

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Kevin O’Gorman

Lord of Living
and Dead

May 2018

Lord of Living and Dead¹

Kevin O’Gorman

‘Is sport the new salvation?’ is a variation on the frequently asked ‘Is sport the new religion?’ The popularity and prevalence of sport in contemporary society is clearly perceived in the amount of time and space spent watching and commenting on sporting activity and adulation. Fans, whether actually at games, matches and races or following on a multiplicity of media platforms, are a vital part of the sporting experience(s) and, in business terms, a very valuable one. As a ‘sign of the times’ sport in its many strata calls for ethical and spiritual discernment. Moreover, the language of salvation/redemption has become a staple of much sports coverage and commentary. Success in sport is often seen and stated in terms of salvation with individuals, especially in the context of team games, identified as ‘saviours/redeemers’. However, one person’s or team’s sporting redemption results in another’s ruin and while failure may spur one on to greater effort and even victory in the end the cycle of losing is an inevitable part of competition. Ultimately the cycle of life and death, the contest of good and evil constrains and consumes both the victorious and vanquished in sport.

In his *Speaking Christian* Marcus J. Borg bemoans the fact that ‘Christian language has become a stumbling block in our time’ and that ‘much of its basic vocabulary is seriously misunderstood by Christians and non-Christians alike’.² Subtitled *Recovering the lost meaning of Christian words* Borg lists, *inter alia*, ‘salvation, saved, sacrifice’ among such words, stating that he ‘had thought of titling the book Redeeming Christian Language, but then I realized that *redeeming* is one of the words that need redeeming’.³ Reasons for this loss of meaning lie ‘in the literalisation of language in the modern period, affecting Christians and non-Christians alike’ and ‘the interpretation of Christian language within a common framework that I call “heaven and hell” [which] when this is the primary framework for understanding Christianity, as it often

1 Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘The Wreck of the Deutschland’, in W.H. Gardner, (ed.), *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, Penguin Books, 1974, 1.

2 Marcus J. Borg, *Speaking Christian*, (London: SPCK, 2011).

3 *Ibid*, 1-2.

Kevin O’Gorman, SMA, teaches Moral Theology at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth.

THE FURROW

is, diminishes and distorts the meaning of Christian language'.⁴ However, the distortion and diminution which denies eschatology (for which there is no entry in Borg's list) is deeply disturbing. In his chapter on *Salvation* (the longest in the book) Borg states that it 'is a twofold transformation – of ourselves and the world'. This reductionism is reinforced on the same page by his reference to the mention 'in my first lecture that whenever Christianity emphasises the afterlife as the reason for being Christian, the result invariably is a distortion of Christianity'.⁵ Salvation interpreted in only and totally inner-worldly terms is inimical to the truth of Christian faith. The Achilles' heel of Borg's analysis lies in his splitting of life (and hence language) into two spheres, the historical and heavenly. The saying of Jesus 'I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10) sees earthly and eternal life in its entirety, in an image of Saint John, as a 'seamless garment'. Indeed, as Thomas McDermott states, 'human flourishing, understood in the Christian sense, is the "abundant life" that Jesus speaks of and it is meant to begin here and now in this life'.⁶ Begun on earth and looking forward to being brought to fulfilment in eternity is the meaning of Christian hope. This vision is succinctly but superbly stated in the saying of the message of Saint Irenaeus: 'The glory of God is the person fully alive, who comes to him/herself only in God'.

PLACUIT DEO

This is 'A Letter from 'the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of Christian salvation',⁷ issued on 1st March 2018 (hereafter *Letter*). The opening line of *Placuit Deo* (*It has pleased God*) begins with a scriptural statement (referring to *Ephesians* and *2 Peter*) of God's goodness and wisdom in giving us knowledge of His will, with both access to and a share 'in the divine nature' through Christ in the Holy Spirit. The means of this communication and communion is Christ 'who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation', a quote taken from Vatican II's *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*. The introductory paragraph indicates that the intention of this *Letter* is 'to demonstrate certain aspects of Christian salvation that can be difficult to understand today because of recent cultural changes' in the light of tradition and 'with particular reference to the teachings of Pope Francis'.

4 Ibid, 1.

5 Ibid, 53.

6 Thomas McDermott, *Filled with all the Fullness of God – An Introduction to Catholic Spirituality*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 1.

7 <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bolletino/pubblico/2018/03/01/18031a> [accessed 3rd March 2018].

