

## THE CHILD JESUS ... THE EMPTIED GOD

If you have faith, you will learn the value of a suffering and hidden life, for it is to this that you are called by the very name you bear – the Child Jesus, the world's saviour, the emptied God.



When I first read these words they struck me like lightning. I found them one evening (I think it was a winter's evening, but I'm not certain of that). What I do know for sure is exactly where I was standing when I read them — in the novitiate community room at New Sharon, at the cabinets along the wall, sorting through the various papers piled there. I was a novice, examining a vocation brochure from our then English Province, feeling startled and disturbed by the words they had chosen to help young women like myself discern a call to the Society. The year must have been late 1965 or early 1966. I didn't realize then that these were, for the most part, Cornelia Connelly's own words to her newly forming community.

I never forgot the words or the feelings that came with them. At first I was afraid. "What am I getting myself into?" I wondered. Fear yielded to curiosity, followed by a sense of clarity and direction, and the recognition that God's ways are not my ways. In fact, I began to feel hopeful, attracted by the words, and lured further into the deepening mystery of God. I think I took the words to heart then and there and let them become a touchstone and guide in subsequent years.

Recently, I heard an echo of that experience at a meeting with the core team of the SHCJ Associates in the American Province. We were talking about articles for their coming bulletin and one person said “Why doesn’t someone write an article about the poverty of God?” She was more theologically astute than the rest of us, and we looked at her with a collective sense of puzzlement. Some one of us eventually asked the obvious question, “Why?” “Because that’s what the Child Jesus is all about,” she said. “The Child Jesus is the symbol of the poverty and powerlessness of God.” Then she went on to speak of various contemporary theologians who have developed that line of thought in their work. “Why don’t you write that article?” we all said, and she explained that other commitments just didn’t permit her to right now, and then she sort of passed the buck to me.

This conversation has stayed with me, just as the words on the vocation brochure had stayed with me years earlier, and I saw their obvious connection to each other in the sentiments that Paul expresses in *Philippians 2* –

Christ, though in the image of God, didn't deem equality with God something to be clung to — but instead became completely empty and took on the image of oppressed humankind ...



I suppose these two memories have been particularly active of late because they have something to say to me at a major point of personal transition — my own shift from the northern hemisphere to the southern, from Washington, DC to Santiago, Chile. As I gear-up and let-go once again, I have the hunch that this hemispheric shift is not just a matter of geography, culture and language. At 65, I suspect that it might also be about shifting from one time of life to another. Although my present energies and interests don’t suggest that I’m ready to let go of the upper reaches of middle-aged vigor just yet, I do realize that another stage of life is on the horizon. A fourth age follows the third age in our first world context of increased longevity. And two recent stays with the Society’s most elderly and vulnerable members, in Rosemont and Harrogate, have invited my attention toward this mysterious fourth age of life. In my older sisters I see a striking gratitude. It flows forth spontaneously and I take it as the fruit of a lifetime of seeking and finding God in all things. But I also see diminishment in the concrete, sometimes in a gentle form and at other times harshly and to an extreme degree. It’s there — irritatingly, irrevocably — as

impairment or loss of sight, hearing, speech, mobility, memory, physical grace and beauty ... as disease, restriction, dependence, and need for total care ... And of course I have a slew of questions about what is really going on in the human person beneath the outward expressions of increasing poverty and powerlessness. Are there energies at that stage that I know nothing about? Is there an unconscious yet radical clinging in trust to God, whose face seems even more hidden than the hiddenness imposed by retirement? And is there also a quiet fullness, a loving presence too simple and constant for words? Are people of advanced years absorbed dynamically in the progressive letting go that costs “not less than everything” — not an intentional, calculated letting go, but something they’re hard-wired for, something total and relentless as death? How might others support and accompany people in the later stages of this process? Can *Philippians* 2 be a most reliable guide at this stage of life, like the lamp on the miner’s hat, like the canary in the coal mine?

... born into the human condition, found in the likeness of a human being,  
Jesus was thus humbled — obediently accepting death ...

I read not long ago in a scholarly journal of spirituality that the Greek word “kenosis” really refers to the commonplace action of “scouring” — as one would scour the inside of a pot to free it of any substance that might be sticking to it. Is this the central work of the later stages of life, this being cleaned and scoured and shined? Are increasing poverty and powerlessness the signs that a person is deeply engaged in this essential “activity”, mysteriously passive though it may seem to be?

Jorge Luis Borges, the 20th Century Argentinian writer who spent many years of his life in total blindness, wrote in a poem called “Boast of Quietness”:

... My humanity is in feeling we are all voices of the same poverty ...  
Time is living in me.  
More silent than my shadow, I pass through the loftily covetous multitude.  
They are indispensable, singular, worthy of tomorrow.  
My name is someone and anyone.  
I walk slowly, like one who comes from so far away he doesn't  
Expect to arrive.

