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Apostolic Reflection

BY

HUGH O'DONNELL, C.M.*

The Inter-Assembly document of the Daughters of Charity, *At Jacob's Well*, states: "We will move forward . . . We will commit ourselves to the way of discernment through apostolic reflection." These words declare apostolic reflection will be your way of life, your way of journeying forward.¹

Two insights emerged in working with the Ongoing Formation Team which give direction and substance to the following article. The first appeared in the presentation on Vincentian Discernment, namely, that *unrestricted readiness* is at the heart of discernment and belongs, not to the order of technique or spiritual means but is our way of life. At the center of our lives is *unrestricted readiness* rooted in the goodness of God which opens us dynamically toward the Kingdom of God and our brothers and sisters.

The second insight concerns apostolic reflection as a concrete instance of discernment. Apostolic reflection is not a religious exercise or a new technique that is now in fashion. Rather, apostolic reflection is emerging in our time as the very center of community life in such a way that it is the way forward. *Sharing our lives is the way forward*. This insight is at the heart of these reflections.

What is the foundation of apostolic reflection for Vincent? It is the absolute conviction "God is here!" I have been mentored on the road to this understanding by a confrere, Father André Dodin, and a Trinitarian priest, Father Dennis Dwyer. They led me to understand the profound influence of Benet of Canfield, the English Capuchin, on

*This is a companion article to "Vincentian Discernment," which appeared in *Vincentian Heritage* 15, no. 1 (1994):7-23.

¹The Congregation of the Mission also affirms apostolic sharing as a key way of renewing and animating its own missionary life, though the vocabulary is different. Paragraph 46 of the *Constitutions and Statutes of the Congregation of the Mission* reads, "In community prayer we find an excellent way of animating and renewing our lives, especially when we celebrate the word of God and share it, or when in fraternal dialogue we share with one another the fruit of our spiritual and apostolic experience."

Vincent and the more distant but real influence of Jan Ruusbroec, the Flemish mystic. The very important lesson Vincent learned from them is "God is here" -- within me, in front of me, behind me, in this person, this sister, this child, these circumstances, these events. Much careful study remains to be done. I will present what I know and trust you to receive it to the degree it resonates with the love in your hearts and your lived experience of Vincent and Louise.

I heard of Benet of Canfield for the first time four years ago. I learned from Father Dodin that in 1609, when Vincent arrived in Paris for the first time, Father Duval gave him a copy of Canfield's principal work, *The Rule of Perfection*. Canfield is considered by historians of the spiritual life as the Master of the Masters of seventeenth-century spirituality. In particular, he was a teacher of Cardinal de Bérulle and many of those interested in the spiritual renewal of France. When Vincent came to Paris in 1609, he had not yet let go of his ambitions. When Canfield's book came into his hands, he was just beginning to turn to a totally new future in the kingdom. Fifty years later, in 1658, when he wrote the *Common Rules of the Congregation of the Mission*, he took the paragraph on discerning God's will and obedience to it body and bones from Canfield. But, Canfield's influence on Vincent penetrated his spirit far beyond this text. When I had an opportunity to read *The Rule of Perfection*, I experienced knowing Vincent in a wholly new way. Comparable to reading Francis de Sales's *An Introduction to the Devout Life* and *On the Love of God*, I realized I was reading Benet of Canfield just as Vincent himself had.

Canfield maintained that the whole of the spiritual journey could be boiled down to one thing: the will of God. God's will mediates everything else. Canfield's influence on Vincent is found, for example, in Vincent's words, "Do not tread on the heels of Providence." He took these words from Canfield and they characterize Vincent's whole spiritual journey.

Canfield divides *The Rule of Perfection* according to the three ways God's will comes to us, namely, the external will of God, the internal will of God and the supereminent will of God. The external will of God which is well known to us, refers to what we are permitted or forbidden to do. These commands and prohibitions flow from the moral law, civil society, the Church or one's situation in life. The external will of God--that is easy enough. Sometimes we stop there.

