

# The Language of Christian Experience

by Nicholas Lash

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'The proposition that is closest to the very centre of our common faith is that he who loses his life shall save it. It applies not only to the material dispositions of our egoism, but to the spiritual universe we construct to secure ourselves against uncertainty.'<sup>1</sup> I am an inveterate optimist, and one of my current optimisms is the thought that, just because it is now being forced to embrace the truth of that proposition, English catholicism may be on the verge of an exhilarating breakthrough. We English catholics are apt to envy more favoured countries than our own, where bishops, priests and people were better prepared for that burgeoning of new life in the Church to which the Vatican Council stands as mid-wife. In many places ecclesiastical structures were already more flexible, liturgical and ecumenical sensitivity was already awakened, pastoral practice was less heavily complacent. And yet—is there not a danger (I am ridiculously overgeneralizing in order to try to focus the point I want to make) that, *because* of these things, the *aggiornamento* in such countries might entail little more than an invigorating rearrangement of the ecclesiastical furniture? In our own country, where structures were so rigid, where clergy and devout laity tended to live (with the 'catholic half' of their minds) in unruffled isolation from so many of the real issues that rack humanity and the Church of Christ, where theology hardly existed until recently, where '*pastorale*' is significantly untranslatable, where liturgical immobility made Pius XII's application of the brakes in 1958 look like dangerous novelty—in this country we are certain to be spared a superficial renewal. The very fact that some people see reform as a minimal updating of an immutable complex of structures and attitudes, while others see it as something not slightly but totally different, was bound to provoke a crisis. And so here we are: many of us frightened, many intolerant, many suspicious, many exasperated, all of us together manifesting that combination of creaking joints and crotchety conversation which, in the individual, we associate with senility and the onset of death (and readers of *New Blackfriars* do not need to be reminded of the appropriate term with which to describe the state of a body shortly after death). So it looks as if 'the spiritual universe' we had constructed 'to secure ourselves

<sup>1</sup>*God is a New Language*. By Dom Sebastian Moore, O.S.B. Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967, 12s. 6d., p. 146.

against uncertainty' is dying; as if the life of the Church in this country as we have recently and quite concretely known it, is about to be lost. To the outsider, this may look like 'the end of the Roman Catholic Church'. But to us, who hold that 'the proposition that is closest to the very centre of our common faith is that he who loses his life shall save it', death is not the *end*, but the permanent condition necessary for the emergence of new life. What else does it mean when we say that the Church on earth, and the individual in the Church, is 'made like to him, sharing his death and resurrection, until we shall share his reign'?<sup>2</sup> What else is it that we celebrate whenever we meet to celebrate Mass?

Take the business of the 'simple faithful' for example. From my own few years in an industrial parish, I have acquired an enormous confidence in the simplicity (i.e. wholeness, directness) of faith of the ordinary catholic. I tend to suspect that someone who says: 'because their faith is simple, it must on no account be disturbed' (which is roughly what the Grand Inquisitor said), is talking, albeit unconsciously, about the fragility of his own Christian belief. Of course it is cruel and pointless unnecessarily to raise questions with which people cannot cope. But are there not certain *necessary* (and disturbing) questions about the agony of human existence today which *must* be raised if 'Christian witness' is to be a fact, and not a hollow slogan? Certainly, in writing *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI seemed to think so.

Faith is the response, in the conjunction of the human question, of death, of hope, of meaning, of love, to the light of the gospel which questions our complacency and comforts our despair. And if Christian faith is essentially 'Abrahamic', if the condition of its very survival is the preparedness permanently to go out into unknown territory, then must we not say that, in all of us, there is a hard core of *unbelief*, reluctant to 'let go'? What is the *ground* of our belief, as catholics, in England, today; what is it upon which our faith *rests*? (And I must repeat my conviction that the element of true belief in the ordinary Catholic is quite strong enough to 'take' a disquieting answer to that question.) Is it the dark problem of our own existence, individually and corporately, as that problem is, *in us*, transfigured with the light that streams from Calvary? Is our faith a personal commitment to the living person of God in Christ, and therefore to the construction of his Body, his brotherhood? Or is its 'objective pole' a set of facts and truths that stand unmoved 'outside' our common questioning and concern? It cannot be insisted upon too strongly that in the measure that the ground of our Christian certainty is anything other than the God who speaks in Christ crucified and who breathes his Spirit as the life of brotherhood in the risen Christ, then our faith is not *Christian* faith at all. Dom Sebastian (and since I am meant to be reviewing his book, it is high time he

