

**Anxious Hearts, Wounded Lives
The Place of the New Sacred**

Talk at St Brigid's Parish, Belfast

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It's a huge honour for me to be invited to give this talk here at St Brigid's this evening. Few things, as you can imagine, are more humbling than being invited to give a talk to the people of your own place, of your own home even. Present here this evening, I'm afraid, are an alarming number of my own family and, along with them, several close friends from the past. And that, believe me, is no small challenge. Invited to speak in public to your own family – think of it! St Brigid, pray for us!

Belfast, in the form of St Malachy's College, was indeed my "home" for several years, and it was also home in another sense as well. Sometime after I joined the Dominican Order, my mother moved from Newcastle to Belfast to look after my younger brother John and, quite often, I would come from Dublin to visit her. At that time the Troubles were at their height. And I recall one rather striking and decidedly humorous conversation with my mother which is not unrelated to the subject of the talk this evening. When in Dublin I used to visit, when I could, a number of prisoners in Mount Joy and Arbor Hill. One day someone asked me to visit a man in prison in Belfast. This meant I would arrive late at my mother's, and that would certainly have caused her to worry. So, I phoned to explain that I would be arriving late. "Late?" she exclaimed. I said I would be visiting someone in prison in Belfast. "Prison?" she exclaimed again. Tongue in cheek, and half-teasing her, I made bold to remark: "You know, Mother, Jesus tells us in the Gospel you're supposed to visit people in prison." She replied, and without a moment's hesitation: "Paul Brendan, Jesus isn't living in the North of Ireland!" Needless to say, she was joking. I hope she was joking! But the humour of her remark touches, as it happens, on the topic of our talk this evening, "Anxious Hearts, Wounded Lives: The Place of the New Sacred."

The Sacred. What is the link, if any, between the realm of the sacred, as we usually understand it, and the world we associate with prisons and prisoners, the world which some might call the profane world of crime and violence, of loneliness and desperation? What link is there between the sacred and the anxious hearts and wounded lives of so many of our contemporaries suffering from severe illness, or from poverty and unemployment, men and women who have themselves perhaps become victims of violence?

At first glance it would seem that the realm of the sacred is a world utterly and completely separate from the murky, dangerous, complicated and unhappy world in which so many people today, and some people here, perhaps, are obliged to live their lives. So – what then is the connection with the sacred?

If asked to choose one saying of Jesus which strikes me as the most surprising and the most unexpected in the New Testament what first comes to mind is a statement on the sacred which must have completely stunned the contemporaries of Jesus when they first heard it, a comment which would almost certainly have sounded not merely bold but also subversive, especially given the enormous respect and awe felt by the Jewish people regarding the Sabbath and its obligations. The statement I have in mind is the following:

“Man was not made for the Sabbath. No – the Sabbath was made for man!”
(Mark 2: 27)

Even today, after 20 centuries of Christianity, in the third millennium, these words sound fresh and revolutionary. They seem in fact, at least at first hearing, to challenge the age-old distinction on which religion has traditionally been based, the distinction that is between the sacred and the profane. So, what then did Jesus intend by this remarkable declaration? Is it possible that, after many hundreds of years of Christian experience, we have hardly even begun to take in the implications of what he said?

There are other statements made by Christ in the New Testament which contain something of the same surprise. When speaking, for example, to his disciples about the blessings to come in heaven for those who feed the hungry in this life and welcome strangers and clothe the naked and visit prisoners etc, we might expect Jesus to say, “Do these things and, in time, you will inherit the kingdom prepared for you by my Father.” But this is not

what he says. Instead, astonishingly, he declares: “I am in prison and you visit me, I am hungry and you give me food, I am naked and you clothe me.”

The disciples of Jesus, when they first came to realize that the one making these statements was no mere mortal, but was in fact God come in the flesh, the All Holy Son of God, they must have been astounded. Holiness, in their understanding, belonged naturally to the realm of the sacred. How was it possible, then, that the one who was All-Holy could speak of himself as if belonging to the dereliction and dirt and drama of the profane world, the world of the sick and the wounded, of the starving and naked, of beggars, prisoners, and outsiders? Was the inherited notion of the sacred being somehow turned completely on its head? And, if that’s the case, how are we to understand this incredible reversal, this new sacred established by Christ?

