

The Challenge of *Koinonia*

Runcie Convocation Lecture
May 5, 2016
Graduate Theological Foundation

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I am honored to be here this evening to deliver the 2016 Lord Robert Runcie Convocation Address for the Graduate Theological Foundation. Lord Runcie, the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1980 to 1991, was an eminent Christian leader of his day, someone very concerned about preserving our Christian heritage in the midst of growing secularism and pluralism and working with others to promote Church unity. We honor him each year at this Convocation Address in recognition of the loyalty, support, and endorsement he gave to the Foundation's work in ministry education.

Some of you may know that, despite steep opposition at home, Lord Runcie set out in 1989 to reconcile the Church of England with the Church of Rome by recognizing the pope's primacy of honor in the Christian world. Although this gesture of reconciliation would ultimately not come to fruition, it illustrates his deep commitment to pursue the road toward Christian unity and his dogged pursuit to make this aspiration a reality.

I think he would be gratified to know that, since his death in the spring of 2000 and subsequent establishment of this lecture series in his honor, the Graduate Theological Foundation has continued his efforts to promote dialogue and communion both within the Christian community and beyond. The membership in its ranks of students from all over the world and

from such a variety of religious tradition---Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and others----offers firm evidence that his hope of communion among believers and all persons of good will is alive, well, and even thriving.¹

The Challenge of Koinonia

The topic I have chosen for my lecture this evening has deep roots in the Christian tradition and was very dear to Lord Runcie's heart. It concerns the quest for *koinonia* or *communio*, the state of "being one with," others as a result of being in right relationship with God.² I do this fully aware that I am standing in and speaking from a particular religious tradition, that of Roman Catholicism (the very tradition Lord Runcie sought to bring into communion with his own) and that I am speaking to an audience of mixed religious, philosophical, and ethical backgrounds which does not necessarily share many of the tenets of faith that I hold dear.

It is important to say this at the very outset, because I firmly believe that the text of every rational, moral, and religious discourse takes place within the context of a tradition and that, as Alasdair MacIntyre reminds us, the possibility of an entirely detached, context-free discourse is an armchair abstraction that does not exist in the warp and woof of the real world.³ There is no such thing as a completely impartial observer, and part of the challenge of *koinonia* is to listen to

¹ For a summary of Runcie's accomplishments as Archbishop of Canterbury, see Andrew Brown, "Robert Runcie," <http://anglicanonline.org/archive/news/articles/2000/000713a.html>.

² See *The New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Joseph A. Komonchak et al. (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), s.v. "Koinonia;" Fabio Ciardi, *Koinonia: Spiritual and Theological Growth of Religious Community* (London: New City Press, 2001), 41-56.

³ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2d ed. (London, Duckworth, 1985), 204-25; Idem, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 349-69; on the rationality of the Thomistic tradition, see Idem, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 127-48.

our differences, appreciate them, and allow them to open up new horizons of possibility for the way we relate to each other. The only way to build bridges is to understand the art of active listening, that “dialogue of charity in truth” which enables us to respect the differences of others and enter into lasting relationships with them based on the dignity we share as human beings and the hope embedded deep within our hearts that order rather than chaos, love rather than hatred, peace rather than violence, form the fabric of the *humanum*, our human reality.⁴

My concerns this evening are theological, in the classical sense of *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”) as proposed by St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033/34-1109) or as St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430), one of the early fathers of Latin Christianity put it centuries before him, *credo ut intelligam* (“I believe in order that I might understand”).⁵

Although I recognize the important role played by the empirical and social sciences in the accumulation of human (even theological) knowledge, I also recognize their limitations and thus draw a sharp distinction between “theology” as such, that is, religious reflection that presupposes faith and is pursued within a particular creedal tradition, and “religious studies,” which attempts to study religious experience outside the context of faith and from a more scientific, empirical viewpoint.⁶ My reflections this evening presuppose a living faith and are conducted within the tradition of Roman Catholicism. My purpose in sharing them with you this evening is not to try and change your own religious convictions, but simply to explain my own and to reach out my hand to you in friendship. Authentic dialogue only takes place in the context of truth-in-charity

⁴ For a discussion of the relationship between the “dialogue of charity” and the “dialogue of truth,” see Angelo Amato, “Reflection on the Dialogue of Charity and the Dialogue of Truth,” *L'Osservatore Romano*, Weekly Edition in English (July 30, 2008), 6.

