

CHRISTIAN RADICALISM

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Ritual Thought

My first thoughts, on this your graduation day, are most ordinary ones indeed. You hear them all the time. You will say "corny", and you will be right. But I will voice them out anyway: Where will you be five years from now? Or ten? Or fifteen? Or even next year? And will the education you have earned at this institution — at great expense to your parents and trouble to yourselves — make a difference at all to your lives and the lives of others? And will that difference be for the better? Or for the worse?

These are, as I said, very ordinary thoughts. Prosaic. Trite. Expectable. But ancient. As ancient as those expressed in an initiation rite, ages and ages ago when mankind was young — and a wise old *shaman* spoke to young initiates of duties and responsibilities they were to take up as adults, of the ways and traditions of the tribe of which they were henceforth to be full-fledged members.

It is a ritual thus, that we go through here, usual, commonplace. And it is ritual questions we ask, also usual, commonplace, but for all that, necessary. And not at all irrelevant (unless, of course, you want to make them so because the future, yours, the community's, the people's, the nation's, is never an irrelevancy — for the mature citizen, for the real Christian.) And that maturity, that Christianity — I take for granted here.

So, though we go through rituals today, I trust we will not be indulging in irrelevancies; nor in asking questions about your future, in fantasies. For the future I am concerned with is the future that stems from the present. And it is a present that does not allow for an escape into unrealistic dreaming. True, you are young. And you must dream. But there is dreaming and dreaming. And it is the kind of dreaming, built on reality, not on sheer fantasy, that I would like to dwell on today.

Today

The reality of today. Or realities. 1983 *Anno Domini*. The 462nd since "the Discovery of the Philippines". The 85th since "the First Republic". The 38th since "Independence."

*Commencement address to the 1983 graduates of the Ateneo de Davao University, Davao City.

ence." The 11th since "the New Society." The 2nd since "the Fourth—or Fifth? — Republic." It is strange that all those labels are just that, labels. And labels that cloak, not reveal, the reality they are supposed to name. And that, my dear graduates, is the first fact we will note about today's reality: its *as if* character.

The second is like the first. If the first fact does violence to our sense of the honest and the true, the second does violence too — because it is violence. Militarization and counter-militarization — these are the order of the day. Not one day passes but we hear of murders, of killings, not the usual ones perpetuated by common criminals but by those who are supposed to ensure "peace and order" for the people on the one hand, and on the other hand, by those who are supposed to be "the liberators of the oppressed." In short, there is a war going on, a real, shooting war. And despite the high and noble intents claimed by the combatants, it is directed against the people. A fratricidal war.

The third fact is born from the first two: fear, uncertainty. In the atmosphere of easy suspicion under which we live, and the easy charge of being "subversive", of being a "rebel" or, contrariwise, of being "a hindrance to the revolution," "an enemy of the people" — for so anyone who dares to refuse to be cowed by fear is labeled — the ordinary citizen cannot but fear. And then, the most common response to enervating fear is apathy, unconcern. This state of things, this reality does not bode well for the health of ourselves as a nation — and as individuals.

That, in great part, is the reality. Our reality. Or at least my reading of it. You can contest it. You can deny it. You can analyze it differently. But whatever you do, whether you agree or not, you will have to do more than look at the surface reality I have focused on. For the untruth, the violence, the fear, problematic as they are, I am afraid, only the symptoms of a far more serious sickness. There is a deeper reality.

Roots

This deeper reality I speak of is more daunting — a reality that will not go away by our simply naming its components, by talking about them — or re-labeling them. Because they are the hard roots of the surface reality we have just reviewed: poverty — endemic, destructive of dignity; injustice — all-pervasive, corrupting both perpetrators and victims; and selfishness — institutionalized, glorified as virtue. That is the reality you are going into and for which your education, presumably, has prepared you. That is the reality about which I asked in the beginning whether you would make a difference to it, in it, at all by what you will be, by what you will be doing after today.

So let me ask this further question: If this in truth is the reality you are to live under as adult men and women; if you are to be part of that troubled—and troubling — society; if you are to be responsible, concerned citizens, cognizant of your rights and duties and fulfilling them precisely because you are citizens; and if you are also men and women of faith to whom justice and charity are not simply private virtues but social as well, having

much to do with our common striving for the good of all; what will be your response to the challenging demands of our reality and the problems that we see mark it *and* make it what it is? This question and your differing responses to it are no longer going to be discussed and analyzed under classroom conditions. They will have to be lived. And the living — that is going to be your task and lot henceforth. Out there.

Radicality

The living, if it is to be an answer at all, if it is to correspond with all you have learned so far from textbooks, will have to go in only one direction. It has to go at those roots. In a word it has to be literally *radical*. The term is fast becoming another of those labels that hide, rather than reveal truth, reality, meaning. Just a few weeks ago, I was reading a commentary on the Catholic Bishop's latest joint pastoral letter, and the author of the piece noted how not one of the bishops of the Philippines had yet "gone radical." It wasn't hard figuring out what he meant by his statement: No bishop has yet come out in support of bloody revolution. He was right in the narrow way he understood the term. But is that what it means? To be radical in the Philippines today means to be for violence, for bloodshed, for revolution? I am not too sure.

