

The following statement was published by the Doctrinal Commission of the Spanish Bishops' Conference on 8 July 2002. This English translation was published on 15 March 2006 in the English edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* (reprinted here with permission). The original Spanish text may be found at <http://www.conferenciaepiscopal.es/index.php/actividades-noticias-doctrina/4030-rehacer-la-vida-religiosa-una-mirada-al-futuro-del-p-diarmuid-omurchu.html>.

A DOCTRINAL NOTE ON THE BOOK
REFRAMING RELIGIOUS LIFE: AN EXPANDED VISION FOR THE FUTURE
BY FR DIARMUID O'MURCHU, M.S.C.

Doctrinal Commission of the Bishops' Conference of Spain

Introduction

1. One of the duties of the doctrinal commission is to safeguard Christian doctrine in matters of Faith, a duty which is undertaken as a service to the Church and the teaching ministry of her shepherds. In fulfilment of this mission, therefore, and having at heart the common good of the People of God we wish to manifest our concern at the publication by Publicaciones Claretianas of the book entitled *Reframing Religious Life: An Expanded Vision for the Future* by Father Diarmuid O'Murchu,¹ an Irish priest of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart. In the underlying presuppositions of his book and in some of his explicit affirmations, O'Murchu is in open conflict with the teaching of the Church, and for this reason we consider it necessary to issue a doctrinal clarification.

2. The book calls for an urgent reform of Religious life. However, notwithstanding its claims to scientific impartiality, it offers an unsubstantiated critique of the very foundations of Religious life which will contribute far more to its destruction than to its renewal.

I. An Old Proposal with the Claim of Novelty

3. O'Murchu's thesis and the language he uses are certainly ambitious;² however, beyond all his promises of “planetary” or “holistic” implications, the true content of what he proposes is

¹ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Reframing Religious Life: An Expanded Vision for the Future* (London: St Paul's, 1998).

² “[N]ot only will we have reframed Religious life itself; more importantly, we will have helped to name the transformation that is taking place and empowered people to engage with growth and change — and in that way contribute to a new lease of life for our planet and for all its life-forms” (p. 63).

actually quite simple and primitive. The essence of his thesis can be summarized in the following six points:

A) It is striking that the author explicitly and repeatedly (with slight variations) proposes to Religious that “a process of disengagement from the institutional Church is both desirable and necessary” (p. 73); “there seems to be only one authentic response: leave the Church and adopt a non-canonical status” (p. 120).³

B) Less explicit, but nonetheless present, is O'Murchu's call to abandon the Catholic faith in Jesus Christ as the only full Revelation of God and as the Lord and Saviour of all mankind. This is but one of the elements of the thesis that not only systematically obfuscates the true theological significance of Jesus Christ, but which in fact contradicts all that he stands for, thus denigrating and ridiculing him.⁴

C) O'Murchu does not speak of the Triune God revealed in Jesus Christ but rather rejects this revelation and suggests a conception of God that fluctuates between pantheism and animism.⁵ God can at the most be considered as a “capacity for relatedness”. This “capacity for relatedness” is naturally not a God that freely creates the world. The author speaks much of “creation”, but the meaning of this concept in the book is not that proper to the Christian faith, since the Creator God in question is identified, in one way or another, with the world. God is envisioned as the internal energy of the cosmos, and the world as the “incarnation” of God.⁶

³ The invitation to abandon the Church is repeated over and over again, either in direct reference to the canonical bond, 62, 73, 74, 97, 120, 122; or in a more generic anti-ecclesial reasoning, 14, 32-33, 61, 70, 72, 74, 90, 92, 113ff., 119, 128, 137ff., 145.

⁴ “The voluminous figurines [of the Palaeolithic goddesses] illustrate a culture of abundance, relishing and quite unashamedly rejoicing in its proclivity. The central religious image was of *woman giving birth*, and not, as in our time, the often necrophilic symbol of a *man dying on the cross*” (p. 86).

⁵ “We find versions of such trinitarian allusions to godhead in practically all the major religions . . . What we are encountering here, I suggest, is not some profound religious dogma, but an archetypal truth . . . In other words, our trinitarian doctrines are human efforts at naming God's real essence, and the nearest we can hope to come . . . is that our God is above all else, a power for relatedness” (pp. 75-76).

