



The industry and commerce of the soul

An address for the Founders Day Meritus Mass

3rd August 2008 ● Rev Antoinette

Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body-, that is, the church, of which I became a minister according to the divine office which was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man mature in Christ. For this I toil, striving with all the energy which he mightily inspires within me.

Colossians 1:24-29

It has been a very long time since I have been here to celebrate the Mass in our Centre in Melbourne, so my heartfelt thanks go to Rev Heather, Rev Richard and the Council, for their thoughtful invitation. Of all the days to be together, this is the day!

I have a couple of aims for myself today; given that it is Founders Day I am feeling a bit nostalgic and want to honour some of our traditions. So one of my aims is to swear during the sermon and the other is to commit some kind of 'no-no'. So, here we go.

Today, of course, I want to reflect on what has been given to us through the Founding of The Centre. In particular I want to focus on what has been given to us to do.

Recently, we had two visitors come to stay with us in Coffs Harbour, Marja and David. They came to work, but also to play. One of the tasks before us was to revitalize and update our general website. As soon as we started, we realized that the very first page which welcomes people to the website of The Independent Church of Australia would have to be changed — because on the world-wide web we are not only representing The Independent Church of Australia, but the vision and ideals which motivate all Centre members, whether in Melbourne, in Adelaide, in Wellington or The Netherlands. So, we realized once again, that we need a new name, one that describes us all! So, one of the ways we played together during that week was to come up with some new names.

Of course, as you know, a new name for our Centre has been on the agenda of our Executive Board and Consultative Council for a number of years, but without a clear result so it has been put in the too-hard-basket for the time being. The guidance we accepted at that time was to find a one word name, because that is what is modern. A name like 'Transform' or 'Evolve'. Just like some of the more conservative churches have renamed themselves 'Highway' or 'Crossways' or 'Planet-Shakers'!

During our playful working week we found ourselves going in at opposite direction to this and trying to think of the longest names we could. There's an organization we know with a very long name, and it was the very length of its name that made it memorable. Their name is 'The Little Sisters of the Disciples of the Divine Master', a small Catholic order who make

vestments. We thought we could come up with a similar musical rhythmic name. One of my favourites went something like 'The Small Youthful Church of Independent Mystics Who Follow St John and St Paul'. You can kind of tell that that is a name thought up by a committee! And it still didn't get rid of the word 'church' which I think was one of the aims, but it was fun and in fact more than fun to think on the values that we have that distinguish us.

In fact, one of the things that happened as a result of this play was that we realized just how precious and rare are the ideals and values to which we have been called. And the purpose of our gathering today is similar: to celebrate the values, the ideals, the insights which connect us together to a life that is so much bigger than our own personal life. These values and ideals which have enabled us to become larger and stronger in soul and more able to express the divine spirit which has been given to us.

That was one reason why I mentioned that story of The Youthful Independent Mystics who follow St John and St Paul. The other reason is because on this day, when we celebrate the beginning of our being called together, I want to quote from both St John and St Paul. I want to acknowledge what a great part of our fellowship they are. We would be poor indeed if we did not have their company, their love, and their insight and guidance. And I personally give thanks that our fellowship and kinship with these saints and mystics and many others in the household of God is growing in depth and richness.

We have already heard the well-known passage from St Paul's letter to the Colossians which contains the phrase which lies at the centre of The Centre: "Christ is in you! And for this I toil", St Paul says, "that everyone may become mature in Christ." Hereby he sums up our purpose.

Now I want to read from St John, the sixth chapter of his gospel. He is recording the words of Jesus who is also speaking of toil. He says:

Do not labour for the food which perishes. But for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of man will give to you; for on him has God the Father set his seal." Then they said to him, "What must we do, to be doing the works of God?" Jesus answered them, "This is the work of God; that you believe in him whom he has sent,"...

John 6:27- 29

St Paul uses the word toil. St John uses the word labour. Whatever word we use, we have all become members of this Centre in order to do this work of believing in the Christ within. This is the work of God. We have not come here to do our own work — that we can do any time and must do because that is the karma we have, as spiritual beings who decided to take on flesh and blood. But we are not limited to simply fulfilling our own karma and working away for ourselves. We are here, by calling and by choice, to assist the Father in fulfilling his vision of this world.

The work of God, to which we have been called, is described in the Gospel of St John as 'to believe'. This word 'believe' appears more times in John's gospel than in any other place in the Bible. It means to accept, to trust, to embrace as real and true, to rely upon ... It is the same Greek word which is translated as FAITH. Accept that Christ is in you. Trust the Christ within you. Rely on the Christ within you. That is our work. That is what we have been given to us.

