

INTEGRITAS – A Vision of Christian Life
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On June 6th, 2004 a service was held at Duiske Abbey in Graiguenamanagh, County Kilkenny to celebrate its eight hundredth anniversary. During his homily to the large attendance gathered there, Archbishop Sean Brady raised the question as to whether this country has lost its spiritual identity. This timely question invites us to reflect upon whether there is something in our identity which is being repressed. We are generally willing to acknowledge ourselves as spiritual. We also have little difficulty in describing ourselves as a Celtic people. We are, however, embarrassed to describe our spiritual identity as Christian. Is it excessive to say that we are now ashamed to call ourselves Christian?

Irish society is immersed in a spiritual wasteland born from the denial of our Christian identity. In the absence of people being able to connect with their Christian heritage, irrational ‘teachings’ of the ‘New Age’ abound. Yet, we cannot deny our ancestors. The spiritual identity of the Irish people is Celtic and Christian. We seem increasingly prepared, however, to neglect our spiritual identity as Christian even though it remains rooted and repressed in our collective unconscious.

The Integritas Centre

We are a married couple who live close to a small village called Ennisnag, in the County of Kilkenny. One of us is a member of the Church of Ireland and the other a Roman Catholic. In February, 2001 we commenced holding evenings of Christian meditation and contemplative prayer in our home, or more particularly, in a prayer room within it. These evenings are now held on each Wednesday and commence with an exercise prepared by a close friend of ours, Louis Hughes O.P. This exercise invites us to relax the body, makes us conscious of the breath and cultivates awareness of ourselves and our surroundings. After the reading of scripture, another guided exercise is used to lead into a period of silence. This second exercise is part of a series of exercises prepared under the guidance of another dear friend of ours, Peter Hannan S.J.

The purpose of these evenings of prayer is not to extract a sense of meaning or advice from the scriptural piece but rather to evoke our dormant and unconscious memory of *the attractiveness of Jesus Christ*. It is our shared experience that when His attractiveness is cultivated in our lives, we become more centred and less fragmented. All of the aspects of our being – material, physical, intellectual and psychological can become integrated in our spiritual being in Him. The pivotal relationships in our lives can also gain renewed life as they become drawn around His steadfast presence. An apt image of this phenomenon can be seen when one places iron filings on a page. When a magnet is placed at the centre, beneath the page, the filings develop an integrated, concentric pattern around it. The magnet is not visible but its effect is transparent.

An integral vision of the Christian faith

When we are drawn to Jesus Christ, He gradually becomes the centre of our existence. A centre emerges within us through a progressive transformation of mind and heart. This centre integrates every aspect of our being and the relationships in our lives. We use the word *integritas*, being the latin for integrity, to describe this phenomenon – the atonement (at-one-ment) of the whole human person and all of our relationships through the centre of Jesus Christ. A small initiative is developing where we live which concentrates upon this phenomenon. It is called *Integritas*. The underlying vision of this initiative is that if we are bereft of a sense of God in the centre of our being, all of the relationships that make us human progressively fall apart.

The unravelling of these relationships begins in the unconscious displacement of *the human relationship with God*. Once a divine vision no longer resonates in our hearts, we are without *the centre which holds*. When this occurs, we lose *our relationship with our own divine calling or vocation in life*. We are then set upon a life path which is not authentic and *our relationship with others in the bonds of friendship, family and community* cannot come to life as the true revelation of ourselves is not available for intimate disclosure to others. The final symptom then emerges. With the breakdown of the relationships that make friendship, family and community, our sense of common *relationship in our society and to its central institutions* dis-integrates. When we see the prevailing public cynicism with the administration of our system of justice, the decline of the standing of the Christian Church and the loss of interest in political involvement, we encounter the final frontier of a progressive fracturing of these four fundamental relationships.

We use the term '*integral*' to describe a vision of the Christian faith which is based on healing these four relationships through the attractiveness of Jesus Christ. By placing Jesus Christ at the centre and by allowing ourselves to be won over by His attractiveness, He re-establishes our relationship with God. The Holy Spirit then emanates from this divine centre to provide us with the strength and vision to follow our deepest calling or vocation in life and draws us into renewed bonds of friendship, family and community. When these relationships become inspired, a new sense of commitment to society emerges, based upon the values of citizenship and leading towards a renewal of society's central institutions of law, church and politics.

The first purpose of *Integritas* is therefore to search for, and articulate a vision of the Christian faith which honours these four relationships. This integral vision has no end because the integrating potential of these relationships is infinite. These relationships call us to open to the integrity of all of the great religious traditions, to respect the integrity of every human vocation, to nurture the integrity of man and woman in community and to realise the integrity of under-represented interests in our society, whether individual, social or environmental.

An integral practice of the Christian faith

The vision of integrating these four relationships through His attractiveness must then be realised in practice. We are like falcons and He is the falconer. We need a practice which enables us to find stillness in Him and from this still centre to follow the Spirit in these relationships. This search for an integral practice of the Christian faith is the second purpose of *Integritas*.

