**ENGAGING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY**

**PART 3: SPIRITUALITY & MISSION**



#

# Introduction to the Course

**Aim & outline of the module**

This module explores a range of issues which face and challenge the contemporary practice of Christian spirituality. In the background is the temptation to privatize and individualize spirituality and a divide between spirituality and responding to the needs of today’s world. This gives us a tremendous opportunity to re-connect spirituality and mission, and to discern in our spiritual practice our vocation to serve more courageously and generously.

We begin by exploring the background to the present problem and opportunity by seeing how issues around the inter-relationship between prayer and mission have been faced in times past.

We start by taking a look at the way Jesus not only integrates the practice of prayer into his mission, but also finds it to be transformative and energizing. We see how Jesus models the integration between the mystical and the prophetic.

In the next two Units, we identify the ways in which major spiritual writers in the last two millennia have struggled with the divorce between spirituality and mission. First we attend to Anthony, Basil, Benedict and Columbanus. In the second millennium we see how Julian, Teresa and others faced up to the issues.

Turning to recent times, we celebrate contemporary examples of a creative relationship between prayer and mission. In Unit 4 we explore examples of how traditional and inherited spiritualities, which had become increasingly introspective in their focus, are transformed in order to respond to the demands and hurts of our present context and culture. We look at how contemporary lay Franciscans have radically reworked the three traditional vows of poverty, chastity and obedience to meet the needs of the present day. Second we take a fresh look the traditional Triple Way which has been so influential in Christian spirituality in past generations and see how it can be adapted to meet the needs of contemporary spirituality and mission.

In Unit 5 we see how spiritual practice can lead to a fresh discovery of our identity and potentiality, vital in the clarifying of our vocation. Unit 6 takes a closer look at how the practice of spirituality can both unsettle us and inspire us as we seek to relate the inner world of prayer to the needs and cries of a hurting world. We see how we can turn prayer inside out - how the experience of meditation leads to the rediscovery of one’s vocation, exploring how meditation turns to mission. We note the key themes of vocation and discernment in early Christian writers, represented by Gregory of Nyssa and John Cassian. Next, we take a look at how two classic English spiritual directors, the authors of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Fire of Love*, offer contrasting approaches to the issue of how spiritual experiences relate to mission. We conclude by taking a look at what the Ignatian tradition has to teach us about the discovery of vocation in prayer and John Henry Newman’s cheering words on our evolving vocation.

Unit 7 introduces us to one of the earliest Franciscans, Andrew of Spello, who helps us explore the interplay between contemplation and action. In Unit 8 we see how a careful examination of one’s spiritual disciplines can completely re-orientate their focus. We look at how five devotional practices, which often are turned inwards, can be transformed and refocused. They become excellent starting points in the re-orientation of a person towards mission and engagement. A systematic and thorough review or spiritual audit will raise key issues and clarify priorities about our lifestyle. We see how personal piety can be transformed into prophetic spirituality.

In Unit 9 we explore the climate of the soul, and how attentiveness to the elements and issues of climate change can help us interpret transitions of the soul. This leads in Unit 10 to an exploration of how Christology, our view of Jesus Christ, shapes and impacts our mission, as we celebrate the Cosmic Christ and the universal dimensions of mission.

Each unit will conclude with some questions for group discussion, with a suggested the prayer exercise to conclude the session. Leaders can choose from the ‘menu’ of the contents, completing a minimum of seven or using all ten units. The course might be used in 10 successive weeks or months, or perhaps in two shorter courses of five, or less, units.

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**3 Spirituality and mission in the second millennium**

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Beguiling Heresy from the 17th century: Molinos, Guyon & Fenelon

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Retrieving the Three Vows and the Three Ways (TSSF, Soelle)

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Discovering forgotten insights into human potentiality with the help of Ephrem, Jacopone da Todi, John Ruusbroec, Gerard Manley Hopkins

**6 Spiritual practice clarifies vocation**

Learning from Gregory of Nyssa, John Cassian, the authors of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Fire of Love*, and Ignatius Loyola.

**7 Struggle and contemplation: learning from the early Franciscan Tradition**

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**9 Reading the climate of the soul, and the climate of the world**

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**10 Discovering the Cosmic Christ : spiritual practice shifts us from insight to wider vision** Is your God too small? From Jesus of Nazareth to the Cosmic Christ

### Practicalities

The module consists of between seven and ten sessions (the group can decide how many beyond the seven core sessions to do) and each lasts approximately 90 minutes concluding with a suggested prayer exercise. There will be a group leader to guide you through the material, and plenty of questions to get you thinking!

### Commitment

Apart from attending and playing a full part in the sessions themselves, the only other commitment is to do some preparation prior to each meeting. This will normally be something to think about or read. There will also be additional resources recommended - such as books – but there is no requirement to make use of these.

I hope that this course will both support you as you grapple with contemporary questions about spirituality, and also equip you as you seek to respond to the spiritual thirsts of our time.

Canon Dr Andrew Mayes, Spirituality Adviser, Diocese of Chichester

**Introduction**

**A vital challenge and opportunity**

In today’s world there is a tremendous spiritual thirst. We are confronted, too, by painful injustices and oppressions near and far. Our hearts are torn when we witness division and fragmentation, whether in our own families, local community, or in the wider world. We are becoming, at last, alert to the degradation and despoilation of the planet. We wonder what we should do, and how we should respond. What is the relationship, between prayer and mission? This module explores the dynamic inter-action and interplay between prayer and discovering a sense of calling.

**We have a problem...**

Sometimes spirituality gets a bad press. Attentiveness to our individual and personal spiritual journey can be regarded as self-indulgent, fostering a spirituality that is introverted, narcisstic, self-centred, closed in on itself. Is it about escapism and navel-gazing and encourage insularity? Does spirituality provide a refuge from life’s storms, a place of safety away from the harsh realities of life? Is it a distraction from, or evasion of, reality? Does it represent a flight from the world? A diversion to keep us peaceful, to insulate us and keep free from stress? Does the practice of prayer amount luxuriating in self-absorption, spiritual pleasure-seekers? Does it encourage living in an ivory tower – or burying one’s head in the sand? People’s perceptions give fuel to this critique: spirituality is seen as a ghettoized, personal matter, a private concern, nurturing the inner world at the expense of the outer: it is about ‘me and Jesus.’ People sometimes talk of spirituality in terms of self-fulfilment or self-discovery, the exploration of the ‘spiritual side of themselves’. It has been called ‘another bandwagon to jump on, or a market need to satisfy.’[[1]](#endnote-1) Pope Francis, calling us in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* to radiate the joy of the Gospel and develop a missionary spirituality, observes:

Today we are seeing in many pastoral workers...an inordinate concern for their personal freedom and relaxation...At the same time, the spiritual life comes to be identified with a few religious exercises which can offer a certain comfort but which do not encourage encounter with others, engagement with the world or a passion for evangelisation.

He continues:

Mystical notions without a solid social and missionary outreach are of no help to evangelisation...What is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity. [[2]](#endnote-2)

The danger is that spirituality becomes seen as an esoteric and fringe activity, for those spiritual and heavenly-minded beings amongst us that perhaps have too much time on their hands! The focus becomes pandering to the ego and self-development. The all-pervasive individualism which infects so much of western society, allied to a consumerist approach to all things (’what can I get out of this, what’s in this for me?’), can seep its way into how people approach spirituality. Spirituality can become a hobby, a recreational activity for self-entertainment. God becomes a private experience. Postmodernist thinking has reinforced the divide between private and public, and considers spirituality, and indeed religion, as something that pertains only to the subjective, private lives of individuals. Philip Sheldrake observes:

If human solidarity is forgotten, contemplation becomes no more than spiritual self-delusion. A non-social experience, or on that is purely ‘spiritual’ and removed from our materiel existence, is a self-centred concern for a false peace. The greatest danger for Christian spirituality is for it to become anti-material, spiritualised, and individualistic...There will be a tendency to retreat into prayer and ‘spiritual’ experiences as ends in themselves without any obvious implications for our behaviour and attitudes...Prayer that is unconcerned with the situation of our neighbour is pure self-indulgence.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Eugene Peterson observes: ‘Every expression of spirituality, left to itself, tends towards being more about me and less about God.’[[4]](#endnote-4) Jim Wallis cautions: ‘Personal piety has become an end in itself instead of the energy for social justice...’[[5]](#endnote-5) St John says: ‘those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen’ (1 Jn. 4.20). James is emphatic: ‘Show me your faith apart from your works, and I by my works will show you my faith’ (2.18).

**A problem with dichotomy**

The religion of the Incarnation proclaims: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us’ (Jn 1:18). God is to be found in the stable, the marketplace, the cross. But from the beginning there has been a tendency in Christian thinking to spiritualize the physical. In his version of the Lord’s Prayer, Luke turns Matthew’s ‘Release us from our debts’ – a physical petition arising from a situation of dire poverty – into ‘Forgive us our sins’. In the Beatitudes, Matthew spiritualizes Luke’s ‘Blessed are you poor’ into ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’. It is often easier to conceive of spiritual things instead of getting our hands dirty. We forget that the root meaning of the very word ministry, *diakonia*, means ‘through the dust’. The flesh of God forbids any retreat into ‘spiritual religion’.

So, as incarnational spirituality celebrates not only God within, but God in our very midst, in the dirt and in the gutter, the prayer of contemplation must of necessity lead to courageous and compassionate action. Prayer might begin with a sense of God beyond: ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’ But it dares to pray ‘thy Kingdom come’ and moves to an awareness of the God nearby: ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’

Christian spirituality became infected with divisive, dualistic thinking since the early centuries embraced Platonic thought. Plato himself wrote in the *Republic* that attentiveness to the world of the senses was ‘looking in the wrong direction.’[[6]](#endnote-6) The key to life was to become radically detached from the concerns of the body. Origen (c.185-c.254 ) outlined a progress of successive stages by which the soul is invited to advance towards God. We see here the genesis of the Triple Way which was to be so influential in the history of Christian spirituality: a sketch of the spiritual life that moves from purgation / separation from the world, illumination, to union with God. This is profoundly shaped by Origen’s platonic anthropology: the goal in view is for the soul (psyche) to become free from the attentions of the body in order to contemplate God as nous, mind. Evagrius (346-99) likewise taught that greater detachment enables greater attentiveness to God, a movement from the material to the immaterial.

Disastrous polarities crept into Christian thinking, undermining the idea of God’s incarnation. Things were pitched against one another: heaven was opposed to earth, the body to the spirit. Politics and prayer were to be kept separate. Sacred and secular were delineated with barriers, as if they were two separate realms, holy and unholy. The church and the world are set against each other.

In spirituality, such dualistic thinking has created unnecessary distances and opened up uncalled-for chasms. When God is thought of as ‘up there’ prayer becomes detached from life. In works like *The Cloud of Unknowing* we encounter such advice as:

Do not occupy yourself either in your thoughts or your desires with any of God’s creatures, or anything associated with them either in a general or particular way. One might think such occupation correct. But I tell you: free yourself interiorly from all creatures, and pay no heed to them...let the clouds of forgetfulness spread over them.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In similar vein John of the Cross tells us:

The soul, indeed, lost to all things and won over to love, no longer occupies her spirit in anything else. She even withdraws in matters pertinent to the active life and other exterior exercises for the sake of fulfilling the one thing the Bridegroom said was necessary [Lk 10.42], and that is: attentiveness to God and the continual exercise of love in him...once she arrives [at this state of union with God] she should not become involved in other works and exterior exercises ...Great wrong would be done to a soul who possesses some degree of this solitary love, as well as to the Church, if we were to urge her to become occupied in exterior or active things, even if the works were very important and required only a short time.[[8]](#endnote-8)

In the spiritual classics, images of ascent to God predominate: the further we get up the mountain of prayer, leaving the earth behind, the closer we get to God. The further the earth below, the greater the proximity to God. A flight from the world is required. Many spiritual writers see prayer as a ‘going up’ to God, especially male authors.[[9]](#endnote-9) John Climacus (579-649), the abbot of the monastery of St Catherine’s, at the foot of Mount Sinai itself, suggested in his work *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* that there were thirty rungs on the staircase to heaven, thirty virtues to be nurtured. St Bonaventure (1217-74) in his work *The Journey of the Mind into God* writes of the ‘mind’s ascent to God.’ In the English tradition, Walter Hilton (d.1396) described prayer in terms of ascending a *Ladder of Perfection*, the title of his major work. In the sixteenth century, John of the Cross centres his masterpiece *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* on the model of going up to God in prayer. A recurring theme is the necessity for detachment – withdrawal from daily demands in order to enter prayer, conceived as a sacred space, as a different world.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Throughout the history of Christian spirituality, the contemplative life has been exalted above the active apostolate. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* (question 182) gives eight reasons why the angelic life of prayer is a higher calling and attracts more merit than the active life of service. Counsels of Perfection encouraged an elitist view of spirituality, for those who were able to make withdrawal from the world.

Robert McAfee Brown subtitled his book *Spirituality and Liberation* with the words: ‘overcoming the great fallacy’.[[11]](#endnote-11) He identifies this as a persistent dualism that separates and opposes faith and ethics, the holy and the profane, the otherworldly and this-worldly – eroding the central Christian belief in the Word made flesh. Overcoming the dichotomy is part of the challenge of this book.

**A problem with definition**

What *is* spirituality? ‘It appears that spirituality is one of those subjects whose meaning everyone claims to know until they have to define it.’[[12]](#endnote-12) As Professor Sheldrake cautions, spirituality has become a slippery and elusive word to define. In recent years, the word has been utilised in ever-wider contexts, far beyond the confines of church or even religion: indeed, the rise in the use of spirituality to denote some kind of personal experience of awareness seems proportionate to the decline of the institutional church.[[13]](#endnote-13) A national study of college students’ search for meaning and purpose typifies current usage of the term: ‘Spirituality…captures those aspects of our experience that are not easy to define or talk about, such as inspiration, creativity, the mysterious, the sacred, and the mystical. Within this very broad perspective, we believe spirituality is a universal impulse and reality.’[[14]](#endnote-14)

Does spirituality allude only to some ephemeral, elusive dimension of human existence? What can we learn from the history of the term?

The word *spirituality* translates the Latin *spiritualitas*, corresponding to Paul’s use of *pneumatikos*. In his theology, Paul expresses the believer’s new life in Christ as ‘life in the Spirit’ *kata* *pneuma*, ‘ according to the Spirit’, contrasted with life outside Christ which is *kata sarx*, ‘according to the flesh’ (here ‘flesh’ denotes not body or physicality but ‘life not ruled by God’).[[15]](#endnote-15) For Paul, ‘For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God’ (Rm 8:14). The earliest recorded use of *spiritualitas*, in a text once attributed to Jerome, conveys this same sense: ‘So act as to advance in spirituality.’ It was only in the twelfth century that *spiritualitas* began to be used in contrast to *corporalitas* (bodily) or  *materialis* (matter). In France in the seventeenth century the word *spirituality* began to be used more widely of the spiritual life referring to practices of prayer or devotion; ultimately it entered the English language in this sense of ‘means towards Christian perfection’ in the early twentieth century through the translation of Pierre Pourrat’s *La spiritualité chrétienne.* [[16]](#endnote-16)

In recent years Christian scholars have pointed to the transformational or transformative character of spirituality in a sense that is directly relevant to this study. Sandra Schneiders writes that ‘spirituality as an academic discipline studies the transformative Christian experience as such’ while McGinn goes further and calls mysticism ‘a process of personal transformation. ’[[17]](#endnote-17) Waaijman considers spirituality as a process of transformation taking place within the divine-human relationship.[[18]](#endnote-18)

A definition of spirituality that entails divine/human encounter is offered by former Anglican Officer for Evangelism Robert Warren: ‘By *spirituality* is meant our understanding and experience of how encounter with God takes place and how such an encounter is sustained.’[[19]](#endnote-19) But such a definition does not go far enough, for it stops short of suggesting that such encounter changes people, makes a measurable difference to their lives. The late Methodist scholar Gordon Wakefield stresses this: ‘Spirituality concerns the way in which prayer influences conduct, our behaviour and manner of life, our attitudes to other people...Spirituality is the combination of living and praying.[[20]](#endnote-20) Dyckman and Carroll suggest: ‘Spirituality is the style of a person’s response to Christ before the challenge of everyday life, in a given historical and cultural environment.’[[21]](#endnote-21)

Leech puts it like this:

I believe that we can speak of spirituality as a necessary bedrock and foundation of our lives, provided that we understand that we are speaking of the foundation and not of a compartment. To speak of spirituality in this sense is to speak of the whole life of the human person and human community in their relationship with the divine.[[22]](#endnote-22)

**The challenge and opportunity of spirituality**

So privatized spirituality is a contradiction in terms. Spirituality – the encounter with God – is the wellspring and source of both mission and evangelism. The encounter with God is not to be kept as some private possession but rather should energise and stimulate our life of witness. Prayer should lead us to that risky place where we engage with the struggle for justice and where we are ready to speak out for our faith. Mary needs Martha; the disciple becomes the apostle; love of God spills over to love of neighbour. As Rohr reminds us, it is ‘both/and’ not ‘either/or.’[[23]](#endnote-23) In his *Confessions* Augustine prayed: ‘Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new...you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there.’[[24]](#endnote-24) In his autobiography, Jurgen Moltmann offers a contrasting prayer:

For a long time I looked for you within myself and crept into the shell of my soul, shielding myself with an armour of inapproachability. But you were outside – outside myself – and enticed me out of the narrowness of my heart into the broad place of love for life. So I came out of myself and found my soul in my senses, and my own self in others.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Spirituality needs to experience repeatedly a shift from the inward to the outward, and where necessary, vice versa. It is ‘both, and.’ We shall look at tools and questions that help break down the divide, so we can recognize how our life can be whole, an ‘unceasing prayer’ in the midst of service. Jesus calls us: ‘whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret’ (Mt 6:6). But we also need to open the door to mission- as Paul puts it: “A wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries” (1 Co 16:19); “God will open to us a door for the word, that we may declare the mystery of Christ” (Col 4:3).

Contemporary spirituality needs to be alert to the criticism that it can become elitist and individualistic, fostering a ‘personal relationship with God’ at the expense of an incarnate spirituality grounded and earthed in the needs of the age: aware of the danger of what Hughes calls ‘split spirituality’ – piety which has become adrift from life.[[26]](#endnote-26) As Merton, the contemplative within a Cistercian/Trappist tradition, came to see the role of the monk as a social critic, so the Christian must root his or her spiritual relationship within the demands and struggles of the world. Merton wrote in 1963: ‘What is the contemplative life if one doesn’t listen to God in it? What is the contemplative life if one becomes oblivious to the rights of men and the truth of God in the world and in His Church?’[[27]](#endnote-27) He goes on: ‘We do not go into the desert [of prayer] to escape people but to learn how to find them; we do not leave them in order to have nothing more to do with them, but to find out the way to do them most good.’ [[28]](#endnote-28)

As Leech reminds us: ‘all spirituality must be judged by the vision of the coming age. The Kingdom is the standard by which the Christian disciple lives, and by that standard he discerns the signs of the times.’[[29]](#endnote-29) The theme of the Kingdom is a prominent one in the writings of liberation spirituality in Latin America. There an oft-quoted text is: *Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream* (Amos 5:24). There can be no place for individualistic spirituality in the context of living in a community in conflict with political or commercial powers, where the experience of struggle is a daily reality. Within the base ecclesial communities there is a role for a communal practice of spiritual direction, where members of a group are led into processes of discernment and reflection.[[30]](#endnote-30) Indeed, such a model of ‘being Church’ has been developed in the West, calling for a new look at the practice of spirituality, one that is acutely in tune with the hurts of the wider community.[[31]](#endnote-31)

In whatever social context, spirituality must not be uprooted in from its location within the corporate and communal setting of the Church, so that spiritual formation can be seen in ecclesial as well as individual terms in the context of the wider world. Moving from individualism to the experience of the community of the Church in the world, we reveal in our lifestyle and actions the cutting-edge of prophetic spirituality. This may include being able to speak a godly critique both to the world, for there is a need not only to understand the culture and be earthed incarnationally *within* it – it is also necessary to uphold the integrity of the Christian witness by speaking *against* the culture, especially against its gods of consumerism and militarism.[[32]](#endnote-32) Wallis laments and affirms:

Personal piety has become an end in itself instead of the energy for social justice….Prophetic spirituality will always fundamentally challenge the system at its roots and offer genuine alternatives based on values from our truest religious, cultural and political traditions.[[33]](#endnote-33)

Duraisingh highlights the importance of locating Christian formation within this kind of perspective, calling for:

an *empowering-others-for-mission* model that arises out of an ideological option for, participation in and learning from the struggles and hopes of the poor and the marginalized. It is out of such a process of formation that comes the capacity, so badly needed today, to envision a new social order, the alternative, and even the impossible.[[34]](#endnote-34)

An indispensable dimension of spirituality must be to support Christian disciples with spiritual resources, not only to help them make sense of their own discipleship, but also to enable them to engage seriously with the spiritual thirst increasingly evident in their commUnities. This is sometimes described as combining in Christian spirituality the mystical and the prophetic dimensions.[[35]](#endnote-35)

**The aim of this module**

This study will stimulate mission and act as a catalyst for the turn from introspection to outreach, from private experience to public witness, from the heart to the marketplace, from the interior to the external, from retreat to engagement. It will challenge and unsettle those who see spirituality as an indulgence or self-preoccupation. Care of the inner life might actually lead to dangerous and risky action in the outer world! Privilege and responsibility, prayer and vocation go together.

This resource, then, will encourage a rediscovery of spirituality across all traditions, as something that inspires and equips us for responding to the needs to our time. It will disturb those who seek too much ease in their spiritual lives. It reminds us that a primary aim in spirituality is to lead us out of our comfort zones and into the risky spaces of the world. The dance of prayer has a centrifugal energy that sends us outwards.

This module aims to provide resources that can be worked through in order to reflect on the issues, together with suggesting penetrating questions aimed to stimulate a greater integration and relationship between the inner and outer worlds. Its strategy, then, is to open up issues by looking at a range of spiritual writers, and, as we go along, to suggest questions that will at once unsettle and inspire.

**A note on key terms**

When we talk of prayer as clarifying vocation we recall that, at its role, this word means a summons, and invitation. Prayer is about vocation not vacation! It entails a continual discernment and listening that we may sense aright what we are being called to do and to be. The word ‘Mission’ is used as a shorthand for a holistic ministry of outreach and engagement with the world, encompassing both personal evangelism and witness and also active involvement in expressions of social care, and as we shall see, participation in the political and human struggles of the oppressed and the care of the planet. This will sometimes need a sharp prophetic edge – which we will unpack further. As Bosch reminds us, this is God’s mission, the *Missio Dei*, in which we are invited to join in.[[36]](#endnote-36) So this book explores how a ministry of giving spiritual support can unleash us for participation in what God is doing in the world!

**UNIT 1 inseparable spirituality and mission of Jesus**

**This unit introduces a key theme in this module: how we can relate the call to stillness with the call to action, how we can relate personal spirituality to the search for justice in the world. This has often been described as the interplay between the mystical and prophetic dimensions of our faith, and in this unit we explore how Jesus embodies his mission as both mystic and prophet.**

**Jesus the mystic**

In recent years, attempting to pinpoint and locate the inspiration that drives Jesus, scholars have characterised him as a ‘mystic.’ In his study of the prayer-life of Jesus, Thomson identifies prayer as a crucial source of inspiration and illumination for his ministry.[[37]](#endnote-37) In a more recent study, Bruce Chilton characterises Jesus as a mystic imparting esoteric teaching: ‘He had already initiated them [the disciples] into his visionary practice, but now he distilled and systemized his mystical insights...into a personal tradition *(a kabbalah)’* [[38]](#endnote-38). Marcus Borg sees Jesus as a ‘Spirit person,’ interpreting the long periods of prayer mentioned by Luke (6.12) as Jesus use of contemplation or meditation.[[39]](#endnote-39) Borg sees Jesus as a Jewish revolutionary mystic and affirms that his mystical experience is the best explanation for his subversive wisdom and his passion and courage as a social prophet. Borg believes that Jesus’ radical convictions spring from his prayer-experience, which was marked by a vivid sense of epiphany and divine disclosure.

Other scholars too point to the prayer life of Jesus as being the source and spring of his mission: Geza Vermes, in his *Jesus the Jew*, sees Jesus as a Galilean charismatic holy man and miracle-worker in the tradition of Elijah and Elisha. Tom Wright notes the role of receptive prayer in Jesus’ experience, remembering that in the return of the Seventy after their mission, within their debriefing and reflection with Christ, perspectives arising from prayer are shared: ‘Jesus in prayer had seen a vision…[he] had seen, in mystical sight, the heavenly reality which corresponded to the earthly victories won by the 70.’ [[40]](#endnote-40)

In this unit, building on our look at Jesus as hermit, we will attempt to uncover glimpses of Jesus’ prayer life and explore what this speaks to the practice of ministry today. So, what is a mystic? Is it someone who has been captivated by what Rudolf Otto called *mysterium tremendum et fascinas,* in his classic *The Idea of the Holy*? Barreau affirms: ‘mysticism is an existential attitude, a way of living at a greater depth.’[[41]](#endnote-41) Jones states: ‘the mystic is in touch with an ‘object’ which is invisible, intangible and inaccessible, beyond sensual contact.’ [[42]](#endnote-42) ‘The Christian of the future will be a mystic, or he will not exist at all’ wrote Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, affirming that mysticism is ‘a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.’ [[43]](#endnote-43)

Evelyn Underhill declares that mysticism ‘is the direct intuition or experience of God; and a mystic is a person who has, to a greater or lesser degree, such a direct experience – one whose religion and life are centred , not merely on an accepted belief of practice, but on that which he regards as first hand personal knowledge.’[[44]](#endnote-44) William Wainwright in his work *Mysticism* notes: ‘While modern English speakers use ‘mystical experience’ to refer to a wide variety of preternatural experiences, scholars have tended to restrict the term to ‘unitary states.’ [[45]](#endnote-45) Scholars speak of mysticism in terms of an experience of ‘undifferentiated unity’ where there are no distinctions between human and divine, between subject and object: these are transcended in a consciousness of union with God where all is one. As we explore Jesus’ mysticism we shall note some significant differences: while Jesus has a vision for the wholeness of creation, he sees this as the coming together of different elements that had been separated: their reconciliation, not their merger.

**Seeing things differently**

In Jesus’ experience, his mystical openness to the Father is not only a question of firsthand knowledge of God, but also triggers and enables a new and different way of knowing altogether: a different way of seeing the world. The essential thing about his mystical prayer, it seems, is its ability to encompass and enfold into one, into a unity, the diverse and often competing elements of life. Jesus is a seer in more than one sense.[[46]](#endnote-46) He opens his eyes to view the world, its divisions and possibilities, with insight and longing.

Jesus goes *up into the hills* to pray. There he will glimpse a new perspective on things. On the shoreline at Capernaum and the lakeside villages, one can see either one coast of Galilee or another. It is not possible to see both opposite coasts at the same time. One can look west and see the city of Tiberias and the nearby northern shore: mainly Jewish, conservative traditional communities. Or, alternatively, one can look east across the waters of the lake to the other side and glimpse enemy territory, the heathen and pagan land of the Decapolis, Hellenistic and gentile lands where lurk demoniacs and unclean pigs! One may set one’s eyes on one side or another, and an ‘either/or’ choice is involved.

But when you climb up into the hills you see things differently. The higher you climb, the more you see: physically and mystically. You see vistas and panoramas that are able to encompass, in one single view, both sides. You can see both the safe traditional towns that Peter and the disciples dwelt in, and you can see the steep looming cliffs of the Golan Heights to the east – the other side. In his experience of prayer on these very hills, Jesus glimpses a new reality. The lake does not divide, after all – it unites! Both sides, both peoples, both cultures are within the Father’s embrace. It is not a question of dualistic ‘either/or’ thinking. It is ‘both/and.’ Note how Jesus will often say: ‘let us go over to the other side.’ He wants to enfold into his Kingdom all sorts and conditions of people. He longs to criss-cross the lake repeatedly: there is space in the Kingdom for all. Jesus develops a vision for wholeness – for the healing of divides.

**Living in a polarized world**

Jesus lived in a bitterly divided and polarized world. In the first century society was falling apart and riven by conflict and opposing forces. Jew was pitted against Gentile, as the Jewish people tried to maintain a ritual purity and sense of identity in a contaminated land. Zealot warred against Roman occupier. Pharisees and Sadducees were at each other’s necks. The scribes and the lawyers were at loggerheads. The Essenes opposed and defied the Temple authorities. It was a fragmenting society, riven with divisions and splits in the population.

Studies in cultural anthropology and historical sociology illumine the dynamics and mindsets prevailing in first century society, especially the status/ shame divide.[[47]](#endnote-47) In the society of Jesus' time, people were kept apart by a sense of hierarchy, in which honour was ascribed to patriarchal families and to the well-to-do, while at the opposite end of the spectrum, shame was associated with the social nobodies: not only obvious social outcasts like tax collectors (deemed to be collaborators with the Romans) and prostitutes, but also children and women. It was a painfully polarized society in which the sick and maimed were excluded from the Temple and where those who did not ‘fit’ were mercilessly marginalized.

But this human tendency to divide and rule, to split things up so they can be controlled and manipulated, infected not only culture and social structures, but the very structure of religious thinking itself. Even with the Hebrew Scriptures one detects dualistic thinking at times:

Heaven is remote and God’s ways distant (Isaiah 55:8, 9).

Enemies are to be slaughtered (Ps 139:19-22).

The Gospels give evidence of dualistic thinking persisting among ordinary people:

Sinners are to be stoned not welcomed (Jn. 8 1-11).

The outside of the cup is more important than the inside (Matt. 23: 25).

Outer compliance seems more respectable than the inner heart (Matt. 23: 17,18).

Tithing and religious observance are divorced from issues of justice and mercy (Matt. 23: 23).

The chosen people are superior to gentiles (Mk.7:27).

Paul will go on to develop polarities in his theology: flesh vs. spirit and works vs. grace, while John’s letters express a conflict and opposition between the Church and the world.

Sadly, Christian spirituality itself became infected with divisive, dualistic thinking since the early centuries embraced Platonic thought. This gave rise to disastrous polarities in Christian thinking, as things were pitched against one another. Heaven was opposed to earth, the body to the spirit. Politics and prayer were to be kept separate. Sacred and secular were delineated with barriers, as if they were two separate realms, holy and unholy. The church and the world are set against each other.

There seems to be a natural human tendency towards polarization, keeping things apart. It has to do with being in control, trying to make sense of things neatly, seeing things in black and white, but as we know it can lead to fundamentalism, racism, homophobia, fear of the other. We feel safer when we oppose, judge, differentiate, label and compare. Today, we live in a polarised word: republican vs. democrat, conservative vs. labour, protestant vs. catholic, east vs. west. Things are often said to be black or white. Bifurcation is the preferred option. It has been said, we live in a ‘tit for tat universe.’[[48]](#endnote-48) Computers, which increasingly rule our lives, are based on a binary system. McAfee Brown calls this addiction to duality ‘the great fallacy’: noting how prevalent it is, he offers a strategy for overcoming it through an incarnational approach to the world.[[49]](#endnote-49)

In spirituality, dualistic thinking has created unnecessary distances and opened up uncalled-for chasms. Where God is thought of as something ‘out there’ or ‘up there’ he is seen as remote and unapproachable. But Christian spirituality celebrates the God within, and the breakthrough to non-dualistic thinking comes precisely when the prayer of contemplation – mystic prayer – begins to shorten the distance between humans and God. John Macquarrie entitles his introduction to Christian mysticism *Two worlds are ours*.[[50]](#endnote-50) Prayer becomes the entry into a different way of knowing, an alternative way of perceiving reality. Prayer might begin with a sense of God beyond: ‘Our Father who art in heaven.’ But it dares to pray ‘thy Kingdom come’ and moves to an awareness of the God within: ‘Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.’ Jesus leads us from a dualistic view of things to a unitive understanding. He leads us to reconciliation.

**A unifying vision**

It is precisely in a context of prevailing dualistic mindsets that Jesus develops his radical unifying and inclusive vision of the Kingdom of God. With all his heart he longs to bring all people together as one in their dignity as beloved and cherished children of God. In the holy city Jesus will cry out his heart’s longing: ‘Jerusalem Jerusalem...How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!’ (Lk. 13:34). Jesus’ desire is for the unity of the world: ‘Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God’ (Lk.13:29).

Did Jesus gain this heart-felt desire from his reading of the prophet Isaiah? Jesus was inspired by the prophet Isaiah: in Luke 4, he finds in Isaiah 61 a vivid description of his ministry, and there are clues in the gospels that he saw in Isaiah’s ‘servant songs’ ( for example, Isaiah 53) a sketch of his unfolding vocation. The prophet Isaiah reveals a longing for unity and for elements that are often divorced or separated to be united:

The wolf shall live with the lamb,

the leopard shall lie down with the kid...

The cow and the bear shall graze (Is 11: 6,7)

Maybe Jesus was inspired by the psalms’ non-dualistic call to worship:

Wild animals and all cattle,

creeping things and flying birds!...

Young men and women alike,

old and young together! (Ps.148: 10, 12).

The Gospels are full of episodes in which Jesus crosses boundaries and breaks down barriers, as we saw in unit three. For him the child, the social nobody, is the model of true greatness (Mk. 9:33). The presence of women is welcomed by Jesus (Lk.8:3, 23:49) and Mary Magdalene is the first witness of the resurrection. Jesus reaches out to those marginalized by society, embracing the leper (Lk. 17:10-19). In Jerusalem, as he throws down the tables of the money-changers in the Temple, he welcomes the outcasts and the ritually unclean: ‘The blind and the lame came to him in the temple, and he cured them’ (Matt. 21:14).

Notice how many of Jesus sayings are about overcoming separation, loss and division. He sees the potential for things once separated coming together:

The woman is reunited with her lost coin.

The shepherd once again embraces his sheep.

The yeast is mixed with the flour.

The vine is joined to the branches.

The birds come to roost in the branches.

Things old and new are to be treasured.

The enemy is to be loved.

The prodigal is restored to his father.

The wounded Jewish traveller finds himself in the arms of a hated Samaritan.

God’s will is to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Love of God and love of neighbour are inseperable.

The kingdom is both now and not yet, here and still to come.

The life of the disciple is to be marked by action and contemplation: Martha and Mary need each other – being and doing are equally vital.

Jesus echoes the *Shema* (Deut. 6) with a holistic view of the human person: ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’ (Mk. 12:30).

As we will see in unit 8, the most significant sign of his inclusive kingdom, where barriers are overturned, is the meal where Jesus eats with tax collectors and sinners (Lk. 5: 29-32: see Lk. 14: 12-24). For Jesus, the open table – where everyone, regardless of shame or status, have an honoured place – expresses his readiness to smash barriers and social taboos.

Where did these ideas come from? For Jesus, the selfsame mountains of prayer, the hills above Galilee become the mountains of teaching. In Matthew’s perspective, Jesus goes up the mountain to teach (Matt. 5) and the Sermon on the Mount follows. But this hillside is precisely the same place where Jesus went up into the hills to pray. His teachings flow from his prayer.

Three major features emerge in the prayer of Jesus.

**Discovering both the light and the cloud**

In his prayer atop Tabor (or Hermon) in the event we call the Transfiguration (the Greek church calls it the *metamorphosis*, the transformation) Jesus gains a unifying view of reality. He refers to it as an *orama –* a vision, that which is seen, a sight, something glimpsed (Matt. 17:9). Jesus sees things that were separated coming together. This is not a case of dualistic ‘either/or’ options or dichotomies: rather, ‘both/and’ conjunctions recur again and again. Five unities stand out.

First, heaven itself is joined to earth. Jesus leads the disciples up a ‘high mountain’ which points into the heavens, but they fall to earth with their faces on the ground (Matt.17:6). The voice of heaven is heard ‘This is my beloved Son!’ and the clamour of voices of earth are heard too, as Peter cries out, insensibly, ‘Let us build three tents!’

Secondly, Jesus himself is both a transcendent figure, bathed with divine light, and also an immanent figure, giving his disciples a hand as he touches them and lifts them up from the earth. Intimacy meets ultimacy. Human fear and awe meet joy in this double encounter of one who is ‘beyond’ yet humanly present.

Thirdly, suffering and glory are closely interwined: while Jesus reveals his radiant glory, in the self-same moment, Luke emphasises, he speaks with Moses about the exodus he is to accomplish in Jerusalem (Lk. 9:31). The heavenly city of glory points to the earthly city of passion and pain.

A fourth unitive feature reveals itself in the presence of Moses and Elijah. They are often taken to represent, dualistically, the Jewish Law and the Prophets – the two main ways that God reveals himself under the first covenant. Now, they seem to need each other, for they appear together – the Law can become unhelpful without the prophetic critique which brings to the fore issues of honesty and justice; while the prophets need the grounding in the commandments or else they might become unanchored from the tradition. In the event of the Transfiguration, the Law and the Prophets stand in closest relation, linked by the person of Jesus who extends a hand to each.

Fifthly, Jesus encounters God in both the light and the cloud. The light represents the *kataphatic* tradition of prayer – where affirmations and declarations about God are made confidently: Jesus is light; ‘his face shone like the sun’; ‘his garments became white as light.’ But the cloud represents the *apophatic* tradition, where words give way to silence, where concepts about God dissolve into speechless wonder, where the unifying dense wet fog of the cloud shrouds the disciples and silences all attempts at talking. Peter’s instinct is to construct tents: to domesticate the divine, to contain the mystery, to regain control in the situation: ‘let us build three booths’ (Lk. 9: 33). This can represent our attempts in prayer to ‘get a handle’ on God, to box him in with words, concepts and images, to encase divinity with human structures. But precisely at the point when Peter suggests the building of booths ‘a cloud came and overshadowed them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud’ (Lk. 9: 34). The response to human tent-building is a divine smothering or drenching in mysterious wet mist where visibility is reduced to nil. The cloud now dampens the senses and exuberant conceptualising and silences the over-active mind. The cloud eclipses the sun: there has been, as it were, a change in the weather, from bright sunlight to darkening cloud, gloom and impenetrable haze. A swirling fog blankets the disciples. It becomes a poignant symbol of that transition in prayer from active, discursive thinking to simpler loving. But Matthew calls it a ‘bright cloud’ as if the revealing light and the concealing cloud can co-exist in the vision of Jesus: in the event of the Transfiguration Jesus unites the two ways of prayer, the two very different approaches to God, represented in light and cloud.

