

The Bear and the Nun : What is the Sense of Religious Life Today!

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SEARCHING FOR A STORY

I have been asked to speak about 'La vie religieuse, quel sens aujourd'hui?' This is an urgent question for religious today because many of us wonder whether the way of life to which we have committed ourselves has any meaning at all. There are fewer vocations in western Europe than before; in France many congregations are growing smaller and some are dying out; to be a religious does not have the same status and respect that it used to have. We may appear to have lost our role in a Church that seems to have become more clerical, and our importance in a society in which lay people now do so much that before was largely done by religious. With the new sense of the sanctity of marriage we are not even considered to live a way of life that is more perfect than any other. It is understandable that many religious ask, 'La vie religieuse, quel sens aujourd'hui?'

In this situation it would be natural to try to find the sense of religious life in something special about us, something that we do that no one else does, something that gives us our special place, our special identity. We are like blacksmiths in a world of cars, looking for a new role. I suspect that this is one reason why we religious often eagerly talk of ourselves as prophets. We claim that we are the prophetic part of the life of the Church. It gives us a role, an identity, a label. I do believe that religious life is called to be prophetic, but not as a solution to our identity crisis! Instead I would like to start elsewhere, which is with the crisis of meaning which western society is living. I believe that religious life is more important than ever before because of how we are called to face the crisis of meaning of our contemporaries. Our life must be an answer to the question: 'What is the sense of human life today?' Perhaps this has always been the primary witness of religious life.

How can we even begin to think about a question as large as the contemporary crisis of meaning. To say anything adequately, I would have to have studied books about modernity and postmodernity. I have not done so. My excuse is that with my life on the road, I have had no time. But the truth is that if I were to read these books probably I would not understand them. They are mainly written by clever French people and beyond the grasp of the English! Instead I will try a simpler approach. I would like to offer you the contrast between two images, two implicit stories of human life.

Every culture needs stories which embody an understanding of what it means to be a human being, what the pattern of life is. We need stories which tell us who we are and where we are going. When there is a crisis of meaning in a society, one symptom is that the stories that society tells seem no longer to make sense of our experience. They do not fit any more. When a society goes through a moment of profound change, then it needs a new sort of story to make sense of its life.

I shall argue that the basic crisis of meaning in our society is that the story which has been implicit in European culture for a few hundred years, no longer makes sense. It is a story of progress, of the survival of the fittest, of the triumph of the strong. The hero of this story is the modern self. He (and it is usually a he!) is alone, and free. This is the story that has been implicit in our novels, our films, our philosophy, our economics and our politics. But now it is ceasing to make sense of our experience. I shall take as a symbol of this story a poster of a bear that I have often seen in the posters of Rome.

So we are a society that hungers for a new story that will make some sense of who we are. I believe that the meaning of religious life lies in answering that question: 'What is the meaning of human life today?' People must be able to recognize in our lives an invitation to be a human being in a new way. For me the symbol of this other story will be of a nun singing in the dark to the paschal candle.

So I wish to offer you this contrast between two images, two stories, of a bear and a nun. I wish to contrast these two stories by looking at the three elements which are necessary for every story: a plot that evolves through time; the events that move the story forward, and the actors. If our contemporaries feel lost and confused, hungry for meaning, then it is because the stories of modernity no longer make sense of our experience of time, events and what it means to be an individual. We religious should embody another way of being alive.

PLOT AND TIME

Let me start by telling you about my bear. A year ago, the walls of Rome were covered with posters of a large and angry bear. And the inscription on the poster read 'La forza del prezzo giusto' 'The power of the Right Price'. As I waited for buses I had much time to contemplate this bear. It captures well the story of modernity.

In the first place this bear suggests that the basic plot of history is an irresistible progress. It is a bear of which Darwin would have been proud, a victor in the evolutionary process. Human history marches onwards. It is also a symbol of the global economy, the market place. What drives human history forward is economics. 'La forza del prezzo giusto' 'The power of the Right Price'. History is the story of inevitable progress, through the liberalisation of the market. The best economic system must triumph. The bear is the victor.