As our first relationship is with God, the starting point of our practice is *prayer*. We need to learn how to create space for prayer, both in terms of making time for it as a priority and in preparing a physical place that is conducive for it. Our prayer must honour the body, engage the mind and permeate into our soul. Gradually, we are invited to become receptive to the gentle prompting of the Holy Spirit within us at every layer of our being. For this reason, meetings for prayer on each Wednesday evening and on the first Friday evening of each month, form the basis of the programme at this centre. The content of these evenings attempts to relax the body and still the mind. With the body and the mind cared for, one can then enter into the psychological level of prayer by recognising one's own feelings and intuition. All of one's being is then ready to be invited into its spiritual ground and support, into that place of silence where one can be arrested by a fleeting glimpse of the beauty of Jesus Christ.

Once we begin to learn how to pray and to listen to His voice, we are then called to follow our deepest desires. We need to learn the art of *discernment* in order to distinguish between those desires that lead to our happiness and those which are compulsive. Discernment re-establishes our relationship with our own unique calling and vocation in life. Prayer and discernment must go together and we need guidance in both. Accordingly, courses in prayer and discernment are organised here throughout the year. These courses concentrate on how to integrate the body, mind and psyche in the experience of prayer. As the gift of discernment has found its most telling expression in the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*, these exercises will be introduced during the Wednesday evenings of prayer here next year under the ongoing guidance of Peter Hannan S.J. These evenings of prayer are therefore also part of an ongoing process of learning how to accept the mutual gifts of prayer and discernment.

The practice of prayer and discernment also needs to be nurtured within the context of *community*. By sharing our experience of prayer and the challenges of discernment together, our relationships of friendship are enhanced with intimacy and authenticity. We are called, however, to share the experience of prayer and discernment in places of home and family life and to allow the relationships woven in family and local communities to strengthen in this. For too long, we have categorised Christian community as the preserve of those who choose celibate life. We need to re-instate shared life in family, friendships and local communities as the crucible for encountering the attractiveness of Jesus Christ. To do so, lay people are called to take responsibility by creating opportunities for others to share in prayer and discernment in their own homes and to be supportive of others who are prepared to do so. The shared experience of prayer and discernment needs to extend from retreat houses and

religious communities into our homes. When people come to the small centre here for prayer or for courses, they come to a home.

When the practice of prayer, discernment and community takes root in our lives, it will issue in a desire for *justice*. Working for justice is the final step in an integral practice of the Christian faith. We are not called to withdraw from society but to re-engage within it at a deeper level. We are invited by Him to become involved in the institutions of law, church and politics so as to protect and enhance our relationship in society and with the environment. It is hoped that a Christian vision for these three central institutions, based upon the values of prayer, discernment, community and justice, will emerge from this centre.

An additional model of lay involvement in the Christian Church

Integritas is therefore a centre dedicated to the search for an integral vision and practice of the Christian faith. As noted earlier, this centre is based in a family home and is supported by friends in the local community and in religious and diocesan life. It is not part of the local parish structure but it is in service of the local Christian Churches. It is not aligned to a religious order but it seeks support and guidance from a number of friends in religious life and draws from Dominican and Jesuit spirituality in particular. In this position, it may say something about the future nature of lay involvement in the Christian Church.

With the decline of vocations to the priesthood, it is increasingly necessary for lay people to take increased responsibility for the care of their local Church and parish. To further the charism and dynamic of the religious orders, it is also consoling to see different forms of association and co-operation between these orders and lay people emerge. There is a danger, however, that lay people will only express their involvement in the Christian Church through the existing models of the diocesan structure and religious orders. If the involvement of lay people in the Church remains confined to these existing structures, a dynamic, lay spirituality will not unfold. It cannot find its expression through structures which are neither designed nor intended for lay people to be at the forefront within them.

More than even before, lay people are called to take responsibility for a third and complementary model of Church, the model of small Christian communities based in their homes. There is nothing original in such an idea but rather it marks a return to the foundation of the Christian Church. This emerging model of Church was also foreseen by Karl Rahner S.J. in saying that “the Church of the future will be built up from small communities”. These Christian communities need to be rooted in the regular practice of prayer. They are called to be at the frontier of Christian ecumenism by being completely in service of the local Christian churches. They must develop in the warmth of home life and finally, they must be open to anyone in what they provide.

Integritas has this additional purpose, namely to be part of the ongoing emergence of a lay Christian spirituality which finds its expression in a third model of Church, complementing the diocesan structure and religious orders. It attempts to fit within an emerging lay model of Church which is finding expression in numerous small communities which share the values of prayer, discernment, community and justice.

The L'Arche communities are one particularly inspiring example. In this particular centre, these values find their expression to date in :-

- the practice of Christian meditation and contemplative prayer,
- supported by courses in prayer and discernment,
- held within the context of a family and community environment,
- in order to search for an integral vision and practice of the Christian faith which can, in time, be applied to the central institutions in our society of law, church and politics.

The overriding aim of this initiative, however, is to remain concentrated upon the spiritual centre of Jesus Christ. For this reason, on the first Friday of every month, we have prayer around the Cross. One of the seven last words of the Lord is reflected upon in silence. By meditating on the Lord upon the cross, we are brought in touch with the extent of His love. As He shows His love for us to the utmost extent, He wins us over with an attractiveness which is compelling and beyond compare. By being lifted up unto a cross, He draws all unto Himself. (Jn 12:32) We, in turn, are invited to be enraptured by His glory, to become integrated in all of our relationships through our attraction to Him. We are called to discover again the beauty of this Christian vision, as our ancestors did, and to be freed from our repressed condition which denies the truth and goodness of our identity in Him.

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