I like to imagine the Christ of *Philippians 2* learning Borges' words, and saying with him, and with all the rest of us, "My humanity is in feeling we are all voices of the same poverty". Is the "same poverty" the poverty of God? are we all voices of the poverty of God? How do I give voice to God's poverty? How do you? So many questions! so few answers!



In between my visits to Rosemont and Harrogate I came across an article called *Have An Empty Christmas* and the unlikely combination of words in the title caught my attention. As I read it I thought "Eureka!" The man who wrote this article (Charles Moore of the Bruderhof Communities) must be in touch with those theologians of the poverty of God that I had learned of a few months ago. Maybe he is one of those theologians. He seems to know all about "the Child Jesus ... the emptied God" of the 1960's vocation brochure, and he says that this Child is more apt to question our answers than answer our questions:

The helpless child Jesus keeps us from turning God into an instrument to serve our interests. God does not seek to display his divinity, but to be nothing. He is neither useful nor "helpful." He came and still comes, not to solve our problems or answer our questions or fulfil our needs or bless our endeavors, but to expose our problems, to question our answers, to be our need, and point us to his kingdom. In Christ, God enters time and space to turn our world upside down and inside out. "Valleys are made high, mountains are laid low." We are left bewildered, undone.

Moore's message in this article is that we can miss the point when we fill the celebration of Christmas with things of every kind — gifts, decorations, foods, music, greetings, special events, and so on. When we over-spend, over-schedule and over-eat, we can fail to grasp the significance of God's coming among us as one who is poor and powerless. He admits that this sounds like pretty "terrible news" before it turns into "glad tidings".

The Ground of our being and of all that exists is not able to help us on our terms. Christmas is ... a humiliating fact ... The God who saves is beggarly; he is the supremely Empty One. God exists in weakness and comes to those who reach up to him with empty hands. Such a God is an embarrassment, not just to the Herods of this world, but to all who are enamored of themselves and their own potency.

Etty Hillesum saw into this mystery of God's poverty as she lived out her young life in the context of Hitler's occupation of Holland and his systematic elimination of the Jews there. A Jew herself, she had little or nothing to do with the Child Jesus, but she learned the poverty of God in her own school of suffering. In her journal entry of July 12, 1942, she prays directly and tenderly to God:

One thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: that you cannot help us, that we must help you to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of you, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much you yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible. You cannot help us, but we must help you and defend your dwelling place inside us to the last .... I shall try to make you at home always.

Her two-fold insight, that the helpless God needs our help and that we are God's dwelling place, led her to the limits of compassion and solidarity into the darkness of Auschwitz where she was exterminated with millions of others. Her tenacious witness to the loving presence of God, even in that overpowering darkness, is light for our time.

To our horror, however, our time continues to know the evil of genocide. As recently as two days ago, I happened to hear a radio interview about a coming performance of Verdi's *Requiem*, intended as a fundraiser for the people of the Darfur region of Sudan. The interviewer engaged the musical conductor and a relief worker from Khartoum in a conversation about the sense of helplessness that the rest of the world feels in the face of such inhumanity. He pointed out that for the victims' sake people certainly want the violence to end, but they also want relief from their own feelings of powerlessness, isolation, wealth or indifference with regard to this prolonged atrocity. The conductor explained that the music of the *Requiem* moves from the dread expressed in the opening *Dies Irae* into an uplifting sense of joy in the *Sanctus*. He hopes that these musical statements will help people feel both the terror of Darfur's agony and the hopefulness inherent in it, so that they may be moved from paralysis to empathetic response.

When the relief worker was pressed to say how she finds hope in the midst of such incredible

suffering, she spoke of the smiles of the children and their inextinguishable spirit. The conductor echoed her response, saying that the one place where relief and release are present in our world is in the spirit of the child, a spirit he believes is in each one of us all the time and captured in the *Sanctus* of the *Requiem*.



As I listened to this interview my own thoughts shot across time from the children of Darfur to the mystery of the Child Jesus to ponder the various meanings of our Society's central symbol. The Child Jesus is not only the emptied God, but also our well spring of life, hope and joy, our irrepres-ible source of energy to begin again ... and again. Here, finally, are the "glad tidings" Charles Moore said we would find if we accept the "terrible news" that the Child is telling us about God's pover-ty and our own. I hope to explore and savor this good news at another time and under a south-ern cross, once my northern dwelling has been emptied and swept clean.

Because of this, God highly exalted Christ  
and gave to Jesus the name above every other name,  
so that at the name of Jesus every knee must bend in the heavens,  
on the earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God:  
Jesus Christ reigns supreme!