⁶ “It was the essential *unity* of all things that mattered, the deep intuitive realisation that the creative energy (what today we call God) was within the unfolding process and not external to it” (p. 84); “we belong . . . to a co-creative God whose body is that of the universe itself” (p. 127). He alludes elsewhere to this concept of God as a force immanent to the world: 55ff., 67, 76, 119ff. What he calls “essential unity” of all things makes it impossible for the author to differentiate time from eternity and this finite world from its future glorification. He criticizes all

D) O'Murchu places Religious life “far beyond” the Church, Jesus Christ and the God revealed in him. Religious life should come back to itself, that is to say, “reincarnate the ever-old in a world that is ever new” (p. 140). The “ever-old” is paganism, or better put, the pre-Christian and pre-religious culture that supposedly existed at the very origins of humanity.⁷

E) According to the author, the “values of the Religious life” are anterior to Christianity or any other “formal religion”. However, it is difficult to ascertain from O'Murchu exactly what these values are. After having gone through the “painful and dislocating” (p. 73) process of destroying and abandoning Christianity, we would expect to arrive at something really great and original in exchange for the past archetype, something full of life and of humanity as befits us. What we are offered instead is a confused mix of the politico-cultural ideas currently fashionable among certain radical groups, ideas which the author calls “liminars”. Liminal values, those values which are found at the margins of the western capitalist patriarchal culture (pp. 46, 73-74) — because they have been marginalized by the culture — constitute the basis for a future that will overcome this culture. These values are already being introduced in our world and are those values promoted by “socio-political networks such as Worldwatch, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace and several feminist groups” with whom “liminar religious” ought to form “alliances” (p. 38; cf. p. 55ff.).

F) Here we find the “key focus for reframing Religious life in the modern world” (p. 50). In the final chapter of the book O'Murchu calls it “the most original and provocative challenge of our time”. For him, “spirituality” is neither “the individual's relationship with God” (p. 141), nor something within the sphere of interpersonal relationships (pp. 147-48), nor again a capacity that belongs exclusively to human beings (p. 147). Rather, spirituality is defined as the “power to

“dualistic” distinction and advocates a unilateral commitment of Religious life to “the world”, which he conceives as practically identical with the godhead. He clearly accepts neither the Christian theology of creation and of sin, nor the Johannine distinction of the world as a good creation of God on the one hand, and the world as a force of evil on the other.

⁷ The “reframing of Religious life suggested in this book does not require the Church as overall guardian, nor even as an essential ingredient”, and moreover, “the vowed life makes complete sense in itself, apart entirely from that ecclesiastical context in which millions assume it must be grounded. Religious life predates the Christian Church and all the formal religions known to us today by thousands of years; Religious life values belong to an even more ancient pre-religious tradition. These are our deep roots; this is our ancient story, ever old and ever new; this is our sacred tradition, of which no movement or organisation should deprive us” (p. 139).

connect” and “we encounter it in the behaviour of the sub-atomic world, in the tripartite structure that dominates terrestrial life and even in the foundational imprint of the curvature of space-time itself” (p. 147).

II. A Modern-day Gnosis

4. O'Murchu speaks much of God and constantly talks of human liminal values in a “planetary” or “cosmic” context, but says almost nothing about Jesus Christ. Christian terminology is emptied of its theological meaning so as to be better integrated into a “vision” or a supposedly “new wisdom” that comes back to the “ever-old” — in other words, a modern-day gnosis. The author presents his work as a “new theology of Religious life” and dedicates a whole chapter to the “theological frame” into which it is to be integrated. It fails, however, by any standards whatsoever to meet the most basic requirements for a work of Christian theology:

A) Above all this is because he completely ignores the principle of revelation. There is no theology — Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant — that does not recognize Jesus Christ as the ultimate revelation of God and as the supreme source of its discourse. O'Murchu, however, explicitly rejects this principle when he affirms that “creation itself [is] our primary and primordial source of divine revelation” (p. 146). Although this affirmation appears to be purely natural or rational theology that is not yet opened up to Christian revelation but is still capable of it, this is in fact not the case. For, as we have already indicated, the concept of creation and of a Creator God presented by the author is of a philosophy that is incompatible with revelation and even explicitly rejects it. For this reason, he speaks at times of the “divine disclosures” (p. 77).

