

Rome in October

The challenge of living the Camillian beatitudes in a secular society

Camillian Spirituality presents us with a Christian Vision of life, lived with a particular hue which underscores the merciful love of Christ for the sick. We see life as a gift and everyone as being gifted, talented and unique in the eyes of God. We are not afraid to acknowledge our dependence on God and we openly turn to him in prayer. This vision underpins how we think and act. Our vision of life is very different to that of the humanist, or the secularist. It is a philosophical difference, not a theological one. We work out of a different philosophy of life: we see life itself differently. It is important to realise this in any discussion.

Faith

I believe that the greatest challenge facing us as Christian people, especially in the western world, lies in the area of faith. Our challenge lies in our ability and willingness to face an uncertain future with joy. Recently the archbishop of Dublin, Dermot Martin, remarked that *“faith is now a foreign language for people in Ireland”*. When I was a student in Italy in the sixties my country was still known as *“the island of saints and scholars”*. Now once children make their first communion they are no longer seen in church. The sacraments are more rites of passage than spiritual milestones. There has been a relentless push for secularism from the media and the politicians for over 30 years. This has accelerated in intensity over the last 10 years. The media and popular culture in Ireland is quite anti the Catholic Church.

Only thirty years ago practically all the patients and staff I was called to work with came from the main line Christian Churches, I now find myself surrounded by people of well over one hundred different faiths (religions) and none. In such an environment our Christian future would appear to be more uncertain than ever. **Are we men and women of Christian hope, who are prepared to continue doing what we do because it is the right thing to do, independent of the consequences, without looking for results? This is surely a challenge to our being prophetic.**

What a challenge for healthcare ministry where the traditional language of sacrifice, suffering, the cross, trust in God, prayer, are fast becoming for the Irish people mere words in a dictionary which requires consultation if they are to be understood.

Trying to understand the society that I am called to live and minister in.

In the Europe of fifty years ago (within my lived experience) children in Catholic families were “**brought up in the faith**” in a fairly natural transmission. You were socialized within the church through family, school and parish. If or when adult children rejected their faith it caused a lot of discomfort to their parents. This was due to the fact that the parents had a deep faith themselves. But in a lot of these cases the teenagers returned to their faith as adults.

This is now changed – parents are no longer inclined to socialize their children within the church. They have a new concept of religious freedom. They wish their children to have complete freedom from religion or in choosing the expression of religion that is most suitable to them. They talk more now of adult baptism

I live in a society where there is a huge **over sixty and under sixty** divide

Many see religion as a place of latent violence. The church is no longer seen as the innocent place of former generations. Parents themselves are no longer very sure about what they are passing on, and so are reluctant to push it. In fact, passing on the faith is not an important issue for many younger parents.

Unless a religion is seen to have respect for all it no longer has any chance of taking root in modern society. More and more people tend to find their own link to religion and to decide how one might express it. The concern which our parents had about passing on the faith is no longer much of a priority for younger parents.

Pro Choice

The more I listen to people the more I realise that “Pro Choice” is much bigger and more influential than I ever realized it was, or would have imagined it could be. It has entered the mind set of most people. I was inclined to think of “Pro-Choice” as the opponents of abortion and that was it. But it goes so far beyond

this. It is about choosing and deciding what sin is, choosing whether live or die, whether to use contraception, abortion, euthanasia. **I will not be dictated to by anybody or Institution, is the cry.** As far as many who consider themselves Catholic are concerned the Church is like a restaurant where there are two menus: the Main Menu and the “alla carte”. So many today are “alla carte” Catholics who pick and choose what they are going to accept and live by, while rejecting or ignoring others.

I have seen the Church described as a series of Concentric Circles; the inner circle is made up of those who have been socialised in the Church environment, who regularly attend mass and are the backbone of the parish. The next circle is made up of those who attend church occasionally, and would like their children to be catechized and educated in Catholic schools. They are probably the majority group, epitomized by the lady who said when her son seemed to be getting very interested in Church matters: *“I want him to be a Catholic alright but I don’t want him to carry it too far”.*

Then there is a still wider circle made up of those who attend funerals and weddings, but the church has no effect on their lives.