St John always uses this word 'believe' as a verb; it is not a belief, something to rest on; it is a living, dynamic action which calls forth something from ourselves. Faith or believing, as the Gospel of St John describes it, is a force; in fact it is the transformative force in human evolution. When we believe, trust and rely on the I AM we move forward into a new and

bigger experience of ourselves. Faith has often been portrayed as simple, yet it is not, as we are all coming to discover in this Year of Faith. Faith is an act that surpasses the material-sensual intellect. In the Gospel of St John, to believe means much more than an act of the mind to accept a certain idea. It is work to prove it.

The people of John's times couldn't do this. They couldn't believe in the Christ because they couldn't understand him. What he revealed to them called their whole world and belief system into question. To place their trust and faith in him meant renouncing their ideas of the world, their religion and themselves, and they were not willing to surrender the things that made such 'sense' and in which they had so much invested. Christ didn't fit the picture of the Messiah, he didn't follow the law, he associated with sinners, and then he was arrested, he failed, and even then he didn't fight to justify or defend himself. These things are not popular in our world. And the people of those days were not willing to engage in the labour of understanding what made no sense. To accept Christ meant risking becoming a fool in the eyes of the world.

So far I've been focusing on the work or industry of the soul, now I come to what I am calling the 'commerce of the soul' — how we spend our energies or invest in beliefs.

I have recently taken to watching the ABC on a Wednesday night. One of the programs I have been watching is called the Gruen Transfer in which they examine commercial advertising and give two advertising agencies the challenge to sell the unsellable. Last week the challenge was to create an ad campaign that would convince people not to buy anything.

The one I liked showed a young boy coming in to his very cute old-fashioned grandmother and telling her the tallest tales imaginable about what he had done that day, which involved slaying crystal dragons and all sorts of weird adventures. At the end of his long and descriptive story, the grandmother looked kindly at the little boy and said, "Bullshit". I loved it. It cut through the sentimental expectations we have of grandmothers for a start. But it also showed me how easily we are persuaded to buy into things that are complete bullshit. We buy so many crazy things — like "I can't do that", or "It should be easy", or "I shouldn't be the one that has to change". "I'm in the right." We believe in crap like that because it's easier; it doesn't involve much commitment or work.

The idea, for instance, that we can and should rely on an authority outside ourselves, rather than rely and trust and believe in what has been placed within us, by the Father, is an extremely popular commodity. Because it is just plain difficult to rely on what is within us. It's work. It's toil. It's industry. It's labour. And it's scary. The returns are unknown. It's far easier and safer to rely on someone or something else. And yet how un-Christ, how anti-Christ is that. We did not learn this from him.

This is not the work of God. This is not the labour for the food which endures. This does nothing to make our soul more able or the Christ more visible. But we often spend our energies on that which does not, in the long term, satisfy.

At the heart of our Centre is an eternal priesthood. It's work is to endure and to give something that is truly enduring and truly nourishing to the human soul. So it is focused on what, in the end, counts. And on what will be there when the temporary things of this age pass away. What at the end of this world will count? What at the end of your life will count? Knowing you have done the best you could or knowing you had an easy time. Knowing you have fulfilled your purpose or that you avoided it. Knowing that you leave more able, more free. Knowing you are a spiritual being before anything else. Knowing you have a relationship with the Father. Knowing that a divine spirit dwells within you and that because of that you can do what Jesus Christ did, that in you is the same power, the same love, the same insight

and strength? This is the spiritual perspective we try to cultivate. This is the work of God, the toil of the soul which, leads to maturity in Christ.

Our Centre is 39 years old today and so we are celebrating 39 years of working to see the Christ, accept the Christ, know the Christ and express his spirit. It's not a long time in the scheme of things. We are still youthful, and yet it is possible and wonderful to look back and see the evolving nature of this work. How our understanding and application has grown. How our vision has become clearer. It is great to see the evolving nature of our fellowship in Christ, and the slow development of a more responsible attitude towards our task in this world.

Yes, we have made plenty of mistakes in our young life together, we have not always understood, we have often gone our own selfish way, we have often bought popular ideas, we have often shrunk from relying on the Christ within ourselves and each other, but thanks be to God, we still have that spirit of Christ in us, we know the impulse of the Holy Spirit correcting us, we have a very firm foundation and we've have been given great ways of balancing the forces we are working with. We've got a lot going for us.

