

Just Imagine

[From James Alison]

In the insufficiency of everything attainable - why, in this life, are all symphonies unfinished?

Rahner

Why are we tortured by what we can't have? Our loving always craves *something more*. Our dreams are always pipe dreams; when tired we cannot sleep; why does my life seem not to fit so often?

Rahner is not just querying, he is highlighting how we move beyond such restlessness; by realising that *in this life* all symphonies will be unfinished!

We are deliberately over-tuned for life *on this earth*. Infinite spirit confined in a finite situation. Hearts able for infinity - set within limits. Nothing but the infinite can ever fill a finite void. To be tormented by restlessness is to be human!

Accepting this freely, as it is, makes our restlessness easier for us. It is only by accepting this that we can step beyond demanding, be it from our partner, our job, from whatever. We are created for something more – something we will eventually die and rise into.

Why is this?

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

*And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.*

G.M. Hopkins

Life is fired-up by longing. From a simple plant to the intensity of human loving - we have this in common, to long, to reach beyond our reach. What is longing? Most often it is deep down in our unconsciousness. See what happens when you think you have got rid of an unsightly weed! Dandelions can break-through concrete.

There is incredible pressure *to grow* in all living things. Life will always push outwards. We are no exception. We see it in our many hungers for more... We need to remember what the Letter to the Hebrews says: *with us in mind God intended something more* - Heb.11.40. Something

more – not in quantity but quality. *I have come to bring fire on the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled* - Lk.12.49.

The Cosmos is of one piece. The chemicals in my body were forged in the furnace of the stars. The story of life is written in our Divine DNA - and relentless longing lies just as much in the cosmos; all creation has the DNA of God.

What is it all for? Longing is not without a purpose. It might well be experienced as pointless pressure, driving life into creativity - but it is the Spirit of God shaping us. For example, Scripture while insisting that we pray always, tells us we don't know how to pray - Rom.8.26. *Life, energy, love and affection etc.* all carry this urging by the Spirit. Who teaches us to pray: *Abba, Father...*

Unlimited: every choice we make calls for a letting-go; which is why *choosing* is never easy; most especially a permanent commitment. Could this be one reason why many couples choose cohabitation over marriage; or why some in Religious Life prefer temporary vows to lifelong commitment?

Certainly, today more and more people are experiencing broken situations, and being victimised. But there is something else: our inability to accept limitation in our own lives. *If I marry this person, I can't marry so many others; if I choose to live in UK...!*

In the majority of cases of choosing, however, we do not have many strong feelings; not so where love is involved, when we are reluctant to close-off options. It is never easy to embrace the limits of being an infinite spirit in a finite world. In heart, soul and sexuality we are built for the task of embracing everything and everyone. We are infinite in yearning, yet finite in capacity. In this life we never meet the infinite, only the finite.

However, we have infinity inside us - and it all comes to marrying one person! Such is the nature of incarnate human love. To make *permanent* commitment in love, means growing in a specific way. *Youth* gathers materials to build a stairway to the stars. *Middle-age* decides to build a shed in the garden! So too with love, a child wants to marry everyone - the adult chooses one person!

My True Self: it is indeed rare that we are consciously present to what is happening in our lives - we are, all too often, absentee landlords. As Augustine writes: *you were with me, but I was not with you.* We seem determined to look everywhere for God, rather than in our own lives - no wonder we are restless.

The healing of restlessness is inward rather than outward. We become *at ease*, not by seeking to achieve, or making our mark; but by *being present to the eternal* and extraordinary within our everyday living. Life happens while I'm busy planning. Being interrupted seems irksome, *till I become aware that interruptions are my real work.* Just as joy is occasioned by what takes me by surprise, while I'm seeking it elsewhere.

In this life, all symphonies are unfinished... we all die with lives incomplete; still searching for real intimacy; in fact, married or otherwise, we all sleep alone! We will die unfulfilled – refusal to recognise this brings anger, bitterness, disappointment and needing to blame. This is when marriage, sex, family, a job is expected to take our loneliness away.

Little wonder we used to find ourselves praying that we send up our sighs, *mourning and weeping in this valley of tears.*

Our spiritual life must find room for this; gently reminding us that *we need to die unfinished*, if we are to rise, as Jesus promised, with our joy complete – Jn.15.11. This is why it is better to focus, not so much on life after death, as on life after birth! Childhood's daydreams fade and die, but the source that fired them does not. – a source that can only be reached by dying, incomplete!

Where are we going?

[The Inward Journey]. *The one journey that ultimately matters is into that stillness deep within, to find our way home* – This is a challenging fact, it is not easy to be still, and know God. This journey is long and challenging, with every little joy inviting us to take it.

We are born restless, full of energy, raring to go – everything that makes *being still* something for *not just now!* Our restlessness is what the hidden fire of God is doing to us – waiting to be discovered and welcomed, yet seemingly at odds with what we long for: *You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you* – Augustine.

Restlessness pushes outwards – seeking fulfilment in something/someone beyond us. Culture is geared to excitement, not silence; activity, not stillness; as if seeing fulfilment and satisfaction as always *out there*, not *in here*. The world of advertising suggests that there is a real *out there* waiting for us, with a new and more exciting life.

Given all this, it is not easy for us to see fulfilment as an inward journey. We have travelled from earth to moon – but the journey from head to heart is not yet. But this is where *home* is. When Jesus shows and shares a life for, with and as the poor, he is showing humanness at its best: *be still and know...* Ps.46.10.

The pains and tensions of everyday living lock us into the reality of here and now. As we grow from childhood into adulthood, we gain a wider perspective; moving from childlike living on and into adult-child living – Mt.18.24.

In the Gospel, what God says at Jesus' baptism, is said over us also – *this is the love of my life*. What does it mean to be blessed? *Blessing* comes from *bene/dicere: to speak well of*. To bless through word, gesture or ritual, is to persuade the person of the goodness of everything created, and when God saw humankind, and says *very good!* God experiences the same delight in us, as in Jesus' baptism.

The blessing we experience at the end of the Eucharist is: *As we leave this celebration, let us feel deeply that we and all our world are good, very good*. Despite our faults and failings, we give God delight and joy – so why not show delight in each other? To be unblessed is to experience ache deep inside. So much aching in the world is through lack of experiencing being blessed.

Blessing is not simply an external gesture; blessing requires shape – to convey the truth that life is good, that this particular life is very good; and with God, we experience delight in what we see.

And God saw... Seeing is a blessing. A look of understanding, an appreciative glance. What we say is not nearly as important as what we see. There is a longing in us to want to be seen. In the Papal Audience Hall, you may be in anywhere – but if Pope Francis catches your eye, the distance separating you is gone. It is more important to us than we realise, to be recognised.

Good parents *see* their children, good teachers *see* their students – a good restaurant owner goes around, *to see* his guests. We are blessed by being seen.

I recall visiting a family in the parish, and was sitting with the mother and her young daughter, who was on the floor playing with a doll. Mum went into the hallway to answer the phone. She was there for a while; without saying anything, the little girl moved across the room – where she could be seen by her mum, not just see her, but be seen.

Blessing – as dying...

All of us experience a kind of barrier in our efforts to attain intimacy. We make efforts to free-up our hearts in pursuit of intimacy; forgetting that my heart is not set free by my intellect – a free heart comes only through blessing, which unclutters the heart.

