

## ***JYT Essay* – Witnessing on the Way: West-European Perspectives on the Roman-Catholic Church as a Learning Community**

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### **Editor's Introduction**

Prof Dr Bert Roebben is a European academic in the field of Religious Education and Practical Theology and his work is highly regarded and influential both in his home continent and internationally. Bert is also a valued member of our association and has served on our Executive for a number of years. In this essay Professor Roebben describes, discusses and debates influences upon both his journey of faith and his intellectual understanding of the place of faith in contemporary society. In so doing, he guides us through insightful reflections on the past and provocative challenges for the future.

### **Witnessing on the Way**

Learning to be faithful to the signs of the times on your way in daily life: that seems to be the central task of the Christian in line with the teachings of Vatican II. But what vision do we need to remain spiritually 'at home on that road'? How can the gospel illuminate the journey of the faithful, especially of young adults, in a scattered world? How can they (learn to) make sustainable decisions in contexts of politics, economy, society, culture and religion? Christians are convinced that every era has to formulate and to live out its own interpretation of the gospel. But the question remains: how can we be sure that the right spirit, the spirit of discernment, is guiding us in this effort? In order to clarify this issue a 'narthical' approach to the church as a learning community is presented in this essay. It invites the reader to reframe radically his/her pedagogy (and theology!) of religious experience.

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## Forty years of faithful living and reflecting

I was born in 1962, the opening year of the Second Vatican Council. About twenty years later, I became a student in theology. Today, some twenty years later again, I am teaching and researching in a theological faculty. A lot has changed since. During my university studies in the nineteen eighties my heart began to beat faster, every time we read the theological concepts of Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Gutierrez and Moltmann. They offered us insight in the motion and movements of a vital Christian faith that was anchored in everyday life. I still remember how Moltmann's theology of hope in those days radically influenced my spiritual and ethical behaviour. How liberation theology inspired me to closely examine social injustice within my own living environment and how the interdependency of grace and free will (the classic theological tussle) appealed to my imagination when I read Schillebeeckx' oeuvre. And how deeply moved I was by the idea of a God who touches and calls upon each and every soul, as explained in Rahner's theological anthropology. These theological concepts emanated from a recovered Christian faith, embedded in living communities which passionately went in search of God's providence in the world and which strove to find some powerful (read: mystical and political) answers.

At the present it has been claimed that this kind of coherence, this correlation between living and faith has been broken. Are correlation-theories, such as Tillich's, of the past? Correlative religious learning seems outdated and correlational communities no longer exist. After all, faith is no longer being passed on to coming generations, families no longer commit themselves to religious socialisation, sacramental catechesis has become empty, and schools limit themselves to a strictly cognitive encounter with religious traditions in a multi-cultural society. To put it more boldly: the *fides ex auditu* (faith through hearing the word) has dissipated. Or as our children as regular as clockwork on a Sunday used to ask: "Where are my friends in church? Didn't they also celebrate their first holy communion and confirmation?" For long churches have thought: "Well, make the church visible again, bring it to the attention, make it more accessible and easier to digest." But apparently that didn't work out. The malaise is more deep-seated. Beneath the *Tradierungskrise*, the crisis that makes it difficult for churches to connect the Christian faith with everyday life, lies an experiential crisis. People say: "There doesn't have to be a relationship between living and faith. I can easily do without a faith in God. I will manage just fine." A religious attitude or openness seems no longer to be optional. Why should one 'live in dedication' and trust in God

when you know you have to stand up for yourself: at school, at work, in your relations, in your spare time, and in your church community?

And what about Divine Providence in the meanwhile? If God is not been searched for by his people, does that imply that he no longer exists? Or has he withdrawn himself from this world and sought shelter in the safety of heaven? Does God no longer wants to hear from us? Those thoughts are far from meaningless. They are present in Scripture, both in collective and personal faith stories, just think about the exile literature. If we no longer matter for him, how could we then function as a symbol of salvation for the world? Or does he want us to be a symbol of contradiction, like a holy remnant? The struggle of the people of Israel with this thought is inspiring for us today. For people involved in ministry, for those who should be guides on the way in life, this challenge can be painful. In deep spiritual turmoil they can get: “How can I guide people on their journey to God, if I am lost on my own way to Him...?”<sup>1</sup>