⁵ Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, 1; Augustine of Hippo, *Tractatus in Ioannis evangelium*, 29.6.

⁶ See *The New Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Theology” by William J. Hill. For a critique of positivist knowledge, see Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 3d ed., trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Edinburg: T&T Clark, 1995), 48-82.

and honest self-disclosure, and it is upon these two pillars that mutual understanding takes shape and impacts the way we interact with one another in our daily lives.

Some Catholic Assertions

Catholics affirm that salvation history has reached its climax in the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christianity, we maintain, is a revealed religion, the most fundamental truths of which---the existence of God, the creator/creature relationship, the moral principle of doing good and avoiding evil--- are also accessible to human reason, which was weakened, but not irreparably damaged, by that primeval sin of humanity known as the Fall. Revelation and Reason form two pillars upon which we approach God and seek to understand the world around us.⁷ The commandments, we assert, were inscribed not only in the stone tablets of the Decalogue, but also in the beating chambers of every human heart. We employ faith *and* reason, revelation *and* natural law, grace *and* action in our attempts to explain our religious faith and moral world-view. Faith, we maintain, is not opposed to reason, but purifies, illumines, and even perfects it.⁸ If our present anthropological dissonance is one of the consequences of humanity's original fall from grace, then *communio* (*koinonia* in Greek) is a consequence of the Christ-event and a lived reality for all who root themselves through faith in the wounds of the Risen Lord.

⁷ See, for example, Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct* (May 11, 2008), no. 4; International Theological Commission, *In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at Natural Law* (2009), nos. 26-35 [All magisterial documents may be found at "The Holy See," <http://w2.vatican.va/content/vatican/en.html>].

⁸ See Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est* (Encyclical Letter, December 25, 2005), no. 28. For the purification of reason by faith, see Scott W. Hahn, "Bringing Theologians to Their Knee: Theology as a Spiritual Science in Pope Benedict XVI," in *Eschatology* (Proceedings of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars, September 26-27, 2014), 21-24.

The desire for unity, Catholics would say, is hardwired in the human heart. We say this because we believe human beings are created in God's image and because our Trinitarian doctrine understands God to be an intimate communion of Persons---Father, Son, and Spirit---the very essence of which can be described by a single phrase: *Deus caritas est*--- "God is love" (1Jn 4:8).⁹ For us, the interplay between the one and the many is not a problem in need of resolving, but a mystery to be pondered with reverence and awe. For us, the underlying basis of reality is not a law to be discovered, or a puzzle to be solved, but a mystery to behold, an intimate community of love that is, at one and the same time, personal and supra-personal, self-sufficient and self-diffusive, all-powerful yet humble and self-effacing. If God is love, and if human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, then they are created to love, and one can love only through *communio*, by living in communion with one another.

Catholicism asserts that *koinonia* or *communio* is not an option, but a necessity, not only for the Christian life, but also for human life in general. Its roots go deep, for it is reflected in the very nature of God and permeates the message of the Christian Scriptures, and beyond. In John's Gospel, for example, Jesus says, "The Father and I are one" (Jn 10:30). Later, in that same Gospel, he prays, "...that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us" (Jn 17:21). In the Acts of the Apostles, the early Christian community continues its following of Christ by dedicating itself to four things: the teaching of the apostles, fellowship (*koinonia*), the breaking of the bread, and the prayers (Acts 2:42). The mid-second century text known as *The Didache* eloquently describes this desire for unity in the context of the Church's Eucharistic celebration: "As this piece [of bread] was scattered over the hills and then was brought together and made one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the

⁹ All quotations of Scripture come from *Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

earth into your Kingdom. For yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ forever.”¹⁰ These and other early texts show that unity in God, with God, and with one another were deeply cherished by the Lord himself and by his earliest followers. From very early on Christians sought to live in fellowship with one another and with their fellow man. They sought to live what we might call a “spirituality of communion.”¹¹ This practice of living in fellowship with others and with God represents one of the fundamental challenges of the Christian life. It is also a very human challenge, one embedded in our nature, and one that must be taken up anew by every generation of believers and non-believers alike. The alternative is a dismal downward spiral of violence and hatred that threatens the very fabric of human civilization.

