

# CONVERSATION PIECES

*contributed by some of those who have before now  
been part of conversation groups at Retreat House Chester*

RHC has always made the invitation to 'Explore spirituality in a Christian context', and these contributions below consider the explorations some have made through reading during these times when we find ourselves living differently.

Take time with what is said here. Maybe print these out and add your own notes in the spaces. What do you find for yourself in this? Maybe share responses with someone you can talk with.

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It was International Earth Day on 22 April. I am ashamed to say that I did not know anything about it until this year. However, I read some "aims" on the website and I paraphrase them here: (1) Develop an environmental spirituality; (2) Assess life style and consumption: re-use, recycle, reduce, restore; (3) Prevent pollution; (4) Promote sound environmental management practices; (5) Enjoy nature. I was sure I could and do promote the last one and that has been more and more a product of this challenging time. I was reasonably sure I might address 2 and 3. Number 4 seemed completely beyond my expertise.

It was number 1 which most of all attracted my interest. I could not quite imagine what is an environmental spirituality. Then, I remembered reading, with Book Club at RHC, **The Universal Christ** by Richard Rohr. I could almost choose to quote from any page but I chose p227, part of a meditation:

*Every object serves as a mirror, another kind of presence.  
You can find such mirrors in all of nature, in animals,  
In your parents, lovers, children, books, pictures, movies  
And even in what some call God.*

Then, as usual I began to look to poetry - Wordsworth, 'Ode on the Intimations of Mortality':

*Thanks to the human heart by which we live,  
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears  
To me the meanest flower that blows can give  
Thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears.*

Of course, I remembered Gerard Manley Hopkins and 'God's Grandeur':

*...nature is never spent: there lies the dearest freshness / deep down things*

It's almost impossible to find one single quotation from Mary Oliver, but I tried the impossible!

The last two verses of 'Children, It's Spring':

*We, the older ones,  
call it Spring,  
and we have been through it  
many times.  
But there is still nothing  
Like the children bringing home  
such happiness  
in their small hands.*



*the meanest flower*

These together seem to me to be a beginning of thinking about environmental spirituality. It feels like something worth exploring.

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When 'lockdown' began, I was part way through reading *Luminaries* by Rowan Williams, for Book Club at RHC. Its subheading 'Twenty lives that illuminate the Christian way' took on a particular relevance in a time of little illumination and little sense of a way. How might this book, begun in quite different circumstances, serve now?

A very short book, its twenty chapters each take one figure from history - from St Paul to Oscar Romero - that Williams has found influential for himself, encapsulating something of that person's influence in just a few pages. With a few interruptions, I took one character a day, reading the chapter in the morning and hoping that I might somehow 'live' with that person for the day. Williams is so adept at bringing focus and depth to 'large' subject matter, and I felt I learnt something worth learning with each chapter – not just about the individual life, but also of theology, spirituality, history, culture, and even myself.

I loved it all, in fact. Especially the longing of St Augustine; the Godly paradox of Eckhart; the languages of Cranmer, Milton and Dickens; the loving nursing of Nightingale; the place of suffering in twentieth century Stein, Bonhoeffer, Weil, and Hillesum. Big names in a small book – each chapter opening up the possibility of exploring so much further, but also each chapter an end in itself, a rich gift.

So much seemed true for these new times – times unknown when the book was produced. Take this, after a description of the two world wars and the fact that Jesus spoke in times when people expected the end of the world: 'it is hardly surprising that so many figures of spiritual and intellectual stature and complexity in the twentieth century discovered or rediscovered Christian faith at a completely new level of depth as they lived through the ends of their worlds.'

The succinct chapters were each really an essay, taken from different writings or talks of Williams, rather than written for this book. This brevity was appealing at a time when lengthy concentration was difficult. I didn't want a large tome of theology – but I did want depth. I started to find this in other essays or articles, online and in the press. Something to read in a short sitting, but with much to ponder.



Chester town square

Especially striking amongst these was Pope Francis' reflections in response to an interviewer's questions on this crisis, published in 'The Tablet' at Easter. Like *Luminaries*, in a few words it takes the reader to deep meaning. He reflects on the need to build a future through remembering what has come before – and how the time after now must remember what is happening now. He says that now – this time of crisis and pain - is a time for creativity and invention; a time for integrity and coherence; a time for contemplation and reconnection. What we must contemplate especially, he says, is nature and the poor. This is a world which needs our care and our love. We need to listen to this crisis and bring about change.

It was only later that I realised, with surprise, that these two explorations of others' words – which I had found so helpful – drew on the words of two church leaders. I am encouraged by both of them. We need some reflective, considered voices, speaking with clarity, compassion and wisdom. Good voices which enable us to hear our own voice, too – and, having listened, to speak.

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In February I attended a Soulful Saturday at RHC. This particular day was about The Sacraments. At the start of the day came a very beautiful phrase... "A sacrament is an outward sign of an inward grace." I so loved that phrase and felt drawn to wanting to learn more about that "inward grace".