And then there is the outer circle made up of those who know very little of the workings of the church, and may in many cases be quite hostile towards Christianity.

Living in this environment

What I have just presented is a restricted way of looking at faith and spirituality. Here we see only what we are looking for and miss out on other important dimensions. **How you look determines what you discover.** The problem with this way of looking at religion is that it is based on the fact that one form is right, and so every other form is evaluated against it. This is okay for the over sixties but not for the younger ones.

Secularism and Secularisation

It is in this world that I am called to be prophetic through living out my Camillian spirituality. If I am to be prophetic in this environment I find it helpful to bear in mind the difference between Secularism and Secularisation. Michael Paul Gallagher describes secularism as a way of perceiving the world in which

there is no room for the transcendent, the divine, the supernatural. We can say that God is missing and his absence is not felt.

Secularisation, however, is a life process through which life, at a personal and social level, is freed from the detailed control of religion, while it still remains, in great part illumined and guided by faith. Secularisation wants its own autonomy but not necessarily its independence. "Secularisation is not necessarily", Gallagher maintains, "the enemy of discipleship, nor of the Christian mission".

Christians respond in many different ways to our secularised world: there are those of us who respond in anger or with hostility. This type of response is often based on fear and uses a language that is very negative and which has little to do with Christianity. Others reply with a certain thoughtless liberalism that is a bit ingenuous, in which everything is accepted without criticism or reflection. This is another way of stating that Christianity has nothing to say or contribute, and so the prophetic voice of the church disappears. If one culture is the equal of another then there is no further need of discernment.

But there is a third way, the prophetic way, the Camillian way. I would suggest that we try imitating St. Paul (Acts 17.16). Initially Paul was disgusted with the attitudes of the people in Athens, but then he showed a capacity to listen and recognise their hunger for spiritual and genuine religious values. If we treat contemporary culture with disgust, we are engaging in a futile ministry that will get us nowhere.

I think it might be useful to bear in mind what I regard as a Camillian definition of atheism. For me the atheist is someone who has lost contact with his fellow man. He/she is someone who cannot love his brother. Most people still have very broad spiritual values and this is a point of connection, an opening for discussion and interaction. So in dealing with the sick we try to help them discover what it is that connects for them. What it is that gives meaning to this moment of their life. And in dealing with humanist carers we try to utilise what is positive in their caring as a starting point for discussion.

Pilgrim

Charles Taylor and Daniele Hervieu-Leger propose that a good way of capturing and understanding the dynamic of faith in today's world is to think in terms of "pilgrim" and "convert".

The way of arriving at your identity is quite fluid. There is no longer an ideal that you step into and take on. There is no longer any structure that predates you and to which you are beholden. There are of course necessities to which we are beholden, but even these are subject to choice.

In the past there was stability. Today who you are is less a noun and more a verb: you are constantly moving and changing. Life for me is a journey and I am in the process of discerning who I am for myself and others. My life is a moving story and not a monumental statue. This is what twitter and snapchat capture so well. In other words I am a pilgrim. This is why the idea of pilgrimage always appealed to us and continues to do so today. There is a great growth in interest in the "camminos" - the Camino de Santiago is more attractive than ever and local camminos are springing up all over the place. People go there for all sorts of reasons and not always from a religious motivation.

Have you seen the movie "*The Way*" with Martin Sheen. He meets so many strange characters on the road. For all of them the search is different including himself, and they each have their own story.

This film shows the Pilgrim is that figure that makes his way alone while at the same time tending towards and needing a group/community. Along the way he or she chooses in order to seek and discover something personal, something that they will find to be authentic. The path, the journey will have different stages, some of which are avoided, while others are accepted and then left for a while. I always loved the idea of Pilgrimage and being a pilgrim. I see life as a journey from God back to God with numerous turns and many amazing corners to go around.

Remember "you don't choose your life you live it". There are certain things over which we have no control – the family we were born into, how we were brought up, the social grouping in which we had to move. But education, growth and development do eventually bring us to adulthood and to the making of decisions. You have to make choices along the way of life, but it is important

that you really **live** those choices while keeping yourself open to other people's choices and reasoning, which may not necessarily be in harmony with your own.