The Trinitarian Basis of Communion.

It should come as no small surprise that, in their attempts at renewal and to place the Catholic Church more in touch with the modern world, the fathers of the Second Vatican Council made the ecclesiology of communion one of its fundamental, overarching themes. As *Lumen gentium*, “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church,” attests, the Church was “established by Christ as *a communion of life, charity and truth*,” (italics mine) and “used by Him as an instrument for the redemption of all.”¹² This emphasis on communion has great repercussions on the Church’s self-perception. Rooted in a Trinitarian theology of love, a Christology that maintains a unique balance between the human and divine in the person of Jesus, and an anthropology that recognizes humanity’s call to participate in the divine life, the Church views

¹⁰ *The Didache*, 8.4.

¹¹ For an extended treatment of the “spirituality of communion,” see Chiara Lubich, *A New Way: The Spirituality of Unity* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002); Idem, *Essential Writings: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007), 27-32.

¹² The Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* (The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, November 21, 1964), no. 9.

herself as the sacramental presence of Christ's body on earth. She sees herself as the spouse of Christ, having become one flesh with his glorious risen body. As such, she is the Sacrament of Christ, a visible sign of his presence on earth and her individual sacraments as actions of Christ that continue his redeeming action through time.

Based on these theological foundations, a spirituality of communion seeks to build bonds of fellowship among all peoples in order to draw them into the love of Christ for the Father and of the Father for the Son. The bond of love they share is that of the Holy Spirit, whose grace has been identified as the Law of the Gospel, the New Law, the Law which sets us free and which makes us adopted children of the Father. This Trinitarian dimension lies at the very heart of the spirituality of communion. In *Novo millennio ineunte*, his "Apostolic Letter in the New Millennium," the late Pope St. John Paul II (1920-2005) describes it thus:

A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling in us, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us. A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body, and therefore as "those who are a part of me." This makes us able to share their joys and sufferings, to sense their desires and attend to their needs, to offer them deep and genuine friendship. A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a "gift for me." A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to "make room" for our brothers and sisters, bearing "each other's burdens" (Gal 6:2) and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy. Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.¹³

For Saint John Paul II, living a spirituality of communion calls for a fundamental change of heart, one that contemplates not only the image, but also God's actual presence within us. The

¹³ John Paul II, *Novo millennio ineunte* (Apostolic Letter, January 6, 2001), no. 43.

Catholic communion believes that, because of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, God does not merely forgive us our sins and cover us with his abundant grace (which he does), but that he also has chosen to dwell within us. "Paradise for God," to use a phrase often used by St. Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1787), a Doctor of the Church and the patron saint of confessors and moral theologians, "is to dwell in the human heart."¹⁴ Christ's redeeming grace, in other words, has an interior, transforming effect on the human person. It changes us from the inside out and elevates us to new heights. It does not merely heal us of our wounds, but actually divinizes us and enables us to share deeply in the intimate life of the Trinity.

The Process of Theosis

Orthodox Christians refer to this as the process of *theosis* or "deification," a concept that is perhaps best expressed by the soteriological principle of St. Athanasius of Alexandria (295-373), "God became man so that man might become divine."¹⁵ Through an act of divine humility known as *kenosis* or "self-emptying," God entered our world (in the mystery of the Incarnation), gave of himself completely to the point of dying for us (in the mystery of his Passion and Death), to become nourishment for us (in the mystery of the Eucharist), and a source of hope (in the mysteries of his Resurrection and Ascension into heaven).¹⁶ He did so to undo the knot of sin perpetuated by our first parents, that sin of human origins, the desire "to be like God" (Gn 3:5), by binding our humanity ("re-tying it" if you will) in an intimate way with his own divinity.

¹⁴ Alphonsus de Liguori, *How to Converse with God Always and Familiarly in The Way of Salvation and Perfection*, The Complete Ascetical Works of St. Alphonsus de Liguori, ed. Eugene Grimm, vol. 2 (Brooklyn, St. Louis, Toronto: Redemptorist Fathers, 1926), 395.

¹⁵ Athanasius of Alexandria, *De incarnatione*, 54.3.

¹⁶ See Dennis J. Billy, *Evangelical Kernels: A Theological Spirituality of the Religious Life* (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1993), 19-27.

