AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL
Emmanuel Lévinas, I am reliably told, once said that one’s philosophy is set off by one’s “formative experiences.” No sooner had I begun to write this preface than I realized it was going to degenerate into a theological confession. The French (who, as everybody knows, have “a way of saying things”—as if we didn’t) might call it a prise de conscience: taking stock of one’s consciousness. It is just that. It is a reply to the customs officer’s question: “Have you anything to declare?”

This is a hefty book. It explores the human habit of balking at both death and love, especially at the intimate love that accepts death as its measure. It also suggests the transformation of this habit offered us by God, with a pained love, of the kind that is in the end irresistible. Now that it is done, I realize that one of its hidden themes is the conciliation between the two chief formative experiences of my life: the Catholic Church in which I was born and bred in the Southern Netherlands, and the Catholic faith as I have come to profess it in my thirty-six years as a Jesuit priest-teacher in the United States. The reader is forewarned.

I remember the Catholicism of the eastern part of the Province of North Brabant. It still subsists in many of the elderly and the very old in the area today. It had one enormous advantage: never having been impugned, nobody was needed to jump to its defense. Neither the Calvinists of the Northern and Western Low Countries nor the Jansenists of Flanders had ever taken an interest in us; we were simply too poor to be interesting. Most of us lived happily in the knowledge that the Hollanders thought little of us. By the time I was old enough to be aware of this, economic and educational development was well underway. There was a handful of respected Catholic “colleges.” Jews
like Jurgens, van den Bergh, and Anton Philips (a distant cousin of Karl Marx!) had gotten promising industries off the ground; farmers’ cooperatives had been started, mostly by local intelligentsia and small factory owners who had learned how to draw on the dormant energies of a small army of assistant parish priests, many of them gentlemen-farmers’ sons. What was notable, too, was the virtual absence of anticlericalism of the *laissez-faire* kind; but how could there be, since there was no clericalism to speak of? (I recall how I heard, at the age of nine or ten, one of my younger uncles call the assistant pastor “a cow” without meeting with any contradiction in the jam-packed kitchen.)

If our Catholic faith was unsophisticated (and heaven knows it was), it was also the quiet guiding light of the petty farmers, the hard-working peat diggers, the factory workers, the small shopkeepers, the local bureaucracy, and the handful of gentlemen-farmers. And I have not even mentioned the (largely resigned) faith of many Brabant women—farmers’, small business owners’, and especially factory workers’ wives. Dedicated mothers of customarily large families, many of them had looked for home work in addition to their household tasks, to supplement the meager family income. Noisy we could be (the people of Asten, my mother’s home village, had a reputation for being “shrill-spoken”), especially with the help of some beer and loud company from elsewhere; still, modesty, humility, good neighborliness, and deep faith were far from unknown. Most of all, God—*Zlieveneer: “r-dea-Lord”—was quietly and without ado held to be real, loving, forgiving, and present.

Now comes the contrast experience. If there is anything I seem to have become familiar with in over thirty years of living in the United States, it is Deism—belief in the existence of a Supreme Being that from an enormous distance keeps the world moving and makes ethical demands on humanity, though without taking any active part in what human beings (or for that matter, Nature) do. Deism started in Europe, of course, especially in France, England, and Scotland; still, nowhere did it properly establish itself as the normative cultural climate, except maybe among the British intelligentsia; but even there the challenges offered by the still large membership of the Church of England, the Kirk, and the Free Churches were never feeble nor far to seek. Maybe this is why European Deism never became affable; it always remained too deliberate for that. By contrast, a full quarter century before the
French Revolution, Deism had made its friendly, largely peaceful home in the recently founded United States, spreading its obvious blessings across the federation, as well as its less obvious curses. Both are considerable, and for well over two centuries the former well outshone the latter, most noticeably in the direct aftermath of the horrors of the Civil War—a sensitive issue even today.

In the eighteen-thirties, Alexis de Tocqueville correctly observed that American-style Deism was genuinely tolerant, unlike its European counterpart. More than a century and a half later, I can say that nowhere else have I felt such a generous invitation extended to me to full participation in a culture by people proud of their national accomplishment yet invariably excited by things and people that are “different.” *Vive la différence* (pronounced without the slightest hint of a French accent) is an American saying. Even as they sing America’s praises, Americans will invite the rest of us “differents” to join their large, noisy family, managed somehow, in an unsubtle yet always generous way, by what simply has to be a big Invisible Hand. Only in the United States have I found kind tolerance, in the form of the amicable willingness, sometimes to the point of ludicrousness, to treat each and every opinion as worthy of being entertained, and every individual “experience”—a key word in the United States idiom—as the potential bearer of a profound moral message of wide, if not general application. A Jewish-Scots convert to the Catholic Church—a woman novelist with a sharp eye and an even sharper pen—once wrote:

> New York, home of the vivisectors of the mind, and of the mentally vivisected still to be reassembled, of those who live intact, habitually wondering about their states of sanity, and home of those whose minds have been dead, bearing the scars of resurrection.

*Touché,* many Americans are apt to say to this. (Europeans are apt to bristle, or quail, or resort to ridicule, when their Europe is caricatured.) But in the quotation, please note the sardonic reference to the central theme of the Christian faith. Typically, Americans have no illusions of sanctity or morality, yet they are a proud and patriotic people, and they love ethical principle and their many, mostly Christian churches. But what is nearest and dearest to them are “the facts”; and,
more often than not, those facts—loss of “moral fiber” and sins of every
weight and measure—can be trusted to see to it that humility remains
a respected virtue in the United States. To this day, Machiavelli has few
principled adherents here; in the teeth of daily evidence to the contrary,
most citizens think that in the last resort a-moral political opportunism
is wrong; there simply has to be a way of doing things right.
Accordingly, hypocrisy meets with very little tolerance; and faire comme
si—elsewhere considered the best way to learn civility, manners, and
ethics—is suspect. “Be sincere” is the motto. At the same time, one way
or another, freedom must rule. It’s a hard pair to hold together.

As Muriel Spark implies, freedom comes at a price. It is paid in the
coinage of stress. I tell inquiring friends “abroad” (as I now call the rest
of the world) that living in the United States is like having a lightly
elevated temperature as a permanent condition. But then again, there
is that sense of freedom: no self-impressed, self-anointed establishment
has succeeded in imposing itself and forcing its style on the common
culture without eventually being held accountable by a majority of one
kind or another. Once, a gay and lesbian manifestation in dismal taste
had interrupted the pontifical Sunday Eucharist in Saint Patrick’s
Cathedral on Fifth Avenue. As it happened, Ed Koch, the unforgettable
Jewish Mayor of New York City, had been in Saint Pat’s for his weekly
visit to a “place of worship.” Right after the service, facing the TV
cameras standing ready outside the cathedral, he declared, with a
preacher’s pizzazz, “It’s not American. In America, if you don’t like your
church you get out and start your own.” In Europe, this is liable to
produce peals of laughter, mostly of the condescending kind. In New
York or Chicago, if you show yourself horrified at theological
pronouncements like Mayor Koch’s, well-educated Catholic friends
will remind you that in the United States serious differences, including
those among Catholics, are by and large stated publicly, and best
addressed publicly as well; the better-traveled among them may even
politely remind you, “In this country, there’s no church tax.” We have
separation of church and state. And so, faith and public funds are sepa-
rate as well.