The New Temple, the New Sacred

Holiness, within the Jewish tradition, was always linked with the word “separation” and, in particular, with the notion of a radical divide between the sacred and the profane. Those who were pure were to be kept from the impure, the clean from the unclean, the righteous from sinners. The temple, being itself regarded as the most sacred place of all, was constructed on the fundamental principle of separation. First of all, it was separated from the city by its walls. Then, inside the walls of the temple, the Holy of Holies was established in a place set apart. And, as a further sign of separation, inside the Holy of Holies, the Mercy Seat of God was covered by a veil or curtain. That curtain was, of course, the ultimate symbol of separation. So almost nothing could be more momentous, with regard to the sacred, than what we are told in the Gospel of Matthew concerning the moment of Christ’s death, namely that “the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom” (Mt 27:51).

What this means is that because of Christ’s sacrifice, because of his complete giving of himself to the point of death, there is now no longer any barrier between ourselves and what is most sacred. As Hebrews puts it:

By virtue of that one single offering he has achieved the eternal perfection of all whom he is sanctifying ... In other words, brothers and sisters, through the blood of Jesus we have the right to enter the sanctuary, by a way which he has

opened for us, a living opening through the curtain, that is to say, his body (Heb 10:14, 19-21).

Christ died naked on the side of a hill, outside the temple, outside the city, achieving thereby the purification of the entire earth, making every mountain and valley, every river and ocean on earth a place of new blessing, a place suitable for prayer. By dying on the cross he became the priest not of one single people, nor of one exclusive religion, but the priest in a sense of the entire world. All of us, as a result, simply in virtue of being human have access to what is most sacred. And the reason? Because the new temple on earth, the true Holy of Holies, is nothing other than the body of Christ Jesus. "Destroy this temple," Jesus said, "and in three days I will raise it up." And the text adds: "he was speaking about the temple of his body" (Jn 2: 19).

The implications of this statement are enormous. And the early Christians were quick to seize on what exactly it indicated about their own lives as believers. Yes, the new temple is Christ, but it is also Christ's body, his Church, the community of the faithful. And that's why St Paul, writing to the Corinthians, has no hesitation in saying: "Do you not realize that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling within you?" (I Cor 6:19).

God was manifestly at one with the wounded lives of those first Christians. And that fact was, of course, the revelation which knocked Paul to the ground at the moment of his own conversion. The voice he heard from heaven did not cry out: "Why are you persecuting the poor Christians," but rather "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting *me*?" (Acts 9:4). Already, during the life of Jesus, there were clear signs of his deliberate identification with those in great suffering. He was prepared, for example, to trespass the prohibitions laid down by Mosaic Law and, on one occasion, permitted the lame and the blind to come to him in the temple where he cured them, a thing unheard of. He also allowed a prostitute to touch him, and he himself reached out to touch handicapped people, and lepers, and even the dead. These were all signs of his amazing compassion. But they were also, I would suggest, beginning indications of a revelation that would come later regarding what we might call the hidden dignity and sacred character of the human person and of the human body. St Paul gave expression to that new revelation in the passage already quoted from I Corinthians: "Do you not realize that your bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit dwelling within you?" (I Cor 6:19)

For the authentic disciples of Jesus, the human person – the human body – far from being regarded as belonging merely to the secular realm, or to a realm outside the sacred, is viewed as nothing less than the very temple of the sacred, the temple of God’s Spirit. Not only, therefore, has the human spirit acquired a new dignity in Christ, the human body has also been made holy by the event of the Incarnation.

The Human Body as Sacred

To what extent, we need to ask, at this point, have we been able, over the centuries, to live up to the remarkable vision communicated to us here by St Paul? Does there exist, in the Catholic tradition, abundant evidence of this vision being lived and understood by the lay-faithful of the Church, by married men and women, and by the many religious of the Church’s past? And is the new sacred, therefore, something which immediately compels attention, something that stands out in the lived theology of our saints and poets, our monks and mystics, our artisans, labourers, painters, and theologians?

