

Tablet - July 18, 2008



World Youth Day

Dear friends,

No one, not even the British Crown, can put on a show like the Catholic Church. A papal funeral or election or the World Youth Day here in Sydney becomes a global liturgy. Hostile press, complaining about costs and road closures, join the bandwagon and run headlines about the Pope working miracles with the weather and the euphoria of a city caught up in the youthful energy of God. The world stops and watches the ceremonies unfold (apparently) with religious perfection. More boats fill Sydney harbour for the pope than for the Australian centennial celebrations. The non-believer and cynics reluctantly feel moved by what they don't believe in. Politicians declare that faith is real. It is a brave critic who voices dissent to such a populace. And there truly is grace at work in the numbers, hectic schedules and the over-stimulation of it all.

It is the Church's audaciousness that takes one's breath away. As the pews of former Christendom continue to empty, the piazzas can still be filled with enthusiastic young people who are oblivious to the criticisms leveled against the institution they feel triumphantly they belong to. There is rich contradiction everywhere. A papacy that advocates restoration of the Tridentine rite shares limelight with rapping priests and rock concerts as well as Taize worship and Christian meditation.

The church has always been composed of self-contradictions striving to achieve the state of paradox. That perhaps is the charism of Catholicism as it tirelessly tries to be truly catholic, inclusive rather than just another sect. Contradiction is irrational and leads to conflict and exclusion. Paradox is the portal of mystery and the life-blood of unity. And, however rarely and unpredictably realized it may be, one has to keep on trying for it or give up on the project of Church altogether. As the post-modern philosophers say there is always the possibility of the impossible and World Youth Day, true to its name, has become a kind of post-modern fiesta as well as an enriching global catechesis. The infinite connectivity of the internet, where everything can be linked to everything else, seems to have become flesh momentarily in the streaming video of the urban confluence of cultures and languages.

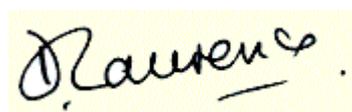
Yet (an annoying little voice reminds us) the role of the crowd in the gospels is always to be wrong. The paradox glimpsed in these contradictions is deep and anarchic. As the pope was welcomed in Sydney Harbour some organisers of the WYD Christian Meditation Centre took the Day to a meditation group in a women's prison a few miles away. Cardinal Pell had visited the prison some months ago and the genuine kindness of his presence with them was still lifting their oppressed spirits. Another ecclesiastical contradiction. Pilloried by the liberals, he is loved by the homeless men he visits regularly or the prisoners he does not forget.

The women inmates, like monks, make much of small things, the issues and struggles of their enclosed cloister. Like the Little Flower some of them have plunged deep. They understand when you say that, like Therese, they can find their vocation loving the world, hidden with Christ in God, at the heart of the Church. Cardinal Pell proclaimed at the opening mass that for these few days the centre of the Church was Sydney. True, one feels that. But it is no less centred in this small group of broken and excluded women who were so happy, so unenvious, to hear news of the euphoric events outside.

I spoke about the prison to someone later. She said she had always had a terror of going inside a prison. I could only say for me it was a grace in paradox: flashes of divine goodness in places the world punitively labels bad and unforgiveable.

Yes, God also manifests in the young and beautiful as well as the broken and unattractive. But faith always scratches below the surface of things. A group of young East Timorese came to meditate in the church and sang for us afterwards. I asked one pilgrim what he did back home and was pulled up by his saying 'nothing'. He stayed at home with his family struggling to put food on the table. He had been forced to give up high school because there was no money for education. All day he was jostling and joking with young people from many countries, sharing a common faith but a very different and unequal lot in life. One church, one faith, one Lord but not yet one world. It is life's contradictions that make judgment so difficult. 'Do not judge,' the Lord said. The same contradictions mean we can never fully believe our own rhetoric or trust our own successes without succumbing to the temptation to power. After all, 'where two or three are gathered in my Name, I am with you,' is really what justifies World Youth Day.

Much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Lawrence" in a cursive, slightly slanted script. There is a small horizontal line under the "e" at the end of the name.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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