This implies, of course, that reactionary Catholic groups and indi-
viduals, especially of the very wealthy kind, regularly engage in
machinations to get a handle on “their” church. Wealthy Catholics
have tried that for centuries. (Just look up the name of Paul of
Samosata in a decent Catholic dictionary, or read Acts of the Apostles 5:1–11.) Besides, there are authoritative parties in the Church, not only here, but also in Rome, who have the good of the Church Universal at heart and know the value of the dollar. They tend to be impressed by “expert” groups and individuals willing to throw millions at projects they expect will help make the church “really Catholic.” However, most Catholics find this sort of thing almost unpardonably disloyal. From experience we know that reactionaries occur everywhere, mostly behind the scenes, but every now and then in embarrassingly full view. Many American Catholics will occasionally call them unflattering names, but they will rarely read them out of the One, Holy, Catholic Church (let alone out of the Republic), and in any case, never by common consent; some Catholics are embarrassing, that’s all. By way of explanation they will say, “Well, it takes all kinds”—a phrase with religious overtones. In the offices of that very Catholic, very American bimonthly, Commonweal, edited by thoughtful, intelligent Catholic lay people, the motto is, “It’s a big church.”

Thus, being a Catholic in the United States means: being a Catholic with no political advantage or privilege other than feeling you are generally welcome to make a difference. “Do your thing.” A number of years ago, there were voices objecting to the large amounts of public funds allegedly being spent on the construction of an altar with a canopy for a papal Mass. Almost immediately, a noted politician let it be known that “once you let the pope come for a visit you also agree to a mass Mass—that’s the kind of thing popes do.” One far less symbolic proof of accepted influence on public life is that American bishops and cardinals regularly testify before congressional committees not as dignitaries but as significant citizens. And if there should be such a thing as a negative symbol, the Catholic Church in the United States neither tithes nor levies church taxes, never mind getting them levied through public agencies. It needs a lot of money, not so much for its church buildings (which are by and large modest) as for its many schools (where non-Catholics have been made to feel more and more welcome, and now fairly often decide to join the Catholic Church without being exhorted to do so). It also runs fund-raising campaigns in behalf of a wide range of worthy causes at home and overseas, from the Vatican to the poor everywhere; in the Chicago archdiocese, two thirds of the aid furnished by Catholic Charities ends up in non-Catholic
hands—a barely advertised fact. Still, no matter how passionately the contributions are solicited, they are offered, not exacted, not even virtually.

Why am I distracting the reader with this outpouring of admiration and contentment? Well, let me detail my earlier confession. When I started to write this preface, in November 1998, I was in Rome, working for my university. I was surprising myself with what I wrote; long before I ever thought of any readers I found myself giving an account to myself of my having become a theologian. It boiled down to this: never having prayed for the grace of living during a watershed of historic proportions, I found myself thankful for having received precisely that favor. And if I have gone through any growth and development as a Catholic theologian innocent of doctoral studies in theology, it is unimaginable without the context of the United States. As early as 1964–65, during my tertianship—a virtually meaningless routine in Jesuit formation at the time—I had reworked my licentiate dissertation at the time—I had reworked my licentiate dissertation in theology, and offered it (if without my superiors’ permission) to the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*. I was underway.

I arrived in Boston for a one-year stint in 1968—a year of widespread unrest both here and “at home” (as I was still calling it) in Europe. By that time, the Catholic Church in the United States was still proving to itself and to the nation, even after the election of John F. Kennedy, that it was truly American; still, there were many signs indeed that the Catholic bid for national acceptance was spending itself. One of its last prominent symbols was Francis Cardinal Spellman, an antifascist and anticommunist once trusted by both Pius XI and Pius XII, as well as a supporter of the Vietnam war; he would celebrate Christmas surrounded by GIs near the front lines, in vestments put on right over his army fatigues. Still, he had also been a moving force behind Vatican II’s promulgation of *Dignitatis Humanae*, the “liberal” Declaration on Religious Freedom.

Just what was Cardinal Spellman symbolizing? One of my friends, the Jesuit historian James Hennesey, one of Msgr. John Tracy Ellis’s students at the Catholic University of America and the author of a large number of essays on American Catholicism, captures the complex situation in the sixties and seventies in the respective titles of the two final chapters of his book *American Catholics*. Spellman still personified the mentality of conciliation between “Cross and Flag”; however, in
endorsing John Courtney Murray’s theories about religious freedom as a human right he helped support the “Revolutionary Moment” that saw the Catholic Church in the United States transformed into a community that fosters scriptural studies of international caliber, free, often critical yet also creative theological exploration, and what I like to term a “charismatic” stance in the doctrinal, practical, and liturgical-spiritual areas. Catholics of this kind by and large want to be “involved” on the basis of personal motives and abilities.

Unsurprisingly, this was a huge irritant to a Catholic establishment whose primary features had been shaped by the “pistic” stance: unquestioning orthodoxy, dependence on clerical authority, traditional practices of sacramental and individual worship and especially piety, and an exaggerated emphasis on the afterlife. What is now known as the wars between the “liberals” and the “conservatives” had begun. They are still continuing in some form, witness the halfhearted and even downright negative reactions to the late Cardinal Bernardin’s intensely constructive “Common Ground” project. In the United States, Vatican II has not fully entered the Catholic Church’s bloodstream by a long shot.

In retrospect, though, it was of great symbolic significance that the frankest, most unvarnished account of what was happening, day by day, at the second Vatican Council in Rome should have been written by an American, and for a sophisticated magazine published right in Cardinal Spellman’s metropolitan see, the New Yorker. His name was Xavier Rynne. While he was writing, his pen name became a household word, but his identity, thank heavens, remained a well-kept secret. While the Council lasted, Rynne was variously identified as “a disgruntled Catholic clergyman,” “a Roman student who after failing his final exams criticized the Roman educational system,” “a fellow named Wilfred Sheed, who used to write for Jubilee,” “a mild Redemptorist professor of Church history,” “an American bishop,” “an English Dominican,” “a New York Jesuit,” and “a writer inspired by the Vatican Secretariat of State.” Even Jack Kerouac made the list of suspects, as did (yes!) Phyllis McGinley (renamed “McGentley” for the occasion). After a year, Rynne’s reports began to appear in weekly installments; they must have greatly swelled the New Yorker’s Catholic readership; odds are only the then-editors knew by how much. At Council’s end, they appeared in four volumes—one for each session. The author turned out
to be the mild early-church historian, a Redemptorist priest with that most Catholic of American names, Francis X. Murphy. I still make a point of exhorting young North American Catholic theologians, who have grown up with the Council’s decrees, to read Rynne’s story before the patina that comes with time dulls it for good. Maybe it has already come to that.