You’ll forgive me I hope if, by way of an answer, I begin by referring first of all to a number of texts from the Dominican tradition. One work dating from the fourteenth century I find of particular interest in this context. Entitled *The Nine Ways of Prayer of St Dominic*, the work gives an unusually important place to the role of the body in prayer. For St Dominic it was never enough simply to focus the mind in meditation, and be raised up into a state of “mental prayer.” No – Dominic prays with all that he is, body and soul. He doesn’t simply reverence the Lord in his spirit. He bows down physically before God’s presence, allowing the members of his body to draw him or to lead him, as it were, into prayer. Thus, one moment we see him kneeling on the ground or sitting in a chair wholly absorbed in meditation; another moment (in what is called the prayer of the hands) we see him lifting up his hands and arms in supplication; another moment, he is lying prostrate on the ground in humble adoration; and then again we see him, in a moment of extreme need, standing with his arms outstretched in the shape of a cross. The body, therefore, is not to be excluded, *cannot* be excluded, from the life of prayer. And the same holds true for the senses and the imagination. Margaret Ebner, a Dominican mystic of the Middle Ages, hears God saying

to her, on one occasion: “I am no robber of the senses, I am the enlightener of the senses!”¹

Dominic himself, we are told by early witnesses, would keep long night vigils. According to one of the saint’s contemporaries – Brother John of Bologna – after lengthy prayers, and after lying face down on the pavement of the Church, St Dominic would rise up, and perform two simple acts of homage. First, within the Church, he would “*visit* each altar in turn ... until midnight.” But then “he would go very quietly and *visit* the sleeping brethren; and, if necessary, he would cover them up.”² In Latin the same verb “*visitare*” is used for visiting the sacred altars and visiting the sleeping brethren. One has the distinct impression that Dominic’s reverence for the individual altars in the Church is intimately related to his reverence and care for the sleeping brethren. It’s almost as if Dominic is acknowledging, first of all, the presence of the sacred in the altars, and then – with no less reverence – acknowledging that same presence in his own brethren.

The fact that God in Christ assumed a human body in the Incarnation has obviously changed everything. Common, everyday tasks – those places where, in Kavanagh’s phrase, “life pours ordinary plenty” – are now hallowed. Utterly convinced of this fact, Johannes Tauler, the great Dominican preacher of the fourteenth century, remarked: “There is no task so small, so insignificant or menial, that it is not a proof of God’s special grace.”³ And again: “One person knows how to spin, another how to make shoes; some people are good at practical things, which they perform to best advantage; others are not. All these graces are God-given, the work of His Spirit.”⁴ In similar vein, the Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, writes: “To lift up the hands in prayer gives God glory, but a man with a dungfork in his hand, a woman with a sloppail, give him glory too.”⁵

¹ “*The Revelations of Margaret Ebner*,” in *Margaret Ebner: Major Works*, ed., L.P. Hindsley (Mahwah 1993) p.100.

² “*De Beato Dominico*” XVII, in *Vitae Fratrum*, MOFPH, Vol I, ed., B. Reichert O.P. (Louvain 1846) p.79. My italics.

³ Sermon 47, *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, trans., M. Shradly (Mahwah, New Jersey 1985) p.154.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Gerard Manley Hopkins, “On St Ignatius’s Spiritual Exercises,” in *A Hopkins Reader*, ed., J. Pick (New York 1966) p.396.

What these texts make clear is that ordinary human life is now in some way sacred, and the common, everyday details of that life no less sacred. One of the finest theologians of the 20th century, Yves Congar, speaking on the subject of human dignity, quotes a stunning phrase from the Orthodox saint, Nicolas Cabasilas. It reads: “Among all visible creatures, human nature alone can truly be an altar.”⁶ Congar himself, in his book, *The Mystery of the Temple*, makes bold to say: “Every Christian is entitled to the name of ‘saint’ and the title of ‘temple’.”⁷ Saint, temple, altar – these are extraordinary words to use when describing a human being, and so extraordinary they sound, at first hearing, far too extravagant, far too wonderful to be real. That’s no doubt the reason why preachers today instinctively avoid any attempt to articulate this Gospel vision. But there are exceptions. I have been struck, for example, by lines I read a few years ago in a homily by one of our contemporaries, a Benedictine monk. Speaking of how ordinary human life is transfigured in the light of the Gospel, he remarked:

When you stand at the kitchen stove, that is the centre, that is the altar. When you lie in your bed, your bed becomes the altar. When you wash a dish or pick up litter, you are the altar. You are always standing on holy ground. Any moment can be the moment. Any place can be the place.⁸

A Key Question

At this point in our reflections we need to stop and ask ourselves a question of great importance. If it is true, as all the texts I have quoted so far seem to

⁶ Cited in Congar, *The Mystery of the Temple*, trans., R.F. Trevett (Westminster, Maryland 1962) p.203.