“The glory of God,” St. Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 180) tells us, “is man fully alive.”¹⁷ God makes us fully alive by entering into relationship with us and allowing us to befriend him. The saints of late antiquity were known as the “friends of God.” As Jesus himself tells us in the Gospel of John: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). Friendship, according to St. Thomas Aquinas (1224/25-1274) has three marks: benevolence (wishing a person well and actively seeking his or her well-being), reciprocity, and mutual indwelling.¹⁸ God’s coming into our world and dying for us was his way of befriending us: he actively pursues our well-being; he invites us to respond positively to his invitation of friendship; and when this happens he dwells in our hearts and we dwell in his. When seen in this light, the mystery of the Incarnation and all that comes afterwards, the “Christ-event,” as we call it, is a visible sign (a “sacrament” if you will) of this divine friendship. Catholics maintain that Christ is the “sacrament of God” and that his mystical body, the Church, is the “sacrament of Christ.” Its purpose is to build God’s kingdom of love within the historical bounds of time and space. Its mission is to call all men and women and children into communion. Communion. *Communio. Koinonia.* This is the purpose of Christianity: to build deep bonds of communion within the human family and to lead them into a deep sharing of the intimate fellowship of divine love.

Although this divine gift was undeserved and entirely gratuitous, its seed was planted in the very fiber of our beings at the first moment our creation. This is so, because we are more than just material beings. We are more than even emotional and psychological beings. We are more than even rational beings. We are all of these, but we are much more. We are also

¹⁷ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Adversus haereses*, 4.20.7.

¹⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 23, a. 1, resp. For commentary, see Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 130-41.

spiritual beings. As the Apostle Paul tells the Thessalonians: “May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Th 5:23).

The work of our divinization is a work of God. It is possible, however, because we were created, to borrow a Latin phrase from St. Thomas Aquinas, *capax Dei*, that is, “capable of God.”¹⁹ Grace does not destroy nature, but perfects it.²⁰ We were made for God. We are creatures (and always will be) with a supernatural destiny. In the words of St. Augustine of Hippo, “Thou made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.”²¹

Objectively speaking, God is our ultimate end, the teleological goal toward which all our actions in this life must tend. Subjectively speaking, he is the source of our beatitude. He alone can fill us and make us happy. He alone can make us “fully alive.” Our ultimate happiness, what theologians call the “beatific vision” resides in God alone. These two dimensions of our ultimate end---the objective and subjective---are two sides of the coin of the *visio Dei* or “vision of God.” There is God’s vision of us and our vision of God. The two go hand in hand.²²

God, in other words, invites us into the intimate community of love that makes up his very being. He does this because his love is “self-diffusive,” to borrow a term from the early sixth-century author known today as the Pseudo-Dionysius (c. 500).²³ It is entirely free and complete unto itself, but refuses to contain itself. The threefold economic plan of creation, redemption, and sanctification is nothing more than an expression of the mystery of love that comprises the very essence of God himself. Although God always acts as one, Creation is

¹⁹ Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 113, a. 10, resp.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, I-II, q. 113, a. 10, resp.

²¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Confessiones*, 1.1.

²² See Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 1, a. 8, resp.; I-II, q. 3, a. 8, resp.

²³ See Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 4.1; *The Divine Names*, 4.1.20.

typically understood as the work of the Father; Redemption, the work of the Son; and Sanctification, the work of the Spirit.²⁴ The Father, in other words, has created us and keeps us in being; the Son, in the mysterious “already-but-not-yet” realization of God’s kingdom, has redeemed, is redeeming us, and will redeem us; the Spirit, in its mysterious presence and divine promptings, binds us both to one another and to God, and even in the midst of our own human imperfections dwells within us and cries out, “Abba! Father” (Rom 8: 15). God’s love, in other words, was responsible for creation. It refused to give up when creation went awry and entered our world in the person of Jesus to set things right. It not only made things right, but through the movement of his Spirit in our hearts made them better by making the possible a reality and offering us a share in his Love.

Living in Communion

Some of you may be saying to yourselves, “This is all well and good, but it all seems a bit too abstract, even obtuse, and it is all blatantly out of touch with reality.” Such thoughts are not uncommon and, I must admit that I have, at times, entertained either these or similar sentiments myself. I would be remiss, however, if I did not bring your attention to something that took me quite a long time to discover for myself.