In many ways, American Catholics, especially those with a good education, went on, in the wake of the second Vatican Council, to show just how American they were, except they were much less deliberate about it. Polarization between traditionalists and liberals became both fierce and public, especially in the East and Northeast; in the Midwest, Catholicism was both franker and gentler, probably because it had never had natural enemies in positions of power before it arrived; a more relaxed, open, welcoming (and in that sense “liberal”) climate prevailed, as I noticed when in 1985 I moved from Boston to Chicago. Still, the situation was far from quiet in the Midwest. If anyone felt the heat, it was Cardinal Bernardin.

How so? The best way I know how to put it is as follows. Below the superficial polarization, a far more profound crisis has been surfacing. In my view, it has everything to do with Catholic identity—something more profoundly rooted than we have been led to think in the United States thus far. Neither the tame fences of the traditional church nor the liberal removal of needless restrictions can guarantee Catholicity. Catholicity has been described by the dean of American Catholic theologians, Avery Dulles, S.J. (by now a cardinal, much to the satisfaction of both the right and the left), as “unity in diversity.” A formula like this is, of course, just what fits the bill in the United States, with its motto E pluribus unum: “unity forged out of more than one unit.” Catholic unity-in-diversity is a matter neither of being open nor of being closed, for openness without an inner focus is shapeless, and closedness without a world view is a prison. Faith in God is neither severe orthodoxy nor free-thinking tolerance. In essence, it is a discerning habit of loving the Living God and the neighbor—living, dying, or something in between—at least as much as oneself. It has more to do with persons looking out for persons than with self-made individuals, and more with growth in communication than with the increase or the dwindling of ecclesiastical bodies large or small.
This book will explore the reasons why the Deist culture of which we are part has little or no idea of what this means. We Catholics in the United States have experienced the blessings of Deism, but our awareness of its curses is still limited. Accordingly, many of our typical theological stances neglect a vital ingredient of the Catholic faith. (I was tempted to write “the vital ingredient,” but I do not want the reader to put this book to rest, unread, on a shelf, its back turned on its owner—the fate that has befallen many fat theological tomes.)

The present Archbishop of Chicago, Cardinal Francis E. George, O.M.I., has often remarked, in private but also in public, “The Catholic liberal project is out of breath.” He has also made it clear that he does not commend a turn to traditionalism. What I am fairly sure he means is: having a good look at the Catholic Church now, in light of the Great Tradition embodied in the apostolic Scriptures first, but then also in actual, living witnesses to the Tradition; among the latter, the successors of the Apostles and their teachings, especially those laid down in Council decrees, enjoy pride of place.

However, this is pretty much the opposite of what Mayor Koch thought of the Church, and he still has the vast majority of American citizens in his corner. So, once again, the opinionated culture of which we are part has little or no idea what being a member of the Catholic Church means. Unsurprisingly, we Catholics in the United States have only a very partial understanding of what it means. The issue as I see it is this. Our Deist culture has given us the freedom of religion we need and want, but this is not to say that freedom of religion is the heart of Catholicity. So the issue becomes: do we Catholics now wish simply to continue enjoying our freedom, or will we try to return the favor by courteously offering to share with our Deist culture our central blessing: “the knowledge of God’s Glory in the Face of Christ” (2 Cor 2, 6)? And do we wish to do so—at least in principle—in front of all the people we meet, “alone or with others”: Catholics, disaffected Catholics, fearful Catholics, and non-Catholics, and to do so while giving evidence of our being participants in the Great Tradition of Christian worship, conduct, and teaching, in that order? This has a lot to do with what Pope John Paul II has called a “new evangelization,” by means of a fully Catholic pastoral-liturgical catechesis. This is not likely to be always and everywhere welcome any more than cod liver oil or the equally obsolete Baltimore Catechism, but it would seem to be
badly needed. Latinos now are one-quarter of the Catholics in the United States. They are Catholics to the bone, but also significantly unfamiliar with North American culture. Who knows if this is not going to be a decisive factor in the search for Catholic identity?

My mother was born and bred in Asten, not far from Eindhoven, today the hub of the multinational company known as Koninklijke Philips Electronics N.V. As a school child, she had learned by heart, and given back by heart, what was known as “the big catechism,” and not just the answers, but both the questions and the answers. In our home, the award for this achievement could be seen on a book shelf: a life of Godfrey of Bouillon, the Crusader, in “luxury binding.” “Sir Dean”—the chief priest of the deanery—had personally handed it to her. I mean, to our mother. As a small boy, I once asked her if I could read a bit in it. Of course, never mind the fact that we back then had had to learn by heart only the answers of the big catechism. Profoundly impressed, I opened the book. Right on the first page, slightly yellowed, I found strange things. The hero’s mother had seen unusual lights during her “pregnancy,” and once born, he himself had “refused his mother’s breast,” on Wednesdays and Fridays, if I recall. I immediately showed it to our mother. She read a bit, clearly for the first time—a move that it had apparently never occurred to the Very Reverend Dean Mossault to undertake almost thirty years earlier. Then she returned the book to its place of honor on the shelf. In those days, that’s the way things went in Catholic North Brabant.

Notes


On Keeping Dogs and Strangers Out

A

nimals are by and large socially aware, even across different species. To their own kind they readily respond, mostly positively, yet they are wary, so to speak, of birds of a different feather. But since wariness implies awareness, my opening gambit must be at least broadly true: animals are by and large socially aware. Still, the woodpecker I watched going about his loud business this morning did not seem concerned with other animals at all, except, I assume, the bugs he was knocking out of their primitive habitat for the purpose of eating them as detected. But actually, there are a lot of constructive things to report about trans-specific ventures in the animal kingdom. As a teenager I learned about an odd-shaped bird that eats the ticks that in turn feed themselves on whatever it is that makes a rhinoceros’s back palatable to them—such fine cooperation! I likewise learned that the yellow meadow ant, a common denizen of the many meadows in the Low Countries, keeps lice the way the farmers who own the meadows keep cows on them: they nourish the lice and milk them of a delicious, healthy, sweet fluid which the lice exude from two minuscule glands on their hind quarters. It boggles the imagination, but it is not all that different from what we have done for thousands of years with cows, sheep, goats, and camels, not counting the mares whose milk is so popular—or so I was taught in fifth grade—in Hungary.

