

# Searching for Meaning, Struggling for Faith

## Theological Reflection and Pastoral Outreach

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A noted professor of missiology invites believers who are experiencing a sense of emptiness or meaninglessness to enter into a process of exploration, involving theological reflection and a committed engagement with those in need.

### *Crisis of Meaning, Crisis of Faith*

For several decades now, experts and diagnosticians of various stripes have been telling us that we are living between the times, amid paradigm shifts or paradigm breakdowns, and at the beginning of a new era, sometimes named as postmodernity, sometimes confused with globalization, and sometimes simply identified with the new millennium. As a result, many people are left feeling cut loose from their moorings. They are persuaded, or at least informed, that they can never return to previous, or imagined, securities. Many certainly feel as though they have been set adrift, and that they must simply get used to it, or perhaps batten down the hatches and wait for death. The nautical image is stark enough when applied to existential lives; applied to faith lives it becomes utterly bleak.

It is not my present intention to enter the lists; I want simply to acknowledge the fact that fluidity, change, chaos, and, for far too many, meaninglessness, and hopelessness characterize people's worlds of experience, and to take this as a

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point of departure for a reflection about living meaningful, integrated, and gospel-based lives. A point of departure, however—no matter how fixed in time or territory, how clear in mind or memory—is no guarantee of a sure arrival. Nor does it necessarily indicate a clear direction to follow, much less a congenial or easy one. Perhaps that is why so many people feel bogged down, incapable of moving forward with determination, reduced to wandering aimlessly, or even overcome by a sense of futility.

This reflection is offered to anyone struggling with meaning and with faith, with religion and with Church. The operative word here is struggling; those past struggling, becalmed, or in a safe haven, will find nothing of interest here; and I cannot even offer guarantees for those who are struggling. Taking the image of a journey (starting point, progress, orientation), the context of a storm (inclement conditions, with all-enveloping mist or fog), and the life-experience of a person of Christian faith, I have three suggestions. First, storms must not deter us; they are part of the natural and supernatural cycle. Second, lack of clarity about the outcome should not prevent us from setting out and remaining committed; if we imagine life as adventure rather than merely as journey, we will recall that we simply cannot know the outcome in advance, but also that adventures are the very stuff of life. And third, we should be steadfast but sensible: in order to proceed we need both a compass and a compass bearing. It is not enough to set out; we must be at least minimally equipped. The compass in this instance is our faith's magnetic core; the compass bearing is God's magnetic attraction.

I will develop these thoughts using theological reflection as the analogue of an effective compass, and service to homeless people as a metaphorical needle to point us in the right direction. But an expensive compass is of little help unless it can be read, and the needle is not itself the way ahead: it merely orients us and points us in the right direction. Many people have not learned to use a compass that would provide a setting for their life's adventures; and because so many have not discovered life's cardinal point, they do not set out with conviction. So it would be very sad, to the point of tragedy, if we were to rail against the night or spend our lives in futility, when the instruments that could be most useful are actually within our reach.

### *Theological Reflection*

“**W**hen we deliberately incorporate wisdom from our Christian heritage into the process of uncovering *the meanings* in our life-experiences, we are doing theological reflection” (Killen, 46; emphasis added). Psychotherapist Viktor Frankl identified meaninglessness as the greatest malaise of the Western world in the twentieth century, and if anything, the situation continues to deteriorate in the twenty-first. In the so-called First World, it is palpably clear that millions of

people do not know whether life has any meaning at all, or if it has, what that meaning might be. Theological reflection—at least to people of faith, and perhaps by contagion or osmosis spreading more widely in society—can provide an excellent opportunity and a means for making sense of our lives.

But theological reflection can do more than crystallize meaning; it can help to change lives, and not only our own. This is critically important for all who are committed to their own conversion and to serving others. The assertion that “you repent, not by feeling bad but by thinking different[ly]” (Wiebe, 216), is very pointed. Theological reflection changes us precisely by causing us to see, think, and act differently in our daily lives (Killen, 68). Dianne Bergant goes further: it is “aimed at human transformation, *that of the faith community and the world*” (Bergant, 2; emphasis added). These are powerful endorsements.

Some people already do theological reflection but many more do not. Yet everyone *could*; and everyone *should*, if they are seriously committed to finding meaning in their lives by discovering discipleship and living their faith fully. But many Christians seem not to understand discipleship, nor to have an intimate relationship with God. Until they do, their faith cannot reach its potential and they themselves will remain frustrated. So what is theological reflection, and how can it contribute to people’s lives?