**Discovering a sacramental universe**

A second major unifying theme reveals itself: as Jesus prayed in the hills above Galilee, he looked at the world sacramentally and contemplatively. ‘Consider the flowers of the field’ – take a long, slow look at them and discover how they reveal the secrets of the Kingdom. Time and again Jesus glimpses the unity of creation. Jesus sees a wholeness to creation: there is no place for dualistic polarized thought.

 ‘Both / and’ thinking reveals itself again and again. Looking up at the sun and feeling on his skin the rain falling on the lush Galilee hills, Jesus announces: ‘He makes the sun rise on the righteous and unrighteous alike and the rain on the just and unjust’ (Matt. 5:5). Looking at the earth below him and seeing how wheat and weed become intertwined, he declares: ‘Let both of them grow together’ (Matt. 13: 24-30).

For Jesus, the key is in the looking – how we see the world contemplatively, what we notice and what we miss. Jesus rejoices: ‘blessed are your eyes, for they see’ (Matt. 13: 16). In the *Gospel of Thomas* (113), his disciples ask him, ‘When will the kingdom come?’ Jesus replies: ‘the Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people don't see it.’ In another saying from this source, words are placed on the lips of Jesus that testify to a unifying vision of the world: ‘When you make the two into one, and when you make the inner like the outer and the outer like the inner, and the upper like the lower,... then you will enter the kingdom’ (*Gospel of Thomas* 22).

**Discovering union with God**

Thirdly, his prayer in John 17 celebrates the unity of Father and Son. Jesus had already declared: ‘The Father and I are one’ (Jn. 10: 30): now he longs and aches for such a communion to be established in the hearts of all. His prayer up in the hills anticipates his intense prayer of the Upper Room as John offers it to us. In the fourth gospel, Jesus affirms ‘those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit’ (15:5). In his great prayer of John 17 Jesus pleads: ‘that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us...’(17:21) Jesus wants to overcome the divide. This is a radically alternative way of looking at things: to uncover and reveal the unity of all creation with God.

Jesus’ longing culminates in the cross where he is crucified on a structure that sums up his healing of dichotomy: the vertical, transcendent, Godward shaft of the cross meets the horizontal, inclusive arm. Outstretched arms embrace all. The Letter to the Ephesians celebrates how here Jew and Gentile are brought together: ‘in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall...that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace...through the cross’ (Eph. 2: 14-16). At Calvary itself, as Jesus stretches out his arms wide to embrace the world, it is astonishing to see who are the founder-members of his new community gathered at the foot of the cross: a despairing mother; a fisherman disciple; a political guerrilla (the so-called ‘thief’); a soldier centurion who stands for the might of Rome; Mary Magdalene who loves much, because she is forgiven much. The space of Calvary has a place for all. The cross is a place of reconciliation, and Jesus extends his arms to encompass the universe: ‘God has made known to us the mystery of his will...as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth’ (Eph. 1:9,10). The Letter to the Colossians affirms: ‘in him all things hold together ...through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross’ (Col. 1: 17, 20).

Jesus the mystic shows us that it is in the place of receptive prayer that we discover a vision for unity. We start to crave for wholeness and healing among the divided. Vision that inspires is born in mystic prayer – the sort of prayer that looks contemplatively at the world, and the sort of prayer that learns to receive from God, the Father of us all: ‘There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all’ (Eph. 4:4-6).[[51]](#endnote-51)

Justin Welby has said recently:

There has never been a renewal of church life in western Christianity without a renewal of prayer...it is in prayer, individually and together, that God puts into our minds new possibilities of what the Church can be.[[52]](#endnote-52)

**Jesus the Prophet**

The Galilee of Jesus’ time suffered the double trouble of oppression and poverty. Lee writes: ‘Galileans... were oppressed, dehumanized and looked down upon. Galileans were marginalized by foreign invaders and also by the Jerusalem Temple-state...’[[53]](#endnote-53) But above all, it was a place of deep poverty and need. The Galileans were crippled by heavy taxes: dues were owed to the Roman occupier, and Temple taxes added to the burden. At the time of Jesus ordinary families were being forced to quit their ancestral landholdings, where they had lived for centuries, in order to meet these demands. Land was also confiscated for the building projects and villas of the urban elite at Sefforis and Tiberias. But then they had to pay rent for what had been their own fields and homes: they became caught in a downwards economic spiral, becoming tenants in their own property. We should note how many of Jesus’ parables speak of absentee landlords who impose severe dues on their tenants (see, for example, Lk.16:1-8; Matt.25:14-30). Tax and rent robbed the Galilean peasant farmer of two thirds of the family income. Many were living at barely subsistence level. No doubt Matthew preserves an original aspect of the Lord’s Prayer when he puts it: ‘Forgive us our debts and we forgive those who are in debt to us’ (Matt.6:12).

Greco-Roman culture nourished the creation of an upper class, the social elites, who owned great homes and estates. The value-system and belief-system of the culture manifested itself in indulgent architecture, which archaeology has recently revealed. Wealth was power, and the gentry of Tiberias and Sefforis were at the top of the social pyramid. It was a world of ‘haves’ and ‘have nots.’

It is against this background that we see, at the time of Jesus, the emergence of two significant expressions of resistance and protest against the status quo. First, there were the terrorists. 'Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest me as though I was a bandit?' (Mk. 14: 48). The Greek word *lestes*, translated ‘bandit’, denotes freedom fighter or even terrorist. Josephus tells us about revolutionary activists based in Galilee who sought to undermine Roman domination by acts of sabotage or terrorism. Since the revolt of Judas the Galilean in 4 BC the region had become a hotbed of resistance to increasingly stifling imperial rule.[[54]](#endnote-54) In the accounts of the passion, it is clear that Jesus is on trial before the Roman authorities precisely for being a subversive social revolutionary. He is arraigned beside the insurrectionist Barabbas. He is crucified between two ‘thieves’ – this is the usual tame translation (Mk. 15:27), but the Greek word ‘bandit’ reminds us of this growing movement of rebellion and insurgency against Roman oppression.

The second group we encounter at this time were the Zealots. The hand-picked band of disciples included Judas Iscariot – his surname may relate to the Sicarri rebels, forerunners of the Zealots. Also we meet ‘Simon the Zealot’ and the ‘sons of thunder.’ Maybe, therefore, a third of the Twelve were involved one way or another in the protest movement that was raising steam at the time of Jesus. Peter Walker writes: ‘The Palestine in which Jesus grew up was ...politically red-hot...The tension between the Jews and Roman rulers was increasing...Jesus [found himself] in a context that was like a tinderbox waiting to go up in flames.’[[55]](#endnote-55)

Scholars speak increasingly of Jesus as a fearless rebel. For John Dominic Crossan, Jesus is a social revolutionary who questions Rome’s claims, while for Marcus Borg he is a revolutionary mystic. [[56]](#endnote-56) Richard Horsley sees the Jesus movement as a peasant revolt, calling the community back to Mosaic covenantal cooperation and mutuality.[[57]](#endnote-57) Sean Freyne, too, notes that aspects of Jesus’ ministry read like a Galilean protest movement.[[58]](#endnote-58) Jesus’ heart was with the underdog and the oppressed Galilean peasant. Jesus may be called an outlaw: defined as a person who rebels against established rules or practices; a nonconformist. Was he a rogue, a mischievous rascal, ready to undermine the Establishment with a subversive message?

Scholars point out that the one subject most likely to lead to conflict with the Roman authorities is the question of rule – and Jesus frames his message precisely around the concept of the reign of God: what would life look like if God, not Caesar, were on the throne?[[59]](#endnote-59) Jesus challenges both the power of Rome and the conventions of first century Judaism by his message about the Kingdom of God, where all are welcome and all are equal. The Kingdom of God represents a new way of living, a different path, an alternative vision for society, and the Sermon on the Mount reads like a radical manifesto. It all seems defiance. Jesus *is* a rebel in the eyes of Rome and crucifixion is the imperial reward for insurgents: the murderous insurrectionist Barabbas was released, while Jesus hung. In contrast to the brutal strategy of the guerrilla fighters and activists, crucified to left and right, Jesus becomes a rebel by peacefully advancing the Reign of God. He, the non-violent one, is pinned to the cross, between the violent alternatives.

In what ways, then, does Jesus emerge as a rebel? While the Gospels tell us that Jesus met his death as a rebel against Rome, they communicate the subversive ministry of Jesus through a closely-linked image: Jesus the prophet. So what is a prophet and how is it related to rebel?

Those on Emmaus Road spoke of ‘Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people’ (Lk. 24:19). The prophets of old both spoke the word of God and also embodied or symbolised the word in a dramatic action. Jesus speaks and he acts. The burden of the Old Testament prophets was not prediction of the future, but rather declaring God’s word into the present situation, naming the idols and illusions of contemporary society. For example, Amos was concerned to deliver his people from self-satisfying rituals and self-absorbing forms of prayer and alert them to the desperate needs of the society around them:

I hate, I despise your festivals...

But let justice roll down like waters,

And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream (Am. 5: 21, 24).

In similar vein Isaiah is uncompromising:

Is this not the fast that I choose:

To loosen the bonds of injustice,

To undo the thongs of the yoke,

To let the oppressed go free...

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry...? (Is. 58:6,7).

Walter Brueggeman in his classic *The Prophetic Imagination* tells us that the role of the prophet is to envision an alternative consciousness, and to open up for people a different vision of things: Jesus’ Kingdom of God directly questioned the prevailing status quo of the Kingdom of Rome. The role of the prophet is to enable an alternative perspective which may be subversive, questioning, compassionate, and which certainly reveals itself in counter-cultural lifestyle and political choices.[[60]](#endnote-60)

There are three contexts in which Jesus is depicted as a radical prophet: personal, pastoral and political.

**Prophet Jesus: personal self-reference**

In the synagogue at Nazareth, at the very start of his public ministry, Jesus chooses a text from the prophet Isaiah to be the manifesto for his ministry: he, too, is called ‘to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives’ (Lk. 4: 17-21).

Also in Nazareth, according to all four Gospels, Jesus calls himself a prophet in the words: ‘Prophets are not without honour, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house’ (Mk. 6:4; Lk. 4:24, Jn. 4:44). In a further self-reference, Jesus talks about the destiny of prophets to die in the holy city: ‘Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem’ (Lk. 13:33).

At the event sometimes called the ‘cleansing of the temple’ Jesus quotes Jeremiah and Isaiah and thereby locates himself in the tradition of Jerusalem prophets (Is. 56:7, Jer. 7:11). This event, we know, is best interpreted as a prophetic action declaring in word and deed the ending of the temple worship. Jesus was identified by his own disciples as a prophet at Caesarea Philippi: ‘And they said, ‘Some say [he is] John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets’ (Matt. 16:14).

**Prophet Jesus: pastoral context**

A second context where Jesus is greeted as a prophet is the pastoral encounter. At Nain, after Jesus has spoken words of hope to a grieving widow and lifted up her dead son to new life, the people ‘glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” ’ (Lk.7:16). Jacob’s Well witnesses the woman’s acclamation: ‘Sir, I see that you are a prophet’ (Jn.4:19). In Jerusalem, he is hailed in prophetic terms: ‘So they said again to the blind man, “What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.” He said, “He is a prophet” ’ (Jn.9:17).

**Prophet Jesus: political context**

A third context can loosely be called political. At the Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem the crowds were saying, ‘This is the prophet Jesus from Nazareth in Galilee’ (Matt. 21: 11). Soon afterwards, we read, ‘They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet’ (Matt.21:46).

In the fourth gospel, Jesus is twice acclaimed a prophet in a context about political choices. ‘When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world” ’ (Jn.6:14). There was a division among the people: ‘When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, “This is really the prophet” ’ (Jn. 7:40).

Four things stand out in Jesus’ courageous and audacious prophetic ministry: he emerges as rebel, revolutionary, ringleader and radical.

**1 Rebel Jesus: standing against culture**

There is a place, Jesus shows, for righteous anger. He is outraged at cultural injustices. In first century society children were regarded as nobodies. When Jesus saw the disciples themselves shooing away and banishing children, the account says: ‘he was indignant’ (Mk. 10:14). The Greek verb is ‘to feel irritation, to be vexed, displeased or angry at a thing.’[[61]](#endnote-61) Incensed, Jesus turns these rejected ones into those who will teach us about the Kingdom: ‘whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it’ (Mk.10:15). In an act of deepest affirmation, he lays his hands upon these so-called ‘worthless’ children and blesses them.

Jesus also gets angry at the exclusion of a leper walking alone along a road. Ancient manuscripts translating Mk 1: 40 say that at the sight of the leper Jesus was ‘moved with anger.’ He found it intolerable, totally unacceptable, that this man should be ostracized and stigmatized by society. His next response is ‘Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him’ (1: 41). Jesus embraces the ones society deems untouchable and contaminating. We glimpse a Jesus who is vehemently opposed to oppression and ‘structural sin’ – prejudices embedded in the culture – and expresses his feelings of anger and exasperation openly.

As we have seen, Jesus embraces the poor, defying customs, smashing taboos, breaking conventions, destroying barriers, and crossing all sorts of boundaries which keep people apart in strict social hierarchies. He is truly a rebel spirit!

**2 Ringleader Jesus: empowering disciples**

It is a remarkable feature of Mark’s gospel that very early on in the narrative, Jesus empowers his disciples to go out and advance his mission. Indeed, Mark tells us, the reason he appointed the twelve apostles was ‘to be with him, and to sent out to proclaim the message, and to have authority to cast out demons’ (Mk. 3: 14, 15). Jesus here is not a substitute but an energizer: Jesus is the exemplar, not stand-in. It is not a question of just admiring what Jesus does but rather a question of getting on and doing it too. So he sends them out, two by two (Mk. 6: 7-13). Mark tells us that they are to travel light – taking nothing for the journey except a staff – they are to travel trusting in God’s providence. They are to focus their ministry on the needs of the outcasts: the demonized and the sick (Mark 6:13).

Luke (10: 1) tells us that Jesus commissions and despatches some seventy people – an echo of the prophet Moses and his seventy co-workers (Numbers 11:16). Jesus emerges as a ringleader – one who leads others and imparts to them a real sense of authority and urgency which takes them onto the road. Luke tells us that they are to have just one message: ‘the Kingdom of God has come near to you’ (Lk. 10: 9). They are to proclaim a different reign, an alternative to Roman ideology and domination: they are to declare the sovereignty of God.

**3 Revolutionary Jesus: undermining military mindset**

The two Palm Sunday processions vividly express the contrast.[[62]](#endnote-62) From the east comes Jesus, sitting upon a donkey, hailed as a king by children waving palms. From the west comes Pilate, arriving with a battalion of hundreds of soldiers to oversee the Passover crowds, with the sound of metal against leather, marching boots, war horses and stallions; swords and shields, standards lifted high. Pilate, coming from his headquarters in Caesarea Maritima, represents the might of Rome, ready to crush at an instant any trace of trouble or protest; Jesus comes not in a ‘triumphal entry’ (as it is sometimes called) but in a prophetic action, bespeaking another kingdom, a different way of doing things, an alternative vision. Jesus’ action is indeed a protest against Roman might: what is it like to be people of a different king?

Scholars remind us that the Caesars, who were becoming divinised, were underpinning their claims with a sort of imperial theology: Augustus Caesar was hailed as ‘son of God’, his victories were announced as ‘Gospel’ or ‘Good News.’ We recall that it was precisely at Caesarea Philippi, where Herod had built a splendid new temple to the divine Augustus, that Jesus dares to ask: ‘Who do you say that I am?’

Scholars see Jesus as a social revolutionary rather than as a political one. He refuses that option: ‘When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself’ (Jn. 6:15). He did not want to be a conquering hero vanquishing Rome by might. He did not come to lead a political revolution but rather to call members of society back being to a covenantal egalitarian community, marked by mutual respect.

This was essentially a seditious message because it undermined the status quo and the very assumptions of Roman rule. The admonition to love your enemy and turn the other cheek directly confronts the Roman military mindset where might is right (Matt.5:44). The word ‘subversive’ from the Latin *subvertere* literally means ‘to turn from under, from below, from beneath’ and the parables emerge as subversive wisdom. The parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Matt.20:1-16) affirms the worth of each person, while the advice to make peace with an opponent on the way to court (Matt. 5:25) rejects a judgmental spirit between people. As in the case of the parable of the vineyard (Mk. 12), sometimes the hearers get the point and realize that ‘he had told the parable against them.’

**4 Radical Jesus: critiquing Judaism**

Jesus does not say to Nicodemus, respected member of the Sanhedrin and ‘a leader of the Jews’: ‘please revise or update your thinking.’ Rather Jesus says to this representative figure that those seeking the Kingdom of God must be born again (3:3). Jesus calls the practitioners of Judaism back to the basics: Nicodemus is next seen at the womb-tomb (Jn. 19:39-42). Jesus emerges as a rebel or radical in relation to prevailing aspects of Judaism, represented in scribe, Pharisee and Sadducee. Though the diatribes and woes of Matthew 23 reflect the struggles that the Matthean church was facing, aspects of the radical critique of Jewish practice here no doubt go back to Jesus himself. In Matthew Jesus calls his co-religionists ‘a brood of vipers’ while in John, they are ‘sons of the devil’ (8:44) – John’s gospel too reflects both the Johannine conflict with Judeans and something of Jesus’ own struggle.

What is beyond doubt is that Jesus exposes hypocrisy and double standards. This is not the conflict between law and grace, but an incisive critique by Jesus of practices that have become distorted: ‘You tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith’ (Matt. 23: 23). As Matthew presents it, Jesus is outraged and stunned by empty rituals and the longing in his heart is to call his hearers back to real encounter with the living God. The Sermon on the Mount contrasts human traditions and divine imperatives. Radicalizing, it strikes right at the heart of the matter. ‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall not commit adultery.” But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart’ (Matt. 5:27,28). Jesus’ prophetic critique goes to the very root and to the origin of our weakness: the relation of the human heart with God and others.

**6 contemporary challenges**

**1 subversive worship**

How courageously does our worship question the culture we find ourselves in? Two opposite approaches – inculturation or being counter-cultural – were summed up for me at a recent meeting. An evangelical colleague explained how the clergy had abandoned clerical attire for their services, wear T shirts and jeans, use the latest IT gadgetry, sing contemporary songs – it sounded like ‘cafe church’ (without the coffee). I said my church was probably totally opposite. We were culturally irrelevant, in a sense. We want to offer people things they can’t get in a supermarket or in the cathedrals of our age, the shopping malls. We seek worship that is transcendent, gives a glimpse of heaven, is other-worldly, and takes your breath away with its sheer beauty and mystery with its incense, icons, music, silences, darkness, symbols and sacraments! Each church was responding to the culture – the first, ministering to students, the second to older and well-travelled people. The challenge is, of course, to communicate in our worship a different vision, an alternative view of the universe, a distinctive, God-centred approach to life in contemporary society.

The Eucharist can become subversive, and opens up an alternative vision that questions and doubts the norms of society. The Eucharist emerges as profoundly counter cultural: accepting all people as they are, scorning societal norms and hierarchies in the welcome extended to all, without distinction – a challenge to today’s ‘X Factor’ climate, where only the beautiful and clever count! The Gospel itself is subversive as it throws up radical questions about our culture.

**2 alternative lifestyle**

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges facing us is that we have accommodated unthinkingly to the spirit of the age and our outward lives don’t look very different to those around us. We are infected by the plague of individualism and the mindset of the consumer. We should grapple with ethical issues in the pulpit, shining Gospel-light into contemporary dilemmas. We should model in our household a lifestyle that questions the status quo of society. The hardest thing is to live simply.[[63]](#endnote-63)

We need to learn the art of rebellion in relation to aspects of the culture that the Gospel must critique. We need to train people to laugh at and scorn the advertising inflicted on us, that tries to convince us of the need for a luxury item, where there is none. More seriously, we need to support people to ‘stand up and be counted’ on issues that undermine the sanctity of life and inalienable human rights. But there are contentious or confusing issues where the Spirit may be speaking to us through God’s world and not through synods. This happens sometimes! We have to read ‘what the Spirit is saying to the churches’ on issues like human sexuality: sometimes God might be calling out to us through the experience of those who have been alienated and despised!

In the face of materialistic, consumerist ways of living, the Church is challenged afresh to pioneer lifestyles that are different, alternative, in tune with the Gospel, which indeed will go against the grain, against the flow, and be counter-cultural in this present age.[[64]](#endnote-64) Postmodernism exposes the moral and spiritual vacuum at the heart of British society. We must be alert to the emptiness of current hedonism and to a sense of spiritual bankruptcy which cries out for experience of God revealed in a lifestyle marked by authenticity and simplicity. Dare to be different!

John Dear puts it:

Following Jesus today in a land of nuclear weapons, rampant racism, and widespread economic injustice means actively going against our culture of violence. As the culture promotes violence, we promote Jesus’ nonviolence. As the culture calls for war, we call for Jesus’ peace. As the culture supports racism, sexism, and classism, we demand Jesus’ vision of equality, community and reconciliation. As the culture insists on vengeance and execution, we pray with Jesus for forgiveness and compassion. As the culture summons us to be successful, to make money, to have a career, to get to the top, and to be number one, we race in the opposite direction and go with Jesus into voluntary poverty, powerlessness, humility, suffering and death. Discipleship to Jesus, according to the Gospel, requires that we love our enemies, demand justice for the poor, seek liberation of the oppressed, visit the sick and the imprisoned....create community, beat swords into ploughshares...If we try to engage in these social practices, we will feel the sting of discipleship and the Gospel will come alive.[[65]](#endnote-65)

**3 prophetic struggle**

An incarnational model of ministry demands that we are down below, in the gutter and in the dirt, where the poor and wounded are to be found. We will not be in ivory towers but situate ourselves on ground zero, joining the struggle and standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the crushed and the little ones. This model demands that we take another look at the balance in our lives between action and contemplation, between struggle and silence. There is a ‘a time to speak out and a time to be silent’ (Eccl. 3:7). As Casaldaliga and Vigil put it:

We are called to live contemplation in liberative activity, decoding surroundings made up of grace and sin, light and shade, justice and injustice, peace and violence, discovering in this historical process the presence of the Wind that blows where it will...in the wail of a child, or in the full-throated cry of a people, we try to ‘listen’ to God...[[66]](#endnote-66)

The Archbishop of Canterbury has spoken recently of the need for a ‘revolution’:

As Pope Francis has recalled so memorably, we are to be a poor church for the poor, however and wherever poverty is seen, materially or spiritually. That is a revolution. Being a poor church means...prophetic challenge in a country that is still able and has the resources to reduce inequality...[[67]](#endnote-67)

Such a ‘revolution’ needs rebels who are prepared to speak prophetic words to those who have responsibility in our society.

**4 outspoken witness**

Courageous deacons, priests and bishops from history and the present day inspire and hearten us. Deacon St Francis reveals the dilemmas of being a rebel. He was intensely loyal to the Church, submitting his Rules for papal approval and honouring we because they bring to God’s people the sacrament of love. But he defied authority not so much by his words but by modelling a radically alternative lifestyle that called into question the hedonistic capitalism of his time: ‘preach the Gospel always, and use words when necessary.’

England has had its share of ‘turbulent priests’. The description was given to Thomas a Becket (1118 – 1170) who resisted Henry II’s attempts at controlling aspects of the Church, and paid with his life. In our own day, a recent successor at Canterbury, Rowan Williams, has shown how it is possible to be part of the Establishment yet offer searing critique of the powers that be.[[68]](#endnote-68) These examples invite us to explore how we can be prophets and poets in our own contexts. We should be angry and outraged at poverty, exploitation and social exclusion.

**5 risky care**

Matthew 25 summons us to find a scruffy and bleeding Christ in the broken and marginalized, and to honour him in them. A prophetic spirituality can be symbolised in hands and ears. Holy hands uplifted in prayer become hands outstretched in care, hands that may become dirty, bruised, wounded. We have, as it were, two ears: one to listen to God, one to listen to the cries of the poor, the screams of the exploited – which might turn out to be the cry of God himself.

**6 courageous prayer**

There are big questions that we should be ready to ask about our own spirituality and prayer. Are there danger signs that my spirituality is becoming narcisstic, self-centred, closed in on itself? Is my spirituality about self-fulfilment or about empowering sacrificial living? If the measure of spiritual maturity is increasing solidarity with the hurting, an enlarging capacity for compassion, what are the signs that I am maturing? Is my heart getting bigger? How far can I allow the pain of the world to enter my prayer? Does my prayer have room for the oppressions and injustices of the world? What place is there for a costly intercession which is inseparable from self-offering (does not let me ‘off the hook’)? Indeed, what is my understanding of intercession? Advising the Almighty or ‘coming before God with the people on your heart’ (Michael Ramsey). What place is there in my prayer for the Cross – not only in terms of seeking personal forgiveness but in realising that God suffers among us? What does Matthew 25 look like in my experience? What is the evidence? Am I drawn to the margins in any way? As Jim Wallis puts it: ‘ Personal piety has become an end in itself instead of the energy for social justice....Prophetic spirituality will always fundamentally challenge the system at its roots and offer genuine alternatives based on values from our truest religious, cultural and political traditions.’[[69]](#endnote-69)

**Questions for reflection**

1 What divisions among people do you face in your community? How can you bring these into prayer? What dichotomies or divorces do you encounter today in Christian thinking or strategy? How can Christian prayer enfold and unite the diverse elements?

2 What do you make of the claim relating to Jesus by the Sea of Galilee: ‘The higher you climb, the more you see: physically and mystically.’ Does this resonate with your own experience of prayer?

3 This unit claims that at the heart of mystic prayer is the ability to receive from God a unifying vision of the Kingdom. How would you express the heart of mystical prayer?

4 What do you think we can learn most effectively from Jesus the mystic? What is your own vision for wholeness and healing?

5 What would your Christian life look like if you modelled it on Jesus the prophet?

6 When was the last time you were outraged or indignant about an injustice, near or far, and actually did something about it?

7 The ministry of the prophet is characterised by courage and audacity, by plain speaking and bold actions. How do these reveal themselves in your Christian witness?

**Prayer Exercise**

Use your hands expressively in this prayer-time in four actions. Begin by clenching your fists tight and holding them before you. Feel the tension and let these fists represent an anger or frustration that bothers you today, a situation in the world that you feel strongly about. Hold them before God in the solidarity of prayer and intercession.

Secondly, slowly open your down-turned palms and let go of the tension. Let it fall away from you to God. In this gesture give to God any negative feelings or stresses, feel them drip out of your fingertips, as it were. Surrender the situation to God’s providence and sovereignty.

Thirdly, turn your hands upwards in a gesture of surrender to God and of receiving from God. Breathe in what God wants to give you right now – perhaps a reassurance that all will be well. Breathe in his empowering Spirit who will give you the courage for action.

Finally, take a look at your hands. Is there an action that God is calling you to make in relation to your initial concern? What should you do as a result of this – something bold, something risky or rebellious?

Recall 2 Timothy 1:7 : ‘God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.’ End with the Serenity Prayer: ‘God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change; courage to change the things I can; and wisdom to know the difference.’

OR

Use the ‘cross-prayers’ devised by Francis of Assisi. Open your arms wide – extend them as far as you can. This is first to embody a solidarity with the cross. Think of Jesus opening wide his arms on the cross to embrace all who suffer, all who are in any form of distress. Think of Christ’s all-encompassing love and acceptance. Second, think of the Risen Christ and the way he longs to enfold whole of creation, the little ones and marginalised ones of the earth. Third, offer this prayer as an act of intercession. It is a prayer that hurts – in the sense that your arms will grow weary and ache. Moses prayed like this and had to have others hold his arms up (Exodus 17:11,12). As you feel the ache, let it connect you to those who are in pain, those who are hurting: the sick, the dispossessed, those whose human rights are trampled on. Finally, use this prayer-action as an act of self-offering. Offer yourself afresh to God for the part he has in store for you in his mission of reconciliation in the world.

**2 Spirituality and mission in the first millennium**

**In the next two units, we identify the ways in which major spiritual writers have struggled with the divorce between spirituality and mission. We are pointed to resources in the tradition that will equip us to grapple with the issues today.**

This unit plunges us into the central dilemmas inherent in a life of prayer and witness. In differing ways, major shapers of Christian spirituality grapple with tensions that can turn out to be threatening, or extremely creative, within the spiritual life. As we meet with Anthony, Basil, Benedict, Columbanus and the Celtic tradition, we ask ourselves: how does this play out – in my own experience, and in my ministry of giving support to others?

**Anthony, father of monasticism: backwards and forwards**

Anthony (c. 251 – 356 AD), found himself responding radically to the words of Jesus: ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasures in heaven; and come, follow Me’ (Matt 19:21). He took himself to the desert of Nitria, desiring to be completely cut off from civilization. Yet his anchoretic lifestyle became an extraordinary magnet to those seeking a radical Christianity, and he found himself welcoming into his solitude hundreds of people with the request: ‘Give me a word, father.’ Athanasius’ *Life of Anthony* gives us an idealized account of his life – a work that was destined to become very influential as monasticism developed in the succeeding centuries. Athanasius tells us that Anthony advanced into a further desert and enclosed himself in an old Roman fort for some twenty years. Significantly, Anthony did not grant access to his personal cell to anyone, but spoke his words of wisdom and advice to seekers as they stood outside listening.

Finally, he emerged from the fort. Locals expected him to have wasted away, or to have gone insane in his solitary confinement, but he emerged healthy, serene and enlightened. Everyone was amazed that he had endured such disciplines and spiritual trials (Athanasius tells us he fought with demons and suffered bad dreams) and emerged spiritually rejuvenated.

He felt impelled to do something positive to hearten and encourage the Christians of Alexandria facing bitter persecution. He visited those imprisoned for their faith. But when the Governor saw that he was confessing his own faith publicly, not caring what might happen to him, he ordered him not to show up in the city. However, the Saint did not heed his threats.

He left Alexandria to return to the old Roman fort upon the end of the persecutions. Here, many came to visit him and to hear his teachings. Aware that these visits were eroding his prayer, he retreated into the Egypt’s eastern desert. But hundreds of spiritual seekers still managed to track him down. It is possible to visit St Anthony’s cave today. Hidden away in Mount Colzim, in a valley that runs down to the Red Sea, it is high up in the cliff face, more than two thousand feet above sea level; the pilgrim can access it today by climbing up many steps. From the cliff-face, you enter a dark, narrow tunnel, more than twenty feet in length, which finally reaches a chamber in pitch blackness. Inside there is a real sense of enclosure, of being held by God. It does not feel claustrophobic but it does feel that you are in a deep mysterious place concealed from the world and from the blazing sunlight of the desert, wrapped around with the walls of living rock.

From this cave of prayer, he practised and commended a lifestyle integrating prayer into work, anticipating the *Rule of Benedict* some two hundred years later. Below in the valley, near a life-giving spring, he cultivated a garden and platted palm leaves and rushes into mats. He and his disciples were regularly sought out for words of enlightenment. These statements were later collected into the book of *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, which together with his *Letters* forms a vital source for our discovery of his teaching. There we find his deep conviction: ‘Our life and our death is with our neighbour. If we gain our brother, we have gained God, but if we scandalise our brother, we have sinned against Christ.’[[70]](#endnote-70)

A striking feature of the *Letters of St Anthony* is the teaching about *gnosis*, self knowledge. As Rubenson points out: ‘Without knowledge of himself, or, as Anthony says, of his own *spiritual essence*, a man (sic) cannot know God, he cannot understand God’s acts of salvation, but by fully understanding himself a man knows his time.’[[71]](#endnote-71) Anthony’s *Letters* celebrate a spiritual anthropology: ‘A sensible man who has prepared himself to be freed at the coming of Jesus knows himself in his spiritual essence, for he who knows himself also knows the dispensations of his Creator, and what he does for his creatures.’[[72]](#endnote-72) Fusing Platonic, Origenist and Biblical ideas, Anthony teaches that humanity’s ‘spiritual essence’ consists in being rational, that is, in our capacity for true knowledge of God. His advice is ‘know thyself.’

Despite his solitude, Anthony kept in close touch with the vicissitudes that the Church was facing – not only the martyrdoms but also the fierce doctrinal controversies that were threatening to tear the Church apart. In 338, he left the desert temporarily to visit Alexandria to help refute the teachings of Arius, and played a key role in upholding orthodox views of the divinity of Christ. So Anthony managed to safeguard his own solitude while being ready to support not only seekers in the wilderness but also the urban Christians. He modelled a movement between the city and the desert, between enclosure and availability. Referring to the Egyptian setting, Laurence Freeman reminds us: ‘ In no other country does the desert come so close to the populated world.’ [[73]](#endnote-73) Rowan Williams puts it:

The whole purpose of any kind of *ascesis* is to challenge and overcome in ourselves whatever makes us an obstacle to the connection between God and the neighbour…What is to be learned in the desert is clearly not some individual technique for communing with the divine, but the business of becoming a means of reconciliation and healing for the neighbour…We love God when and only when we are the conduit for God’s reconciling presence with the person next to us.[[74]](#endnote-74)

**Basil the Great: the blessings and dangers of solitude**

In 380 the Emperor Theodosius declared Christianity to be the required religion throughout the Empire, cementing the marriage between Church and State. Monastic life developed partly as a reaction against the nominalism creeping into the Church after the persecutions ended. It became the “white martyrdom” for thousands seeking to rediscover an authentic and radical discipleship in the solitude of the deserts and remote areas of Egypt, Syria, Palestine and Asia Minor.

Basil of Caesarea (330-379) played a vital role in helping to bring the vision of desert monasticism to the wider world. He visited the monastic settlements of Palestine, Syria and Egypt in order to discover their secret. On his return to Cappodocia he embodied his insights in his Rule which to this day is central to eastern monasticism, while Benedict acknowledges his debt to Basil in his own Rule which became the basis of western monasticism. In his letter to his friend Gregory Nazianzus, written to persuade him to come and join the retreat at Pontus, Basil celebrates four blessings of the desert: silence, solitude, separation and stillness.[[75]](#endnote-75)

**Four Blessings**

**Silence enables inner focus**

Basil writes: ‘One should aspire at keeping the mind in quietude [*hesychia*]… Quietude is therefore the principle of purification of the soul, when the tongue does not speak the words of men, when the eyes do not turn all around to behold the complexion and the proportion of bodies, when the hearing does not loosen the spirit with sweet tunes composed for pleasure, or with jokes or buffoon cries most apt to unnerve the strength of the soul…’

**Solitude enables continuity of prayer**.

Basil explains: ‘The solitude [*eremia*] offers a very great advantage for our task of prayer. Let us for a season be free from the commerce of men, so that nothing may come from without and break the continuity of the *ascesis*’[training or discipline]. There is a place in discipleship for getting off the treadmill of work and activity, saying goodbye to the clamour of things in the world forever competing for our attention, in order that, for a while at least, we may become focussed on God and utterly attentive to him – as Basil says, ‘for a season.’

**Separation enables a clear vision of the truth**

Basil extols the virtues of making a retreat (*anachoresis*) from activity, for a few minutes, or hours, or days. He says that, at times, we have to cut our ties, loosen our grip and grasp on activities, let go of our attachments and of our worries, so we can become wholly available to God in prayer. But Basil’s advice is nuanced. He is not necessarily advocating a physical retreat from the world, but rather commending the art of living in the midst of the world with a certain detachment:

The eye that wanders continually around, now sideways, now up and down, is unable to see distinctly what lies under it; it ought rather to apply itself firmly to the visible object if it aims at a clear vision. Likewise, the spirit of man, if it is dragged about by the world’s thousand cares, has no way to attain a clear vision of the truth…Each day arrives, each in its own way obscuring the mind; and the nights, taking over the cares of the day, deceive the soul with obnoxious phantasms. There is only one escape: withdraw from the world altogether. Now this withdrawal does not mean that we should leave the world bodily, but rather break loose from the ties of ‘sympathy’ of the soul with the body.

**Stillness enables receptivity to God**

The most important thing, says Basil, is that we are ‘making ready to receive in our heart the imprint of divine teaching…beautiful is the prayer that impresses into the mind a clear notion of God.’ For Basil and the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the overriding aim is to learning to listen out for the whisper of God’s voice and to discern his will and guidance.

As Bishop of Caesarea, Basil organised monastic life in Cappadocia. He advocated the common life (cenobitic monasticism) and became fiercely anti-eremitical. He was against any isolation that encouraged individualism.

**Four dangers**

**The danger of self-serving**

But Basil also gives important warnings in his *Longer Rules.*[[76]](#endnote-76)He cautions: ‘The manner of the love of Christ does not allow us each to be concerned with his own interests. For ‘love’, we read, ‘does not seek its own’ (1 Co 13:5). Now the solitary life has one aim, the service of the needs of the individual. But this is plainly in conflict with the law of love, which the Apostle fulfilled when he sought not his own advantage but that of the many, that they might be saved (1 Co 10:33).’

**The danger of self-delusion**

Basil names a further danger:

Secondly, a person living in such seclusion will not even readily recognize his own defects, not having anyone to reprove him and to set him right with kindness and compassion...The solitary, consequently, experiences the truth of the saying, ‘Woe to the one who lives alone, for if he falls there will be none to raise him up’ (Eccles.4:10).

**The danger of fragmenting the church community**

Basil considers that excessive isolation is a threat to Christian unity and fragments the body of Christ:

If we are not joined together harmoniously in the close links of one body in the Holy Spirit, but each of us chooses solitude, not serving the common welfare in a way well-pleasing to God but fulfilling our own passion for self-pleasing, how, when we are thus separated and divided, can we preserve the mutual relations and service of the limbs to one another, or their subjection to our head, who is Christ?

Moreover, continues Basil, spiritual gifts are meant for sharing within a mutuality and reciprocity, and we need each other: ‘Now all of you who have read the gospels know the great danger brought on himself by the man living alone, who has perhaps one gift, and makes it useless by idleness, digging a hole for it in himself’ (Mt 25:14-30).

