

Unum necessarium: The Mercy that has no End

Fr. Brian Laffler of the St. John Vianney branch and our host priest for this SSC Synod of the Province of Our Lady of Sorrows tells me that “people speak funny here.” Now whether he means at St. Anthony of Padua in the polyglot nature of the Parish with its liturgies in Italian, Spanish, and some form of English or whether he means New York where every language in the world is spoken, it seems, except Hittite, Canaanite, Perrizite and all of the other ‘ites’, I am not sure. But I hope that it means some consideration and tolerance for the speech of a Canadian from Nova Scotia! We are a diverse group ethnically and linguistically but united in the catholicity of the sacred priesthood that defines the Society of the Holy Cross.

I want to thank the Master, Fr. Chris Cantrell, for the privilege and honour of addressing the *fratres* of our society. I would like us to reflect on the story of Martha and Mary which bookends the parable of the so-called Good Samaritan, the classic Christian ethic of compassion and service, and to do so in relation to the Feast of the Holy Cross. The point is to highlight the centrality of the Passion for the understanding of the life and purpose of the Society. It is what we pray: “We should glory in the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” who “opened his arms on the Cross” and “has commanded us to love one another” that “through the saving power of the Cross + impressed inwardly and revealed outwardly ... others may come to know the love and truth of God.” The love of God and the love of neighbour, of one another, are inescapably and intimately connected. Martha and Mary represent action and contemplation respectively in what is a long and rich tradition about the forms of spiritual life which are critical for the life and fellowship of the Society of the Holy Cross implicit in the Society Prayer.”¹

“One thing is needful”. It is *unum necessarium*, the one thing necessary, Jesus says. One of the most remarkable figures of the 20th century in all its disarray, the legacy of which is our own disordered world, is the philosopher and social activist, Simone Weil. Her essay, ‘Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God’, begins with the astute observation that “prayer consists of attention,” and, indeed, attention of the highest order, namely, “the orientation of all the attention of which the soul is capable toward God”.² This complements Richard Hooker’s observation that prayer signifies “all the service that ever we do unto God”.³ For him, as for Simone Weil, the connection between learning and prayer was ever so obvious. They belong to our relation to God’s truth and goodness.

As teaching bringeth us to know that God is *our supreme truth*; so prayer testifieth that we acknowledge him *our sovereign good*.⁴

¹ *Oratio Societatis*: “nostrae vitae intra *impressae* et extrinsecus in opera nostra *expressae*.” My emphasis.

² Simone Weil, *Waiting for God*, ‘Reflections on the Right Use of School Studies with a View to the Love of God’, trans. Emma Crauford, HarperPerennial Modern Classics, 2009, pp. 57-59.

³ Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, Bk. V, ch. Xxiii, p. 115 (Keble edition). My emphasis.

⁴ *Ibid.*

God, too, is for us 'most beautiful' and so completes the triad of Plato's transcendentals, 'the true, the beautiful, and the good', which belong to the intellectual and ethical structure of reality. The good, *ἀγαθός*, and the beautiful, *καλός*, are virtually interchangeable in Greek. Beauty belongs to our seeking truth and the good. That sense of beauty is not simply about smoke and bells in rituals "merrily on high" but paradoxically and primarily concentrates our thinking on Christ crucified; "this beauteous form assures a piteous mind" as John Donne puts it in one of his holy sonnets, with which we will conclude.⁵

Following Plato and Aristotle, contemplation is the highest form of human activity, an inner activity of spiritual and intellectual reflection, but not at the expense of outward activity which belongs to our lives physically and socially with one another. There is, after all, something spiritual, intellectual, and ethical about our interactions with one another, even necessary. At issue is the interplay between action and contemplation; in short, between Martha and Mary.

Augustine encapsulates the idea in 'The City of God'. *Otium sanctum quaerit charitas veritatis, negotium iustum suscipit necessitas charitatis*: "The love of truth seeks a holy quiet; the necessity of love accepts a righteous busyness".⁶ They are a reminder to us about our priestly life of prayer in relation to the true, the beautiful, and the good; a reminder of what Augustine calls *vita mixta*, a mixed life, which belongs to our journey, *via ad patriam*.