Actually, we humans ourselves practice symbiosis with a vengeance. If anyone were looking for proof positive for the correctness of Friedrich Nietzsche’s characterization of the human species as das noch nicht festgestellte Tier—“the as-yet unstabilized animal”—our awareness of our pretty much completely festgestellte fellow-mammals and indeed fellow-vertebrates would amply suffice. All animals are specialized for better for worse, depending on your point of view. But they have nowhere else to go, really; still, they are awfully good at doing what they do and they bequeath their skills, narrow as they are, to their
brood. Lions are masters at frightening and killing. Hares and rabbits run as if their lives depended on it—which they actually do. The deer and the antelope are no different, except for their gait, of course. Ospreys are hell-bent on catching fish and eating it—strictly business, no bells and whistles. By contrast we humans have been going places; we have populated every known climate on earth; they’re now talking of turning parts of the Sahara into arable land where some of us will learn how to live; and most efforts to get the Eskimos to live elsewhere have failed. No wonder we humans have favored, bred, cross-bred, used and gotten used to, and thrown in our lot with an immense variety of animals.

We cultivate bovine cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, ducks, chickens, peacocks, geese, monkeys, rabbits, cats, a wide array of dogs (Chihuahua to Saint Bernard), camels both Bactrian and Saharan, gerbils, horses, elephants, pet turtles, a snake or two, an alligator or two, fish, carrier pigeons, finches (sometimes blinded “for better musical results”), canaries, caged quail, bees, parrots, not to mention all the animals we keep in zoos. Some animals do not seem to mind providing us with three staples: various meats (let’s not get into the particulars of that habit of ours), eggs, and milk, not counting everything we fabricate of that trio, like egg-beaters. But we also bring in harvests of plumes, bristles, hair, feathers, idioms (“clean as a hound’s tooth”), horsepower at the plough and transportation on the byways, tortoiseshell spectacle-frames, target practice, song, expensive crocodile leather shoes, companionship, cod liver oil, invectives (“that toad!”), random occasions for sexual curiosity at a chaste distance, circus routines, safe conduct for the blind, excuses for hunting and giving chase, scrimshaw art, ivory napkin rings, visual entertainment (often of the brilliant kind, as bird watchers will tell us), and expensive adventures at animals’ expense, like safaris. I will resist the temptation to delve into the poaching of African rhinoceros with the intent to sawing off their horns, grinding them up fine, and selling the powder to oil-millionaires allegedly availing themselves of it as an allegedly potent aphrodisiac. Nobody has ever explained to me how it is applied or taken, or whichever other verb applies.

Some animals seek us out, too, or at least our facilities. Our heads (used to) attract lice and our small intestines tapeworms; the special foods we take on our camping trips are utterly irresistible to bears, some
of them quite dangerous; our houses still invite shrews, mice, spiders, cockroaches, mosquitoes, and moths; swallows, owls, and urban pigeons find our roofs, window sills, sheds, barns, and railway bridges appealing, just as ants, flies, and roaches like our sugar bowls, our fruits, and the open pasta packages in our pantries—where I am sure they meet the mice, which quite probably find them a nuisance the way we do.

* * * *

Still, when it comes to animals being attracted to us, dogs take the cake. The dog is our friend. “Man’s Best Friend.” Close to three hundred years ago, I am sure Carl von Linné was right when in his classification of the mammals he put the primates at the top, but when he proceeded to put the monkeys next, my admiration starts to wane. I have my doubts about his putting mandrills and baboons ahead of our friends, the canines. Why classify animals by the shape and number of their teeth rather than by their talent for companiability? Did the Greek philosopher whose name I forget not say that humanity is the measure of everything? In the last eight decades or so biologists have finally been studying animal behavior, but Linné’s system is presumably written in stone by now, so I will spare my readers an unwinnable war of words. But why in the world did the learned Swede see fit to place the felines (and thus, our house cats) ahead of our dogs? In my book, not even the noblest cat, whether Cheshire, Persian, Siamese, nor even a Manx, can hold a candle to a dog—any dog. My obvious reason: dogs live with us; cats at best live around us, with that inquisitorial look on their faces and ready to eat the canary when given a chance. After this, need I explain that the learned Swede completely discredited his own humanity by placing the dog—canis—between on the one hand the weasel and their sly and cowardly blood-sucking cousins and the filthy, gross hyenas (for crying out loud!), and on the other hand the bears? This shows you what injustices rational systems will produce. The Dog, ipse, between hyenas and bears. A scandal!

For the simple fact is, dogs are an existential human fact. I doubt that dogs know this, but for us humans the fact needs no proof. Human life is different in the company of dogs. The absence of a numbered section titled Mensch und Hund: eigentliches oder uneigentliches Mitsein? in
Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* is a philosophic failure. Why do we cultivate cemeteries for dogs?

Wherever we are, dogs are, and not just the way house sparrows and cardinals (I mean the birds) and humming-birds offer us their hungry companionship, sometimes shrill, sometimes deep-throated, never dull. But dogs empathize, welcome us beyond the call of duty, sympathize, console, watch out, defend, frighten or even attack outsiders, finish leftovers, lick our hands. They *love* us. They expect our attention even as they glower at us intruders—the pockmarked cur, the wide-ranging mutt, the scrappy stray, the archbeggar for attention living largely by his wet nose, the all-purpose trash can cleaner looking for something delicious, right down to the shameless, inconvenient public copulator raising pedagogical issues—am I supposed to pull the kids away from the love scene, or do the opposite and change the subject to the bees and birds?

Dogs are most like us in one highly moral respect. Like us humans, they come in an improbable array of races, where they are barely *fest-gestellt*. For example, I am convinced that the vast majority of dachshunds alive today have never ventured into a badger burrow to catch an actual badger, even though they are supposed to be past masters at that subtle skill, on which the higher-end shaving-brush industry relies. Note that whereas lions have no choice but to roar, kill, and eat flesh, dachshunds get along fine without practicing their specialty. Like human beings, there are enough huskies that show that they do not have to live in the Arctic regions to be the real thing. Setters go without setting to a crouch without protest, and retrievers can be happy without retrieving anything beyond a frisbee. German shepherds go without sheep without getting depressed. Dalmatians live outside the North West Adriatic coastal regions, and I am reliably informed that St. Bernard dogs do not insist on delivering hard liquor to forsaken alpinists. The biggest advantage dogs have over humans is that in the teeth of their multiple races they show no sign of racism. Only we do. This by itself is reason to consider dogs our “best friend.”

Dogs *are* a bit much. Small wonder we don’t like them around when we get serious—really serious. Thus, I have steadfastly refused dogs admission to my classroom for the forty-three years I have taught; I know how wonderful they must be, yet they do not belong in my academic world. Shopkeepers, cash-register clerks, sextons, sacristans,
priests, preachers, hair dressers, department store managers, pharmacists, supermarket owners agree: No Dogs Allowed. Judges too: No Dogs in Court.