To be radical, according to the ordinary dictionary sense, is to depart considerably from the usual, the traditional; to make extreme changes in existing views, habits, conditions or institutions. If that definition holds, I see nothing radical about violence: Countering violence with violence is as old as the hills, dating back in fact to our beginnings in the jungles. Neither do I see anything radical with the ends the champions of revolution propose: Replacing a totalitarian system of government with another just as totalitarian is no change at all. And, yes, we will have to say too, apathy, unconcern, as responses to violence, or criticizing and talking but doing nothing — passive acceptance of things as they are — these are no way radical either. So what *is* radical? *Who* is radical?

Gospel Radicalism

A young man put it to me very simply once: "The true radical is the one who lives by the Sermon on the Mount." That definition does not sound too exciting. And you may laugh at it, reject it out of hand. I didn't when I first heard it. If it had been said by a priest, a holy *manang*, a professional *cursillista* or charismatic, I might have dismissed it as conventional religion at best, as pious dribble at worst. But the young man who spoke those words had known war and violence, insurgency and counter-insurgency, and had gone through such soul-searching as many a thoughtful young man or woman does today not only in regard to his mode of thinking but as well in the style of life he and his

family were to live. And knowing all that, I saw his acceptance of the Sermon on the Mount as his charter of radicality made plenty of sense.

If his words still strike you, as I said above, as sheer "pious dribble," try doing what he did: Try giving up great opportunities for economic and social preferment for a life given over to service, often thankless service, of the needy; try putting everything you have in working mightily for justice and turning the other cheek when you are slapped for your efforts; try hacking away at entrenched oppression and exploitation and keeping at it even when you see no results, or when there are, seeing them brought to naught because to the powers-that-be they are "subversive"; try facing the nozzle end of a gun held by one who looks at you as a hindrance to his ends of power mainly because you are for peace, truth, justice, and still go on working for those ends, come what may; try in the face of frustration after depressing frustration to continue believing in the human capability to find answers to the apparently impossible, to go beyond "last resort" solutions; try walking the way of peace when that way leads through violence, hatred, the threat of death — for yourself.

I don't think this particular young man can be easily ignored, his Christianity dismissed as "opiate". For if there is anything that will go to the roots of our untruths, our violences, our fears, do something drastic to our poverties, our injustices, our selfishness, it is his formula. Or rather, Christ's. We talk of options a lot of these days, of alternatives, ideologies, approaches to change. And when we do, we think in terms of huge systemic, political, and economic structures like capitalism and communism and the like. We debate and argue and fight among ourselves about which system will best bring about the millenium of peace and prosperity to our poor benighted country. We talk about reform, renewal, restructuring. We talk about radicalism.

The meaning I give radicalism, I am fully aware, is not acceptable to many of you here. Events in this part of the country in the recent past only serve to strengthen the definition of radicality in terms of violence and the destruction of present oppressive structures of society through violence. But that is exactly the point: Change there has to be, but if the change we envision is to be truly radical, the methods and means we use should also share in the quality of radicality of our ends, the process of bringing about change must carry in itself, if only in germ, the radically new structures we aim to build. The seeds sown, the harvest reaped, cannot, as the folk saying goes, be two different things. Neither can the manner, the *how* of the sowing and the reaping.

Hope

These are heavy thoughts for a joyful event such as today's. So let me end on an up-beat note. And that note is hope. Our young man is not an isolated "voice crying in the wilderness." There are thousands like him, I am happy to say, little people, the majority of them, working away at their Christianity in the midst of killing and blood-

shed, rapine and fear, and consuming selfishness. They are our hope. Though unnoticed, though unsung, they will make a difference in their attempting to go beyond mere labels to the radical core of their Christianity. With them striving, plugging away, suffering in the manner of the Preacher of the Sermon on the Mount, whatever happens in the future to us as a people, they will make a difference to that future.

You too will make a difference, certainly, whatever you do, whatever you will be after today. I only pray it will be the kind that those little people I spoke of represent — the kind that will enlarge our hope. From these rites, then, from our ritual questions and our ritual answers, we pass on from symbol to reality. In that reality, let us make — hope.

*EX UMBRIS ET IMAGINIBUS:**
THE CONVERSION OF JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

MIGUEL A. BERNAD S.J.

I

When the Catholics of London decided to have a memorial service for Cardinal Newman a few days after his death, they invited the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster, Edward Manning, to preach the eulogy. Manning was then an old man. He had been a great archbishop in many respects. He was particularly good to the poor. But there was in his character a streak of pettiness caused perhaps by envy of the great Newman. And so, he had not been Newman's friend. Indeed, he had been Newman's antagonist. He had tried to block Newman's progress, and in some cases had even conspired to try to destroy him. It is therefore all the more remarkable that when Newman died, Manning ended his eulogy of Newman in the following words:

We lost our greatest witness to the Faith and we are all poorer and lower by the loss. . . . He had committed the hitherto unpardonable sin in England. He had become Catholic as our fathers were. And yet for no one in our memory has such a heartfelt and loving veneration been poured out. Of this one proof is enough. Someone has said, whether Rome canonizes him or not, he will be canonized in the thoughts of pious people of many creeds in England.

The history of our land will hereafter record the name of John Henry Newman among the greatest of her people, as a confessor of the Faith, a great teacher of men, a preacher of justice, of piety, and of compassion. May we all

*Lecture delivered to undergraduates at Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro, 22 September 1983, as the closing lecture of the series on the 19th Century given by several professors and sponsored by Haggerty Hall.