Chapter II is composed of three paragraphs which present ‘the effect of current cultural changes on the meaning of Christian salvation’. This effect is summarised in the contemporary difficulty of seeing ‘Jesus as the only Saviour of the whole human person and of all humanity’. An ideology of individualism interprets human existence in terms of autonomous subjectivity as the sole point of reference for self-realisation ‘depend[ing] only on his or her own strength’. The *Letter* states that ‘in this vision’ Christ is seen as an ethical exemplar and not as the One who transforms human existence through reconciliation with the Father and sanctification in the Holy Spirit. Another ‘vision of salvation’ identifies it in purely interior terms which, while including ‘a strong personal conviction or feeling of being united with God’, does not involve responsibility for relationships with others and the outside world. The upshot of this is the difficulty of understanding ‘the meaning of the Incarnation of the Word’, of Christ’s humanity in the history of the world and the healing, for the human condition that he both heralds and makes happen. (Latin *salus*, health, is root of salvation). Tendencies in these versions of individualistic and interior salvation have been identified by Pope Francis as bearing resemblance to traits of the heresies of Pelagianism and Gnosticism.⁸ ‘A new form of Pelagianism’ is presented in the present day affirmation of the absolute autonomy of persons without any relationship to God and which relies for salvation ‘on the strength of the individual or on purely human structures, which are incapable of welcoming the newness of the Spirit of God’. Gnosticism is a gravitating towards the self, separated from the human body which sees salvation in terms of intellectual improvement and access to divinity without any regard for Christian revelation. A footnote refers readers to the comprehensive coverage and criticism produced by the collaboration of the Pontifical Councils for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue in 2003, *Jesus Christ, the Bearer of the Water of Life: A Christian Reflection on the New Age*. This document articulates the total anthropological turn of this approach: ‘New Age involves a fundamental belief in the perfectibility of the human person by means of a wide variety of techniques and therapies (as opposed to the Christian view of cooperation with divine grace). There is general accord with Nietzsche’s idea that Christianity has prevented the full manifestation of genuine humanity. Perfection, in this context, means achieving self-fulfilment according to an order of value which we ourselves create and which we achieve by our own strength’.⁹ The *Letter* declares that ‘insofar as Gnosticism and Pelagianism represent perennial dangers for misunderstanding

8 Footnote nine of the *Letter* gives a fuller account of the original heresies.

9 *Origins*, 32(February 13, 2003), 570-592, here 577.

THE FURROW

Biblical faith, it is possible to find similarities between the ancient heresies and the modern tendencies just described'. Contemporary versions of these 'ancient heresies' are completely at variation with 'the confession of faith in Christ, the one, universal Saviour'. The division and dualism of neo-Pelagianism and neo-Gnosticism deny the possibility of the deliverance and drawing into communion with God the Father and others that Christ does by means of his Paschal Mystery.

Chapter III is also composed of three paragraphs which concentrate on 'The human desire for salvation'. Being human means considering the experience of contingency in various contexts, ranging from health through having the necessities of life to happiness. While focussed on attaining the good there is also the fight against evil in its many forms: 'ignorance and error, fragility and weakness, sickness and death'. These universal aspirations towards ultimacy cannot be achieved by means of or in terms of human goods alone. Quoting Augustine's classic reference to *cor inquietum*, the *Letter* states that 'no created thing can totally satisfy us, because God has destined us for communion with Him; our hearts will be restless until they rest in Him'. Salvation is not simply the satisfaction of a series of human needs and God cannot be seen as a projection or provider of human perfection, however this is perceived or philosophised about. Moreover, sin has separated people from God, shattering harmony among themselves and showing 'the dominion of disintegration and death'. Chapter IV moves from consideration of the human condition to 'Christ, Saviour and Salvation'. Laying out the biblical account of God not abandoning His people the *Letter* looks to 'the good news of salvation [which] has a name and a face', Jesus who in 'his own person is fully revealed as Lord of life and death in his paschal event'. This leads to the line of Pope emeritus Benedict XVI 'which take us to the very heart of the Gospel', words which Francis has stated elsewhere he never grows weary of recalling¹⁰: 'being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction'. This line links two favourite concepts of Francis, encounter and horizon. Early in *The Joy of the Gospel* he invites 'all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them'.¹¹ True encounter with Christ 'the Lord of life and death' expands the horizon of existence. Employing both descending and ascending perspectives, the *Letter* lists titles and tasks of Christ, 'illuminator and revealer, redeemer

10 *The Joy of the Gospel*, (Dublin: Veritas, 2013), par. 7.