Each of us have become part of this evolutionary force which is called The Centre - not to get something for ourselves but to lend our strength and our being to work together with good purpose: to complete what Christ began. There are plenty of other places where we can go to get things and much more appealing things than are offered here. But just as people don't join the Red Cross in order to get but to support and build, so we also have been called to a vision of the human being which is so great and so liberating that we want to make it a reality in our own lives and in the life of this world. And so we come here to be challenged. We come here to be woken up. We come here to give and to learn and be trained so we might learn to know ourselves as we are in Christ. And today we are here to give thanks that such a work has been going on for 39 years.

It's true that we are all growing in our ability to see this vision of the human being which lies at the heart of our Centre, and which is so beautifully described by both St John and St Paul. And we all know that at times this vision grows dim within us. One of the functions of our fellowship is keeping this vision alive and vibrant. Alone we can't always do that, but when we are together we can remember and contact this consciousness again.

Together we take responsibility for maintaining this ideal that Christ is in you, and we create opportunities and experiences that each one of us can work with. And as we each do this work of believing in the Christ within us we see that our individual capacity to express the power of Christ, the strength of Christ, the compassion and love of Christ, grows. And so the Christ becomes more visible, more known. And the inspiration to toil grows greater.

We are dedicated to working with evolution, which means we are always dealing with imperfection. Things will never be quite right. We are constantly developing. One of the last things Mario said to me before he died was, "Never wait for things to be perfect." After all it's another one of those bullshit things that we love to buy. Things should run smoothly. If only this or that, etc. He said if he had waited for things to be perfect, he never would have done anything. He worked with what he had.

At the same time he didn't limit what he wanted. And that I think is one of the greatest works of God that we can do. Limiting not A line from one of our favourite hymns. This is a great industry for our souls.

Okay, I am now about to commit a great no-no. I am going to reveal something that was said at one of our meetings of the Order of the Mystic Christ. This was said by one of our members about the work we have wilfully taken upon ourselves by setting foot on the

spiritual path as we know it in The Centre. As I read these words I want you to think about what you would say about the ramifications of having the Christ in you. And what it means for you to labour for the food which endures to eternal life. These are the words:

This business of being ourselves, having the security within us, being our own resource, is about taking full responsibility for who we are, accepting where we are in our maturity and spiritual development, and having a sense of our direction into the future. It's about not being captured by the past or limited in our vision of the future. In my perception this approach to living is not what we see in the usual spiritual or religious life. There we may be encouraged to find 'guides', 'masters', saints, Jesus - whomever - to alleviate the pain in our life or to give us a better life. To have to take full responsibility for ourselves in the context of a rich and knowledgeable spiritual life I think is unusual and challenging. It takes us into the future. But I think it is the process of living out this kind of life in an attitude of thankfulness for our own work and for the hierarchy allowing us to do it alone that is a very powerful combination. Mario says that thankfulness is possibly the first step in spiritual development. Being thankful for all that comes our way, including success and failure, difficulties and easy times is in itself a way of living out self responsibility.

Today is a day of thanksgiving and to me this statement I have just read out is a real thanksgiving. Thanksgiving always involves realization, it involves clear seeing of what we have been given and what we have come to and what is before us. Somehow in that process more energy, more inspiration, more determination flows into us. It is a sustaining thing. It one of the things that helps us to endure.

What I particularly liked about this statement was the bit about not limiting your vision of the future. Today I want to say to you and to myself:

"Don't limit your vision of the future and of what is possible. Don't limit your vision of your own future, don't limit your vision of The Centre's future, don't limit your vision of this world's future. Don't take subtle account of age, physical weakness, mental inability, poor circumstances. Past mistakes. Social acceptability. They are all temptations to take you away from the real work of believing in the Christ in you and of course, very buyable. Most of the world buys this stuff.

But I want to say to you today:

Take account of the Christ in you. Believe in that. If you are going to buy anything, invest in anything, buy that!"

But you can't buy it with money. You can only buy this with your love and your willingness to change, to grow, and to give, as the Christ, the tender lover of our souls, gave and still gives. This is the Christ that is in you!

So shall it be

Works from Rev Mario Schoenmaker
Used with permission
Antoinette Schoenmaker ©

The Independent Church of Australia ©
The Melbourne Centre
email: melbournecentre@ica.org.au
web: <http://www.ica.org.au/melbourne>