⁷ *The Mystery of the Temple*, p.203.

⁸ From a homily preached by a Benedictine monk on Passion Sunday; cited in Esther de Waal in “The Benedictine Charism Today,” Talk at Illinois Benedictine College Community, 26 April 1995.

suggest, that ordinary human life is indeed hallowed, and if the most basic, everyday details of our human existence are now to be regarded as sacred, and if, therefore, the inherited notion of what is sacred has been deliberately turned on its head by Jesus, what does that mean for the practice of religion? If we are to believe that all the earth is holy, and our human lives are holy, what need is there for the rites and rules of a separate religion? The one theologian of our time who dared to put this question to himself with great candour and great honesty was Joseph Ratzinger. Writing in *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, reflecting on the new sense of the sacred achieved by Christ, he asks if, as disciples of Christ, we are now free to abandon the rites and ceremonies of the past:

Is the whole world not now God's sanctuary? Is sanctity not to be practiced by living one's daily life in the right way? Is our divine worship not a matter of being loving people in our daily life? ... Can the sacral be anything other than imitating Christ in the simple patience of daily life? Can there be any other holy time than the time for practicing love of neighbour, whenever and wherever the circumstances of our life demand it?⁹

At the core of this list of questions there is one challenging question: Is there, in fact, in light of the new teaching of Jesus, still a place for the practice of religion, or has religion been somehow superseded by what might be thought of as the new sacred task – the new exclusive task – simply loving one another?

Joseph Ratzinger, with quiet impressive wisdom points out that the answer we give to this question will surely be mistaken if we choose to ignore the crucial “not yet” of our Christian existence.¹⁰ It is true: Christ has already in many ways exploded our familiar ways of thinking about the sacred. But the new understanding of the sacred doesn't mean that, all of a sudden, we have become as if by magic as holy as the angels, and that the New Heaven and the New Earth have arrived. No, if we are honest with ourselves, we will be

⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans., J. Saward (San Francisco 2000) p.53.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

willing to acknowledge what Ratzinger calls “the permanent limits of human existence in this world.”¹¹

But a radical change has taken place all the same. Things are not as they were before. Yes, the empirical conditions of life in this world still remain “in force,” and for us they are so challenging, so much in our face, they might seem to mock the great Christian vision. But all these conditions, Ratzinger insists, “have been burst open, and must be more and more burst open.”¹² He writes:

[Christ] has already done what we have to do ... And now the challenge is to allow ourselves to be taken up into his being “for” the sake of other human beings, to let ourselves be embraced by his opened arms, which draw us to himself. He, the Holy One, hallows us with the holiness that none of us could ever have given ourselves.¹³

We are living now in what Ratzinger calls an “in-between” time, “a mixture of the already and the not yet.”¹⁴ And it is the reality of the “not yet” which helps explain why we continue to need the visible and tangible sacraments of Christ’s presence in the Church, and why so many of the traditional forms of the sacred in religion have survived. Ratzinger writes: “The curtain of the Temple has been torn. Heaven has been opened up by the union of the man Jesus, and thus of all human existence, with the living God.”¹⁵ Then he asks, given that extraordinary event: “do we still need sacred space, sacred time, mediating symbols?” And he answers: “Yes, we do need them ... We need them to give us the capacity to know the mystery of God.”¹⁶ It’s true, we can already dare to say that “we participate in the heavenly liturgy,” but this participation, Ratzinger reminds us, is always mediated to us “through earthly signs.”¹⁷

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*, p.54.

13 *Ibid.*, p.59.

14 *Ibid.*, p.54.

15 *Ibid.*, p.60.

16 *Ibid.*, p.61.

17 *Ibid.*, p.61.