### **Recaptured identity**

The answer of the official churches on the crisis of religious experience tends towards a renewed and increased focus on the small group of core believers. In the Roman-Catholic and Protestant communities of Flanders (Belgium), where I live as well as in the Netherlands there is an apparent decrease in church support. Churches are confronted with the decline of resources and the necessity to establish priorities. A tendency towards conservatism can be discerned, a development that is expressed in a definite stressing of the distinctive features of ones' identity and hence certain pastoral policies. But it most certainly continues worldwide also. The largest religious research on youth and spirituality in the USA indicates that the mainstream churches have dozed off when it comes to handing over the faith to the coming generations and that precisely the smaller and more conservative denominations, predominantly of evangelical and charismatic origin, are popular among young adults.<sup>2</sup> And one cannot deny, when having read the research reports, that mainstream churches feel tempted to pursue a mode of internal doctrinal and disciplinary concord.

This development cannot but effect living and learning in the church. A church who withdraws herself, who doesn't risk or dare herself to be scorched by the dynamics of the world and its future generations, will lose her correlative power, her vision on how faith and life relate, and on how God wants to exceed himself in this world. It needs

no say that the theological reflection will also suffer the consequences. Some scholars choose the safe rationality of *religious studies*, others that of an explicit church theology. The presence of social and cultural theological representatives in the public debate and their feedback towards ecclesial theology subsides. The internal diversity within theology decreases, the official correction increases. Not much has been left of the initial enthusiasm that accompanied the theological projects during the twilight of Vatican II. We are at a great loss. Our theological reading glasses have been steamed-up and we don't know how to get them clean again.

### **Living in dedication**

Suppose that faith to our contemporaries no longer is a matter of concern, then what about that other component of the correlation, life itself? In my encounters with young and young adult people I discern that underneath the material and relational needs hides a deep longing for unconditional love. The most intimate question is as old as the hills itself, but it is asked passionately today: "Is there someone who loves me unconditionally, so that I dare trust and thrust myself in the arms of my own existence which is so often both adrift as well as full of longing?" I have found that many people do not have the courage to listen to their own biographical narrative and instead would rather like to run away from their destiny. The small story seems to be too insignificant for them and therefore they mindlessly log into the big scripts of the market and media. Today, we are for the greater part defined and determined by a lifeless secularism and aggressive consumer anthropology. Many fall victim to this destructive plot, emotionally and mentally. Unfortunately, there are also people in our cultures who literally break down and become physically ruined. Not to mention the fates of our contemporaries in the southern part of the hemisphere.

Sometimes the thought occurs that "this ain't no living": in moments of contrast-experience ("This can't go on"), in experiences of sudden insight ("Now I see"), or in a situation of zest and engagement ("I care").<sup>3</sup> Through the cracks and holes of the consumer-society then dawns the insight that we forgot something essential, to life with empty hands, in susceptibility and dedication. During those precious moments we are aware of the fact that we do not have to manage on our own, that we in our struggle to organise and direct life, already are accepted and acknowledged. And with this we come close to the heart of what faith is about. According to Schillebeeckx, faith is about trusting oneself to the ultimate foundation of our existence, in the hope that this will not

be in vain, that a human being cannot end up in complete meaninglessness. He adds that this act of humanity can be expressed in a religious language game with a transcendent origin. But it doesn't have to be necessarily so, he continues, for ones' attitude can also be described from a secular perspective. As long as one is willing to accept the spiritual dimension of our existence, in the sense of: "I already have been noticed, I do not have to expose myself in order to be seen. I am already found, I do not have to root myself. In all of my searching, I already have been found. And if I fall, I will not fall into ultimate meaninglessness."<sup>4</sup>

This type of *faith* is no *submission*; this living in dedication is not the same as living in surrender. In contrary, those who have learnt to accept their human identity as a 'bestowed identity', dare to live life with an open approach and fight for the betterment of humanity, exactly in those areas where life itself is threatened. In this approach shimmers a 21st century spirituality: learning to let go of oneself as a human being, amidst all of the complexity, and yet not losing oneself as human being because of the same complexity – in concordance with many others who share the same belief in humanity. Empty hands turn into open and offering hands, once one learns to share them.

