

SHIMMERINGS OF THE FUTURE

It seems like this is exactly the period we needed to bring us to the beginning of Lent. Whoever it was that suggested that the theme of Lent this year had to do with social repentance, hit it "right on the nail head." This was a quarter in which we had a series of glimpses of the future that indicated with a kind of depth seriousness that we have not known before, what social repentance is all about. I do not teach the Niebuhr paper in RS-I the same way anymore. We talk about being the social pioneer that repents on behalf of society. There is a dimension of our own lives present in that kind of language that I have not felt being there prior to this quarter--a quarter of turning to the world and a quarter of turning to the church, not with our minds but with our whole being. I feel that this quarter in our work and in our struggles has been just one series of glimpses.

There are no direct images, but every once in awhile a little piece of image comes clear and is seen and then it kind of shimmers a little bit more. Then another little piece of image comes clear and it shimmers some more. Next time both of these little pieces comes clear at the same time and you begin to get a decent picture in your mind. Then it shimmers some more and every once in awhile, for just a half second, the whole picture shimmers into being and then goes away again. Glimpses, glimpses, glimpses ...and the future literally says, "Let me tell you..." and that's social repentance.

We found that songs we could hardly sing in the past we can really sing now. In fact, the song I have hated since 1970 has been "The King's Business." I couldn't stand that song. When somebody would suggest that we sing that song I'd leave the room. Then the next song I hated with an even greater degree of passion, was "My Consummation." That one just crucified me. Every time it happened I'd leave the room.

This quarter one of our interns was priesting breakfast; he had been meditating on the Dark Night of the Soul during the quarter. So he had us sing both of those songs and there wasn't anything I could say. I just had to let it happen. That's where the wonder came in and it was great. It was like that God lecture that we all did, you know that old, old mood. Nowadays you don't know quite what to say. You know that it's not the old mood that you're talking about, and it's not the new mood that you're talking about. You're talking about something else. I call it the "third mood." That's where we are these days. The fear of the old mood of collapse has been intensified or escalated. And the fascination of the new mood--of possibility--has been intensified or escalated. And the whole thing has turned transparent. We are in a third mood where we have been thrust into the depth of being as never before.

Let me say a little bit about the inkling we've had this quarter about the real--those shimmering images that just happen to appear and then go away. The image we had was that of "people do care!" People do care--the Mountain of Care--that's right. I don't see how they believed that until this quarter. I began to run into local man and found that he does care. Deep down in his being he does care.

The other night I had occasion to go to the Annual Dinner of the Houston Metropolitan Ministry. Five or six years ago the Council of Churches in Houston faced reality and went out of existence. At the same time a new thing came into being called the Houston Metropolitan Ministry, a co-operative group of concerned people living their religious heritage (Jews and Christians), who supported very project-oriented ministries to alleviate human need in the urban scene. Some of these things are on the edge, kind of the periphery of anything serious, but in Houston that thing is incredible. I was at their annual dinner and there were 600 people out for it. A third of them were Black, a quarter of them were Mexican-Americans. The place was tabled with people from synagogues, there were corporation executives, and there was local man there. They were all together in that room for one thing: concern for their community, concern for their dispossessed. It was a great evening. It made me stop and reflect about the fact that people do care. I could also see the People of God triangle. You've got historical Christianity, and you've got the ecumenical manifestation of the church up there on the top of that triangle. We've already said that ecumenics comes into being around action--or care, concern. That evening the newly elected President of that group got up and looked over the room (he was in city government) and he said, "You know, I've been trying to figure out what brings us together here. What is it that unites all these people together?" He paused and smiled, and said, "Well, I guess that everybody here has a streak of consciousness in him, and everybody in this room has a streak of care and concern for other human beings, and everybody in this room has a streak of human decency. I guess what brings us here together is that we are 'streakers'." It is true. Human beings do care.

Another event that happened to me this quarter was the LENS course. It does work! We have some regional people who raised this question before this quarter. But this quarter has been unbelievable. We had fifteen people from our parish through the LENS course. Mexican-Americans, Blacks, Texas red-necks--and we got them through the LENS course. I mean to tell you that we can't lose. That's exactly what they've been waiting for. They came back saying, "Okay, about this Uptown 5 thing, where do we start?" So we had a follow-up meeting at the House...one of these things where we sat around and swapped stories. It was an informal, relaxed thing where we made everybody feel right at home and let them follow their noses and see what happened. At the end of the meeting the fellow who was leading it said, "Well, we've been thinking that it would be good to have another LENS course in three weeks time. Does that sound like something we ought to do?" It was real quiet. Then this Mexican, who had gone through the LENS course without saying anything, spoke up and said, "If we do that, then maybe I could do some recruiting. Would that be okay?" Then a girl at the end of the table said, "I'll come back to one of these meetings on one condition: if we can use the methodology that we were taught."