Blessing assures the person, not only in being seen, *but also recognised*. There is more – if I really want to bless someone, I need, in some way, to give my life – to let the person have more life; in this sense, to bless someone is to die for them. Hear it in so many romantic songs and poems. E.g. Jean Val Jean in *Les Miserables*... seeing young Marius at the barricades prays: *God on high, hear my prayer – he is only a boy, young and afraid... let him live, let me die – let him live!*

Praying to God, from the empowered to the disempowered, from one who has fullness of life, to one who hasn't. To bless someone deeply, is, in some way, to die for them. Let his/her opinion overrule yours – *let me die, let him/her live!*

Love made us, and we long always to be within its reach. How is this done? Today's answer, like days gone-by, is to seek it in sex. But, setting the heart free has more to do with blessing than sex. Notice what happens to the newly-born in the animal world: the mother deconstructs the baby by licking its entire body – removing the membranes of birthing.

The heart is set free by blessing from *elders* [*the mother licking away the after-birth*] when affirmation is communicated in whatever form; as it was constricted by lack of blessing in the past! A child that is never held close will be deprived of the essentials of good living. First, seek someone to bless, rather than someone to sleep with. First things first.

It is sad today that *home* is downgraded – home is the place of belonging, and belonging is through giving and receiving. Today, home is becoming no more than my post-code, where I pick-up mail. *Where there is no sense of belonging, self-identity is the victim*. Part of the lack of an experience of home has to do with location. When the school I taught in was sold – the old-pupils association, despite lots of good intent, disintegrated. Place is also important.

Land is considered *Holy* – many wars have been waged over the Holy Land. Aboriginal peoples are dislocated when deprived of homelands.

Every Symphony is Unfinished

We are born with longings, at every level: *Body, mind, spirit*. No matter how much we try, and we must try to satisfy it with creative living, we will never fully succeed – *in this life!* Loneliness is built-in, but we can strive to see it more as *not yet but will be*. [*Culture suggests we will be lonely until we have the right sexual partner.*]

There is truth in that. Sexual union, in its proper context, can blossom into becoming *one-flesh*, as promised by our Creator: *it is not good to be alone* – Gen.2.18. However, history has shown

that sexual intimacy is no *guarantee* for loneliness to be alleviated. We can and do experience loneliness, at levels which sexual activity cannot reach. That place where we feel most strongly about right and wrong.

That place is less frequented – it is where we are most vulnerable. We are deeply cautious about who we let in there. In that place we are alone, most often; with a fierce, moral loneliness. We long for moral belonging more than anything else – for someone to *sleep-with morally*; a kindred spirit, a soul-mate in the truest sense.

Great friendships have such at their root. The persons in there are lovers in the truest sense. At the level of feeling, this is experienced as truly coming home, where I belong. Like Adam looking at Eve – *at last, flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone*. We are gifted with a means to take us towards this, by relating to each other in *charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, long suffering, faith and fidelity*...what the Holy Spirit brings – Gal.5.22.

How do we connect with each other through our loneliness? Sadness, loneliness, frustration and disappointment don't come from the fact that love has not happened, but from the fact that human love is finite. Why can't two persons ever be enough for each other?

We wake-up to life with longings that are infinite, without limits – but in bodies, minds and hearts that are finite. This caused Augustine to pray: *our minds, hearts and bodies are restless, until they rest in God*. In life before death we have limited capacity in coping with infinite longing.

Until we have *lived our dying*, there is no total fulfilment of longing and desire – we are left wanting – until... in this life, no matter how deep the union in friendship, we always remain separate – two who, in this life, cannot become one. In love we can't help disappointing each other. When we recognise the limits of love, we accept our ongoing separateness and learn to suffer *for* each other in our disappointment.

Passion and Purity

It is said *the Church doesn't understand passion; and the world doesn't understand purity!* Possibly a dangerous generalisation, but with aspects of truth. Preoccupation with *purity* impedes the Church from appreciating the gift of passion; just as the world's romance with passion, blinds it to the reality of purity.

The common perception of the Church is of an institution obsessed with purity, especially in sexual matters. However, passion without boundaries has led to an early grave for more than a few loves and lives. But the Church still remains too fearful of passion.

Purity and any chaste hesitancy, the world regards with disapproval. To believe in purity, especially sexual purity, is like believing in Santa Claus. Certainly, excessive concern for purity can rob life of its necessary earthiness, and spontaneity. The world does the Church a favour in highlighting this.

But the world does much harm to itself when it dismisses purity and chastity out of hand. This has caused heartbreak and hardness of heart. To lose purity and chastity is to lose innocence. To lose innocence is to lose joy and happiness.

The world and the Church must learn from each other. Passion and purity, sex and chastity belong together. This will mean the Church letting go of fears and inhibitions. It must,

unequivocally, celebrate the goodness of sexuality, and challenge people to embrace the gift of passion.

Purity only makes sense when linked to passion. Chastity, outside sexuality is frigidity. The world must discover purity, and realise how much of its emotional pain results from trivialising sex, from denigrating and dismissing chastity and sexual caution. Passion takes its meaning from purity, just as sex does from chastity. We all need to bring together the fire of eros and the desire for innocence. Through the resulting storm we will understand and appreciate life and love as never before.

Sex and Soul

Sex is not always about love, though it should be. It certainly is about soul. Whether it is mindless, abusive or sacramental, sex always touches the soul. *Abusive sex – destroys the soul. Casual sex – trivialises it. Sacramental sex – reinforces the soul.*

We are all too well aware how damaging is sexual abuse; wounding probably more than anything else. **Abusive sex** leaves a scar on the soul, unique in its pain and power to create chaos and disintegration in the one violated.

We have somewhat less insight about **casual sex** – it seems to be an area where we are blind to its consequences. Today, sex is a normal part of dating. We tend to believe that casual sex, as long as it is consensual, and with contraceptive responsibility, harms no one and leaves no scars.

Our heads may not be hurt by this – but our souls are! However, loving and consensual is casual sex, the soul suffers a cheapening of love. It has been remarked: *Plato's students tell stories about their immortal longings – my students tell stories about being horny* – Bloom. Such a difference in soul experience.

Sacramental sex, has power to build-up the soul in ways few other experiences can. One soul is joined to another – an experience of what is God's design for the soul. The fruits are *gratitude, stability and peace*. The peace the world cannot give – yet freely available.

We are not insincere, or morally worse than past generations, but we are losing touch with the very real connection between *sublimation* and *the sublime!* We have forgotten the importance of *waiting, of longing, of holding these in creative tension*.

The *sublime* depends on *sublimation* – peace requires effort, just as love needs chastity. Not just in sexual issues: great art takes time, no one creates a masterpiece overnight. Great satisfaction comes via tension. What comes without resistance brings no satisfaction.

It is not without purpose that Scripture says *those who sow in tears will sing when they reap*; and the mystics speak of the dark night of the soul. Our times have this weakness, not understanding the creative value of appropriate tension. We certainly believe that sex should be sublime – but what of the living tension that makes it that? We want the ecstasy without the agony.

Sex *alone* cannot deliver this; of itself it cannot alleviate our moral loneliness. What it brings is a *fix* which helps temporarily. Sex can only blossom into sublimation when linked with chastity. Sleeping with someone hardly known knows nothing of commitment. Short-circuiting chastity

is like trying to write a masterpiece before lunch. Love, like art, thrives on commitment, and lots of time.

God is telling us: learn to wait! Wait for God, be patient. Everything worthwhile is worth waiting for – Carretto. That is chastity!

Receive, give thanks, break and share – daily Eucharist.

Without touch, God is monologue, an idea, a philosophy. God must touch and be touched; the tongue on the flesh... in touching there is no room for thinking, for talking – silent touch affirms all that, and goes deeper –

Andre Dubus.