**The danger of missing opportunities to serve**

For, behold, the Lord, because of his great love for mankind...clearly gave us an example of humility in the perfection of love, he girded himself and washed the feet of the disciples in person. Whose feet then will you wash? Who will you care for? In comparison to whom will you be last if you live by yourself?

How, asks Basil, can you show compassion, if you have cut yourself off from the world?[[77]](#endnote-77)

**Benedict of Nursa: the search for balance**

Benedict of Nursa (480-547) plays tribute to Basil and acknowledges his indebtedness to his wisdom as he formulates a rule to guide spiritual seekers in the sixth century. We recall Benedict’s intention in composing his Rule: ‘Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love’ (Prologue 45-47).

The *Rule* can be approached as a supreme example of wisdom literature. This is suggested by its opening words: ‘Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from a father who loves you…’[[78]](#endnote-78)

In recent years, there have been fruitful encounters between the *Rule of* *Benedict* and family life[[79]](#endnote-79), and between the text and the business world.[[80]](#endnote-80) But how can a *Rule* one and a half thousand years old be relevant to Christian life in the 21st century? Chittister helpfully points out: ‘*Regula*, the word now translated to mean ‘rule’, in the ancient sense meant ‘guidepost’ or ‘railing’, something to hang onto in the dark, something that points out the road, something that gives us support as we climb. The *Rule* of Benedict, in other words, is more wisdom than law.’[[81]](#endnote-81)

**Benedict’s three vows**

The triple vows of the *Rule* suggest a framework in which to understand and make sense of the sometimes conflicting dynamics of Christian discipleship today. We find ourselves caught between the pull of duty to others and the pull of developing the self, and the first two vows suggest a dialectic within which this tension can be not so much resolved, as held creatively.

Benedict’s vow of ***stability*** commits the monk to stay with a particular community for life. It is the first of the vows, because it is about the total surrender of one’s life to God, within the particular setting and context of a group of people. In a world where people are rushing around in ever greater degrees of mobility, this commitment invites us to reconsider a rootedness in the here and now, an attentiveness to the needs of a particular community, and firmly rejects the temptation that ‘the grass is greener elsewhere’. The vow of *stabilitas* reminds us of the essentially incarnational nature of discipleship, and of the call to be fully present to a particular historical context. But this vow also calls us to consistency, to steadfastness, as Benedict puts it: ‘to persevere in his stability.’ (58:9) It calls us to the rock of faithfulness and constancy in a sea of change and tempest of transition. In today’s context, this vow is about not giving up, not giving way under the pressures which confront today’s Christian, which include marginalisation and loss of respect in society. It is about rediscovering God’s *hesed* or steadfast love and faithfulness, expressed in Paul’s affirmation: ‘I am sure that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion’ (Phil.1:6).

Yet the Biblical metaphors of ‘standing in the evil day’ (Eph.6) or ‘remaining in the Vine’ (Jn 15) need also to be in conversation with the dynamic language of movement and motion with which Benedict both begins and ends his *Rule*:

 Run while you have the light of life (Prologue13)

 Run on the path of God’s commandments (Prologue 49)

 Hasten towards your heavenly home (73:8)

And so the vow of *stabilitas* stands in tension with Benedict’s second vow of ***conversatio morum***, the conversion of life, which calls for constant growth and change. This is an echo of the NT call to *metanoia*, turning again to God, and resonates with Paul’s resolve: ‘Reaching out to what is before’ (Phil.3:13).

Such a commitment can be both liberating and unnerving. It invites us to let go of cherished and familiar ways of working, to be ready for risk-taking, open to experimental and provisional patterns of witness and ministry which emerge as Christendom dissolves and the Church discovers different ways of being, in a post-Christian, post-modern world.[[82]](#endnote-82) It calls us to accept the need for life-long learning and continuous development. It requires of us both a thirst for fresh understanding of God’s Word and world, and also a vulnerability, a lowering of self-protective barriers, to be open to the God of surprises.

In his vow of ***obedience*** to Christ, as represented in the person of the Abbot, Benedict is demanding the surrender of self-will, the giving up of any personal agenda, and the submission of the individual to the wider concerns of the community (see 5:12). It is to be remembered that the word ‘obedience’ comes from *ob audiens*, meaning ‘to listen intently’. This vow calls for an undivided attentiveness to the will of God, represented in Gospel, *Rule*, and those set in authority: ‘Today, if you will listen to his voice, harden not your hearts.’(Ps 95:8). It is this attentive listening and discerning of God’s will that underpins and unites both the call to stability and the call to continuous conversion. Radically, it represents the primacy of God’s will over any independent planning or prioritizing in our ministries. It invites us to slow down, and to reach a place of acute theological reflection and prayer. In short, the triple vows cry out to us: stay at it, stay open, stay listening!

**Handling paradoxes**

It is this wisdom about holding together paradoxes and often conflicting demands that is the principal gift of the *Rule* to discipleship today. Benedict is emphatic about the use of time: ‘Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labour as well as for prayerful reading. We believe that the times for both may be arranged as follows: From Easter to the first of October, they will spend their mornings after Prime till about the fourth hour at whatever work needs to be done. [Then] they will devote themselves to reading, But after Sext and their meal, they may rest on their beds in complete silence…’ (48:1-5).

There is a real danger today of burnout.[[83]](#endnote-83) Time management is a pressing concern. Benedict calls his readers to live within an ordered rhythm of prayer, which celebrates the primacy of God and his resourcing in ministry. *Ora et labora:* he allows proper time for prayer, labor, study and creativity. Worship is to be considered the *Opus Dei,* the work of God. Benedict is emphatic: no one is to overwork. In an age where we find themselves under intense pressures here is a call to regain a sense of perspective. But it is not simply a question of managing time, but of living within the dialectic, within the tension of juggling different vocations or responsibilities at the same time, for example as priest, carer, teacher and our vocation as spouse, parent or companion...De Waal observes the message given by Benedictine Gothic architecture in the vault of a nave:

Here is never-ending conflict. The high vaults strive to push the walls outwards; the flying buttresses strive to push them inwards. Here are columns, arches, walls all locked in unceasing combat…. If there is a single reason why the Benedictine way of life has remained dynamic across the centuries, I suspect it is because the Rule carries within itself this same ability to hold together opposing forces, conflicting tensions.[[84]](#endnote-84)

We can read a sense of balance revealed in the layout of a Benedictine monastery: there is the church, the chapter house, dormitory, refectory, kitchen…each reflecting different commitments and tasks, all held together by a common walkway, the cloister walk, and, at the centre of it all a large open space of the cloister-garden, where stands a spring or fountain. This speaks to every Christian of the need for living our lives not in fragmentedness but in connectedness, in unity and integrity: with a place of cleansing, refreshment and stillness at the very centre.

The *Rule* can most powerfully shape discipleship today in its call to hold together disparate commitments within a creative tension: the call to community, the call to solitude; the desert and the city, the needs of body, mind and spirit; human decision-making and divine grace; standing still in stability and moving out in continuous conversion, and the balance between giving out and receiving from God. The *Rule* invites us to live with these tensions with a humble, vigilant and teachable heart (7). Benedict himself offers his *Rule* with such humility: ‘Above all else we urge that if anyone finds this arrangement…unsatisfactory, he should arrange whatever he judges better’ (18:22). We accept the *Rule* as a flexible tool, adaptable guidelines, ancient but ever fresh wisdom.

**Columbanus: the early Celtic tradition**

Celtic spiritual life has often been romanticized and idealized in recent presentations. To get in touch with the real aspirations of the Celtic tradition we need to go back to primary sources, and here we will focus on the earliest period of Irish monasticism, from the sixth century to the so-called reform movement of the *Ceili De* of the eighth century. A variety of data give clues about the formation and influence of early Irish monasticism. [[85]](#endnote-85) We will examine both theological themes and variety of practice, attending to a spectrum of primary sources, including monastic *Rules*, legal texts, prescriptive texts like the *Penitentials*, and the colourful hagiographical literature of the *Lives*. First, let’s identify the central elements of the monastic *ascesis* or training, which sum up the pursuit of perfection as a life dedicated to God and prayer: the two *Rules of St Columbanus* will open our discussion. Then we analyze key polarities or tensions within the emerging ideal, and see these as a dialectic within which the ideal of perfection was worked out locally.

**Essentials: the basic *ascesis***

Two key texts sum up very clearly the early Celtic ideal of perfection. The two *Rules of St Columbanus* (543-615) were written for use on the continent, as their author established new monastic foundations, but they embody ideals that originate in Ireland. [[86]](#endnote-86) In his *Regula Monachorum*,Columbanus aims topenetrate the inner resolve of the monk, and ensure that outer actions correspond to an inner disposition. He shows that the outward disciplines imposed on the monk are not ends in themselves, but means to an end. He proposes a radical asceticism in order to enable a closer relationship with God. Columbanus opens his *Rule* with the words: ‘First of all things, we are taught to love God with the whole heart and the whole mind, and all our strength, and our neighbour as ourselves.[[87]](#endnote-87)

For Columbanus, perfection consists in a single-minded love for God: this is the goal and end in view. He will reject all that seems to stand in the way of this pursuit - that is how we understand the radical renunciations he demands: for him, certain aspects of life can be barriers to the divine. He identifies a number of things which need strict controlling, that he sees as potentially dangerous for the Christian. The key to comprehending the prescriptions of both his *Rules* and the *Penitential* is to grasp how outer disciplines can shape inner dispositions that enable closer union with God. Thus an overcoming of obstacles that litter the spiritual journey lead to single-minded devotion, purity of heart. He puts this succinctly: ‘Nakedness and disdain of riches are the first perfection of monks, but the second is the purging of vices, the third the most perfect and perpetual love of God and unceasing affection for things divine which follows on the forgetfulness of earthly things. [[88]](#endnote-88)

There is a sense of logic and progression here: the first two renunciations pave the way for the goal in view, the perfect love of God. It is the conversion of heart that matters, and it is not the outer action that is of the essence, but the inner psychology and mindset which need to be reshaped and healed. Columbanus puts it: ‘monks must everywhere beware of a proud independence, and learn true lowliness.’ [[89]](#endnote-89) He is anxious to deal with anything which leads to an independent and self-ruled spirit. The basic renunciations entail subjection of the body, including fasting and chastity; control of the tongue, with careful vigilance over one’s speech; and the rejection of riches: material poverty and dispossession are enjoined as a means of grace.

**Tensions within the early Celtic ideal**

**1 Together or alone? Community or solitude?**

While the *Rules* of Columbanus have little time for the vocation of the hermit, other sources give us important clues about the eremetical life. Adomnan’s *Vita Columbae*, testimony to seventh century life on Iona, has two references to anchorites. Firstly, Adomnan refers to a ‘soldier of Christ called Finan [who] lived for many years an irreproachable life as an anchorite beside the monastery of Durrow.’ [[90]](#endnote-90) This man was evidently a visionary, living in solitude but also in close relation to the community. A second reference is to one who progressed from the cenobitic to the eremetical life: ‘After completing irreproachably many years in subjection among the brothers, this Virgno completed another twelve years as a victorious soldier of Christ, leading the life of an anchorite in the place of the anchorites in Muirbulc Mar.’ [[91]](#endnote-91) This tells us that hermits lived not entirely alone but in recognisable groups.

This also concurs with the impression given by the eighth century prescriptive document which covers many aspects of Christian law *Collectio Canon Hibernensis*. This considers that the hermit life is not for the novice but only for the experienced monk, only possible after a monastic training.[[92]](#endnote-92) Significantly, *Hibernensis* includes the *rustic sanctus*, the ‘holy rustic’, and the scorner of worldly affairs as suitable to serve as an ecclesiastical judge.[[93]](#endnote-93) It is remarkable that vernacular law-tracts give a high-status role to the anchorite or those known as *deorad De,* literally ‘exile of God’, setting such on the same level as bishops and kings.[[94]](#endnote-94)

From the earliest times, then, there has been a superior status accredited to the anchorite, but generally the texts root the ideal of perfection within community life. It is important not to quote out of context such lines as

 Alone in my little oratory, without a single human being in my company;

 dear to me would such a pilgrimage be before going to meet death.

 A hidden secret little hut for the forgiveness of every fault;

 A conscience upright and untroubled intent on holy heaven.

for the poem goes on

 Let the place which shelters me amid monastic enclosures be a

 beautiful spot hallowed by holy stones, and I all alone therein. [[95]](#endnote-95)

Here it is clear that the solitary lives in close proximity to the cenobitic settlement, with which he maintains a real relationship: indeed, the anchorites themselves often lived in groups. The overwhelming emphasis is the need to form a common life, building a community of learning and prayer. Columbanus puts it: ‘Let the monk live in a community under the discipline of one father, and in company with many, so that from one he may learn lowliness, from another patience. For one may teach him silence, and another meekness.’ [[96]](#endnote-96) Columbanus directs that ‘At the conclusion of which [the common prayer of the Office] each should pray in his own cell.’ [[97]](#endnote-97) The cell represents the call to solitude, a private space which should not be transgressed. It represents the eremetical dimension within the monastic ideal of perfection.

**2 Stillness or activity? Prayer or work?**

A key issue is whether the contemplative life represents a higher ideal of perfection than the active life, and the role of work. The *Regula Monachorum* sums up the dilemma:

 For lowliness of heart is the repose of the soul when wearied with

 vices and toils, and its only refuge from so many evils, and in so far

 as it is wholly drawn to the meditation of this from so many errant

 and empty things without, so far does it enjoy repose and

 refreshment within.[[98]](#endnote-98)

This is the only reference to labour in this document, where it is considered in negative terms. There are, indeed, remarkably few references to work in such key texts as the *Hibernensis*, *the Penitential of Cummean* and *the Bigotian Penitential*. Adomnan’s *Vita Columbae*, however, makes many passing references to the monks’ labor, mentioning not only a range of tasks connected with agriculture (ploughing, sowing, harvesting, threshing) but also those connected with building work. Indeed he has Columba himself weeping over the monks with the words: ‘I see my monks worn out with heavy labour.’[[99]](#endnote-99)

Early hagiography reveals an ambivalent attitude to the value of work, and in places gives a higher status to those freed from it to enjoy a contemplative life. The evidence from the Tallaghttexts points to a diversity of attitudes towards work, but does not suggest that contemplatives should be dependent on the community; rather, they should survive by their own toil. There are references to work as a penitential exercise, for the mortification of the flesh. The picture that emerges, however, is of communities achieving a balanced rhythm of work and prayer, but labour is nowhere given the ideological value credited to it by the *Rule of St Benedict*, and cannot therefore be considered little more than of pragmatic or utilitarian value within the ideal of Irish Celtic perfection.

**3 To stay or go? Stability and pilgrimage**

A further tension or dialectic within the ideal of perfection is that between stability and pilgrimage. The *Regula Monachorum* of Columbanus notes that the brothers are to remain in their cells: ‘If he has gone outside the wall [*extra vallum*], that is, outside the bounds of the monastery, without asking [let him do penance] with an imposition.[[100]](#endnote-100)

The *Monastery of Tallaght* text *(MT)* sums up the later *Ceili De* spirituality in three words: *‘fit foss figell’* – ‘fasting, stability and prayer’. The text relates the comments of Mac Oiga of Lismore. While there can be an excess of love or humility, ‘I have never heard of anyone of whom it was said: “This man is too steady.” Whatever task a man has set his hand to, it is best for him to stick at it – *foss occa.*’[[101]](#endnote-101)The *Ceili De* were cautious about the spiritual dangers of travel. The tension is well expressed in the *Old Irish Penitential*:

 As for him who desires to reach the pitch of perfectness, he

 distributes all he has to the poor and needy or goes on

 pilgrimage or lives in destitution in a communal church till he

 goes to Heaven.[[102]](#endnote-102)

The tensions are clearly revealed in the *Vita Columbae* which at one level gives several clues about the blessings of a settled life on Iona, with the routines and expected tasks of both agriculture and study. Yet the members of the community appear to have moved from monastic house to house, between Durrow, Derry, Iona and other houses. They also took part in evangelistic and diplomatic missions involving travel to different parts of Scotland. Columba himself, of course, had come to Iona as ‘a pilgrim for Christ.’[[103]](#endnote-103) Was this a desire to venture forth for Christ, impelled by missionary zeal, or a penance imposed by his confessor? According to Adomnan, Columba saw his monastic life in terms of the phrase ‘to live in pilgrimage’ (III:22). This very phrase seems to combine movement and residence.

The *Vita Columbae* mentions a monk Baitan who sought from Columba on Iona a blessing that he might seek ‘a desert place in the sea.’ Columba, in reply, uses the phrase ‘*in ociano desertum’* - a desert in the ocean.42 Such a tradition of *peregrinatio* in Irish spirituality was influenced by a variety of motivations: the need to do penance, the missionary imperative, the desire for exploration, migration, even the commercial quest. There is a different rich tradition associated with the *immrama* or genre of monastic sea voyaging, typified by *The* *Voyage of Brendan* . They testify to the tradition of pilgrimage and venturing into the unknown in search of monastic solitude and a place of retreat.

We are seeing that in the insular (island) ideal of perfection we are not encountering something static and uniform, but rather a movement both dynamic and varied.The later *Rules* associated with the *Ceili De* or *Culdees* give evidence of considerable local variation in the practice of the ideal of perfection. Indeed, since there was no overall organization of monasteries, each developed something of its own character, based on the values of its founding father, and the character and need of the locality. No one size fits all. Like *the Rule of St Benedict* the challenge is reconciling and holding together the central paradoxes of the Christian faith. The monastic ideal seeks to hold together within an unresolved tension the call to solitude with the commitment to community; the tendency to individualism with the cenobitic ideal; a commitment to ‘stability’ and rootedness with the attractions of the voyage; high ideals and ways of restoration for the failing. Two contrasting pictures or images sum up the ideal. On the one hand we have the ‘soldier of Christ’, committed to radical asceticism, strict discipline, waging war with sin and the demonic. On the other hand, we have the ‘pilgrim for Christ’, ready to venture forth for the sake of the Gospel, as Columbanus’ own life led him to become an apostle for monasticism far away from home. We have in the insular traditions, a wide variety of practice and some irreducible, core values. They developed in constant dialogue and interaction with local culture, and it is not possible to schematize them too neatly, for the ideal varied in practice from locality to locality, and was essentially a local phenomenon, often tied to the physicality and immediacy of its place and setting. Within its own context, the ideal of perfection in Irish monasticism represents a unique expression of the Christian vision. It does not require us to copy it, but it sheds light on the paradoxes and tensions of our own Christian life today, as we wrestle with similar issues. Ian Bradley observes that the Celtic monasteries themselves lived out of a tension between separation and engagement:

Whereas the monks in the desert communities generally sought and practised radical separation from the world, many of the [Celtic] monasteries in the British Isles were intensely involved in the affairs of the world and the lives of the people they served as well as being places of withdrawal and sanctuary. In scattered rural communities with virtually no other institutions or centres, they fulfilled the role of hospital, hotel, school, university, arts workshop, open prison and reformatory, night shelter and day-centre as well as church, retreat house, mission station and place of prayer and spiritual healing.[[104]](#endnote-104)

**Questions for reflection**

 1 Which character from the first millennium do you identify most closely with? Why?

 2 How would you go about encouraging someone to review their balance of prayer/ work/ ministry?

 3 What common or shared issues emerge in the writings? Which challenges you the most?

1. Which of Basil’s blessings and dangers speaks most powerfully to you? Why?
2. How would you explore with another Christian Benedict’s interplay between stability and continuous conversion?

**Prayer Exercise**

On a clean piece of paper draw a circle to represent your life. Divide it up into different sized segments representing the proportions of time you normally spend on tasks and commitments. Reflect on whether there is a right balance between work and play, prayer and activity ( this can be done in pairs in a group). Notice the tension between possible fragmentedness and the wholeness of the circle. Close by placing the papers under a Cross as a sign of surrendering our often frantic lives to the Lordship of Christ.

**3 Spirituality and Mission in the second millennium**

**In the second millennium we see how Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila faced up to the challenge of relating stillness and activity. We recall the tempting cul-de-sac of 17th century Molinos, Guyon and Fenelon and how de Caussade found a pathway out!**

**Julian’s three windows**

Julian of Norwich (c1342 - 1413) stands within the English mystical tradition. Living as a hermit attached to a parish church, she discovers God through a series of vivid revelations in 1373 which she records and reflects upon. While she glimpses immense suffering in the heart of God as seen on the Cross, her vision of the divine is supremely optimistic, delighting in a God whose love can conquer all human foibles.

There were thirty anchoresses living in the city of Norwich at this time. Julian dwelt in her cell attached to the parish church of St Julian: ‘the Lady at St Julian’s’ became shortened to ‘the Lady Julian’ – we never learn her actual name. Living a life of enclosure, she remained for over twenty years in her small cell, which becomes a place of ‘Revelation of Divine Love’[[105]](#endnote-105). It is a place where she ponders the deepest mysteries of the passion of Christ and dares to call Christ ‘tender mother.’ It is a room with three windows, and each opening turns out to be symbolic, representing a different dimension of her vocation. [[106]](#endnote-106) She has a window onto the church, through which she can literally communicate with the divine, receiving the sacrament of Holy Communion from the altar, which she can glimpse in her view of the sanctuary. This window onto the church represents her longing to be fed and nourished by Christ, food for the spirit.

A second window connects her to her servants and helpers, Alice and Sarah, who attend to her physical needs and bring her the food for the body and requisites for life. This window is a reminder to her of her humanity and indebtedness to others, representing her relationship to others in the Christian family as they help one another out. She cannot survive without this window of practicality. Through this window she receives from others.

But while she makes the cell her abode, she is not ‘walled up’. What is given to her in contemplative prayer is given to her to share. There is a third window – a window onto the world. This curtained window opens onto a little shelter or roofed area where others can come, one by one, to receive counsel and spiritual guidance. Margery Kempe, another local mystic of the time, tells us about this dimension of Julian’s ministry and of the spiritual direction she has personally received.[[107]](#endnote-107) To this window come all who seek a word of direction, an insight into their turmoil, an encouragement on the journey, rich and poor, the tradesman and the prostitute, the sailor and the traveller, all are welcome at this window of ministry. Through this window Julian stays in touch with the pains and heartaches of the fourteenth century: devastating upheaval in people’s lives, civil unrest, the 100 Years’ War. Through this window she learns of the Peasants’ Revolt, the Black Death, religious unrest, the burning of Lollards, the great Schism in the western church and the opposing papacies. All this feeds into her prayer of intercession, and all this forms a background to her thinking when she sees in vivid terms the passion of Christ and starts to glimpse the unrelenting and indefatigable love of God. Through this window she listens intently and patiently to what is going on in people’s everyday lives. Through this window pours out her compassion and healing as she ministers to the hurting, distraught and confused. This window onto the world represents an opening up in availability to others.

Elizabeth Obbard concludes: ‘Julian can teach us how to balance the conflicting demands on our time, but she can also teach us how to nourish our own inner solitude while befriending others and holding them close in prayer and compassion.’ [[108]](#endnote-108)

**Teresa of Avila: ‘break out of the cocoon!’**

In a memorable image, Teresa (1515-82) depicts the life of prayer as forming a cocoon around the soul, protecting it from danger. Just as a silkworm works hard to spin its chrysalis, so the Christian, bit by bit, creates by its spiritual disciplines and repeated efforts in prayer, a safe and cosy place in which to reside: ‘your life is hid with Christ in God’ (Col 3:3). However, Teresa insists, this is but a prelude to greater witness to the world, for the soul, like the caterpillar, must in some sense die and then break free from its self-created imprisonment: ‘It has wings now: how can it be content to crawl along slowly when it is able to fly?’[[109]](#endnote-109) She urges her readers to break out of their cocoon and realise that they are called to be a beautiful presence of Christ in the world: like a butterfly, the soul is both stunning and vulnerable in this state. In the cocoon, Teresa says ‘this soul was thinking of nothing but itself’ but now it enjoys a wider perspective on the world and discovers a solidarity and shared grief with those who are suffering. The Christian becomes more aware of those in the world who are struggling spiritually. As the soul begins to fly, ‘here the Lord asks only two things of us: love for His Majesty and love for our neighbour.’[[110]](#endnote-110) As the soul breaks free from its self-preoccupation, Teresa advises:

Ask Our Lord to grant you this perfect love for your neighbour....even though this may cause you to forgo your own rights and forget your own good in your concern for theirs...try to shoulder some trial in order to relieve your neighbour of it [[111]](#endnote-111)

We need to spot the signs and indicators that we are ready to leave our cocoon and begin to fly! We need to take time to reflect on danger signs that we might have become trapped or fixated in our spiritual evolution. Is God summoning us to transition and movement into a new stage of growth and engagement with the world?

**A journey within – but what is the goal?**

Teresa develops the patristic concept of the Triple Way with its idea that the spiritual journey will go through three major phases of purgation/repentance, illumination/ receptive prayer towards union. Teresa uses this as a basis to shape the spiritual journey she describes in *The Interior Castle*. Depicting the soul as a crystal castle with many rooms, Christ dwelling at the centre, she invites the reader to trace a journey through successive stages in order to reach a state of mystical union. The image conveys the beauty and potential of the soul; the door to the castle, and indeed its weaving corridor, is the experience of prayer.

The adventure of prayer begins with *the Purgative Way* of prayer in the first three rooms of the Teresa’s interior castle. They represent an increasing detachment from the things of the world and a process of deepening repentance and humility. In the first room of self-knowledge, Teresa’s cries: ‘O souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ! Learn to understand yourselves!... The soul’s capacity is much greater than we can realise.’[[112]](#endnote-112) The soul must understand both its darkness without Christ’s purgation, and its capacity for union with God. In the second room Teresa calls the reader to have ‘a very determined determination’ – a deep resolve to conquer the pull to turn back to the attractions of the world, in order to remain very focussed and single-minded in the interior journey. The third room describes the stability and predictability of respectable routines and normal disciplines of the Christian life, like active discursive meditation. A sign or indicator that the soul is ready to move on from these reveals itself in a holy restlessness or discontent with unfulfilling dutiful praying – a craving for a greater interior freedom and a desire to jump off the treadmill of Christian life. This marks a turning point in the journey, and a readiness for transition into the next phase. It is time to learn new ways of praying.

The journey takes a major step forward into the *Illuminative Way*  through Teresa’s fourth room, a place of new discovery which opens us up to ‘supernatural prayer’. Here Teresa introduces her readers to ‘the Prayer of Quiet’ by means of a powerful picture: while active discursive prayer (using many words and images) can be likened to a basin receiving water from lengthy manmade conduits, pipelines and aqueducts of human effort, the Prayer of Quiet is like a basin placed very close to the spring, at its very source, where the water can flow into it unceasingly and without effort: such is the heart of contemplative prayer. The heart becomes enlarged (c.f. Ps 119:32); there is a greater capacity for prayer, a letting-go of former restrictive practices of prayer and a movement from the primacy of ego to the initiative of God.

But, says Teresa, there is no need to rest even here. The *Unitive Way* beckons: we may go deeper into God in Teresa’sremaining mansions, which explore different dimensions of contemplative prayer. The fifth mansion is a place of liberation where the soul learns to ‘fly’ in a new freedom, as we have seen.

The sixth mansion opens the pilgrim-soul to the discovery of a glittering treasury in the inner reaches of the castle. The soul is approaching the place where Christ dwells in splendour in the inner room, and it stumbles on his storehouse of breath-taking treasures, which may include extraordinary spiritual experiences: locutions ( a sense of a divine ‘inner word’), a sense of ecstasy, rapture or unexpected sudden awareness of God’s presence within; visions of different kinds; the gift of tears. Teresa insists that all should be tested, and gives clear guidelines for discernment. She is adamant that God should not be sought for these experiences, but for God alone.

However, in these Mansions, there is also an experience of pain. There are both inner spiritual distresses and external assaults – unfriendly gossip, misunderstanding, rejection, and sometimes physical pains too, including illness. As Bielecki puts it: ‘Suffering places us in a crucible, and like gold, we emerge refined, purified and strengthened… The meaning of suffering is summed up in the mystery of the cross: Teresa believed that the cross is the gift God gives to his intimate friends.’[[113]](#endnote-113)

In the sixth mansion Teresa speaks of the soul’s betrothal to God, while in the seventh she uses the daring language of mystical marriage to describe union with God as an abiding awareness and permanent consciousness of unity with the indwelling Christ. *But a big question surfaces: is this the goal of the journey within – to rest and luxuriate in intimate communion with Christ?*

She is emphatic:

How forgetful this soul, in which the Lord dwells in so particular a way, should be of its own rest...For if it is with Him very much, as is right, it should think little about itself. All its concern is taken up with how to please Him more and how or where it will show Him the love it bears Him. This is the reason for prayer, my daughters, the purpose of the spiritual marriage: the birth always of good works, good works.[[114]](#endnote-114)

So this experience of union with Christ is not at the cost of total withdrawal from the world. Teresa recalls the story of Martha and Mary to call for an integration between action and contemplation: ‘This I should like us to attain: we should desire and engage in prayer, not for our enjoyment, but for the sake of acquiring this strength which fits us for service.’[[115]](#endnote-115)

**Beguiling Heresy from the 17th century**

**Molinos, Guyon and Fenelon**

Seventeenth century controversies give us extreme examples of the dialectic between stillness and activity. The Spanish priest Miguel de Molinos (1628-96) held the view that ‘One must totally abandon one’s whole self in God and thereafter remain like a lifeless body, since natural activity is the enemy of grace and it hinders God’s action and true perfection because God wishes to act in us without us.’[[116]](#endnote-116) Developing what became known as ‘quietism’ he advocated a state of total passivity before God, publishing his book *The Spiritual Guide which leads the Soul to the Fruition of Inward Peace* in 1675. Molinos saw perfection consisting in a state of uninterrupted contemplation and love, which would dispense the Christian from all active virtue and reduce it to absolute inaction. He was investigated and imprisoned by the Inquisition and condemned by Pope Innocent 11 in 1687 on the grounds that the solitary prayer of quiet undermined the catholic practices of mass attendance and questioned the need for sacraments and outward symbols of devotion: all was to be centred on the heart. His teaching was condemned as "heretical, erroneous, blasphemous, dangerous, and in practice, incompatible with Christian morality".

But his ideas were attractive, resurfacing in the prolific writings of the famous (or infamous) Madame Guyon (1648-1717), an aristocratic self-styled mystic. She taught an individualistic approach to God which did not require participation in corporate acts of worship nor entail outward acts of charity or almsgiving. The fundamental principle of her teaching was the condemnation of all human effort – in order to be perfect one should cultivate complete passivity and the annihilation of the will – this is the only way to the perfect love of God. She was condemned and imprisoned for a while, but the Archbishop of Cambrai fell under her spell and became her advocate. There was something deeply attractive in her teaching, because it seemed to open up a very direct way to God – indeed, her most popular work was called *A Short and Easy Method of Prayer.[[117]](#endnote-117)* Writing in the context of the growing rationalism of seventeenth century France, Archbishop Fenelon (1651-1715) was more earthed and pastoral than Guyon, but continued to insist that God was to be loved above all things rather than in all things. He came to see that one’s natural desire to work things out for ourselves was essentially egotistic and prevented the growth of a pure love for God alone. The soul should become unaware of itself and its acts and concentrate solely on a disinterested devotion to God. He advocated a ‘holy indifference’ which emphasized detachment from the world , and self-abandonment to God, but which could be read as an aloofness and lack of concern for the needs of the world. Fenelon likewise faced papal condemnation, because such an approach undermined the Catholic approach to sacraments and pastoral care. His work *Les Maxims des Saints* was condemned in 1699 as containing propositions judged to be "temerarious, scandalous, ill-sounding, offensive to pious ears, pernicious in practice, and false in fact".

But his sort of teaching has an enduring appeal. John Wesley (1701-91), attracted by Fenelon’s emphasis on resting in God’s love, included Guyon and Fenelon’s works in his library of Christian classics (published in 50 volumes between 1749-55), while his brother Charles transcribes parts of Fenelon in his works. Alexander Knox commented that ‘no Catholic was more popular in Protestant countries than Fenelon’. Fenelon’s ideas have been gently formative within the Wesleyan holiness movement, as represented in Jean Pig­ott’s 1876 hymn:

Jesus, I am resting, resting,
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness
Of Thy loving heart.
Thou hast bid me gaze upon Thee,
And Thy beauty fills my soul,
For by Thy transforming power,
Thou hast made me whole.

The desire to foster a spiritual life that is focused on God alone is beguiling, but it seems to exalt the command ‘love God with all your heart’ above the command ‘love your neighbour as yourself’. Devotion is stillborn if it does not issue in mission. Quietism can lead to fatalism, to a kind of resignation to God’s will which seems to exclude Christian responsibility for action and response to the world’s needs. We confuse humility with passivity; submission with inaction.

**Surrender leading to action and co-operation with God**

In the great classic *Self-Abandonment to Divine Providence,* Jean-Pierre de Caussade (1675-1751) encourages us to abide in a state of surrender to God in a way that avoids the pitfalls of the quietists. [[118]](#endnote-118) De Caussade urged his readers to strive for a synergy, an active co-operation with God’s will: ‘We know that in all things God works for good for those who love him, who are called according to his purpose’ (Rom. 8.28, alt. reading). De Caussade believed that God is supremely active in the world, guiding all things according to his divine plans. Our part is to be awake and responsive to God’s actions, to allow him to move and direct our life in the midst of change. We are to train ourselves to recognise God’s hand of providence in the ‘chances and changes of this mortal life.’

De Caussade gave us the striking phrase ‘the sacrament of the present moment.’ He teaches us that we should not live in the past nor become anxious about the future, but rather be totally available to God this day and this very moment: ‘See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation’ (2 Cor. 6.2). Today, right now, God waits to meet us. De Caussade urges us to live in an attitude of continual surrender to God, yielding ourselves totally to him without qualification or preconditions, so we can become channels through which he can work: ‘Loving, we wish to be the instrument of his action so that his love can operate in and through us.’ [[119]](#endnote-119) We are to live by humble trust in God, confident that he is working his purposes out. We are not to seek our own fulfilment but God’s Kingdom: ‘Follow your path without a map, not knowing the way, and all will be revealed to you. Seek only God’s kingdom and his justice through love and obedience, and all will be granted to you.’[[120]](#endnote-120) Abandoned into God’s hands, we are to ‘go with the flow’ as he opens and closes doors before us.

But what if our prayer resembles Gethsemane, and suffering and upheavals come our way – can these be welcomed as God’s will for us? Should we not try to fight against them? De Caussade warns that we must not set bounds or limits to God’s plans. He is a ‘God of surprises.’ He works in unpredictable and unlikely ways and we should be ready for anything: ‘The terrifying objects put in our way are nothing. They are only summoned to embellish our lives with glorious adventures.’[[121]](#endnote-121) Hardships can be in God’s hands pathways to growth: ‘With God, the more we seem to loose, the more we gain. The more he takes from us materially, the more he gives spiritually.’[[122]](#endnote-122) We should not resent difficult circumstances, but rather listen to what God is saying to us through them.

How then is it possible to cultivate an attitude of such openness to God? De Caussade affirms that it is achieved by living in communion with God, and allowing Jesus Christ to dwell at the very centre of our being. The Christ who longs to live within us is ‘noble, loving, free, serene, and fearless.’[[123]](#endnote-123) De Caussade has a vision of the Christ-life growing within each person who has the courage to surrender to him. This is the secret of recognising ‘the sacrament of the present moment.’

**Questions for reflection**

1 Which character from the second millennium do you identify most closely with? Why?

2 In the Gospels Jesus says to active Martha ‘there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part’ (Lk 10:42). Has she?

3 Which of Julian’s three windows would you use the most? Why?

4 To what extent do you feel tempted to follow the way of Guyon and Molinos? How would you go about challenging such a fixation?

5 What questions would you like to put to Caussade?

**Prayer Exercise**

Use your hands expressively in this prayer-time in four actions. Begin by clenching your fists tight and holding them before you. Feel the tension and let these fists represent an anger or frustration that bothers you today, a situation in the world that you feel strongly about. Hold them before God in the solidarity of prayer and intercession.

Secondly, slowly open your down-turned palms and let go of the tension. Let it fall away from you to God. In this gesture give to God any negative feelings or stresses, feel them drip out of your fingertips, as it were. Surrender the situation to God’s providence and sovereignty.

Thirdly, turn your hands upwards in a gesture of surrender to God and of receiving from God. Make an act of self offering. Breathe in his empowering Spirit who will give you the courage for action.

Finally, take a look at your hands. Is there an action that God is calling you to make in relation to your initial concern? What should you do as a result of this – something bold, something risky or rebellious?

**4 Spirituality and mission: contemporary examples of a creative relationship**

**In this unit we explore two examples of how traditional and inherited spiritualities, conventions which had become increasingly introspective in their focus, are transformed in order to respond to the demands and hurts of our present context and culture.**

**First we look at how contemporary lay Franciscans have significantly reworked the traditional vows of poverty , chastity and obedience to meet the needs of the present day.**

**Second, we encounter in Dorothy Soelle a writer, mystic and activist who, seeking to apply the insights of a spirituality of liberation to the western culture, takes a fresh look the traditional Triple Way which has been so influential in Christian spirituality in past generations.**

**1 Re-working the ‘evangelical counsels’ : Francis in the twenty first century**

For many centuries, Christian perfection has been expressed in terms of following the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. In the western tradition, these have become the bedrock and touchstone, not only of cloistered monastic life but also of an ideal Christian, and have been called ‘the surest and quickest way of obtaining everlasting life’.[[124]](#endnote-124)

They express the Christian vision in terms of renunciation of the world and its temptations. The Catholic Encyclopaedia puts it thus:

the man who is wholly detached from this world, and whose thoughts are wholly bent on the realities of the world above, is taking the shortest way to obtain possession of that on which his heart is fixed...Now the principal good things of this world easily divide themselves into three classes. There are the riches which make life easy and pleasant, there are the pleasures of the flesh which appeal to the appetites, and, lastly, there are honours and positions of authority which delight the self-love of the individual. These three matters...hold back the soul from its true aim and vocation, and delay it from becoming entirely conformed to the will of God. It is, therefore, the object of the three counsels of perfection to free the soul from these hindrances.

