

Love's Urgent Longings

Wrestling with belief in today's church

GEOFFREY ROBINSON

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INTRODUCTION

This book tells the story of my spiritual journey over the last few years since I published a book that criticised the response of the Catholic Church to revelations of sexual abuse and called for a new look at all aspects of the two questions of power and sex within the church.¹

Responses to the book were sharply divided. On the one hand, the Australian bishops felt the need to issue a public statement criticising the book, and a Roman cardinal and several American bishops told me to turn around and go home again when I visited the United States to speak about these issues.

The Australian bishops have invariably been friendly whenever we have chanced to meet, but I have been left with the feeling that, in the eyes of many of them, I have, according to the image you choose, moved beyond the pale, let the side down, left the club, become an outsider rather than an insider. Several bishops have told me that I am not welcome to speak in their dioceses. In my own diocese I have been progressively cut out of functions a bishop might perform and have had to adjust to my new status.

On the other hand, I have been overwhelmed by the avalanche of positive messages from people who felt that, finally, here was a bishop expressing concerns that they had had in their minds for many years. The Roman cardinal dismissed all these people as “disloyal”, but the most obvious fact about them is the very opposite of this. These are people who have been intensely loyal all their lives, but are profoundly dissatisfied with the response of the church to abuse and are convinced that it raises many

¹ *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church, Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus*, John Garratt Publishing, Melbourne, 2007.

questions about both power and sex that will not go away until they have been honestly answered.

The crux of the disagreement between the two sides is that I am convinced that, in responding to abuse, we must unflinchingly study all contributing causes and confront them, even when this leads us to question long-standing practices or teachings of the church. The authorities, on the other hand, would say that the teachings and ancient practices of the church have been solemnly proclaimed by the authority of the pope and may never be questioned, not even in responding to abuse.

Living in this strange world for the past few years, with the official and the popular responses so far apart, has forced me to ask such questions as: Do I really belong in the church? Is there any realistic chance that it will ever change to become the kind of church I could give myself to without reservation? What do I do in the meantime? Should I go before I am pushed? Or do I continue to live in a limbo world?

While these feelings have been heightened by recent events, I must add that they are not new. In my younger days I was given a particular understanding of God, religion and church. There was much that was good and, indeed, beautiful in this understanding, but I have found that a significant part of my life since then has consisted in a long and painful journey away from a number of the ideas that had been implanted in me.

If I may single out two ideas in particular, the first is the idea of the Christian life as consisting overwhelmingly in right behaviour before a judgemental God. It concerns what I have come to call "the God of the high jump". The idea was that I should achieve a high level of right behaviour before God and that, if I worked hard, I would achieve that level, I would clear the bar. The problem was that, any time I did clear the bar, it was immediately put up higher. The ultimate level was how Jesus had acted, and I could never reach that high.

This left me with the pervasive feeling that I was always failing, that there was always a higher level I should have attained, and I do not believe that this was either good psychology or good spirituality.

The second is that of putting rational statements about God before a personal relationship with God, of seeing the most important aspect of faith in the intellectual assent to creeds rather than in a response of love between persons. In that mindset I “had the faith” if I submitted my mind to all the teachings, whether I had a personal relationship with God or not.

Some time ago an Australian bishop was speaking with the pastor of one of the big Pentecostal churches and asked him whether many Catholics attended his services. “Oh yes”, he replied, “we get many Catholics. In fact, they make the best converts. They have all this wonderful knowledge about Jesus Christ, and their only problem is that they’ve never met him.” While this is a rather glib statement, it must surely be admitted that there can at times be an uncomfortable degree of truth in it.

So this new book will speak of the personal journey that has taken up most of my adult life, and that has now been brought to some form of crisis or decision by the ambivalent situation I find myself in.

My primary audience will be all the people, both old and young, I have met in the last few years who are greatly upset at the church’s response to abuse and are struggling with many things within that church. I shall tell a personal story, but I shall try to do so in dialogue with them.

There is only one conviction in my mind as I begin, and that is that I do not wish to simply reject my past and put nothing in its place. I am now in my seventies, so I feel too old to throw everything out and construct a new building from the foundations up. I do not wish to believe in nothing or only in

some vague and uncertain spiritual idea. I do not want to drift wherever the currents of the world around me might carry me. If I must leave something behind, I want to do so only because I have found something of equal value to put in its place. Whatever else, I want this to be a positive book.

I hope that this personal story will have something to say to other people.

Sample

1

LONGING FOR SOMETHING DEEPER

What first made me dissatisfied with a religion of rational arguments was the presence of restless, insatiable desires within me. These desires were so strong that I eventually came to realise that I am not a serene person who occasionally becomes restless, but a driven person who only occasionally experiences peace.² Whether I have been aware of it or not, my whole life has been taken up with my efforts to respond to these desires within me.

I then came across the opening words of one of the poems of St. John of the Cross, one of the greatest writers of all time on the spiritual life.

One dark night
 fired by love's urgent longings
 - Ah, the sheer grace -
 I went out unseen,
 my house being now all stilled.³

For him it was the urgent longings of love that were the beginning of all that might be called "spiritual" within us. His words spoke to something deep within me, and in them I found a firm starting point, a certainty on which I could build. If we feel confused, we need to go back to basics, and here, I felt, was a certainty that could underpin my entire journey.

² See Ronald Rolheiser, *Seeking Spirituality*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1998, p.3.

³ These are the opening words of the poem *The Dark Night of the Soul*. See *The Collected Works of John of the Cross*, tr. K. Kavanaugh, ICS Publications, Washington D.C., 1991, p.113.

