

# Comment

*'This is the time of tension between dying and birth'*  
(T.S. Eliot: Ash Wednesday VI)

In the year 1730 two inventive, aristocratic canons of the Premonstratensian abbey of Steingaden, in upper Bavaria, whiled away an afternoon by fashioning a figure of the suffering Christ. This rather rickety icon was put together from the fragments of two other statues. The resulting pastiche was to be carried in the Good Friday processions, a popular feature of Bavarian devotional life of the time. The statue proved so successful with the people that they became excessively moved and excited with feelings of pity. The cultivated canons, formed in the spirit of the Catholic Enlightenment, disapproved of such enthusiasm and hastily disposed of the statue in the loft of a local innkeeper, from where it was rescued by a devout farmer's wife who took it home and installed it in a shack on her land. In 1738 the statue was observed to be shedding tears, and was soon the focus of enthusiastic pilgrimages from all over Bavaria, Austria, Hungary, Bohemia and Moravia. After seven years of this, the canons of Steingaden decided to invest some of their considerable financial resources to replace the hut with a large church to house the miraculous image. The result is one of the most stunning examples of high baroque art. Nobody could fail to be moved by the glorious symphony of colour, proportion, form and symmetry, which was designed to give a brief glimpse of heaven in the midst of an Alpine wilderness.

The key to why so many countless thousands made their difficult way to the *Wieskirche*, or 'the church in the meadow' as it is still called, lies in the decorative scheme executed by Johann Baptist Zimmerman, the painter. The *Wies* is an answer to the cry for forgiveness and pardon. It is designed as a monument to reconciliation. Zimmerman's masterpiece is the ceiling fresco which depicts the day of judgement not as a 'day of wrath and weeping', but as a glorious Easter of Christ's mercy. The symbols of judgement all feature in the composition, but their presentation is subtly nuanced. The throne of judgement is there but empty; the angels stand by with their trumpets of judgement, which remain unsounded; a serene and youthful Christ comes from the heavens resting on a rainbow, the symbol of peace and of his fidelity to his promises; a radiant cross, the sign of his love for us, is held aloft by a beaming angel; the fiery sword of judgement appears, but it is balanced by the olive-branch of peace. This presentation of the superabundant, exuberant, irrepressible, grace and mercy of God was the response of the canons of Steingaden to the pious expectations of their people. The possibility of mercy and the vocation to reconciliation redeem lives, characterised by sacrifice and suffering, from the nihilism of pessimism.

It seems to be generally agreed today that the sacrament of reconciliation is in something of a crisis. It is suggested that fewer Catholics approach the sacrament, and that those who do come to confession do so less often. Various reasons have been advanced for this. It has been claimed that generally we are losing our sense of sin. Anybody who has exercised the sacramental ministry of reconciliation will find this hard to credit. It can

come as something of a surprise, especially to those unduly weighed down by the fashion for moral pessimism in our time, to discover how good people are; this is one of the gifts penitents bring to their confessors. It is difficult to accept that we minister to a wicked and amoral generation; many people see a vision of the integrated life but despair of approaching such a standard. A fairly common experience of many confessors must be that their penitents are sterner judges in their own cases than those appointed to be such by the Church.

We are sometimes told that the world in which we live has no sense of God. Again, anybody who has ministered in a parochial community, even an inner-city community with all of the implications that term contains, will find this hard to accept. The sense of the divine, the *mysterium tremendum*, has not been banished from our society, indeed it is proving to be exceptionally fertile. The problem of the religious life in our cities lies not in an absence of a sense of the mystery of God, but rather in a sense of there being too many gods. The world in which we live often appears to be too full of gods. A world that is too full of gods gives rise to extravagant religious sensibilities, superstition and, above all, to a profound pessimism.

The *Wieskirche* was built during one of the most theocentric centuries since the thirteenth. It has to be seen against the backdrop of both Jansenism and the Catholic Enlightenment. Both were attempts to spiritualize religion. When the Church is at her most insecure she is often at her most demanding. Whilst the *dévots* may gain some reassurance from casting themselves in the mould of the 'holy remnant', those whose education or social circumstances have ill-equipped them for fluency in the language of commitment, have no forms in which to sound the jarringly ambiguous notes of failure and disorder. As Pascal observed in the seventeenth century, radical pessimism with regard to our own sinfulness leads to moral relativism, the undermining of law, and disrespect for authority. What is often presented as a theological critique of the moral climate of our time may offer less of a solution to our dilemma since, paradoxically, it may form too large a part of the problem.

The alarming state of the the sacrament of reconciliation does not stem from a reluctance 'to do' penance, but rather from a deeply rooted doubt about the possibility of forgiveness. The challenge facing the ministers of reconciliation is to cast off the temptation to preach morality, and to commit themselves to preaching faith. The canons of Steingaden provided a theological space in the glories of the *Wieskirche* for the expression of this desire for repentance and reconciliation. It may be that such a liturgical and spiritual space is necessary for our contemporaries, for those who experience such a deep mis-match between the structures and vocabulary which the Church offers them, and their own experiences of failure and guilt.

A visitor to Mount Athos once asked a monk 'What do you monks do here all day?' The monk answered 'We fall and we get up again, we fall and we get up again, we fall and we get up again...' The fragmented figure at the heart of the *Wieskirche* was the focus of all those who had fallen and were looking to how to get up again. Augustine speaks of the Church as the inn of the Good Samaritan, the crisis of reconciliation suggests that there are many empty beds in it.