At this point I would like to make an observation about the event of the Last Supper which strikes me as relevant here. Jesus did not simply say to us and to his disciples on that occasion: “Love one another.” He said, and *did* something else as well. “He placed himself,” as De la Taille so accurately expresses it, “in the order of signs, in the order of symbols”.¹⁸ Having first taken up the bread and wine into his hands, and having pronounced over them the words “This is my body, this is my blood,” Jesus then said: “Do this in memory of me.” In other words, conscious of our human need for the tangible and the visible, and knowing how we live our lives in the hope and anguish of the not yet, Jesus asked us to perform a simple rite, a liturgy in his memory. Concerned that we should always, in this in-between time, have a palpable reassurance of his love, he humbly “placed himself in the order of signs.”

There is no doubt we are living now in the time of the new sacred. But we are not yet in heaven – God knows! In heaven there will be no need of any sanctuary, or altar, or temple, because Christ himself will be that temple. But here on earth we need the temple, we need the visible Church, we need the sacraments of Christ’s presence, and we need the visible witness of men and women, religious and lay, living signs for our own anxious and bewildered generation – signs of transcendent hope.

And we also, let it be said here, and without hesitation, we also need liturgy. But our liturgy should be one formed in the light of the new sacred, and that means a liturgy at once beautiful and yet chastened, exalted and yet humble, a liturgy always contemplative at its core of the presence of Christ our High Priest, but also of Christ our humble brother and servant, Christ, the friend of the poor and the starving, the sick and the forgotten, the downtrodden and the outsiders.

The New Sacred and the Poor

I have always been struck by a passage in the private diary of Saint John XXIII. Sometime in March 1925, under the heading “Preparation for my episcopal ordination,” he wrote: “The bishop’s robes will always remind me of ‘the splendour of souls’ which they signify, the bishop’s real glory. God

¹⁸ Maurice de la Taille, *The Mystery of Faith and Human Opinion, Contrasted and Defined* (London 1930) p.212.

forbid that they should ever become a motive for vanity.”¹⁹ I don’t know if Pope Francis was familiar with this passage, but I was reminded of it as soon as I heard the homily he gave at his first Chrism Mass on Holy Thursday as Pope. The chasuble the priest wears at Mass is not worn for personal honour. No, Pope Francis declares: “the priest celebrates by carrying on his shoulders [on his chasuble] the people entrusted to his care and bearing their names written in his heart. When we put on our simple chasuble it might well make us feel, upon our shoulders and in our hearts, the burdens and the faces of our faithful people.”²⁰

Pope Francis then goes on to note that “the beauty of all these liturgical things ... is not so much about trappings and fine fabrics ... [but rather] about the glory of our God resplendent in his people”:

The precious oil which anoints the head of Aaron does more than simply lend fragrance to his person; it overflows down to “the edges”. The Lord will say this clearly: his anointing is meant for the poor, prisoners and the sick, for those who are sorrowing and alone ... We need to “go out”, then, in order to experience our own anointing, its power and its redemptive efficacy: to the “outskirts” where there is suffering, bloodshed, blindness that longs for sight, and prisoners in thrall to many evil masters ... giving what little ointment we have to those who have nothing, nothing at all.²¹

Pope Francis is alerting us here most particularly to the fact that we can at times become so absorbed in the external trappings and rubrics of liturgy that we can forget what liturgy represents. We can forget the humble Lord and we can forget our neighbour in need. A Dominican friend of mine, while engaged in giving a retreat to a contemplative monastery in the States, was asked one morning to bring the Eucharist to a Sister who was seriously ill. The Sister had great difficulty in breathing and had been put on oxygen as result. Accompanying him into the room were two sisters carrying candles.

¹⁹ Pope John XXIII, *Journal of a Soul*, trans., D. White (New York 2000) p.205.

²⁰ Pope Francis, *Homily for Chrism Mass*, Holy Thursday 2013.

²¹ *Ibid.*

At one point the candles were brought so close to the bed and, therefore, to the oxygen container, he whispered that it might be dangerous, that there could be an accident, so one of the sisters immediately bent over the bed and, to his astonishment, turned off the oxygen! Not, I would suggest, the wisest move. When in doubt, blow out the candles, not the last breath of your dying sister!