I am fascinated by the mileage chart in the square in Bucchianico telling the distance to the great places of pilgrimage. Where am I going? Life is a journey – a pilgrimage

“And all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well”

The Convert

He chooses his or her religion freely. And in their choosing, they choose something that best expresses who they are. Is this not something that we all must do? I choose as an adult to remain in this sinful church, this sinful Order which I love. It is adult appropriation of your own spiritual identity. I think I do respect the choices of others, but there is unfortunately an element of negative exclusivity still there.

Do we really believe that we are speaking on behalf of God? Life is about continuing conversion. When I remain faithful to the gospel, yes I am more likely to engage in speaking God's word. Roddy Doyle, a popular and influential writer says we need to tell religion to “back off”. **Maybe we too need to tell the secular world “to back off” from invading and ridiculing my sacred space**

The convert and the pilgrim are the two major figures in contemporary European culture. The concept of pilgrim is appealing as it encapsulates movement, dynamism, open mindedness, journey. I was a little perplexed by a friend who had experienced a profound conversion from Lutheranism to Catholicism when in response to my observation years later as to whether he considered himself to be still a catholic, he smiled and with that total honesty and openness which was part of his life replied “*Oh Frank, the church helped me greatly at an important stage on my journey but I think I have moved on*”

Being a convert is appealing because it suggests stability, identity, belonging, community and personal challenge. Both can accommodate the other and both can learn from the other. It is important to note that that the element of freedom, personal identity and singularity are central to both of them

Response

“The Church does not have a reverse gear, it can only go forward” Card.

Rodriguez Maradiaga

We have to personalise our response – nobody can say yes for you, nobody can do your Christian living or thinking for you. And it is in the reality of this world that I must live my response

- 1) Camillian family members will witness through their love for the sick and their support for one another which must stem from internal conviction. I’m a bit obsessed by the concept of the need to give witness with our lives, and I am growing in the conviction that inestimable damage has been done by priests and religious who preach one thing while living another. *“By their fruits you will know them”*. The very simple, straight and unsolicited response of a very radical male religious friend to my simple question as to how he was settling into his new community is worth pondering by all of us: **“Ah, grand but none of the friars is too interested in building the Kingdom”**. It certainly made me reflect as I drove home from the visit. Again *“by their fruits you will know them”* the Lord says. **Where are my fruits to be found?**

***How committed are we?** I personally have had to soul search because life was not always straight forward.*

*At times I too have wondered and doubted. Is there anybody who does not? **Is doubt part of the journey?** Pope Francis certainly seems to think so. Every one of us gets hit on the head, at some time or other, usually by our so called friends.*

***How do we deal with disillusionment and rejection it?** The recent referendum result on abortion flattened me. Why? I presume because I cared passionately. Maybe too because I am a very long way from understanding what is happening to my country, but am obliged to try and figure it out as this is where I must honestly minister and practice my faith. The sad part is that in the run up to the referendum we continually gave the opposition plenty of ammunition through our Lack of witness. We seemed to keep shooting ourselves in the foot, and of course the maverick clergymen kept appearing.*

Being Fortright - Courageous

In promoting the Camillian way we need to be more forthright. Baptism is not just a gift of salvation but is also a call to ministry. We are all called by our baptism to evangelise. Those who espouse Camillian spirituality are stepping forward and proclaiming themselves to be open to answering that baptismal call through their concern for the sick and vulnerable. We must ask ourselves whether in our ministry we are involved in a maintenance exercise or whether we have a sense of mission. By maintenance I mean an attitude of simply keeping the boat afloat, a safe pair of hands, or *“of keeping the ball kicked out”* as one of our Irish bishops would say.

By maintenance I have in mind staying close to the converted and saved, while avoiding the deluded and those who find the Church discouraging and unwelcoming, and we find loads of these in our hospitals, hospices and nursing homes. It is very tempting and very easy to drift into a cosy life style and conveniently forget about going the extra half mile.