Now that’s precisely where the deeper problem starts, though. (I apologize for not having explained that this is a theological essay.) At least from Roman times on, dogs have lived with us in all public locations, back yards, front yards, streets, even temple areas. In Indonesia today, they are still everywhere, enjoying the population density and happily contributing to it. It has been like this from time immemorial. They were a common sight in Roman basilicas; they still were in eighteenth-century churches, especially in the Catholic ones before they adopted pews—presumably to keep the people in their places. I imagine dogs vanished from our churches as pews came in; they know the difference between kennels that imprison you and big, friendly public spaces where all kinds of people and also dogs go to see (and be seen by) friends both human and canine.

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But now what is my problem? What’s the point of writing this essay? It will take me a while to explain.

At the far end of every ancient pagan basilica there was an elevated area—the bema. That area was for serious business: lobbying, currying favors, conspiracies, stitching coalitions together, large commodities trading. Even more importantly, on the bema, the judges held court, starting at sunrise. Dogs Not Allowed there.

How to manage this efficiently? Simple. You put up wooden latticework fences, low brick walls, or even metal barriers to separate the court personnel from the crowd and from the dogs who love crowds. This was an essential requirement for serious business, for dogs are even more shameless than the most barefaced humans going about their business in court. Understandably, those separators were not named for the judges, the barristers, or the important people. (Until I set about editing this essay, I thought that they were named for the only creatures that didn’t object to having fences named after them—the dogs. These fences, you see, were called cancelli in Latin, which at first blush sounds and looks like “doggies.” However, scholarly integrity compels me to confess that as a matter of plausible etymological fact
cancelli derives from the Latin word for a particular type of reed, used for the weaving of fences and baskets.) In any case, a minor official was posted at the place of entry: the cancellarius—the fence-keeper. He kept strangers and dogs out.

Now we know what happens when officialdom happens: function turns into rank. The guy who still fixes toilets at the university where I taught used to be Lavatory Lou or Bathroom Bob; he became first “the plumber on staff,” then “the sanitary engineer”; now, finally, he is the “sanitary engineering associate.” Analogously, “fence-keeper” became “chancellor.” (Was “barkeeper” a transitional semiotic phase in this steep ascent to sociological civilization?)

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What you have just finished reading is a brief history of the “chancel” in Anglican churches and the “communion rail” that marks off the “sanctuary” in Catholic ones. Originally designed to keep dogs and strangers out, they began to be used to keep “the people” out. While we still had dogs in our churches (just study antique engravings of church interiors!), dogs were refused admission near the altar, the font, and the lectern. Not, of course, that they felt out of place there; being friends, they feel at home wherever we are. (Years ago, at the annual commemoration of the war dead on Dam Square in Amsterdam on May 5, the late Queen Juliana had just finished putting the wreath at the foot of the National Monument, when, with everyone silent and at attention, a little black-and-white dog sidled up to the monument to take a leak. The nation saw it right on national TV. In the crowd, not a murmur was heard, not a laugh seen. Smiles everywhere, if interspersed with some purple-faced indignation among dignitaries. The mutt loped off, happily, back into the crowd. He felt at home, visibly. After all, we were there, so why not him? He just did not recognize our serious business.)

While we had dogs in our churches, one thing was clear: the whole church was the sanctuary. It was the common property of God’s people; they were often proud of it, pretty much the way we are now proud (sort of) of our oversize malls where we do our serious business. The church embraced the world; so did church buildings: churches were public places; dogs abounded; they were kept away only from where we were being serious in church: the altar and the font. We turned a more
serious corner when it was decided to get serious about church build-
ings as places set apart for matters of high purpose. The bitter fruit of
this our seriousness were “real churches”—of the sort where you go
only to pray, and where the ordained and their companions go about
their serious business way up front, whether they are standing or
(mysteriously) seated. That kind of church is also locked when nothing
(i.e., no “service”) is going on. People were no longer welcome, except
to “attend” religious services; dogs became pests. No chancel was
needed any longer; instead, sanctuary barriers were canonized: they
became communion rails—an object of devotion, and much later on,
in the later twentieth century, of irritated discord between the standers
and the kneelers at the Banquet of Unity.

What continued unabated was the fence-keeper’s instinct. Chancellors (now often called ushers) saw to it that the communion
rail was a place where order prevailed, and where the non-ordained met
the ordained across the good fences that we are told make good neigh-
bors. Dogs were gone; their place was taken by the laity. The sanctuary
became the area restricted to the ordained and their associates vested
vaguely like them. Thank God for the renewal Vatican II gave us; in the
Constitution on the Church, Lumen gentium, the council treated the
unity of God’s People before ever raising the status of its ordained
servants, who were relegated to the third chapter. Happily, many “or-di-
nary” laity are once again where they belong: sanctuaries are for saints.
The dogs might as well have tried to stage a comeback; in fact, I once
found myself in a church that had a crèche for pet dogs in the back.
Seeing-eye dogs, an ecologically correct plastic sign on the wall
informed us, were welcome in the pews.

What is likely to continue, I think, is the fence-keeper’s instinct. Chancellors will continue to abound, especially in Rome, but also here
at home, in places favoring canon law written in Rome. Lately, they
have told us there are limits to promiscuity. For now that some people
have made it to the bema to do serious business such as reading
Scripture and offering prayers, the church brass have to remain where
they belong, i.e., in the sanctuary: the ordained are not to join the
people, to preach to them or (worse?) to exchange the kiss of peace with
them. Dogs are no longer an issue nowadays; spayed as they now all
seem to be, I imagine they have lost interest in churches, too. The
fences are once again for our guidance. They have a vital job to do:
protecting the ordained from the danger of being mistaken for ordinary people.

I am an ordinary priest who has been a priest for forty-plus years—no more than a few weeks by the measure of the history of Christian worship. Yet I have never been mistaken for a layman while I have gone about Christ’s business in the Liturgy; I guess only a fool would vest like me. (I must confess, though, that I have heard a story about an informal “mass” informally presided over by a woman religious; as she went around to distribute the bread, the only priest in the room met her pious “Michael, the body of Christ” with a friendly “Wanna bet, Dorothy?” But then again, I have also heard of a cardinal who forbade a community of contemplative nuns to join the lay guests standing near the altar during the Eucharist; the reason (so the abbess told me): the faithful—never mind the nuns—might get the idea that the nuns are concelebrants. Now there’s a thought!)

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In any case, neither folly is likely to be fixed by keeping celebrants in any “sanctuary.” Vested in an unmistakable way, I don’t need a communion rail, and I very much doubt if the congregation does. I have not seen a dog in church for half a century, so chancels are now as little needed as chancellors. Unless we priests are now being encouraged to think of God’s people out there as dogs. Now that would be some renewal!