11 *Ibid.*, par. 3.

and liberator, the One who divinises and justifies the human person', 'High Priest of the New Covenant' who offers 'perfect worship to the Father in the name of all humanity' and by 'sacrificing himself' 'expiates sins and remains forever alive to intercede on our behalf'. This comprehensive Christology connects both the 'healing' and 'elevating' dimensions of salvation. The horizon of salvation is the holiness by which we are made 'sons and daughters of God, participants in his divine nature'. By combining 'an incredible synergy between divine and human action', Christ cannot be reduced to ethical exemplarism or relegated to the fringes of experience as the tendencies towards Pelagianism and Gnosticism would treat him. Having 'assumed the entirety of our humanity and lived a fully human life in communion with his Father and with others', Christ represents both the 'decisive direction' and 'horizon' of human existence. Combining both Christology and soteriology the last line of paragraph 11 proclaims 'He is at the same Saviour and Salvation'.

In Chapter V the *Letter* looks to the church as 'the place where we receive the salvation brought by Jesus'. The role of the church is expressed as essential in explaining salvation and eliminating any tendencies to reduce it to human effort. The experience of salvation is enjoyed 'in the relationships that are born from the incarnate Son of God and that form the communion of the Church'. This communion contradicts and counters salvation conceived in terms of 'the self-realisation of the isolated individual nor in an interior fusion of the individual with the divine'. As the 'universal sacrament of salvation' the mission of the church is to mediate salvation which 'consists in being incorporated into a communion of persons that participates in the communion of the Trinity'. Individualistic and interior versions of salvation are inimical to 'the sacramental economy through which God wants to save the human person'. The sacraments build up the person and community on the foundation of faith in God, forming them in 'a new existence conforming to Christ'. The communal character of Christian existence is a call to charity, to going out of and giving oneself which goes against the grain of growth that is imagined in individualistic terms and on interior conditions. The Christian is joined to and journeys with Christ who proclaimed that 'unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit' (Jn 12:24). Unlike Gnosticism which 'associates itself with a negative view of the created order' and sees salvation 'as freedom from the body and from the concrete relationships in which a person lives', the Gospel brings creation and salvation together through the Incarnation of Christ and his Paschal Mystery. Bridging bodily living in the world

and belonging to the Body of Christ that is the church, the *Letter* states that the sacraments are the means by which Christians can be ‘able to live faithful to the flesh of Christ and, as a result, in fidelity to the kind of relationships that he gave us’. Responsibility for ‘this type of relationality’ requires ‘the care of all suffering humanity through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy’.

The opening line of the concluding chapter (paragraph 15) ‘Communicating the faith, in expectation of the Saviour’ articulates the apostolic agenda of and for the church: ‘The knowledge of the fullness of life into which Christ the Saviour introduces us propels Christians onwards in the mission of announcing to all the joy and light of the Gospel’.¹² With a clear echo of Paul’s call to the Corinthians ‘*caritas enim Christ urget nos* – for the love of Christ urges us on’ (2 Cor 5:14), this line links both the motivation and meaning of Christian mission. ‘Knowledge’ here is more than intellectual as its subject matter is stated to be ‘the fullness of life’. Hence the Gospel and Gnosticism are antithetical. Christians are called to engage in an earnest and enriching dialogue with ‘believers of other religions’ because of the belief that God’s grace is at work in the hearts of all people of good will even ‘in an unseen way’. These words are taken from Chapter 22 of *Gaudium et spes*, ‘Christ the New Man’, which speaks of the Christian being ‘a partner in the Paschal mystery’ and the offer through the Holy Spirit to all people of ‘the possibility of being made partners, in a way known to God, in the Paschal Mystery’.¹³ Evangelisation and expectation are entwined in an eschatological perspective. As salvation embraces the totality of body and soul ‘the salvation of men and women will be complete only when, after having conquered the last enemy, death, we will participate fully in the glory of the risen Jesus’. The end state of salvation is our share in and with Jesus, the Lord of life and death, in ‘the final destiny to which God calls all of humanity’. The *Letter* concludes with the affirmation that, assisted ‘with the example of Mary, Mother of the Saviour and first among the saved’, we are assured that the destiny of saved humanity is a share in ‘the fullness of life’ proclaimed, presented and promised in Christ.

A few lines from Mary Ann Donovan about Athanasius help to offer an initial commentary on the six and a half page (with footnotes) printed version of this document:

12 This line has a double reference, to Saint Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (*The Mission of the Redeemer*) and Francis’ exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel*.

13 Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, in ed. Austin Flannery, *Vatican Council II – The Basic Sixteen Documents*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2007), 186.