The story of Martha and Mary turns on the question of attention. Martha, you will recall, "was distracted with much serving" and complained to Jesus about Mary "sitting at his feet, listening to his word." There is no greater contrast than between 'being distracted' and 'being collected', being attentive, as it were. "The faculty of attention, directed toward God," Simone Weil says, "is the very substance of prayer."⁷ She connects this to studies because seeking to learn means a commitment to 'truth' in all of its various forms in accord with our varying capacities and situations. Yet no genuine effort of attention is ever wasted. "It always has its effect on the spiritual plane and in consequence on the lower one of the intelligence, for all spiritual light lightens the mind."⁸ For "there is real desire when there is an effort of attention" even if "our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result."⁹

She notes, for example, that "the useless efforts made by the Curé d'Ars, for long and painful years, in his attempt to learn Latin bore fruit in the marvelous discernment that enabled him to see the very souls of his penitents behind their words and even their

⁵ John Donne, *The Complete English Poems*, Everyman's Library, New York, ed. & Intro by C.A. Patrides, Sonnet XIII, p. 443. His text has "assumes" but notes that the MSS and all modern editors have "assures". Both speak to the intensity of the paradox of the Passion.

⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, Bk XIX, xix, I have these words carved on panels of wood which hang in my oratory and library.

⁷ Weil, *op.cit.*, p. 58

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59

silences.”¹⁰ There is hope for us all, poor students and priests that we are! Being attentive to the true, the beautiful and the good means seeking the true, the beautiful and the good in each other and in calling each other to these abiding principles which belong to our spiritual life together. We are not the measure of the truth, the beautiful or the good; rather they are the metaphysical or theological principles that measure and define us spiritually and ethically.

Another wonderful story about the Curé d’Ars, famous as a confessor of souls and for the miracles that resulted from his ministry, is told by the English theologian and preacher, Austin Farrer. A cripple was pestering the Curé incessantly for a cure. The Curé exhorted him time after time to be reconciled to his condition, to bear his burden as a daily sacrifice and as a way of bearing the burdens of others and so fulfilling the law of Christ; the kinds of things no doubt which we would all say. But all to no avail, the cripple could not accept this advice. “‘Very well,’ the Saint said, with tears in his eyes. ‘Put your crutches in the corner, and walk out.’ And he did.”

As Austin Farrer observes, miracles are, in a way, a concession to our condition; “but then the whole work that God did in Christ and still does for our salvation is a concession to our condition, extorted by our need for his compassion. Every line, every page of the Gospel records the concession of divine wisdom to human folly.” As such “we have every reason to rejoice, and to thank the mercy that has no end.”¹¹ That, too, is about a kind of attentiveness, attention to God in his truth and goodness which is so beautiful; “the mercy that has no end.” Without that quality of attention, there can be no healing, no salvation or wholeness. It is about our attention to Christ who “when he saw the multitudes, was moved with compassion;” and perhaps nowhere with greater intensity than on the Cross. “Father, forgive them.” It is our attention to the compassion of Christ that properly defines our gathering as brother priests. That attention to his compassion is our faith in the divine love made visible on the Cross.

Distraction is the enemy of attention. We live in a culture of distraction, captive to our devices of distraction, oblivious perhaps of their insidious intent, the intent to distract. Yet however much we might think it is a modern problem unique to our technocratic world, it is not; a point made ever so strongly in Jamie Kreiner’s ‘The Wandering Mind: What Medieval Monks Tell Us about Distraction,’¹² which explores the different modalities of monastic cultures through the various ways in which they address the problem of distraction. There is much to learn from this. But there is a much deeper problem that belongs to the ‘neo-modernism’ of our time.

This is, as the American catholic theologian Michael Hanby puts it, the reduction of “all philosophical and theological questions to political questions.”¹³ As he says, “there is something inherently absurd about the reduction of Catholicism to politics, especially in

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Austin Farrer, *The Essential Sermons*, ed. Leslie Houlden, (SPCK, 1991), ‘Faith and Crutches’, p. 55.