But Canfield says there is also an internal will. It resembles Jesuit discernment, which pays attention to the inner motions of the spirit,

our feelings, our emotions, our interior experience. It refers to the interior guidance of the Holy Spirit. The will of God is manifested to us in the ways we are attracted and repelled interiorly. We are invited by Saint Ignatius to listen to our interior, our feelings, our emotions, our likes and dislikes, our consolations and desolations. There is an increasing interiority and intimacy between the human heart and the Spirit.

The third and most interior level is the supereminent will of God. The expression sounds very technical, but it can be translated this way. It is the knowledge of the will of God that comes about through friendship, through communion, through having one heart with God. It is the knowledge of God arising intuitively from the love of God. The gifts and the fruits of the Holy Spirit operate in the same way: spontaneously. We become 'in tune' and then we become intuitive in regard to God's will. When a couple has been married for fifty years, each one knows what is in the other's mind and heart. When we have had friends for a long time, we know in the same way, and beyond that we know we know. That's what the expression "the supereminent will of God" means. It is the knowledge of God's will which comes about through love, communion, friendship, being of one mind and heart with God. That is what Saint Paul speaks of in First Corinthians, when he speaks of having the mind and heart of Christ. It is this increasingly interior experience of God's will that leads us to the heart of Vincent's life.

There is one more influence worth noting. Who influenced Benet of Canfield? Canfield probably was very much influenced by the Flemish mystic Jan Ruusbroec, who is considered by some as the greatest of all the mystics. At the same time, he is *the least other-worldly* of all the mystics. This is Evelyn Underhill's considered opinion. If we translate *least other-worldly* into positive terms, you will see what I am leading to: Ruusbroec regards the mystic as the one who knows in his gut, in her heart, in his bones, in her being that *God is here*. That is his great contribution. He sees that we are not outside of God. We exist *within the common life* of God. When God speaks the Eternal Word, at the very same moment (if you can talk that way) God speaks us. As the Spirit brings everything back to God eternally, the Spirit is always bringing us back to God. For Ruusbroec, we are drawn into the breathing of God: the speaking of the Word and the return of the Spirit. We are inside the divine breathing out and breathing in. God is here. God is *here*. We are *in* God. We are *in* God.

I think this is the deepest sense of Vincent's and Louise's life. If we try to get to their heart and soul, what would we say? We would say that in their hearts and in their bones, they know "God is here!"

I began to reach the conclusion that Vincent's separation from Cardinal de Bérulle was not something he chose to do, rather it was something he had to do. He received a lot from Bérulle, who was an important guide and companion for a long time. It was Bérulle who got him to Clichy and to Châtillon. Vincent, though he could have joined the Oratory, did not; he was being led in another direction. I believe there was a deep reason why Vincent found himself on another path than Bérulle's. For Bérulle, God was elsewhere. He regarded life in terms of taking what was happening in front of him and bringing it to the Divine Liturgy before the throne of God. Vincent's experience led him in the opposite direction. For Vincent, God is here and the Divine Liturgy is in front of us. God is here! That is why we can say "the poor are our Masters." God is here! God is here in poor people, in our experiences, in events and in the persons who are in our presence and in whose presence we are. Saint Ignatius is very strong on the secularity of God's presence, but Vincent recognizes God's presence in a particular form--the presence of God in poor people.

Let us think of *repetition of prayer*, which is a creation of Vincent and Louise, from this perspective. Spontaneously and from his heart, Vincent says: Sister, what do you think? Please share your prayer with us, for 'God is here,' God is in your life, in your heart, in your thoughts, in your reflections, in your prayer, in your experiences. Share God with us.

The heart and soul of apostolic reflection, then, is to be found in the radical conviction that *God is here*. When you come together in apostolic reflection, then, what is the ground for your coming together? God is here in me, in my Sister, in each other and in the community. God is here in our coming together.

Now what is the contribution of Vincent and Louise? They treated each person as sacred and unique. Personalism is very powerful with them. Vincent and Louise treated one another as sacred and unique. Then they treated each and every person as sacred and unique.

DePaul University in Chicago has been able to identify the charism of the university in a way people can work with, which is what you have done with your mission statements. You have identified the five qualities that characterize your institutions. DePaul found two words to express our values: *Vincentian Personalism*.