Dominicans, I've discovered, are just as prone as anyone else to making these kind of mistakes, allowing ourselves on occasion to place a wholly exaggerated emphasis on some of the externals of liturgical practice and on the externals also of religious life. One story from the 15th century comes to mind in this context, and it always makes me blush when I think of it. It concerns a Dominican friar who found himself actively engaged in conversation one day with the remarkable lay woman saint, Catherine of Genoa, a married woman.²² The Dominican was foolish enough to suggest that, being himself a man who had renounced the world in favour of religion, in contrast to Catherine who was living in the world – “wedded to the world” – was the way he put it, he was better prepared than she was “for divine love.”²³ Catherine, although not in any sense a proud person, on hearing these words, was so shocked, she jumped at once to her feet and, with so much emotion, we're told that “her hair burst from the band that confined it, and fell dishevelled over her shoulders.”²⁴ Then she exclaimed: “[Father] if I believed that your habit would add one spark to my love for God, and I could obtain divine love in no other way, I would not hesitate to tear it from you!”²⁵

The New Sacred and the Family

In parenthesis allow me to say something here about the implications of the new sacred for family life and married life. The vision expressed in the Gospels and by St Paul in this regard has, unfortunately, seldom been grasped in depth by Catholic preachers and theologians. One impressive

²² See *The Life and Doctrine of Saint Catherine of Genoa*, ed., P.A. Boer (London 1997) p.23.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

exception, however, is the teaching on marriage and married love by St John Paul II. When he was Pope, John Paul dedicated a great number of his audiences from September 1979 to November 1984 to an in-depth explanation and exploration of the mystery of marriage and human sexuality. Karl Wojtyla, John Paul II, was of course a celibate all his life. Some within the Church, and also outside it, hold to the view that a celibate lacks the necessary knowledge, the necessary experience, to speak with authority on the topic. A working-class woman in Dublin, I remember, after listening to a long, pious sermon from a priest on the mystery of sacramental marriage, turned to her friend, and remarked: “Jees, Bernadette, I only wish I knew as little about it as he does!”

During the pontificate of Pius XII, the Pope came under direct attack from George Bernard Shaw for having presumed to speak out on the subject of women’s dress. But an unexpected author came at once to the Pope’s defence, a man one imagines would be opposed to the Catholic vision on sex and marriage. I am referring to the English novelist D.H. Lawrence. Lawrence, in defence of Pius XII, wrote the following: “George Bernard Shaw scoffs at the Pope for wanting to cover women up; saying that the last person in the world to know anything about sex is the Chief Priest of Europe; and that the one person to ask about it would be the Chief Prostitute of Europe, if there were such a person.”²⁶

But Lawrence will have none of this: “The Chief Priest of Europe,” he says, “knows more about sex than Mr Shaw does, anyhow, because he knows more about the essential nature of the human being. Traditionally, he [the Pope] has a thousand years’ experience. Mr Shaw jumped up in a day”!²⁷ Lawrence then continues with unconstrained sarcasm: “The Chief Prostitute of Europe would know truly as much about sex as Mr Shaw does. Which is, not much. Just like Mr Shaw, the Chief Prostitute would know an immense amount about the counterfeit sex of men, the shoddy thing that is worked by tricks. And just like him she would know nothing at all about the real sex in a man, that has the rhythm of the seasons and the years, the crisis of the winter solstice and the passion of Easter.”²⁸

²⁶ D. H. Lawrence, *Phoenix II, Unpublished and Other Prose Works*, ed., W. Roberts and H.T. Moore (London 1968) p.497.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.499

²⁸ *Ibid.*

In contrast, “the Church,” in Lawrence’s opinion, “is established upon a recognition of some, at least, of the greatest and deepest desires in man, desires that take years, or a life-time, or even centuries to fulfil.”²⁹ The Church “celibate as its priesthood may be,” in Lawrence’s judgment, and built upon what he calls “the lonely rock of Peter,” possesses a wisdom that is remarkable both for its range and its profundity.³⁰ He writes: “To the priest, sex is the clue to marriage and marriage is the clue to the daily life of the people, and the Church is the clue to the greater life.”³¹

That last statement of Lawrence is, in one regard at least, close the vision of John Paul II, close that is to the conviction of Wojtya that the call to love, *inscribed in our very bodies*, is “the fundamental element of human existence in the world” (General Audience 16.1.80): married love viewed, in other words, in all its particularity, but always against the background of the “greater life.” In a 1982 Audience John Paul remarked that the “great mystery of marriage” – the call, that is, of male and female to become one body – is not something of secondary or minor importance. On the contrary, it is at the very centre of what matters most to God (General Audience 8.9.82). Two years earlier, in the April of 1980, John Paul made bold to declare: “Through the fact that the Word of God became flesh the body entered theology ... through the front door” (General Audience 2.4.80).