¹² Jamie Kreiner, *The Wandering Mind: What Medieval Monks Tell Us about Distraction*, Liveright Publ. Co., W.W. Norton, 2023.

¹³ <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2023/08/synodality-and-the-spirit-of-truth>

the age of social media, principally a lack of intellectual seriousness";¹⁴ in short, it is a failure to attend to truth. "The absolutization of politics is a principal symptom of the crisis of Catholicism in modernity, for the translation of the theological into the political is one of the marks of the modern age."¹⁵ This reflects, as Hanby observes, "the triumph of scientific and technological order - and thus of power - over the transcendence of God and the givenness of human nature."¹⁶

He is mainly raising concerns with "the Synod of Synodality"¹⁷ within the Roman Catholic Church about a progressive agenda which would overturn classical Christian and Catholic teaching about sex and morality. These all turn upon the question of what it means to be human. What he identifies concerns all of the forms of catholicity in our times. It is a question about truth which is denied in the negation of the transcendence of God, in the negation of human nature, and thus, too, in the negation of the real nature of the Church. Such are the politics that belong to the metaphysical rejection of 'essentials' while at the same time demanding the recognition of 'essence' for itself in whatever claims are made about identity.

This was recognized by Joseph Ratzinger long before he became Pope Benedict XVI. "The notion of truth ... gives place to the notion of progress: the 'true' is whatever serves progress, that is, whatever serves the logic of history."¹⁷ He asks "is there a human 'nature'? Is there a truth that *remains* true in every historical time because it is true?" These lead to the question about the catholicity of the Church. Is the Church "fundamentally an ontological and sacramental reality, or a sociological and political one?"¹⁸

"Sociologism," as the French Philosopher Michel Henry calls it in 'Barbarism', is a kind of shallow sociology which supplants philosophy and theology both in *academia* and in our churches.¹⁹ Our technocratic culture, as Henry suggests, "puts out of play the transcendental life that constitutes the humanity of the human being."²⁰ The claims to truth are reduced "to their historical, political, and economic conditions and thus to expressions of ideology,"²¹ and, as Hannah Arendt recognized, often in totalitarian ways. It is not 'what is true' but what 'works' from the standpoint of the technocratic elite; in short, the will to power trumps any concept of truth, and, in the case of the churches, any meaningful form of Catholicity.

This has been the Anglican tragedy of decades upon decades of impaired communion *inter* and *intra* the national, provincial and diocesan churches, and, sadly, with respect to

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 1982, As quoted in Hanby's *Synodality and the Spirit of Truth*, *First Things*, 2023/08

¹⁸ Hanby, *Synodality*, *First Things*

¹⁹ Michel Henry, *Barbarism*, tr. Scott Davidson, 2004, *Continuum Impacts*, pp. 115-136, particularly p. 129 and p. 136.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. 122

²¹ Hanby, *Synodality*, *First Things*

associations which in their truth have a certain independence from such polities. SSC in its 19th century expression and life was faithful to the classical Anglican formularies, seeing 'Anglicanism' as an integral part of 'the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church,' despite various tensions with some bishops. Has anything really changed, *intra* or *inter alia* ecclesiologicaly?

But the Church Catholic, in her essential mystery, *is* ontologically prior to the various historical and institutional churches. It has "a theological and sacramental nature that transcends its location in time and space"²² and thus includes within the dynamic of its life, the communion of saints. The *sensus fidei*, the sense or understanding of the Faith, shapes and determines the *consensus fidelium*, the consensus of the faithful; *not the other way around*. The reduction of theology to politics is the inversion of this classical and catholic understanding and contributes to our disordered times.