When I was growing up (and looking at you I suspect that when many of you were growing up too), it was still just possible to believe that humanity was on the way to a glorious future. But already there were shadows. I was born a week before the end of a war that left fifty million people dead. We slowly learned of the Holocaust and of the six million Jews who died in the camps. I grew up under the shadow of the bomb. I remember my mother storing tins of food in the cellar, just in case a nuclear war started. Yet, still it was possible to cling to the idea that humanity was moving forward. Every year we saw independence given to our old colonies, medicine was wiping out diseases like TB and malaria. Surely poverty would also be ended soon. Even the planes and cars went more quickly every year. Things would go on getting better.

Today we are less sure. The gap between rich and poor goes on growing. Malaria and TB are coming back and within a year there will probably be forty million people with AIDS. Unemployment stands at twenty million in Europe alone. The dreams of a just world seem farther away. Where is humanity going? Does our history have a meaning, a direction? Or are we wandering around in circles in the desert, getting no nearer to the promised land? Even the Church, which seemed to be moving towards renewal and new life at the Second Vatican Council, now seems not to know where it is going.

At the heart of modernity there is a contradiction, and that is why its story is no longer plausible. On the one hand the bear is indeed irresistible. The global market is triumphing over all its enemies. Communism has fallen in Eastern Europe and even China looks as if it may succumb. But, on the other hand, the story is not taking us to the Kingdom. What we seeing is growing poverty and war. Even the Asian tigers are sick. The bear is irresistible but it is tearing us to pieces. So the plot of modernity contains an unbearable contradiction. We cannot find ourselves in it any more.

We cannot live without stories. As we have come to doubt the story of humanity's march forward, so other stories must fill the vacuum. They may be millenarian stories of the end of the world, stories of aliens, stories of victory in the World Cup (Congratulations, France!). Often enough, it is just what we call in English 'soap operas', trivial serials on television. Recently the final episode of a soap opera in the United States was watched by eighty million people. Restaurants closed for the night. When it was announced that a giant asteroid would hit the earth on 26 October 2028, there was less interest. Having come to disbelieve in the myth of progress we take refuge in fictions.

Maybe it was the hunger for a story that explains the extraordinary reaction to the death of Princess Diana. The English are, as you know, very unemotional, or so the French like to think! But I have never seen such grief. It was as if the story at the heart of humanity had come to an end under a bridge in Paris. Millions of people wept as if they had lost their wife or child or mother. Everywhere I

go in the world, I know that eventually people will ask me about the Princess. I am prepared to answer questions about her after this lecture. In Vietnam they even told me that I looked like Prince William. I was delighted, but they are a very polite people! It was the world's soap opera. Perhaps her story appealed to so many precisely because in her we could see ourselves. She was a good but not perfect person, who really cared for others, whose life should have been wonderful, and yet inexplicably it was a failure. It was a sad and futile story, which evoked the futility that so many people feel, as they wonder where their lives are going.

In what sense can religious life suggest another plot, an alternative story?

Let me offer you another image. I celebrated Easter this year in a monastery of Dominican contemplative nuns. The monastery was built on a hill behind Caracas, in Venezuela. The church was packed with young people. We lit the Paschal Candle and placed it on its stand. And a young nun with a guitar sang a love song to the candle. The song had all the harsh passion of Andalusia. I confess that I was completely bowled over by this image, of a young nun singing a love song in the darkness to the newborn fire. This image suggested that we are caught up in another drama, another story. This is our story, not that of the angry bear, devouring its rivals.

In the first place, the nun singing in the night suggests that the basic plot of the story of humanity is longer than that represented by the bear. Out in the garden the celebrant had inscribed the candle with these words: 'Christ yesterday and today, the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega. All time belongs to him, and all the ages. To him be glory and power through every age. Amen.'

The religious life is perhaps in the first place a living Amen to that longer span of time. It is within the stretch of the story from Alpha to Omega, from Creation to Kingdom, that every human life must find its meaning. We are those who live for the Kingdom when, as Julian of Norwich said, 'All will be well, all manner of things will be well.'