One would expect that, over the centuries, this vision of marriage and of married love, and of family life, this affirmative vision of the body, would have found expression over and over again in the writings of Catholic theologians and, in particular, in the readings included in the breviary. Well, it did find expression, of course, but never or almost never with the imaginative confidence and vision of John Paul II. The readings we find today in the breviary include many wonderful readings on the life and spirituality of figures such as the martyr, the confessor, the virgin, the monk and the priest, but little, very little about the spirituality of marriage and married love. And nothing or almost nothing, of course, about babies!

²⁹ Ibid., p.501

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p.499.

The theologian, Fr Edward Schillebeelx, tells the story that, when he was a young Dominican novice, he wrote home to his parents in a rapture of enthusiasm praising the great holiness, as he perceived it, of the Dominican priests and brothers in the priory. “These men,” he wrote, “sometimes get up in the middle of the night in order to pray for sinners in the world.” Young Edward’s father sent back at once the following scathing reply: “My son, it may have escaped your notice that since you were born your mother and I have been getting up in the middle of the night, time after time, in order to attend to the crying of babies – your small brothers and sisters – and we like to think that it has something to do with the call to holiness!” Schillebeelx, the Dominican, it should be noted, was the sixth of fourteen children. So – no less than five babies before him and eight babies after him!

There are signs, if I’m not mistaken, since the middle of the last century, signs, that God is anxious to wake up the members of his Church – wake us up – to the reality of the new sacred and all that it implies. I have every confidence, therefore, that within a generation or two the breviary will include not only many wise and illumined readings about the call to holiness in married life and in married love, and family life, but actual accounts of the holiness of married men and women, the details of their love for God and their love for one another, and the details also of the heroic but joyful task of raising children, highlighting needless to say among other things the link between holiness and crying babies!

Preachers of the New Sacred

After that brief excursus on the family, let us turn our attention back now to the main theme of our talk – anxious hearts, wounded lives and the new sacred. In the Church’s tradition, there is one preacher, one saint, who stands out as having grasped in great depth the meaning of the new sacred in so far as it relates to the poor and afflicted. That preacher, that saint, was John Chrysostom in the fifth century. St John was known by his contemporaries as “the golden-tongued,” and for good reason. No-one in his generation was more inspiring, no one more challenging as a preacher. Allow me to read for you an extract from one of his most remarkable sermons:

Do you want to honour Christ’s body? Then do not scorn him in his nakedness, nor honour him here in the church with silken garments while neglecting him where he is cold

and naked. For he who said: *This is my body*, and made it so by his words, also said: *You saw me hungry and did not feed me*, and *inasmuch as you did not do it for one of these, the least of my brothers, you did not do it for me*. What we do here in the church requires a pure heart, not special garments; what we do outside requires great dedication ... Of what use is it to weigh down Christ's table with golden cups, when he himself is dying of hunger? First, fill him when he is hungry; then us the means you have left to adorn his table. Will you have a golden cup made but not give a cup of water? What is the use of providing the table with cloths woven of gold thread, and not providing Christ himself with the clothes he needs? ... What if you were to see him clad in worn-out rags and stiff from the cold, and were to forget about clothing him and instead were to set up golden columns for him, saying that you were doing it in his honour? ... You provide silver chains for the lamps, but you cannot bear even to look at him as he lies chained in prison ... Do not, therefore, adorn the church and ignore your afflicted brother, for he is the most precious temple of all.³²

Lest there be misunderstanding it should be said at once that John Chrysostom is not against adorning the house of God in a way that is fitting and beautiful. He is not against having a golden cup, for example, on the altar, and he makes this point clear in the same homily. So it's not a question, then, of either/or, but rather of both/and.