Early in his career Athanasius, the feisty and often fiery Bishop of Alexandria, set out to explain Christ and the meaning of redemption to a broad, popular audience. But to do this requires some examination of the human condition. Athanasius knew well – none better! – that Christian belief in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Son of God, unites the divine works of creation and salvation. The very One through whom all things were made chose to be born of Mary for us and for our salvation. So we are at the centre of the story: in Athanasius’ words: “we were the cause of his incarnation, and for our salvation he had compassion to the extent of being born and revealed in a body”.¹⁴

While Athanasius attempted an explanation aimed at a general audience, the *Letter* is addressed to the Bishops to elucidate ‘certain aspects of Christian salvation’ in light of the church’s tradition and the magisterium of Pope Francis. In its effort to elucidate the *Letter* examines the human condition which entails the correcting of errors in the comprehension of salvation, especially in the contemporary context. Athanasius’ forceful assertion ‘So we are at the centre of the story’ is articulated in the light of faith. The *Letter* develops this, dovetailing creation and salvation, directing us to Christ whom it declares ‘re-established and renewed’ the original calling of humanity to hail the gifts of God and live in harmony. Athanasius’ reference to ‘the centre of the story’ recalls and throws into relief the opening line of the first encyclical of Saint Pope John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*: ‘The Redeemer of man, Jesus Christ is the centre of the universe and of history’.¹⁵ *The Letter* emphasises the evangelisation of human existence, as prophetically proclaimed by John Paul II:

The Church cannot abandon man, for his “destiny”, that is to say his election, calling, birth and death, salvation or perdition, is so closely and unbreakably linked with Christ... Man is the primary route that the Church must travel in fulfilling her mission: *he is the primary and fundamental way for the Church*, the way traced out by Christ himself, the way that leads invariably through the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption.¹⁶

The *Letter* is deeply theological as it seeks to teach the truth about salvation and the task of evangelising human experience. Athanasius’ reference to Christ’s compassion connects with the reference in the *Letter* to Pope Francis’ Apostolic Letter

14 Mary Ann Donovan, ‘Dancing before the Lord: Theological Anthropology and Christian Spirituality as Graceful Partners’, Presidential Address, *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings*, 53(1998), 73-87, here 77.

15 *Redemptor Hominis*, Rome: Vatican Press, 1979, par. 1.

16 *Ibid.*, par. 14.

THE FURROW

Misericordia et misera which opens with the magnificent lines: ‘*Misericordia et misera* is a phrase used by Saint Augustine in recounting the story of Jesus’ meeting with the woman taken in adultery. It would be difficult to imagine a more beautiful or apt way of expressing the mystery of God’s love when it touches the sinner: “the two of them alone remained: *mercy with misery*”.¹⁷ In the magisterium and ministry of Francis mercy is not a metaphor for salvation but its motive and means, if not indeed its meaning.¹⁸

While noting that ‘in the recent decades of our own time the topic of sin has fallen under suspicion both in Church and society’ Neil Darragh states that ‘we have even reached the point where the word ‘sin’ is beginning to make new appearances as creative accusatory language with only a hint of religious origins [and] so we talk now about ‘sin bins’ for offending rugby players’.¹⁹ A ‘purgatorial’ period (10 minutes) off the pitch for an offending player is further evidence of the reductionism of religious language in contemporary culture. However, as its horizon is inner-worldly (and wearying for many who do not watch), sport in society is a significant reminder of the need for salvation. Incarnating finitude and contingency, involving the compression of time and space, sport symbolises the human condition with its cycle of success and defeat, despair and hope. In the end, when the games are won, lost or drawn sportsmen and women, spectators and subscribers stand in need of the healing and hope that God alone can hold out for human hearts. As Kenneth R. Himes states, ‘Sin-talk is necessarily God-talk. It is the effort to articulate something of the mystery of evil and what it means for our relationship with God’.²⁰ In the face of human evil God’s relationship with us is not one of rejection but redemption. This is the mystery of salvation. Fans and viewers on television in Ireland may be familiar with the sight of a placard placed prominently behind a goalpost proclaiming verse(s) from the Gospel of John: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’ (3:16-17). This is the message of mercy in *It has pleased God*, mandated to the Bishops for the evangelisation of all, especially for people ensnared in the empires of neo-Pelagian egoism and Gnostic escapism.

17 Vatican City: *Libreria Editrice Vaticana*, 2016, par. 1.

18 Pope Francis, *The name of God is Mercy*, (Bluebird: London, 2016).

19 Neil Darragh, *A thinker’s guide to Sin – Talking about wrongdoing today*, (Accent Publications: Auckland, 2010), 10.

20 Kenneth R. Himes, ‘Human Failings: The Meanings and Metaphors of Sin’, in ed. James Keating, *Moral Theology – New Directions and Fundamental Issues*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 145-161, here 146.