It may be that some people do theological reflection without naming it as such. However, what is implicit or informal can often become more intentional and effective. But other people think, or even claim, that they are doing it, though they never develop it in such a way that it contributes to their own spiritual development and conversion. True theological reflection would both turn us within (to focus us on the common treasure-trove of our Christian heritage) and without (to engage with people and situations around us or just beyond our grasp). This turning in and out is not two movements, but a single, integrated process, analogous to breathing in and breathing out; the complete process is essential to life.

Theological reflection is neither spiritual navel-gazing nor naïve and wishful thinking about utopias, but a concerted effort both to engage with processes that will change us, and actually to undertake to change the world. It “enriches and challenges us on our journeys [our adventures] in faith. It invites us to discern God’s presence [our compass bearing] and to move deeply into the world and not away from it” [following the compass bearing] (Killen, 76). More specifically, at issue here is

the artful practice of bringing our lives into conversation with our Christian heritage in a way that nurtures insights for us and for the tradition. We are called to engage our lives and our Christian heritage from a standpoint of exploration, willing to *trust that God is present in our experience* and that our religious tradition has something to give us. (Killen, 142)

When Christians vote with their feet, whether leaving the Church in droves or discovering fundamentalism, there is acute need for understanding and creative dialogue. Many people struggle to find meaning in their own Christian lives and in their engagement with others. Indeed, their restless spirit persuades them that the former actually requires the latter; they feel the need to look beyond themselves and their familiar ecclesial structure (a local parish turned in on itself and dying by degrees) and to start with the needs of the wider world, not to mention the deeper desires of disaffected Christians closer to home. My concern is with both these poles: with the wider world, in terms of needy persons, and with the deeper desires of Christians themselves. It might be expressed as *outreach* and *inreach*.

*Outreach* moves us toward actual people: a case in point would be particular homeless people in local shelters or subsisting on our streets; we should not merely acknowledge “the homeless” generically, but encounter them in person. *Inreach* might be exemplified in the practice of theological reflection. Together, these two processes may contribute to a rediscovery of personal meaning, assure us that we do not live in vain, and provide the essential social dimension of our Christian lives. Such a combination (and it is not the only possible one) can produce transformation and lead us back to a renewed praxis of ecclesial life, but charged now with a missionary spirit and the capacity both to challenge familiar ecclesial structures and to call local believing communities to conversion.

### *Becoming Versed in the Art*

As with many skills, theological reflection is acquired by practice: one who claimed only to be a theoretician would lack all credibility. Yet some theory is also necessary. Theological reflection requires the cultivation of

the discipline of exploring individual and corporate experience in conversation with the wisdom of a religious heritage. The conversation is a genuine dialogue that seeks to hear from our own beliefs, actions and perspectives, as well as those of the tradition. It respects the integrity of both. Theological reflection therefore may *confirm, challenge, clarify, and expand* how we understand our own experience and how we understand the religious tradition. The outcome is *new truth and meaning for living* (Killen, viii; emphasis added)

There are evidently two prerequisites. The first is a *tradition*: a heritage of accumulated and transmitted wisdom, combining theology with practical and symbolic action. The second is a reservoir of *experience*: both exposure to human encounters and some resulting personal modification, that is, thinking and acting differently. For us, theological reflection will engage with the Judeo-Christian

tradition, the fundamental truths of faith and modes of action that are consistent with the person and teachings of Jesus Christ. And the experience with which it engages is whatever has been motivated by Christian belief and shaped us into greater conformity to Christ. So there will be a significant problem for Christians who are not conversant with the tradition, and for those who, having been brought up as cradle-Catholics and received their religion in grade school, have little or no experience of the practice of mature Christianity: the faith-life of persons living as morally responsible Christian adults. There may be no “problem” for people who pick and choose what to believe or do, but these are unlikely to be attracted to theological reflection as a discipline. But Christians who routinely experience a vague and non-localized sense of emptiness or meaninglessness, and are concerned to acknowledge and address it, may indeed have an authentic “problem” that theological reflection and intentional outreach can assuage and even cure, provided they are serious about both of these practices. There’s the rub.