These three counsels have been commended to lay people as a sure-fire way of living a holy life, but they have fostered a piety that retreats from engagement with the world. Is it possible to retrieve the wisdom contained in them, without needing to commit oneself to an other-worldly set of principles?

The Society of St Francis offers a radical re-interpretation for our times of these counsels of perfection.[[125]](#endnote-125) They have been transformed from a set of inward-looking aims for personal sanctification into radical outward-looking commitments to the world. The *Principles* set the scene:

When Saint Francis encouraged the formation of the Third Order he recognized that many are called to serve God in the spirit of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience in everyday life (rather than in a literal acceptance of these principles as in the vows of the Brothers and Sisters of the First and Second Orders). The Rule of the Third Order is intended to enable the duties and conditions of daily living to be carried out in this spirit.

**A fresh take on obedience**

The first aim for tertiaries is ‘to make our Lord known and loved everywhere.’ This is how the *TSSF Principles* re-interpret the call to obedience:

The Order is founded on the conviction that Jesus Christ is the perfect revelation of God; that true life has been made available to us through his Incarnation and Ministry, by his Cross and Resurrection, and by the sending of his Holy Spirit. The Order believes that it is the commission of the church to make the gospel known to all, and therefore accepts the duty of bringing others to know Christ, and of praying and working for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The primary aim for us as Tertiaries is therefore to make Christ known. This shapes our lives and attitudes to reflect the obedience of those whom our Lord chose to be with him and sent out as his witnesses. Like them, by word and example, we bear witness to Christ in our own immediate environment and pray and work for the fulfilment of his command to make disciples of all nations.

No longer is obedience understood as directed to a religious superior, involving the surrender of one’s own will and agenda to that of the community. Now it is obedience to Christ’s Great Commission: ‘Go into all the world...’ (Matt. 28). The traditional vow of obedience has relocated from the cloister to the world, from loyalty within a religious hierarchy to utter commitment to God. It has become Good News to the world.

**A fresh take on chastity**

The second aim of the Third Order is ‘to spread the spirit of love and harmony’:

The Order sets out, in the name of Christ, to break down barriers between people and to seek equality for all. We accept as our second aim the spreading of a spirit of love and harmony among all people. We are pledged to fight against the ignorance, pride, and prejudice that breed injustice or partiality of any kind.

Members of the Third Order fight against all such injustice in the name of Christ, in whom there can be neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for in him all are one. Our chief object is to reflect that openness to all which was characteristic of Jesus. This can only be achieved in a spirit of chastity, which sees others as belonging to God and not as a means of self-fulfilment.

This is a radical re-interpretation of the call to celibacy. It advances with its own logic: moving from the egotistical and self-gratifying exploitation of others towards an honouring and respecting of every man and woman, it calls us to take a fresh look at how we view the ‘other.’ Left behind are attitudes of condescension or using/ abusing others, or approaches to others that are utilitarian or consumerist. Rather one is now called to precisely the opposite: to build relationships between those who are separated; to be proactive in affirming others who are marginalised and oppressed; to be agents of reconciliation in a fragmenting world. This is a radical re-working of the ancient vow that moves from the bedroom to the gutter; from private fantasy to nitty-gritty service of those who are ripped apart from society, from self-improvement to affirmation of human dignity. By working with people of different race, colour, creed, education and opportunity Tertiaries seek to break down the divisions in the world.

It shifts the tertiary from attention to individualistic sin to awareness of social, structural sin. There is paradox in its language: calling us to ‘spread a spirit of harmony’ yet telling us to fight against injustice, to fight against prejudice. Franciscans are not to be bird-loving nature mystics but reconcilers who are prepared to get their hands dirty, to roll up their sleeves and join in the fight! It is recognised that the living-out of this reworked vow will involve struggle, and the possibility of rejection:

As Tertiaries, we are prepared not only to speak out for social justice and international peace, but to put these principles into practice in our own lives, cheerfully facing any scorn or persecution to which this may lead.

In this fresh take on an ancient vow, there is a change of focus from perfection to prophecy.

**A fresh take on poverty**

The third aim of the Society of St Francis is an invitation to develop a counter-cultural lifestyle, marked by total availability to others. Resources are neither to be hoarded nor renounced but rather put at the disposal of God and human need. The aim is ‘to live simply’:

The first Christians surrendered completely to our Lord and recklessly gave all that they had, offering the world a new vision of a society in which a fresh attitude was taken towards material possessions. This vision was renewed by Saint Francis when he chose Lady Poverty as his bride, desiring that all barriers set up by privilege based on wealth should be overcome by love. This is the inspiration for the third aim of the Society, to live simply.

Although we possess property and earn money to support ourselves and our families, we show ourselves to be true followers of Christ and of Saint Francis by our readiness to live simply and to share with others...we avoid luxury and waste, and regard our possessions as being held in trust for God.

Personal spending is limited to what is necessary for our health and well-being and that of our dependents. We aim to stay free from all attachment to wealth, keeping ourselves constantly aware of the poverty in the world and its claim on us. We are concerned more for the generosity that gives all, rather than the value of poverty in itself. In this way we reflect in spirit the acceptance of Jesus' challenge to sell all, give to the poor, and follow him.

In this reworking of the ancient vow there is a shift from self-improving asceticism to courageous generosity, from being dependent on others to responding to others’ need.

**2 Re-working the Triple Way : spirituality of liberation in the first world**

‘Now, as always, I see it as my task to do liberation theology for the people of the First World, and to articulate the culture in which I live from that perspective’[[126]](#endnote-126) Dorothy Soelle (1929-2003) is a prophetic voice in western Christianity that challenges us, in the title of one of her major works, to make a link between *Mysticism and Resistance.* [[127]](#endnote-127)

Teaching theology at Cologne University, in the aftermath of Auschwitz, she wrestled with the idea of an impassive, antiseptic God locked up in heaven, and came to see the God to be loved as suffering and present amidst his people. Between 1977 and 1987 she taught at the Union Seminary, New York where she was confronted by the imperative, arising from her life of prayer, to become involved in political action, leading her to speak out against the Vietnam War, the arms race of the Cold War and injustices in the developing world.

‘Mystical sensibility’ as she puts it – a capacity for encounter God and the fullness of reality – leads us to seek the divine not only in moments of spiritual retreat and solitude but in creation, in the mystery of human love, in the experience of suffering. She traces three movements in the spiritual journey as she offers a critique and rewriting to the traditional *Triple Way* sketched out in the tradition – we touched on this in Unit 3 - which distinguished three successive stages of purgation, illumination and union. This enduring model of spiritual development, we noted, had originated in the early centuries of the Church, as developed by Origen (c.185-c.254 ), Evagrius (346-99) and Dionysius (5/6 Century). Bonaventure (1217-74) took it further and Teresa of Avila, as we saw, popularized it in her *Interior Castle,* so that by the end of the 16th century it had been widely used and accepted by spiritual writers. Waaijman sums it up: First, people must repent so as to be freed from sin: this happens by a saving act of Christ *(via purgativa).* Secondly, they move into a stage where they learn to know the truths of the faith and the moral goals as Christ and the Church state them *(via illuminativa).* The ultimate stage focuses on the goal of complete sanctification by the Spirit who unites every Christian with God *(via unitiva).*[[128]](#endnote-128)But in this view of the spiritual pilgrimage, there is an increasing introspection and removal from the world: is a journey within.

For Soelle, following Matthew Fox[[129]](#endnote-129), offers a fresh approach.

First comes the experience of amazement at the mystery of God (*via positiva*). This dawning of wonder and praise starts to set us free from the captivities of our ego with its narrow self-centred thinking: ‘the soul needs amazement, the repeated liberation from customs, viewpoints, and convictions, which, like layers of fat that make us untouchable and insensitive, accumulate around us.’ [[130]](#endnote-130)

A second stage is characterized by a letting go of false desires and false needs, such as are fostered in us by consumerism. This may entail a ‘dark night of the soul’, a *via negativa*, as we start to part with the normal seductive attachments and the obsessions of our culture.

God starts to work a transformation in our outlook and priorities, as we move into a third stage, the *via transformativa*. Here the two themes of healing and resistance are inseparable: as God leads us into a costly compassion for those who suffer so we find ourselves standing up to expressions of injustice in the world. As Soelle puts it: ‘every way of union is one that continues onward and radiates outward. Being-at-one is not individualistic self-realization but moves beyond that to change death-orientated reality. Being-at-one shares itself and realizes itself in the ways of resistance.’[[131]](#endnote-131) She is emphatic:

For me, mysticism and transformation are indissolubly interconnected. Without economic and ecological justice (known as ecojustice) and without God’s preferential love for the poor and for this planet, the love for God and the longing for oneness seem to me to be an atomistic illusion...A genuine mystical journey has a much larger goal...[[132]](#endnote-132)

In an earlier work, Soelle considers the journey of prayer under the title *The Inward Road and the way back.* Reflecting on the experience of Elijah as related in 1 Kings 19, she traces the prophet’s forty day sojourn in the wilderness, his retreat to the cave on Mount Horeb and his encounter with God, not in earthquake, wind or fire but in ‘the still small voice.’ She observes that Elijah did not linger there, for the still small voice uttered a political charge: ‘Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram...”’ (1 Kings 19:15). Soelle points out:

[ after] the experience of God in the ‘still, small voice’ what happens now? Elijah does not withdraw into an act of worship; he does not make a pilgrimage to some shrine. Nor does he continue to divide things into the categories of sacred and profane, a division so dear to all religions. Instead, what happens is of significance for the Judeo-Christian tradition: the renewal of his political mission...he returns to the world.[[133]](#endnote-133)

She is clear that prayer, if it involves a journey to a world within, must entail the remaking of the self – a re-energizing – so as to enable the return journey to the outer world without delay:

The goal is to reconcile the two worlds...It seems almost impossible to reconcile the two: the magnitude of the inward journey which we need for experience of self, and the way back into the society of a world that can once more be lived in. Inwardness and involvement are not companion attributes in most people, for sensitive people are often not communally inclined, and people who like to be communally involved are sometimes lacking in sensitivity. Prayer and work, labor and contemplation appear to be compartmentalized into two worlds...The critical question with respect to expression of the deepest human experiences, those we regard as ‘the inward journey’, is the question of connection to and with society....Living as Christ lived means the inward journey to the emptying and surrendering of the ego and the return journey to the midst of this world. [[134]](#endnote-134)

It is precisely that we find in the journey within an encounter not only with God but a clarification of our own identity in God, our destiny, and our vocation in the world.

**Questions for reflection**

1 What questions arise for you as you read this unit?

2 What are the greatest challenges for you?

3 What aspects of the tradition would you like to see re-worked and re-interpreted for today’s world?

4 What kinds of vows or commitments are appropriate for today’s Christian?

**Prayer exercise**

First, name, celebrate and give thanks for the blessings you have received in your life. Then turn to Mt 5:3-10 and see in the Beatitudes where Jesus locates God’s blessings. Notice how they begin and end with the Kingdom (5:3 & 5: 10) and notice too, that while the others are set in the future tense, Jesus promises the Kingdom now, in the present, to those mentioned in these two beatitudes which frame the others. Reflect on how these ‘blessings’ lead you outwards to those in need.

Or

Ask yourself how you find out about injustices in the world. Pray with a newspaper: what causes you upset or outrage? What are you going to do about it?

# UNIT 5 Spiritual practice identifies identity and potentiality

# In this unit we encounter a diversity of spiritual writers, some often undiscovered widely, who highlight the human and Christian potentiality and vocation. It is like discovering hidden treasures in the field of Christian spirituality!

# Ephrem the Syrian (d. 373): our baptismal potentiality

# Jacopone da Todi (1230-1306): Christ’s self-emptying:

# John Ruusbroec (1293-1381): our identity in Christ

# Teresa of Avila & Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-89): our destiny and worth

# George Herbert (1593-1633): The famous stone that turneth all to gold

The ecstasy of uncovering a hidden treasure is a deep, archetypal experience: we are invited here to discover something precious, of great value, perhaps long forgotten. Indeed, some of the treasures we will now take a look at have been long-buried in the depths of the Christian tradition. This is because they were suspect, mysterious, not easily intelligible to rational orthodox minds which liked to imprison divine truth and mystery within dogma and doctrine. We will encounter sources that have been marginalized or even condemned by church authorities. Like evaluating semi-precious stones, people have not always appreciated their true worth.1

# Veritable treasure: our baptismal potentiality

Ephrem the Syrian poet, hymn-writer and deacon of the fourth century (d. 373) tells us to approach the search with a loving desire:

Whenever I have meditated upon You

I have acquired a veritable treasure from You...

Your treasury seems empty to the person who rejects You.

Love is the treasurer

Of Your heavenly treasure store...2

The rich heritage of the Syriac spiritual tradition glints like specks of gold in the dark rock. St Ephrem represents an outstanding example. His great *Hymn on Faith* shows us how he uses powerful imagery and metaphors in his description of the spiritual life:

See, Fire and Spirit are in the womb of her who bore You;

See, Fire and Spirit in are in the river in which You were baptized.

Fire and Spirit are in our baptismal font,

In the Bread and the Cup are Fire and Holy Spirit

In this poem Ephrem celebrates the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist and in the spiritual life. Echoing the story of the Syro-phoenician Woman (Mark 7) he writes,

Look, Lord, my lap is now filled with the crumbs from Your table

there is no more room in the folds of my garment,

So hold back your gift as I worship before You,

Keep it in Your treasure house in readiness

to give it us on another occasion.3

There certainly are many ‘other occasions’ - for Ephrem was a prolific and inspiring writer. He encourages us to see reality differently, using his famed image of the ‘luminous eye’ which can look into the hiddenness of God’s mystery:

Blessed is the person who has acquired a luminous eye

With which he will see how much the angels stand in awe of You, Lord,

And how audacious is man.4

Ephrem encourages us to pray for the gift of the inner eye, which penetrates the deep things of God and gives true in-sight. In this way our prayer can become luminous, radiant and light-revealing:

Let our prayer be a mirror, Lord, placed before Your face;

Then Your fair beauty will be imprinted on its luminous surface...5

Ephrem represents one strand in the rich tapestry of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. We might encounter too writings from the Armenian tradition, especially in the well-loved writers Gregory of Narek and Nerses Shnorhali.6 For a modern restatement of Coptic spirituality, we might discover Matthew the Poor.7

# Riches beyond imagining: Christ’s self-emptying

The life experience of Jacopone da Todi (1230-1306) enabled him to encounter ever more deeply the love of Christ, and a favourite theme in his *Lauds*, poems of praise, is the discovery of riches and treasures. His nick-name means ‘Crazy Jim’ (he was baptized Jacopo) – he was eccentric and passionate Franciscan friar in Umbria, head- over-heels in love with Christ. His discovery of Christ’s riches came from adversity. He had been married, but his young wife died tragically. As a friar, he grappled with different versions of the Franciscan vision: the idealism, radical, real poverty of the *Spirituals* deeply attracted him, and shone in a greater light than the compromised and more comfortable life of the *Conventuals*, who permitted the possession of buildings and were supported by Pope Boniface. The Pope, enraged by Jacopone’s harsh criticism of him excommunicated him and later he was thrown into a dank dungeon of a underground prison of a monastery in Todi. His stunning poetry exalts the love of Christ, and his descent from heaven to earth. Brother Ramon tells the story:

The horror and fear that had caused him to shiver uncontrollably as he was forced down to his cell had now given way to a gentle passivity. It was not a passivity born of despair or resignation but rather a consequence of trust in the mercy of God.… He had almost reached the point of accepting that the darkness of his cell was leading to his death. But at that moment of acceptance a new spark of hope was ignited in his heart, and burst into a gentle but powerful flame…

It was all part of the way, of the dark night of purgation. His prison cell had taught him detachment and abandonment to God and the beginnings of naked faith. He heard the words of Christ:

Soul, if you come to Me,

Hear now then what I say:

You can be Mine upon the Cross,

There is no other way.8

In the darkness of his subterranean incarceration, Jacopone discovered the treasure of Christ and the gift of a sense of amazement and wonder at the Incarnation and the Cross:

Wrapped in poor swaddling clothes,

You were utterly dependent….

Humble cloth which enfolded treasure

That puts to shame all gems and gold!9

Christ says to him:

It is the love you have in your power that drives Me mad,

It is your heart I have always sought.

This is the prize I want to give you –

Myself and all my riches,

The treasure I brought with Me when I exchanged

The glorious life of Heaven for a cruel death…

I give you infinite riches you never dreamed of,

Your every desire will be satisfied…

Jacopone is overcome:

I sing for the birth of my Love;

He has redeemed me and slipped on my finger His ring;

I burn with love for Him who now appears in the flesh,

And embrace Him, He who is now my brother…

Lovers, come to our festive wedding:

Where Love is, there is joy.

He is one with us in loving riches and delights.

Soul, you are created anew –

Hurry to embrace your spouse

Who gathers you into His joy – O love, love!

He is intoxicated and energized by the love of Christ:

Love, jocund and joyous,

Divine fire, You do not stint

Of Your endlessly bountiful riches…

Generous Love,

Gracious Love,

Your riches are beyond imagining

**Sparkling stones: our identity**

John Ruusbroec (1293-1381) stumbled on a great discovery. He meditates on Christ’s promise in Revelation 2:17: ‘To the one who overcomes… I will give him a sparkling stone. On this stone a new name will be written, unknown to everyone except him who receives it.’ For Ruusbroec, this gemstone is at once the treasure of Christ and our true identity in Christ:

By this sparkling stone we mean our Lord Jesus Christ, for according to his divinity he is a beam of the eternal light, a ray of God’s glory, and a spotless mirror in which all things have their life. Whoever overcomes and transcends all things is given this sparkling stone, through which he receives light, truth, and life.

He goes on:

This, then, is the sparkling stone which is given to a contemplative; on it is written a new name, unknown to everyone except him who receives it. You should know that all spirits receive a name when they return to God – each a special name in accordance with the nobility of its service and the depth of its love. This name is different from that first name of innocence which we received at baptism and which is adorned with the merits of our Lord. Having lost that name of innocence through sin, if we still wish to follow God – especially through three works which he desires to work in us – then we will be baptized a second time in the Holy Spirit. It is then that we will receive a new name, which will remain with us for eternity.10

He explains further that the new name upon the Sparkling Stone represents each person’s unique experience of God, our singular vocation to discover for ourselves God’s touch:

Whoever feels himself to be united with God savours this name… to the extent that each person can overcome himself and die to all things, to that same extent he will feel the Father’s touch drawing him inward and will savour the sweetness of the Son’s inborn fruit; by means of this savour the Holy Spirit will reveal to him that he is an heir of God. No one is exactly like anyone else as regards these three points, which is why everyone receives a special name, one which is continually being renewed through new grace and new works of virtue.11

# Immortal diamond: our destiny and worth

As we recalled earlier, Teresa of Avila had stumbled on a great reality: the dignity and spaciousness of the soul. She had written in her *Interior Castle:*

Consider our soul to be like a castle made entirely out of a diamond or of a very clear crystal, in which there are many rooms, just as in heaven there are many dwelling places… I don’t find anything comparable to the magnificent beauty of a soul and its marvellous capacity…he Himself said that He created us in His own image and likeness.12

She is ecstatic in her excitement at this discovery: in the first room of self-knowledge, Teresa cries: ‘O souls redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ! Learn to understand yourselves!... The soul’s capacity is much greater than we can realise.’13

Later she will ask:

How can I explain the riches and treasures and delights found in the fifth dwelling places? Since in some way we can enjoy heaven on earth, be brave in begging the Lord to give us His grace in such a way that nothing will be lacking through our own fault; that he show us the way and strengthen the soul that it may dig until it finds this hidden treasure. The truth is that the treasure lies within our very selves.14

Teresa will go on to talk about other gems:

Three things, especially, are left in [the soul] to a very sublime degree: knowledge of the grandeur of God, because the more we see of this grandeur the greater is our understanding; self-knowledge and humility... third, little esteem of earthly things save for those that can be used for the service of so great a God. These are the jewels the Spouse begins to give the betrothed, and their value is such that the soul will not want to lose them.15

Gerard Manley Hopkins, Jesuit priest (1844-89), stumbles on the treasure within, immortal diamond. In his poem *Heraclitean Nature and the Comfort of the Resurrection* he imagines the whole of nature as did the Greek philosopher Heraclitus (c.500BC) as originating and ending with fire: ‘Million-fueled, nature’s bonfire burns on.’ He realizes that humanity is fragile and passing, vulnerable and contingent.

Man, how fast his firedint, his mark on mind, is gone!

Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark

Drowned.

But he wakes up to the difference that the Resurrection of Christ can make:

Enough! The Resurrection,

A heart’s-clarion! Away grief’s gasping, joyless days, dejection.

Across my foundering deck shone

A beacon, an eternal beam.

Fresh confidence bubbles up inside of him, as he glimpses the Christian hope:

Flesh fade, and mortal trash

Fall to the residuary worm; world's wildfire, leave but ash:

In a flash, at a trumpet crash,

I am all at once what Christ is, since he was what I am, and

This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,

Is immortal diamond.

His descriptions of humanity as fragile clay or wood are juxtaposed with the glorious truth that we are destined to become the most beautiful and enduring diamond in God’s sight through participating in the metamorphosis of the Resurrection. We feel ourselves to be wounded, flawed, sinful, of little worth. We are actually, in Christ, beautiful, radiant and indestructible as diamond. Paul put it: ‘in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet… we will be changed. For this perishable body must put on imperishability, and this mortal body must put on immortality’ (1 Corinthians 15: 52, 53).

Thomas Merton writes of our inviolable dignity:

At the centre of our being is a point... which is untouched by sin and by illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God... from which God disposes our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This…is the pure glory of God in us. It is, so to speak, His name written in us…It is like a pure diamond, blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely.16

Richard Rohr contrasts the false self, marked by egotism and ‘keeping up appearances’ with the true self revealed to us by God:

God uses everything to construct this hard and immortal diamond, our core of love... Diamonds, once soft black carbon, become beautiful and radiant white lightening under pressure. The true pattern, the big secret, has now been revealed and exposed ‘like a treasure hidden in a field’.… Diamonds are deeply hidden under miles, pounds, and pressure of earth and time, but like the True Self, like the thread, like the presence itself, they are there. And now YOU are there too.’

Below the surface, the façade, of superficial living lies the hidden treasure of our true worth. As we discover God in the depths, we discover our true selves too. We realize that we are, in God’s sight, precious and valued beyond measure: we are loved for who we are and for what we are becoming. Diamonds, however, do not just appear – they are the result of a painful process of metamorphosis in which pressures and stresses and extreme heat play their part. Here below, we must allow God to shape and reshape us. But as John puts it, in time our true treasure will be clear: ‘Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is’ (1 John 3.2). John the Seer gives us this glimpse of the city of heaven:

He showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It has the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal.

The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel; the first was jasper, the second sapphire, the third agate, the fourth emerald, the fifth onyx, the sixth cornelian, the seventh chrysolite, the eighth beryl, the ninth topaz, the tenth chrysoprase, the eleventh jacinth, the twelfth amethyst. And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass. (Revelation 21: 10, 18-21)

This is our destiny, O diamond!

# The famous stone that turneth all to gold

George Herbert (1593-1633), the Anglican poet-priest of the seventeenth century, wrote that his poems were ‘a picture of the many spiritual conflicts that have passed betwixt God and my soul’. His poems testify to an on-going struggle to accept personally within himself God’s unconditional love. Secular ambitions wrestled with a persistent and nagging sense of vocation to the priesthood, and Herbert finally gave in and was ordained deacon in 1626. But things were not to be straightforward for him. Illness and indecision delayed Herbert from entering full-time ministry and he was not ordained priest until 1630. Some of Herbert’s most poignant and questioning poems were composed during these four ‘wilderness’ years. Herbert found himself appointed to a small and undistinguished parish church near Salisbury.

For just three years he was to exercise his ministry, until his death in 1633. He embraced the life of a parish priest with extraordinary devotion and dedication, and expressed his ideals for pastoral ministry in his work *The Country Parson.* But he faced different struggles during this period. Now he was no longer fighting against his vocation but, dogged with ill-health, found himself questioning his usefulness. Though he valued the presence of Christ in the scriptures and in the sacraments, he wrestled with a sense of spiritual confusion, the dilemma of unanswered prayer, and found himself echoing the sentiments of Jeremiah and the psalmists. Then he stumbled upon a great treasure that would transform daily dreariness into a spiritual adventure:

Teach me, my God and King,

in all things thee to see,

and what I do in anything

to do it as for thee.

We have a choice. We can live life on the surface. Or we can see things more deeply, penetrate the dust:

A man that looks on glass,

on it may stay his eye;

or if he pleaseth, through it pass,

and then the heaven espy.

All may of thee partake;

nothing can be so mean,

which with this tincture, ‘for thy sake,’

will not grow bright and clean.

Herbert wakes up to a deeply sacramental view of life – a new way of seeing reality, glimpsing the presence of God in all things, which can be transformative.

A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine:

who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine.

Herbert has discovered the ‘philosopher’s stone’ – an alchemy:

This is the famous stone

that turneth all to gold;

for that which God doth touch and own

cannot for less be told.

Herbert called this poem, ‘The Elixir’ – referring to an extremely valuable stone sought by alchemists because they believed it had the power to transform common metals into precious ones.17 This was the treasure he unearthed in a time of personal struggle to accept his true worth and potential in Christ.

# Questions for reflection

1. What is the greatest discovery in your spiritual life that you have made so far?
2. Is there a way in which you can share this with others? Have you done so yet? What is stopping you?
3. As you review this unit and its discoveries, which of the treasures most surprises you, astounds you, delights you? Veritable treasure: our baptismal potentiality; riches beyond imagining: Christ’s self-emptying; sparkling stones: our true identity; immortal diamond: our destiny and worth; the famous stone ‘that turneth all to gold’?

# Prayer exercise: the greatest treasure of all

Teresa of Avila, in her *Interior Castle,* tells us that the ultimate treasure to be mined is not the Prayer of Quiet, or even the secrets of silence. It is the baptismal reality of the indwelling Christ. At the centre of the soul dwells Christ – this is an objective truth and nothing can take it away: ‘in the centre and middle is the main dwelling place where the very secret exchanges between God and the soul take place.’18 But paradoxically ‘the still point of the turning world’19 is set in the midst of the world’s confusions and upheaval. As the Carthusian motto puts it: ‘Stands the cross, still point of the turning world.’

Teresa is lost for words:

This centre of our soul... is something so difficult to explain... That there are trials and sufferings and that at the same time the soul is in peace is a difficult thing to explain.... The King is in his palace and there are many wars in his kingdom and many painful things going on, but not on that account does he fail to be at his post. So here, even though in those other dwelling places there is much tumult and there are many poisonous creatures and the noise is heard, no one enters that centre dwelling place and makes the soul leave...

In our prayer exercise let us welcome the unshakable peace that the indwelling Christ gives, while remaining in solidarity with those who suffer.

Repeat to your soul, slowly, these words of Jesus: ‘Abide in me as I abide in you’ (John 15:4). Say these several times and let the reality sink deep within you: Christ is abiding, residing, at the centre of your being. *He* is, in fact, the very centre of the soul!

End by reading the words of St Paul:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?… No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8: 35, 37- 39).

1 This theme is explored more fully in Andrew D. Mayes, *Journey to the Centre of the Soul: a handbook for explorers* (Abingdon; BRF, 2017).

2 Sebastian Brock, *The Luminous Eye: The Spiritual World Vision of St Ephrem the Syrian* (Cistercian Publications, 1992), Hymn on Faith 32:2-3, 44

3 From ‘Hymn on Faith’, 10 in Brock, *Luminous Eye.* The three extracts from St Ephrem are Copyright 1992 by Cistercian Publications and published by Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN.

4 ‘Hymn on Faith’, 3 in Brock, *Luminous Eye* p. 73.

5 ‘Hymn on the Church’, 29 in Brock, *Luminous Eye,* p. 75.

6 Thomas J. Samuelian (tr.), *St Grigor Narekatsi: Speaking with God from the Depths of the Heart* (Vem Press, 2002); M. Kudian, (tr.), *Nerses Shnorhali: Jesus the Son* (Mashtots Press,1986).

7 Matthew the Poor, *Orthodox Prayer Life: the Interior Way* (St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).

8 Br. Ramon, *Jacopone* (Collins, Flame, 1990), pp. 172, 181.

9 S. & E. Hughes, *Jacopone da Todi: The Lauds* (Paulist Press, 1982). Jacopone is credited with being the author of the passiontide hymn *Stabat mater dolorosa* (‘At the Cross her station keeping’).

10 James A. Wiseman (tr.), *John Ruusbroec: The Spiritual Espousals and Other Works* (Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 160, 161

11 Wiseman , *Ruusbroec*, p. 180

12 Kieran Kavanaugh & Otilio Rodriguez (trs.), *Teresa of Avila: The Interior Castle* (Paulist Press, 1979), p. 35.

13 Allison Peers (tr.), *St Teresa of Avila: Interior Castle* (Sheed & Ward, 1974), pp. 6, 8.

14 Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, p. 86

15 Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, p.137

16 Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Image 1968)

17 An idea explored by Jung in *Psychology and Alchemy*

18 Kavanaugh & Rodriguez, p. 36

19 T.S. Elliot, ‘Burnt Norton’, *Four Quartets*

**UNIT 6 Spiritual practice clarifies vocation and discerns gifting**

**We take a closer look at how spiritual practice can both unsettle us and inspire us as we seek to relate the inner world of prayer to the needs and cries of a hurting world.**

**In this unit we examine how the experience of meditation leads to the rediscovery of one’s vocation. We will see how spiritual practice aids this process of relating prayer to one’s personal mission in this way. Meditation is understood as a pondering type of prayer reflecting deeply on Scripture or on God’s character, which can move into more receptive and contemplative modes of being with God.**

**We begin by noting the key themes of vocation and discernment in early Christian writers, represented by Gregory of Nyssa and John Cassian. Next, we take a look at how two classic English spiritual directors, the authors of the *Cloud of Unknowing* and the *Fire of Love*, offer contrasting approaches to the issue how spiritual experiences relate to mission.**

**We conclude by taking a look at what the Ignatian tradition has to teach us about the discovery of vocation in prayer and John Henry Newman’s cheering words on our evolving vocation.**

**Gregory of Nyssa: You’ve only just begun...**

Where can we look to find clues that will help us shape a spirituality that inspires a dynamic view of the Christian vocation, filled with the Spirit? We can turn to Gregory of Nyssa (335-395) , one of the outstanding theologians of the eastern Church, who lived in Cappadocia in the fourth century. He communicated an exciting vision of the Christian life as continually evolving and progressing, energized by the Holy Spirit. His key text was the resolve of Paul: ‘Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus’ (Phil.3.13-14). Here Paul is saying that there is no room for self-satisfaction in the Christian life. We should never stand still, but continually stretch ourselves towards the ‘upward call’.

God invites us to make Christian vocation an adventure, in which we are beckoned to keep on growing. Gregory urges us to break free from any way of life that seems deterministic and predictable; to jump off the treadmill of dull routine which traps us into going round in circles. Rather he encourages us to discover our full potential in Christ: ‘the finest aspect of our mutability is the possibility of growth in good… let us change in such a way that we may constantly evolve towards what is better, being transformed from glory into glory, and thus always improving and ever becoming more perfect by daily growth.’ [[135]](#endnote-135) For Gregory, each stage we reach in the spiritual journey is but a beginning, not an end. We can never say we have arrived. As the letter to the Hebrews puts it: ‘ Let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith’ (Heb.12.1). In Gregory’s eyes, the greatest sin is that of complacency, of resting on our laurels.

In *the Song of Songs,* Gregory sees a powerful allegory of the relationship between God (the bridegroom) and the Christian (the bride). The Bridegroom is a dynamic figure, ever in movement: ‘Behold, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle’ (Songs 2.8,9). What is his message to his bride as she relaxes and rests on her couch? ‘My beloved speaks and says to me, “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away…” ’ (2.3). He repeats this call again (2.10). Gregory comments: ‘For this reason the Word says once again to his awakened Bride: *Arise*; and when she has come, *Come*. For he who is rising can always rise further, and for him who runs to the Lord the open field of the divine course is never exhausted. We must therefore constantly arouse ourselves […] for as often as He says *Arise* and *Come*, He gives us the power to rise and make progress.’ [[136]](#endnote-136) In this image, Gregory sees a powerful metaphor for the Christian vocation. We are not to allow ourselves to become too content with where we are spiritually. We are not to rest in our achievements in a spirit of self-congratulation. God ever calls us to the next stage of our development. Every point of arrival is to be a spring-board that catapults us into another adventure! We must keep moving.

This however requires of us great determination and resolve. We need to foster an unending sense of yearning and desire to grow in faith. For Gregory, it is a question of a partnership between human effort and divine help. It is the Holy Spirit who can transform the Christian vocation into an adventure of moving further into the mystery of God. He enables us to participate in the divine life itself, which animates, vivifies and completes human life: ‘The rich and ungrudging Spirit is always flowing into those accepting grace […] for those who have taken possession of this gift sincerely, it endures as a co-worker and companion in accordance with the measure of faith.’[[137]](#endnote-137) The Holy Spirit helps us reach our full potential and an ever-increasing likeness to God; as Gregory puts it: ‘The soul having been brought to the full flower of its beauty by the grace of the Spirit.’[[138]](#endnote-138) Gregory pictures the Holy Spirit as a Dove who not only broods over our life, but actually gives us wings to fly, never staying put for long upon the mountain, but ever ascending : ‘the soul keeps rising higher and higher, stretching with its desire for heavenly things ‘to those that are before’ as the Apostle tells us, and thus it will always continue to soar ever higher.’[[139]](#endnote-139)

**Cassian: Learn the art of discernment**

John Cassian (365-435)helped to communicate the ideals of monastic practice to the West. After his own experience as a monk in Bethlehem and Egypt, he travelled to Marseilles and the region of Provence where he sought to put into practice what he had discovered in the desert. He wrote *Institutes* as a book for beginners and the *Conferences* as a study of the Egyptian ideal of the monk: both were to be greatly influential in the West and Benedict acknowledges his debt to them at the end of his *Rule.*[[140]](#endnote-140)Cassian advocates a clear vision, a singleness of purpose, in relation to the spiritual life:

Every art and every discipline has a particular objective, that is to say, a target and an end particularly its own…the aim of our profession is the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. But the point of reference, our objective, is a clean heart, without which it is impossible for anyone to reach our target….

Everything we do, our every objective, must be undertaken for the sake of this purity of heart. This is why we take on loneliness, fasting, vigils, work, nakedness. For this we must practice the reading of Scripture, together with all the other virtuous activities, and we do so to trap and to hold our hearts free of the harm of every dangerous passion and in order to rise step by step to the high point of love…To cling always to God, and to the things of God – this must be our major effort, this must be the road that the heart follows unswervingly.[[141]](#endnote-141)

In such passages, Cassian celebrates the heart as the centre of his anthropology: the meeting point or battleground of vices and virtues, an inner space that needs to be kept clear of disturbances so that it becomes ready for the contemplation (*theoria)* of God.

In his sketches of the practice of spiritual parenting, Cassian called discernment- *diakrisis* – ‘the source and root of all the virtues.’[[142]](#endnote-142) He places on Anthony’s lips this definition:

It keeps him [the monk] from veering to the right, that is, it keeps him from going with stupid presumption and excessive fervour beyond the boundary of reasonable restraint. It keeps him from going to the left to carelessness and sin, to sluggishness of spirit, and all this on the pretext of actually keeping the body under control.’[[143]](#endnote-143)

For Cassian, discernment, which can also be translated discretion, is a watchfulness and vigilance for the angelic and the demonic, a wariness of excess in physical deprivation, and a healthy, compassionate account of humanity’s weaknesses. In short, it stops ascetic practice from becoming dehumanising, self-destructive and self-preoccupied. He advocates this as a guiding principle in the process we now call spiritual direction.

**Inside or out: two contrasting approaches to spiritual guidance from the fourteenth century**

The 14th century mystical tradition in England confronts us with two contrasting examples of spiritual guidance: the anonymous *The Cloud of Unknowing* and Richard Rolle’s *The Fire of Love*. In the first, as we shall see, Rolle falls into the danger of attending only to interior states, but the second moves to the questions of Why? What are we here for? Which of these two approaches will resonate most closely with you?

*The Fire of Love* was penned by Richard Rolle, a hermit in Yorkshire (1300-49). he travelled in the county of Yorkshire, engaged in an informal ministry of spiritual encouragement and conversation: the religious landscape of 14th century Yorkshire included one hundred anchorites, fourteen abbeys, ten priories and thirty friaries.[[144]](#endnote-144) It opens with the arresting words: ‘I cannot tell you how surprised I was the first time I felt my heart begin to warm. It was a real warmth too not imaginary, and it felt as if it were actually on fire…But once I realized that it came entirely from within, that this fire of love had no cause, material or sinful, but was the gift of my Maker, I was absolutely delighted...’[[145]](#endnote-145) Rolle extolled, with unbridled enthusiasm, the affective dimensions of Christian spirituality and can also be said to be a representative of the kataphatic, positive tradition. Rolle affirms the need for a passionate love of Christ and hails him as Beloved, Compassion, Saviour, Friend.

There is an emphasis on his own spiritual experience which he hopes will be reproduced in the lives of those he is guiding. He writes about both physical sensations, as we have seen, and also what might be called psycho-auditory sensations, akin to locutions, as the hearing of a symphony of spiritual sounds or heavenly choirs that resonated somehow in his mind (ch. 15). He talks about experiencing sweetness of feeling in his body, and celebrates the emotions of wonder and joy, and of becoming ‘intoxicated with sweetness ever more rare.’[[146]](#endnote-146) He has no time for any ‘dark night of the soul’ or trials in the spiritual life, save the ongoing battle with sin. But while his favourite theme and cherished experience is the flame in his soul kindled by the Holy Spirit, this flame never seems to be very contagious. He remains preoccupied with his inner experiences of ecstasy and rapture, and cautions the reader against any contact with the world. It remains an inner flame of devotion only, and doesn’t catch anyone else alight! Indeed, Rolle says:

…when the love of God takes complete charge of a man, it kills the root of his love for the world…since he is now dead to the world and one with heaven…if you still regard earthly things with pleasure your soul will be unprepared to endure suffering or death. And you will show clearly that you are not a true lover of God.[[147]](#endnote-147)

In another place he is emphatic: ‘This is the life of a perfect man: it means rejecting all care of worldly affairs.’[[148]](#endnote-148) Of course it may be argued that such a polarity between body and soul, between the physical and spiritual, derives from the ancient Platonic duality, and this is but a 14th century expression of an enduring theme, or dilemma, in Christian spirituality: it is certainly an individualistic and even isolationist piety.