If we were able to root ourselves in the reality that everything in Creation, starting with life itself, is given, and to *wait to receive whatever is given*, as is appropriate, we would never break any of the commandments! We would have, first and foremost, the appropriate *experience of Gratitude* – the appropriate response to graced living.

God says to Adam – *I am giving you yourself – life. You can only receive life – not take it!* To take, destroys gift. Adam's sin was *taking* knowledge of good and evil; something that can only be present when it is *given and received*. Original Sin is failure in gratitude, taking without receiving. No wonder the text continues with the experience of something wrong – *hiding nakedness from the one who gave it!*

They began to take *by force*, as by right, what was only offered as gift. Whose fruit is always shame. Original Grace, ever-present before Original Sin. Our world defines morality by *achievement; God helps those who help themselves*. Which should read: *God help those who help themselves!* What God gives is good – it is gift, respect it as such – *don't take and eat the fruit*.

Gratitude

It is all too easy to see sanctity, virtue and self-renunciation as doing what is tough! Gratitude is gratefully receiving what is offered as gift. I heard a patient thanking a nurse for her looking after him – she smiled and said, there's no need to thank me; it's my job. He said – it's nobody's job to look after me – no one owes me that. Let me say *thank-you!*

Everything in life comes as gift, nothing is owed. It is forgetting this that get us into trouble. Consciously or otherwise we think we are owed care and protection. We take it as if we have a right to it. Taking instead of receiving, explains Original Sin.

When Jesus gave us the Eucharist, he said: *receive, give thanks, break and share*. He was talking a lot more than about ritual and rubrics to be followed. He was talking about a pattern for everyday living.

How is *breaking* Eucharistic? See it in the context of the ever-present urge to self-promote. Be shown a group photograph and see the need to find yourself in the picture; and not see the well-being of the group.

Breaking bread has a lot to do with seeing how the group is faring. *If you receive this well, you are what you receive... the loaf that contains Christ is made up of many kernels, but to become the loaf containing Christ, they must be ground and baked together by fire – Augustine.*

We cannot live very long in any group, community, marriage, friendship... without becoming aware of our limitations. This is when we either start to grow-up, or leave! Sadly, leaving tends to be the norm. The idea appears to be we will be happy and available if we are *free spirits*, and unattached. It is often said *I was never so petty and selfish* when I lived on my own!

When I was on my own, it was lonely, but it was easier. Family, group, community – file away the rough edges, so that we can discover how much more life-enhancing is sharing than doing one's own thing. Family, community... aren't boring, they are terrifying. There is no place to hide [*they hid because they were naked*] holding in there is often the hell and purgatory that leads to heaven.

Thank you

Many people find it hard to die – not because they fear God, or what happens next, but they simply love being alive; enjoy friendships and new experiences... The highest compliment we can give our Creator; is to thoroughly enjoy the gift we have been given. The best way to pay for an enjoyable moment, is to enjoy it. Sadly, this does not yet prevail – what we have is a kind of stoicism – *eat, drink and be merry – tomorrow you die!* To see life as tragic is not to believe in the Resurrection.

Eucharist – being touched by God

Nowhere is the Body of Christ so physical and open to intimacy as in the Eucharist. Paul points out that it is as real, as sensual as sexual intercourse! Dare we risk seeing the Eucharist like this? If we do not, we are all the poorer.

The early Church recognised this and surrounded the celebration with secrecy, barring all but the initiated from being present. [*the practice within RCIA, asking catechumens to leave after the homily, is a relic of this*]

This wasn't an attempt to create a mystique around the Eucharist, but a reverence, akin to not making love in public. Eucharist is physical, not spiritual – its embrace is physical. Eucharist is more radical than the Word. The Word is sacramental, less physical than Eucharist. The Word is the appropriate preparation for Eucharist, which is touch and taste, the physical embrace, the consummation.

The Mystery of the Body of Christ – is when the dust of the earth became the body of God, and we experienced intimacy with the Word of God through breaking bread together. This intimacy is not the result of information and analysis but of pure gift of *real presence*: literally, embraced by God.

Eucharist – Forgiveness

The Eucharist is the primary sacrament of reconciliation. We receive the Eucharist because we need health, not because we are healthy. One of the great tragedies – when we are in a moral mess, and most in need of the healing touch – is that we feel we ought to stay away from the Eucharist, because we are not worthy.

Seeing Eucharist for what it truly is, allows the Sacrament of Reconciliation to come into its own – acknowledging, and celebrating such lavish and gifted forgiveness.

God's forgiveness, unlike ours, is always total, freely given – no such thing as *terms and conditions apply!* How true – *God's ways are not ours!* This is nowhere more evident than in

unconditional forgiveness. God is not the slightest bit interested in *what I have done and what I have failed to do!* But longs to hear that I do believe, when he tells me *I love you* – and asks *do you believe me?* My yes – apparent by the way I live – is my salvation.

Being at home

This flower is itself, it is not *that* flower. It is unique, like every grain of sand or blade of grass. Many would define a flower through colour, scent, shape. Duns Scotus introduces a third element - *this* - it is *this* flower not any other. Just as the Word became flesh in *this* man, this uniquely unrepeatable creature.

Contemplating things in themselves, without any hint of *it reminds me of...* confronts me with the fully alive Christ. In the Eucharist look and see Christ. In this baked wheat, this crushed grape, see the Creator and the created *as one*. The Incarnation has no place for the trivial belonging.

A Good Marriage – is variously described – *a warm fireside!* A warmth that radiates to all who see and enjoy. *A laden-table* – such a marriage is lavish in hospitality. *Shared suffering* – everything can be borne, if it is shared. Most of all – *is the Body of Christ* – food for the life of the world; *nourishing* everything and everyone around it.

Our age doesn't understand *sacrament*. Often, the sacrament we need most is not just receiving communion – but around the family kitchen table, or in a warm living-room.

Two become one – often we hear a bereaved spouse speak of losing half their life. It is not half, but all. They didn't half-give themselves in marriage! This relationship has gone – the physical presence is no longer there. Both had left family, and familiar surroundings, to be one with each other; keeping loneliness at bay.

What makes a couple one? They aren't Romeo and Juliet – but what is so special can easily be missed, because it is unobtrusive and gentle. They are ordinary folk, doing what is ordinary – but doing it extraordinarily well. The shared glances which assured they were at home when together.

But what makes this happen? Some things might easily spring to mind: - gentle respect, enjoying the difference they make for each other in trust. These in fact, are the harvest of something else – *a moral belonging* – in the *real* sense of moral.

Every one of us has a place where we feel the goodness or otherwise of things; a place where we keep what we cherish most. It is where we feel alone, without being lonely. More intensely than sleeping with a partner, we long to *sleep together* in that hidden place. Everything that is deepest and precious to each of them individually, is safe when shared in that secret place.

Sex as Sacrament

A catholic commentator said: *the world will take Church seriously when talking about sex, when the Church openly affirms that, for married people, the marriage bed is their daily Eucharist!*

Sex as sacrament – as Eucharist. This can either be a profound spiritual statement, or something blasphemous.