The counter is to reclaim the long-standing catholic principle known as the Vincentian Canon, derived from the fifth century *Commonitorium* of Vincent of Lérins: *Quod ubique, quod semper, quod ab omnibus creditum est*, "what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all."²³

It looks back to Paul's emphasis on "that pattern of teaching" (Rom. 6. 17) which we have received and to such Patristic figures as Irenaeus, the great 2nd century apologist, bishop, and theologian. Irenaeus articulates wonderfully the underlying principles of catholicity. His work 'On the Apostolic Preaching' speaks directly to us as a society of catholic priests. Writing to a certain Marcianus, whom I think is a presbyter or priest, he provides a summary manual or memorandum through which Marcianus may be able "to understand all the members of the body of truth."²⁴ As the orthodox theologian and translator of the work, John Behr, aptly notes: "it is the earliest summary of Christian teaching, presented", he adds, "in a non-polemical or apologetic manner."²⁵ It belongs to Irenaeus' emphasis upon 'the rule of faith' which he also calls the "rule of truth"²⁶; in short, what comes to be embodied in the Creeds. Irenaeus speaks directly to the confusions of our times about what it means to be truly human and what it means to be a member of the body of Christ.

"Man," he says, "is a living being composed of a soul and a body."²⁷ Both matter. But he says that "the holiness of the soul is to keep the faith in God whole, neither adding nor subtracting from it."²⁸ In a famous phrase, he says, "The glory of God is man alive and

²² *Ibid.*

²³ For convenience see <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/ancient/434lerins-canon.asp>

²⁴ Irenaeus, *On the Apostolic Preaching*, tr. John Behr, Popular Patristics Series, St. Vladimir's Press, 1997, p. 7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Rule of faith is synonymous with "rule of truth", *Adv. Haereses* 3.11.1

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 40

²⁸ *Ibid.*

the life of man is the vision of God,"²⁹ known and lived in the body of Christ, the Church Catholic.

This dynamic, catholic sensibility is very much part of the Anglican classical legacy in its refusal, *contra* the Council of Trent, on the one hand, *and* the Synod of Dort, on the other hand, counter-reformation and protestant reformation respectively, to add to or to take away anything that belongs to creedal Catholicism. I think the whole tendency of catholic thought is best captured by Archbishop John Bramhall, the Irish Canterbury, also known as *Athanasius Hibernicus*. He writes:

That which was once an essential part of the Christian Faith is always an essential part of the Christian Faith; that which was once no essential, is never an essential. ³⁰

This is our challenge where the prevailing winds of neo-modernism are about a kind of anti-essentialism, denying God and our humanity and the nature of our life in the body of Christ. These are our challenges and our distractions, in part because it is so easy to get caught up in the sophistry of social media. We become distracted from the very thing which defines us as contemplative and spiritual beings and which connects us to one another.

This brings us to the Cross as the meeting place of lovers, the meeting place of the love of God and the love of neighbour; in short, to the centrality of the Passion especially in relation to the spirituality of the catholic priesthood. Once again, it is Simone Weil who shows us that this is really all about attention. "Not only does the love of God have attention for its substance," she writes, "the love of neighbour, which we know to be the same love, is made of this same substance." As she explains, "the capacity to give one's attention to a sufferer is a very rare and difficult thing; it is almost a miracle; it *is* a miracle." But what is the Passion of Christ except the contemplation of the one who bears the sufferings of our sinful world? We behold what God wills to undergo for us in the body of our humanity.

She recalls the first legend of the Grail where it is said that the Grail "belongs to the first comer who asks the guardian of the vessel, a king three-quarters paralyzed by the most painful wound, 'What are you going through?'" This is the question born out of attention that challenges us in terms of the love of God and the love of neighbour. "The love of neighbour in all its fullness simply means being able to say to him: 'What are you going through?'"³¹ As Miranda says in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, the only play not set in the Euro-Mediterranean world but in the Americas, Bermuda, "I have suffered with those that I saw suffer."³² It equally belongs to our attention and care for one another in the Society.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haereses*, 4. 20.

³⁰ John Bramhall, *The Works* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, L.A.C.T., 1847), vol. II, "A Replication to the Bishop of Chalcedon", Works, II, p. 279. He recognizes and articulates a form of reasoning upon the essentials. See David Curry, 'Reasoning Upon the Essentials: Chalcedonian Sacramentalism in Andrewes and Bramhall' in *Christ Unabridged: Knowing and Loving the Son of Man*, ed. George Westhaver, Rebekah Vince, SCM Press, 2020.