There is more to the world than meets the eyes. Our powers of perception are weak and feeble. Spiritual, intellectual, emotional, and social cataracts fog our minds’ vision. We trust the assumption of our secularized world at our own risk. We need to delve beneath the appearances of things and see life from an entirely different perspective. Reason is not the autonomous bulwark that modern philosophy has made it out to be. Freedom is not the radical ability to

²⁴ See, for example, Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* trans. Patrick Lynch (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 1974), 79-324.

choose between two contraries, but being empowered to pursue the good. We are not isolated, rugged individuals, as much of American culture makes us out to be, but members of something much greater, the family of man, the family of humanity, called to live in freedom and in faithfulness under the benevolent gaze of a loving God.²⁵

We must displace the subjective turn in Western culture that began with the *cogito* of Descartes by retrieving the *credo* of the Apostle Paul, “We walk by faith, not by sight” (2Cor 5:7). We must remember what it means, “to believe.” Or perhaps we never really new. As far as my own faith tradition is concerned perhaps Chesterton had it right, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.”²⁶ Where is the *conviction*, the *urgency*, and the *zeal* of the early Christian community? Where is that bond of fellowship, that sense of brotherhood, of being committed to a common cause, that sense urgency? Where did it go? How did we lose it? Have we somehow succumbed to the latent melancholy that haunts the consumer and entertainment society of the secularized West, which seeks an immediate gratification of the senses with little or no concern for the vulnerable and marginalized of society?

It has been said that in this technological age of Internet, social media, and instant communication, we are at one and the same time the most *connected* and *disconnected* people who ever lived. We have forgotten to talk to each other about things that really matter. We

²⁵ See John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* (Encyclical Letter, September 14, 1998), no. 45-48; Francis, *Lumen fidei* (Encyclical letter, June 29, 2013), nos. 32-34; Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, 375, 379-99.

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (London: Cassell and Co., Ltd., 1910), Part I, chap. 5.

simply talk past one another without ever really listening.²⁷ And since we have forgotten how to listen, we have forgotten how to pray, since 99% of prayer is nothing but listening to the still small whispering voice of God within our hearts. And if we have forgotten how to listen and how to pray, we have forgotten how to live in communion with one another. Everything begins to hinge on externals. We are all words and no action. We have become complacent in our own little worlds and lost sight of the deeper meaning of things in the larger world around us.

The Catholic faith affirms that the Most Holy Trinity---Father, Son, and Holy Spirit---this mysterious communion of three persons in one God, is not some armchair theological abstraction with little or no relevance for our present times, but *the first and ultimate* FACT, the basis of all reality, the one eternal, perennial, and lasting truth from which all created reality flows and, through the workings of Divine Providence, is destined to return. Catholics believe that the Most Holy Trinity exists at the summit of what it calls the “hierarchy of truths” and the “hierarchy of being.”²⁸ When we profess our faith at the celebration of the Eucharist, we profess a Triune belief in Three Persons in One God. At the Eucharistic celebration, after the consecration of the sacred species, the priest proclaims: “Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, for ever and ever.” And to this, the *communio*, the community of faithful gathered together in prayer, responds, “Amen!”²⁹

“Amen,” in Greek means, “So be it!” or “Let it be!” Catholics receive Holy Communion because they wish to enter into communion with Jesus Christ and, through him and the gift of his Spirit, in close union with the Father himself. This simple word affirms the communicant’s

²⁷ For the elements of active listening, see Dennis J. Billy, “Spiritual Direction and the Art of Active Listening,” *Seminary Journal* 19(no. 1, 2013): 22-26.

²⁸ See *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 90, 234.

²⁹ *The Roman Missal*, English translation according to the third typical edition (Vatican City State: International Commission on English in the Liturgy, 2010), 633.

desire to live in intimacy with the Trinity and, in doing so, the conviction not merely to profess, but also to live this communion out with others. Receiving communion, in other words, is a visible sign of their commitment to embrace a “spirituality of communion” in their lives. Jesus affirms his presence with the believing community numerous times in the Gospel accounts. He says that he is present wherever two or three are gathered in his name (cf. Mt 18:20); he attests that whatever is done to the least of his brothers is done to him (cf. Mt 25:40); and he boldly proclaims that he will be with his followers always, even until the end of time (Mt 28:20). His presence in our midst through the Holy Spirit makes living (and, if not living, at least the desire of living in communion with one another) possible. If nothing else, his injunction to love your enemies and pray for those who persecute us (Mt 5:44) gives voice to a hidden hope of humanity’s capacity to overcome hatred and violence and live together in fellowship.