Many “good Christians” have virtually no pastoral outreach or engagement. Though quite faithful in their religious observances, and always highly law-abiding citizens, they do not realize (in both senses) their baptism’s potential. They have never developed a missionary spirit, an active and intimate prayer life, or a realization that they are called to a developing relationship with God. It is highly likely that without some level of intentional theological reflection they will never reach their potential. Some, deeply rooted in their own certainties and prejudices, simply see no reason to change. Others are so self-assured that they have nothing to learn from their peers, and certainly not from their forebears.

Lines of T. S. Eliot are a helpful stimulus here, and suggest a way forward:

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

(*Little Gidding*, Part 5)

The operative word here is *exploration*. Only if we are willing to move forward into unfamiliar territory, gathering our accumulated experience and the reflection it has generated in us, are we becoming people of wisdom; only when we are pursuing wisdom will we be making authentic discoveries that produce insight that will change our lives. Many Christians fail to explore their faith or God’s faithfulness; and because of timidity or conceit they pass through life, older but no wiser, observing religious conventions but without a deepening faith, a capacity for faith sharing, or an experience of a God who calls, sends, and sustains. Exploration should mark our faith-lives. If it does, we will make discoveries that

will not only illuminate the way ahead but help us understand the significance of the way already traveled.

Explorers cannot anticipate the nature of their discoveries, whether thoughts, feelings, images, questions, or insights. But theological reflection will help us identify and interpret all of these as we review our experience, our actual encounters. This brings us back to the tradition: we may need to marry study of the Christian story with meditation on the call to discipleship. Sadly, many of us are so caught up in the humdrum that we simply cannot find the time and space for discernment, prayer, and gaining insights about God's concern for our apparently petty lives. Or perhaps we lack the imagination to find a different rhythm or take a different path that would stimulate us to pay closer attention to the local details and circumstances of our lives. Theological reflection is perfectly compatible with the routine or humdrum events of our lives, if we make time for it. But a complementary perspective, afforded by deliberately engaging in some "vocational" pursuit, is one that I would like briefly to sketch here.

### *Homelessness: Scandal on our Doorstep*

Signs of sinfulness and selfishness are all around. They should give us pause as we proceed through life, not justifying us in pointing the finger at others, but galvanizing and challenging us to give an account of our Christian stewardship in a bruised and needy world. "Am I my brother's [sister's] keeper?" (Gen 4:9), is Cain's peevish and rhetorical question; Christians must answer with a resounding "Yes!" On the Last Day we will be reminded that whatever we did—or failed to do—for our least significant and most needy brothers and sisters, is the measure of our response to Christ. Christians' social responsibilities are not optional but central to our own lives and those of the broader community. Poor and needy people; men and women in our prisons, hospitals and nursing homes; aged and housebound individuals; homeless, overlooked, forgotten, and abandoned citizens; refugees, undocumented "aliens," and all manner of victims: these are only some of the images or faces of God that we so often ignore or fail to identify. Not only do such people continue to suffer when we overlook them; we ourselves fail to become who we are called to be, unless we explore the edges of our comfortable worlds, make encounters, gain insights, and come to a deeper grasp of the meaning and purpose of our own lives, indelibly marked by baptism and by God's call and commission.

Patricia O'Connell Killen and John de Beer (whom I have intentionally quoted often) illustrate the potential of theological reflection by recounting the story of "Elaine" who worked in a shelter for homeless people. It can shape our own reflections, too. But voluntary work, or pastoral commitment, is virtually unlimited

in shape and scope. The most important thing for would-be Christians is to look for any situation of need, and, taking their courage in both hands, actually offer to help. An element of risk is intrinsic to Christian discipleship, and is perhaps the first thing we must come to terms with. But the way of many Christians is paved only with good intentions, which accounts for our frequent failure to become the People of the Way of Jesus.

“Elaine” acknowledged that she found herself tense and burdened after being at the shelter. But people vary enormously, and it is just as likely that we ourselves could be energized and liberated by such an experience of simple service, and re-committed to the Christian endeavor. Crucially, we should first have an experience, then reflect on it and discern what it might mean and point to; this is

insight, which should lead to renewed praxis. But since experience’s fruit is partly dependent on our own presuppositions, we need to look at our prejudices or certitude, our self-assurance or independence of spirit. To repent by thinking and acting differently is a challenge for us all, but if our attitude is one of exploration or adventure, we will be much more open both to risk and transformation (Killen, 47–51). Then, our encounters will not only take us back to previous personal experience but, integrated with theological reflection, will lead to a re-examination of our religious heritage as a repository of practical wisdom. This is no superficial affair: it requires reading, learning, and prayerful integration, which many people are simply unwilling to invest in their Christian lives.