<sup>2</sup>*Lumen Gentium*, art. 7.

came back into the discussion) puts it this way: 'The process of reification shows itself in the situation created by a divided Christendom. The Great Church which in this confused situation is the home and custodian of Christian certainties, comes to fulfil this function by emphasizing the security that she offers to her fortunate inmates. And thus the Catholic contrasts sharply with his bewildered separated brethren as having his journey through life neatly mapped out. An apologetic is worked out that does not rely on the central Christian proposition of life through death, that eschews as hopelessly vague the apostolic statement that we know we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren, and appeals exclusively to the Petrine claims and those descriptions of the Church that are concerned with her institutional character.'<sup>3</sup>

I suggested earlier that the Church in this country, as we have known her, is dying. But she is not *petering out*; the conflicts in the Church have all the marks of agony, and these are the right marks. It is highly paradoxical, but true, that because the Church as we have known her (i.e. experienced her) is dying in a particular way, I am daily more certain that the Church as we *confess* her (in the death and resurrection of Christ, and the outpouring of the Spirit) is very much alive. Certainly it is true that conflict *in itself* is sterile, evil and unproductive. But the death of Christ, considered *in itself*, was one of the most sterile, evil and unproductive events in human history. Yet 'Was the Messiah not bound to suffer thus before entering upon his glory?'.<sup>4</sup> The many attempts that are currently being made to diminish conflict in the name of charity seem (unknowingly) to wish to reduce the ontological *process* of our redemption to a matter of good manners. But are we too not bound to suffer thus before entering upon his glory? Certainly we all need more patience, more tolerance, more kindness, more sensitivity in regard to each other; certainly we all need more charity. But first we need an increase (a *corporate* increase) in that living faith whose flowering will be that charity. We need an increase in *Christian* faith (that Pauline faith which includes the virtue of hope). We need to deepen our lived apprehension (articulate in the measure of our learning) of the Father, Son and Spirit who ground, activate, interpret and beckon our *human* existence. If we have not got what Dom Sebastian would probably call the 'God-business' straight, not only in our heads, but in our hearts, our bodies, our marriages, our politics, then there is little point in trying to do anything else. 'The gospel message is not about another kind of life, called "*eternal* life". It is the statement that in Christ life is eternal.'<sup>5</sup> 'The Christian mind is open to all human experience, exposed to death as the abiding human reality,

<sup>3</sup> p. 147.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 24, v. 26.

<sup>5</sup> p. 112.

and knows God as liberation and light in this context of human insolvency.’<sup>6</sup>

I hope that any form-critic, reading these sweeping and imprecise remarks of mine, will be generous enough not to subject them to the canons appropriate to formal theological statement. They are simply an attempt to catch the flavour of a book which appropriately defies categorization. Appropriately, because we too easily try to ‘deal with’ the *one* Word of God on the *divide et impera* principle. If, we feel, we can get one part of the total truth clear in our minds, then we shall have got somewhere. But the sum of the parts is an impoverishment of the whole so considerable as frequently to amount to falsehood, and any attempt to say the *whole* thing, to communicate the whole thing, is bound to be somewhat lacking in precision (as St Paul so often discovered).

I have not really tried to review Dom Sebastian’s book. I gave that up some time ago as a hopeless task. I have simply tried to put down on paper some of the reactions which were provoked in me on reading it (and to do so as quickly as possible, in order to preserve, if not coherence, at least authenticity). If I say that it is the best book on death I have read for a long time, I shall mislead the reader. If I say that it is the best book on the Trinity I have read for a long time, I shall irritate the author. It is unquestionably an important book and, I hope, a contagious one. ‘For the Christian community has still to rise to the awful challenge, so inadequately though so courageously met by the modernists and in our time by the Bishop of Woolwich, of conceiving of the new life in Christ simply as a life that has come to be in us as men and women, while maintaining with the strictest orthodoxy the gratuitous and gracious nature of the divine initiative that has brought this life into being. We must learn to say to our time and of ourselves in this time: “ We know that we have passed from death to life, *because we love the brethren*”.’<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> p. 128.

<sup>7</sup> p. 137.

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