievement and approval. The false self is the reason we tend to define ourselves by what we have, what we do and what other people think of us. Sadly the culture we are living in today reinforces this definition of ourselves. It promotes accumulation, achievement and the need for human approval. It openly and often shamelessly makes us believe that possessions, power and popularity will make us happy and fulfilled. The truth is they cannot make us happy because they are external sources of value. They have us look for happiness in the wrong places, in things outside ourselves.

To tame the power of the false self and its investment in the three A's we need to find a way of healing the wound of conditional love. Our relationships with significant people have a part to play in this healing process but human love is not enough. Only unconditional love can heal conditional love and only God is unconditional love. Contemplative practice is about exposing ourselves to the unconditional love of God. It allows us to claim belovedness. Our belovedness is our original blessing, the face we had before we were born, as the Buddhists would say. We were born into this world as God's beloved sons and daughters. This is our core truth, our deepest identity. But because of our childhood experience we lost touch with it.

There is a story – apparently true – about a new born baby’s homecoming. The new-born’s precocious four-year-old sibling tells her parents, “I want to talk to my new little brother alone.” The parents put their ears to the nursery door and hear the little girl saying to her baby brother, “Quick, tell me who made you. Tell me where you came from. I’m beginning to forget!” The four-year-old represents most of us, caught in between knowing and forgetting and wanting to know again. The reason many of us end up restless, fragmented and dissatisfied is because we have lost the awareness of our belovedness. This is why we need some form of contemplative practice in our lives. In the silence of contemplative practice we are able to listen to the still small voice within us. This still small voice is the voice of unconditional love and it speaks words of affirmation and approval into our hearts. Contemplative practice is the divine therapy that heals the wound of our low self-esteem. Without a form of prayer that exposes our wound of conditional love to God we will keep filling our lives with possessions, restless activity and superficial relationships.

CLAIMING OUR DEEPEST BELONGING

But the false self is not the only thing we need to tame. We also need to let go of our tendency to become too emotionally dependent on our group of origin and our groups of adoption. One of the deepest needs we have is to belong. The most important and fundamental group we belong to is the family. But we can also belong to a club, a community, a church, a professional body. When we belong we not only feel connected with others, we also feel safe and secure. Feeling connected and secure within a human group is of course a very good thing but like many good things it has potential dangers. The groups we belong to often let us down. They can fail us leaving us feeling hurt and disillusioned. This sometimes happens within families. It can also happen in our experience of church. Many of us know people who have ‘left’ the church because someone has said or done something that made them feel inadequate and unwelcome.

Another danger with our attachment to the group is the possibility of compromise. Our emotional dependency on the group we belong to can be so strong that we end up compromising ourselves, our principles and our values. We side with the group even though we know the group is only protecting itself and its reputation. In recent years we have witnessed this happening in many of the big institutions that play an important part in our lives. No wonder there is a major breakdown of trust in our society.

Our over-identification with the group we belong to can also lead to dualistic thinking. Dualistic thinking tends to put groups

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in competition with one another. This often finds expression in statements like: 'We are right and you are wrong, we are good and you are bad, we have the truth and you do not.' Behind each of these statements is the belief that our group is better than yours which of course is not true. Dualistic thinking is an assertion of the ego and the ego always seeks to dominate and control.

It is obvious that it is not good for us to become too emotionally attached to a human group. Only God can fulfil our need to feel accepted and secure. Sooner or later we must anchor ourselves in God and allow God to be our rock, refuge and strength. This is why we need some form of contemplative practice in our lives. The silence of contemplative practice helps us to rest in God. As we rest in God we gradually come to realise that our deepest belonging is in fact to God. Contemplative practice helps us to find our home in the relationship that God has with us. To come home to God is to know that we are accepted, cherished and safe.

Our experience of life tends to leave us feeling dissatisfied and disillusioned. Our investment in the three A's only reinforces our low self-esteem and the groups we belong to often let us down. We have no choice but to search for an alternative source of love and security. Contemplative practice helps us to find the love and security we need in the personal relationship that God has with us. Perhaps this is the reason St Augustine once wrote, "You have made us for yourself O Lord and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

COMPASSION

The world we are living in today is divided. The gap between the rich and the poor, between the East and the West, between political ideologies and of course between religions continues to widen. Globalisation has not brought a new sense of world community. Indeed in many ways the peoples that inhabit this earth seem to be further apart than ever. Without doubt a shift needs to take place in our consciousness. I believe that the best word to describe this shift in consciousness is compassion. Our willingness and capacity to offer each other compassion is essential if we are to have any chance of living together in mutual understanding and peace. Emerging Christianity recognises the absolute necessity of compassion.