Catholic Psychiatrist, Jack Dominian, lists five possibilities which can be realised when a couple make love:

1. *They verify their personal significance for each other; that they are the most important person in each other's lives. That it is love that sustains marriage, not marriage sustaining love.*
2. *Sexual intercourse is one of the most powerful acts to reinforce each other's sexual i.d.*
3. *Sexual intercourse can be a most powerful act of reconciliation, healing and forgiveness. Wounds appear in all relationships; which could seem to create unbridgeable chasms. Sexual intercourse can facilitate harmony restored. Not because the hurt has been taken away, but in that experience, something is felt which lets the hurting subside – in the real presence of something more.*
4. *Sexual intercourse is the most powerful way a couple has of telling each other, they wish their relationship to continue and flourish.*
5. *Sexual intercourse is the richest vein of thanksgiving – intimacy begets gratitude.*

With such possibilities, we can readily appreciate the marriage bed as sacrament, as daily Eucharist; something visible, prolonging the saving action of Christ, something incarnate which, somehow, makes God present. Not all sacraments are for angels! Like the Eucharist, it expresses love, fidelity and gratitude in a profoundly earthy way.

Blessings

Blessing houses today, is not as fashionable as in former times. Maybe, because we move so often, or it just doesn't occur to us to have the house blessed. In former times it was believed to be a form of protection; keeping residents safe. Today, we have insurance policies. So, should we still bless houses?

Much depends on whether a house is a home – or just an address. When I bless a house, I don't ask that the blessing ward off evil. I ask that God make this house a home, a place of belonging, a place missed when away – such a home has its own aroma, spelling welcome and safety – real, when all else seems manufactured.

Marriage – under siege

Most people over 40 were taught that marriage is for life. We didn't always live-up to the ideal, which we saw as a failure on our part.

Today, the concept that sexual love belongs in life-long commitment, is under siege. More and more the norm is not sex *inside* marriage with life-long commitment, but sex *outside* marriage and infidelity within marriage. Cohabiting is becoming preferable to marriage.

It was said at Woodstock [1969 USA] that the young people said they practised free love – *because they would never see each other again*, so it's OK. In this view, sex is not something that follows a lengthy process of relationship-building. It is a short-cut to deeper communication. Two people met, fell in love, became lovers – and later, moved-on to take on other lovers, while retaining the original friendship.

Hearts don't break through lack of enlightenment; but when the foundations of love are destroyed. Pascal reminds us: *the heart has its reasons*. There are aspects of love and sex that simply do not evolve and pass on.

Independent of religious experience, we must be careful about letting go the links between sex and marriage, and marriage and life-long commitment. The anger and bitterness that

almost always surround *moving out of relationships* are not so much a cry for a new understanding of sex and love, as the heart protesting.

The thesis that love and sex are infinitely adaptable, that they don't have boundaries that demand a degree of fidelity, might be in line with human, evolving potential, is mistaken, both morally and romantically – and more naïve than is the traditional morality it seeks to enlighten. The heart, indeed, has its reasons, but also its limits. Certainly, the *old* morality protected this.

God – parent

It is not uncommon to meet a single-state teacher, devoted and dedicated to teaching other people's children, occasionally feeling frustrated at not having their own children. Getting to know and respect children, only to see them move on, can be tough. In fact, this truth also applies to parents. They only have their children for a short time. They move on, and grow away from home. Even for parents, your children are never your own.

There is something worth noting in this. Children are given in trust, for a time, and we are asked to be mothers, fathers, teachers, guardians, friends... but they are never *ours*. They belong elsewhere – to God, and to themselves, more than to us.

If we accept this, we will be less inclined to *own*; seeing them as satellites orbiting us. When we realise our children are not really ours, we will also discover we are not alone in raising them. In a sense, we are foster parents – with God the real parent, whose love and care for them is very real.

This can be consoling for single parents – God is struggling with and for you, and can reach levels within a child that we can't. Children can refuse to listen to you, walk away and reject your values – *they can never walk away from God*, deeply embedded within, no matter what they say or do.

Many sincere and loving couples decide not to bring children into this mess of a world. They are genuinely frightened at what they see. They are right in saying they cannot guarantee the health, well-being and safety of a potential child. But wrong in feeling they alone are responsible for such guarantees. God is also there – always will be, to ensure that, no matter what, *all manner of things will be well*.

This has tremendous value for parents who have to bury their children – when it should be the other way round. Be it loss through ill health, tragic accidents, drugs, suicide... which brings worries about parenting failures – *what could I have done, if only...* When a child dies, whatever the circumstances, they move into hands far gentler than ours. They have left our foster care and returned home – to the one who will complete what we have affectionately begun.

From Womb to Tomb – Death and Resurrection

There is such a thing as a good death; and we are responsible for the way we die. We have to choose between clinging to life in such ways that death means failure, or letting go freely so that we can be given to others as a source of hope...

The real question before our death, is not how much can I still accomplish, how much influence can I exert – but how can I live so that I can continue to be fruitful, when I am no longer among family and friends? That is the question that shifts our attention from doing to being. Doing brings success, being bears fruit.

Henry Nouwen.

How can we prepare to die? How can we live so that death doesn't take us by surprise? Whatever it is, it must not be something that takes us away from enjoying life here and now. We do not prepare by any kind of withdrawal – what prepares us for death is an ever deepening, and more intimate entry into full living.

The banquet is open to anyone who is open to sit down with all – John Shea. The one condition for going to God, is to have the heart and openness to sit down with absolutely anyone. We need to love less narrowly – preparing for death is an ever-widening enjoyment of life.

There are only two tragedies in life, and dying young isn't one of them. They are: if you go through life and don't love... and if you go through life and don't tell those you love, that you love them – John Powell.

Belief in the Resurrection in some indefinite future, stands in stark contrast to the routinely present. Nothing can prepare us for the finality and stark reality of death. Death has a sting. The death of a young person has a double effect – life cut off in its bloom, and so much potential and opportunity missed and lost. Bitterness and anger can easily flow. It posits the question *Why?* – Why an ending when so much is beginning? Why has there to be death?

Nature works like that – so many flowers bloom and blossom, unseen and are gone. Life is nature, nature is life! Yet, in Nature, nothing is lost, not a sparrow falls to the ground unnoticed; but the day is coming when all will be revealed.

What of terminal illness? Why does it have to intrude into vibrant and caring lives? Why does such a human being have to be reduced to infantile dependency? Why does death, so often, come clothed with pain?

It is helpful to remind ourselves that God did not give us answers, but came to join us in the experience of dying. During his final hours, he is passive, after a short life of serving and helping others, he is now being ministered to. He does nothing, except submit to what is being done to him. And yet, with that time, when he was most passive, we are most graced – just as, in the death of every good person there is new birth – *death is mysteriously life-giving*.

Nothing is more evident, nothing more obscure than life through death. Faith tells us this with stark simplicity – not easy to believe. We draw life through our senses – so powerful and needed is sense living, that it is hard to believe, or even imagine life beyond this world. That beyond the dust of this world is a life so radically different is hard to picture – *the resurrection of the body and life everlasting*.

It has been said that when we fear death, we are like babies, secure in the womb, fearing birth. The world, for all its vastness, is simply just another womb – and like babies in the womb, it is virtually impossible to imagine a life beyond our present experience. Which is why we cling to what we know. We fear death very much as babies fear life after birth!

Death, seen through the eyes of faith, is not *like* a birth, it *is* a birth. We had to be born before we could see the mother who carried and nurtured us into life – so too, with Mother-God. After this second birth, we will see where we come from, and where we have been going. Birth and death require the same act of faith, that a fuller life is waiting for us.

Love is resilient

We *know* that Christ has risen from the dead, because, despite the hurt, pain and suffering, love exists and is present in the world. Charity, care and compassion – the Easter Life. There is abundant evidence, waiting to be found, of so much resilience of people rising out of seemingly death-dealing horrors.

The Resurrection is our invitation to new living, life that is untouched by any and every form of death-dealing. Faith in the Resurrection is the only thing able to empower us into life beyond all our crucifixions.