The vocation that most radically brings to light that longest story is that of the contemplative monk or nun. Their lives have no meaning at all if they are not on the way to the Kingdom. Cardinal Basil Hume is the most respected Christian in England, and partly because he is a monk. And he wrote of monks: 'We do not see ourselves as having any particular mission or function in the Church. We do not set out to change the course of history. We are just there almost by accident from a human point of view.'

And, happily, we go on "just being there". (I. In Praise of Benedict, Ampleforth, 1996. p. 23.)

Monks are just there, and so their lives have no meaning at all, except as pointing to the fulfilment of the ages, that meeting with God. They are like people waiting at a bus stop. Just being there points to the bus that must surely come. There is no provisional or lesser sense. No children, no career, no achievements, no promotion, no use. It is by an absence of meaning that their lives point to a fullness of meaning that we cannot state, as the empty tomb points to the Resurrection, or as the wobble in the orbit of a star points to the invisible planet.

Western monasticism was born in a moment of crisis. It was when the Roman Empire was slowly dying before the assaults of the barbarians that Benedict went to Subiaco and founded a community of monks. When the story of humanity seemed to be going nowhere, then Benedict founded a community of people whose lives had sense only in pointing to that ultimate end, the Kingdom.

One might say that religious life forces us to live nakedly the crisis of modernity. Most people's lives have a shape and a story which may hold the larger question at bay. A life may have its own meaning, from falling in love, marrying, having children and then grandchildren. Or maybe someone's story may find its meaning in a career, in rising up the ladder of promotion, in gaining wealth and even fame. There are so many stories that we may tell which will give a provisional pattern and a meaning to our span of years. And that is good and right. But our vows do not give us that consolation. We have no marriage to offer a shape to our lives. We have no careers. We are naked before the question: 'What is the meaning of human life?'

Kingdom. Sometimes the younger brethren may not agree with me, but one does have to get out of bed each morning and do something. Even monks and nuns must do something! I remember asking an especially lazy brother what he was doing one day. He replied that he was being an 'eschatological sign', waiting for the Kingdom. How do we give value to what we do now? Most of us spend our days doing useful things, teaching, working in hospitals, helping in parishes, looking after the forgotten. How do our daily lives say something about the story of humanity?

Let us return to that young nun again. It is the middle of the night when she sings that wild song. It is in the night when she praises God. Even when it is dark, between the beginning and the end, one may encounter God and praise him. Now is the hour. As he is waiting to be murdered, Jesus says to the disciples, 'In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world' (Jn 16:33). Now is the hour of victory and praise.

What this suggests is a new sense of time. What gives shape to time is not the story of inevitable progress towards wealth and success. The hidden shape of our lives is the growth in friendship with God, as we meet him on the way and say Amen. It is not just the end of the story which gives it meaning. The pattern of my life is the encounter with God, and my response to his invitation. This is what makes of my life not just a sequence of events but a destiny. As Cornelius Ernst OP said, 'Destiny is the summons and invitation of the God of love, that we should respond to him in loving and creative consent.' (The Theology of Grace, Dublin, 1974. p. 82.) Even in the dark, in despair, when nothing makes sense any more, we may meet the God of life. As a Jewish philosopher wrote: 'Every moment can be the small door through which the Messiah can enter.' The story of our lives is of this meeting with the God who comes in the night like a lover. This we celebrate with praise.

Some of the most moving moments of the last six years have been the times when I have been able to share with my brothers and sisters in praising God in the most difficult circumstances. In a monastery in Burundi, after touring a country torn apart by ethnic violence; in Iraq, as we waited for the bombs to fall; in Algeria, with our brother Pierre Claverie before he was killed. It is central to the religious life that we sing the praises of God, even in the night. We sing the psalms, the tehillim, the book of praises. We measure the day with the hours of the Divine Office, the liturgy of the psalms, not just with the mechanical hours of the clock. 'Seven times a day I praise you'. Well, at least twice for most of us.

I remember a story which illustrates how the time of praise may interact with the time of the clock, the time of modernity. When one of my brethren was a child at school, a dentist came to give lessons in dental hygiene to the children. He asked the class when they must clean their teeth. There was absolute silence. He said, 'Come on, you know when you must clean your teeth. In the morning and in the evening ...' This touched a button in the minds of these good Catholic children who knew their catechism. And they all carried on 'before and after meals'. 'Excellent,' said the dentist. 'In times of temptation and in the hour of our death'. Well, if we always cleaned our teeth in the hours of temptation, we might avoid many sins!