It is important that we understand the true meaning of compassion. Compassion is more than doing deeds of kindness for people who are in need. It is more than fixing things. It is more than finding solutions for people who have problems. In essence compassion is simply about being there for people without pulling back in fear or anger. Compassion is being with others. It

is walking with and along-side other people. In a rescue situation it is the difference between throwing a rope into a well and going down into the well. Throwing the rope is a detached action that costs little. Going down into the well is personal involvement in the situation.

Compassion can also be described as standing in another's shoes. To stand in another person's shoes is to see the world as they see it, from their perspective. This may not be easy. It may require us to let go of our opinions, our prejudices, our need to be in control. Compassion invites us to allow others to find their own solutions to their problems. This means that we may have to let go of our need to fix things. True dialogue requires this kind of compassion. Openness and a willingness to stand in the shoes of others create the possibility of compromise and consensus.

In its purest form compassion is the ability to feel with others. The word itself literally means 'with passion.' To enter into the passion of others is to be truly compassionate. There is a story told about the French diocesan priest known as the Cure d'Ars. When the only son of an elderly widow died the Cure came to visit her. People expected him to help her make sense of her loss. Instead he simply sat beside her, put his hand on her shoulder and let his tears flow with hers. This is a beautiful example of compassion. Compassion is more than sympathy. It is empathy.

Compassion recognises and accepts the weakness and fragility of the human condition. Many years ago the then Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Runcie, wrote an article in a Sunday newspaper in response to a media 'witch hunt.' He was addressing the way the newspapers were attacking a priest in the Anglican Church about an aspect of his moral life and behaviour. Inviting them to have some compassion he said, "In this earthly tabernacle there are many mansions and they are all made of glass." Beautifully put! We are all (including journalists) wounded, weak, vulnerable. We could all display a label, 'Fragile, handle with care.' We could all say with W.B. Yeats, "Tread softly or you will tread on my dreams."

As I mentioned earlier, in our world today we have a great need to create and build inclusive community. There is a tendency in human nature to divide and to exclude. It makes us feel safe to divide the world into who is right and who is wrong; who is good and who is bad; who is in and who is out; who is worthy and who is unworthy. History has proven this time and time again with devastating consequences. West verses East; democracy verses communism; Catholics verses Protestants; Islam verses Christianity; liberals verses conservatives; the list could go on! Dividing the world in this way justifies our need to dominate, to be in control, to feel better and more important than others. It often

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gets politicians and heads of state elected. Yet the reality is no one person or group has a monopoly on the truth and on goodness. Every individual and every group are right and wrong, good and bad, worthy and unworthy. Jesus once told a parable about wheat and weeds growing together in the same field. His followers wanted to act immediately to separate them, but Jesus said no. If you do this you may pull up the wheat with the weeds. Leave both grow together until the harvest. Then it will be easier to separate what is to be kept and what needs to be thrown away.

Compassion does not see people and situations in black and white. It accepts that there are many shades of grey. It is not threatened by difference; in fact it is comfortable with difference. Compassion recognises that every human person is a child of God and that the Father “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust” (Matt 5:45). In answer to the question, “Who is my neighbour?” it responds, “Everyone!” Compassion seeks to include rather than exclude. It breaks down barriers, builds trust between people and creates inclusive community. For this reason compassion is absolutely essential if there is to be peace among the peoples and nations of the world.

A COMPASSIONATE HEART

How then do we become compassionate? How do we develop a compassionate heart? One thing we need to do is accept God’s compassion. Jesus said, “Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate” (Luke 6:36). The Father looks on us with compassion. The Father treats us with compassion. We must allow the Father be compassionate towards us. If we do, this will help us be compassionate with ourselves. It is a fact that many people find it difficult to offer themselves compassion. This is probably because of low self-esteem. We feel we are not worthy of compassion. If we are not able to be compassionate with ourselves it is likely that we will find it difficult to offer compassion to others.

Another thing that helps us to become compassionate is the acceptance of our woundedness and our weakness. One of the most painful journeys we have to make in life is the journey to self-acceptance. To really accept ourselves as we are we need to accept our wounds, our weaknesses and our vulnerability. We do not need to be perfect; it is alright to fail. Imperfection and failure are part of the human condition. There is nothing wrong with showing weakness and with being vulnerable. We do not need to protect ourselves behind a coat of armour. Wearing a coat of armour does not allow anyone in; not even God. In saying ‘yes’ to his humanity Jesus said ‘yes’ to weakness, limitation and vulnerability. We are no different to Jesus. We cannot say ‘yes’ to our humanity unless

we say ‘yes’ to weakness, limitation and vulnerability. Without this ‘yes’ it will be very difficult to grow in compassion.

It is said that Jesus was the compassionate face of the Father. The religion he practiced and preached was certainly built around compassion. We can understand why. For those of us who seek to follow Jesus developing a compassionate heart is not an optional extra; it is a must.