An Easter card reads – *may you leave behind you a string of empty tombs!* – Christ has died, has risen, and has said: *where I am you too will be!*

Communion of Saints

Do we ever reflect on this? Simply put, it means we are still in communion with those who have died. Which means we can still relate to them. The bond of family persists, and we can still be present to each other – even in absence. For many, this is fanciful thinking; wonderful, if only it were true! It is true – it is an article of faith.

A young couple shared their story. In the past year their 12-year-old son had died, after a long struggle with cancer. Nothing, literally nothing, could soften such a devastating blow. Nature is set-up for the reverse: children are equipped to bury parents, tough as it may be, but not the other way round.

The morning after his death, they were at home sitting with friends – the phone rang. It was a neighbour – *Quick, look out of you front door!* They went and looked at a rainbow, the like of which they had never seen before, in terms of spectacular colour. They were, of course, taken by what they were seeing – but even more by the intuition, that this was their son's fireworks display for them.

As they watched, the mother heard – *Mum, this is for you, and because it is hard for you to believe it, I'll do it again tomorrow*. When this happened, I am sure that family has no hesitation in believing in the communion of saints.

GKC said:

The Communion of Saints is the democracy of the dead. Refusing to submit to the oligarchy of those who happen to be around. All democrats object to persons being disqualified by accident of birth; Christian Tradition objects to them being disqualified by accident of death.

Orthodoxy.

Walking justly...

Ghandi named seven social sins:

Politics without principle. Wealth without work. Commerce without morality. Pleasure without conscience. Education without character. Science without humanity. Worship without sacrifice.

When Pedro Arrupe [former General Superior SJ] was asked *why weren't previous generations as active in social justice, as the Church is today?* He replied: *Today, we know more!*

Knowing less, it was possible to be good and less involved in social justice. Today we know more, not only because modern communications show us the victims of injustice, but because we are less socially naïve. We understand better how social systems affect us for good or ill. Social justice is about how systems affect us – especially adversely.

Social justice and social morality are distinct from private charity and private morality. Private morality is doing something on my own. Social Morality has to do with systems I am part of. I can be god in my private life, and still be part of systems that victimise.

We are too blind to the fact that greed and violence at large, simply mirrors what is happening in individual hearts. There is a connection between what seems to be private and what is political and social. There will never be peace where there is greed, jealousy, unwillingness to forgive and compromise.

When we can't move beyond past hurts in local community and family – expect no better internationally. Private virtue, private charity is not enough. Recall the words of S James – *I wish you well, stay warm and well-fed* – is an abdication of responsibility.

Waging peace means much more than confronting the powers that be. What must first be confronted is our personal greed, hurts and jealousies. We need to convert self before trying to change systems. Waging peace means first be mindful of what are our true weapons and who is our real enemy!

Gentle Strength

It is now more urgent than ever to marry justice and contemplation. The trouble in the world and in the Church is that *the pious are not liberal, and the liberal are not pious*. When worship and private morality dominate there is a tendency to rationalise away the Gospel's demand for peace with justice.

When social justice dominates, we easily confuse Greenpeace with the Gospel, forgetting that the rock foundation for our commitment to social justice is Jesus Christ, not a liberal ideology. Social justice in both Church and State have been neutered by their own resident fears. Social Justice has not gone mainstream because, too often, while it contained truth, it undermined its own credibility

Failure to get beyond ideologies of left or right. Failure to be self-critical. Failure to be universally inclusive. Failure to see the necessary bridge between social action and contemplation.

Unnoticed haemorrhage

Failure to see the everyday face of suffering. Christ is still bleeding in suffering and injustice, with blood largely unnoticed; the cost of living charity, peace, patience... What is needed in both Church and State are persons able to see this, and able to make sure it isn't wasted.

What if...?

What if consistency was normal? What if we paused before butting-in? What if we remembered that heresy is a truth that is nine-tenths correct? What if the pious were more liberal, and the liberal more pious? What if theologians were as renowned for their real life stories, as for their academic acumen?

If all these, and so many others, happened, our planet would discover the urgency and credibility of hope.

David and Goliath

There is no substitute for imagination. Unless our symbols are working, there is no hope of changing direction. Take the images of David and Goliath – simple goodness standing before overwhelming evil; gentle sensitivity before brute force – putting to flight: *keep the rule, and the rule will keep you*. Currently, what is good, just and tender seems hopelessly outmatched.

Israel [*representing God*] facing the brutality of the Philistines, in their giant champion, Goliath, has nobody of corresponding strength. So, they send a boy, armed with a simple sling-shot; which Goliath sees as a joke.

We know the outcome. But what is the lesson to be learned? It obviously was not the first time David had used his sling. As a shepherd, alone on hillsides, he would have had much practice time to acquire a degree of accuracy. No matter what faces us, we will benefit from preparation.

Walking honestly

Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real."

"Does it Hurt?"

"Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt."

"Does it happen all at once," he asked, "or bit by bit?"

"It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't happen to people who break easily or have sharp edges or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But those things don't matter at all because once you are real you can't be ugly except to people who don't understand."

Velveteen Rabbit Margery Williams

Drunkenness has as much to do with lying as it has to do with alcohol. We are sober, truly sober, when we stop lying. AA.

Today, universally, the pervading temptation is to lie ourselves out of difficult/embarrassing situations; there is little temptation to honesty. We don't have to be sinless, bright or religiously inclined, to find Christ – we just have to be honest, and stop lying.

S John reminds us: *truth will set you free* – 8.32. When we stop lying, and speak truthfully, we change – we can even change the world. To lie in any area of life, is to be sick in every area. I wonder what difference it would have made if Adam and Eve, instead of lying, had simply said – *it seemed like a good idea at the time?*

Positive Inferiority

It isn't our strengths that build character, but our weaknesses and failures. Why is it that more of us are torn apart by our strengths than by our weaknesses? We grow by first falling apart. Theoretically, we can grow through our achieving, though almost always it is the opposite that brings change – our *dying* prepares us for rising!

Our weaknesses are not things to be cured from, problems to be solved, things to be hidden and buried. They are to be listened-to. Listening to someone who regularly visits, and sits by the bed of a young child, who can't hear, speak or see. Nothing is said, seemingly nothing shared – *and yet I know that in this powerlessness, God is speaking, and speaking in the only way God can speak in this world – inferiority powerlessness and humiliation let the voice of God be heard.*

It is good to remember that in our lives, it isn't only bad things that are hidden – but many good things too! Which is what I believe, motivated Jesus into saying: *everything now hidden, will be revealed.* Not the ominous just the bad things! As well as a hidden dark life, we also have a hidden Grace life.

We are called to community-living – if it is easy, it isn't real! Which is why community depends on us having the resilience to forgive [*without having to forget*]. There are no whole persons. From birth we meander through experiences of *being with* that leave scars. Damage which is permanent, but not fatal. Even though the tendency is to live as if it is fatal. There is a time for licking one's wounds – but also time for owning our ability to forgive.

To be Christian, is to be a child of the resurrection; bouncing back from every black Friday, with something always new. When spoken truthfully, it is not possible to say *I love you* repetitively. Since the expressing of love is always new!

Innocence

Innocence is the foundation stone of morality. Every child spontaneously longs for the experiences of adults – any healthy adult longs for the heart of a child!

Innocence is that sheer gaze of admiration and wonder. Innocence is evidence that chastity has far, far more than sexual connotations. Real experiencing happens when we can do so while remaining integrated. Conversely, we lose innocence when we experience things that cause disintegration – be they moral, psychological, emotional, spiritual or erotic.

That this is happening today, shows through spiralling rates of suicide, self-harm, substance abuse and the like.