This regular rhythm of praise is more than just an optimism that all will be well in the end. We are claiming that even now, in the desert, the Lord of life meets us and shapes our lives. In this sense religious life should be truly prophetic, for the prophet is the one who sees the future bursting into present. As Habakkuk says, 'Even though the fig tree does not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, even though the olive crop fails ... yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I rejoice in the God of my salvation.' (3:17-19)

Recently I met the Order's Promoters of Justice and Peace for Latin America. They were a new generation, not the old ones of the late sixties like me! They were young men and women who keep alive a dream. I expected that they would be discouraged, given the worsening economic situation, the growing violence, the social disintegration of the continent. Not at all! They said that it was precisely now, when all the utopias had disappeared, when the Kingdom seemed more remote than ever, that we religious have our role to play. No one else could dream now. But to fight for a more just world now, when no progress ever seems to be made, means that one has to be a person of deep prayer. As our Brazilian brother, Frei Betto has said, one has to be a mystic now to believe in justice and peace.

ACTION

There is a second contrast between the stories of bear and nun that I would like to make, and that is in terms of how things happen. What is the motive force of the story? What carries the story forward? We need both plot and action.

We have already seen that the bear represents the competitive struggle for survival. What moves history is that competition in which the weak perish and the strong thrive. Whether you are studying evolution or economics, that is just the way things happen. That is the basic assumption of the modern story. The motor which drives history is free competition, which eliminates the defective, the hopeless, the unviable.

But once again we see a contradiction. For this bear is a symbol of that freedom which is at the heart of modernity: freedom to compete in the free market, in which everyone is free to choose what they want. Yet we have seen that this freedom too is, to some extent, illusory. For we are caught in a global transformation of the world that makes us powerless, and which no one is able to halt, which is destroying communities, and devouring the planet. So at the heart of the modern story is a double contradiction. We are offered progress, and find poverty; we are offered freedom, and find ourselves powerless. What alternative story can religious life embody?

But let us look again at that young nun, singing her love song in the dark. She represents another way of telling a story. The story that she celebrates is of a man who is crushed by the strong but lives for ever. The big bears of Rome and Jerusalem devour the weak man from Galilee. What we celebrate in this story is not God's superior strength, God the bigger bear, but his utter creativity in raising Jesus from the dead.

There can be no story unless something new happens. Stories tell about how things change. But the model of change of modernity is that of the survival of the fittest. Evolution, whether biological or economic, brings change, but through the competition to survive. But our story of the nun suggests an even more radical novelty, the unimaginable gift of new life. We praise the God who says, 'Behold I make all things new.' (Rev 21:5) We religious are called to be signs of God's unspeakable novelty, his unutterable creativity.

How are we religious to be the signs of this strange story of the God of death and resurrection? The clearest sign is in the presence of all those religious who refuse to leave places of death and violence, trusting in the Lord who raises the dead. Everywhere there is violence, in Rwanda, Burundi, the Congo, Chiapas, one can find men and women religious whose presence is a sign of that other story, of which our nun sings. Naturally here in France we think of those many religious who have died in Algeria. You must all know so well those wonderful words of Christian de Cherge, prior of the Trappist monks, when he wrote his last spiritual testimony, shortly before his death. I hope you will let me repeat them yet again:

When an A Dieu is foreseen

If it should happen one day and it could be today that I become a victim of the terrorism which now seems set to engulf all the foreigners living in Algeria, I would love my community, my Church, my family, to remember that my life was given to God and to this country. I ask them to accept that the one Master of all life was not a foreigner at this brutal departure. I ask them to pray for me: for how would I be found worthy of such an offering? I would like them to be able to link this death with so many other deaths, equally violent, but shrouded in indifference and anonymity ...

This life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God who seems to have willed it in its entirety for the sake of that joy in everything and in spite of everything.