COMPANIONSHIP

The Gospel is an invitation to create and build community. Emerging Christianity accepts the importance of community, but it recognises that the experience of community for those who seek to follow Jesus needs a new emphasis. This emphasis can be described as a movement from convention to intention. To be a Christian in the world of today it is not enough to be a member of a church congregation because of social or cultural expectation. To belong to a church requires a deliberate decision and commitment. This is what is referred to by Emerging Christianity as intentional communities. To belong to an intentional community offers a whole range of opportunities for our human and spiritual growth and development. Not least among these is the experience of companionship.

We know that from the very beginning of his public life Jesus gathered a group of companions around him with whom he formed community. Jesus certainly recognised the need for companionship in himself and in his followers. But he also saw it as a powerful means of evangelisation, an effective sign that the Kingdom of God was at hand. The Gospels are full of stories about the way Jesus modelled the qualities of companionship. For me one story stands out for the way it brings the qualities of companionship together. It is a resurrection story known as the Emmaus story.

At the end of St Luke’s Gospel (24:13-35) we find a description of the experience of two people as they travelled from Jerusalem to Emmaus after the death of Jesus. The story tells of how they were joined on their journey by an apparent stranger who walked with them. Their relationship with the stranger began with the experience of acceptance and ended with a shared meal. On the road there was mutual listening and soulful conversation. In my view this story is a deeply rich and meaningful account of the experience of companionship.

In the story companionship begins with mutual acceptance, in fact it begins with mutual unconditional acceptance. Unconditional acceptance is the essential starting point and foundation of companionship. Unconditional acceptance is an attitude that is inclusive and that transcends race, colour, religion, class and sexual

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orientation. With it there are no conditions and no requirements. There is also no judgement and no condemnation. If there needs to be criticism, this criticism is offered in a way that makes a distinction between the person and the person's behaviour. The renowned psychotherapist, Karl Rogers, discovered in his therapy work that unconditional acceptance or unconditional positive regard as he would put it was absolutely essential if people were to begin a process of healing. When people take off their mask, when they take off the suit of clothes they hide behind they need to know that they are still accepted. Without this type of acceptance there is little or no possibility of companionship developing.

A second thing the Emmaus story tells us about companionship is the importance of listening, mutual listening. In the experience of companionship listening, good listening, attentive listening is essential. People need to be heard. To be human is to have a story to tell. We need opportunities to tell our story; we need people to tell our story to. A companion is someone who allows you to tell your story, who encourages you to tell your story, who helps you to tell your story. When we listen, really listen to another we create a welcoming space in our hearts for that person. Often this is enough for the person sharing their story to feel better.

Attentive listening isn't easy. There is always the temptation to interrupt, to respond or react too quickly. We need to learn when it is right to stay quiet and when it is right to speak. If we rush in too quickly with our opinion the other person may close up and an opportunity may be lost. We need to remember that those who have an opportunity to tell their stories to someone who listens attentively find it easier to deal with their circumstances.

SOULFUL CONVERSATION

On the journey from Jerusalem to Emmaus there was soulful conversation. Soulful conversation is not that common and yet without it there is no real experience of companionship. Soulful conversation is about diving deeper. To have a soulful conversation means that we must be willing to talk about the things we carry in our hearts. In other words we must be willing to talk about what is happening within us emotionally and even spiritually. There is actually a huge need in people to have this kind of conversation. But something prevents it from happening. Perhaps this is fear. We are frightened of revealing our true selves and we are frightened of feeling exposed and vulnerable. The truth is soulful conversation creates emotional and spiritual intimacy and emotional and spiritual intimacy is one of the most enriching and fulfilling experiences we can have. No wonder the two companions walking to Emmaus found themselves saying, "Did not our hearts burn within us as

we talked on the road.” The word companion comes from two Latin words ‘cum’ and ‘panis’ which literally mean ‘with bread.’ A companion is someone you sit at table with, you break bread with, you share food with. This is sometimes referred to as table fellowship. In the Jewish culture at the time of Jesus the table was a place of acceptance and an invitation to friendship. For the Jews sitting down to a meal was much more than our need for food. It was about relationships; creating relationships and building relationships. Companionship probably happens best over food, around the table. It certainly happens naturally over food, around the table. At the end of their journey to Emmaus the two companions invited the stranger who walked with them to join them for a meal. Significantly it was while they were sitting together around the table that the stranger’s true identity was revealed. We can understand why Jesus used the images of a wedding feast and a great banquet to describe life in the Kingdom of God. The enjoyment of a shared meal accompanied by meaningful conversation and indeed a relaxed silence is a delightful experience.