“Nothing ventured, nothing gained.” Indelible gospel images challenge us to launch out into the deep or to get out of the boat and come to

Jesus across the waves, precisely when we would far prefer to remain in the shallows or hunker down in safety. If, as Christians, we recall that Christ calls in order to send, invites people to come in order to commission them to go, we might be willing to explore the implications of discipleship. We may recall too, that old and insightful comment, that the “problem” with Christians is not the evil they do, individually or corporately, but the good they fail to do. Many of us forget that Jesus said it was not those who say ‘Lord, Lord,’ but those who do God’s will, who will enter God’s Realm. God’s will includes not simply religious observance, but a taste for God’s own justice and a commitment to God’s own poor.

There is hardly a city in the United States in which homelessness is not a serious social problem, certainly for its victims, if not for the citizenship in general.

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And if there were such a city, it would take very little imagination to identify a host of other social problems and needs that Christians are called to address: whatever we do, or do not do, to the least, the forgotten, or the invisible, we do, or fail to do to Christ himself (cf. Matt 25:45).

To approach an unfamiliar social situation where help is needed is to take a step in the direction of our own conversion. Conversion is a process coextensive with life, through which we become transformed or reformed and thus conformed to Christ. It implies change, and the kind of change effected by conversion can only happen if we are willing accomplices. If we say we want to be more Christian, we must also undertake to be changed. If we undertake to be changed, we must also allow for new experiences in our lives. One kind of new experience is a consciously undertaken commitment to needy people.

Assuming we are people of good will, we must, then, discover a “fit” between our good intentions and the legitimate needs of those we hope to serve. Often, we approach others, but only on our own terms: we know beforehand what we are prepared to do. This makes our service more of a program than a discovery procedure, allowing us to take and maintain initiatives ourselves. But authentic ministry demands something rather different: a willingness to meet the needs of others rather than to set and achieve personal goals. This brings us back to the necessity of dialogical service, which requires reflection on the extent to which our outreach reflects the Christian idea of service, or perhaps fails to do so. The overall context for all this is theological reflection.

If we hold to what our Christian faith teaches, then we do not believe in generic creation; there are no people in general, only actual, particular, individuals. Nor is it possible to identify “the poor” or “the homeless”; these are categories, abstractions. Concretely, we can only identify actual people: poor, homeless, or otherwise. We cannot claim to be concerned about, much less for, “the poor,” unless we actually know some real people who fall into that category. Jesus did not simply know about “sinners,” “tax-collectors” or “the poor”: he knew real people, personally, and often by name. To *know about*, is what H. Richard Niebuhr called “outer knowledge,” to distinguish it from to *know*, to have “inner knowledge,” or the knowledge that comes from encounter.

On Judgment Day we will not pass muster by claiming to know about any number of things or problems; we will need to demonstrate that we have actually been acquainted with the grief of grieving people or the poverty of actual

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flesh and blood poor persons, that we have touched and been touched by real lives other than our own, that we have known the inner history of God's actual poor, needy, or insignificant ones, some of whom we too know by name. Outreach to homeless people, or to actual members of any of the other social categories, is the proof that we take Christ and our faith seriously. Theological reflection based on such encounter is the warranty that our outreach is authentic, faith-based, and contributing to our own conversion.

### ***“To Whom Shall We Go?”***

Christian living cannot be reduced either to vegetative existence or to assimilation by the surrounding culture; it requires dialogue between our religious tradition and our life's experience. We always begin with the current activity of our lives, but we also remember Socrates' words: “the unexamined life is not worth living.” The examined life, however, will result in change: in modification of experience so that it comes into greater conformity with the call of Christ. Commitment to social justice, a preferential option for actual poor persons, is the litmus test of a mature Christian life. A spirit of prudent risk and adventurous exploration might help us respond to our calling, to remain faithful until we rest in the One who is our eternal destination and destiny, and to use the God-given compass of our faith as we seek our true selves, each other, and God.

Theological reflection can help us log and interpret our journeys and keep us on track, whether by commitment to the homeless poor in our neighborhood or to other forgotten, victimized, or abandoned brothers and sisters. But we must reach out. We must go. We must extend the edges of our experience, in order to enrich our theological reflection, and, with God's grace, to renew the face of the earth. This time is now, the place is here, the persons are you and I. Shouldn't we be thinking differently, acting differently, and becoming more committed investors in the Realm of God?

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