



The World Community for Christian Meditation

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I always found it hard to shake off the feeling that canon lawyers were like traffic wardens or security guards. Necessary for the law, no doubt, but somewhat bent towards the letter rather than the spirit. A canon lawyer-theologian shook me out of this demonstrating how, in the right hands, canon law is a tool for freedom and innovation. In conversation with him you see the flaws of the institution yet end feeling privileged and excited to belong to it.

For a Catholic today, sharing in Ladislav Orsy's view of things is like flying on a day of crystal visibility, high over the Church's historical terrain, seeing the horizon in all directions and amazed by what it all means. We were talking in my guestroom at the Jesuit residence at Georgetown University where he is a professor at the Law School and I was visiting the John Main Centre for Meditation and Inter-Religious Dialogue.

Although Jesuits and Benedictines are supposed to be poles apart they share many qualities spanning the academic, the mystical and the pastoral and miraculously managing ? occasionally - to pull utterly diverse personalities and opinions into the same God-centred direction. As our conversation progressed Fr Orsy seemed to me very Benedictine and I felt rather Jesuit. We agreed that labeling ?spirituality? with too precise a barcode is a modern error. The Jesuits once prided themselves precisely for not having a specific spirituality and ?Benedictine spirituality? can mean everything or nothing. Yet the specifics of history were not lost in the high octane survey of the universals of faith.

T.S. Eliot became skeptical about the ?wisdom of old men? and saw rather their subjection to fear and their panic of self-preservation. So, when you meet a person of ripeness in whom wisdom has settled ? quick, lucid, ever young as scripture says ? you also see what Eliot meant about tradition and individual talent: tradition must be hard-earned before individuals can make a creative contribution to it. In his ninth decade Fr Orsy's new book, finely reviewed by John Wilkins in the *National Catholic Reporter*, does this and brings the balm of wisdom to the wounds of the contemporary church. ?Receiving the Council: Theological and Canonical Insights and Debates? could have been more pithily titled but its cutting edge is razor-sharp and splices away much of the depression and shame that many Catholics feel today.

He argues with calm precision for implementing the Council's teaching on the full role of the laity in the governance of the church and for mature collegiality between bishops and papacy. In his debate with Cardinal Ratzinger a decade ago the Hungarian theologian took on the

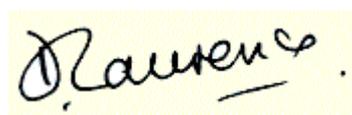
German theologian, then also the ecclesiastical defender of orthodoxy, on the latter's invention of the concept of a 'definitive' truth. This was to all intents like an 'infallible' doctrine though an infallibility-lite. Dangerously illogical, Orsy argued, it reduced truth to a tool for enforcing uniformity of belief.

Orsy graciously let Ratzinger have the last word but by the end had spiked the gun of the idea. Through the exchange, however, there is no venom or betrayal of the terms of civilized debate. Instead there is a sense of how truth is won by testing insights and how institutions are kept healthy by the rule of law, courtesy, and the free exercise of intelligence by minds whose strong wills could otherwise darken their own ideals by the shadow of the ego.

As the global economy and politics lurches from one extreme to another, such prudence and moderation can look like recent archeological discoveries. The Catholic Church itself seems at times to drive close to the edge of an abyss. Without the papacy it might have tipped over, like the Anglican communion. But what preserves can also stifle. How can we hold the road and keep moving? Minds like Fr Orsy's - although there are not many of them around - allow us to see the Church for what it is - not just a conflicted organization but an 'organic body that engenders life and *energia*'.

Such Newmanesque clarity with its depth of field opens a historical perspective that the media with its sensationalism and personality-fixation quickly obscures. Coping with our crisis of transition is eased by a historical perspective, by seeing how recent many of our problems are - over-centralization and clericalisation of the Church's governance, isolating of the papacy from the full magisterium and excluding the laity from the responsibilities of mature membership.

After our tour of the contemporary church, Fr Orsy dropped in to visit the meditation centre. Some students fell into conversation with him. I watched them entranced by his mind - that seemed younger than theirs - opening them to new ways of understanding that fragile and resilient mystery of faith which the Church will always imperfectly carry from age to age.

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" with a small flourish at the end.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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