In contrast, while *The Cloud of Unknowing* nurtures the inner experience, it contains good advice at times about the overflow of the experience into ministry. The identity of the author of *The* *Cloud* is unknown: scholars generally agree that he was a priest, perhaps a Carthusian monk, writing in the north-east Midlands about 1370. The work is addressed as a piece of spiritual guidance to a young man aged 24, who has perhaps recently entered a religious order. The writer suggests to us he is in a state of anxiety: ‘But now you are anxious and say: ‘What am I to do?...Here am I, twenty-four years old, altogether heedless of time!...What a plight I am in! Help me know, for the love of Jesus!’[[149]](#endnote-149)

Actually it may have been written to counteract some of Rolle’s more extreme tendencies. It has an unemotional, straightforward, instructional approach:

When you first begin, you find only darkness and as it were a cloud of unknowing. You don’t know what this means except that in your will you feel a simple steadfast intention reaching out towards God…Reconcile yourself to wait in this darkness as long as is necessary, but still go on longing after him whom you love. [[150]](#endnote-150)

The writer is critical of emotional spiritual experiences that lead nowhere. He does not mince his words:

Some squint as though they were silly sheep that have been banged on the head, and were soon going to die. Some hang their heads on one side as if they have got a worm in their ear. Some squeak when they should speak...some cry and whine...yet they think that all they do is done for the love of God, and to maintain truth! I really believe that unless God works a miracle of mercy to make them stop, they will ‘love God’ like this for so long that they will end by going to the devil, raving mad.[[151]](#endnote-151)

The writer, on the other hand, is keen to encourage discernment:

Therefore seek to get this gift [of friendship and company with others] by grace; for whoever really has it will be well able to control both himself and his possessions by virtue of it. It gives him discernment, when he needs it, to read people’s needs and characters. It gives him the knack of being at home with everyone he talks to, habitual sinners or not, without sinning himself...with a magnetic effect on others, drawing them by grace to the same spiritual work that he practices.[[152]](#endnote-152)

This is a contagious flame of devotion. The author writes as a spiritual director both affirming the directee and helping them to see that the gift is not only for themselves, but is to be shared.

Three aspects remain helpful for our understanding of spiritual guidance

**First, clarify an interpretative framework for experience**

Both works, in quite different ways, provide the reader with a vocabulary with which to articulate the inner stirrings of prayer. They offer a framework of beliefs as a tool with which the reader can begin to name and make sense of subjective experience.

The *Cloud* works with a psychology of the time with its theory about the faculties of the soul (units 62-66). It highlights the importance of the will in responding to God, and downplays the role of imagination and what it calls ‘sensuality.’ Both *The Cloud* and *The Fire* pay attention to the affective aspects of prayer, rather than the cognitive aspects, but in different ways. *The Cloud* can say of God: ‘He may well be loved, but not thought. By love he can be caught and held, but by thinking never.’[[153]](#endnote-153)

*The* *Fire* provides a rich range of metaphors with which to describe mystical experience, speaking of warmth (*calor*), sweetness infusing one’s whole being (*dulcor*) and celestial music (*canor*). But Wolters observes: ‘This threefold gift was strongly criticised by his contemporaries as it has been by Western scholars since, who regard it as the mark of the beginner who might need such encouragement: it is not for the proficient, who can get on perfectly well without it.’[[154]](#endnote-154)

**Second, identify ‘signs’ of spiritual progress or impediments to growth**

The author of *The* *Cloud* teaches that there are various signs, clues or evidences that suggest that the reader may be ready to make a transition in their praying from discursive, active thinking with words and images, as in meditations on the Passion, towards the wordless silence and solitude of contemplation. One key indicator is that of desire or yearning:

It seems to me, in my rough and ready way, that there are four states or kinds of Christian life, and they are these: Common, Special, Solitary, and Perfect… I think that our Lord in his great mercy has called you in the same order and in the same way, leading you on to himself by your heart-felt desire.[[155]](#endnote-155)

*The* *Cloud* offers guidelines for the task of discernment, to be worked through with a ‘discreet director’. Sometimes it will be necessary to exercise extreme caution in interpreting unbidden feelings: ‘All other comforts, sounds, gladness sweetness that come suddenly to you from outside, please do suspect! They can be good or evil; the work of a good angel if good, and of an evil angel if evil.’[[156]](#endnote-156)

And so the author aims to be as directive and clear as possible: ‘So when you feel by the grace of God that he is calling you to this work, and you intend to respond, lift up your heart to God with humble love…. It all depends on your desire.’[[157]](#endnote-157)

McGinn raises the issue of the difficulty of assessing spiritual experiences:

..it is also important to remember that the term ‘experience’ itself is fraught with ambiguity. Of course, everyone has ‘experiences’ and thinks they know what they mean when they use the word, but there is a considerable gap between the commonsense view of what we ordinarily call experience and a theoretical understanding, philosophical or theological, of what constitutes experience, especially as presented in ancient texts…Grace Jantzen reminds us, summarizing the argument of several important Christian mystics, ‘mystical experience is not reducible to a set of mystical experiences, no matter how intense they may be.’ This is why I prefer to speak of the direct ‘consciousness’ of God, a category that is broad enough to encompass both visionary and ecstatic states as mystical (as long as they have the character of immediacy to God), without excluding the more permanent, nonecstatic forms of divine immediacy, such as those which most mystical teachers have insisted are the essential identifying note of true *contemplatio*.[[158]](#endnote-158)

**Thirdly, magnify the issues of identity and selfhood**

As we shall shortly see, the clarification of vocation in prayer emerges from a unique sense of personhood, rooted in the experience of God’s love. Scholars such as Renevey refer to the increasing use of self-examination and concern with the inner life from the twelfth century, and places Rolle’s preoccupation with his own spiritual experiences as a model for others within the evolving sense of self-consciousness and self-reflexivity in the quest for interiority. Devotional use of the dialogue of *Song of Songs*, argues Reveney, encouraged the construction of a ‘self’ in relation to the divine Lover, but Rolle’s own journey towards interiority was marked by personal difficulties and struggles. He concludes: ‘Rolle needs to reinvent medieval subjectivity for the construction of the dialogic exchange [between a person and God’s love]...Turning inward in the fourteenth century gives birth to the emergence of an awareness shaped of course by personal characteristics, which are also dependent on the cultural, social, political and religious conditions of the period.’[[159]](#endnote-159) When the vicissitudes of the time batter and bruise the soul, there is all the more need, it is suggested, for one to regain – and perhaps overstate – a sense that one soul is a place where God’s love can be received and experienced.

**Ignatius of Loyola: prayer leads to action**

What are we aiming at when we pray? What is the purpose of prayer? Spiritual directors have been inspired by the approach of St Ignatius of Loyola.

His four-fold outline for meditations – called ‘weeks’ – can, indeed be completed in a 30 day retreat, but the more usual pattern is to follow such a guide as ‘ a retreat in daily life’ with dedicated periods of prayer each day while one fulfils one’s normal occupation.[[160]](#endnote-160) In the ‘first week’ one is invited to reflect on God’s boundless love for us and recognize how our sin creates barriers to this. In the second ‘week’ one is invited to meditate on events in the life of Jesus using gospel passages as springboards into prayer. The third ‘week’ leads us to mediate on the Last Supper and passion of Jesus. The fourth ‘week’ focuses on Jesus’ resurrection and his approaches to the disciples.

What is the point of it all? He states that these *Spiritual Exercises* are not primarily for the edification of the pray-er or even a greater knowledge of the biblical texts. The outlines of prayer are not necessarily for the increase of devotion. Rather the purpose of the *Spiritual Exercises* is to radically open ourselves to the will of God, and to come to a clearer sense of our vocation. The aim of praying is the realignment of one’s own will to God’s purposes At the outset Ignatius advises: ‘the retreatant will benefit greatly if he starts with a large-hearted generosity towards his Creator and Lord, surrendering to Him his freedom of will, so that His Divine Majesty may make that use of his person and possessions which is in accordance with His most holy will.’ (5)[[161]](#endnote-161) The purpose of the Exercises is ‘the search for the divine will’ (15). It calls for radical openness to God, a sense of abandonment to the divine, utter availability to God that he may do his work in the soul. Ignatius states that the overall aim of the *Exercises* is: ‘For the overcoming of self and the regulation of one’s life on the basis of a decision arrived at without any unregulated motive’ (21). A contemporary reading gives this translation and paraphrase: ‘The structure of these exercises has the purpose of leading a person to a true spiritual freedom. We attain this goal by gradually bringing an order of values into our lives so that we make no choice or decisions because we have been influenced by some disordered attachment or love.’[[162]](#endnote-162) The *Exercises* are prefaced by what Ignatius calls the Fundamental Principle: ‘Man (sic) has been created to praise, reverence and serve our Lord God, thereby saving his soul.’ What is needed in utter surrender to go God’s way:

Therefore we need to train ourselves to be impartial in our attitude toward all created reality...we do not set our hearts on good health as against bad health, prosperity as against poverty, a good reputation as against a bad one...The one thing we desire, the one thing we choose is what is more likely to achieve the purpose of our creating (23)

We can learn much from the approach of the *Spiritual Exercises* without following this particular programme for prayer. Three themes stand out

**Naming our desires**

What do you really want? Ignatian spiritual direction attempts to uncover the deepest desires of the human heart. Typically, these are smothered by superficial desires for transitory things. Our most profound desires are shaped by the Holy Spirit and point toward new choices for spiritual growth and fruitful service.

We need to move from shallow, superficial and surface desires to naming the deep desire in the human heart, which resonates with ‘the fundamental principle’, what we were created for. While it is not always helpful or even possible to work out where a desire has come from, Ignatius suggests that we might detect where we sense their desire is leading... naming the direction in which it is pointing.

# Our deepest desires coalesce and crystallize in a clear sense of one’s vocation. We realize that our yearnings meet God’s longings for us. We each have a unique song to sing. We each have a singular God-given vocation and meaning in life. God calls us into a particular role to play in his mission.[[163]](#endnote-163) The Ignatian tradition[[164]](#endnote-164) reminds us of basic convictions that underpin spiritual guidance: God is present in all human experience; God is a self –communicating God; God can be experienced in our hearts, minds, imaginations, psyches, bodies; God communicates Self to us in a personal way; God waits and longs for us to respond. Our brokenness, sinfulness, blindness, areas of unfreedom can prevent us from noticing and responding to God’s self-communication. God desires that we be healed, made whole and more completely human and alive. Spiritual guidance recognizes God’s specific self-communication in life, prayer and relationships. It savours, relives and enjoys the deep affective touches of God. Practice seeks to respond both interiorly and exteriorly to God’s self-revelation. It notices differences in oneself as a result of affective experiences of God. It explores and unpacks areas of unfreedom that keep us from responding to God’s presence and desires for us. It would nurture both an affective and intimate relationship with God and also a more integrated and more intimate relationship with self and others.

**Supporting creative decisions**

We need not only to be awake and alert to our true feelings but also be able to see what God is saying through our feelings, to read our feelings in the light of the Spirit. Here Ignatius’ distinction between consolations and desolations alerts us to what God is saying to us in our prayers. Despite their names they do not necessarily represent happy feelings or sad, but rather what leads to God and the service of others and what leads away from God and from others. A consolation might be happy – a sense of being blessed by God – or it might be, for example, a feeling of penitence or brokenness which leads us back to God’s grace. A ‘dark night of the soul’ could turn out to be a consolation because it leads to a greater awareness of God. A desolation might indeed be a bleak experience, but it could also be enjoyable in a self-centred or narcissistic way, so it leads away from God and from others. The devil appears as an angel of light - a ‘feel-good’ factor might actually turn out to be a desolation, leading us to self-satisfaction rather than the service of others. The spiritual director has a key role, then, in helping a directee articulate both their feelings and reactions in prayer, and helping them recognize what this is telling them not only about themselves but also about what God may be saying to them. Directors need to ask open questions like: is this leading you towards greater courage, greater solidarity with hurting ones? Ignatius says of consolations ‘this is the name I give to any interior movement experienced in the soul, causing it to glow with love ...’ (316). Anything which leads to an increase of faith, hope or love can be celebrated and welcomed as a consolation. He also gives a range of examples of feelings to be recognized as desolations: where the soul finds itself listless, apathetic, tepid, lacking confidence.

**Re-orientation towards mission**

Ignatius encourages us, then, to be responsive to what he calls ‘interior movements’ (316) – movements in the soul, shifts in perception, transitions, inner changes. He says: ‘We should pay great attention to the entire train of thought. If beginning, middle and end are wholly sound, tending to what us completely innocent, this is a sign of the good angel...’ (333). A key Ignatian word is ‘noticing’ – spotting the signs.

In this regard, we might make daily use Ignatius’ *examen,* which can become a great stimulus for discernment. We make a prayerful review of each day and ask such questions as: What were there creative moments? What were hurtful or life-denying? As we replay some of the key moments and revisit the experiences, we reconnect with the feelings produced and begin to sift and sort them. We pray for enlightenment about any particular moments that stand out in our recent memory, especially if they reveal a shift of mood or feeling. We ask God to show us where these feelings came from – from God or somewhere else? Where was God in these experiences, and what is he saying to me now about them? So this is not an exercise in introspection but a seeking of God’s light to shine on our day, with a deep concern that we have fulfilled God’s mission in some way. We close by celebrating and giving thanks for God’s presence in us through the day and for working through us, even if we were not aware of it at the time, but only in hindsight. This exercise is not then, about making our own analysis or judgment on the ‘success’ of the day but a rather it is about becoming more alert to God’s movement in us. We might conclude the exercise by entrusting the coming day to God, with the particular intention that we will be alert to his call, however it comes – and it often comes through the needs of others.[[165]](#endnote-165)

The challenge of the Ignatian tradition to us is to see how prayer practices lead to creative decisions and the celebration and living out of our vocation ‘to the greater glory of God’. Houdek puts it:

Ignatian spirituality is a decision-making and action-orientated spirituality. The Ignatian insight *par excellence* is that one meets God in choosing and doing...Mission becomes the subject for new contemplation and reflection and so the circle grows and grows, as choice and action return one to prayer and discernment.[[166]](#endnote-166)

Spiritual practice, then, enables a life-changing process of discernment. We start to notice what is important, and what is not. We begin to spot and give name to God’s nudgings. Our vocation, springing from our baptismal call to share in God’s mission, begins to clarify. We become aware of what God is asking of us. We see in greater focus our priorities as Christians. This is illustrated by an examination of the desert and baptism in Jesus’ experience.

We become more alert to our strengths and weakness. We are able to recognize and celebrate our spiritual gifts. Spiritual practice should aim to unlock and release undiscovered, latent or hidden talents for the sake of God’s mission in the world. Spiritual practice opens us increasingly to the energizing of the Holy Spirit, as we learn to lower our self-protective defences and barriers to God and to others. We discover total availability to God. Love of God and neighbour are not separate conjoined activities. Spiritual practice alerts us to how we start to love God in and through our neighbour.

In addition, as we reflect on our own identity and calling, we realize that every person has spiritual potential to be nurtured, and, made in the image of God, a capacity for the Divine. As we gain a fresh sense of our own selfhood in God, we discover an understanding of human destiny and capacity for God - a theological anthropology – that enables us to reach out to others and appreciate their potential and spiritual thirst.

In this unit we have seen that one of the major tasks of spiritual practice is to help summon forth and clarify one’s sense of vocation – the part that God would have us play in his ongoing mission in the world. We conclude with some words from St John Henry Newman:

For in truth we are not called once only, but many times; all through our life Christ is calling us. He called us first in Baptism; but afterwards also; whether we obey His voice or not, He graciously calls us still…He calls us on from grace to grace, and from holiness to holiness, while life is given us. Abraham was called from his home, Peter from his nets, Matthew from his office, Elisha from his farm, Nathaniel from his retreat; we are all in course of calling, on and on, from one thing to another, having no resting-place, but mounting towards our eternal rest, and obeying one command only to have another put upon us…[[167]](#endnote-167)

God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission…I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place while not intending it if I do but keep His Commandments.

Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever I am, I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me - still He knows what He is about.[[168]](#endnote-168)

**Questions for reflection**

1What is your own understanding of discernment? How would you expand Cassian’s definition?

2 How do Rolle’s proclivities towards soothing spiritual experiences resonate with what you encounter in yourself or in others? How would you counteract them?

3 How would you guide someone in the exploration of their feelings, without falling back into the danger of encouraging unhealthy self preoccupation?

4 What other links do you see between the practice of prayer and the discovery of vocation?

**Prayer Exercise**

**Either**

Make a careful review of the previous day. Recall what things happened, who you met (whether intended or ‘accidentally’), what you did. Was Christ calling you in a way that you did not recognize at the time? Did you hear his voice - or miss it? Did you obey? How did you handle interruptions or unexpected challenges? Did you find yourself resenting any task? Be penitent for negative attitudes or opportunities missed. Praise God for the times you were aware of his presence. Then take time to pray for a greater awareness of his presence today, and watch how God can bring people across your path and speak to you in unexpected ways and through unlikely individuals! Be ready to have your best-laid plans interrupted and stay open to God’s surprises! Pray for a rediscovery of a sense of ‘providence.’

**Or**

Prayerfully reflect on the question: Why is the Holy Spirit given to us? Look up Bible passages: Jn 20:21,22 , Ac 1.8, 2 Tm 1:7 : ‘God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.’ Repeat these verses in the style of *lectio divina* so they sink from head to heart. Realize afresh: spirituality entails the gift of the Spirit to us in prayer, not to be a private possession but to empower and inspire our daily witness in the world.

**UNIT 7 Struggle and contemplation: learning from the early Franciscan Tradition**

**In this unit we learn from Francis of Assisi, and early followers Giles of Assisi (born 1190) and Andrew of Spello (born 1194), who was the first parish priest to become a Franciscan. They embody vividly the interplay between struggle and contemplation, the challenge of being a contemplative in action.**

**St Francis’ dilemma**

Even St Francis (1181-1226) wrestled over the question of the relationship between activity and stillness and found himself torn between the two, as Bonaventure relates in his biography. Francis agonises:

What do you think, brothers, what do you judge better? That I should spend my time in prayer, or that I should travel about preaching?... in prayer there seems to be a profit and an accumulation of graces, but in preaching a distribution of gifts already given from heaven.

He went on to rehearse the advantages of a life dedicated solely to prayer:

In prayer there is a purification of interior affections and a uniting to the one, true and supreme good with an invigorating of virtue; in preaching, there is dust on our spiritual feet, distraction over many things and a relaxation of discipline.

Ultimately he sees the truth that proves to be decisive:

There is one thing ...that seems to outweigh all these considerations before God, that is, the only begotten Son of God, who is the highest wisdom, came down from the bosom of the Father for the salvation of souls in order to instruct the world by his example and to speak the word of salvation to people...holding back for himself absolutely nothing that he could freely give for our salvation. And because we should do everything according to the pattern shown us in him ...it seems more pleasing to God that I interrupt my quiet and go out to labour.[[169]](#endnote-169)

According to *The Little Flowers of St Francis* (ch. 16) Sister Clare and Brother Silvester, after a time of prayer, agree on the same advice to Francis: ‘Continue with your preaching, because God called you not for your sake alone but for the salvation of others’.[[170]](#endnote-170) However, in the life of Francis, this was never going to be an ‘either/or’ choice. In the course of his mission, he established hermitages and retreats, and his whole ministry was an ebb and flow of action and contemplation. As we shall see, it models an integration of prayer into service, an inter-penetration and cross-fertilization between the two. It has been written of Francis: ‘his mystical experience, far from cutting him off from the world, always sent him right back into its most basic realities.’[[171]](#endnote-171) A key role in spiritual practice will be to sensitize and alert the pray-er to the presence of God not only to be found in stillness and solitude, but, as Francis would put it, in the despised leper and the feared wolf.

Francis composed *A Rule for Hermitages* showing that he values solitude amidst activity. In this text Francis puts only one biblical text. It related to the Kingdom: ‘And let them seek first of all the Kingdom of God and his justice’ (Matt 6:33). Thomas Merton observes:

The importance of the document lies in the spirit which it exhales- a spirit of simplicity and charity which pervades even the life of solitary contemplation. It has been noted that the genius of sanctity is notable for the way in which it easily reconciles what seems at first sight irreconcilable. Here St Francis has completely reconciled the life of solitary prayer with warm and open fraternal love. Instead of detailing the austerities and penances which hermits must perform, the hours they must devote to prayer and so on, the saint simply communicates the atmosphere of love which is to form the ideal climate of prayer in the hermitage. The spirit of the eremitical life as seen by St Francis is therefore cleansed of any taint of selfishness and individualism. Solitude is surrounded by fraternal care and is therefore solidly established in the life of the Order and of the Church. It is not an individualistic exploit in which the hermit by the power of his own asceticism gains a right to isolation from an elevation above others.[[172]](#endnote-172)

St Francis’ life of witness culminated in the experience of receiving the stigmata on Mt Alverna: the very wounds of Christ appeared in his own feet, hands and side. But this was not a private ecstasy. Rather, Bonaventure tells us in his *Major Legend,* it led Francis to fresh engagement with the lepers. He continued to say to his brothers ‘Let us begin, brothers, to serve the Lord our God, for up to now we have done little’. Bonaventure tells us: ‘He burned with a great desire to return to the humility he preached at the beginning; to nurse lepers as he did at the outset.’[[173]](#endnote-173) This encapsulates Francis’ testimony: the experience of prayer enabled a life marked by reaching out to others.

**Giles of Assisi**

The pull between prayer and mission, between stillness and activity, between solitude and building community: this can be a creative tension or demoralizing and guilt-inducing. We know we’re called to wait on God in quiet, but we have a job to be getting on with. How do the mystical and prophetic relate? Giles of Assisi was one of the first four followers of St Francis and became a mentor to Andrew of Spello. He knew that a recurring theme in the history of Christian spirituality is the necessity for detachment – withdrawal from daily demands in order to enter prayer, conceived as a sacred space, as a different world.[[174]](#endnote-174) It seems to be a question of ascent into prayer and a descent into ministry. How did Giles approach the problem?

Giles of Assisi taught ‘the highest, fairest and most splendid things which are above man must be hoped for, so consider Mary and Martha. The Lord would gladly bestow his treasure upon people if he found receptacles ready.’ Giles was mystic and a rebel, an itinerant and a visionary. He experienced prayer as transformative:

The graces and virtues which are found in prayer are many.

First, you are enlightened in mind.

Second, you are strengthened in faith.

Third, you know your weaknesses.

Fourth, you arrive at holy fear and humility and self-knowledge.

Fifth, you gain contrition of heart.

Sixth, you are purified in conscience.

Seventh, you are confirmed in patience.

Eighth, you learn obedience.

Ninth, you come to true discretion and discernment.

Tenth, you reach high knowledge .

Eleventh, you come to understanding.

Twelfth, you acquire fortitude.

Thirteenth, you attains wisdom.

Fourteenth, you arrive at the knowledge of God who reveals himself to those who adore him in spirit and in truth.

Then you become inflamed with love, fragrant with grace, and, attaining courtesy and sweetness, led to peace of mind and finally come to glory[[175]](#endnote-175)

Giles gave a little more insight into these graces when he spoke of the seven degrees in contemplation

* fire: a divine light floods the soul with light
* anointing: a wonderful fragrance invades the soul (as in the Song of Sings 1:3)
* ecstasy: the soul experiences a rapture and becomes withdrawn from the bodily senses
* contemplation: gazing on God in a wonderful manner
* taste: we truly ‘taste and see that the Lord is good’ (Psalm 33:9)
* rest: the soul abides in this sweetness
* glory: replenished with boundless joy, the words of the psalm 16:15 come true: ‘I shall be satisfied when your glory appears’

And he went on: ‘You can become re-animated and re-energized by such fervour of spirit, and as long as you can stay focussed, not desiring anything else but God, your heart will ascend to the heights of contemplation[[176]](#endnote-176)

Giles taught the secret of ascent:

The graces of God and virtues are the ladder and way of ascending into heaven....What you need is holy contrition, holy humility, holy charity, holy devotion, and holy joy.

Unless you prepare a place for God within yourself, you will never find your place among the creatures of God.

Prayer is the beginning and the end of all good. Prayer illuminates the soul, and by it all good and evil is discerned.[[177]](#endnote-177)

But he also taught:

The way up is to go down.[[178]](#endnote-178)

No-one can come to the knowledge of God except through humility. The way of going above is to go below... Descend into the depths...

His friend Andrew of Spello was to discover very powerfully the truth of this paradox.

**Andrew of Spello: going higher**

The much-loved American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-82), in the course of his researches in Italy, stumbled on an historical source that told of Andrew’s dilemma. He vividly retold the story in his poem *The Legend Beautiful.*We reproduce it here in its entirety, for it not only tells a story, it also that opens up for us key questions in this issue***:***

"Hads't thou stayed, I must have fled!"
That is what the Vision said.

In his chamber all alone,
Kneeling on the floor of stone,
Prayed the Monk in deep contrition
For his sins of indecision,
Prayed for greater self-denial
In temptation and in trial;
It was noonday by the dial,
And the Monk was all alone.

Suddenly, as if it lightened,
An unwonted splendour brightened
All within him and without him
In that narrow cell of stone;
And he saw the Blessed Vision
Of our Lord, with light Elysian
Like a vesture wrapped about him,
Like a garment round him thrown.

Not as crucified and slain,
Not in agonies of pain,
Not with bleeding hands and feet,
Did the Monk his Master see;
But as in the village street,
In the house or harvest-field,
Halt and lame and blind he healed,
When he walked in Galilee.

In an attitude imploring,
Hands upon his bosom crossed,
Wondering, worshipping, adoring,
Knelt the Monk in rapture lost.
Lord, he thought, in heaven that reignest,
Who am I, that thus thou deignest
To reveal thyself to me?
Who am I, that from the centre
Of thy glory thou shouldst enter
This poor cell, my guest to be?

Then amid his exaltation,
Loud the convent bell appalling,
From its belfry calling, calling,
Rang through court and corridor
With persistent iteration
He had never heard before.

It was now the appointed hour
When alike in shine or shower,
Winter's cold or summer's heat,
To the convent portals came
All the blind and halt and lame,
All the beggars of the street,
For their daily dole of food
Dealt them by the brotherhood;
And their almoner was he
Who upon his bended knee,
Rapt in silent ecstasy
Of divinest self-surrender,
Saw the Vision and the Splendour.

Deep distress and hesitation
Mingled with his adoration;\_
**Should he go, or should he stay?**Should he leave the poor to wait
Hungry at the convent gate,
Till the Vision passed away?
Should he slight his radiant guest,
Slight this visitant celestial,
For a crowd of ragged, bestial
Beggars at the convent gate?
Would the Vision there remain?
Would the Vision come again?

Then a voice within his breast
Whispered, audible and clear
As if to the outward ear:
"Do thy duty; that is best;
Leave unto thy Lord the rest!"

Straightway to his feet he started,
And with longing look intent
On the Blessed Vision bent,
Slowly from his cell departed,
Slowly on his errand went.

At the gate the poor were waiting,
Looking through the iron grating,\_
With that terror in the eye
That is only seen in those
Who amid their wants and woes
Hear the sound of doors that close,
And of feet that pass them by;
Grown familiar with disfavour,
Grown familiar with the savour
Of the bread by which men die!

But to-day, they knew not why,
Like the gate of Paradise
Seemed the convent gate to rise,
Like a sacrament divine
Seemed to them the bread and wine.
In his heart the Monk was praying,
Thinking of the homeless poor,
What they suffer and endure;
What we see not, what we see;
And the inward voice was saying:
"Whatsoever thing thou doest
To the least of mine and lowest,
That thou doest unto me!"

Unto me! but had the Vision
Come to him in beggar's clothing,
Come a mendicant imploring,
Would he then have knelt adoring,
Or have listened with derision,
And have turned away with loathing?

Thus his conscience put the question,
Full of troublesome suggestion,
As at length, with hurried pace,
Towards his cell he turned his face,
And beheld the convent bright
With a supernatural light,
Like a luminous cloud expanding
Over floor and wall and ceiling.

But he paused with awe-struck feeling
At the threshold of his door,
For the Vision still was standing
As he left it there before,
When the convent bell appalling,
From its belfry calling, calling,
Summoned him to feed the poor.

Through the long hour intervening
It had waited his return,
And he felt his bosom burn,
Comprehending all the meaning,
When the Blessed Vision said,
"Hadst thou stayed, I must have fled!"

The event is located in the hermitage forest so beloved of Francis and Andrew as a precious place of retreat above Assisi. Like the garden of Gethsemane, to which Jesus often retired for prayer, it was pretty close to the city but far enough away to allow some distance from the clamouring demands and needs of the people. Andrew’s cell was located on the steep side of the ravine, but within earshot of the chapel bell. After years of exhausting travel, he spent long periods there. The forest was a place of deep stillness and silence, where amidst the rocks, oaks and beech trees Andrew could immerse himself in peaceful contemplation. No doubt he would find himself singing Francis’ Canticle of Creation as he welcomed the dawn or dusk, as he rejoiced in the birdsong, the streams flowing down the cliff-face or as he felt the breeze blowing upon him. But the focus of devotion was not only creation but incarnation, as he marvelled in prayer at the condescension and humility of the Son of God. He was learning receptive prayer – the type of prayer that listens not speaks, and that sometimes glimpses the divine. In 1249 he was given a singular grace as he sat in his little cell, which to this day is a place of shadow, barely permitting the entry of sunlight. As he sat in the darkness of the cell, watching and waiting in prayer, he became aware of a light that gradually grew in intensity. He sensed that angels were present. Then he was overwhelmed as he saw with his own eyes the infant Jesus. But it was not only a remarkable vision, it was an intimate embrace, for the child went into his outstretched arms and clasped Andrew to his own chest.

This was an experience beyond description, and it lasted several minutes. It gave Andrew a massive re-assurance of the tender love of God for him shown in the Word made flesh. Andrew found himself echoing the words of Francis

**A sublime humility**

This a intensely personal, individual experience was interrupted by the community bell which summoned him to prayer and service. It was the hour of vespers which was preceded by the distribution of alms to the poor who gathered each day at the hermitage gate. The question was: should he stay or should he go? How could he possibly quit this experience of intimacy with the Son of God for an encounter with scruffy beggars? Yet he knew what he had to do. Not only was it a matter of discipline - community obedience – it was also the conviction that Christ might show up at any time or place. As Andrew made his way up the steep hillside and took his place among his brothers at the gate, he was once again surprised by God. In the faces of the poor he discerned the features of the same Jesus Christ who he had encountered in the vision. He recalled the question in the gospel:

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” (Matthew 25:37-40).

Andrew realized afresh that those in need are the very brothers and sisters of Jesus. The sacrament of the poor mediates the presence of Christ as much as the sacrament of the altar, and as much as any mystic vision. In the poor Jesus becomes tangible – no ephemeral and passing vision, but a permanent presence calling out for compassionate response. Andrew refused to limit where God might show up by narrow thinking of his own. Jesus shows up incognito – as Hopkins was to put it later: ‘Christ plays in a thousand places.’ But, returning to his cell, the infant Christ was waiting for him. He was once again given a re-assurance of the divine presence, which cannot be tied down. Indeed, according to the poet, the Child says ‘If you had remained here in the cell, I would have departed.’ What is more important than encountering the divine in the poor and hurting, as well as in mystical prayer?

**Jesus: contemplative in action**

The greatest challenge is not to set aside alternating times for prayer and stillness and times for service. The greatest challenge is to bring a contemplative heart into the bustling centre of ministry. Jesus models not only the ebb and flow of prayer and action, but also the ability to maintain a listening heart in the very maelstrom of ministry. Certainly he lives within a rhythm of withdrawal and engagement, but it is in the heat of fierce debate that he is able to say: ‘Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own but only what he sees his Father doing…The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing’ (Jn. 5:19,20).

In Mark’s gospel, the Twelve are chosen (ch.3) ‘to be with him and to be sent out’. They are to spend quality time in the presence of Jesus and then venture forth in their apostolate. Both Mark and Luke emphasize the role of prayer and silence in the example Jesus sets before the disciples, following the forty days of prayer, struggle and preparation in the desert prior to the start of his public ministry. In Mark chapter 1, a hectic twenty-four hours of ministry is followed by prayer before dawn in an *eremos* –lonely place (1:35): the time of prayer is both the conclusion of an intense period of ministry and the prelude to the next stage. This rhythm of prayer and activity is repeated in the disciples’ experience, as they go to a place of retreat enabling rest and reflection after first incursions into ministry and giving an account to Jesus (Mk 6:30,31). After this retreat, another time of ministry (6:35-45) is followed by Christ’s retirement into the hills for prayer at night (6:46): the pattern of intense activity and solitude is repeated.

Luke gives a similar picture. Jesus withdraws to the hills and prays through the night after a demanding period in which great crowds gathered for preaching and healing (Lk. 6:12). After another time of intense ministry, there is further prayer which becomes the context for learning and questions: ‘Once when Jesus was praying alone, with only the disciples near him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say that I am?” ’ (9:18). This passage vividly highlights Jesus modelling solitude to the disciples and the thin line between teaching and prayer. As Dunn puts it, we should note ‘the degree to which Jesus provided a model to his disciples as a man of prayer…To be a disciple of Jesus was to pray as Jesus prayed.’[[179]](#endnote-179)

Christ’s practice of modelling a balance between prayer and activity is communicated to the disciples not only by his own personal example but by appeal to other expressions, notably in the passage about Mary and Martha (Lk. 10:38-42) in which Mary chooses ‘the better part.’ This prompts the disciples to request particular training in prayer (Lk. 11.1). Christ speaks of the kind of prayer that involves bringing questions and puzzlement to God: ‘Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock and the door will be opened for you’ (Lk. 11:9).

While Jesus cherishes and safeguards times of aloneness, he also brings his stillness into the midst of the noisy world: his desert heart still pulsates within him. But he must leave the lonely places – heartened, challenged, instructed, comforted and energized – to face the demands of ministry and the call of the cross. This rhythm between withdrawal and engagement, this ebb and flow of prayer and ministry, is the key to the ministry of Jesus: we noted that, in John’s view, he only does what he hears the Father telling him, in his listening prayer (Jn.5:19, 20; 14:10). He moves with a listening heart amidst a clamouring, demanding world. The Jesus of John’s gospel can only share and reveal what he himself has heard from his Father: ‘He testifies to what he has seen and heard, yet no one accepts his testimony’ ( 3:32). Jesus is emphatic: ‘the one who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him’ (8:26). He describes himself as ‘a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God’ (8:40). He is clear: ‘the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me’ (14:24). As he speaks, he is listening!

**Questions for reflection**

1 ‘Should he stay or should he go?’ How does the tension between the call to prayer and call to service work itself out in your life? How can one feed or challenge the other?

2 What is your experience of meeting and recognizing Christ in the poor, hurting or marginalized?

3 Giles identified 14 blessings or benefits of prayer. What would go on your list? Share this with a spiritual director or soul friend.

4 How can you bring a contemplative praying heart into the centre of activity and engagement with world? What difference might this make to the way you go about your business/busyness?

**Prayer exercise**

Reflect on the transfiguration story and its aftermath in Luke 9:28-43. Recall how Jesus went up the mountain to pray. What happened in his ascent? How did he discover both God and his calling? What did the prayer of Jesus lead to, in terms of descent into ministry?

End your reflection with the hymn:

'Tis good, Lord, to be here,
Thy glory fills the night;
Thy face and garments, like the sun,
Shine with unborrowed light.

 'Tis good, Lord, to be here,
Thy beauty to behold
Where Moses and Elijah stand,
Thy messengers of old.

Fulfiller of the past,
Promise of things to be,
We hail Thy body glorified
And our redemption see.

Before we taste of death,
We see Thy kingdom come;
We fain would hold the vision bright
And make this hill our home.

'Tis good, Lord, to be here.
Yet we may not remain;
But since Thou bidst us leave the mount,
Come with us to the plain. Joseph A. Robinson, 1858

*Or*

On a clean piece of paper draw a circle to represent your life. Divide it up into different sized segments representing the proportions of time you normally spend on tasks and commitments. Reflect on whether there is a right balance between work and play, prayer and activity (this can be done in pairs in a group). Do you maintain such a balance and perspective in your life, juggling the demands of work, recreation and home? Notice the tension between possible fragmentedness and the wholeness of the circle. Close by placing the papers under a cross as a sign of surrendering our often frantic lives to the Lordship of Christ.

**UNIT 8 spiritual practice leads us from personal piety to prophetic spirituality**

**In this unit we will explore how spiritual practice connects us to the pain of the world. We will see how spiritual practice calls us to seek Christ in the poor and strengthens us for the struggle for justice.**

**In particular, we will see how five devotional practices, which often are turned inwards, can be transformed and refocused. We take a fresh look at the spiritual disciplines which are vital to sustain Christian discipleship. They become excellent starting points in the attempt to re-orientate ourselves towards mission and engagement . A systematic and thorough review or spiritual audit will raise key issues and reclarify priorities about our lifestyle. We should be unafraid of facing questions that unsettle or challenge. They are specific and call out for scrutiny and reflection. In this way we will see how personal piety can be transformed into prophetic spirituality. Jesus himself asked demanding questions about religious practices which had become sacrosanct and divorced from reality. In this unit, additional questions are found in the text in bold italic.**

**I Scripture**

**2 Eucharist and Mission**

**3 Self-examination**

**4 Fasting**

**5 Pilgrimage**

In the time of Jesus, tithing and religious observances had become detached from issues of justice and mercy: ‘Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practised without neglecting the others.’ (Mt 23: 23).

