



Exploring *Fratelli tutti*: 4. Finding Christ in the world

James Hanvey SJ

James Hanvey SJ concludes the interview he gave to Jan Regner SJ by reflecting on the process of secularisation in many European countries. Those philosophers and sociologists of religion who say that faith in Europe is changing, rather than vanishing, claim that there are now fewer 'dwellers' and more 'seekers'. Is this true, and how can the Society of Jesus respond?

I think Christians are always both [dwellers and seekers]. We 'dwell' as members of the Church – a Church that is not bound by space or time. We 'dwell' in the liturgy and in the sacraments and these not only make the other 'dwellers' present to us, but they also open the world itself as the place in which we are rooted. And, of course, we are not only 'dwellers' but we are also 'indwelt', for Christ dwells in us and gives us his Spirit 'who makes his home in us.'

I think that there are two forms of this 'inquietude': the first is that searching of love itself. Love itself makes us 'seekers'. Faith not only seeks understanding; it seeks the one who is the light and the life of that understanding. It seeks to love more the Love that is beyond understanding. The more we come to love and know Christ, the more we will always want to know and love. His love is infinite, and we will never exhaust it, but it is a wonderful and joyous seeking. Normally, we are seekers because we feel that we have lost something or that there is something we do not have that we wish to find. This 'seeking' of our faith in love is exactly the reverse: in finding Christ and in being found by



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him, we are summoned to always go deeper into the life that is God, and we seek that life through the way that Christ is for us.

The second 'inquietude' is the restless heart and mind which has not found anything or feels that it has lost something that it once had or should have had. This is a tragic way and perhaps it sometimes ends in cynicism

and despair. Often, it will follow so many things but, in the end, they will always disappoint. Sometimes, the secularised world wants to see this sort of seeking as a noble freedom. It is idealised in the poem *Ulysses* by Alfred Tennyson: 'To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.' You can hear echoes of it in *Star Trek*: 'To boldly go where no man has gone before'! Now, there is something noble in this quest to measure the frontiers of our universe and master knowledge of it, but perhaps the secret is disclosed – 'to master' – so is it really a quest for knowledge or for power? Ultimately, of course, even the noblest quest must come to dwell in the house of death. So, I think we need to be conscious that we are not deceived by the myths of the secular and especially the way in which it constructs its own grandiose self-legitimizing narratives.

Our contemporary culture, whatever it may say about itself, is not a God-free zone. God cannot be excluded because we prefer his absence and think that this makes us more liberated and progressive. All such myths of the imperial self soon end as artefacts in the museums of past cultures. There is something about being human which also makes us 'seekers' in the deepest sense and to lose that or suppress it is to diminish our own humanity and, indeed, the infinite depth of the multi-dimensional world God has created for us. The challenge for the Church is to become a dwelling place of seekers, to be a 'seeking' Church: to go into our culture and to find those who are lost or confused seekers or maybe even those who have given up. Secular culture is a new moment for searching and we know the promise of Christ: 'seek and you will find.'

I am reminded of a Hasidic story. A man rushes home to tell his wife that the great rabbi has said that the Messiah is coming. He asks his wife how they should prepare to welcome him when he comes. All she says is that they must prepare by becoming better Jews first.

I think it is the same for the Society of Jesus. We have such wonderful works and apostolates to offer in the service of the Church, our culture and, indeed, the world. But the most precious thing of all is ourselves, our faith in Christ and our knowledge, love and dedication to God and our neighbour. If Christ is alive for us, he will be alive for all whom we serve and to whom we desire to reach out. Our works are only a means to this end. They should not become a substitute for this. Christ has chosen us and our Society to be his companions and to 'labour in the vineyard of the Lord.' This gives us a great freedom and, throughout its history, the Society has shown itself to be courageous, creative and resilient in its service.

I think we need to be alert to the 'enemy of our human nature' that will always seek to make us preoccupied with our lack of resources or our low numbers. Our resources will always outstrip our needs and our desires. But that is also part of God's way of employing us – it is the deeper reality of our poverty which means that we totally reliant upon God and those whom God sends.

Our one mission is to love Christ and to see him in our world, in the faces of those around us, in both the sceptics and the seekers, in the distracted and the disinterested, and especially in those who seek him alongside us. For me, the founding contemplation of the Society is the contemplation of the nativity in the Spiritual Exercises. There, Ignatius asks us to place ourselves in the presence of Christ newly born. We are present before the new-born and vulnerable Christ-child as 'a poor unworthy servant' but completely attentive to see how we might be of some small service to him and his mother. Christ makes himself known here in the humility of his fragility and need and we are present to him in our own poverty and gratitude. These seem to me to be fundamental dispositions of the Society of Jesus and the graces that we have to accomplish the mission we have received from Christ and his Church. This is the deep affective school of the heart in which every Jesuit lives and is called to the service and sacrifice of love.

James Hanvey SJ is Secretary of the Service of the Faith for the Society of Jesus. He was speaking to Jan Regner SJ, Editor of Jezuité, the Czech Jesuit cultural review, in which this interview will also be published.