### **The powerful testimony of empty hands**

In consideration of future generations, this testimony of empty hands is a task that cannot be disregarded. Whether in my personal encounters with young and young adult people, or in meetings with youth workers in church and society, teachers and school administrators, there is always the resonation of: "Tell us about the ultimate ground of existence that encourages us to embrace our strength and that inspires us to anticipate the future with faith." Young adults long for inspiration, understood as the encouragement of a passion that is already present within them.<sup>5</sup> They hope for acknowledgement, for someone who authorizes their potential and who lets them participate in the general project of 'humanity'. To me, this is a 'calling' – an urgent assignment for our society that has been lulled to sleep, for our sedated schools and churches. A lot of the social discomfort stems from the given that people are no longer asked to perform altruistic acts of engagement. Underneath hides a more severe complaint: the fact that there doesn't resound a calling from the heart of that same society. The calling is no longer being stated explicitly, she has fallen silent. And it could as well be that we no longer are able to understand the calling of our youth as a call at all...

In order to discern this calling, our churches need to dare to open up, to free themselves of burden and to focus on what really matters. An act of faith does not end, according to Thomas Aquinas with a correct testimony of faith but in the act itself (“*Actus credentis non terminatur ad enuntiabile, sed ad rem*” – S.Th. IIa IIae, 1, 2, ad 2), or with Schillebeeckx: in the courage to entrust the ultimate ground of existence. Do we learn to understand how our youth today expresses their vulnerable faith in the future, with their own language and symbols? Do we dare trust that this new spiritual language also generates new experiences of faith? And in addition: are we, in our encounters with young adults, able to represent an open and mature faith? Is our trust in God visible in our own lives? Do we represent and resemble his solidarity with the world, recognizable and always surprisingly new, amidst the complexity of our existence, even through our own adult desperation and bewilderment? Do we dare show that we have faith in the future even though we don’t know exactly what the ground of that faith is? Or do we keep up the façade, entrenched in our vestiges of faith with our gates closed, counting on the invincibility of our concrete answers?

### **Narthical living and learning**

One reasonably can expect of churches that they create the room and space for a life *etsi Deus daretur*, as if God is given, for a life dedicated to the reality which they radically experience as a bestowed reality. Moreover one can expect of churches that they will do everything in their might to make that space as liveable and ordered as possible, not out of personal gain but out of a commitment towards the well-being of others. Therein lies their main objective.

An imaginative metaphor that fits this assignment is the *narthex*.<sup>6</sup> The image refers to the portal of a church building, the space that demarcates the transition from the inside to the outside of a church, and vice versa. In the early medieval churches, the narthex was the space in which the pilgrims took a moment to stand still, to concentrate and contemplate on the basis and destination of their pilgrimage. The narthex they found wasn’t a desolate place, but a space filled with the stories of fellow travellers and images of history of salvation. In search of some shade and relief for the soul, these pilgrims were then and there confronted with narratives and images that came from elsewhere. And having witnessed these testimonies, the thirst and needs of their solitary journey were put into a new and original light. While being on the road, the pilgrim thus found his home, steadily grounded in his own narrative identity.

The image of the narthex is just an image. It would be misleading to use the narthex as an anthropological stepping stone which, by way of a fyke, eventually leads to the Christian experience: the portal as the training area for the ‘real deal’ in the fullness of the churches’ sacred space. No, I intend the narthical living and learning space to be a transitional sphere in which the sacred and profane meet, interact and infuse each other. It is a space that not only offers points of reference from a pedagogical perspective (images and narratives to re-present the narrative identity), but that as well offers the theological opportunity to create ‘new life’ (images and narratives that help me remember the ultimate ground of my existence). The narthex is a place for everyone who allows themselves to be seduced to let (momentarily) go of their lives, to look at it from a different perspective and to be inspired by the complete un-usual. The latter is never estranging: only a minimum of identification and recognition is needed to notice that the presented is strange in a challenging and innovative way. Hunger and saturation, thirst and refreshment, longing and fulfilment are two poles of this process. Saturation is recognized for it stills the hunger and literally satisfies our immediate needs, even though the food is completely different than one had longed or hoped for. Those who dare to participate in the narthical process become vulnerable and learn to distance themselves from *instant* faith communication which delivers *fast food* answers and saddles the seeker with the unfortunate idea that one has to be religiously self made. The narthical living and learning process takes the seeker in his unfulfilled longing and the limitation of his own resources for fulfilment seriously, it supports persons in their ability to ask ‘slow questions’ and creates space for a ‘life in dedication’.