This turn to the world...it got to us that this business about the ecumenical parish is real. Now we've got a huge map of Houston on the wall and we've drawn a box that represents our nuclear parish. It's a little bit lost in that huge urban spread, but it just so happens that one of the galaxy churches is just north of our parish. The other galaxy church is just south of our parish. And if you put those two parishes on top of our nuclear bi-parish, why you begin to see that a pretty good-size chunk of that city is

going to be cared for by forces already in existence. Then you begin to look at the other churches which are starting toward galaxies, and you imagine the parishes they are a part of. And the map of that huge urban complex begins to take on a new form. Instead of seeing by-ways, you begin to see a spirit community come out of that map. You begin to realize that the parish is exactly the kind of care needed for the world in which we live. That geography in which you live becomes my parish; you don't talk to the guy in the drugstore in the same way anymore. You don't fool around in your yard in the same way anymore. You are very conscious about the relationships in your community. Coming home, you take little side trips in order to see some of the other streets. It's my parish. The Ecumenical Parish is here. It is real.

Now, what is the thing we're calling the Guild? I began to get all kinds of wild images about the Guild. The Guild has as its foundation the fact that people do care. If you take a parish of 30,000 people, how many Guilds would be there in that parish? How many guildsmen...30,000? Maybe 3,000, I do not know. Can you imagine in a parish of 30,000 people having an active Guild of 3,000? or maybe 9,000? That is just one of those images which shimmered and then went out of existence. We're heading into something that's huge. When you tackle the whole thing, the Ecumenical Parish and the Guild, it is huge.

And there are images about the Church. I heard mentioned several times this morning the Local Church Consult we held this quarter. It was a powerful happening, and it amazed me because there wasn't really anything new going on there. We went back through some of the old methodologies and we looked at those old triangles. In fact, I was rather unexcited when I heard what the construct of the consult was going to be. But once you got into it, there was just enough being provided in what was going on there to begin to insert some new images into your consciousness about what the church is, and is going to be. It was an awesome experience to see, for example, the business of the imbalance. When you touch it you don't stop at just realizing you've got a congregational imbalance. Suddenly, you flip through and you wonder, "Well, what does Congregation mean?" "How will the congregational dynamic look down the line?" The church is a dynamic, the form of which is unknown. We're heading into something that is wildly unknown. Any of the images that you and I have been taught as to what the church is are simply not going to be anything near adequate for the future. It's an awe-filling experience when we see that everything you and I have ever called the renewal of the church is only some kind of very preliminary step relative to the future. The awe creeps in. The new era is upon us.

We had a group of clergy in for lunch on Friday, to begin studying the Segundo book. There were a dozen, maybe fifteen, seated around the table, and we only looked at the first chapter. They had not had a chance to read it ahead of time, so we were kind of walking through the chapters. Just with that first chapter, where Segundo barely gets off first base, you suddenly looked at the faces around that table and you knew that they knew that the new era was upon us. They were set up for the rest of that book. I've never seen a group more set up before.

They were so clear. I don't know what triggered his comment, but one Roman Catholic priest was sitting there talking about the book, and he said, "You know, we've got something like the Middle Ages coming upon us." I remembered all those lectures about the New Middle Ages that said we were headed toward that kind of a period again in the church and there it was, just sitting before us. It's very clear that a new age is before us.

There is a new lucidity in the church today and when you run into it, you run into something that is just fantastic. We went to a suburban city the other day where we talked with five men at a clergy meeting. They wanted to know what resources we had to offer their parish. In that group of five there were two who just said "no." One was a Presbyterian and one a seminary professor. There were two who were clear that the church is mission, but that it had collapsed; they were ready to go. As a matter of fact, I said, "Have any of you ever read the book, The Community Called Church?" The Episcopalian reached over to his desk, picked up a book, and said, "You mean this one?" And there was the fifth guy, who can be persuaded.

It was a parallel for any situation in the church today. You walk into any situation and you are going to find those two guys, ready to go, ready to move. One of the things that surprised us this quarter was that lucidity is there even in those spots in the church where you would not credit them with having any lucidity.