When Malcolm Muggeridge visited Calcutta for the first time, he was enormously impressed by the work being done for the poor, and so later, when he returned home, he sent Mother Teresa a generous gift of money, presuming it would go straight to the poor. Mother Teresa wrote back, thanking him, and said that with the money they had at last been able to buy a golden chalice for the altar. Muggeridge was at first shocked, even

³² St John Chrysostom, Homily on Matthew's Gospel (Second Reading for the Office of Readings, Saturday, 21st Week in Ordinary Time), Homily 50, 3-4; PG 58, 508-509.

scandalized, but then he remembered, in the Gospel, how Judas had complained about precious oil being spent on Christ, money that could have been sold and given to the poor. In practice, therefore, for the saints, it is never a question of either/or, either serving the poor or worshipping God, but of both/and – an unabbreviated Catholicism.

St John Chrysostom is a saint of the 5th century. Our St Brigid was also, as it happens, of the 5th century. And she was noted most of all for her devoted love of the poor and afflicted. According to the legend, she did not hesitate as a young girl, to the distress of her mother, to give away her family's most basic food supply. I was struck, this morning, by the Communion Antiphon for her feast, words taken of course from the Gosepl: "Come, you whom my Father has blessed, says the Lord. I was sick and you visited me. In truth I tell you. In so far as you did this to one of the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me." Once, I remember, in Calcutta, Mother Teresa took my hand, and said: "Fr Paul, the entire mystery of our life is here." And, with her forefinger, she spelt out on my five fingers the words: *You did it to me*. I think she knew I must be a slow learner because she did it all over once again!

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If there is a new Chrysostom among us I suspect it may be Pope Francis. My knowledge of history is limited, but I am not aware of any previous Bishop of Rome as concerned as Francis to make lively the link between the worship of God in the sacred liturgy and the service of God in the poor. It was, I think, typical of Pope Francis that, recently, when he had occasion to speak about the Shroud of Turin, he remarked: "This disfigured Face resembles all those faces of men and women marred by a life that does not respect their dignity, by war and the violence that afflict the weakest."³³

The Shroud is now in Turin, as you know, but it was not always there. In the early 16th century it was in France, in the Sainte Chapelle at Chambéry. I mention this fact because the mother of St Francis de Sales – another Francis – visited this chapel when she was pregnant with Francis and, in the

³³ Pope Francis, A sentence from a video message delivered by the Pope to mark an "extraordinary exposition" of the Holy Shroud at Turin ("I join all of you gathered before the Holy Shroud"). See Vatican Information Service, 30 March 2013.

presence of the Shroud, dedicated her unborn child to God.³⁴ Many years later, in 1613, by which time the Shroud had already been moved to Turin, Francis had occasion to show the Shroud to a large group of people in the Cathedral, among them a Prince Cardinal. Sweat, he tells us in a letter, was pouring down his face. It must have been a very hot day, and he was probably nervous. At one point some of the sweat fell unto the Shroud itself which, as you can perhaps imagine, did not please the Cardinal. Francis writes: “The Prince Cardinal was annoyed that my sweat fell on to my Saviour’s Holy Shroud, but it entered my heart to say to him that Our Lord was not so particular, and that he had spilled his sweat and blood so as to unite them to ours.”³⁵

Francis is one of those saints who clearly grasped the implications of the new sacred. But, behind Francis there was another saint, a hidden saint, and that was his mother. It was she, it would seem, who was the first to initiate him into the knowledge of the new sacred, something she achieved more by action than words. Francis writes in the same letter: “Now another memory comes back to me. When my brothers were ill as children I have seen my mother wrap them in my father’s shirt, saying that a father’s sweat could heal his child.”³⁶

The statement is as unexpected and startling as it is profound. The mother of Francis de Sales was clearly convinced that, in the new life we now share in Christ, even the most humble and menial tasks are somehow graced and hallowed. What was once considered the profane world – the world of sick children and of hard-working fathers – has now become the place of the new sacred. All of us, in spite of our human limitations and failures, are now standing on holy ground. Our anxious hearts, our wounded lives, have been redeemed by grace. How amazing it is! How blessed we are! Any moment can be the moment, any place can be the place. What was once viewed as hopelessly lost and beyond the pale, is now the centre; what was judged profane is now the sacred. In Christ we are a holy temple.

³⁴ See Jean-Pierre Camus, *The Spirit of St Francis de Sales*, trans., J.S. (London 1910) p.306.

³⁵ St Francis de Sales, Letter to Mère de Chantal, 4 May 1614. See *Oeuvres complètes*, vol 16, édition d’Annecy (Paris 1910) pp.177-78.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.178.