The person is very much at the center for Vincent and Louise. So, you can see that the key in apostolic reflection is the sacredness of every person in the group, then, the sacredness of the coming together of different people on this given evening. Another thing that is very strong in Louise and in Vincent is the idea that every person is a member of the Body of Christ, and, consequently, is a gift. There is deep affection for each sister. It is each person as person and each person as member in communion with the others that evokes not only respect but affection and deep attention to each one's silence, presence, being and words.

I think one of the great miracles in the life of Louise is that she became such a great mother to the Daughters of Charity. Louise's basic wound is on her mother's side. She had very good relationships with the men in her life: she had an affectionate and trusting relationship with her father who claimed her in spite of illegitimacy, with her husband, with Francis de Sales, and with Vincent. On her father's side, there was great natural strength. Her wound was on the mother's side. She tried to overcome that in the way she raised Michel but without notable success. She tried so hard to be a good mother to Michel that she was chronically anxious about him. The miracle of grace, to my way of thinking, is that she became such a tremendous mother to the Daughters of Charity. She knew each one personally and held each one in her heart with affection and tender love. She passed on bits of information from one to the other in her letters, and taught them everything from the alphabet to all that the mission required. This is a remarkable story of transformation. It says something to us about our own wounds and what the grace of God does. In exactly the place where she was wounded initially, she became an absolutely wonderful mother to her Daughters and to many others. Vincent and Louise shared their apostolic and spiritual experiences with one another over a period of thirty-five years.

In our reflection on apostolic reflection, there are three beacons that guide us: (1) the sacredness and uniqueness of each person; (2) the affection for each member of the local community and of the larger community; and (3) the sharing of apostolic and spiritual experiences with one another.

In 1989, I gave a retreat in England to Daughters of Charity. I met a Daughter who was being missioned to Liverpool. Liverpool, famous as one of the nineteenth century industrial cities, is in severe decline. In the center of that city is a place called Netherly. It is inner city. The

three Daughters on mission there have a ministry of presence. Their mission is to be parishioners in that place. The Sister I met was in her early fifties when a letter went around asking for volunteers for Ethiopia. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she had the vague idea that someday she would go. She volunteered, thinking there was no chance she would be chosen. The next thing she knew she was in Ethiopia. She was there for ten or eleven years and loved it. For reasons of health she came back, expecting to return to Ethiopia, where her heart was. It did not happen. Instead, she was being missioned to Liverpool. You can see from what is written below, she has found a new life and mission. I got the letter around Christmas, just before we met to plan this day. In it she talked about how important, how central apostolic reflection was to them in their radical and in a certain way difficult mission. I asked her permission to quote from the letter. She responded that all three sisters gave their permission but could not imagine that what was said could be important to the American sisters. She was glad for whatever gift it might be. Actually, it is a great gift. She writes:

I must admit, God is so good to me . . . just wondering if I am still on the right track—and being careful not to get our little community into a rut . . . This would defeat the purpose of this difficult mission—“parishioners” in a very poor parish in a first world country, where we are struggling together to maintain a very simple lifestyle—on the beat on the streets of the estate—trusting on Divine Providence to see to our needs—and together trying to live within a budget, that is realistic but not excessive, spending only what we need and not satisfying every fad or fancy. We are helping each other to grow and in this growth process to remain full of joy—hope and love. To help us do this we have apostolic sharing on Wednesdays—where we come into His Presence and share with Him and with each other all the joy—sorrows—disappointments and visions for the future. He does speak to each of us if we listen. We love that hour sharing. Even if we have no words to say—it is still great. I remember you saying how difficult—if not impossible—for (some) to pray thus. They do not know what is missing in their

lives. I hope—no pressure of work—not any thing will take over this hour—it is here we get food for the week ahead.

This is a remarkable testimony to what apostolic reflection can become. Apostolic reflection has come to be at the very center of their lives. It is their way forward. The gift of God is communicated through the companions with whom they live and with whom they share their lives. Sharing has become the central gift. It flows from life, from the exigency of the apostolate, from a felt need for one another -- from life together.