³¹ Weil, *op.cit.* p.64.

³² Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2.

It arises out of and belongs to our attention to the Cross where we contemplate what God goes through for us.

Holy Cross recalls us to the centrality of the Passion. It is the traditional marker for the Autumn Ember Days, one of the four times in the seasonal course of the year that remind us of our priestly ordinations as grounded in the Pentecostal mystery of the outpouring of the Spirit in the gifts given that belong of our life “in the one body of Christ” and to our being “sent forth as labourers” into the Lord’s harvest.

This is to remember what has been forgotten in our culture and church: that the Passion of Christ is the central mystery that reveals God and our humanity to us; the central mystery that makes known the radical meaning of the Incarnation in Christ’s suffering pilgrimage on the Cross. Is this not central to the SCC? To the preaching of the Passion understood in relation to the Mass, as exemplified so powerfully by such witnesses as Fr. Mackonochie?³³

The preaching of the Passion is central to the catholicity of the priesthood and to our Society. And while the Passion is a constant and necessary theme, when and where exactly did the practice of preaching the Passion in terms of the Seven Last Words of Christ arise? The seven last words are found in the Gospels, three from Luke and three from John, one in both Matthew and Mark. It may surprise you to know that the ordering of these words which has shaped the classical custom of the devotions on the seven last words of Christ on Good Friday came out of the Americas. It was devised by a Peruvian native who became a Jesuit priest, Fr. Alonso Messio Bedoya in the late 17th century following a series of devastating earthquakes in Lima, Peru.

He ordered the seven last words of Christ into the present devotional sequence. They went from Peru to Europe and influenced many, notably Franz Joseph Haydn who composed the great musical classic “The Seven Last Words of Christ” first performed in Cadiz, Spain in 1786. Devotions on the seven last words in this way of ordering them have become a classic for both Roman Catholics and Protestants and are an important feature of the mission and life of the SSC. How wonderful that this sequence of devotions should have come out of the Americas to Europe and then back again to the Americas in the continuing missionary life of the Church, and, moreover, to have emerged out of the indigenous cultures of the Americas in their engagement with Christian missions. I simply note that our Province and its branches are composed of priests from different ethnic, cultural and linguistic communities of the Americas. This speaks to a wider and deeper sense of catholicity.

The devotions of Fr. Alonso Messio Bedoya focus on the pilgrimage of the Son to the Father. They begin and end with an address of the Son to the Father: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” ... “Father, into thy hands, I commend my spirit.” Everything is gathered to God in God through the love of the Son in the mutual bonds of

³³ *Readings for the Liturgy of the Hours: A Supplement for Priests of the Society of the Holy Cross.* “No theme was so common in his preaching as the Passion ... Closely allied to this devotion to the Cross was his devotion to the Blessed Sacrament”, *About Fr. A H Mackonochie*, Master, SSC by Fr. E F Russell.

divine love, the Blessed Trinity. We contemplate Christ crucified who, as Lancelot Andrewes puts it, is "*liber charitatis*, the book of love" opened for us to read.

The story of Martha and Mary follows directly upon the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke's Gospel (Lk. 10). That is intriguing and suggestive. Is the story of Martha and Mary the counter or the complement to the concluding injunction of the parable to "go and do thou likewise" towards those in need? We are, it seems, to act with compassion rather than indifference towards those who are suffering. Does that imply the priority of action over contemplation? Or does the story of Martha and Mary complement and complete the very setting and meaning of the parable?