A prophetic spirituality attends to ‘justice and mercy and faith.’ Those on Emmaus Road spoke of ‘Jesus of Nazareth, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people’ (Lk 24:19). As we saw in Unit 1, the prophets of old both spoke the word of God and also embodied or symbolized the word in a dramatic action. Jesus speaks and he acts. The burden of the Old Testament prophets was not prediction of the future, but rather declaring God’s word into the present situation, naming the idols and illusions of contemporary society. Walter Brueggeman in his classic *The Prophetic Imagination* tells us that the role of the prophet is to envision an alternative consciousness, and to open up for people a different vision of things: Jesus’ Kingdom of God directly questioned the prevailing status quo of the Kingdom of Rome. The role of the prophet is to enable an alternative perspective which may be subversive, questioning, compassionate, and which certainly reveals itself in counter-cultural lifestyle and political choices.[[180]](#endnote-180) How can our spirituality become prophetic?

**I Scripture**

We have already seen how Ignatius shows us that Scripture reading and meditation relates to vocation. Paul tells us: 'All Scripture is inspired by God and can profitably be used for teaching, for refuting error, for guiding people's lives. By teaching them to be holy this is how the one who is dedicated to God becomes fully equipped and ready for any good work' (2 Tm 3:16, JB). In this passage, four reasons are given for the Scripture, and reading this we could ask, with Timothy, four questions of ourselves: ***What am I learning right now from God's Word? What weaknesses in my life does it speak to? How do I allow God's Word to guide me? What am I learning about being holy?***But the danger is that we stay stuck with looking at Scripture in terms of personal application.

The Old Testament reminds us that from the beginning God's creative Word or *dabar* powerfully shapes the landscape of the planet and redefines the cosmos. Genesis' opening hymn to creation tells us that when God speaks his word, things happen: 'And God said…And it was so… And God saw that it was good'. God's Word is ever active and formative in our lives today. Isaiah expresses the power of God's Word:

For as the rain and snow come down from heaven,

And do not return there until they have watered the earth,

Making it bring forth and sprout,

Giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,

So shall my Word be that goes out from my mouth;

It shall not return to me empty,

But it shall accomplish that which I purpose… (55:10,11).

In the New Testament, John gives us new glimpses into the Creator Word made flesh. In speaking of the *Logos* he echoes the Greek idea of Wisdom, *Sophia* and the Hebrew *hokmot,* by which God shaped creation (c.f. Pr 8: 22-31). The Word reveals the divine in signs and words. With Peter we say: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life' (Jn 6: 68). The continual challenge for us is to read Scripture in such a way that brings into a dialectic conversation the text and context: a creative interaction, an interplay. The text points first to the original context – the historical setting and the geography of the Holy Land; in the case of the Gospels, to the first century world with its political and religious pressures. But it also speaks to today's context: to our present situation, often ugly, often messy…full of contradictions, paradoxes, injustices and questions. Of every passage, we must ask: ***how is this two-way conversation going? How is God’s Word shaping and re-shaping my priorities?***

The six major different types of Scripture shape our witness and engagement with society in different ways.

*The Historical books* challenge us to discern the action of God in history and in the present. As interpretations of events within a narrative-theology that seeks to make sense of the experience and vicissitudes of God's people, they invite us to identify and name the work of God in today's world. What is going on, and what is God up to today?

*The Prophetic books* present a special challenge to mission today. They invite us to uncover hypocrisy and idolatry, and to recall God's people to courageously struggle for peace and justice and the true knowledge of God.

*The Psalms* and poetic works invite us to identify with the hopes and hurts of the psalmist. They teach us not to hesitate in bringing to God in prayer our questions and our doubts, but they also move us from individual to community laments (see 44, 60,74).

*The Wisdom literature* invites us to make sense of today's confusions by pondering anew the meaning of a life well-lived, with the providence of God.

*The Gospels,* showing us the evangelists found ideas to communicate the mystery of Christ, challenged us to discover a Christology for today, faithful to the given tradition but alert and responsive to the pains and joys of the present movement.

*The Letters* too invite us to do what Paul and the other writers did: to struggle to articulate the reality of salvation in language and concepts which resonate with today's world. If, for example, the language of 'justification by faith' makes sense primarily within the thought-world of the first century, the question becomes: what concepts, ideas and images must *we* use to communicate the wonder of life in Christ to contemporary hearers?

Our challenge is to dare to engage daily in the risky business of exposing the mind and soul to God's Word. This requires the vulnerability and utter openness to surprises, as revealed in Mary at the Annunciation: we must be prepared to be disturbed and reshaped by the Word. Indeed, through our disciplined times of daily Scripture reading we must dare to change (c.f. 2 Tm 4:16,17).

**2 Eucharist and Mission**

Often we are encouraged to approach the Eucharist in terms of personal devotion. We talk about ‘making my communion.’ But in what ways can elements within the Eucharist inspire and empower mission? In what ways can the Eucharist be a manifesto for mission: calling us to certain priorities? What are the links between worship/spirituality and mission? Liturgical formation celebrates the way that God shapes and redirects us through worship. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, we are formed as we worship. This is true of all worship but can be seen most clearly in the celebration of the Eucharist.

 *Proclamation of the Gospel*: the deacon or priest not here giving another reading: they are proclaiming the Word of Life, and all stand to listen to the voice of the living Christ. This encapsulates the very mission of Christians: to speak out boldly the message of salvation. ***In what ways do we welcome and stand alert to the Gospel each day? How do we announce the Good News in our lives?***

*Intercession*: Intercession calls us to listen both to God and to the needs of the world, that we may offer ourselves for involvement in God’s mission. It is the moment in the celebration where we are reminded of our vocation to be in touch with the passionate and compassionate heart-beat of God and with the pulse of a world in need of healing. ***How alert are our intercessions to the hurts and wounds of the world?***

*Sign of peace*: As we share a sign of mutual acceptance and reconciliation, around the table Christ forms a people in radical equality, community and dignity. Here we are offered a powerful image of our vocation to be reconcilers and agents of God's healing in a broken, fragmenting world. ***Who will we reach out our hands to this week?* *Which outsider will we welcome and affirm this week?***

*Offertory*: As the priest at the Offertory takes to the holy table the people's bread, 'which earth has given and human hands have made' so God’s people surrender their daily work and labour to God. As the priest accepts the wine, so throughout the week in our daily ministry we encounter sorrows and joys to be offered up to God: the chalice holds 'wine to gladden the human heart' (Ps 104:15) but also represents the cup of suffering (Mk14:36). ***What labours does the bread represent for us? What joys or sorrows do we wish to see poured as wine into the chalice?***

*Thanksgiving*: As God's people are invited to 'lift up their hearts' so we are called to live a Eucharistic life, marked by daily praise and fulfilling the injunction to 'pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances' (1 Th 5:17).***How can we ‘lift up our hearts’ on a Monday morning?***

*Consecration*: As the priest takes bread and wine into his hands and asks that by the power of the Holy Spirit these natural elements may become for us the Body and Blood of Christ, so we see a powerful image of God's call to us to surrender into his hands the raw material of our lives, that we may become Christ-bearers for our needy world. As a Eucharistic prayer in *Common Worship* puts it: 'form us into the likeness of Christ.' We find ourselves caught up into the movement of Christ's self-offering to the Father, as we make *anamnesis* (remembrance) of the Cross. ***What are we offering to God of ourselves in the Eucharist? What are we holding back?***

*Fraction*: As we recognize Christ in the breaking of the bread, we see before our eyes the clearest possible expression of the ministry and mission: to be consecrated for God and to be broken and given for the people. As the Ordination rite in the Catholic tradition puts it, at the giving of the Chalice: 'Realize what you are doing; imitate what you handle.' ***How will the bread of our lives be broken and shared this week?***

As we recognize the presence of Christ, in some way, in fragments of broken bread and in poured out wine, so we recommit ourselves to discover Christ in the broken and torn bread of people’s lives. We seek to fulfil Matthew 25's injunction: 'I was sick and you visited me', finding Christ in broken, fragile bread-like lives: the sacrament of the poor. The Eucharist, celebrating ‘God with us’ and ‘the Word made flesh' in the physicality and materiality of created elements, prompts us to go out into God's world and become ever more alert to God's presence in human lives: to rediscover the sacramentality of all of life. St. John Chrysostom (Hom. 50:3-4), asks: 'Do you wish to honour the body of Christ? Do not ignore him when he is naked. Do not pay him homage in the temple clad in silk, only then to neglect him outside where he is cold and ill-clad. He who said: "This is my body" is the same who said: "You saw me hungry and you gave me no food", and "whatever you did to the least of my brothers you did also to me..." What good is it if the Eucharistic table is over loaded with golden chalices when your brother is dying of hunger? Start by satisfying his hunger and then with what is left you may adorn the altar as well.' Mother Teresa of Calcutta challenges us: 'If you really love Jesus in the Eucharist, you will naturally want to put that love into action by serving him in his distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor. We cannot separate these two things: the Eucharist and the Poor'.[[181]](#endnote-181)

*Communion*: Further, as we hold out empty and expectant hands as we receive the gift of Holy Communion , can we see in this action a reminder of the call to go out into the world to respond to the both physical and spiritual hungers: to feed the poor and the spiritually hungry of the parish.***What spiritual or physical thirst and hungers are we aware of in our own community?* *Who and how will we feed this week?***If the Eucharist is truly a new Passover, a freedom meal, celebrating the new exodus, the new liberation from slavery to sin and death that Christ has won for us, ***how will we lead people this week into the liberation Christ opens up for us?***If the Eucharistic table is a symbol of God’s welcome and generosity to us, and foretaste of the heavenly banquet, ***what expressions of hospitality will we offer this week?***

*Blessing*: As the priest blesses the people and sends them forth into mission with the words: ‘Go in peace to love and serve the Lord’, so we are reminded of that God empowers us not for our own benefit but to the sake of the world. ***Who will we bless this week? How can be a blessing to others?***

In these ways elements within the Eucharist can inspire and empower mission. Indeed the Eucharist becomes a manifesto for mission, calling us to clear priorities. At the very heart of the Eucharist is the celebration of the Cross, Passion and Resurrection of the Lord. It is the paschal mystery, the mystery of Easter, the mystery of God's sharing and redeeming our human pain, that will help make sense of the daily practice of ministry – rather, it is the key, the heart of ministry and mission. What is proclaimed in the Eucharist – in both Word and Sacrament – is nothing less than the very message we will live out in our daily mission. The Eucharist clarifies and strengthens our vocation of as Christians.[[182]](#endnote-182)

The Eucharist powerfully reminds us, on each occasion, of our mission and vocation. As Augustine put it (Sermon 272):

If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving! You are saying *Amen* to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith. When you hear *The Body of Christ* you reply *Amen.* Be a member of Christ's body, that your *Amen* may ring true!

What is needed is that we then search out his real presence in the lives of the poor. The Bishop of Zanzibar put it memorably in his 1923 address *Your Present Duty*. He spoke of the joy of encountering the Risen Christ in the Eucharist, but this was to be a beginning not an ending of the quest for the Risen Lord:

Now go out into the highways and hedges … Go out and look for Jesus in the ragged, in the naked, in the oppressed and sweated, in those who have lost hope, in those who are struggling to make good. Look for Jesus. And when you see him, gird yourselves with his towel and try to wash their feet. [[183]](#endnote-183)

**3 Self-examination**

The practice of self-examination – whether it leads to sacramental or to corporate confession (penance or general confession) – can become like a ‘spiritual flea-hunt’ as we turn inwards to identify our faults. Of course, such a reality check is essential, but it can lead to scrupulosity and self-preoccupation. We recall how repeatedly emphatic Jesus was about reaching out in reconciliation to *others*.

We have only to recall the Lord’s Prayer itself: ‘Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who have trespassed against us’. This may be translated: ‘forgive us our sins *to the extent that* we forgive those who sin against us.’ Certainly that would be consistent with Christ’s teaching. The heavenly Father will deal harshly with you ‘if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart’ (Mt 18:35). We should forgive seventy-seven times (Mt 18:22) – that is, give up counting! Jesus is empathic: ‘Whenever you stand praying, forgive, if you have anything against anyone; so that your Father in heaven may also forgive you your trespasses’ (Mk 11:25).

But the experience of personal confession and absolution should not only drive us out to be quickly reconciled with those who have hurt us – without waiting for any apology and penitence on their behalf. It should also empower us to work for reconciliation in a fragmenting and polarized world. Our own discovery of reconciliation should impel us and constrain us to offer ourselves to God as his agents for reconciliation. We could start by identifying the rifts and conflicts in our own community, and seeing what steps we can take towards its resolution. As we have become aware, in our own confession, of our blind spots and prejudices, so we are fuelled by divine grace to support others. We become wounded healers. The Sacrament of reconciliation leads to reconciling, and the forgiveness we receive individually leads us to be agents of reconciliation. Paul puts it clearly:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Co 5:18-20).

Confession and the practice of penance must also now recognize not only one’s own transgressions and peccadilloes but our complicity in the ‘social sin’ and in our failure to grapple with injustices; the ways in which we actually contribute to ‘structural sin’ in society: ‘A conversion of heart that is not reflected simultaneously in a struggle for a change of structures is not complete or authentic, but an alienating deception.’[[184]](#endnote-184)

**4 Fasting**

Fasting and abstinence from food is a spiritual discipline commended by all Christian traditions, but it can degenerate into something self-centered – indeed, it is often called self-denial – something about the self.[[185]](#endnote-185) Motives for fasting include mortification of the body: a desire to regain mastery over the physical – this can include the desire to deepen one’s penitence, even to the extent of punishing the body. Some desire fasting to redirect the heart away from worldly activities, its purpose being to cleanse the soul by freeing it from harmful impurities. Others make fasting into an introverted practice by considering it an exercise in weight-control or dieting. Isaiah said: ‘Look, you serve your own interest on your fast day’ (Is 58:3. The RSV gives this as: ‘In the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure’).

We take heed of the scriptural injunctions:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
    to loose the bonds of injustice,
    to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
    and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry... (Is 58: 6, 7)

Say to all the people of the land and the priests: When you fasted and lamented in the fifth month and in the seventh, for these seventy years, was it for me that you fasted?...9Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; 10do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another. (Zc 7:5, 9, 10).

Amos puts it bluntly and poetically:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
    and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
But let justice roll down like waters,
    and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (Am 5: 21, 24).

How can such an inner and personal practice like fasting be turned outwards? We can begin with three themes:

* Fasting can be offered as an act of solidarity with the hungry ones of the earth. Pangs of hunger in one’s stomach can help us stand in prayerful empathy with those who are literally starving. It can foster a sense of unity with our sisters and brothers who are desperate for food and shelter. It connects us to the refugee and the war-torn. It becomes a powerful expression of intercession for them, and may lead to practical support. ***Where is famine today? Who is literally going hungry?***
* Fasting intensifies our sense of those who are starving the soul – the spiritually hungry in our communities. We begin to pray for those who are desperate for some spiritual nourishment and nurture, and this may lead us towards more courageous and sensitive outreach. ***Who do you know who is thirsting spiritually? How can you help quench their thirst?***
* Fasting may lead us to think of God’s ache and longing for the world. He desires that we turn to him. ***What is your understanding of God’s deepest yearnings for the world?***

The practice of fasting prompts us to take a long hard look at our lifestyle choices. What are our normal levels of consumption? How can we live more simply? How can we tell the difference between what we want and what we need?

Moreover, fasting alerts us to those parts of the world where there has been exploitation and degradation of the planet. As Pope Francis has recently reminded us in his encyclical, *Laudato Si':* *Care of our common home,*we must become more informed about how we each contribute to the pressures on the environment and to the process of climate change, with its devastating effects on people and the planet. Pope Francis' encyclical emphasizes the connection between environmental degradation and poverty, between the love for creation and poverty reduction and the interconnection between human dignity, human development and human ecology.

His namesake was the son of a merchant father who displayed a grasping materialistic and even consumerist approach to God’s world, and saw nature as something to be exploited for one’s own gain. St Francis came to respect and reverence God’s creation, calling in his *Canticle of Creation* the elements ‘brother’ and ‘sister’ – brother sun, sister moon, sister water, brother fire. Moreover, we recall that Francis saw goods as gifts from God to be shared, so lived a life marked by simplicity and a light touch towards possessions. He kept giving away his threadbare clothes to the poor! We might ask ourselves questions like: ***Where, do you think, are parts of the earth that are degraded and barren? What can we do about it? How can we practically express our inter-connectedness?***

We recall Christ’s Beatitude:

God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice,
for they will be satisfied. (Mt 5:6)[[186]](#endnote-186)

**5 Pilgrimage**

In recent years there has been an astonishing revival in the practice of pilgrimage to places identified as ‘holy.’ So, what is holiness: how do we recognize it? What *is* a holy place? These are crucial issues for all Christians, whether pilgrims to the places like the Holy Land or those living as pilgrims at home. What is holy? Where, indeed, do we find God?

Behind the word 'holy', the root meaning of the Hebrew *qadesh* is to separate, to set apart. It refers, first of all, to God as utterly Other, transcendent, with a vast gap between Creator and creature. But the divine touches and sanctifies earth. From the dawn of its history, Jerusalem as a Canaanite 'high place' becomes a sacred domain, locus of encounter with the gods, divine-human nexus. Later, after David establishes Jerusalem as his religious and political capital, God himself comes to live on Mount Zion, in the biblical perspective. From the Holy of Holies, the innermost sanctuary in the Temple built by Solomon in about 970BC, the Ark of the Covenant radiates a circle of holiness. The holy place is to be approached with awe, fear and trembling – only the purified priest can draw near. The 'Holiness Code' (Lv.17-26) directs priest and people on the proper accession to the sanctuary, with its oft-repeated divine God's injunction: 'Be holy, as I am holy' (Lv 11:44,45 c.f. 1 P 1:15,16). The psalms celebrate Zion and Jerusalem as 'the holy place': 'Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart…' (Ps 24:2). Psalm 46 proclaims Jerusalem 'the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells.'

In Christianity the holy places developed after the Emperor Constantine's conversion in the fourth century and the visit of his mother Helena to Palestine to identify the holy places associated with the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Splendid Byzantine churches marked these out as sites for worship and pilgrimage. Many became what the Celtic tradition calls 'thin places', where the veil between heaven and earth, between the human and divine is easily crossed – where there is often, to this day, a palpable sense of God's presence, deepened by the prayers of the centuries in these holy places. Here pilgrims sense what Otto called 'the numinous' in his classic work *A Sense of the Holy.*

**The example of Bethlehem: star or compass?**

Every year thousands come to Bethlehem to visit the Basilica of the Nativity. It is a fortress of a church, built by Justinian in the sixth century on Constantinian foundations. It is an awesome place. The pilgrims enter by a low door, requiring them to bend low in humility (though the original purpose of the low door was to prevent people riding their horses in!). One enters the mighty nave, with its stunning mosaics and soaring marble pillars. The church is built over the cave of the nativity, where a silver star marks the traditional birthplace of Christ. Pilgrims descend steep steps to enter the grotto, as if going into the depths of the earth, where they get on their knees to kiss the silver star placed upon the rock. It bears the Latin words: *Hic de Virgine Maria Jesus Christus natus est.'* That short word *hic* is found across the holy land, marking out holy places: it happened *here!*[[187]](#endnote-187)

There is an unbroken tradition of prayer and pilgrimage at this site where it is Christmas everyday! The place of the nativity localizes the incarnation, the Word made flesh who pitches his tent among us (Jn 1:18). It confronts us with the 'scandal of particularity' – for God to take on humanity for the sake of the whole world, there had to be one specific time and one concrete place where that took place. That place is Bethlehem, and here Christians ponder the wonder of God accepting human flesh and blood from Mary and being born our brother in Jesus. We would indeed bend low: the holy God was laid in the dirt and dust here in Bethlehem's stable…now the grotto of a magnificently adorned church which pilgrims come to venerate each year.

But there is another side to Bethlehem and another answer to the question – what is holy? Where can we find God? Where should we be looking for God? Where is God to be encountered today? The silver star revered by pilgrims as a marker for the birthplace of Christ now looks like a compass sending us out east, west, north and south. Today, a short distance from the Church of the Nativity, thousands are crammed into three major refugee camps.[[188]](#endnote-188) Today, Bethlehem is hemmed in by the towering concrete Wall, Israel's Security Barrier, and Christians in Bethlehem are separated from their families and relatives in nearby Jerusalem. Often stripped of their human dignity and human rights, high unemployment robs them of their residual self-worth.[[189]](#endnote-189)

**A challenge from the Gospel : the life of Jesus redefines holiness**

Where do we find God? Where should we be looking for Christ? Can it be that we can encounter him, not only in holy rocks and grottos but also in the broken lives of the oppressed? Let’s take a fuller look at Christ's parable:

Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father; inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world, for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me in, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me…Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of those who are members of my family, you did for me.' (Mt 25:34-36, 40).

The incarnation redefines the holy. Now we touch the holy God in his incarnate life in Jesus. We see the holy, in Jesus, in the dirt of a Bethlehem stable, in the simplicity and poverty of Galilee, in the heartache and longing of his tears on the Mount of Olives, in the pain and isolation of Calvary, in the mystery of Easter – there, in these 'holy places' God's presence is to be discovered and welcomed. This Jesus invites us to find him in 'these brothers and sisters of mine' who are hungry, broken, stripped, imprisoned, estranged. The incarnation overturns the traditional dichotomy between sacred and secular, the divide between 'holy' and 'unholy.' It challenges us to glimpse the divine in the dust, and to be alert to God's presence in the broken.[[190]](#endnote-190) It alerts us to the possibility that Christ might be close at hand, incognito, waiting to be recognized and greeted.

There is still a role for holy places in the traditional sense, but only if they do not become idols, and things in themselves to be venerated. The holy places can be powerful reminders of the God who comes to us, markers in the soil of where God has walked. Yes, they can be 'sacred spaces' where we can encounter the Divine. But they need to be seen as *clues* as to the type of God we believe in, a passionate and compassionate God who enters fully into our human condition and is close to the brokenhearted. The rocks and churches of the 'holy places' testify to a God who empties himself, a dusty and dirty God who involves himself fully in the pain of humanity. Holy places can disturb, challenge us, question us. They can stimulate and inspire us in our search for God. They are not ends in themselves but potentially helps on the journey: *signposts* to where Christ may be revealing himself today in human lives.

God waits to reveal himself in surprising locations and in surprising people. Theophany, divine disclosure, breaks out unsummoned. That, perhaps, is the message of Bethlehem.[[191]](#endnote-191) And the question of Bethlehem is for every time and place: What is holy? Where is God?

**Questions for reflection**

1 Where do you find God? Where are you most aware of his presence?

2 What 'holy places' exist in your life? Where have you discovered 'thin places'?

3 How difficult do you find it to encounter God in the sick, broken and homeless? What might help you to do this?

4 How do you find yourself responding in a 'holy place'?

5 How do holy places challenge you in your mission?

**Prayer Exercise**

Make a pilgrimage within your neighbourhood or local town or city. Go into the rougher parts, poorer housing, industrial estates, run-down areas. Look for the holy – little signs of God’s presence, pointers to the Kingdom. Make this a pilgrimage to places of pain and hope in your community. Discover the “holy places” where God’s presence is to be found: visit nursing homes, school or college ....Identify places and situations of conflict in your community. Give thanks for each and every clue or pointer to God’s Kingdom.

**9 Climate of the soul – steps towards an ecological spirituality**

**In this unit we discover how in the Bible imagery from the weather helps us both speak of God and also discern the climate of the soul. We see the reciprocity between heaven and earth: as we become able to read the climate of the soul we also develop an awareness and alertness to the fragile and changing climate of our planet. As we reflect on this interplay, we realize that it might help us as we seek to develop an ecological spirituality, one that responds to the urgent issues facing the earth.**

Most High, all-powerful, good Lord,Yours are the praises, the glory, and the honour, and all blessing,To You alone, Most High, do they belong,and no human is worthy to mention Your name.Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures,especially Sir Brother Sun,Who is the day and through whom You give us light.And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour;and bears a likeness of You, Most High One.Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,in heaven You formed them clear and precious and beautiful.Praised be You, my Lord, through Brother Wind,and through the air, cloudy and serene, and every kind of weather..

In these words, troubadour St Francis of Assisi invites us to recognize and celebrate the radical and essential interconnectedness of all things, displaying a remarkable kinship and sense of unity with creation in his *Canticle of Creation, the* first poem composed in the Italian vernacular*.* Hailing the sun as brother and the moon as sister, he greeted Sister Water and Brother Wind as dear friends. At the dawn of capitalism and a creeping consumerist approach to things – Francis was the son of a wealthy cloth-merchant and worked in his shop – he discovered a deep connectedness to all things which was honouring and non-exploitative.[[192]](#endnote-192) Pope Francis opens his 2015 encyclical *Care of our common home* with the words *Laudato Si’* – ‘Praise be to you, my Lord’ – quoting St Francis’ Canticle of Creation. In his chapter ‘Ecological Education and Spirituality’ Francis calls us to an ecological spirituality grounded in the convictions of our faith. Calling us towards a new lifestyle, he says that what we need is

an ‘ecological conversion’, whereby the effects of their encounter with Jesus Christ become evident in their relationship with the world around them. Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.[[193]](#endnote-193)

In recent years we have woken up to the effects of climate change. We are noticing what contributes to global warming, melting of icecaps and to rising sea levels. Scientists analyze the symptoms and identify possible causes. We are becoming aware of contributory factors and alert to the changes that are taking place in our very lifetimes.

On a lighter note, the BBC promotes its weather-watchers with the slogan: ‘the nation's favourite conversation.’ The Daily Telegraph reported : ‘The weather is still Britain's favourite topic of conversation with three quarters of us discussing it more than anything else, according to research’ (20 Feb 2017). On getting up each day, the very first question many people ask is: ‘what is the weather doing today?’ The weather affects our moods and behaviours. It can have productive or debilitating effects on our health. It determines our choice of clothing. It shapes agriculture and food production. It influences our planning and organizing – in the UK we often need to have a contingency plan for outside summer events, should the weather disrupt our hoped-for ...More seriously, in many parts of the world adverse weather can bring flooding or drought, famine or plenty. The environmental conditions hovering above the surface of our planet have their impact on almost everything that humans need to do.

In the bible vivid and arresting images of weather furnish us with a rich vocabulary we can use to describe both the divine workings and our own spiritual life. Physicality points to spirituality, and meteorology points to cosmology – ways of reading the world, and ways of reading our own soul.

Victorian explorer of the Holy Land George Adam Smith observes: ‘In the Palestine year there is no inevitableness. Fertility does not spring from a source which is within control of man’s spade...a purely mechanical conception of nature as something inevitable, whose processes are more or less under man’s control, is impossible...the climate of Egypt does not suggest a personal Providence, but the climate of Palestine does so.’[[194]](#endnote-194) This suggests an important theme as we explore the imagery of climate: like the very climate of the Holy Land itself, the spiritual life is not predictable, but capable of many different types of development. Nothing is predetermined or fixed in advance except the constant invitation to greeter Christlikeness. We need rule nothing out. We need not become trapped in routines and regularities if they are becoming unfruitful. God is always summoning us forwards, into an adventurous unpredictable life in the Spirit. And further: his providence will not fail us. There is, as it were, a reciprocal relationship between heaven and earth:

“On that day I will answer your prayers,” declares the Lord.
    “I will speak to the sky,
        it will speak to the earth

and the earth will produce grain, new wine, and olive oil.
                You will produce many crops, Jezreel” (Hosea 2.21, 22)

Two aspects stand out:

**1 Our images of God: Climate conveys God, divine action.**

Isaiah, for example, delights in imagery from the weather to depict the work of God:

Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; let the earth open, that salvation may spring up, and let it cause righteousness to sprout up also; I the Lord have created it. 45:8

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
    and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
    giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
11so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
    it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
    and succeed in the thing for which I sent it. (55.10, 11)

For thus the Lord said to me:
I will quietly look from my dwelling
    like clear heat in sunshine,
    like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest. (18.4)

**2 our self-image and understanding of vocation**

But the sky is also a mirror of the soul. The weather interprets our soul, and reflects our state of mind. In the skies above us we glimpse images of self, pictures of our vocation. Let’s look at some examples from Isaiah and the Psalms that speak of human activity described in meteorological language

**The prophets**

When the house of David heard that Aram had allied itself with Ephraim, the heart of Ahaz and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind. (Isaiah 7:2)

Each will be like a hiding-place from the wind,
    a covert from the tempest,
like streams of water in a dry place,
    like the shade of a great rock in a weary land. (32:2)

The prophets move from employing meteorological language of God, to using such imagery of human lives. In Biblical literature the weather is often read metaphorically and evokes the movements of the soul. Changes in weather can help us describe and put into words what is happening in our inner life, while speaking to us of the divine. Hosea, for example, gives us a dramatic juxtaposition of divine and human behaviours, described in imagery of climate:

Let us know, let us press on to know the Lord;
    his appearing is as sure as the dawn;
he will come to us like the showers,
    like the spring rains that water the earth.’

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
    What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
    like the dew that goes away early. (Hosea 6:3,4)

Hosea often describes human activity in such terms

Ephraim herds the wind,
    and pursues the east wind all day long;
they multiply falsehood and violence;
    they make a treaty with Assyria,
    and oil is carried to Egypt. (Hosea 12:1)

Sow for yourselves righteousness;
    reap steadfast love;
    break up your fallow ground;
for it is time to seek the Lord,
    that he may come and rain righteousness upon you. (Hosea 10:12)

**The Psalms invite us to look to the heavens**

The psalmist greets ‘fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command!’ ( Ps 148:8). He celebrates the message of the skies:

The heavens are telling the glory of God;
    and the firmamentproclaims his handiwork...
In the heavenshe has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
    and like a strong man runs its course with joy.
Its rising is from the end of the heavens,
    and its circuit to the end of them;
    and nothing is hidden from its heat. ( Ps 19: 1, 4-6)

The Psalms also describe the state of soul in weather terms. Psalm 72:5,6, 17 offers this prayer for the king:

May he livewhile the sun endures,
    and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
    like showers that water the earth….

May his name endure for ever,
    his fame continue as long as the sun.
May all nations be blessed in him;
    may they pronounce him happy.

**Jesus himself directs our attention heavenward, in more than one sense.**

‘I tell you, lift up your eyes’ (Jn 4: 35, RSV).

 ‘The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head’ ( Luke 9:58 ) and Jesus himself was exposed to staggering contrasts in environmental conditions, and stunning extremes of temperature, from fierce heat to bitter, biting cold. He traversed the land, moving from the sizzling, scorching desert to the balmy sub-tropical area of the Sea of Galilee (Mark 1:12-14), travelling from the breezy and windswept coast and beaches of Tyre and Sidon to the mountains of the Golan Heights (Mark 7:31), before approaching snow-capped Mount Hermon by Caesarea Philippi (Mark 9:2). In a Jerusalem set high in the hills he takes shelter in the temple precincts in winter (John 10: 22, 23) and feels the chill in his vigil in Gethsemane (John 18:18). Jesus was often out in the open and subject to the vicissitudes of the weather. Ever on the road as pilgrim, wayfarer and itinerant preacher, his sweating forehead did not escape the blazing sun; he felt the variable winds sweeping through his hair and caressing his burnished skin, the rain drenching his clothes. The gospel narratives sometimes refer to the conditions of sky: ‘That evening, at sunset, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons…In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. ( Mark 1 : 32, 35 cf Lk 4.40)

‘He looked up to heaven’ (Jn 17:1) in more than one sense. He says: ‘When it is evening, you say, “It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.” And in the morning, “It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.” You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times’(Matthew 16:2-3). He calls us to vigilance: ‘But be alert; I have already told you everything… in those days, after that suffering,

the sun will be darkened,
    and the moon will not give its light,
and the stars will be falling from heaven,
    and the powers in the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see “the Son of Man coming in clouds” with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. What I say to you I say to all: Keep awake’ (Mark 13:23-27, 33).

Summoning us into the new creation, Jesus invites us: “Consider the lilies, how they grow” (Luke 12:27). “Consider”: the Greek word means “turn your attention to this, notice what is happening, take a long, slow look.” Jesus summons us to a contemplative way of living, a deeply reflective way of seeing the world. Learn to see things differently. This sacramental approach to viewing reality becomes a dominant theme in the gospels, which combine to give us the clear impression that this was an outlook on the world that was truly characteristic of Jesus himself. The secrets of the Kingdom reveal themselves through parables of seed, mountain, field and sea (Matt 13, Mark 11:23). Jesus asks us to notice how the burning sun scorches the fragile shoots, how workers in the vineyard perspire and fatigue after a day under the unforgiving sun, how rain and wind batter down badly-founded homes. He asks us to ‘lift up your eyes’ (Jn 4 ) and read what God is saying to us through the changing seasons.

**Theologians and Mystics celebrate the Macrocosm of the soul**

For those with eyes to see it, the sky is the soul writ large. Theologians and mystics have recognized a potential Microcosm/ macrocosm reciprocity – we can glimpse the movements of the soul in the heavens above us, and the skies help us read the movements of our own soul.

We see this in the **Gospels,** in the ministry of Jesusat its beginning and at its end.

At his baptism, as Jesus emerges, dripping from the waters, the Heavens are ‘torn apart’ (Mark 1) evoking the reality that what has been closed and inaccessible is now open and unfolding; the opening of the heavens symbolizes the very nature and character of Jesus’ ministry, which will witness the opening of a new way to God. At the Transfiguration ‘his face shone like the sun’ (Matt 17:2) and the dazzling light of the bright cloud’ (Matt 17:5) is symbolic of the illumination and enlightenment Jesus is giving to the disciples. Throughout the narrative the gospels offer us a symbolic universe and invite us to see reality more deeply. The physical storm on the lake is symbolic of the confusion and chaos in the disciples and mirrors their soul. (Later writers speak of us being ‘Buffeted by every wind of doctrine’ as in Ephesians 4 :14).At the crucifixion the accompanying earthquake and solar eclipse seem to mirror the darkness of the soul and speak of the cosmic significance of the event. In a similar way, the sun rising at Easter daybreak becomes symbolic of a new beginning and a fresh dawn for humanity.

**The Franciscan theologian Bonaventure (1221-74)** invites us to develop such an outlook and way of seeing in his *Soul’s Journey to God.* He detects clues and signs of the divine throughout creation, which he calls the vestiges or divine fingerprints. For eyes that can see, elements in creation ‘are shadows, echoes and pictures of that first, most powerful , most wise and most perfect Principle...they are vestiges, representations, spectacles proposed to us and signs divinely given so that we can see God.’[[195]](#endnote-195) He invites us to activate our senses to celebrate and welcome the power, wisdom and goodness of God at every turn: ‘Therefore, open your eyes, alert the ears of your spirit, open your lips and apply your heart so that in all creation you may see, hear, praise, love and worship, glorify and honour your God’[[196]](#endnote-196). Bonaventure invites us to notice both magnitude and minuscule details, hailing God in clouds overhead and in a dewdrop on the leaf. His contemporary **Thomas Aquinas** ( 1225-74) also conceived the human being as a microcosm that encapsulates the entire cosmos by containing both spirituality and materiality, as the *imago Dei*, the image of God.

In the mystical tradition, outstanding writers and poets experience this reciprocity between heaven and earth. **Hildegard of Bingen** (1098-1179) writes:

God has formed humanity according to the model of the firmament and strengthened human power with the might of the elements. God has firmly adapted the powers of the world to us so that we breathe, inhale, and exhale these powers like the sun, which illuminates the earth, sends forth its rays, and draws them back again to itself[[197]](#endnote-197)

She ponders how the human mystery mirrors the divine, and how the soul is a microcosm of creation:

In human beings there are body , soul and reason.

The fact that I am aglow above the beauty of earthly realms has this meaning:

 the earth is the material out of which God forms human beings.

The fact that I am illuminated in the water signifies

 the soul, which permeates the entire body just as water flows through the entire Earth.

The fact that I am afire in the sun and the moon signifies reason:

 for the stars are countless words of reason.[[198]](#endnote-198)

So we can read the soul by following clues in the heavens and earth. In one of Hildegard’s visions God declares:

I have created mirrors in which I consider all the wonders of my originality which will never cease. I have prepared for myself these mirror forms so that they may resonate in a song of praise….This I have done, who am the Ancient of Days…Humanity is the guise in which my Son, clothed in heavenly power, reveals himself as the God of all creation and as the Life of life.[[199]](#endnote-199)

**Mechthild of Magdeburg** (1210-82), in her work *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* gives us this exchange and reciprocity:

*God says to the soul*

O you beautiful sun in your radiance!

O you full moon in the firmament!

*The Soul says to God*

O you pouring God in your gift!

O you flowing God in your love!

O you burning God in your desire!...

You are a tempest in my heart[[200]](#endnote-200)

**Invitation to radical exposure**

For millennia humans have lived in a state of exposure – lashed by wind and rain. Today we live in insulated homes, and travel unexposed, not on horse or donkey, but in cars with heaters and impenetrable windows. In our time, we have become disconnected, removed, detached from the vagaries of weather and protected from its impact. Today we resolve ‘we won’t let the weather affect us’ , trying to reign supreme even over the elements - a symbol of our desire to maintain control over our own lives? As we follow this theme in scripture and writings, we find ourselves beckoned to rediscover a certain vulnerability and radical exposure to God. **Gerard Manley Hopkins** asks:

What would the world be, once bereft

Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,

O let them be left, wildness and wet;

Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

(Inversnaid, 1918)

**Thomas Merton** (1915-68) calls us to a high state of wakefulness:

It might be a good thing to open our eyes and see.

It is essential to experience all the times and moods of one good place.

It is God’s love that warms me in the sun and God’s love that sends the cold rain. It is God’s love that feeds me in the bread I eat and God’s love that feeds me also by hunger and fasting...It is God who breathes on me with light winds off the river and in the breezes out of the wood.

As we go about the world everything we meet and everything we see and hear and touch...plants in us...something of heaven.

It is good and praiseworthy to look at some created thing and feel and appreciate its reality. Just to let the reality of what is real sink into you...for through real things we can reach Him who is infinitely real...