What forms can apostolic reflection take? There are many. As an introduction to answering this question, what I want to say that there is a difference sense of corporateness among us. Today, very often, people in the same house no longer share the same ministry. In the past, very often, everyone in the same house, whether it was a school or hospital or social agency, had the same ministry. Where the ministry was shared, there was a natural inclination to talk about it over supper. The reality has changed to a large extent. If we are to be corporate at the level of mission and apostolate, we need to talk to each other about what is happening in our *diverse* apostolates and share our *different* experiences. What happened automatically in another age has to happen consciously and dialogically today. There is a new sense of corporateness, a new opportunity for corporateness in apostolic communities today. Consequently community is not simply given but has to be created. This is also true of the Church. How is the Church created? The Church is created through the Eucharist, through the sharing of the Body and Blood, the dying and rising of Jesus. The Eucharist *celebrated* and *shared* creates the Church.

The same thing is true of our communities. Our communities are no longer a given. If they are only a given, then our houses will be merely hotels. They have to be created in a way they did not need to be created before. The vehicle for creating our communities is sharing: free, deliberate, conscious willingness to share our lives, our experiences, our spirituality, our relationship with God, with one another. There is a new and important face to corporateness, something that could have been taken for granted in the past. In a hospital, you used to take for granted that employees would absorb the values of the Daughters of Charity from daily contact. That is not true in the same way today. Now you have Vice-Presidents for Mission Effectiveness.

Today the values need to be shared consciously, deliberately, intentionally, freely. You have found a way to instill the love, the knowledge and the commitment of your coworkers and employees to the charism.

Apostolic reflection, which may previously have been an exercise on the periphery of your lives, has now become your *way of life*. It has come to *the center*. It is *the way* in which you and we will create our communities.

I would like to suggest a useful image from John Dunne, who has written *The House of Wisdom*. The basic image he uses in his lifetime of theological reflection and writing is the image of *passing over and passing back*. He says our way of moving forward is first to honor our own experience and then to pass over from our own experience to our neighbor's experience. Touched and changed by his or her experience, we pass back to our own experience. It is a way of going beyond the presumption that my experience is normative, the only experience that counts, or the voice of inferiority which discounts my experience in favor of yours. It is a dialogical model, valuing both your experience and mine. *Passing over and passing back . . .* and being transformed in the process. That is the rhythm of our lives. You can see a little of Ruusbroec in this--the divine action of breathing--going forth and coming back.

If we live in this world by passing over and passing back, then diversity is a blessing and the differences of our sisters and of our brothers are a great gift. We pass over into the lives of people who have different points of view, who do not necessarily agree with us, who have their own experiences. The Spirit blesses us through the richness of our differences--in dialogue.

To return to the question: what form will apostolic reflection take? There are several, none is normative. The first one, the one which we are most familiar with, is the *common sharing concerning a common experience*.

The second one, which is the one we are going to experience this afternoon, is *personal sharing-corporate listening*. A group called Inter-Community Consultants, headquartered in Saint Louis, helped our province a great deal in organization and community process. The central process they used was called *simple sharing-corporate listening*. It goes like this. In a group, each person is entitled and invited to share his or her story, his or her experience. Simple sharing means all we do is share it, without dialogue or comments, without critique. We wel-

come each person's story as it is experienced and shared. It is a non-judgmental, non-critical, non-evaluative way of letting people speak out of their own lives. It is permitted to ask a question for clarification. Consequently, everyone around the circle gets a chance to share her (or his) experience. This is followed by *corporate listening*. It is a little tricky but not very. "What did we hear ourselves say?" "What did we, as a group, hear ourselves say?" It could be as simple as, we heard ourselves say it has been a difficult week, or we have heard ourselves say that our God is a God of surprises, or we heard ourselves say that our lives are far more touched by our patients, by our students, by others than we imagined. It is a way of knowing how God is present and active among us, how God is here. That is the sense of it.

A third model, which some have tried in your province, has a lot of power to it. One person shares an event or an experience, then the others enter into a common reflection and dialogue on her experience. Over time, each one has a chance to share her story and have the community reflect on it.