In this book I shall use the term “spiritual” in the broadest of senses to indicate my strivings to go beneath the more immediate desires within me and respond to the deeper desires that I can find there. In this understanding, there are no high jump bars that God or other people have put in place and that I have an obligation to clear, but there are powerful desires within myself that make me want to rise. The spiritual element in my life then consists in consciously responding to the force of these desires as they move me towards higher goals.

Indeed, the spiritual is my response to the very deepest desires within me. I will be spiritual to the extent that I allow these deepest desires, rather than more immediate ones, to guide my life.

In this first chapter I shall choose seven from among the many powerful desires that I find within myself and see where they might lead me. Only in the following two chapters shall I then look to see to what extent this sense of the spiritual might lead me towards more openly religious ideas.

THE DESIRE FOR PURPOSE AND MEANING

Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is the purpose and meaning of my existence?

For as long as I had a firm understanding of the position I held in the church and the work that was asked of me, I felt I had some answers to these questions. But when I was suddenly seen as an outsider, no longer belonging to the safe world I had until then inhabited, I found myself asking these most basic questions again, for they reflect one of the most profound drives within any human being: the search for meaning. There are few things that so eat away at our sense of dignity and self-worth as a loss of a sense of meaning in life.

In responding to this feeling, I found that I was looking for

a sense of meaning that came from something deeper than just belonging to a church.

I saw that, to the big questions of life, some people seem to give an answer as basic as “Making money and enjoying myself” or “Me, what’s good for me.” These answers are a constant temptation and we never leave them behind, and yet the vast majority of people would instinctively seek something more.

I thought of the goal of “Developing the gifts God and my parents have given me, becoming all I’m capable of being”, but this seemed to be too turned in on myself and I knew that any worthwhile goal had to also reach out to others.

There is also a dilemma in all of this. On the one hand, in a world full of fears, I could easily settle for modest goals (“Helping my family to live a good and decent life”, “Trying to find, and even give, a little happiness”).

On the other hand, there is the danger that in adopting these modest goals I could sell myself short by not looking at my deeper desires. This could lead to a lack of the strong and inspiring spiritual underpinning that could be there for me if only I would seek it.

While I need to avoid high jumps, I feel that, if I really want to respond to the depth of the desires within me, I need to choose goals that will allow these desires to move me beyond my comfort zone towards something higher.

Perhaps the best answer lies in a sense of realism. I feel that I need to answer three questions. The first is: If an objective outsider looked closely at the reality of the life I have been living, what conclusions would that person have to draw about the goals I am seeking? Putting aside my dreams and false ideas about myself, what is my actual day-to-day living saying about the goals I in fact pursue? This would base my answer in reality.

The second question involves listening to the deeper

longings within myself, and asking: What goals do I really want to strive for? How high do I want to aim? In my deepest desires, what sort of person do I want to become?

And this would lead to the third question: What can I realistically do to bridge the gap between the first answer and the second? Just how much do I want to bridge that gap?

Whatever the answers might be that I give, high or low, turning inwards or looking outwards, more or less generous, protecting a comfort-zone or stretching beyond it, the answers I give express an important part of the spiritual dimension of my life.

Some years ago there was a top-level meeting in the city where I live on the subject of illegal drugs. Different people spoke of drugs as a physical or mental health problem, a social problem, a law and order problem or an education problem, but I felt that they were missing an important point in that there was no explicit and public mention of the fact that it might also be a spiritual problem.

And yet, it is when people have no sense of meaning, no satisfying answers to the big questions of life, that things like drugs and even suicide can begin to seem attractive. I do not believe that we will make serious progress against drugs and suicide until we confront this spiritual dimension of the problem.

When the dominant idea in a society seems to be that of turning towards the immediate satisfaction of material desires rather than the slower striving towards deeper desires, the spiritual can easily get lost.

Our society has been good at turning us away from many of the more spiritual values of the past, but it has not been good at replacing them with other values. Many people have rejected values and practices of their childhood but have not replaced them with anything truly satisfying.

I have already said that, whatever else I do, I do not want to go down this path and end up with a vacuum in which I have rejected ideas of the past but not replaced them with ideas and values that genuinely inspire me.

I have made the conscious decision, therefore, that, since my firm starting point is “love’s urgent longings”, I shall try to seek the goal of always asking, in every new situation I encounter, “What is the most loving thing I can do here?” If I can train myself to ask this question, I will be genuinely seeking the spiritual. Needless to say, I would not always be doing the most loving thing, but at least I would be asking the right question.

This seems to be a genuine attempt to respond to the deeper desires within me. It is not simply a “nice” goal, for I am not speaking of some sentimental love. On the contrary, to do the most loving thing when I am at odds with the official church and calling for major reform involves much thinking, some quite difficult loving, and many hard decisions.

THE DESIRE FOR UNITY

Some time ago I spoke with a nun who had worked for years in a poor village in a developing country and was home on a needed rest leave. She told me that, after a week or so at home, she started to feel disturbed and even angry, and did not at first know why. She then realised that what was making her angry was all the choices that were constantly being forced on her.

If she said “yes” to the simple idea of a sandwich, she was promptly asked whether she wanted white, brown or wholegrain bread, butter or low-fat or low-salt margarine. And these were only the preliminaries to what she wanted on the sandwich and the sauce on top of it. Did she then want coffee or tea, and, if so, Indian, Sri Lankan, Chinese or herbal? Did