B) At times O'Murchu makes reference to the Tradition of the Church and to the Ecumenical Councils but always in a bid to distance himself from them. The Council of Trent is presented as the climax of the “patriarchal” deviation of Christianity (pp. 65, 96, 105ff., 133ff.) and the Second Vatican Council as an insufficient and “inadequate” effort at renewal (pp. 13, 68, 72). The Ordinary Magisterium is only mentioned in order to be denigrated and rejected. None of these ecclesial realities falls within the ambit of O'Murchu's “new cosmology”.

C) Having dismissed Christian revelation and its ecclesial transmission, O'Murchu locates the starting point of his thesis in the “specialists” whom he believes have discovered the essential

features of the “primordial vision”, and in whose writings we “have all the ingredients of a new cosmology” (p. 84). This, then, is the new “revelation” discovered by O’Murchu, whose only (and tirelessly repeated) point is to stress the natural “unity” of the cosmos as against the patriarchal “duality” of the Hellenistic and Christian traditions.

D) This unitary and harmonious “new cosmology” is presented in contradistinction to a dualist and disintegrating Christianity.⁸ The former unifies the human being and integrates him in a balanced way into a cosmos of harmonic relationships; the latter tears him apart (into body and spirit) and dislocates him from true vital relationships (between the sexes, with nature and God). The former is life; the latter, death. Once again Christianity, along with other “formal religions”, is seen as nothing other than the influential product of a “misguided cosmology” that had its roots in the Neolithic period and its agricultural revolution.

E) According to O’Murchu we are currently living through another revolution in which pre-patriarchal and unifying energies are in the process of emerging anew (p. 109). This revolution is the decisive criterion of his theology; his whole thesis is based on it, and into this revolution must be incorporated all Religious whose institutions are to have any future.

F) In order to be part of this contemporary revolution and to acquire the “new wisdom”, “conversion” is required and a sacrifice must be made, namely, “letting go of all that we have loved and cherished” (p. 131). And now, although previously he has hardly mentioned the Redemption, suddenly O’Murchu evokes the Christian image of Calvary (reduced to a pre-Christian archetype) in order to encourage Religious to abandon their faith (“all that we have loved and cherished”) for the “new wisdom”. This is supposed to be the price of renewal. Moreover, the “conversion” of humanity will apparently also require its own extinction on the grounds that the species *Homo sapiens* is the bearer of patriarchalism (p. 146).

⁸ The author does not distinguish between dualism or duality on the one hand, nor between identity and unity on the other. It is clear that the body should not be opposed to the spirit (dualism), but neither are they the same. The human being is more a duality in unity that excludes undiversified identity (monism). It is also clear that God is not only apart from the world but also cannot be identified with it. Rather, between God and the world we have a fundamental ontological duality that does not, however, exclude unity in difference, given that the Creator is at the same time transcendent and immanent in his creation.

G) *Gnosis*: What O'Murchu is proposing is a supposedly new knowledge of the nature of man, presented by a set of experts, as a means of salvation outside the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In reference to the Second Vatican Council, the author counts himself among the fortunate few who understood what no one else, not even the Council Fathers, had understood: "But the internal decay was so deep-seated and pervasive that only those with a profound sense of history could understand what began to transpire and what ensued over subsequent decades" (p. 72).⁹

III. Religious as Agents of the New Order

5. This book is aimed at an audience of Catholic religious men and women and O'Murchu uses certain theological terms and expressions in order to capture the interest of his intended readership. However, his program is not really Christian and his methodology is not really theological. What he offers is rather an anti-Christian gnosis camouflaged in pseudo-theological language which if put into practice would yield disastrous results in Religious life. Religious life, according to O'Murchu, is not so much about the free response of men and women to a gratuitous call from Jesus Christ, expressed in vows which consecrate them personally in his discipleship, so much as a commitment to the call which proceeds from the "process" of the rediscovery of "liminal values". Religious men and women are called upon to incorporate themselves in the "transformation that is taking place" as its privileged agents or "catalysts for change" (p. 62).