As a result I read a book called *The Sacred Meal* by Nora Gallagher. As I read the book I began to think more and more about who is welcome to this meal. Jesus enjoyed a good party. He was accused of being a glutton, a drunkard and a friend of sinners (Matthew 11 v19). Everyone was welcome, regardless of who they were, where they came from, what they had done or were doing, because it wasn't about them, it was all about Jesus and who HE was. It was grace!

In *The Sacred Meal*, Nora shares about the soup kitchen at her church and how everyone was welcome. She says, "It was not up to us to ask questions and be the judges of who should be fed. And this is true of Communion as well. Jesus practised radical faith: everyone was welcome". She goes on to say, "You are welcome at this table, the altar is a big table. This is the table that wants everyone there." Everyone, whoever they are. What's wonderful is we all fit in there somewhere, at the table we are all equal, all accepted, all loved, no matter what.

I think sometimes I feel I need to be "good enough" to receive God's grace, forgetting that it's all a gift.

The Eucharist is a very special gift of grace to us. Eucharist means "thanksgiving" and I think nothing else says it any better. To come to the open table and receive bread and wine, that outward sign of an inward grace, to know I'm forgiven and to say thank you to my Saviour is the pinnacle of my faith and my life.

If you had asked me before lockdown what I would miss about church if it was all taken away, I would have given you a very different answer to the one I give today.



*in Jerusalem, from the writer of this piece*

What I miss most is not being able to receive bread and wine, I miss this more than anything else. I know now how special and important this act of faith really is, how it somehow transforms me spiritually and changes my view of everything. It is a transformative grace.

When we return to our church services this will be the part that I will delight in the most, sharing in the most Holy of Sacraments. It is where we all can come and receive mercy and the grace we need in our hour of need.

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*"Above all else keep watch over the heart. Since here are the wellsprings of life"* Proverbs 4.23

We are not able to explore by travelling at the moment but we can still journey in the imagination. Reading Scott Cairns' *Short Journey to the Edge* - about several visits he made to the monasteries on Mount Athos - helped me to travel there in the mind's eye too. Pulling together photos, postcards and other memorabilia has also helped me to reflect on past pilgrimages I've been on. I want to retrospectively put them together in a scrapbook/travel journal as a way of thanksgiving, of remembering companions in prayer and to look at what I learned through them.

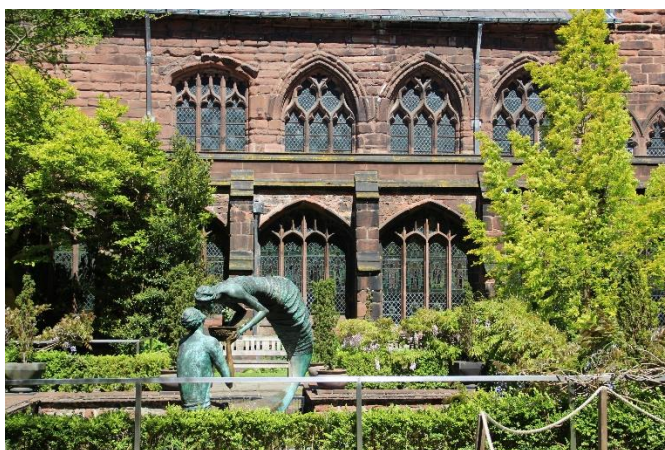
"Goodbye," said the fox (In *Le Petit Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupery). "And now here is my secret. It is very simple. It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

There is also the all-important inner journey to consider, "the pilgrimage of the heart" as George Herbert describes it. Cairns wrestles with his efforts to say the Orthodox *Jesus Prayer* as in the *Way of the Pilgrim*. It is a way of seeking to pray constantly and meet God in the centre of our being. One of the monks told him about the Greek word *nous* as meaning the "eye of the heart" - this is the same word used by St Luke in the appearance of the risen Jesus to the disciples after the story of the road to Emmaus: "Then he opened their *minds* that they might understand the scriptures" (Luke 24.45).

The most beautiful thing I've read during lockdown has been an essay by Kallistos Ware 'How do we enter the heart' (in *Paths to the Heart*, edited by James Cutsinger, 2002). He writes lucidly on the Hebraic meaning of the heart not as the seat of feelings or emotions - these are located lower down in the guts - but on the contrary as the centre of the inwardness of our human personhood in its full spiritual depth. Silent, mindful prayer is the way that journey goes.

One way I've learned about what is in my heart is through free writing for five minutes or so after a prompt (eg What do you miss because of lockdown?). Then reading it over and seeing what I notice, any themes or repetitions and what seems most significant, and then writing a note to self about this.

Proverbs 4.23 has been important to me since I first visited Taize and learned to read scripture prayerfully and slowly as in *lectio divina*. "Above all else keep watch over the heart. Since here are the wellsprings of life."



*The Water of Life, Chester Cathedral*