The preparation for such a witness is surely, that every religious community should be a place in which we learn how to come alive through death and resurrection. I had a great aunt, who became a Sacred Heart nun. At the age of seven she startled all her numerous sisters by pinning on the nursery wall a bit of paper saying, 'I wish to be dissolved and united with Christ'. I doubt whether many candidates for religious life do that sort of thing these days, thanks be to God! But surely a religious

community should be a place in which we learn to die and rise, a place of transformation. We are not the prisoners of our past. We can grow in holiness. We can die and be made new.

This is unlikely to happen if we flee from facing the death of our own institutions. Today in western Europe, many congregations, communities, monasteries and provinces must face death. There are many strategies for avoiding that truth. Perhaps we beatify the founder, start expensive building programmes, write beautiful documents about plans that we will never implement. When we send brothers or sisters to the Philippines or to Colombia or Brazil, is it because of a sudden new missionary zeal, or because we want vocations to let us survive? If we cannot face the prospect of death, then what have we to say about the Lord of life? I once had to visit a Dominican monastery in England with an old friar. The monastery was clearly nearing the end of its life, but one of the nuns said to my companion, 'Surely Father, our dear Lord would never let this monastery die!' To which he replied, 'He let his Son die, didn't he?'

One of the ways in which we live out that unimaginable story of death and resurrection is surely in bringing new life to birth in unexpected places. We must be those who go into the valley of death and show our belief in the God who raises the dead. I remember one of my Scottish brethren, who was a poet and a wrestler, an unlikely combination, but then he was an unlikely man. He started a scheme in Scotland for bringing art to prisoners. He was convinced that unless we could believe in their creativity, then they would never be healed. His first attempt was in a tough prison in Glasgow. He asked the prisoners what they would like to try: painting, poetry, sculpture, dance. You can imagine the reactions that he got! And so he rolled up his sleeves and said, 'If any of you think that art is not for real men, then I will fight him!' And he did, every one of them. And they all took poetry and painting classes! I am glad to say that this is not the only way to bring people to faith in the God who makes all things new.

Perhaps another more traditional way in which religious have always been a sign of the ever creative God is through beauty. Of this you have always been more deeply aware in France than in many other countries. A few weeks ago I met an old Dominican in Germany who is a painter and sculptor. And I asked what he most enjoyed doing. He replied that he always loved carving tombstones! There are some wounds so deep that only beauty may heal them. In the face of some sufferings hope can only be expressed by art. A beautiful tombstone can speak eloquently of the hope of resurrection of the God who can raise the dead.

Finally there is the beauty of liturgy, the beauty of the praise of God, which speaks of the God who transforms all things. It is the beauty from which we started, of a young nun singing a love song to a candle in the night. It is the beauty of a passionate song of the people of southern Spain that bowled me over. It reminds me of Neruda who said that, between the dramas of birth and death, he had chosen the guitar!

ACTOR

Finally one cannot have a story without actors, characters. Every story needs its hero. And what better image of the modern self could one find than our bear, angry and alone. But this modern self is in crisis.

Fundamental to modernity is this new sense of what it means to be a human being; a separate and autonomous self, detached and free, and ultimately alone. He is the fruit of an evolution that has gone on for centuries, in which social bonds have been dissolved, and privacy has become possible and an ideal. He has been our hero since the time of Descartes. We can see him in every American western, a lonely figure.

Part of the crisis of modernity is that this 'modern self' contains a contradiction. Because one cannot be a 'self' alone. One cannot exist as a solitary, autonomous atom. One cannot exist without community, without people to whom we talk, without what Charles Taylor calls 'webs of interlocution'. (Source of the Self, Cambridge, 1989, p. 36) This is the contradiction at the centre of the modern story, that we see ourselves as

essentially solitary, and yet in fact no one can be a self outside some form of community. It is impossible to be a 'modern self' for long. The bear on the poster represents an impossible ideal. Alone it would die.

Let us return for a last time to our nun, singing to the Paschal Candle. She is not alone. Just visible in the light of the candle are the crowd of young people. The Easter Vigil is a gathering of the People of God. What is born that night is a community. We come together to remember our baptism into the body of Christ and recite together a common profession of faith. This represents another vision of what it means to be a self.