The sun on the grass was beautiful. Even the ground seemed alive.. [[201]](#endnote-201)

In *The Sign of Jonas* Merton celebrates the formative influence of the weather on the soul:

How necessary it is for monks to work in the fields, in the rain, in the sun, in the clay, in the wind: these are our spiritual directors and our novice-masters. They form our contemplation. They instill us with virtue. [[202]](#endnote-202)

As we engage with the message of the elements, we start to make greater sense of our vocation. We develop an awareness that becomes transformative – as Pope Francis puts it:

The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person’s face. The ideal is not only to pass from the exterior to the interior to discover the action of God in the soul, but also to discover God in all things.[[203]](#endnote-203)

**Learning from the Sun**

The Wisdom text Ecclesiasticus celebrates the splendour of the sun:

The pride of the higher realms is the clear vault of the sky,
    as glorious to behold as the sight of the heavens.
The sun, when it appears, proclaims as it rises
    what a marvellous instrument it is, the work of the Most High.
At noon it parches the land,
    and who can withstand its burning heat?
A man tending a furnace works in burning heat,
    but three times as hot is the sun scorching the mountains;
it breathes out fiery vapours,
    and its bright rays blind the eyes.
Great is the Lord who made it;
    at his orders it hurries on its course. (Sirach 43:1-5)

Light from the sun is the primordial gift of life on earth. As the Psalmist celebrates:

In the heavens he has set a tent for the sun,
which comes out like a bridegroom from his wedding canopy,
    and like a strong man runs its course with joy. (Psalm 19:5).

God himself is hailed as the sun

For the Lord God is a sun and shield; he bestows favour and honour (Psalm 84:11).

Dramatically, the prophet Habakkuk announces the advent of God:

God came from Teman,
    the Holy One from Mount Paran.
His glory covered the heavens,
    and the earth was full of his praise.
The brightness was like the sun;
    rays came forth from his hand,
    where his power lay hidden (3:3-5).

The sun is a natural image with which to convey the wonder and mystery of the divine theophany. Matthew describes the transfiguration of Christ in these terms: ‘And he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white’ (17:2). This is echoed in the vision of John in the book of Revelation:

In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force. When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, ‘Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades (1:17, 18).

Christ, whose glory fills the skies,
Christ the true, the only Light,
Sun of Righteousness, arise!
Triumph o’er the shades of night:
Dayspring from on high, be near;
Daystar, in my heart appear. (C. Wesley)

**Questions for reflection about the sun**

1 To what extent are you prepared to expose your soul to God? Do you take precautions – akin to sunscreen or sunshades – to prevent radical exposure and spiritual nakedness before God? In modern computing, users are urged to have in place a firewall, to prevent uninvited access to data or systems. Name the barriers or defensive strategies that you resort to, to keep the divine at a safe distance. How might you remove or lower these barriers?

2 Have you experienced being dazzled by God’s glory in anyway? What is your experience of being filled with wonder or awe before the Divine?

3 Can you identify patches of darkness or shadows in your soul? What can you do about them?

4 Dare you allow yourself to be singed by the divine sun and fire, scorched by it? What ignites your spiritual life? Are you a sunny soul?

5 In what ways are you a beacon of hope and a shining light to those around you? How might you bring the light of Christ into someone’s life today?

6 What other scriptures or hymnody can you recall celebrating the symbolism of the sun?

**Learning from the Wind**

There are two contrasting perspectives on the *ruach* or breath of God in the creation accounts. First, inthe primordial chaos of Genesis 1, ‘darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the waters.’ The spirit of God brooded like a mighty wind over the face of the oceans. The second creation account gives us a more tender view, however: ‘then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground,and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being’ (Gen. 2: 7).

This points to the great passage from the prophets concerning the invigorating and life-giving breath of God. Ezekiel, standing in the valley of dry bones, is commanded:

 ‘Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath [wind or spirit]: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.’ I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. 11Then he said to me, ‘Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.” ‘I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live, and I will place you on your own soil; then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken and will act, says the Lord.’(Ezekiel 37)

**Inviting God’s wind**

Dare we pray with the Song of Songs (4:16)

Awake, O north wind,
    and come, O south wind!
Blow upon my garden
    that its fragrance may be wafted abroad.

We may not predict the moving of the Wind in our spiritual lives but we must expose ourselves to its presence: ‘the wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit’ (Jn.3:8). Four themes emerge in this key saying of Jesus;

* **Mystery**: the Spirit, like the wind is untameable and unpredictable. You can’t box the Divine in or tie him down. Like wind he is invisible through you certainly feel his effects.
* **Movement**: the Spirit blows in our lives, if we let him, to create movement in the soul – to shift us, to change us. We are invited to move from resistance to surrender, from bitterness to forgiveness, from anxiety to trust, and from anger to acceptance, from egocentricity to selflessness. We are invited to welcome at the centre of our lives the transitions and shifts that will make us more Christlike. Jesus models for us responsiveness to the divine Spirit and reveals how it changed him. He was driven by the Spirit to the desert (Mark1:26) and the Spirit set his priorities and very direction, for next ‘Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee’ (Lk 4:14). In Nazareth, Jesus quotes Isaiah 61 to reveal the source of his inspiration: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to proclaim release to the captives.’ Throughout his ministry, the wind of the Spirit will be his driving force and leading him into joy: ‘in that same hour he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit’ (Lk 10:21).
* **Momentum**: the wind of the Spirit, as the very breath of God, is life-giving. He is energy for the soul. Jesus promised: ‘You shall receive power when the Spirit comes’ (Acts 1:8) – the word for ‘power’ is *dunamis* from which we get the term ‘dynamite’! This promise was fulfilled when the might wind blew at Pentecost, transforming timid and fearful disciples into apostles that would turn the world upside down as they went out to proclaim the Good News (Acts 17:6).
* **Molding**: **‘**you hear the sound of it’. We hear the wind whistling through the trees, howling across the waters, rustling and whispering in the leaves. In the Judean desert you can see how wind has both carved out the soft rock and also deposited particles in new creations. God’s Spirit longs to shape and reshape our lives. Like a landscape open to the wind we are invited to bare our soul to God who can do wonderful things with the ‘raw material’ of a human life yielded to his hands. Spiritual formation is a process by which a person gets reshaped: the metaphor of formation is drawn from the natural world, speaking of a creative process at work in the landscape both physical and spiritual.[[204]](#endnote-204) It implies that at the heart of spirituality is the raw material of a person’s life, on which God acts in a creative way. Robert Mulhollandputs it succinctly: ‘Spiritual Formation is the experience of being shaped by God towards wholeness.’[[205]](#endnote-205) As we reflect on this we realize that wind encounters unyielding materials and rocks in its path. What resistances are we putting up before God?

God literally inspires us – for the word ‘inspire’ from the Latin inspirare means ‘blow into, breathe upon’. In the act of new creation, Jesus reproduces this act:

Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit.’(Jn 20:21, 22)

In the upper room the risen Lord animates and re-energizes his disciples.

**Edwin Hatch** celebrates this metaphor in his great hymn (1848):

Breathe on me, breath of God,

Fill me with life anew,

That I may love what Thou dost love,

And do what Thou wouldst do.

**Gerard Manley Hopkins** develops the metaphor in daring ways in his poem ‘The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe.’ He calls her

Wild air, world-mothering air,

Nestling me everywhere.

Wind – and air – become powerful images of God’s providence and mysterious presence.

**Mixing the Metaphors**

Exposure to the elements was central to the experience of the Celtic Christians, who had lively traditions of *peregrination* and voyaging on the rough seas around Ireland and Scotland. They were motivated by a desire both to spread the Gospel and to discover God’s providence in the deep, as depicted in the sixth century *Voyage of Brendan.* The Celtic tradition brings together the elemental metaphors speaking of divine and human:

*God*

I am the wind that breathes upon the sea,

I am the wave on the ocean,

I am the murmur of leaves rustling,

I am the rays of the sun...

*The soul*

I am a flame of fire, blazing with passionate love;

I am a spark of light, illuminating the deepest truth...

I am a wild storm, raging at human sins;

I am a gentle breeze, blowing hope in the saddened heart...[[206]](#endnote-206)

**Questions for reflection about the wind**

1 What is the climate of your soul right now? Do you need

* A cleansing wind, like that from the north, that will blow away the cobwebs, the debris and detritus and the clutter in your life?
* A challenging wind, like the sirocco, that will unsettle and disturb complacency?
* A refreshing, renewing wind, like the westerly in the holy land, that will restore, invigorate, reenergize?
* How would you express the need for the Spirit?

2 ‘The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit’ (Jn.3:8). How do you find yourself responding to Jesus’ words about the unpredictable Spirit? Are you prepared to live an unpredictable life?

3 Hildegard of Bingen described herself as ‘a feather of the breath of God.’ What phrase or metaphor might convey your own sense of identity before God and his breezes?

4 If a key aspect of the wind concerns movement, what shifts can you name in the course of your spiritual life in the last year? In what ways are you becoming more open to the winds of God?

**Learning from the cloud**

Clouds are viewed with a certain ambivalence and turn out to be billowing with paradox. We talk of someone who has ‘their head in the clouds’ seeming out of touch with reality. Or we can be ‘on cloud nine’ (if we can use a metaphor from the world of drugs) . People say in exhilaration: ‘it feels like you're floating on air’. But we can also confess ‘a dark cloud hangs over us.’ Brits might moan at the sight of clouds, asking ‘is it going to rain today?’ But in places of drought the sight of a cloud is greatly welcomed as a sign of hope: ‘God commanded the skies above, and opened the doors of heaven’ ( Ps 78: 23). In climates like the UK cloud may be resented, as blocking out precious sunlight. In this section we will discover the cloud to be both offering promise and warning...

Scudding across the thirsty terrain of the Holy Land, clouds appear as harbingers of promise. They represent hopefulness for renewal. Jesus speaks of a ‘cloud rising in the west’ (Luke 12;54) referring to the rain-bearing cumulus coming in from across the Mediterranean. Jesus recalled the ministry of Elijah in a time of desperate need ‘when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land’ (Lk 4:25). Elijah had awaited the advent of moisture-laden clouds from the sea, as they gradual build in density and size. This required a sevenfold weather check:

 Elijah said to Ahab, ‘Go up, eat and drink; for there is a sound of rushing rain.’ So Ahab went up to eat and to drink. Elijah went up to the top of Carmel; there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees. He said to his servant, ‘Go up now, look towards the sea.’ He went up and looked, and said, ‘There is nothing.’ Then he said, ‘Go again seven times.’ At the seventh time he said, ‘Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person’s hand is rising out of the sea.’ Then he said, ‘Go and say to Ahab, “Harness your chariot and go down before the rain stops you.”’ In a little while the heavens grew black with clouds and wind; there was heavy rain. Ahab rode off and went to Jezreel. But the hand of the Lord was on Elijah; he girded up his loins and ran in front of Ahab to the entrance of Jezreel. (1 Kings 18: 41-45)

Ahab had worshipped Baal, the lord of the rainclouds!

**Metaphors of the divine**

The Hebrews first sensed the presence of God in the cloud in their experience of the exodus journey to liberation:

The Lord went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people. (Ex 13:21, 22)

It not only represented a sign of God’s abiding presence among his people, it also shifted its location as if to guide and protect the people:

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night... At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. (Ex 14:19, 20, 24)

The mysterious event of the theophany atop Mount Sinai is vividly described.

Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after.’ ...On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that ll the people who were in the camp trembled....Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud...Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. (Ex 19:9, 16; 24:15, 16, 18)

The cloud was closely associated with the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting, which housed the travelling Ark of the Covenant:

When Moses entered the tent, the pillar of cloud would descend and stand at the entrance of the tent, and the Lord would speak with Moses. When all the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance of the tent, all the people would rise and bow down, all of them, at the entrance of their tents.... The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name, ‘The Lord.’ ... Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle...Whenever the cloud was taken up from the tabernacle, the Israelites would set out on each stage of their journey; but if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out until the day that it was taken up. (ex 33:9, 10; 34:5; 40:34,36,37)

The cloud appears as a re-assuring but paradoxical symbol of the divine. Its presence was both comforting and scary. The cloud is almost palpable but enigmatic. It certainly does not stay static for long – it is on the move, dynamic. It represents the pilgrim God, a God going places with his people. The cloud at once signifies nearness of God but also the fact that he is uncontainable, elusive, incapable of being boxed in or tied down. At the same time it denotes the guidance of God and his unpredictability.

When in about 970 BC Solomon builds his temple, the presence of the divine is not only represented in the static Ark, but in the mysterious cloud that comes and goes, and varies in density and intensity. Chronicles relates:

the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God.Then Solomon said, ‘The Lord has said that he would reside in thick darkness. I have built you an exalted house, a place for you to reside in for ever’ (2 Chronicles 5:13-6:2)

Later, rabbis would explicate this in terms of the *shekinah* glory of God – the Semitic roots of the word mean "to settle, inhabit, or dwell". There was some sense that God manifested or expressed his glorious presence in the cloud. But the parodox remains, expressed by Solomon himself: ‘But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!’ (1 Kings 8:27).

The psalms, hymnbook of the Temple, go on to recall Sinai and to welcome God’s misty presence in the sanctuary of Zion, celebrating both the darkness and brightness of God’s clouds:

Then the earth reeled and rocked;
    the foundations also of the mountains trembled
    and quaked, because he was angry.
Smoke went up from his nostrils,
    and devouring fire from his mouth;
    glowing coals flamed forth from him.
He bowed the heavens, and came down;
    thick darkness was under his feet.
He rode on a cherub, and flew;
    he came swiftly upon the wings of the wind.
He made darkness his covering around him,
    his canopy thick clouds dark with water.
Out of the brightness before him
    there broke through his clouds
    hailstones and coals of fire. (Ps 18: 7-12)

The psalms delight in the mystery and majesty of God:

Sing to God, sing praises to his name;
    lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds —
his name is the Lord —
    be exultant before him …

You set the beams of yourchambers on the waters,
you make the clouds yourchariot,
    you ride on the wings of the wind (Ps 68:4, 104:3)

Clouds, then, summon us to wonderment and silence before the Divine. They represent something we cannot work out or ‘get a handle’ on, something we can’t control, something sovereign…

**Metaphors of the human spirit**

Not only do the scriptures depict God’s being through the imagery of clouds – they also glimpse in the skies clues and pointers about the human condition. On the one hand, clouds might be a symbol of promise and hope, indeed represent the potential goodness of a leader:

In the light of a king’s face there is life,
    and his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain. (Proverbs 16:15)

But what of waterless clouds that don’t deliver? They become a sign of emptiness, broken promises, disappointment:

Like clouds and wind without rain
    is one who boasts of a gift never given. (Proverbs 25:14)

They can speak of lives that look satisfactory on outside but in fact are lacking, clouds that have no moisture to deliver to a thirsty planet. In the Holy Land, waterless clouds, the high cirrus clouds drawing in desert air from the south and east borne by sirocco wind, furnish both Jude and Peter with imagery to describe fickle human beings:

They are waterless clouds carried along by the winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the deepest darkness has been reserved for ever. (Jude 1: 12, 13)

These [ people] are waterless springs and mists driven by a storm; for them the deepest darkness has been reserved. For they speak bombastic nonsense, and with licentious desires of the flesh they entice people who have justescaped from those who live in error. (2 Pet 2: 16-18)

These comparisons vividly bring out the dry, empty and purposeless existence of such people. Morning clouds that quickly evaporate become symbolic of transitory things, and of people to are unreliable, with passing, fleeting, devotion:

What shall I do with you, O Ephraim?
    What shall I do with you, O Judah?
Your love is like a morning cloud,
    like the dew that goes away early. (Hosea 6:4, cf 13:3)

As the cloud fades and vanishes,
    so those who go down to Sheol do not come up (Job 7:9)

Job himself interprets his passing possessions and disappearing resources through such imagery:

Terrors are turned upon me;
    my honour is pursued as by the wind,
    and my prosperity has passed away like a cloud. (Job 30.15)

**Questions for reflection about the cloud**

1 What does the symbol of the cloud speak to you about the nature of God and about human nature? Do you have any changing perceptions about the cloud – maybe seeing it differently now?

2 In what ways can clouds be a mirror of your soul?

3 What is your experience of ‘praying in the cloud’ or the ‘apophatic mode’ of prayer as tradition calls it? What do you make of ‘the cloud of unknowing’?

**Prayer exercise: sun**

This is a way of practising a prayer that is first extravert in character, then introvert. Begin by opening your arms wide. Let this bespeak utter exposure to God: open yourself to the penetrating rays of God’s healing and invigorating grace. Stay in this mode as long as you can. Bask, as it were, the sunlight of God’s energizing love. What does it feel like? What is God saying to you?

Then, close your arms around your chest: let this speak to you of enclosure, being held by God. Feel enfolded and hemmed in by God’s unconditional love. Permit yourself to be overwhelmed by God. Rest in this experience. Don’t wriggle!

After the prayer time, make a review of the experience. What did utter exposure to the sunlight of God feel like for you? Describe possible feelings of vulnerability. What did the second way of praying feel like? What do you conclude – about yourself , and about God? End with the words of Ps 139:7-12.

**Prayer exercise: wind**

Take a walk outside and experience the wind’s moods. Allow the breeze to caress you or disturb you. Open your soul to the breath of God. Use your breathing as a prayer, both your exhaling and inhaling. Breathe out all negativity and anxiety. Breathe in God’s Spirit, his very breath. You can employ the rhythms of breathing using the Jesus prayer. Often the first part, ‘Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God’, is said while drawing in the breath and the second part ‘have mercy on me a sinner’ is synchronized with exhalation. As you use such breath prayers, recall that prayer is the oxygen of the soul! [[207]](#endnote-207) Conclude with a Prayer to Holy Spirit using a classic or modern hymn.

**Prayer exercise: cloud**

Revisit the account of the Transfiguration (Matthew 17 or Luke 9:28-36) to meditate on it in an Ignatian way. Ignatius says: Use your eyes to *look* at the scene, visualize it, imagine it in your mind's eye, place yourself into the picture and become one of the characters. Reach out in your imagination and *touch* with your fingertips the characters, the soil, the water, the physical aspects. Even *smell* the scents of the scene and *taste* the air, the food, the atmosphere. But above all, Ignatius says, open your ears and *listen* to what the characters are saying to each other, what they are saying to you and what God is saying to you through all this.

Picture yourself joining Peter and James and John in their ascent of the holy mountain. As you go through the story step by step, notice how you find yourself reacting – to the dazzling light or becoming enshrouded by the dense cloud. What does that feel like? Conclude with Ignatius's own prayer: 'Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am and all that I possess You have given me: I surrender it all to You to be disposed of according to Your will. Give me only Your love and Your grace; with these I will be rich enough.'

**UNIT 10 Cosmic Christ**

**Sometimes the Christian vision can become narrowed. Some focus on understanding first century Palestine in order to set Jesus of Nazareth in context, but he gets, as it were, imprisoned there. Others might focus on Jesus devotionally in such a way that an individualistic ‘Jesus and me’ mentality takes hold. Someone once wrote a book ‘Is your God too small?’ In this unit we shift from Jesus of Nazareth to the Cosmic Christ, as we retrieve and reconnect to the staggering tradition of the Christ that transcends heaven and earth. We will find this opens before us a breadth of vision that is, breathtaking, mind-boggling, stupendous.**

As a prayer in the Orthodox tradition puts it, said each night at Vespers:

Heavenly King, Comforter, the Spirit of truth,
everywhere present and filling all things,
treasury of good and giver of life,
come and dwell in us and cleanse us from sin,
and of your goodness save our souls!

Such a vision of Jesus the Christ and his universal Spirit can revolutionize our approach to mission. Christ is more than just an historical person who walked this earth for 33 years, a great teacher and miracle-worker. A wider vision enables us to glimpse Jesus the Christ as the Alpha and the Omega, filling all things. The Christology or image of Christ that predominates in our thinking and devotion will have a great impact on our view of mission. Is mission a question of seeking more disciples and followers for Jesus of Nazareth? Or might it involve a commitment to the very cosmos we inhabit?

This unit is in 3 parts

First we look at biblical material, as we ponder the meaning ‘The word made flesh.’ We engage with the cosmic Christ celebrated in early Christian hymns preserved in the New Testament.

Second, we will hear voices from the history of Christian spirituality

Thirdly, we attend to recent and contemporary or recent writers as we begin to explore the implications of Christology for our contemporary mission.

**1 Discovering the Cosmic Christ in the New Testament**

Awesome passages in the New Testament expand our consciousness and point us to a more expansive view of Jesus of Nazareth. Significantly, this cosmic understanding of Christ is found in different authors and across different communities.

### The Word was made flesh

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people…And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory (Jn 1:1-3, 14).

Scholars have long debated the background to John’s use of *Logos,* the Word. What does John wish us to keep in mind as he writes of the role of the Word in the creation of the world, the Word that in the fullness of time will be enfleshed and embodied in the person of Jesus? Some point to the Greek background – and this emphasizes the solemn and serious import of the word *Logos* – it represents the rational principle, ensuring order and stability in creation. In Stoic philosophy *Logos* connotes the structuring principle of the universe, a formal abstraction behind created reality. Greek philosophers like Philo thought of the *Logos* as representing divine reason and logic, bringing order into the midst of chaos. It is a staid and stolid approach.

But the Hebrew background to the *Logos* points us to the mysterious and creative Wisdom of God. Ecclesiasticus celebrates God’s *Sophia:*

I came forth from the mouth of the Most High,
    and covered the earth like a mist.
I dwelt in the highest heavens,
    and my throne was in a pillar of cloud.
 Alone I compassed the vault of heaven
    and traversed the depths of the abyss.
 Over waves of the sea, over all the earth,
    and over every people and nation I have held sway. (Sirach 24: 3-6).

The *Logos* in the Hebrew Scriptures represents God’s playmate in the act of creation, God’s Wisdom, evoking a joyful, frisky, gambolling, dancing playfulness in the heart of God. Proverbs 8 puts it:

 The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
    the first of his acts of long ago.
 Ages ago I was set up,
    at the first, before the beginning of the earth.
 When there were no depths I was brought forth,
    when there were no springs abounding with water.
 Before the mountains had been shaped,
    before the hills, I was brought forth—
 when he had not yet made earth and fields,
    or the world’s first bits of soil.
 When he established the heavens, I was there,
    when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
 when he made firm the skies above,
    when he established the fountains of the deep,
 when he assigned to the sea its limit,
    so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth,
     then I was beside him, like a little child
and I was daily his delight,
    rejoicing before him always,
 rejoicing in his inhabited world
    and delighting in the human race.

A Jewish translation[[208]](#endnote-208) gives us:

And I was daily all delight,

Playing always before Him,

Playing in His habitable earth (8:30,31)

The *New Century Version* gives us:

I was like a child by his side.
I was delighted every day,
    enjoying his presence all the time (8:30)

The *Message* translates the last verse:

Day after day I was there, with my joyful applause,

always enjoying his company (8:31)

This is a dynamic and vibrant view of the *Logos*: the one who is rejoicing in the playfulness of creation, as a little child delights in making new things, crafting and shaping materials. Such an energy, a verve, a daring, a passionate life-force, a sparkling vitality – this is now to be embodied in the person of Jesus.

**The local and the universal**

St John’s gospel powerfully reveals the paradox we face as we seek to balance in our spiritual practice the local and the universal, the particular and the cosmic.From the outset, it reveals an acute sense of place. The disciples of the Baptist ask him: ‘Where are you staying?’ and he responds invitingly ‘Come and see’. This summons resounds across the gospel. We are invited to share in a journey of discovery. We are invited in the fourth gospel to accompany Jesus as he traverses the land as a pilgrim and traveller. We will get a sense that the author of the fourth gospel has a first-hand knowledge of the land, its valleys and plains. Bruce Schein observes: ‘John has probably been the most neglected Gospel in terms of the touchable and seeable background of the first century...John constantly keeps the reader informed with precise geographical data...To enter into this ‘feeling’ with and for the land with eyes, ears, hands, and hearts is important for a complete understanding of the Johannine setting.’[[209]](#endnote-209)

John has a sharp eye, a fascination, for the details, keen attentiveness to physicality and environment. He tells usthe well is deep, and it is in a field (4:5, 11). There is a lot of water at Aenon near Salim (3:23). Grass covers hills above Sea of Galilee (6:10). Bethany is two miles from Jerusalem (11:2). Lazarus tomb is a cave (11:38). The tomb of Jesus has a low entrance (they stooped to look in, 20:5). We learn details about the Jerusalem temple: forecourts accommodate a range of animals (2:13-16); the porticoes of Solomon offer shelter in winter (10: 22, 23); the treasury is a suitable place for teaching (8:20). John takes us to visit the Bethesda, describing a pool near the Sheep Gate with five colonnades or porticos (a line of columns supporting a roof-like structure, 5:2). He gives special significance to the Pool of Siloam (9:1-9). The first is north of the temple, the other south, and both function in relation to the temple.

John knows the city of Jerusalem very well. He mentions a number of locations which do not feature in the other gospels. In the account of the passion, John is keen to give details of specific locations. The Praetorium (18:28, 33, 19:9) is the headquarters of the Roman military governor and probably to be identified with the Anatonia Fortress looming over the Temple area. The stone pavement (*Lithostrotos* in Greek), also known as *Gabbatha* (‘raised place’ in Aramaic) was located outside the Praetorium, and was the place where Pilate made his judgments (19:13 ). He tells us that the house of the High Priest has a courtyard, with a fire in it (18:5, 18). John records that Jesus was crucified at Golgotha, the place of the skull, which was located ‘near the city, meaning just outside the city walls (19:13). Uniquely, he tells us that there is a garden close by, in which an unused tomb had been carved into the rock (19:41-42). We even learn that there is an inviting beach on the shore of Lake Galilee (21)!

While celebrating this alertness to the local and the particular, it is important to recall that all is set within a cosmic perspective: literally so, for when John speaks of the world he uses the word *cosmos.* For John, there is a paradox in this widest of settings. The world is the object of God’s love: ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son’ (3:16). Yet it will reject him and his disciples: ‘If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world-therefore the world hates you’ (15:18-19). He goes on: ‘In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!’ (16.:33). John’s prologue alerts us to this: ‘The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him (1:9, 10). Moving between intimacy and ultimacy, John invites us to appreciate the small details of place without losing a sense of the bigger picture - of cosmic dimensions! In the fourth gospel, Jesus is at once the dusty pilgrim and traveller traversing the land, the very creator Word made flesh!

In today’s frantic world we lose a sense of time and place, of sacred space. Globalization and standardization means we may become less attentive to the small picture, the local, the particular and peculiar.

**Early Christian hymns celebrate Cosmic Christ**

Paul’s vision is that God will be ‘all in all’ (1 Cor 15.28).

**The Letter to the Philippians** preserves an early hymn that gives us a glimpse into the increasing expansiveness of vision and understanding experienced by the first Christians:

 Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,

who, though he was in the form of God,
    did not regard equality with God
    as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
    taking the form of a slave,
    being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
     he humbled himself
    and became obedient to the point of death—
    even death on a cross.

 Therefore God also highly exalted him
    and gave him the name
    that is above every name,
 so that at the name of Jesus
    every knee should bend,
    in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 and every tongue should confess
    that Jesus Christ is Lord,
    to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2: 5-11)

In this great poem the first Christians hold together in a taut tension the historical reality of Jesus of Nazareth and a cosmic view of his divinity. Within a few lines the brutality of the crucifixion is recalled as the centrepoint of history moving to a cosmic worshipping of Christ. The hymn challenges us to hold together the historical and the cosmic in the same breath, and never to see the cross in terms of a local crucifixion without the wider, mind-boggling perspective and expansiveness of vision.

### ‘Every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth’: Paul’s hymns evoke the Hebrew Bible’s three-part world, with the heavens (*shamayim*) above, earth (*eres*) in the middle, and the underworld (*sheol*) below. In the Old Testament the word *shamayim* represented both the sky/atmosphere, and the dwelling place of God. The *raqia* or firmament - the visible sky - was a solid inverted bowl over the earth, coloured blue from the heavenly ocean above it.

Other strands in the New Testament push out the boundaries of our thinking about the person of Christ. Some envisage multiple heavens. The **Letter to the Hebrews** celebrates:

we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God (Heb 4.14)

it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. (Heb 7:26)

It sets before us a colossal image in its opening words:

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word.

**The Letter to the Ephesians** speaks of Christ filling multiple heavens in its hymn:

He has let us know the mystery of his purpose,

the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning

to act upon when the times had run their course to the end:

that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head,

everything in the heavens and everything upon earth (Eph 1: 9-10, JB)

The letter offers the grounds and basis for hope:

This you can tell from the strength of his power at work in Christ, when he used it to raise him from the dead and made him sit at his [right](http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=10046) hand, in heaven, far above every Sovereignty, Authority, Power, or Domination , or any other name that can be named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. He has put all things under his feet, and made him, as the ruler of everything, the head of the Church;  which is his Body, the fullness of him who fills the whole creation.(Eph 1: 17-23)

In cosmic language, the Letter to the Ephesians celebrates Christ filling all things:

When it says, ‘He ascended’, what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is the same one who ascended far above all the heavens, so that he might fill all things.

And it goes on to use meteorological metaphors:

We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine…

Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger (Eph 4: 9-10, 14, 26, JB)

**Colossians** in its poem opens before our imagination the widest horizons:

He is the image of the unseen God

and the first-born of all creation,

for in him were created

all things in heaven and on earth:

everything visible and everything invisible,

Thrones, Dominations, Sovereignties, Powers –

all things were created through him and for him.

Before anything was created, he existed,

and he holds all things in unity...

God wanted all perfection

to be found in him

and all things to be reconciled through him and for him,

everything in heaven and everything on earth... (Col 1:15-17, 19-20, JB)

The letter to the Colossians also issues a clear summons to us to direct our gaze heavenwards:

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.  Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth,  for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory. (Col. 3:1-4)

**2 Christian theologians and mystics discover a Cosmic Christ**

Through the history of Christian spirituality mystics and teachers have expanded our consciousness of the person of Christ.

**The theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries**

Seeking to counter a watered-down understanding of Christ as espoused by Arius, outstanding defenders of the faith affirm that Christ is the eternally pre-existent Word of God. They embody their convictions in the Nicene Creed of 325:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation
he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man…

The cosmic Christ reveals the meaning of the universe. Basil of Caesarea declares: ‘The Word of God ...pervades the creation.’ Gregory of Nazianzus says: ‘This name *Logos* was given to him because he exists in all things that are.’ Athanasius speaks of : ‘The Logos of God who is over all and who governs all’ [[210]](#endnote-210) In his great book *Christus Victor: an historical study of the three main types of the idea of the Atonement* [[211]](#endnote-211)Gustaf Aulen celebrates the classic approach to the Cross which is seen as a battlefield where Christ takes on and defeats humanity’s greatest foes and negative, destructive forces: the forces of sin and death, indeed everything that threatens, erodes and undermines the integrity of the cosmos and contributes to its degradation.

**Hildegard of Bingen**

As we move into the medieval period, we encounter Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179), poet, mystic and musician, who celebrates our ‘greening’ or *viriditas.* Today we talk about the ‘greening of the planet’ but nine hundred years ago Hildegard celebrated the presence of the Holy Spirit in the created order through the idea of greening: ‘the earthly expression of the celestial sunlight; greenness is the condition in which earthly beings experience a fulfillment which is both physical and divine; greenness is the blithe overcoming of the dualism between earthly and heavenly.’[[212]](#endnote-212) For Hildegard, the wetness or moisture of the planet, revealed in verdant growth, bespeaks the Holy Spirit who ‘poured out this green freshness of life into the hearts of men and women so that they may bear good fruit’.[[213]](#endnote-213) She invites us to see the world differently, overcoming the dichotomy of heaven and earth by glimpsing the heavenly action in the freshness of the planet, which mirrors the human soul. We are being summoned away from a pragmatic and self-centred consumer mentality, so deeply entrenched in our culture and mind-set, towards seeing creation as not an entity to be manipulated or exploited but a divine presence to be honoured. Hildegard hears Christ say to her:

I, the fiery life of divine wisdom,

I ignite the beauty of the plains,

I sparkle the waters,

I burn in the sun, and the moon, and the stars,

With wisdom I order all rightly…

I adorn all the earth.

I am the breeze that nurtures all things green…

I am the rain coming from the dew

That causes the grasses to laugh with the joy of life.[[214]](#endnote-214)

**Mechtild of Magdeburg (1210-1280)**

In her mystical book *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* the Beguine Mechtild combines intense personal love for Christ with a cosmic view. He is both bridegroom and lover of the soul and also cosmic Lord: here again, intimacy meets ultimacy. Mechtild expresses the paradoxes in Christology: Jesus among us is a pilgrim trudging across the world , a poor worker , but also omnipresent Lord.[[215]](#endnote-215)

In prayer she addresses Christ in tender terms:

You are the feelings of love in my desire.

You are a sweet cooling for my breast.

You are a passionate kiss for my mouth.

You are a blissful joy of my discovery.

She also shares with us her awesome, expansive vision:

One day I saw with the eyes of my eternity

In bliss and without effort, a stone.

This stone was like a great mountain

And was of assorted colours.

It tasted sweet, like heavenly herbs.

I asked the sweet stone: who are you?

It replied: ‘I am Jesus.’[[216]](#endnote-216)

She delights in the imagery of the Sun:

The sparkling sun of the living Godhead

Shines through the bright water of cheerful humanity…

You shine into my soul

Like the sun against gold

And she hears God responding:

When I shine, you shall glow.

When I flow, you shall become wet. [[217]](#endnote-217)

**Meister Eckhart**

 In the 13th century Eckhart (1260-1327) writes daringly of giving birth to Christ from a naked immersion in Godhead. The virgin-soul becomes a wife to the Divine and embodies and exudes the very compassion and justice of God, within which she is immersed in this most intimate union with God. He writes:

From all eternity

 God lies on a maternity bed

 Giving birth.

The essence of God is birthing ...

And he asks:

What good is it to me

for the Creator to give birth to his/her son

if I do not also give birth to him

in my time

and my culture?[[218]](#endnote-218)

For Eckhart, God is ever creative, constantly creating. Creation is the outgoing, overflowing ebullience and creativity of God in Christ, to be greeted in the theophanies of the heavns and earth, and in the deep, imaginative powers of the soul: ‘I have often said, God is creating the whole wolrd npw this instant. Everything God made six thousand years ago and more when He made this wolrd, God is creating now all at once.’[[219]](#endnote-219) Rejecting pantheism but affirming panentheism, Eckhart encouarges us to encounter, greet and serve the Cosmic Christ in every element of creation, at every moment.

**3 Recent and contemporary perspectives**

**Pierre Teilhard de Chardin** (1881-1955), scientist and Jesuit, became captivated by an all-encompassing vision of the cosmic Christ, existing in all things and sustaining all things. As he looked at the material world, his vision, his seeing, was inspired by the text above in Colossians 1:15-17. He came to see Christ present in all things and as the fundamental principle of unity in a fragmenting world. He wrote: *‘*Christ, through his Incarnation, is interior to the world, rooted in the world even in the very heart of the tiniest atom.’[[220]](#endnote-220) He was convinced: ‘Nothing seems to me more vital, from the point of view of human energy, than the appearance and, eventually, the systematic cultivation of such a “cosmic sense.”’[[221]](#endnote-221)

He saw the Eucharist pointing to this truth: ‘Grant, Lord, that your descent into the universal Species [of bread and wine] may not be for me just something loved and cherished, like the fruit of some philosophical speculation, but may become for me truly a real Presence. Whether we like it or not by power and by right you are incarnate in the world, and we are all of us dependent upon you….I firmly believe that everything around me is the body and blood of the Word.”[[222]](#endnote-222) Inspired by Paul’s vision ‘that God may be all in all’ ( 1Co 15:28), he believed that the world was in a state of continuous evolution understood as the divinization of the universe. He prayed “that in every creature I may discover and sense you, I beg you: give me faith.”[[223]](#endnote-223)

Celebrating the divine presence in every creature, and welcoming the Cosmic Christ everywhere did not come without an intense struggle. De Chardin is acutely aware of his resistances to this in his candid prayer:

I confess, my God, that I have long been, and even now am, recalcitrant to the love of my neighbour. Just as much as I have derived intense joy in the superhuman delight of dissolving myself and losing myself in the souls for which I was destined by the mysterious affinities of human live, so I have always felt an inborn hostility to, and closed myself to, the common run of those whom you tell me to love. I find no difficulty in integrating into my inward life everything above and beneath me in the universe – whether matter, plants, animals; and then powers, dominions and angels: these I can accept without difficulty and delight to feel myself sustained within their hierarchy. But ‘the other man’, my God – by which I do not mean ‘the poor, the halt, the lame and the sick’, but ‘the other’ quite simply as ‘other’, the one who seems to exist independently of me because his universe seems closed to mine, and who seems to shatter the unity and the silence of the world for me- would I be sincere if I did not confess that my instinctive reaction is to rebuff him? ...

Grant, O God, that the light of your countenance may shine for me in the life of that ‘other’...Grant that I may see you, even and above all, in the souls of my brothers, at their personal, and most true, and most distant...A tremendous spiritual power is slumbering in the depth of our multitude, which will manifest itself only when we have learnt to break down the barriers of our egoisms and, by a fundamental recasting of our outlook, raise ourselves up to the habitual and practical vision of universal realities.

Jesus, Saviour of human activity to which you have given meaning, Saviour of human suffering to which you have given living value, be also the Saviour of human unity: compel us to discard our pettiness, and to venture forth, resting on you, into the uncharted ocean of charity.[[224]](#endnote-224)

**Ronald Rolheiser**

Contemporary spiritual writer Ronald Rolheiser recalls:

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was once called to Rome and asked to clarify certain issues in regards to his teachings. At one point, he was asked: “What are you trying to do?” His answer, in effect: “I am trying to write a Christology that is wide enough to incorporate Christ. Christ isn’t just an anthropological phenomenon with significance for humanity, but Christ is also a cosmic event with significance for the planet.”

He goes on:

This concept challenges the imagination, implying far, far more than we normally dare think. Among other things, it tells us that Christ lies not just at the root of spirituality and morality, but at the base of physics, biology, chemistry, and cosmology as well. This has many implications:

First of all, it means that the spiritual and the material, the moral and the physical, the mystical and the hormonal, and the religious and the pagan do not oppose each other but are part of one thing, one pattern, all infused by one and the same spirit, all drawn to the same end, with the same goodness and meaning. Simply put, the same force is responsible both for the law of gravity and the Sermon on the Mount and both are binding for the same reason.