The Emmaus model of companionship is perhaps the ideal, but it is an ideal worth striving for. The pace of life today may not allow much time to create this type of companionship, neither may our preoccupation with the social media, yet deep down we know that it is something we long for. When we are honest with ourselves we admit that we have a desire for relationships that are deep and meaningful. The human heart is made for the kind of companionship the two people experienced on their journey to the village of Emmaus. Creating true companionship is an investment worth making. In fact it is not just a luxury; it is a necessity.

CARE FOR THE EARTH

With the publication of *‘Laudato Si’* Pope Francis has brought spirituality down to earth! Even though not everyone in the Emerging Christianity movement would boast of a strong commitment to caring for the earth most would accept that the earth is God’s good creation and our common home and we have a responsibility to look after it. Care for the earth is both a political imperative and a personal one. We may not have much of a say in influencing political decisions but we can make personal decisions that will create a difference.

There is no doubting the fact that our consumerist lifestyle is having a huge impact on our environment and on climate change. Why do we need to consume so much? Why do we find it difficult to say, ‘I have enough?’ It is true that material possessions are a source of comfort and satisfaction. But there is a deeper reason why we consume. It has to do with a misguided search for happiness.

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Consumerism has us look for happiness in the wrong place, in things outside us, in an external source of value. The love we long for can only be found within. There is wisdom in the old cliché, “happiness is an inside job.” Unless and until I am able to say, ‘I am enough’ it is unlikely that I will be able to say, ‘I have enough.’ Key to this process of course is the habit of contemplative practice I referred to earlier. In contemplative practice we look to God, who is relentless affection, to fill the hole we have inside.

Care for the earth also involves the choices we make around the use of energy. Of course we need sources of energy in our homes, our places of work, our rural and urban environments and indeed for transportation. But do we need to be so wasteful with these sources of energy? Most of us would accept that we waste too much energy and that we settle for the easy options especially if we can afford them. Why drive half a mile to the local shop if we can walk? Why leave our computers on if we are not using them or our televisions beaming if we are not watching them? Why keep our central heating systems set high while we walk around our homes and offices in shirts or blouses? These questions may sound a bit petty but they point to unnecessary waste. If we do not stop exploiting the resources of the earth we will leave little for future generations. Needless to say a decision to stop wasting requires personal discipline, something that doesn’t come easy to human nature.

Then there is our use of materials like plastic, paper and cardboard to mention a few. The production of these materials in such volumes is putting pressure on our natural resources and is polluting our waters and our countryside. We could be described as a disposable generation. But the convenience of disposables comes at a cost. Do we really want an earth whose beauty is contaminated and whose natural rhythms are quickly becoming imbalanced and out of tune? What would the Creator say about our treatment of his creation?

Of course caring for the earth is about caring for the poor of the earth. It always seems to be the poor who suffer most. They are certainly suffering from the consequences of a ‘western’ lifestyle that cannot get enough, that is consuming and wasting to an alarming degree. Climate change is affecting the poorer regions of the world much more than it is affecting the wealthier regions. Famines caused by droughts and homelessness caused by flooding are more common in Africa and in Asia. This is an undeniable fact. A capitalism and consumerism that seeks to put the interests of the so called ‘first world’ first creates a hostile environment for those who are struggling to make ends meet. Ultimately care for the earth is about the practice of justice and a pathway to peace.

Care for the earth in its many forms is in fact a great example of the thrust of Emerging Christianity which sees action flowing from contemplation. Changing our personal behaviour affects the lives of others. Moving from ‘worldly’ values of possessions, power and prestige to ‘kingdom’ values of simplicity, surrender and service makes a difference to our planet and all its peoples. When Jesus emphasised personal transformation he knew that this would find expression in political transformation, in the desire to create a world where justice and peace would ‘reign.’

CONCLUSION

Contemplative practice, compassion, companionship and care for the earth are a spiritual path that is inspired by the life and ministry of Jesus. The emergence of this path has the potential to renew and revitalise the lived experience of Christianity. It also has the capacity to make Christianity an attractive alternative to our capitalist consumerist culture and a powerful force for change in a world divided by greed, power and religion. To be part of the movement to rebuild Christianity from the ground up known as Emerging Christianity is an adventure worth investing in both for ourselves and for others.

Proclamation. Proclamation has stood at the heart of the Gospel since Jesus called the twelve apostles and sent them out two by two with the authority to share in his ministry of preaching and living the kingdom of God (Mk 6.7). St Paul was commissioned by the risen and glorified Jesus (Gal 1.15-16) to exercise a similar apostolic ministry of evangelization by being called to be his ambassador (2 Cor 5.20). Christian mission, therefore, is fundamental for the life of the Church. The Second Vatican Council decree *Ad gentes divinitus*, on the missionary activity of the Church, maintains that she is ‘called upon to save and renew every creature, so that all things might be restored in Christ’ (*AG*, 1).

– Cardinal Vincent Nichols, *Faith Finding A Voice*, London: Bloomsbury, 2018.