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The Covid-19 Crisis: is there a Christian Response?

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March 2020 will be remembered as the month in which COVID-19 shook Irish society. Of course, we heard the reports from Wuhan in China and the efforts taken by Asian countries to curtail the spread of this new virus. It all seemed far away and separated from our everyday lives in Ireland. This changed on Saturday 29 February, when the National Public Health Emergency Team announced the first confirmed case of the virus in this country. But even then, there were few people who realised how this event would impact on society and radically change our way of life. From the closing of schools and universities on 12 March to the unprecedented measures that were announced on 27 of the same month, the impact has been great.

People are unable to visit members of their own family, many shops are closed, and social distancing measures have imposed a very different shape on our society. It seems increasingly likely that some form of restrictions will remain in place for the foreseeable future. The presence of the virus will change our way of life in deep and long-lasting ways. Understanding the need for these measures does not lessen their impact.

THE IMPACT ON RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

The COVID-19 crisis has a profound impact on religious practice. As it became impossible to publicly celebrate the Eucharist, parish teams had to find other ways to reach out to the faithful. The fact that Holy Week had to be celebrated within the limits imposed by the public health measures gave an extra impetus to parishes to be creative and find new ways to celebrate Easter. Many parishes use their webcams to broadcast their celebrations, while others had to improvise by live streaming their services and other religious content on Facebook and other social media platforms.

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What proves to be more difficult is the provision of pastoral care to those who especially need it at this time. Social distancing measures and the request for the elderly to cocoon rules out the possibility of personal pastoral visits to a large section of the faithful. There is the possibility of using the telephone but nothing can substitute for direct personal contact between people. All involved in pastoral ministry are aware of the issues that have arisen around funerals and the grief of families who feel that the space they require to say farewell to their loved ones has been severely limited.

All of these effects are very sudden and immediate. They have a deep impact on our religious practice and force us to innovate in a quick and decisive manner in order to guarantee some form of pastoral and liturgical continuity. But the full impact of this crisis on our society will only become clear over time. It is still too early to comprehend fully what is happening to our way of life. The most immediate consequences, such as the inability to gather to celebrate the Eucharist, are but the first symptoms of something that cuts much deeper.

Of course, in the first place our thoughts are with those who got sick and those who passed away; we think of their families, and of the many health care professionals who heroically risk their own health in order to care for others. This includes hospital chaplains, who stand side by side with their colleagues and strive to offer pastoral care to those who are suffering with the illness and their families. But this crisis touches everyone, it affects the whole of society. Therefore, it is important to continue to reflect on this traumatic event as people of faith.

THE EXCLUSION OF DEATH

As a contribution to the reflection on the COVID-19 crisis I would like to offer some thoughts derived from the writings of Michel de Certeau, a French Jesuit and multi-disciplinary thinker who reflected deeply on the shape of modern culture.

Death, de Certeau argues, is normally excluded from the everyday language of Western society. Contemporary European culture is obsessed with “doing.” Death confronts us with our fear of meaninglessness: “nothing can be said in a place where nothing more can be done.”¹ Death is the great impossibility for contemporary Western culture because it “falls outside the *thinkable*, which is identified with what one can *do*.”² Death is something we cannot explain, where our language falls short:

1 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Randall (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984), 190. ² *Ibid*.

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‘The dying person raises once again the question of the subject at the extreme frontier of inaction, at the very point where it is the most impertinent and the least bearable. In our society, the absence of work is non-sense; it is necessary to eliminate it in order for the discourse that tirelessly articulates tasks and constructs the Occidental story of “There’s always something to do” to continue. The dying person is the lapse in this discourse. He is, and can only be, ob-scene. And hence censured, deprived of language, wrapped up in a shroud of silence: the unnamable’.²

De Certeau argues that the dying person is normally made invisible in Western culture, just as the reality of death itself is being repressed. Sure enough, there are places that are especially designated to speak about death. But these places are situated at the margins of culture and therefore outside of the normal social circulation:

‘In a society that officially recognizes “rest” only in the forms of inertia or waste, death is given over, for example, to religious languages that are no longer current, returned to rites that are now empty of the beliefs that once resided in them’.³

Death is the place where we come up against our final limit. Associated with passivity, it is not expected to take centre stage. We know, of course, that death exists but it is not expected to disrupt the hustle and bustle of our everyday life, with its non-stop communication and endless activity and enjoyment. Religious language and practice, on the margins of contemporary culture, is one of the last places where we can still speak about death.

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De Certeau argues that every culture has its blind spots. “The *other*” is what de Certeau calls those parts of reality that a particular culture or society excludes from its everyday understanding . By repressing death, contemporary Western culture has made it into its *other*. It is important to note that for de Certeau the *other* can never be truly eliminated and always resurfaces to question a culture’s self-understanding and way of looking at life. This is especially true in moments of crisis, when we are confronted with what we cannot understand and control.

The current COVID-19 pandemic is causing such a crisis and forces us to question our understanding of the world. In this crisis the reality of death has broken into our everyday experience. It has

2 Ibid., 191.

3 Ibid., 192.

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re-introduced death into our everyday language and experience. Not just in the form of the daily recurring press briefing by the Department of Health, in which we are confronted with the numbers of deaths and infections, but also by the paralyzing effects of the restrictions on our everyday life. Major parts of life have come to a standstill. This sudden lack of movement imposes an experience of inertia, which is reminiscent of death.