Notes

A previous version of this essay appeared as “God’s Best Friend” in *Commonweal* 128 (April 6, 2001), 31. The piece was originally provoked by an unnecessarily severe insistence in high places on the duty of ordained sacramental ministers not to venture out beyond the communion rail to preach or exchange the Kiss of Peace during the Eucharist. Revised in light of continuing, slightly irritated amusement.
Not for the Kennel:
A Meditation

Somewhere in a subclause in the Jesuit Constitutions, in the context of Ignatius’s discussion of health care in the Society, one of his focal concerns emerges: “And even though it is part of our vocation to travel from place to place, and to lead our lives wherever in the world where there is hope of serving God better and helping souls better, it is still to be left to one’s superior to determine . . . ,” etc.

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I am by no means the sole Jesuit for whom the Society of Jesus is in the first place and very palpably something international. This has been the case for a long time. I have studied and worked in a fair number of places in the Society. Six years of graduate school in English while living at St. Ignatius College, Amsterdam (1954-60), with a one-year leave of absence from the university (1955-56) to study by myself at Manresa College, Roehampton, in the southwest part of London; three months in northern Italy to get fluent in Italian, just before doctoral comprehensives (1959); a year in the United States to round out my training in the Society in tertianship (1964-65), and two years, again in the United States, while I was working as a visiting lecturer in theology at Boston College, a two-year part-time study in applied behavioral study (1968-70). As a regular Jesuit priest, I have had three full-time jobs thus far: coordinator for our schools and director of our special students in the Netherlands (1965-68), lecturer and professor of theology at Boston College (1968-85), and professor of theology at Loyola University Chicago (1985-2003). But in the course of those years I spent five semesters living, studying, and working in Toronto (1973), Cambridge in England (1975), Yogyakarta in Indonesia (1976), and Amsterdam (1980, 1983). Add to this that I spent eight
years in study communities, two years in a Jesuit noviciate (as assistant
novice director), and nine years in a community of university types. 
Never mind the number of summers spent in parishes and retreat
houses (like that marvelous summer of 1980, in Java), or in the Jesuit
part of my old school, St. Aloysius College in the Hague, for a recov-
er period. Also, by 1987 I had spent three Christmas seasons
somewhere on the outer islands of the Bahamas, where I was to return
for an additional seven years. Once, in 1974, I got an errand to run for
the Provincial, which meant ten days in Egypt. Once, in 1978, I spent
a summer month wandering around in Spain and Southern France,
with a packsack and a book of Spanish lyrical poetry and a brief history
of Spain. When I recall those weeks what comes to mind is a long,
intense conversation with a fellow-Jesuit from Poland, in the apple
orchard close by the cave of Manresa, in the sight of the little Cardoner
river where Ignatius had his decisive moment of spiritual enlighten-
ment in 1523. What also comes back is an two-and-a-half-hour
impromptu after-dinner community conversation in French, with
coffee and cognac of course, at our collège in Avignon, about christol-
ogy, after I told the friendly rector who was asking me questions during
dinner that I had just completed a book on that topic.

Heavens, what an enumeration—almost a successful career. And I
have not even mentioned the fact that I tend to find a lot of things
interesting and that I have a good memory for people and situations
and odd events. I do carry a lot of memories with me, and I keep a fair
number of them alive, by way of a Christmas letter every year. Fellow
Jesuits do ask me regularly just exactly where I am at home. Then it is
time to confess that “home” for me is really nowhere, and more often
than not I end with the comical confession, “This dog was made for
the streets, not for the kennel.” But this street dog remembers very well
the people he has met. I know a large number of Jesuits, from all over
the world. In my bibles and breviaries, I come upon quite a few ordi-
nation cards of friends and former students. And when in May of 1983
I received the list of the members of the upcoming 33rd General
Congregation, I was very happy to find that I knew 57 out of 214—34
of them from serious conversations and friendships. And at the actual
Congregation it appeared that a number of these men had read some-
thing I had written. That Congregation is one of the most beautiful
things that have ever come my way as a Jesuit. It became my richest
experience of our Society as an international event, what with things getting on my nerves every now and then, in the crossfire of all those different mentalities and traditions. Nevertheless, I felt entirely at home.

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In the fall of 1974 I was living in a community in an ethnic neighborhood in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where we were trying to live a little more socially committed, and hence, a bit more simply. Juan Luis Segundo, S. J., the liberation theologian from Uruguay, who was teaching at the Harvard Divinity School at the time, was living with us. He once observed that the Spanish Jesuits were better hospitality artists than any other European Jesuits. I remember making a mental note of that.

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So on Thursday, June 15, 1978, at a quarter to seven in the morning, my overnight train from Madrid rolls into the Seville railway station. Backpack strapped on, I walk across the empty square in front of the station, approach a street sweep, and ask him in crippled Spanish for directions to the residencia de los padres Jesuitas. He immediately understands: just straight ahead and then off to the left, you will see the Calle de Jesus del gran poder, the Jesuit church is on the right, a fifteen-minute walk. Everything works out. It is a quarter past seven when I push the door bell, introduce myself as a Dutch Jesuit teaching theology at a Jesuit university in the United States, and ask if I could come in and stay for a week. My Spanish barely makes it. Almost at once I find myself having breakfast in the refectory. After some enjoyable attempts at conversation it is made clear to me that it is unlikely there will be a room free, but someone is already calling the colegio just outside the city to find out if there is a spot there, and things will be decided when Father Minister returns from his daily Mass in a nearby convent. In the mean time I am already conversing in German: two serious elderly fathers who studied theology in the Netherlands, at the old German Jesuit theologate in Valkenburg, back in the good old days. I conclude it would be imprudent to allude to anything political with these old boys. The Minister walks in. He speaks English, and immediately explains to me that he did his tertianship in Cleveland, in the
United States. In no time we turn out to have friends in common. He
tells me there is only one free room in the house, and tells me I have to
go upstairs and see for myself before he will offer it to me. Yes, the attic:
a rough wooden floor, an authentic straw mattress in a brass bed with
curls, a small table, a straight-back chair, and a naked bulb hanging
from the rafters on a crinkly cord. The small roof chamber with walls
for the man of God in the second book of Kings, chapter four. I tell
him I would like to take it. A wonderful week, with visits to Cordoba
with its cathedral-mosque and its ghetto with statues of Maimonides
the Jew and Averroës the Muslim facing each other across a little plaza,
and to Granada, with its incomparable Alhambra, and the Capilla real
where Ferdinand and Isabella, and Philip the Fair and Joan the Mad
and their dead young children lie visibly buried in the dullest, blackest,
most inexorable boxes. A flood of memories and associations surfaces.