A) "The Reign" is seen as a substitute for Jesus Christ and the Church. In Chapter IV, entitled "The Theological Frame", he explicitly proposes restructuring the aforementioned frame, adapting it to the "new cosmology" since this is the "queen of the sciences" (p. 66). The fundamental elements of this restructuring are the following:

§1. "Instead of taking the Gospels and revealed Tradition as its starting point" (p. 65), this "completely new theology" has as its source "lived experience", more concretely, "the

⁹ Given that O'Murchu was already starting to explore this "new wisdom", the tutor who warned him in the 1970s not to proceed was presumably not included among the illuminated: "It took almost ten years to venture beyond that restricted horizon and explore for myself those vastly complex and fascinating processes that comprise the vowed life in its global context . . . I now realise how appallingly ignorant my tutor was" (p. 33).

deeper experiential layers of the vowed life as lived out universally, especially in the other great religions and . . . within the rich resources of prehistoric times” (p. 68).

§2. In order to persuade his Catholic readers of the credibility of his thesis, O'Murchu professes to take the Scriptures seriously, much more seriously, in fact, than the “institutional Church”. To this end, he attempts to demonstrate that what is central in the Gospels is the “Reign of God”, which he calls simply the “New Reign” and which he identifies with “a new world order, marked by right relationships of justice, love, peace and liberation” (p. 71). He then defines this “new world order” in the light of the “liminal values” of the “new cosmology”. And thus, in a circular argument the Gospels are reduced to his own ideology.

§3. O'Murchu declares on page 69 that “we cannot separate the person and mission of Jesus”, but then in the very next line forgets his person and reduces his mission to that of a mere agent (herald and inaugurator) of the “New Reign”, understood in the aforementioned sense. Not one word is said about the Incarnation of the Logos of God (rather, on the incarnation of God in the world!) (p. 60); nor about his redemptive death; nor of sin, from which we have been redeemed;¹⁰ nor about the Resurrection and the Glorification of the Son that opens up for us the possibility of resurrection. Nothing of this nature is of interest for the “new world order” to which the Gospels have been reduced.

§4. This “New Reign” needs neither the person of Jesus Christ nor the Church. On the contrary, according to O'Murchu, “Jesus was not particularly interested in a church” (p. 70), and therefore the Church quickly “lost sight of its central function and purpose — to be the primary agent for the unfolding of God's New Reign” (p. 70). However, even *this* primacy conceded by O'Murchu to the Church does not really seem to follow from his argument, according to which Jesus was not interested in the Church, and Religious of the future do not have to consider themselves bound to her. Rather, they have to “centre themselves” in the world (p. 128), in opposition to sinful systems, and “the major

¹⁰ “All the religions still adhere heavily to a *personal* notion of sin, and we Religious tend to adopt that same restrictive and misguided view” (p. 116).

blockage is the Christian Church itself, with its archaic dualism between the sacred and the secular” (p. 115). Again, “in moving out of the institutional Church we are not abandoning the people; quite the opposite — we are seeking to pitch our tent where the people are” (p. 123).

Why does O'Murchu dedicate so much attention to this “decadent and irrelevant”, “alien and alienating” (p. 138) ecclesial institution? It is not because he hopes to “recall the Church to its primary task” (p. 70), since he clearly believes that “liminality does not need formal religion” (p. 61), and that the Church is really nothing more than a dispensable obstacle. On the contrary, the real reason would appear to be that the author recognizes that he must promote his thesis with caution, since those Religious who are not “yet” capable of conceiving Religious life outside the Church, and in contrast to her, are still in the majority (cf. p. 134). In fact, the picture of Religious life presented in this book is totally alien to what is considered the call to consecrated life in the Church.