In a sense, the whole of society has entered the place of apparent meaninglessness where nothing can be said because nothing can be done. A place where our usual explanations have been forced to silence. Illness and death now dominate our daily conversation. Often masked by strange words that have intruded into our everyday language such as “COVID-19,” “pandemic,” “coronavirus,” etc. We are all going through an experience of passiveness, an experience of mourning, and of loss. We are all entering the place of meaninglessness, where we can no longer *do* anything in the face of mortality and death. And while we hope that things will go back to normal, we have to take stock of the fact that such a traumatic intrusion of death into our life will have a lasting effect.

STUMBLING UPON A WHITE PAGE

In de Certeau’s thought the traumatic encounter with the *other* opens up a new space. It forces us to re-think our beliefs and values. If we compare our normal way of understanding life to reading a text, then encountering the *other* is like stumbling upon a white page. When we encounter such a white page it is our tendency to fill it with more writing. In other words, we seek to colonize the page by filling it with what we already know. We eliminate what falls outside our “comfort zone” by explaining it away with our usual explanations about life.

This is what happens when we try to “solve” a traumatic event by explaining it in such a way that it becomes an extension of our familiar convictions. Some people will see the current crisis as the ultimate vindication of their political ideology, others as an indictment of individualisation, again others use it as proof for their theory on globalization, and so on. And while none of these responses are necessarily invalid, it would be wise to resist the temptation of filling the white page with more of the same. This prevents us from learning something new from this crisis.

A REFLECTIVE RESPONSE

Could there be a different response? I would like to suggest that the alternative would be to allow the emptiness of the white page to

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question us on a deeper level. The COVID-19 crisis challenges us to face the reality of death and to sit with it in silence. This is the most difficult thing to do. It means resisting the temptation to come up with readymade answers. It means that we allow ourselves to be questioned by our inability to “do something about it.” This response requires that we fully accept and live our experience of passivity and powerlessness. It would be a reflective, even contemplative, response.

In the language of de Certeau we can say that this alternative response means that we welcome the *other*. To welcome the *other* is to accept the limits of our understanding. By welcoming the *other* we allow ourselves to be questioned by what we cannot understand or control. It is reminiscent of the position taken by the Christian mystics of 16th and 17th century, whose texts de Certeau studied deeply. The mystic attitude was characterized by the will to move into the unknown, inspired by the belief that “there is always some *other*.”⁴ By opening themselves up to the unknown the mystics sought to enter into the great mystery, exceeding everyday life. For the mystics the ultimate *other* is God, who is always waiting for us beyond what we know and comprehend.

From the mystics we can learn that in the depths of the unknown there is the possibility of new life. This means that moments of crisis, however painful they may be, can be an opportunity to go beyond our cultural and individual blind spots to discover new depths. I do not suggest that death itself is something to be welcomed. But I do believe that the COVID-19 crisis offers an opportunity for a profound reflection on our relationship with ourselves, with the people around us, and with life itself. While this is frightening it is also an opportunity. Taking that opportunity requires boldness and, indeed, faith. To have faith, then, is to hope that by facing the unknown, even when it is painful and frightening, new ways of experiencing life can be discovered. It is too early to say what those new ways will be. We will only know if we allow this painful confrontation with death to question us in a profound way.

BEFRIENDING THE *OTHER*

Finally, I would suggest that this reflective response is the Christian response. To be a Christian is to befriend the *other*. De Certeau recognized this as the essential quality of the Christian life.⁵ To live as a Christian is to make place for mystery and for the unknown.

4 Michel de Certeau, *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 44.

5 Michel de Certeau and Jean-Marie Domenach, *Le Christianisme éclaté* (Paris: Seuil, 1974), 39-40.

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As Christians we are called to make room for what exceeds our everyday understanding. Indeed, it is in the ultimate experience of what is *other* that we recognize the face of the one we call our Lord and our God. Born of the originating experience of Jesus, who completely gave himself over to the *Other* whom he called his Father, Christians believe that death masks a new life.

In this time of crisis, the Christian attitude of friendship with the *other* is especially important. It is a gift that Christians can share with the rest of society, with all who are struggling with this unsettling new reality. We have the language, the prayers, and the rituals that can help us enter into a space of deep reflection. As Christians we know that we need each other to reflect on the mystery, we need community. Let us listen, then, to other people as they try to give words to their experience of this difficult new reality and stand with them in solidarity.

But we must be careful. From Michel de Certeau we can learn a reluctance to fill the white page with the words of our usual answers, even if these answers are Christian. No explanation or teaching can capture the *other*. If we fill the open space with readymade explanations, we have lost our chance to engage in a deeper and more profound reflection. As Christians we have no reason to fear the unknown because we know that no matter how challenging our times may be, we will never be separated from the *Other*, in whom we recognize the loving face of our God.

Ecology and the Renewal of Theology. If it is true that integral ecology requires an integrated, trans-disciplinary approach, it is also equally true that integral ecology has far-reaching consequences for the way we do theology in the twenty-first century. Theology cannot stand by and watch the transformation required of other disciplines without putting its own house in order. Ecology must interrogate the way theology is done. Equally, theology must engage critically and constructively with ecology.

– DERMOT A. LANE, *Theology and Ecology in Dialogue: The Wisdom of Laudato Si'*, (Dublin, Messenger Publications) p. 22.