Whilst the innocence of a child has roots in natural ignorance and naivety – termed *childishness*, adult innocence issues from *childlikeness*. The ability to gaze, rather than look – able to be wide open to what is seen, informed by life's hitherto experiences. According to Jesus, a child is receptive, full of wonder and respect.

Most of us have, long since, ceased being the person, who, as a child made friends easily. And yet, it is possible for life's experiences to lead along life-enhancing paths.; where vulnerability, and hurting can show God's presence in weakness: *when I am weak, then I am strong* – 2Cor.12.10. How does one fight for peace, while remaining gentle? *The echo of God's voice in*

every morning bird that sings – the snow-drop breaking through the sod – evidence of the strength of little things, evidence of prayers unspoken – like a mustard seed: Mt.17.20.

We are dying from a lack of love, in a world where, nearly everyone, wants to love and be loved. Food is abundant, yet millions perish through malnutrition. We have virtual libraries of books telling us why we are dysfunctional, chronically depressed and unfree. But it is all coldly clinical, dissected and examined under the merciless glare of fluorescent light. Weeping because of this, lends dignity to tears.

Gender

*Your life and mine, my love / Passing on and on, the hate / Fusing closer and closer with love /
Until at length they mate*

D H Lawrence

We are urged to *read the signs of the times* – not an easy task, because it's not easy to see how God's Spirit and other spirits are moving; it is a task calling for risk.

The Church today is under fire, which has been labelled *gender alienation*. Meaning, many, consciously or otherwise, experience Church as anti-feminine. What is important is to see that criticism is focussed on the *structures* of the Church – which have masculine roots. Many women [*and a sprinkling of men*] no longer attend Church – they haven't left the Church, they have simply stopped going.

What is not as evident, is that some men also suffer such alienation, though somewhat less with the structures, than with the very *soul* of religion; when religion seems in some way, un-masculine. Evidence for this can be seen, for example, in that there is ratio of 5 to 1 in favour of women to men attending religious gatherings; unlike counterparts in Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism...

Anger and grief do not mix well. And yet, such is the lot of experiencing gender alienation. We are all *imago Dei* – with Divine DNA written into our being. Women are frustrated that this is seemingly ignored in them in Church structure.

We live and breathe within a culture and Church today that is becoming more sophisticated – not a bad thing, but contributes to fostering unhappiness and anger.

The opposite of love is not hate or anger, but indifference. The deeper the love, the deeper the anger if love is betrayed. Anger and hatred both have affinity with love. They have been called love grieving. But not all anger is good, neither are some forms of grief. There is honest anger and grief – and both can be dishonest.

Honest anger does not distort; doesn't let hurt blind. It feels and indicates what is wrong – without having to lie about it. It lets the good remain good. It is not *rage*. Rage only wants to bring down, to destroy. Its wounds are deep, leaving no desire for reconciliation.

Honest anger has a time limit, it isn't forever. It isn't an end in itself. Its basic energy is desire for a way to resolve, to heal.

Honest grief follows the same rules.

Male and Female were made...

We need to imagine a picture in which the male in God empowers the female in God; and how the female empowers the male, in God; and then do the same for us – made in that image!

We can't imagine God as married. Yahweh doesn't have a wife. Factually, we have a masculine, celibate God, with a feminine side. We compensate for this by putting the feminine in God into Mary.

Attempts to remedy this are in seeing the Spirit as feminine. Which creates more problems than it solves. For instance, it leaves the Creator masculine. Our past theologies lack balance here. How do we understand masculine and feminine in terms of equality?

God is a woman, the feminists cry / But anyone knows that's a terrible lie / He toiled for six days, spent the seventh in heaven / If God were a woman, she'd toil the full seven.

God can't be a woman, as some people say / Or he wouldn't have needed to rest on that day / 'Cause since time first began and we women know best / Only children and man – and God – need a rest.

Seriously, how do we speak about God? Two avenues to consider: one *theological*, one *pastoral*. How do we speak about God if we cease conceiving of God as *him* or *male*? Do we resort to neuter language – *creator, redeemer, sanctifier*?

Theology is clear: *God is as much female as male; as much mother as father*. Christian tradition is clear – *both male and female image equally the likeness of God*.

Good theology says God is, by definition, *ineffable* – [*indescribable*] – because God is infinite, without boundaries [*gender is a boundary*] is, therefore, inconceivable and unthinkable. Which means we can *know* God, but never *think* God. Our minds can never capture God. All words, including Scripture, are inadequate; telling us more about what we don't know, than what we do know about God.

We use Revelation language, not because it captures God with accuracy, but because it is less inadequate than other languages, and God asks us to use it. From Fourth Lateran Council [1215] we learn: *everything we think about and speak about God is more inadequate than adequate, more inaccurate than accurate*.

It seems to me, the problem with our attempting to use *inclusive language*, is that because God is not simply male, not simply female, not neuter, all thought and language falls short. Does Julian of Norwich help?

As truly as God is our father, so just as truly God is our mother. In our father, God Almighty, we have our being: in our merciful mother we are remade and restored... It is I, the strength and goodness of fatherhood. It is I, the wisdom of motherhood. It is I, the light and grace of holy love. It is I, the Trinity, it is I, the unity.

This is where *we live and move and have our being* – Acts.17.28.

Try Again

God is totally indescribable – while God can be known, God can never be thought of, nor spoken of, in any adequate way.

This is equally true of God's gender. *All* gender terms applied to God [*father, mother, he, she*] are likewise inadequate. Male and Female both *reflect* God, and so God is somehow, both male and female. How? We don't know! There is no way to speak of the gender of God.

Yet, we must think and speak about God. Thus far, with very few exceptions, we have done this by applying masculine language. *Feminism* is right in saying this must change – language helps shape our thinking, and persistent use of male language perpetuates thinking of God as exclusively male. Which is neither true or healthy. We must risk new ways.

It isn't helpful, however, to eliminate all gender references. What passes for *inclusive language*, is even more *exclusive!* It excludes any reference to gender – speaking of God in cosmic, impersonal and genderless terms.

A feminist writer, wittingly, spoke of Father, Son and Spirit – as *two men and a bird!* No disrespect intended, simply stating fact. But, the suggestion using *Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier*, is of little help. We would then have two cosmic forces and a bird. What is missing is *person, gender, feeling*, any word which could stir-up emotion in us.

Inclusive language must be inclusive of both genders. Why not use alternating terms, male and female; he, she when referring to God? Sometimes *Our Father*, sometimes *Our Mother* – sometimes *he* sometimes *she*?

As happens with *any change*, there will be opposition to this. Eventually, however, we will be at home with using either gender. Our faith, our lives, will be all the better for it. Current attempts at inclusive language impersonalise God, leaving us without emotional connection.

We must risk – as in every aspect of faith-living – genderless language excludes everyone, male and female alike.

Unimaginable Love

When Christ said "Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing". He was speaking of an ignorance that excuses sin. Most of the time, when we sin, we do know what we are doing, what we don't know is how much God loves us – hence we are still innocent, through ignorance

Rahner

It is not uncommon, nor is it untrue, to hear the comment about people who had given-up on religious praxis: *he/she had such good heart*. When everyone dies there is nowhere else to go than to God – what makes it heaven or otherwise is *how we experience being there!* God is absolute love and totally unconditional forgiveness – how *I experience this* is my destiny. There is no *terms and conditions apply* in God.

Do we ever take God's unconditional love seriously? That God loves us long before any sin we commit, and long after every sin we will ever commit? Do I believe there are really no exclusions in God; of which we have many?

