

Tablet - September 2008



Dear friends,

If it hadn't been Buddhist it would have been in a way very Catholic. I was at the consecration of the largest Buddhist temple in Europe, held in a curve of the soft hills of southern France, the rituals performed by the Dalai Lama. Madame Sarkozy was there, looking beautiful (and a little nervous they said) at her first public engagement alone. So were the Minister of Foreign Affairs and other local and national politicians. On the other side of the aisle, segregated, as a supposedly secular nation would like, were the religious leaders.

The local Bishop and a Dominican, the Protestant and Jewish representatives and I sat passively together. In front of us, the elevated shrine space dominated by the overwhelming, impassive stillness of the golden Buddha, made in Burma from an original in Bodhgaya. You had only to penetrate its silence to find its compassion. To its side, a large pot holding a fresh growing sprig of the tree under which the Buddha was enlightened two and a half millennia ago. Strikingly life-like statues of past Buddhist masters in lotus posture sat on either side of the Buddha. On the pillars, walls and ceilings were scenes of dharma stories painted in bright primary colours, lively and instructive as were once the walls of medieval churches.

Everything was decorated meticulously but exuberantly in bright reds and yellows. Behind us in the new temple and outside on the grass and in tents and, miles away, in front of a city screen were thousands of students and friends of Rigpa, the international Buddhist network led by Sogyal Rinpoche, author of the best selling *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*?. When the bright cone-shaped, tasseled yellow hats of the monks appeared I asked the Bishop in a whisper if he had brought his mitre. Incense, busy acolytes bringing water, rice, katags, white silk scarves, conches, bhumpas, dorjes and five-pointed crowns to the Dalai Lama seated on the lower throne to the side of the Buddha. Guttural chanting was interspersed by rasping Tibetan trumpets and bells. The sacred was present with vibrant ease and an informality that did not diminish the reverence. As always the Dalai Lama combined naturalness and seriousness without solemnity. There was no sense of religious politics. Tibetan or Sanskrit did not collide as do Latin and the vernacular for many Catholics today

The time and effort given to making a beautiful liturgy in any tradition express something very similar in often very similar ways. Like the sand mandalas which Buddhist monks take weeks

to make and then tip into the river to exemplify impermanence and non-attachment; like great events such as World Youth Day or papal funerals or the daily sung Office, liturgical art is ephemeral. Yet its impressions often stay in the soul to the degree that we were really present and involved, not just an audience.

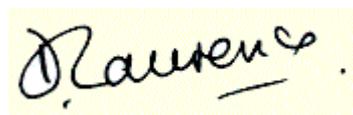
Before the ceremony I read some Buddhist texts on the consecration of images to get some acquaintance with the mind of the ritual. The first element is the preparation of the individuals taking part, 'self-generation', helping to see oneself as a solitary, unattached spiritual being. Not, that is, just an officiant or a devotee. Second, as in the penitential rite of the Mass, is the purification of inner and outer space of negative forces. Finally, seeing the intrinsic 'emptiness' of the object being consecrated, returning it to formlessness and then welcoming it back into material form. No idol worship here. The underlying meaning of it all 'that brings Tibetan and Catholic sacramentality into close relationship' is the spiritual transformation of the people involved.

Does this mean Christian churches simply need to 'restore mystery' to parochial worship, reinstating the colours, perfumes and rituals of older liturgical arts? If only it were so easy.

The secret to the enthusiasm of the post-Christian west for such exotic ceremonies is not in the externals but in what comes after them. After lunch the Dalai Lama returned, to the higher throne, and 'gave a teaching' 'a phrase that explains the dynamism and attraction of Buddhism in the West. The next day other Tibetan masters and one Christian monk also sat and spoke, without looking at the clock, about the spiritual path, the scriptures, disciplines and insights that help us all to persevere in the process of inner transformation.

Some years ago Cardinal Martini of Genova filled his cathedral week after week with his leisurely, careful lectio on the gospels. Sitting on his cathedra he was not giving a sermon but the true doctrina of the faith, part of a living transmission, breaking the Word that is alive and active when deeply shared. I imagine he had understood why Jesus was 'moved with compassion' when he looked at the multitudes and saw that 'they were like sheep without a shepherd'.

Much love,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a yellow background. The signature reads "Laurence" in a cursive script, with a horizontal line under the 'e' and a period at the end.

Laurence Freeman OSB

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