It is good to experiment with different ways of doing apostolic reflection. There is freedom to do so. The key to sharing is to share something that was important to you during the past week. It does not have to be something of great moment. It has to be important to you, it has to have touched your life in some way. The underlying assumption is that God is there, obliquely or directly in your experience. Remember the sister from Liverpool said, "We share with Him and with each other, joys, sorrows, disappointments, visions for the future." The greatest treasure we have is our own lives. If we find ourselves in a community which invites us to share our lives with one another, it is a very powerful thing for the future.

A person who has meant a great deal to me is a Vietnamese monk by the name of Thich Nhat Hanh. He was the head of the Vietnamese Peace delegation in 1974-76 in Paris. He met Thomas Merton one time, and after the meeting Merton said, "Thich Nhat Hanh is my brother." He is an immensely centered and spiritual person. He said in a recent talk, "People ask me, what is the way to peace. But there is no way to peace." Everyone was surprised. "Peace is the way," he said. When you think of it, it is really true. There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.

What is the way to apostolic sharing? There is no way. Apostolic sharing is the way. What is the way to discernment? There is no way. Discernment is the way. Unrestricted readiness is the way. What has

been on the margins has become the center. What have been ways and means in our lives have become the substance. Apostolic sharing is at the heart of our existence. Why? Because that is the nature of community. Not just to be at the same address, or the same work, but to share our lives--a conscious, free, vulnerable, chosen communion and sharing with one another about that which is important in our lives, namely our apostolate, our lives and our spirit. Something radical is happening.

As we pursue Vincentian discernment and Vincentian apostolic reflection, we can ask ourselves: what are their benchmarks? There are a few key ones.

Firstly, *the God who called us here is here*. We come together in the belief that we have been called together. God has called us to come together, not to negotiate but to live together. The God who has called us is in our midst. We have come together in God.

Secondly, *God is present in each person and in the community*. This grouping of people will never happen again. The Spirit is present in a unique way each time we come together. A house of four or five people is a unique place of grace. If someone else comes, it is a new group. If we have a group of four people and a fifth person comes, we cannot simply expect that person to blend in. No, the new person is a new gift. There is a new mix, and there are twenty-five new relationships that have to be considered and shared. Everyone is a gift. Each community has its own uniqueness. It does not mean, of course, that there is not anyone who is hard to get along with. It simply means that this is a place of grace.

Thirdly, *do not tread on the heels of Providence*. Time is on God's side, and, consequently, on ours. We are invited to set aside our timetables and agendas, and abide in God's time. At the heart of our coming together is the Eternal Presence. We have come together to be touched and led by the Presence of God.

Fourth, *in contemplating, loving, and serving the poor, the poor one is Jesus Christ*. This is from the Constitutions of the Daughters of Charity, I think from the original Constitutions. You are stating that the substance of your lives is to contemplate, love, and serve God in poor person.

Finally, *the journey is a shared and corporate one*. There is great strength in sharing your call, because of the power of the Body. Christians know that Divine Life at its heart is shared, because we know the shared life of the Trinity. When we know the Trinity, we

know that not only created life is lived in sharing, but divine life is a shared life. Louise is very strong on the Trinity and the Holy Spirit.

We are being brought back to the substance of our lives: the capacity, the vocation, the opportunity to share our lives with one another in freedom, in respect, in attentiveness, in listening and in love. Apostolic sharing is a way of life, and perhaps the gift for our time. Let us thank and praise God that the Spirit is leading us in the way of apostolic reflection.²

The spirit of the Company consists in giving itself to God to love Our Lord and serve him corporally and spiritually in the person of the poor, in their own homes or elsewhere, to teach young girls and children and, in general, all those whom divine providence sends you.

*(Saint Vincent de Paul, conference to the Daughters of Charity, 9
February 1653)*

²The following process was then used in small groups. First, they took some time for silent reflection on what had been important in each one's life in the last week. Then, in groups of five, they went around the circle and shared something that had been important to them in the past week. They did this in the manner of *simple sharing*. Then, they asked themselves as a group the question, "What have we heard ourselves saying?" This was *corporate listening*. At the end they were free to thank and bless God or intercede as they were moved to do so.