Peter, terrified at what could happen to him, betrayed Jesus – until he saw Jesus, emerging from the scourging, glance at him – what would I make of such a glance? Then, look again and see the reassurance Peter must have seen; that sent him out to cry his eyes out – the softness, the absence of disappointment in that glance. How sad, Judas didn't wait just a little bit longer.

My mind was lifted up to heaven and I saw the Lord as a Lord in his own house, where he had called his friends and servants to a banquet. He did not sit in one place but ranged throughout

the house, filling it with joy and gladness. Completely relaxed and courteous, he was the happiness and peace of his friends. His face radiating measureless love, like a marvellous symphony, it was that wonderful face, shining with the beauty of God that filled the whole place.

Julian of Norwich

What does God Look Like?

Why doesn't God get rid of doubt by self-showing? Why does God hide? Why do we have to have faith? The answer – look at everything you can see, to see certain things is to see the Father.

To ask such a question is like looking at a beautiful summer landscape, with flowers and trees in full bloom, and ask *where is summer?* Seeing certain things is seeing summer, is seeing God.

When asked about the veil of faith, Rahner responded:

- *Have you ever kept silent when unfairly treated?*
- *Have you ever forgiven, though you gained nothing by it?*
- *Have you ever made a sacrifice without receiving thanks, without adverse feelings?*
- *Have you ever done something, purely for the sake of conscience – accepting responsibility for it?*
- *Have you ever tried acting purely for the love of God, when no warmth sustained you?*
- *Have you ever been good to someone, without expecting gratitude?*

If you have, you have experienced God – perhaps without realising it. What does God look like? Look at somebody who has forgiven someone hated for years.

God never explodes into our world like superman come to the rescue. God still enters as Christ did – through a gestation process that produces a baby, which must then be picked up, nurtured and coaxed into adulthood. For God to have flesh and life in our world, for us to have faith in God, there is a pattern.

See how Mary gave birth to Christ and discover:

- *Impregnation by the Holy Spirit.*
- *Gestation of Christ within herself.*
- *The pangs of giving birth.*
- *The nurturing of an infant to adulthood.*

We are told pondered the word from God until she became pregnant. Which means Christ had no human father; Mary became pregnant with the Holy Spirit in *charity, joy, peace, patience, goodness, long-suffering, faith, mildness, fidelity and chastity* – the seeds took root in her. She gestated them into flesh – she gave her own flesh to that seed, it grew into an actual child, waiting to be born into the outside world.

Nurturing an infant to adulthood – she gave birth to a baby, not an adult. She gave birth to Jesus, and gave to the world the adult Christ, after years nursing and nurturing, coaxing and loving.

This isn't for our admiration, but our imitation. Mary is not an icon to be revered, but the pattern for the Incarnation to continue, God becoming flesh in our world. The pattern: *ponder the Word until we too become pregnant with the Spirit; gestate them into birth through our*

presence in the world; spend years nursing and nurturing that helpless child – this how the Incarnation works. It is how faith works. We can't prove God exists – God has to be gestated into today's world – as with Mary in her world.

Consolation

One of the greatest doctrines, *he descended into hell!* An old understanding interprets it: after the Original Sin, heavens gates were shut; no one could enter until *Christ paid the price for our sin!* In the time between Good Friday and Easter, he went to the place where all were waiting for the gates to be unlocked! This was understood as *he descended into hell*. Another understanding is he experienced the absence of God.

John 20 describes the risen Jesus appearing to the disciples; who were *huddled together in fear*, behind locked doors. Jesus came through locked doors [*twice*] and *breathed peace*.

Holman Hunt's *Christ the Light of the World [S Paul's Cathedral]* shows him, with a lantern, knocking on a door, waiting for it to be opened, from inside. Christ is kept waiting – only we, hidden inside, can open the door.

There are certain doors we must open to let him in. Is John 20 wrong? Jesus didn't stand and knock – he came right through locked doors; and said *don't be afraid – peace be with you!*

All the love in the world – as many suicides show – can't open our hell. Grieving families can't descend into hell – but Christ can! *He descended into hell*. There is no locked door he can't penetrate. You don't have to open the door – he is there before you came: *It's only me, and I love you!*

What did Jesus mean when he said: *the gate is small, the way is narrow that leads to life* – Mt.7.14? Hell is certainly a possibility, but not because of God, but because of us! I am free to reject love offered, and be self-sufficient. *It's my life -???* No one is self-starting – I am gifted with existence; and if I would know why, I only have to ask the Giver!

Hell is not full of people regretting their mistakes during their life-time. The quality of being in hell is not regret, but disdain and pity for those whose choices have made them happy. It takes a strong person to permanently set his/her heart love, peace and happiness.

If God is the all-patient, all-forgiving lover that Christ revealed, it is unthinkable that he would sit idly by – if this were so, it would cancel the Incarnation. But, if God respects human freedom, as Christ shows, surely there is nothing more God can do? This doesn't take account of the nature and power of God's love – when evil had done its worst and killed Jesus, it ran into the Resurrection.

If we take the Incarnation seriously, what is being said is *to love someone is saying you will never die*. I can have determination and resolve to do my own thing, but I can never detach myself from the love God expressed in me.

The Incarnation is not a limited company. It isn't just the institutional churches that carry-on the Incarnation in every age. All graced love is the Word made flesh. To touch it, is to be touched. Meaning? We are gifted with the energy to block death and hell. Yes, we will die – but die into new life, life not just for us: *I'm worried about my son, recently killed. Despite being brought up in the faith, he gave it up – what happens now, is he condemned? He will go to God and say I'm Tom, and God will say "yes, I know, your mother has told me all about you"*.

It is truly said *only Christ forgives sin*. What is easily forgotten, is that this is so – and we are the body of Christ! In a sense, the Incarnation appears to be too good to be true. God isn't hard to find: forgiveness, grace and salvation are not just for the few.

We don't have to save ourselves; we don't have to make amends for our sin. This world is not a border check for heaven, but a God-given means to get there. Love, even human love, is stronger than death! Living the risen-life means living it as the fullness of being human – *I have come that you may live abundantly!* - Jn.10.10.

Paschal Imagination

Your inability to understand comes from a failure of imagination – [Tolkien to C S Lewis]. How true! To let ourselves be led by the Spirit through these changing times, calls for great imagination.

First – what is imagination? It is not fantasy! It is not the power to create *Star Wars* or *ET*. *It is the power to create the images we need to understand and to respond to what we are experiencing.*

We lack imagination when we stand petrified facing our experience, unable to cope with what is there. We have healthy imagination when we realise God is asking something of us. It is the foundation of hope – changing fate into destiny.

We are asked to *re-image* [*re-imagine*] our faith-living, our Church-living structures; a task far from easy. There seems to be little interest in reading the *signs of the times*. There is either too much sticking one's head in the sand, or abdicating all responsibility for change. Imagination dies – and so does religion.

But, Christ is not dead! He is still *about his Father's business* – Lk.2.49. The mystery of his death and resurrection is still being lived-out, his spirit stirring hearts. It takes imagination to see where and how this is happening.

Which means being able to look at our lives, our Church, our world and name where *we* have *died*, laid claim to our *rebirth*, and have *ascended in the new Spirit given us*.

Looking at history, we see *significant* people all having imagination – Francis, Dominic, Ignatius, Teresa, Julian... Francis has been well described as *a loyal non-conformist*. He was a loyal son of the Church, but when authority tried to impose a rule – he simply said: *The Lord showed me what to do!*

What would happen today if you said that to the local bishop? These reformers were able to *name a death and claim a resurrection* and so let-go of the old. We have Pope Francis with the same vision – and the same antipathies!