'What is the sense of human life today?' One of the ways in which religious life tries to answer that question, is by living in community. To find one's identity in this community, as a brother or a sister, is to live another image of the self, another way of being a human being. It embodies an alternative story to that of the modern hero. In the early days a Dominican community was called *asacra praedicatio*, a 'holy preaching'. To live together as brothers 'with one heart and one mind' was a preaching, before one said a single word. Probably more young people are drawn to religious life by the search for community than for any other reason. According to the apostolic exhortation after the Synod on religious life, *Vita Consecrata*, we are a sign of communion for the whole Church, a witness to the life of the Trinity.

But if community is what draws the young to religious life, it is the difficulty of community life that makes so many give up. We aspire to communion and yet it is so painful to live. When I meet young Dominicans in formation, I often ask what they find best and worst about religious life, and they usually give the same answer to both questions: living in community. That is because we are all the children of this age, moulded by its perception of the modern self. We are not wolves in sheep's clothing. We are bears in nuns' habits!

Perhaps one could say that in religious life we live the mirror image of the crisis of the modern self. The modern self aspires to an autonomy, a freedom, a detachment that is impossible to sustain, because no one can be human alone. We need to belong to communities to be human at all, whatever we may think. But we religious live the mirror image of this drama. We enter religious life aspiring for community, longing to be truly brothers and sisters of each other, and yet we are products of modernity, marked by its individualism, its fear of commitment, its hunger for independence. Most of us are born into families with 1.5 children and it is hard to live with the crowd. And so the modern self and the religious life are alternative aspects of the same tension. The modern self dreams of an impossible autonomy, and we religious aspire to a community which is hard to sustain.

The bear cannot become the nun during the space of a year's noviciate. There is the slow education in becoming human, in learning to speak and to hear, to break the hold of self absorption and egoism, which makes myself the centre of the world. It is the slow rebirth through prayer and conversation, that will liberate me from false images of God and the other person.

In this we live, naked, acutely, the drama of the modern Church. Never before has the Church so insistently presented herself as a community. *Koinonia* is the heart of all contemporary ecclesiologies. And yet never before has the Church, at least in Western Europe, offered so little real communion. We speak the language of communion, but it is rarely how we live. Language and reality have come apart. One of the ways in which we try to give flesh and blood to this dream of communion is surely by daring to build communities in impossible places, where everyone else has given up. So often in recent years, I have found little communities of religious, usually women, building community where everyone else seems to have despaired, where human beings are crushed and dispersed by violence and poverty. Where it seems hopeless, one can find often a few sisters, making a home with an open door.

One image will stand for so many memories. The day after I celebrated the Easter Vigil with that nun in the monastery, I went to visit a little chapel run by the brethren in Caracas, in one of the most violent barrios of Latin America. The chapel was filled with bullet holes. On average some twenty eight people are murdered in the parish every weekend by gun fire. On the wall behind the altar was a fresco painted by the local children. There was a picture of the Last Supper, with Jesus eating with a

circle of Dominicans, men and women. Dominic was patting his dog. But the beloved disciple, sleeping on the side of Jesus, was a local child, a kid from the streets. It was a symbol of the child who had eventually found somewhere to belong in this violent world, the promise of a home.

CONCLUSION

I must conclude. I began by asserting that we can only find the meaning of religious life if we see how it is an answer to the search for the meaning of human life. And then I suggested that one way to understand the contemporary crisis of meaning in western society is by saying that the basic story that we tell about who we are and where we are going, no longer works. This is symbolised by our beloved bear. It is a story filled with contradictions. It tells of progress but seems to be leading us to poverty. It offers freedom, and yet often we find ourselves powerless. It invites us to be the modern self, autonomous and alone, and yet we discover that we cannot be human without community.

So religious life can only respond to that hunger for meaning by embodying another story, another vision of what it is to be human, which we see symbolised in our even more beloved nun, singing to the Candle in the night. And this is a story which offers another sense of time. It is not so much the inevitable march of progress as the story of how we meet the Lord who summons us to himself. And what drives that story is not the competition of the free, but the unimaginable creativity of God who raises the dead. And the hero of this story is not the solitary hero of modernity, but the brother or sister who find themselves in community, and build community for others.