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A little later, back in the Netherlands, my sister-in-law says to me:
“That is lovely, you Jesuits can drop in everywhere in the world and feel
at home. You never need to stay in hotels. You can have the real expe-
rience, not like the tourists who have to stay at a distance.” Well said,
I think, it is not that simple, but she is right.

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About three days after leaving Seville I am staying in Madrid, at
the Calle Almagro Jesuit community. Time for a day trip to the
Escorial, the colossal building ordered by Philip II: monastery, school,
church, palace, all in one. When you walk into the space behind the
high altar, you suddenly find yourself in the severe world of Philip II:
crucifixes, panels by Hieronymus Bosch depicting the Seven Deadly
Sins, a cold brick floor, a wainscot of Talavera blue tiles, Brussels
tapestries, some fine Flemish leaded stained-glass window panes. There
is a throne as well, with a canopy and backcloth thickly embroidered
with a crucifix and an ojo de Dios—God’s All-Seeing Eye—overhead.
His Catholic Majesty. So this is where he lived and where he died, a
Spaniard through and through, and over there, in the chaise longue, he
lay reigning to the bitter end, his eyes fixed on the tabernacle in the
church, just visible through a paneled opening. Ruling, administering. By mail. Philip II was the architect of the first modern government, based on correspondence: folders, archives, portfolios. The written word as the nervous system of a global empire. At such a moment, a thought will occur to us Dutchmen, obviously: well, but in the end he lost us. Then it is time for us to think of the Philippines and Latin America.

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Something dawns on me. Did Ignatius have a similar insight? Franciscans and Dominicans are organized as provinces; their respective general superiors are not so much leaders as coordinators, presiding over federations of independent provinces. That just might be a relic of the age-old abbatial stability traditions. The preaching and mendicant friars do roam town and countryside, but they are at home in a province. For Ignatius the Society is as one as the wide world is one. Could it be he felt the same relationship between being worldwide and being literate? For him, at any rate, letters amounted to a lot more than tools to issue orders; his letters form the largest body of correspondence that has come to us from the sixteenth century—about eight thousand of them. He insisted that Jesuits keep each other posted as to what was going forward wherever they were. Writing letters, he thought, was something “constructive” or “edifying”—hence the name literae aedificantes: letters of edification. No wonder Jesuits have always been enormous letter-writers; just look at the letters that fill the volumes of the Monumenta Historica Societatis Iesu. Ever seen the Relations, that enormous series of letters, reports, and narratives of the seventeenth and eighteenth century Jesuit missionaries in Nouvelle France, which consisted in a long ribbon of settlements from Quebec to New Orleans? Thus, writing as they went, Jesuits have been experiencing the whole world as their world. In their own way, letters also accommodate the Ignatian culture of obedience: well-thought-out, balanced, realistic accounts of matters and of consciousnesses and consciences, followed by orders and recommendations that do justice to those data.

That leads me to another idea. A learned American Jesuit, the late Walter J. Ong, professor in the humanities at Saint Louis University, spent at least thirty of his years teaching the world that the modern Western mind largely goes back to literary developments in
the mid-sixteenth century. In those critical decades the Society, too, saw the light of day. This was when the Western world made the change-over from a largely speaking and dialoguing and remembering (“oral-acoustical”) culture to an evermore writing and reading and learning-by-accumulating (“visual”) culture. This, of course, had everything to do with the printing press. It enabled concentration on (largely printed) texts—a new phenomenon. It also enabled (to name only one thing) natural science; not even the best memory can keep up with the ever-accumulating scientific data—for that, you need books (and eventually computers), in which you can “literally” store your (objective!) truths in order to retrieve them again later.

But this new learned literacy also succeeded in putting enormous pressure on the whole world of inner human experience and stretching it to the utmost. Just think of all the classical authors newly edited by the humanists; all at once, it became impossible to read them the way the Christian Middle Ages had done. Even the Bible changed: the modern study of the Scriptures started, but at the same time every heretic started to find his own favorite text. Such an intensely developing world of reading demands the utmost in interpretation—i.e., an ever-developing inner world of imagination: the bigger and more brimful the libraries, the more massive the data to take into account and process and discern inside. Add to this, in due time, so sheer a quantity of news and information and products from distant parts as well as the distant past. The world blossomed into a fullness. To contend with this kind of new world, you have a lot of inside labor to go through. Increasingly, the New Learning began to regard as prejudice what an earlier, more naive world had accepted as faith and loyalty. The New Learning began to demand as much freedom of exploration as the voyagers of discovery did. Ever since the mid-sixteenth century, research and study have demanded pride of place and gotten away with it. No wonder a tempest of discord and disharmony was the result. Now wonder the inside world turned troubled on the rebound. Inner openness to the whole world is a lot more challenging than staying at home—or (what really amounts to the same) tourism.

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All this becomes even more compelling when you begin to realize that the modern art of reading is based on habits of loneliness and
silence. The mediaeval *quaestio* is reminiscent of *disputatio*—studying was something you did as you listened and spoke, with others. Could there be an affinity between (a) the quiet loneliness of Jesuit prayer and examination of conscience and consciousness, in which the struggle for unconditional, unreserved abandon to God our Lord must take place, and (b) the course of studies demanded of Jesuits in view of the apostolate, and (c) the capacity for serviceable living anywhere and everywhere? I think there is, and it is not a foregone conclusion that the three will always be perfectly balanced. I myself, for instance, have always been good at studies, but I have always been quite a handful to myself as well, and not till relatively late in my life did the grace of interior prayer find me home, thanks to the re(dis)covery of spiritual direction in our Society over the past half-century. Thus the immediate occasion for the permission I received, in the spring of 1970, to stay away from the Netherlands for the time being and continue work at Boston College teaching theology was not my own decision—they had not even offered me a tenure-track job yet. No, my own cargo had shifted so badly that I did not have the courage to return to the Netherlands just yet; I had too much to come to terms with inside, and the Dutch Provincial agreed. Thus my international Jesuit life, I find, is only very partly supported by natural curiosity and enjoyment of study and quickness in adaptation. To me, it looks more like a taste for unsolicited inner adventure abroad. In this way, I have come to think, being an international Jesuit has far more to do with an inner quest for an inner at-homeness—with yourself, and with God.