Too often we are afraid to be prophetic, to say what needs to be said and to do what needs to be done, and so we settle conveniently into our comfort zone. *“The world needs to experience tenderness. Love is the great evangelising tool”* (Pope Francis). It is also important that we don't get too engrossed in theory and lose contact/touch with the stress and trauma encountered at the coalface of an ever changing healthcare ministry.

One of our most active lay Camillian **Family members sees the secular agenda as a great opportunity for witness:** *“our witness stands out more in a secular society because to practice ones faith is not the norm today. Through this witness we are sowing the seeds of faith in those we encounter, and these seeds will germinate in ways we would not expect and may never come to know about. We have the opportunity to shine a light of Christian faith by the work we do in a world which openly questions the existence of God”* (JJ. Cummins). I love his positive attitude.

“Our witness in this difficult environment deepens and sustains our own faith and enhances our spiritual lives”, he maintains.

Charism as the base for our spirituality

What is this Charism that we have to apply to the reality of today? It is important to remember in the case of someone like Camillus that as a founder of a religious organisation he received a gift from God: *“the Charism of the Founder is an experience of the Spirit, transmitted to the disciples to be lived, guarded and constantly developed in harmony with the body of Christ in constant growth”*. (MR no.11). I

It is important to remember that Camillus’ gift to the church was to restore the merciful love of Christ for the sick to the central role it occupied in the life and teaching of Jesus as this had been lost sight of. Healing you might even say was suspect in the church’s promulgation of the Message.

Camillus was unique and quite inspired in understanding and perceiving how Jesus had raised the bar for all carers by making Himself the object of our care: *“as often as you do it to the least of these brothers of mine you do it to me”* (Mt 25.40). The unique insight of Camillus was to recognise that Jesus had made Himself the direct object of our care. Camillus would take this to the point of seeing Jesus in the sick and even kneeling before them to ask pardon and confess his sins to them.

I believe that those who espouse Camillian spirituality receive that same gift from God that Camillus received, and are commissioned to go out and be faithful to the living out of that experience as envisaged by Camillus. **We do this by constantly developing it so as to meet the needs of the sick and vulnerable in the age in which we live.** That means today. We have to exercise it in the reality of today’s world and avoid engaging in a nostalgic longing for doing what Camillus did.

Because his was an *Experience of the Spirit* it means it came from God and it brought something new. It is not easy to get to know a founder because we are confronted by the mystery of God. Camillus was an instrument of God. Founders were invariably radical but not rebels. They were not afraid to challenge the status quo but they always did so with humility. Mother Teresa (now St. Teresa of Calcutta) challenged the Church without shouting or protesting.

Because it is an experience of the Spirit there will always be a certain tension between the Institution and the movement of the Spirit. This is something positive as the charismatic and institutional need each other. Perhaps we don’t disturb our top brass enough, and worse still we stifle the Spirit working through us by becoming “yes” men and women

This gift that Camillus received from God is the source of our spirituality, the font from which we drink. The Church needs these experiences of the Spirit because the people of God cannot survive without the hand of God on the tiller. The gift given to people like Camillus is for the benefit of the building of the mystical Body of Christ.

The Charism will always be judged on its usefulness, or lack of it, to the community and that includes secularised society. The more useful the charism is to the community the more important it is to the Church. According to Rahner this charismatic dimension is as important to the Church as the sacraments and the ministry. The Church needs religious life. The church needs our the Camillian charism as it is a gift from God to his people. **Camillus told us that we had been given the main course.** We must see this moment as a glorious opportunity to show God's love for suffering humanity to an unbelieving secular world I am reminded of the words of a young mother who struggled for nine months in Intensive Care and survived to tell her story. On her recovery she would talk of "*the huge faith of my mother and her friends*" and how much she owed to it.

We have Jesus on our side. He has promised us authority over all the power of evil. **But we have to use and call upon his name.** I need the Spirit of God with me

There were times as an adult that I was strongly tempted to throw the whole thing there in desperation. Through selfishness, through delusion, through hurt perhaps, but I would always return to the fact that **I have chosen as an adult to stay in this sinful church,** in this sinful Order. I accept that I too am a sinner, **but I realise that although I am a sinner I am loved.** That is what I seek to bring to the sick. Think of Pope Francis' words

This is all that matters. God is Emmanuel, he is with us and I need to keep learning this and keep reminding myself of this. If the church was a human institution it would have disappeared long ago. After all where are the all-conquering Roman Empire, to Napoleon, to Nazism, to Communism today.