Religious life is nothing other than the attempt to live that other story, the paschal story of death and resurrection. As Bruno Chenu wrote in his excellent book, which I read too late, "Religious endeavour to put into practice a certain baptismal logic: a life in Christ taken to its ultimate implications". (L'Urgence prophétique, Dieu au défi de l'Histoire, Paris, p. 262.) The vows do not give a different, a special meaning to our lives. But they make public and explicit our rejection of the story of the bear. Obedience, for example, is a clear rejection of the image of the self as autonomous, solitary and disengaged. It is a declaration of our intention to live by that other story, to discover who we are in the common life of the brethren. It is a commitment to be liberated from the unsustainable burden of the modern and lonely self. In obedience, we also reject the image of life as the struggle to be strong, just as in poverty we publicly renounce the competitive struggle for success, the rat race of the consumerist society. In chastity we accept that the deepest fertility we can ever have is that of the creative God who raises the dead.

These vows leave us naked and exposed. They subvert any other stories that might give provisional meaning to my life and enable me to carry on for another day. We promise to give up career, financial success, any of the hiding places that might suggest that the bear is right after all. If that paschal story is not true, then our lives have no meaning at all and 'we are of all people the most to be pitied.' (I Cor 15:19)

This is not easy. We are children of modernity and we have been formed by its stories and have shared its dreams. I know, for example, that I myself am more like the bear than the nun. My instinctive responses are more often that of the solitary self than the brother. I know that I have barely begun the process of being reborn. My imagination is but half reshaped. Waiting at the bus stops in Rome and looking at the posters, I see myself.

From this I draw two conclusions. First of all, that at least I can share with my contemporaries a struggle to lose the mask of the bear and acquire a human face. If I did not share this struggle, then I would have nothing to say in response to the question: 'What is the sense of human life today?' The religious is not a celestial being, who has escaped modernity, but one whose vows have made the tussle to be new inevitable, inescapable. We share with other people the pangs of rebirth. If we are honest about our struggles, then they may come to share our hope.

Secondly, because it is hard, then we must really dedicate ourselves to building communities in which this new paschal life is possible. A religious community needs to be more than a place where we can eat our meals, say a few prayers and come to sleep every night. It is a place of death and resurrection, in which we help each other to become new. I have come to like the idea of religious life

as an ecosystem, a concept that I have developed elsewhere. ('Religious Vocations: Leaving behind the Usual Signs of Identity', supra, pp. 189 209, at pp. 206 209.) An ecosystem is what enables strange forms of life to flourish. Every strange form of life needs its ecosystem. This is especially true for the young who now come to religious life, often only recently come to faith in God. A rare frog cannot live and reproduce and have a future unless it has all the necessary elements of its ecosystem: a pond, shade, various plants, lots of mud, and other frogs. To be a religious is to choose a strange form of life, and we each will need our sustaining environment: prayer, silence, community. Otherwise we will not thrive. So a good superior is an ecologist who helps his brethren build the necessary environments in which they may thrive. But ecosystems are not little prisons which cut us off from the modern world. An ecosystem allows a form of life to flourish and react creatively with other forms of life.

We need ecosystems that sustain in us that sense of paschaltime, the rhythm of the liturgical year which carries us from Advent to Pentecost. We need communities that are marked by its rhythms, by its patterns of feasting and fasting. We need communities in which we do not simply rush through a few Psalms before leaving for work, but where we are sustained as people who even in the wilderness may finally come to praise. We need to build communities in which we can share our faith, and share our despair, so that we bring each other through the wilderness. We need communities in which we may slowly be reborn as brothers and sisters, children of the living God.

The nun sings in the dark, as Dominic sang as he walked through the south of France. This is the Christian vocation. St Augustine told us: 'Walk along the way. Sing as you walk. That's what travellers do to ease the burden ... Sing a new song. Let no one sing old songs there. Sing the love songs of your homeland . . . Like travellers, sing, and they often sing at night. All the noises they hear around are frightening. Yet they sing even when they are afraid of bandits (F_narrationes in Psalmos 66.6). Or bears!