Fellowship. *Communio. Koinonia.* Living out a “spirituality of communion” is not an easy task. It means following Christ in doing the will of the Father and is intimately bound up with the call to discipleship. As Jesus says in Matthew’s Gospel, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mt 16:24). In following him, we embrace his Gospel narrative of entering the world of others, giving ourselves completely to them, to become nourishment for them, and a source of hope. When seen in this light, Jesus is currently living out his paschal mystery in the lives of his followers. He continues his mission on earth through the members of his Mystical Body and, despite our weaknesses and frailties (many as they are), does so through the power of his Spirit.

This power, however, manifests itself not through strength, but weakness. It is the way of the cross, the witness of the martyrs, the darkness of the tomb that leads to glory. As the great

Horace Bushnell once noted, “There is a cross in God before the wood is seen on Calvary.”³⁰

The Apostle Paul himself affirms, “Therefore I am content with my weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong” (2Cor 12:10). What do you say in the innermost recesses of your heart? Do you embrace these sentiments? Or have you too become numb to the still small voice of the Spirit moving, groaning, whispering within you?

Conclusion

Living the “spirituality of communion” is the challenge that faces Christians and non-Christians alike in these early years of the new millennium. If we cannot learn to live in peace with one another, if we are unable to “Get along,” as the saying goes, if we cannot look for the positive in others while at the same time holding firmly to the truths most dear to us, then we will continue to experience the seemingly endless spiral of violence, hatred, and terror that haunts our world and robs it of its deepest and truest aspirations. If we cannot heed Pope St. John Paul II’s warning to resist “the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy,” then the cross will certainly be emptied of its power (cf. 1Cor 1:17), Christ’s message of love will fall on deaf ears, ideology will take the place of truth, and the Evil One will have his way with the world.

The opposite of communion is isolation, which is another name for Hell. To live there, to be in a state of utter isolation, is to be cut off from the ground of all reality, from others, indeed from one’s deepest truest self. Heaven, by way of contrast, is to live in intimate communion with God, others, oneself, and indeed, the entire cosmos. It is the state of living in grace, in what

³⁰ Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice* (London: Alexander Strahan, 1966), 5-9, 7, 23, 35.

Augustine would call the unity, harmony, and tranquility of order.³¹ It affirms that love and peace, rather than confusion and chaos, lie at the basis of all reality. It represents the yearning of our hearts, our deepest longing and desire. It is a challenge we all must face---that of *koinonia*, of *communio*, of living in communion with one another---and we must face this challenge together. Our response, whatever it is, will have concrete consequences for us and for future generations. Our destiny---both individual and collective---depends on it. And so I leave you this evening with one simple question: To which kingdom do you belong: to the kingdom of love, intimate communion with God, *koinonia*, the fellowship of humanity; or to the kingdom of hatred and radical isolation, fragmentation, fear, power plays, might makes right, prejudice, and lingering suspicion? Ponder this question in the depths of your heart. For what do you truly long? What is your deepest desire and how is it being fulfilled in your life?

The “spirituality of communion” lies at the heart of the Christian message, because it beats within the heart of the *humanum*, that is, within humanity itself. To live it, we must first take off the false masks we wear before others (and before even ourselves), get in touch with our common humanity, and extend a hand of friendship to those around us, especially to the stranger and the marginalized. It means entering into dialogue with one another, respecting each other’s religious and ethical traditions, and trying to find a common language that will draw us closer to each other rather than pull us apart, and enable us to face the evil of violence, however it masks itself, head-on, staring it straight in the eyes with the knowledge that it is nothing but a lack, a parasite, something that defines itself against what it is not and can never be. Most of all, it means cultivating a sense of the dignity of every human being on both ends of the spectrum of

³¹ See Augustine of Hippo, *De civitate Dei*, 13.19.

life and those who are the weakest and most vulnerable. Only then will God's deepest dream for us become a reality in our lives and in the people we serve.