Remember that sick will be my salvation

I have to make my own living and thinking but I need to be touch with believing people. I need the family to which I belong and that means being there to support them physically.

The charism of Camillus has to be the driving force for me as I seek to meet the challenges presented by the diverse cultural surroundings in which I work. Our charism is one of our main sources of motivation for doing what we do, and if we lose sight of this we die. I am called to be prophetic where I am planted.

Motivation is of paramount importance if we are to be prophetic. We should never lose sight of the fact that our ministry must always have a strong evangelising dimension, which if missing means we are not doing our work, that we are no longer in mission. We should always be on guard against losing our sense of mission as *“when we are clear about the why we can face any how”* (V. Frankl). This happens when our identity and motivation are clear. The fact that we are involved in pastoral activity does not of itself mean we are involved in ministry. We are involved in ministry *“when both our lives and our actions spontaneously indicate and promote the Kingdom of God”* (M. Amalodoes). It is not the qualifications I have but the person that I am which attracts, and touches and changes people.

If we are true to our own spiritual journey we will always have an evangelising dimension to our ministry. The healthcare world offers us enormous possibilities for evangelisation. More people pass through the doors of a hospital in a day than through the doors of a Church in a week. No one escapes being hospitalised or of having to visit somebody who is there. Did Camillus not see the hospital as *“the mystical vineyard of the Lord”* where the *“sick are our Lords and masters”*

Importance of Prayer

On our faith journey we have over the past thirty to forty years laid great store on Camillus the Giant of Charity. This has been an exciting time in which wonderfully creative expressions of our charism have unfolded. But we forget Camillus the Mystic at our peril. I was fascinated in Fr. Casera’s *“Positio dei processi canonici”*, which presented us with the testimonies given at the process for the canonisation of St. Camillus. Those who knew him laid more stress on his prayerfulness than on his physical care for the sick: Camillus saying mass, Camillus in prayer at the bedside of the sick, Camillus before the crucifix. In fact it was in prayer before the crucifix that he discovered that on his own he did not

do so well, that he was becoming discouraged and that he needed likeminded spirits. *"Self knows that self is not enough"*. (Brendan Kennelly). Hope cannot be sustained simply by our own will. Hope is something we need to hear from outside ourselves. As Susan McEvoy says, *"just as the fire needs the help of a branch to grow its warmth, we need a voice sometimes, or a sight, or a visitor, to fan the flicker of our hearts when faith grows dim"*. We need one another.

Camillian Spirituality

When I speak of charism I am talking of burning, of being consumed by doing good for the sick. My spirituality will be how I express that in the reality of my life. When I speak of spirituality I am specifically concerned with the relational and personal dimensions of the human person as he/she relates to God, to the Divine. Spirituality is not about discussing theories, principles or moral dogma. Spirituality is the most dynamic theological discipline as it deals with how we actually live, move and have our being, rather than the theory of it. Having a Camillian vision of healthcare is broader than just simply being a Camillian. It depends very much on the calibre of those who are living that spirituality. How sad when an elderly returned missionary says of his new community that *"none of the friars are interested in spreading the Kingdom"*.

The discipline of spirituality has developed out of moral theology's concern for the agenda of human living. On the one hand there is what I believe (what the theologians call the "credenda"), and then there is what I do with what I say I believe (this they call the "agenda"). For this reason spirituality is the most dynamic and concrete discipline of theology as it deals with the reality of life.

Is the gap between the faith we profess and our daily lives not one of the great dichotomies of modern Christians living? (The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World No. 43). Is the closing of that gap not one of our greatest challenges as Christians? We might paraphrase Pope Benedict and ask whether *our Charism is a life-giving and sustaining hope? Is the message of our charism a message which shapes our lives in a new way, or is it just 'information', which in the meantime, we have set aside and now seems to us to have been superseded by more recent information?* (Spe Salvi).