

Society of the Sacred Mission

Journey in the Dark

By Dunstan McKee, SSM

There is a well-known story about Fr Kelly.

Novice: Father, how can I know the will of god for me?

Fr Kelly: That's the giddy joke. You can't.

That story has been part of my life every since I came into contact with SSM. It came as a bit of a shock when I first heard it. What was one supposed to do? Maybe it was a matter of submitting to the will of God, not fighting it, not avoiding it. And so in SSM we went on talking easily about the will of God, as if somehow it was what drove us, as if somehow we could fulfil it even if we could never know what it was.

But that was not what Kelly was on about. Here he is again:

'The glory of God is just the fulfilment of his will in us, and from this nothing keeps us back so much as the notion that to it our activity is capable of adding something.'

This is very *uncomfortable*. But it is all of a part with Kelly's insistence on the otherness of God, on the strangeness of God, on faith as against feeling. We for our part *may* come to perceive what God has done, we may even talk about it, bear witness to it but 'the whole value of a man's life and work lie not in himself but in what God does with it. And that is very rarely or never the same as what he thinks he is doing.'

That is, of course, Kelly again.

Why look back at Kelly at this stage in the life of SSM? Because therein lies the answer to the question of what SSM is doing. That answer is *not* that we are doing the will of God, and we are not getting very far with that just at the moment. We are not alone in this; it is true of the Church; it is true of our Western culture; it is just that it is more clearly seen in the life of religious communities.

'Oh dear, SSM has lost its nerve!' Far from it! To lose one's nerve is to put one's trust in our all-too-human responses to such a situation. So religious communities have tried rediscovering 'the charism of the founder'; all they discovered, however, was a justification of how their life had developed. The latest suggestion is that religious life should be *refounded* or *revitalised* or *re-at-least-do-something*. But any redoing is not something we can initiate; it may be something we can respond to, but, if so, then we are back again where we started.

What *has* happened is that the modern age has come to an end, and with it the modern age's way of understanding God. What I am suggesting is that the culture based on the myth of unending progress, on the power of universal reason, on the primacy of the individual, and of human control over nature is collapsing. With that collapse there is also occurring the collapse of our understanding of God.

Kelly suggested that God was something other, but modern culture could not listen to such a strange suggestion. We trusted in reason, we preached a message of salvation of individuals (and this, regardless of whether we were Catholic or Protestant). When our culture began collapsing we thought up new ways of expressing our ideas, but still in the thought forms of the modern age—co-creators with God, the God within. We preferred not to tackle a theology of the Holocaust or of Dresden or the bomb, or

Vietnam, or an unjust distribution of wealth, or..... We tried to be better Christians, doing what we could. But now our culture, after the modern age, will not let us delude ourselves into thinking *that* is the answer.

For our new culture doubts this easy talk of progress, of unbounded reason; it has seen what the emphasis on the unconnected individual has done, and, as for controlling nature.... What of God? The fact is that the concept of God which carried us through the modern age has now become unbelievable. If that offends us, what *are* we to make of a decade of evangelism, which seems to mean something in those cultures which are now becoming 'modern,' or in enclaves where the believers take refuge from the culture in which they live? It is not that we can choose whether to live in the modern age, or whatever will follow it. The demise of modern culture, and of modern theology, is coming about because of what is happening as a result of modern culture. We are now globally aware, aware of other religions, of endemic and structural injustice, of a materialism which cannot keep its promises, of increasing violence, aware of the 'underside' of society, that is, of the voice of women and of the poor.

Something new is happening; to live in it is to experience God as if there is no God at all. And so faith becomes for us a possibility, a trust in the unpredictable, the unreliable. What *is* God doing? What *can* it mean to talk of God at all? What could possibly be an answer to our questions? We are in the dark; we think this unfortunate and try to find a source of light.

What we may need, rather, is to learn to see in the dark. The question for religious communities like SSM is what they will spend their energies on: looking for the light, or learning to see in the dark. To keep alive a form of religious life that has run its course may only serve to inhabit the way of Jesus.

Insofar as religious communities have traditionally been on the edge—the cutting edge?—of the life of the Church, what is happening in religious life is no more than what is happening to the Church. The difference is that religious are not really adept at preserving, at all costs, the *status quo*, certainly not with a Fr Kelly in your history.

To conclude, a Sufi story, from Anthony de Mello:

'A neighbour found Nasrudin on his knees searching for something. "What are you searing for Mullah?" "My key, I've lost it." Both people got to their knees to search for the lost key. After a while the neighbour says, "Where did you lose it?" "At home." "Good Lord! Then why are you searching for it here?" "Because there is more light here."

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