### **On the churches’ agenda**

There are three tasks on the agenda of the churches that presume the narthical approach of religious living and learning. First, they need to enter the public life in order to discern the youths’ calling for life fulfilment. The churches need to become aware of the material and spiritual struggle that people have to endure to live and survive. As far as I’m concerned the term “lay spirituality” can be considered outdated: the faithful and their ministers must together take the chance to live in dedication, amidst the complexity of everyday life.

Secondly, churches should “elementarise” the stories and images of their traditions (verifying the salvific lines of the tradition that are central for contemporary living) and “decongel” them. I plead for a rehabilitation of the particularity of the

Christian tradition as a source of inspiration for our day-to-day life. I understand particularity as the meaningful and authentic composition of contextual answers that correspond to universal questions, while acknowledging at the same time that none of these answers could ever exhaust the mystery of human existence. Christianity is a particular tradition, with conflicting bottlenecks of dogmatic developments in the past and with innovative prophetic powers today. This quest belongs to the narthical space. It makes Christianity vulnerable, yet appealing.

Thirdly, it is necessary to break and open up the narthical space in order to communicate with other and non-believers – the dialogue about a world of sister- and brotherhood, which, no longer ruled by the market and media, gives precedence to the dedication and humanity of the small and unfinished life. The ontological foundation of Christianity as an all encompassing narrative is over. But it remains monumental in its testimony that every small story is worth saving in the eyes of God.

### **Grateful reason**

I have learned that the important things in life cannot be passed on through educational processes. Love, passion, longing, coping with suffering and death do not bear religious education! They can only be communicated by way of living, in the hope that others are susceptible for this experiential process. In this conclusion dawns a new reasonableness, that of gratitude. Living is participating in the lives of others; learning is sharing in the legacy of others. In my opinion there is an urgent need for Christian intellectuals who give form to this “grateful reason”. Twenty years ago I was deeply influenced by the innovative concepts of prominent theologians who supported my moral and spiritual growth as a theologian in church and society. Where will we be twenty years from here?

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*The JYT essay is a reflective and rigorous academic article through which the author explores a contemporary or personal issue in a field relating to youth ministry.*

Essays will usually be no longer than 4,000 words. Submissions are invited by the editorial team and acceptance is subject to review.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> J.-M. TILLARD, *Sommes-nous les derniers chrétiens?*, Québec, Fides, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> C. SMITH & M. LUNDQUIST DENTON, *Soul Searching. The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> G. STACHEL & D. MIETH, *Ethisch Handeln Lernen. Zu Konzeption und Inhalt ethischer Erziehung*, Zürich, Benziger, 1978, p. 28-29.

<sup>4</sup> E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Glaube und Moral*, in D. MIETH & F. COMPAGNONI (red.), *Ethik im Kontext des Glaubens. Probleme – Grundsätze – Methoden*, Freiburg, Herder, 1978, p. 17-45. This culture-critical interpretation of Christianity, in fellowship with new secular developments for sustainable life, is becoming slowly but surely a new and viable ‘Gestalt’ of Christianity in Western-Europe. How can churches be present and transparent with their rich traditions of openness to (post-)modern societies? People such as Erik Borgman in the Netherlands and Hans Joas in Germany are responding to these kind of questions (E. BORGMAN, *Metamorfosen. Over religie en moderne cultuur*, Kampen/Kapellen, Klement/Pelckmans, 2006; H. JOAS, *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz*, Freiburg, Herder, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> K. CREASY DEAN, *Practicing Passion. Youth and the Quest for a Passionate Church*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> For the groundwork of this approach, see B. Roebben, *Godsdienstpedagogiek van de hoop. Grondlijnen voor religieuze vorming*, Leuven, Acco, 2007 [Religious Pedagogy of Hope. Foundations of Religious Education].