There's a Methodist church about a half mile from us in our parish. It's in a little pocket in the community there, an old church, with old people. The first Sunday we went to worship there, some man said, "Literally nobody, nobody, nobody in my congregation thinks. And the minister is a kind of a lousy guy, too. He is already retired and just waiting for the Bishop to give him permission to leave. At least that is the way it looks. And there is the worst apathy in Christian worship that you can imagine. It is so bad that you can hardly maintain consciousness." He said, "Come teach the Sunday School class," and I taught his class for four weeks. It began to move. The adults started talking in their Sunday School class, and the minister came over to the House and he couldn't move. He said, "I think I've got a new situation." With that kind of tactic already there, all you have to do is tap it into being.

We are responsive to the Church. What of the Congregations? What of the Cadres. You look down into the future twenty to thirty years. I've experienced losses this quarter that kind of knocked me over. I have a whole new appreciation for Christmas and Easter Christians. Every time I say this to clergy they die, because they don't like Christmas and Easter Christians. They want those people to be there every single Sunday. What if the Congregation dynamic is what we need to call the social dynamic? What if once a year, once a quarter, a huge segment of that community were to get together for the one purpose of rehearsing its symbols-- and that is all. What if 5, 10, 15,000 people got together to rehearse their symbols? Now if that should be the kind of thing we are looking at, I suspect that what the Protestant church means by Congregation is that little solid core, which is what we mean by a Cadre. The cadre dynamic in the Parish is going to be that 300 to 500 people who are extremely clear about who they are; who participate in some kind of a disciplined covenant. It could be one of those groups who pass by and raise all kinds of questions.

What I think I am really saying is that these courses are a look into the soul of men. When you look into the soul of man, you look through all the sociological forms of repentance that are going on. You see that some new kind of form is coming into being. The minute you see that, you see that everything we know is dying. There is an intensity to experiencing life and an intensity to experiencing death, this last quarter, that is more than any of us could have possibly anticipated. You and I have got more being born to be done in the future, we've got more dying to do in the future than we ever thought. I look back on my own journey with the Movement and I can see that every single time I got an image together of what it was all about, a year or two later I had to die to it. It's the kind of consciousness that perceives that the Movement is something other than what we thought.

No matter how radical, futuristic and comprehensive we think our images are of the future, and what it needs to be, we are going to have to die to those images. Those images are just going to be yanked out from underneath us and we are going to get born all over again. And it is the pain of that lucidity that is there. It is the light that lucidity gives which causes the darkness of the soul. It is the Dark Night come back in another form. We now see that the Dark Night never goes away. It never goes away. It always comes back but when it comes back it comes back as a new level of consciousness. You are in the Dark Night and you know you are in the Dark Night. And it is not just knowing, it is knowing that you are in the Dark Night. It is being there with your whole being.

One of the interns in the House gave a fantastic witness about the Dark Night in Daily Office one morning. One of the things he said he had learned this quarter was that, "excitement was not enough. Excitement could not sustain you in terms of being a Spirit man. It is the Dark Night. Nothing sustains you in being." That insight slayed a lot of demons around the House, because we had lots of excitement this quarter. On the other side of the excitement it was very clear that that was not enough. It is the Dark Night which sustains us in our journeys as Spirit people.

What is the name, then, of that radical, ontological tactic beyond anything we have ever conceived? Singlemindedness. I find myself using that word a lot these days. It is the kind of singlemindedness where you know your whole life is such that you can see that all of the ages burn with the one thing. There is no corner you can hide in. It is radical, ontological obedience--obedience to the Lord of History. That ceases to be an abstract category, but becomes a practical category. Obedience means move. I used that once in a lecture where I had seen one or two families take a great journey and then stop. They wanted to stay where they were and protect whatever it was they were. That is just disobedience, because obedience means to keep on moving, to be on that journey without being protective.

Or radical poverty--to let go of whatever it is that is being held onto, to build the forms that need to be built. In light of these voices of the future which declare where the Lord is taking us, the only way I can stand in the situation we have with the task of the times--the only way to move and prevail--is in radically disciplined corporateness. There is one thing I want to say over and over again. The only power we've got is our corporateness. We decide to stand and work out of the power of the corporate stance and we prevail. The minute we let go of any part of our corporateness we

fail. You look at the world and what are we, relative to the world? A fly speck, maybe half a fly speck? What are we relative to the Church? A fly speck, half a fly speck? But it's like that uranium they use to fire up a nuclear reaction. It is just a little hunk. Yet, the power that is there! It is something like that. We are a fly speck, just a little hunk; yet our one power in history is our corporateness. That is the one source of the kind of move it is going to take to do the job out there in history for us to do.

-- Don Clark