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With this, another salamander comes up to the surface to breathe. My first “modern” spiritual director was the English Jesuit Paul Kennedy. (Now there’s somebody who from the tertianship house in St. Beuno’s, in Northern Wales, influenced the international Society!) I was almost twenty-five when I first saw him in his filthy room in Manresa College, Roehampton, in May, 1955. In the course of the conversation he suddenly told me, “Say, yesterday I was looking at you when you came into the refectory for dinner—you know, when I smiled at you. That’s when I said to myself, ‘Now this man doesn’t look as if he feels quite at home here yet, but more importantly, he doesn’t look
as if he feels quite at home with himself yet.” So that was the first move, and it is unforgettable. It was not till years later—and thank God, not too late—that I discovered what he meant. Inward peace is the fruit of inward struggle, and I now know that there is a deep linkage between the ability to come to terms with the world inside and the involvement with a world-wide set of companions. No heart as whole as a broken heart. Could this be the Ignatian variation on the opening salvo of the Odyssey: the inspiring story of the resourceful loner, driven hither and thither, got to see the strongholds of all kind of people and to understand how they thought, and so got a lot of inner experience to digest, all of it with the result that in the end he both got a grip on his own life and found a way to take his partners-in-destiny home?

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At least it seems that way. When, in 1539, the first, international group of Ignatius’s companions decided to stay together as a religious community, one of the decisive arguments in favor was the following. Their shared interior conversion and prayer experiences of the membership were so inextricably linked with the experience of finding each other united in Christ in the course of their vagaries in the religiously and politically fractured world of Europe that they were unable to miss the conclusion that the hand of God had been active in their shared experience. No wonder Ignatius was to write later on, in the Constitutions, that there were to be no preferences for the various parties and the shifting alliances into which the Christian princes were regularly dividing up the world of their day; that meant a lot for the international Jesuit communities at the time. Being impartial and yet engaged: the only way we can do this is by seeing through and inwardly—and thus together—digesting fragmentation and division everywhere, including the Church. This is quite demanding, as we Catholics have come to know by now.

Could it be that this is also at least part of the secret behind Ignatius’ reference to a Jesuit’s need for “a way with people”—forma agendi cum hominibus, i.e., a way of dealing with others of each and every sort? Does he expect of us that we come to terms with ourselves at least to such an extent that we can freely go in and out with ourselves and each other, so as to let others freely enter in and freely leave
again—without getting caught time and again on the barbed wire of our own undigested, unmortified ego, or interfering with others in the process? That as Jesuits we have to learn how to speak and otherwise act in public, but as far as possible on the basis of open, sensitive empathy, not of our own raw, undigested “experience”? So is it all about taking on and owning a lot of inner stuff and so getting a grip on our own lives, in order then to make our peace with ourselves and each other in the service of others?

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Now this takes me to another old song: Jesuits think they can handle everything. In the English province I once heard one of Ours ask another, “Hey, do you happen to know anything about chemistry?” The immediate answer was, “Heavens, no, I’ve never even taught it.” Yes, I do think that we have often postured as sharp boys with the gift of omnicompetence, and that we have paid for it by losing a lot of respect, not counting friendships. For competence is best acquired letting oneself normally trained and educated (and then by developing habits of study and letting one’s competence be tested in dialogue with competent others.) Still, there is more to say on this subject, too. Thus I have often asked myself a question that others have regularly asked me: so you are going to Indonesia to direct retreats—what makes you so sure you can do that? Now with that question you are liable to string yourself up quick. If you say “Yes,” you show how appallingly arrogant you are, because you obviously fail to appreciate the cultural chasm, and if you say “No,” the next question immediately follows: “Why do you do it all the same?” I have (over time!) come to the conclusion that I do it because I trust the Indonesian Jesuit brothers who know me, and who are at home in a world that I find largely unmanageable and unknown. If they think I am doing something right, I don’t need to “manage.” That means: I don’t have to overinvest energy in the enterprise. Thus disarmed by their trust in me, I can go about my business without panoply. And the reward is plain as pie: I invariably receive more than I give, because the emphasis is always on carefully shared experience, not on my expertise. Any remaining illusions of omnipotence wilt. The street dog, not the pedigree dog. Could this contribute to world peace?
By the way, I am not the first to evoke the image of the street dog in the context of my own life. The first time was on Sunday, September 1, 1963, in my parents’ parish church—Our Lady of Seven Sorrows in Haarlem, about twelve miles west of Amsterdam, during my first solemn Eucharist. In his sermon, our unforgettable Father Jos. Daniëls referred to Francis Thompson’s famous *The Hound of Heaven*, where God becomes the Heavenly Hunting Hound. In the middle of the homily he turned to me, looked me straight in the eyes from the lectern, and said in his high tenor voice: “Frans Jozef, that Hound of Heaven is not a pedigree dog, but a street dog. Will you always remember that?”

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Over forty years after hearing those words, I cannot say I have always remembered. But they have become true, in a slightly entertaining, slightly disconcerting way. I have encountered, befriended, been befriended by, admired, and been appreciated by, many hard-working, smart, learned, but especially, devoted and even devout, fellow Jesuits who have thought up, planned, designed, set up (or at least directed) splendid kennels for dogs of every kind of canine cause, whether pedigreed, mixed, or mutt. Like them, I have labored like a dog—running, pulling, but not doing my best (for who knows what is one’s best? Did Jesus do it?) but my uttermost, breathlessly but always half-awake, loyal as all hell, pushing, snarling, barking, with a bite or two thrown in. Unlike them, I have piloted little—but then again, dogs never ever initiate; they are company, not leadership, commentary, not main text. But I have never met a dog who ended up leaving nothing. I am ending up leaving nothing more permanent than writings on paper—the record of my street-dog’s life, mainly disguised as Catholic theology. And I am not even done yet—my nose is still wet and my flair for both eye-openers and flinchers is still alive. In time, I guess I shall slink away like a street-dog, somehow leaving much of my digested life experience to my readers, to whose scent I will never wake up.

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A number of years ago, I read Martin Walser’s novel *Seelenarbeit*—“Labor of the Soul.” The principal character, Xaver, is the chauffeur of
the board limousine of a large company. He is the bottom drawer personified. The entire life of this calm, correct, silent back-row figure goes up into undergoing, tolerating, and digesting of the heavy presences of important others. There are millions like him, especially in the First World—poor like church mice in spirit, with never a free choice to make. His kind of people are waiting for felt empathy and mercy everywhere. Some one should offer it to them—people who know the inner struggle for justice and integrity out of their own experience, because they have voluntarily ventured into it, as Ignatius suggests in the *Spiritual Exercises*.

* * * * *

Thus my meditation on my experience of our Society as an international community has returned me to the Heart of our Community, Jesus Christ the Lord. For the title of that novel comes straight from Isaiah 53, verse 11—the passage that combines inner digestion and comprehensive salvation in one prophetic vision: “He will see the fruit of the labor of his soul, and he will be satisfied; through his understanding, my just servant will make all others just, and he will bear their injustices.”

So saving empathy and mercy toward the whole world are guaranteed by perfect inner self-emptying. The two are made flesh and blood in the One who let himself be tested and tried and tempted, let nobody get lost and go to hell, and so gained true life for himself on behalf of all. He calls on us to follow him. More volumes could be written about the things he did than the whole world would ever be able to accommodate (John 21, 25)—never mind this one.

Notes