All reality, be it spiritual, physical, moral, mathematical, mystical, or hormonal is made and shaped according to the one, same pattern and everything (be it the universe itself hurdling through space, the blind attraction of atoms for each other, the relentless push for growth in a plant, the instinctual hunt for blood by a mosquito, the automatic impulse to put everything into his mouth by a baby, the erotic charge inside the body of an adolescent, the fierce protectiveness of a young mother, the obsession to create inside an artist, or the genuflection in prayer or altruism of a saint) is ultimately part of one and the same thing, the unfolding of creation as made in the image of Christ and as revealing the invisible God.

The fact that Christ is cosmic and that nature is shaped in his likeness means too that God’s face is manifest everywhere. If physical creation is patterned on Christ, then we must search for God not just in our scriptures, in our saints, and in our churches, though these shape the boundless nature and energies of God into principles and dogmas in a way that allows us to somehow appropriate them as trustworthy and normative. However if Christ is also the pattern according to which the universe itself is unfolding, then what’s good and what’s inside of God is also somehow manifest in the raw energy, colour, and beauty of the physical, be that the beauty of sunset or a symphony, which we can more easily acknowledge as religious, or be it the more morally ambivalent, but undeniable, beauty that is manifest in the body of a movie star, the voice of a pop singer, or the colourful and lively sexual energy that bubbles inside the culture. Clear or ambivalent, everything reflects the same pattern.

Finally, if Christ is the structure for the cosmic universe itself, the question of the normativeness of Christ for salvation (“There is no way to salvation, except through Christ.”) poses itself differently. The famous, early Christian hymn in Ephesians speaks of “a plan to be carried out in the fullness of time to bring all things into one, in Christ.” What’s implied here, among other things, is that Christ is bigger than the historical churches, operates beyond the scope of historical Christianity (although admittedly he does operate within it), and has influences prior and beyond human history itself. It is Christ, visible and invisible – the person, the spirit, the power, and the mystery – who is drawing all things, physical and spiritual, natural and religious, non-Christian and Christian, into one. As Kenneth Cragg puts it: “It will take all the religions of the world to give full expression to the whole Christ.”

Teilhard was right. We need a Christology wide enough to incorporate the whole Christ and our imaginations need still to be stretched.[[225]](#endnote-225)

**Fresh visions**

Prayer invites us to catch a glimpse concludes of the bigger picture, the wider vision, the broader vista, which will give renewed meaning and purpose to our lives. We conclude with a look at a recent writer, who finds in spirituality clues for a greater vision, moving from Jesus of Nazareth to the cosmic Christ. Franciscan Ilia Delio ends her recent work *Christ in Evolution:* ‘life in Christ can never be private or isolated, for Christ is the Word of the Father and the source of the Spirit. Christ is relational by definition and hence the source of community. To live Christ us to live community; to bear Christ in one’s life is to become a source of healing love for the sake of community...’

Standing as a scientist and Christian within the tradition of de Chardin she concludes: ‘We must liberate Christ from a Western intellectual form that is logical, abstract, privatized and individualized....Christ is the power of God among us and within us, the fullness of the earth and of life in the universe....We can look forward toward that time when there will be one cosmic person uniting all persons, one cosmic humanity uniting all humanity, one Christ in whom God will be all in all.’[[226]](#endnote-226) How big is your vision? Is your God too small?

**Care of our common home**

Pope Francis’ 2015 encyclical *Care of our common home* is a passionate appeal to all people of good will to address the devastating effects of climate change on people and the planet, but also invites us to find Christ in all of creation. Pope Francis' encyclical emphasizes the connection between environmental degradation and poverty, between the love for creation and poverty reduction and the interconnection between human dignity, human development and human ecology. Peoples across the world are being pushed deeper into poverty due to the changing climate and our faith moves us to speak out in solidarity.

He writes:

Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption... A constant flood of new consumer goods can baffle the heart and prevent us from cherishing each thing and each moment. To be serenely present to each reality, however small it may be, opens us to much greater horizons of understanding and personal fulfilment.[[227]](#endnote-227)

We are being summoned from a pragmatic and self-centred consumer mentality, so deeply entrenched in our culture and mind-set, to seeing creation as not an entity to be manipulated or exploited but a divine presence to be honoured.[[228]](#endnote-228) We join with Pope Francis in his prayer:

God of love, show us our place in this world
as channels of your love
for all the creatures of this earth,
for not one of them is forgotten in your sight.
Enlighten those who possess power and money
that they may avoid the sin of indifference,
that they may love the common good,
advance the weak,
and care for this world in which we live.
The poor and the earth are crying out.
O Lord, seize us with your power and light,
help us to protect all life,
to prepare for a better future,
for the coming of your Kingdom
of justice, peace, love and beauty.
Praise be to you!
Amen.

**4 Conclusion**

### John’s offers us a startling vision of the cosmic Christ in the Book of the Revelation:

After this I looked, and there in heaven a door stood open! And the first voice, which I had heard speaking to me like a trumpet, said, ‘Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.’  At once I was in the spirit, and there in heaven stood a throne, with one seated on the throne!  And the one seated there looks like jasper and cornelian, and around the throne is a rainbow that looks like an emerald... Coming from the throne are flashes of lightning, and rumblings and peals of thunder, and in front of the throne burn seven flaming torches, which are the seven spirits of God;  and in front of the throne there is something like a sea of glass, like crystal. (Rev 4: 4,-6)

Cosmology points to eschatology:

 Look! He is coming with the clouds;
    every eye will see him

The Bible begins and ends with a vision of the world, a cosmology. It moves between two awesome affirmations:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1)

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.... And the one who was seated on the throne said, ‘See, I am making all things new.’ (Rev 21:1,5)

In between, we face the reality of a fractured planet, threatened by degradation, as expressed so powerfully by Paul:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. (Romans 8: 19-23)

Yet while admitting our transience and mortality Paul is able to affirm

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us...

I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers,  nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8: 18, 38-39)

With a confidence in the Cosmic Christ we venture towards the city of God:

And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb... And there will be no night there

I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end....

(Rev 21: 23,24; 22: 13).

**Questions for reflection**

1 How can we maintain an attentiveness to the local without becoming excessively parochial in outlook? On the other hand, how can we live in solidarity with suffering peoples in different parts of the earth, while remaining rooted in our own locale? What clues do you get from John’s gospel?

2 How do you find yourself responding to this expansive view of Christ, celebrating his theophany in atom and galaxy?

 What implications are you beginning to see for our understanding of mission and vocation?

3 What do you think are the implication for spiritual practice of an all-encompassing cosmic understanding of Christ? In what ways can a narrower and more historical focus lead to intense action at the local level or limit or impede an appreciation of the vastness of the ecological issues that now face us?

4 How do you find yourself reacting to Rolheiser’s take on the Cosmic Christ. In particular, what is it saying to you about vocation and mission?

**Prayer Exercise**

**Either**

Go outside and enjoy using your five senses to appreciate God’s world

Listen carefully - to the sounds you can hear

Look attentively - notice the details, watch, observe

Touch – feel the different textures and surfaces of your environment

Smell – become alert to different fragrances – or whiffs! – in the air

Taste the air – to take a biscuit or piece of fruit to savour!

**Or**

Remaining inside, arrange on a central table items from the natural world: flowers, leaves, rocks, wood, seeds. Invite each participant to come forward and take an item to hold gently in their hands. Invite them to consider its fragility or strength, its enduring characteristics or its vulnerability. End by inviting each one to offer a short prayer reflecting our responsibility for care and protection of the planet. Conclude by reading together the prayer of Pope Francis above.

1. Laurence Freeman, ‘Dangers of the shallow end’ in *Church Times*, London, 3 July 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel*  (Dublin: Veritas, 2013), pp. 46, 128 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. P. Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness: explorations in contemporary spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), pp. 92, 93. 94. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. E. H. Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places: a conversation in spiritual theology* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2005), p. 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. J. Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* (London: Fount,1994), pp. 38, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Plato, *Republic,* 518 quoted in A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. J. Walsh (ed.), *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), pp. 128, 131. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. K. Kavanaugh and O. Rodriguez, (trs.), *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross* (Washington: ICS Publications,1991), pp. 587, 588. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. J. Borysenko, in her *A Woman’s Journey to God,* (New York: Riverhead Books/Penguin, 2001) contrasts male spirituality represented in the ascent model of Jacob’s ladder, with its successive linear stages, with female spirituality symbolised in Sarah’s circle, a more relational, immanent model: less climbing, more nurturing! [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a critique of the ascent model see M. Miles, *The Image and Practice of Holiness* (London: SCM, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. R. M. Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation* (London: Spire,1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. P. Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History* (London : SPCK, 1991), p. 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See, for example, Archbishops’ Council, *mission-shaped church* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004),p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Spirituality in Higher Education: A National Study of College Students’ search for meaning and purpose on www.spirituality.ucla.edu/about/spirituality.html [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. See J. Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. This paragraph is indebted to article M. Downey, (ed.), *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Quoted in K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), pp. 455-456. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid.,* p. 426. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. R. Warren, *Building Missionary Congregations: Towards a Post-Modern Way of Being Church* (London: Church House Publishing, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. G. Wakefield, *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality* (London: SCM, 3rd ed. 1983), p. v . [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. K. M. Dyckman & L. P. Carroll, *Inviting the Mystic, Supporting the Prophet: an introduction to spiritual direction* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 79. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. K. Leech, *The Eye of the Storm: spiritual resources for the pursuit of justice* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1992), p. 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. R. Rohr, R. Rohr, *The Naked Now: learning to see as the mystics see* (New York: Crossroad, 2009) *....Everything Belongs: the gift of contemplative prayer* (New York: Crossroad, 2003). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. H. Chadwick (tr.), *St Augustine: Confessions*  (Oxford University Press, 1991), X.38-39. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. J. Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An autobiography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), p. 350. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. G. W. Hughes, *God in All Things* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), ch.1. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Letter to Daniel Berrigan in *The Hidden Ground of Love* quoted in W. H. Shannon, *‘Something of a Rebel’: Thomas Merton, His Life and Works, An Introduction* (Ohio: St Anthony Messanger Press, 1997), p. 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. T. Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 80. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. K. Leech, *Soul Friend* (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 190. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See, for example, references to prayer-facilitators in J. Marins, *The Church From the Roots: Basic Ecclesial Communities* (London: CAFOD, 1989). For resources see, for example, G. Gutierrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells* (London: SCM, 1984) and P. Casaldaliga & J. M. Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. See T. A. Kleissler, M. A. Lebert & M. C. McGuinness, *Small Christian Communities: A Vision of Hope* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991); J. O’Halloran, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion* (Blackrock, Co, Dublin: Columba, 1996); T. O’Brien & M. Gunnell, *Why Small Christian Communities Work* (San Jose, California: Resource Publications, 1996). [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. See L. Budde & R. W. Brimlow (eds.), *The Church as Counterculture* (State University of New York, 2000); S. Hauerwas & W. H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. J. Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* (London: Fount, 1994), p. 38, 47. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. C. Duraisingh, ‘Formation for Mission’, *International Review of Mission,*  LXXXI, (January 1992), p. 39. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See R. J. Egan, ‘The Mystical and the Prophetic: Dimensions of Christian Experience’ in *The Way* Supp.102 (2001), 92-106. See also P. Sheldrake, ‘Christian Spirituality as a Way of Living Publicly: A Dialectic of the Mystical and Prophetic’ in *Spiritus: Journal of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality* 3:1 (2003), 19-37. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. D. J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. J.G.S.S. Thomson, *The Praying Christ: A Study of Jesus’ Doctrine and Practice of Prayer* (Tyndale Press, London, 1959). Note: this part of the material has been used in Module 1, Unit 6 – if you have used this, you can recap here [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. B. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus* (Image/ Doubleday, London, 2002), p. 175. For a more cautious approach to the prayer of Jesus see O. Cullmann, *Prayer in the New Testament* (SCM, London, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. M.J. Borg, *Jesus: A New Vision* (1987) as discussed in M.A. Powell, *The Jesus Debate: Modern Historians Investigate the Life of Christ* (Lion, Oxford, 1998) [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (SPCK, London, 2004), p. 125 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. J.-C. Barreau, ‘Preface’ in O. Clement, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (New City, London, 1993), p. 8 [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. C. P.M, Jones, ‘Mysticism, human and Divine’ in C. Jones, G. Wainwright & E. Yarnold (eds.), *The Study of Spirituality* (SPCK, London, 1986), p. 19 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. K. Rahner, Theological Investigations 20 (Crossroads, New York,1981), p. 149 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. E. Underhill, *Mystics of the Church* (James Clarke & Co., Cambridge, 1925), p. 9 [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. Quoted in W. P. Alston, *Perceiving God: the Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Cornel University Press, London, 1991), p. 25 [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. B. Witherington, *Jesus the Seer: The Progress of Prophecy* (Hendrickson, 1999).See alsoJ. Dear, *Jesus the Rebel:* *bearer of God’s peace and justice* (Sheed & Ward, Lanham, MD, 2000); A.D. Mayes, *Another Christ: re-envisioning ministry* (SPCK, London, 2014) [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. B. J. Malina*, The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1981); J. P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* (Doubleday, New York, 1991) [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. R. Rohr, *Naked Now learning to see as the mystics see* (Crossroad, New York, 2009), p. 77 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. R. McAfee Brown, *Spirituality and Liberation: overcoming the great fallacy* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1988) [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. J. Macquarrie, *Two Worlds are Ours: an introduction to Christian mysticism* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2005) [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Centering prayer is a recent example of a way of praying in the West, welcoming a renewed sense of the indwelling God and opening oneself up to the divine action within, healing all dichotomy. It was popularised by Basil Pennington and Thomas Keating and promoted by Contemplative Outreach. See M. B. Pennington 1980. *Centering prayer: renewing an ancient Christian prayer form* (Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1980); T. Keating, *Intimacy with God: an introduction to Centering prayer* (Crossroad Publishing, 2009) [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Justin Welby, Presidential Address to General Synod, 5 July 2013 (www.archbishopofcanterbury.org) [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. S. H. Lee, *From a Liminal Place: an Asian American Theology* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2010), p. 47 [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. See E. Bammel & C.F.D. Moule (eds.), *Jesus and the Politics of his day* (Cambridge University Press, 1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. P. Walker, *Jesus and his World* (Lion, 2003), p. 30 [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. See, for example, J.D. Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (Harper Collins, San Francisco, 1995);

A. Richardson, *The Political Christ*, (SCM, London, 1973); O. Cullmann, *Jesus and the Revolutionaries* (New York, 1970). Cullmann holds that Jesus was an 'eschatological radical.’ See also, M. Hengel, *Was Jesus a Revolutionist?* (Facet Book, Philadelphia, 1971) and M. Borg, *Jesus: a new vision* (SPCK, London, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. R. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: The Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder*(Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2002), *The prophet Jesus and the renewal of Israel* (Eerdmans 2012) [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. S. Freyne, *Jesus, a Jewish Galilean: a new reading of the Jesus-story* (T & T International, London, 2004) [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. This phrase derives from Crossan, *Revolutionary Biography* [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. There is a scholarly debate about the nature of Jesus as prophet. Wright sees Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who embodies the very presence of Israel’s God; Sanders sees Jesus as one of a series of Jewish eschatological prophets. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (SPCK, London, 1996) and E.P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (Penguin, London, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Liddell & Scott, Greek-English Lexicon (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1974) [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. I am indebted to Crossan for this insight [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. #  R. J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger: Moving from Affluence to Generosity* (Hodder & Stoughton, London, 1990)

 [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. See S. Hauerwas & W. H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1989); M.L. Buddle & R. W. Brimlow (eds.), *The Church as Counterculture* (State University of New York Press, Albany, 20000; B. A. Harvey, *Another City: an ecclesiological primer for a post-Christian world* (Trinity Press International, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1999) [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. J. Dear, *Jesus the Rebel: bearer of God’s peace and justice*  (Sheed & Ward, Lanham, MD, 2000), p. 29 [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. P. Casaldaliga & J. M. Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation* (Burns & Oates, Tunbridge Wells, 1994), p. 103 [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Justin Welby, Presidential Address to General Synod, 5 July 2013 [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. R. Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (Bloomsbury, London, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. J. Wallis, *The Soul of Politics* (Fount, London, 1994), p. 38, 47 [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. B. Ward, *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers* (Oxford: A.R. Mowbray, 1975), p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. See S. Rubenson, *The Letters of St Anthony: Monasticism and the Making of a Saint* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p. 59. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. ‘Letter Three’ in Rubenson, *The Letters*, p. 206. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. L. Freeman, ‘Introduction’ in R. Williams, *Silence and Honeycakes: the wisdom of the desert* (Oxford: Lion, 2004), p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. Williams, *Silence,* pp. 38, 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. All the quotations from Basil are from 'Letter 2' in G. Barrois (tr.), *The Fathers Speak* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. The next quotes are drawn from Basil the Great, Longer Rule 7, in A. Holmes, *A Life Pleasing to God: the Spirituality of the Rules of St Basil* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), pp. 139-142. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
77. see also [Ezek. 36:25; Matt. 19:30; 20:16; Mark 9:35; 10:31; Luke 13:30; 22:27; John 13:3-5,12-14; Eph. 5:25-27; Phil. 2:5-8](http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=%22Eze.%2036:25;%20Matt.%2019:30;%2020:16;%20Mark%209:35;%2010:31;%20Luke%2013:30;%2022:27;%20John%2013:3-5,12-14;%20Eph.%205:25-27;%20Phil.%202:5-8%22). [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
78. T. Fry (ed.) *The Rule of St Benedict in English* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1982), Prologue 1. [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
79. D. Robinson, *The Family Cloister: Benedictine Wisdom for the Home* (New York: Crossroad, 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
80. Q. R. Skrabec, *St Benedict’s Rule for Business Success* (Purdue: University Press, 2005). [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
81. J. Chittister, *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St Benedict Today* (San Francisco, Harper, 1991), p. 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
82. See B.A. Harvey, *Another City: An Ecclesiological Primer for a Post-Christian World* (Harrisburg, Penn: Trinity Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
83. See the recent research in Y. Warren, *The Cracked Pot: the state of today’s parish clergy* (Buxhall: Kevin Mayhew, 2002); for RC research see D. R. Hoge, *The First Five Years of the Priesthood: a study of newly ordained catholic priests* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2002). C.f. earlier study by J. A. Sanford, *Ministry Burnout* (London: Arthur James, 1982). [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
84. E. de Waal, *Living with Contradiction: an introduction to Benedictine spirituality* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
85. Archaeological researchers have uncovered significant foundations of monastic settlements:F McCormick, ‘Iona: the Archaeology of the Early Monastery’ in C. Bouke (ed.) *Studies in the Cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997). Other scholars have approached the phenomenon from a socio-political angle: D. O’ Corrain, ‘The Early Irish Churches: Some Aspects of Organisation’ (‘Early Irish’), in D. O’ Corrain (ed.), *Irish Antiquity*, (Cork:Tower Books, 1981). [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
86. As Etchingham puts it, the two *Rules* ‘are doubtless illustrative of monasticism in Ireland in the late sixth and early seventh centuries’ C. Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland A.D. 650 to 1000* (Maynooth,2000), p. 324. Stevenson concurs: ‘Columbanus’ *regulae* are, in effect, the earliest evidence for monastic practice in the Irish Church.’ J. A. Stevenson, ‘the monastic rules of Columbanus’ in M. Lapidge (ed.), *Columbanus: Studies on the Latin writings* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
87. *Regula Monachorum: Preface (Reg. Mon.)* in G. S. Walker (tr.) *Sancti Columbani Opera* (Dublin: 1957). Walker also gives us a translation of *Regula Coenobialis (Reg.Coen.).*  [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
88. *Reg.Mon. IV.* [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
89. *Reg.Mon. I.* [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
90. R. Sharpe (tr.), *Adomnan of Iona; Life of St Columba* (Harmondsworth: Penguin,1995), 1:49 [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
91. *Ibid.,* 1:49 [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
92. Etchingham, *Church Organisation,* 320 [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
93. L. De Paor, *Saint Patrick’s World: the Christian Culture of Ireland’s Apostolic Age.* (Dublin: Four Courts, 1996), p. 138 [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
94. O. Davies & F. Bowie, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1995), p. 34 [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
95. Sharpe, *Life,* I:20 [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
96. *Reg. Mon. X.* [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
97. *Reg. Mon. VII.* [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
98. *Reg. Mon. IX.* [↑](#endnote-ref-98)
99. R. Sharpe (tr.), *Adomnan* , 1:29. [↑](#endnote-ref-99)
100. *Reg. Mon. VII.* [↑](#endnote-ref-100)
101. *Monastery of Tallaght 29* in P. O’ Fiannachta, ‘The Spirituality of the Ceili De’ in M. Maher (ed.), *Irish Spirituality* (Dublin: Veritas,1981), 24; compare the translation in O. Davies & F. Bowie, *Celtic Christian Spirituality: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1995). [↑](#endnote-ref-101)
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103. R. Sharpe,(tr.), *Adomnan* , p. 105. [↑](#endnote-ref-103)
104. I. Bradley, *Colonies of Heaven: Celtic models for today’s church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), p. 11. [↑](#endnote-ref-104)
105. The title of her collected writings. E. Colledge (ed.), *Julian of Norwich: Showings* (NY: Paulist Press, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-105)
106. I am indebted for this insight from E. R. Obbard, *Through Julian’s Windows: growing into wholeness with Julian of Norwich* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-106)
107. B. A. Windeatt (tr.), *The Book of Margery Kempe* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000). [↑](#endnote-ref-107)
108. Obbard, p xvii [↑](#endnote-ref-108)
109. A. Peers (tr.), *St Teresa of Avila: Interior Castle* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1974)*,* 53-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-109)
110. *Ibid.,* pp. 57, 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-110)
111. *Ibid.,* p. 63. [↑](#endnote-ref-111)
112. Peers , *Teresa ,*  pp. 6, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-112)
113. T. Bielecki, *Teresa of Avila: An Introduction to her Life & Writings* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1994),p. 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-113)
114. K. Kavanaugh & O. Rodriguez (trs.), *Teresa of Avila: The Interior Castle*. (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp. 189, 190. [↑](#endnote-ref-114)
115. Peers, *Teresa,* 148. See also C. Bryant, *Journey to the Centre* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-115)
116. J. Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), Vol. 10, p. 533. [↑](#endnote-ref-116)
117. H. Backhouse (ed.), *Madame Guyon: a Short and Easy Method of Prayer* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-117)
118. K. Muggeridge, (tr.), *The Sacrament of the Present Moment: Jean-Pierre de Caussade* (London: Fount, 1996). He sought to counter the heresy of Quietism. [↑](#endnote-ref-118)
119. *Ibid.,* p. 46. [↑](#endnote-ref-119)
120. *Ibid.,* p. 75. [↑](#endnote-ref-120)
121. *Ibid.,* p. 40. [↑](#endnote-ref-121)
122. *Ibid.,* p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-122)
123. *Ibid.,* p. 109. [↑](#endnote-ref-123)
124. Barnes, A. (1908). ‘Evangelical Counsels’ in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company). [↑](#endnote-ref-124)
125. See www.tssf.org [↑](#endnote-ref-125)
126. D. Soelle, *The Window of Vulnerability: a political spirituality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. x. [↑](#endnote-ref-126)
127. D. Soelle, *The Silent Cry: Mysticism and Resistance* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-127)
128. K. Waaijman, *Spirituality: Forms, Foundations, Methods* (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), p. 131. [↑](#endnote-ref-128)
129. Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Bear and Company, 1987). [↑](#endnote-ref-129)
130. *Silent Cry,* p. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-130)
131. *Ibid.,* p. 93. [↑](#endnote-ref-131)
132. *Ibid.,* p. 89. [↑](#endnote-ref-132)
133. D. Soelle, *The Inward Road and the Way Back* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978), p. 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-133)
134. *Ibid.,* pp. 55, 56. [↑](#endnote-ref-134)
135. H. Musurillo, (tr.), *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa’s Mystical*

*Writings.* (London: John Murray, 19620, pp.51-52. [↑](#endnote-ref-135)
136. *Ibid.*, p. 191 [↑](#endnote-ref-136)
137. V. W. Callahan, (tr.), *The Fathers of the Church: St Gregory of Nyssa: Ascetical*

*Works* (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1967), p. 129. [↑](#endnote-ref-137)
138. *Ibid.,* p.130. [↑](#endnote-ref-138)
139. Musurillo, p. 57. [↑](#endnote-ref-139)
140. The *Conferences* present themselves as interviews with the holy men. As Leech claims: ‘The tradition of conferences, or extended discourse on spiritual problems, dates from the Rule of Pachomius, and by the end of the fourth century it was the standard method of spiritual direction.’ K. Leech, *Soul Friend* (London: SPCK, 1997), p. 43. [↑](#endnote-ref-140)
141. C. Luibheid (tr.) *John.Cassian: Conferences* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), pp. 39, 41, 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-141)
142. *Ibid.,* p. 67. [↑](#endnote-ref-142)
143. *Ibid.,* p.62. See also J. Bertram (tr.), *Cassian: the Monastic Institutes* (London: Saint Austin Press, 1999). [↑](#endnote-ref-143)
144. G. L. Miller, *The Way of the English Mystics* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1996), p. 19. Rolle has been called ‘the father of English literature’ – his translations of the Bible were used by Wycliffe in his preparation of the English Bible, and Rolle wrote many works both in Latin and his mother tongue. His poems, discourses and scriptural commentaries reveal a debt to Augustine, Bernard, Bonaventure and Richard of St Victor. See also D. Knowles, *The English Mystical Tradition* (London: Burns & Oates, 1961); J. Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries: Religion and Secular Life in Late Medieval Yorkshire* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-144)
145. All quotations are from C. Wolters, (tr.), *Richard Rolle: The Fire of Love* (London: Penguin, 1972), here ‘Prologue’ . See also R. Allen, (tr.), *Richard Rolle: English Writings* (N.Y.: Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 1988). [↑](#endnote-ref-145)
146. Wolters, *Fire,* p. 144. [↑](#endnote-ref-146)
147. *Ibid.,* p.74 (ch. 10). [↑](#endnote-ref-147)
148. *Ibid.,* p. 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-148)
149. All quotations are from C. Wolters (tr.), *The Cloud of Unknowing* (London: Penguin, 1976), here Ch 24. For a more recent translation see J. Walsh (tr.), *The Cloud of Unknowing*(N.Y.: Classics of Western Spirituality, Paulist Press, 1981). See also W. A. Meninger, *The Loving Search for God: Contemplative Prayer and the Cloud of Unknowing* (N.Y.: Continuum, 1997). [↑](#endnote-ref-149)
150. Wolters, *Cloud,*pp.53, 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-150)
151. *Ibid.,* pp.115, 116. [↑](#endnote-ref-151)
152. *Ibid.,* p. 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-152)
153. *Ibid.,* p. 60. [↑](#endnote-ref-153)
154. C. Wolters, ‘The English Mystics’ in C. Jones, G. Wainwright & E. Yarnold, *The Study of Spirituality* (London: SPCK, 1986). [↑](#endnote-ref-154)
155. Wolters, *Cloud,* 51 For a consideration of the role of desire in spirituality see P. Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-155)
156. Wolters, *Cloud,* p. 110. [↑](#endnote-ref-156)
157. *Ibid.,* p. 61. [↑](#endnote-ref-157)
158. B. McGinn, ‘The Changing Shape of Late Medieval Mysticism’, *Church History* 65:2 (June 1996), 218. For a recent discussion of this issue see C.F. Davis, *The Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-158)
159. D. Reveney, *Language, Self and Love: Hermeneutics in the Writings of Richard Rolle and the Commentaries on the Song of Songs* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2001), p. 154. See also N. Watson, *Richard Rolle and the Invention of Authority* (Cambridge University Press, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-159)
160. This is permitted in the 19th annotation. [↑](#endnote-ref-160)
161. References are paragraph numbers in T. Corbishley, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola.* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1973). [↑](#endnote-ref-161)
162. D. L Fleming, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: a Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (St Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1978), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-162)
163. See H. Alphonso, *Discovering Your Personal Vocation: the Search for Meaning through the Spiritual Exercises* (New York: Paulist Press, 2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-163)
164. I am indebted to Maureen Conroy RSM for the contents of this paragraph.See her *Journey of Love: God Moving in Our Hearts and Lives.* (Neptune, NJ: Upper Room Spiritual Center, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-164)
165. I am grateful to Sue Cash for this approach to the *Examen.* [↑](#endnote-ref-165)
166. F. J. Houdek, ‘Prayer and Mission’ in *Ignatian Spirituality and Mission, The Way Supplement 1994/79.* London: *The Way*, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-166)
167. From *Parochial and Plain Sermons* in E., Przywara (ed.), *The Heart of Newman.* (Wheathampstead: Anthony Clarke, 1963). [↑](#endnote-ref-167)
168. J. H. Newman, from *Meditations and Devotions*, "Meditations on Christian Doctrine: Hope in God—Creator", March 7, 1848 [↑](#endnote-ref-168)
169. Bonaventure’s Major Legend of Saint Francis, ch.12 in R. J. Armstrong, J .A. W. Hellman & W. J. Short (eds.), *Francis of Assisi Early Documents: Vol. 2, The Founder* (New York: New City Press, 2000), p. 622. [↑](#endnote-ref-169)
170. E.M. Blaiklock & A. C. Keys (trs.), *The Little Flowers of St Francis* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985), p. 54. [↑](#endnote-ref-170)
171. A. Rotzetter, W.-C. Van Dijk & T. Matura, *Gospel Living: Francis of Assisi yesterday and today* (New York: Franciscan Institute,1994), p. 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-171)
172. T. Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), pp. 263, 264. [↑](#endnote-ref-172)
173. Bonaventure, ‘Major Legend’, in R. J. Armstrong, J. A. W. Hellman & W. J. Short, *Francis of Assisi: Early Documents, Vol. 2* (New York: New City Press, 2000), p. 640. See also P. Jordan, *An Affair of the Heart: a Biblical and Franciscan Journey*  (Leominster: Gracewing, 2008), pp. 51,52. [↑](#endnote-ref-173)
174. For a critique of the ascent model see M. Miles, *The Image and Practice of Holiness* (SCM, London, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-174)
175. Paschal Robinson, tr., *The Golden Sayings of Blessed Brother Giles of Assisi* (1906), pp 102, 71, 72 [↑](#endnote-ref-175)
176. Robinson, *Golden Sayings,* pp 46-47 [↑](#endnote-ref-176)
177. Robinson, *Golden Sayings,* pp 4,5, 26, 40 [↑](#endnote-ref-177)
178. K. Krug, tr., *The Earliest Franciscans: the legacy of Giles of Assisi, Roger of Provence and James of Milan* (New York: Paulist Press, 2015), p 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-178)
179. J.D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Eerdmans, Michigan/ Cambridge, 2003), p 561 [↑](#endnote-ref-179)
180. There is a scholarly debate about the nature of Jesus as prophet. Wright sees Jesus as an apocalyptic prophet who embodies the very presence of Israel’s God; Sanders sees Jesus as one of a series of Jewish eschatological prophets. See N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996) and E. P. Sanders, *The Historical Figure of Jesus* (London: Penguin, 1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-180)
181. From www.motherteresacause.info [↑](#endnote-ref-181)
182. See also, F. C. Senn, *The Witness of the Worshiping Community: Liturgy and the Practice of Evangelism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993); P. McPartlan, *The Eucharist makes the Church* (Eastern Christian Publications, 2006). [↑](#endnote-ref-182)
183. Address of Bishop Francis Weston to the Anglo-Catholic Congress 1923, from anglicanhistory.org [↑](#endnote-ref-183)
184. P. Casaldaliga & J. M. Vigil, *The Spirituality of Liberation* (Tunbridge Wells: Burns & Oates, 1994), 158. See also W. Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and resistance in a world of domination* (Augsburg: Fortress Press, 1992). [↑](#endnote-ref-184)
185. See R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: the path to spiritual growth* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980); D. Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper: 1991);D. S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Amersham, Bucks: Scripture Press, 1991). R. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Intervaristy Press, 1977). [↑](#endnote-ref-185)
186. New Living Translation copyright© 1996, 2004, 2007, 2013 by Tyndale House Foundation [↑](#endnote-ref-186)
187. For example, at Nazareth the altar's marker says: *Verbum cardo hic factum est:* 'Here the Word became flesh.' [↑](#endnote-ref-187)
188. Dheisheh, Aida and Azzeh refugee camps. [↑](#endnote-ref-188)
189. The statistics tell of increasing rates of emigration of Christians in local years. In 1947 Bethlehem was 75 per cent Christian and 25 per cent Muslim. Today it is the other way around, for Christians are leaving in their droves, in search of a better life, in the US and elsewhere. [↑](#endnote-ref-189)
190. Liberation theology has opened our eyes to the ways in which God reveals his Kingdom and his presence precisely through the poor: see, for example, L. Boff, *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology For Our Times* (New York: Orbis, 1978). [↑](#endnote-ref-190)
191. See A. D. Mayes, *Holy Land? Challenging Questions from the Biblical Landscape*  (London: SPCK, 2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-191)
192. Franciscan prayer nurtures such an appreciative and respectful approach to the world of nature. See, for example, Joseph M. Stoutzenberger & John D. Bohrer, *Praying with Francis of Assisi* (Winona, Minnesota: Saint Mary’s Press, 1989). [↑](#endnote-ref-192)
193. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’, Care of our Common Home*  [↑](#endnote-ref-193)
194. George Adam Smith*, The Historical Geography of the Holy Land* ( Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1935), p 72, 73 [↑](#endnote-ref-194)
195. Bonaventure: The Soul*’s Journey into God*, tr, E. Cousins (NY: Paulist Press, 1978), p 26 [↑](#endnote-ref-195)
196. Ibid, p 30 [↑](#endnote-ref-196)
197. M. Fox,  *Illuminations of Hildegard of Bingen*  (Rochester, Vermont: Bear & Company, 2002), p 68 [↑](#endnote-ref-197)
198. *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works* (Sante Fe, NM: Bear & Co, 1987),p 11 [↑](#endnote-ref-198)
199. Fox (tr.), *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works* (Sante Fe, NM: Bear & Co, 1987), p 128 [↑](#endnote-ref-199)
200. Mechthild of Magdeburg, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead* p 48 [↑](#endnote-ref-200)
201. T. Merton, quoted in E. De Waal, *A Seven Day Journey with Thomas Merton,* (Guildford: Eagle, 2000), p. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-201)
202. *Sign of Jonas* quoted in Thomas Merton, *When the Trees say Nothing: Writings on Nature* (Notre Dame, IN: Sorin Books, 2003) [↑](#endnote-ref-202)
203. *On Care For Our Common Home* , Para 233 [↑](#endnote-ref-203)
204. The language of formation is a hylomorphic term, utilized scientifically of the shaping of matter. That is, it involves an analogy with the shaping of matter. D.H. Kelsey, ‘Reflections on a Discussion of Theological Education as Character Formation’, *Theological Education* 25:1(1988), 64 [↑](#endnote-ref-204)
205. M. Robert Mulholland Jnr, *Invitation to a Journey: A Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Intervarsity Press, 1993) [↑](#endnote-ref-205)
206. From the Black Book of Carmarthen, Robert Van de Weyer, tr., *Celtic Fire: An Anthology of Celtic Christian Literature* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), p 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-206)
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208. *The Holy Scriptures according to the Masoretic Text: a new translation* (Jewish Publication Society , 1917). [↑](#endnote-ref-208)
209. B. E. Schein, *Following the Way: The Setting of John’s Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1980), pp. 7, 8. [↑](#endnote-ref-209)
210. Quotes drawn from Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus Through the Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), chapter 5 ‘The Cosmic Christ’ [↑](#endnote-ref-210)
211. G. Aulen, *Christus Victor: an historical study of the three main types of the idea of the Atonement.* (London: SPCK, 1970). [↑](#endnote-ref-211)
212. Peter Dronke, quoted in Fiona Bowie & Oliver Davies (ed.), *Hildegard of Bingen: An Anthology* (London: SPCK, 1990), p 32. [↑](#endnote-ref-212)
213. Ibid, 32. See Renate Craine, 1998. *Hildegard: Prophet of the Cosmic Christ* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company), pp 26-27. [↑](#endnote-ref-213)
214. G. Uhlein, *Meditations with Hildegard of Bingen* (Sante Fee: 1982), p 31. Another translation found in M. Fox, *Hildegard of Bingen’s Book of Divine Works* (Sante Fe, NM: Bear & Co., 1987), p 8 (Vision 1). See also M. Fox, *The Coming of the Cosmic Christ*  (San Francisco, HarperOne, 1990), p 110 [↑](#endnote-ref-214)
215. Frank Tobin, tr., *Mechthild of Magdeburg: The Flowing Light of the Godhead* (NY: Paulist Press, 1998), pp 286, 284 [↑](#endnote-ref-215)
216. Sue Woodruff, *Meditations with Mechtild of Magdeburg* (Sante Fe,NM: Bear & Co., 1982), p. 108 [↑](#endnote-ref-216)
217. Tobin, *Mechthild of* Magdeburg, pp 152, 76 [↑](#endnote-ref-217)
218. Matthew Fox (tr.), *Meditations with Meister Eckhart* (Rochester, Vermont: Bear & Co., 1983), 88, 81. [↑](#endnote-ref-218)
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220. Teilhard de Chardin, Science and Christ, tr. René Hague (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p 36. [↑](#endnote-ref-220)
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222. De Chardin, *Hymn of the Universe,* pp. 27f. [↑](#endnote-ref-222)
223. *Ibid.,* p. 29. [↑](#endnote-ref-223)
224. T. De Chardin, *Le Milieu Divin: an essay on the interior life* (London: Fontana, 1957), pp. 145, 146. [↑](#endnote-ref-224)
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226. I. Delio, *Christ in Evolution.* (New York: Orbis, 2008), p. 180. [↑](#endnote-ref-226)
227. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’, Care of our Common Home,* paragraphs 217, 222 [↑](#endnote-ref-227)
228. We might begin by using the environmental toolkit via www.ecocongregation.org [↑](#endnote-ref-228)