The Church as I knew it is gone – it is now different; long may it continue to be open to change, through *Paschal Imagination* – looking and finding the pattern of Christ's death and resurrection – and let the old ascend with gratitude for making the new possible.

The Sacramentality of Life

The world is holy – everything comes from God, and is, thereby, sacramental. Our bodies are temples of the Spirit... The problem is that so much of our everyday living is lack-lustre, with

enforced restrictions – Covid 19 etc. – that any talk of sacramentality sounds like whistling in the wind.

News bulletins can be litanies of disasters – what does *my body is a temple of the Spirit* actually mean in all this mess? Have we lost our awareness that the world is holy? That everything in it is sacramental? We had the custom [*Rogation Days*] of blessing the crops where we live – and good as this is, I always felt, and still feel, that as it is, everything is holy, and in place of blessing could we not do something similar to our world as we do with Grace before and after meals?

Most of our eating isn't sacramental because we don't connect what is put before us to its sacred origin. For better or for worse our ways are different from former times. Long, long ago, Socrates said *the unexamined life is not worth living*.

After a mother has smiled, for a long time, at her new-born, the child will begin to smile back. She has awakened love in the infant heart, along with recognition. Just as important as her smile is the sound of her voice; it is this that is crucial for nurturing human awareness.

We come out of the dark chaos of unconscious infancy only when we are *called out* by voices that attract and lure us. [*It is no accident that speak our mother tongue*]. Before we can speak, we are confined in a darkness that leaves us unable to think and feel life. Which we can see dramatically happening when a person unable to speak, learns signing.

God's Word challenges us to charity, justice, aspects of morality and worship. Christ came as this word in flesh and blood, to bring light, life and love to be our *mother tongue*. Christianity is much more our mother tongue than our religion.

How sad, that we hear very little of this in homilies and catechesis. How much of what we hear and share deserves the name: *our mother tongue*? There certainly is much good in what is heard and shared – what tends to be missing is a welcoming smile, a beckoning *mother*. To hear the Word of God in my *mother tongue*!

We have been given *another Francis*. It is evident that what is needed is not coming from Hierarchy or Theology or Pastoral Plans – though they are trying generously and mightily. We need to be stopped in our tracks, probably by someone not of our generation, like a wild flower in an unspoiled meadow – far from well-used ways.

For me, Francis of Assisi was one such. His secret was first, not to see himself as a human being in Creation, but as a creature among creatures – experiencing equality without having to go looking for it. It is interesting that in his Canticle of Creation, *human* only appears way down what he lists.

Ritual

Whilst I have been blessed to be born into Christian living from infant baptism, I do at times wonder if I would have the courage to change so much of life, to risk alienation, as do all who come to Baptism as adults; who have seen everything the world is offering and realise, good as it is, it isn't enough. Anything that can be rationally understood is, by definition, limited; will never satisfy an infinite thirst – we need help beyond the rational.

We value explanations more than ancient rituals. In one sense, the world is leaving the Church behind in its rediscovery of the value of true ritual. In many areas, counselling is giving way to ritual. How does it work? We don't know – if we did we could rationalise it!

Ritual works in ways beyond reason – like a kiss or a hug, which can do things that words do not. Coming home after a more than tense day at work, we feel the need to unburden, to tell someone what has happened – with nothing left out – hopefully, what happens is a hug that resolves in silence.

Whatever the current practice, the origin of Sacramental ritual is to provide an experience of wholeness [*holiness*] beyond the reach of words. In the clamour of our noisy, modern world, a cry is actually growing more and more common – it has been expressed as: *tell me something old!*

It is not unusual to meet religious people with faith problems: *I was brought up in a Catholic family, went to a Catholic school, never miss Mass... and yet, I have trouble believing the Easter story – Resurrection.*

We have good times, when we know we believe – and times when we are full of doubt, and feel we are losing faith. Does this mean some days my faith is strong – other days it is weak? No – what I do have is a strong/weak *imagination!* Where is my faith – in my head or my heart? My faith is me, where I am. Often my gut instinct is nearer to my faith than my head or my heart! We all have experiences of owning commitments – *marriage church etc.* – where our heads and our hearts are not, *but we are!*

The head screams *this doesn't make sense*; the heart *no longer has feelings for it* – but we stay, held by something we can't explain or feel. This is where faith lives!

Pray

I got up early one morning / And rushed right into the day / I had so much to do / I took no time to pray.

I woke up quite early this morning / and paused ere entering the day / there was so much to do / I had to take time to pray!

The understanding of *Divine Providence* does not feature in popularity poles; sadly, to be replaced by a kind of destructive fatalism – *if God wants my child to live he will not let it die – we won't take a blood transfusion – God sent aids to punish our sexual promiscuity – God sends disasters to bring us back to our senses!*

God does not start floods, wars, disasters, pandemics. Nature, chance, human freedom, and sin cause these. But having said that, it is not the same as saying God does not speak through them. God speaks through chance events, both the disastrous and the advantageous.

A woman is on record saying that she, by her own choice, gave up going to Church or praying, because she saw it as whistling in the wind. On holiday with a family member, she was invited to go to Mass on Sunday. She politely declined, and went skiing.

She had a mishap on the ski slope, getting a broken leg. After a stay in hospital, with a leg now in plaster, she was invited again to go to Sunday Mass. Having nothing else to do, she went. It happened to be *Good Shepherd Sunday*, and the preacher began speaking about an ancient, Jewish tradition among shepherds. Some lambs are born congenital strays – always drifting away from the flock. So, they broke one of their legs, so it had to be carried, until healed – by which time the lamb had become accustomed to the Shepherd.

This woman said to herself – given me with a broken leg, which the preacher knew nothing about – surely there is more than coincidence here. That happened 15 years previously – *I have gone to Church and prayed ever since.*

For some, Divine Providence is a given – if God gave a bumper crop, thank-God! If the crop failed, God was asking them to live on less for a while.

In all the conspiracies of accidents in everyday life, the finger of God is there. We are all children of God, and this shows when we ask, not where is God in all this, but *what is God saying to us?*

How right Eliz. Browning: *the earth is ablaze with the fire of God; but only those who see it take their shoes off – the rest sit around and pick blackberries!*

Ordinary dust of the earth is holy – it became the body of God. Unfortunately, we don't see it, because we are too busy trying to get, to number and claim... instead of pondering and wondering. *Lord, let me see!*

We start taking things for granted when we no longer approach life with the eyes of a child – *unless you become as little children...Mt.18.3.* The roots of boredom are embedded in the loss of wonder. *Familiarity breeds contempt.* Children are never bored because, as GKC remarked: *they look at familiar things until they become unfamiliar.*

Karl Rahner was asked whether he believed in miracles. *I don't believe in them; I rely on them to get through everyday living!*

Am I one of those people who allows God to do big things – like the Resurrection – but expect God leaves everyday happenings well alone?

Someone once said: *the only difference between a mystic and a psychotic, is that the mystic is more careful about who he/she talks to!* Which is not true! The difference is that, for the mystic, God is real, the supernatural actually exists, and God's providence is in little things.

Distractions

We often get irritated when we are interrupted in our work – until we realise that the interruptions are our work! An unplanned pregnancy turns plans upside down, initially causing annoyance – until *the unwanted* turns out to be a much loved child.

What starts as an unwelcome interruption, can become a real agenda. Surely, our lives are not to be left to pure circumstance, we must be pro-active in choosing our destiny.

Baptism is such a distraction! When I receive baptism, I am saying my life is no longer *mine*. To be baptised is to submit to love.