B) O'Murchu sees the vows of Religious life as an expression of a commitment to the “ever-old”. Once the Gospel has been reduced to the “new world order”, consecrated life no longer needs to consider itself as rooted in Christ's action in the world, nor in his mission from the Father, nor in the prolongation by the Holy Spirit of the salvific action of the Blessed Trinity. The vows do not, therefore, refer to the sacramental insertion of the believer into the Body of Christ which occurs at Baptism. Rather, they are presented as an efficient way of collaborating with the emergent revolution, which constitutes a return to the “ever-old”, “far beyond” Christianity and all religions. Again, O'Murchu takes pains to present this revolutionary collaboration within a Christian context of generous self-sacrifice according to the image of Calvary, and he invokes divine grace for its fulfilment, since such a revolution is a superhuman feat (cf. p. 111).

§1. The vow of chastity acquires the new name of a “vow for relatedness”.

1.1. *Definition of the vow*: “a call to name, explore and mediate the human engagement in intimate relationships, *within* the changing circumstances of life and culture” (p. 107).

1.2. The ultimate framework within which O'Murchu locates the liminary commitment “for relatedness” is the pre-patriarchal culture, where sexual intimacy is linked neither to monogamous matrimony (which according to O'Murchu is a Medieval and Tridentine construct) (p. 106), nor to reproduction (p. 108), nor to a dualism of the sexes (p. 110). Religious men and women with their vows “for relatedness” are supposed to work towards a sexual life that is not repressed by Christianity or Patriarchalism and which will be “mediated in a *breadth* of relationships, rather than in a depth of relatedness”. This will be “more about the release of creativity, passion and spirituality than about human reproduction” (p. 109), and about the assimilation of the “creative upsurge taking place in the inner being of many persons” that O'Murchu calls the “androgynous experience” (p. 110), in other words: homosexuality.

1.3. This sexual life of religious men and women, undertaken in “service to the world”, will be concretely expressed primarily in the “paradox” of the celibate life, but will not automatically exclude any of the above-mentioned genital relationships.¹¹

§2. The vow of poverty acquires the new name of a “vow for stewardship”.

2.1. *Definition of the vow*: “critical and creative engagement with the use and abuse of the goods of creation, including Planet Earth itself. Our role is to model, on behalf of the people, those sustainable relationships that make justice and equality more attainable ideals” (p. 117).

2.2. The context: a patriarchal culture heading for destruction because of its rejection of “global interdependency” and its concomitant duty of right administration of the earth or “stewardship” (cf. p. 116).

2.3. Expressed concretely in the development of “skills of political and social engagement unknown to previous generations and still anathema to the official Churches” (p. 116), after the example of the theology of liberation (p. 115).

¹¹ “Some celibates in the Christian tradition avail of genital intimacy, usually for a short or sporadic periods of time; some openly admit that this has deepened their sense of calling. . . . That the vow for relatedness will include the possibility of genital interaction in the future is something we cannot totally exclude. This is not an attempt at compromise . . . but an aspiration to remain as open as possible to the changing nature of human sexuality” (p. 112).

§3. The vow of obedience acquires the new name of a “vow for partnership”.

3.1. *Definition of the vow*: the call to “name the new yearnings for more participative government and concerted leadership”; “and from a Christian viewpoint”, giving up power (p. 120).¹²

3.2. The context: given the unhealthy partnership of religious men and women with the patriarchal system that has made them “perpetrators of heinous crimes against humanity” (p. 119), the impetus begun with Marxism and Feminism is to be pursued (cf. p. 118).

3.3. Expressed concretely in the call to “leave the Church”, the stronghold of patriarchalism, abandoning it since it is “better left to decline and become extinct”. In the meantime, the call of our times spurs us on to direct our energies and attention to the world (p. 122).

Conclusion

6. Diarmuid O'Murchu's manifesto is based on a simple fact: namely, that “Religious life is in crisis”, to the extent that its very future, at least in its present form, is in doubt (cf. pp. 12-13). In response to this stark reality he attempts to present a solution for the future. What he offers, however, is an efficient formula for the progressive distortion and destruction of Religious and consecrated life, separating it little by little from the Church, divorcing it from the service of mankind and dissolving it in a world that does not know Christ (cf. Jn 1:10).

¹² The author does not explain how this renunciation fits in with the political activity required of Religious by their “vow of stewardship”.