For the parable begins with the question of "a certain Lawyer," a cynical lawyer who seeks to put Christ to the test, to tempt him. But what is his initial question? "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" A question about what to do. Jesus responds with two questions: "What is written in the Law? How readest thou?" Questions about what to think and how to think. Those two questions have their meaning and answer in the parable of the Good Samaritan and in the story of Martha and Mary. What is drawn out of the lawyer is precisely "the summary of the law"; the love of God and the love of neighbour are one and meet in Jesus Christ, himself the Good Samaritan. The imagery of the parable, as the Fathers so commonly observed, relates to the themes of the Fall and Redemption; in short, to the Cross and Passion of Christ and to images of the sacraments. "Go and do likewise," Jesus says to the questioning lawyer. But only if and after we have attended to what is written and said; "sitting and listening" to the words of Christ and acting upon them.

Martha, in contrast to Mary sitting at Jesus' feet listening to his word, is "distracted with much service." Distraction has to do with going from one thing to another in a kind of frenzy and with a loss of focus. It signals the inability to attend to anything. It is easy to get caught up in the busyness of life and miss out on life itself.³⁴ In contrast to Martha's distractedness there is Mary's collectedness, her attentiveness in sitting and listening to the words of Christ. Don't just do something, sit there, listen and think! What could be more counter-culture than that in our busyness obsessed culture? We are almost afraid to sit and think. To be collected rather than distracted is good in itself and, paradoxically, in relation to all our other activities. The one informs the other because it is about paying attention to the primacy of an ethical and spiritual principle alive in us.

Sitting and listening means that there is something greater and prior to our activities. It means that our activities really only have meaning when they are for an end, a purpose. In that sense, it is "the one thing needful," *unum necessarium*. Jesus responds gently but firmly to Martha's complaint about her sister: "Martha, Martha, thou art anxious and troubled about a multitude of things; one thing is needful; and Mary hath chosen the better part [the good portion] which shall not be taken from her." The notion of the "better

³⁴ Iain McGilchrist sees this as a feature of the modern problem - the dominance of left-hemisphere thinking. What is needed philosophically and neurologically is the proper balance and relation of left brain and right brain thinking. See McGilchrist, *The Matter of Things*, 2. Vols, or <https://unherd.com/2023/05/left-brain-thinking-will-destroy-civilisation/>

part” comes from the Vulgate translation, *optima partem*. As Augustine wisely notes, it is not that Martha “was playing a bad part, but that there was ‘the best part’ which shall not be taken away.”³⁵

Our modern translations have given us the word “anxious”.³⁶ It is the word used for “careful” in the King James Version, meaning being ‘full of cares.’ This is our busyness and our distraction. It marks a failure to attend to what matters most. It is too easy to get lost in the busyness of our lives. This is why contemplation is seen as primary and necessary in the great religious and philosophical traditions. Sitting and listening is a critical feature of our spiritual lives. And our challenge.

Law is transformed into love, a love of ‘the true, the beautiful and the good,’ to put in Plato’s terms, for the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. The fourth of the Ten Commandments is about the Sabbath rest. It points to a universal need for a time of recollection, of contemplation, over and against work and busyness. In the Christian and catholic understanding this is concentrated for us on the Cross.

This is powerfully seen in John Donne’s holy sonnet, “What if this present were the world’s last night?” The question begins the octet of the sonnet. It is about facing death and the eschaton either individually or collectively. How do we face the end of all things, the consummation of the ages and creation? “Mark in my heart, O Soul, where thou dost dwell,” the poem bids us. Mark means take note, pay attention in other words. But to what? “The picture of Christ crucified.” We are asked to call to mind the image or picture of the crucified Christ. I think Donne has in mind one of the disturbingly grotesque images of the crucifixion that came out of the late medieval plaques such as seen in the Isenheim altarpiece by Matthias Grünewald. It depicts Christ on the Cross bearing the marks of the plaque, identifying Christ with the intense sufferings of our wounded and broken humanity.

In contemplating the picture of Christ crucified, the poem bids us interrogate it; to ponder the meaning of what it conveys. “Tell whether his countenance” - the face of Christ - “can thee affright”? Does what you see frighten you? The image is described in all of the intensity of the Passion: “Tears in his eyes quench the amazing light,/ Blood fills his frowns, which from his pierc’d head fell.” It is deliberately graphic. But then the poem shifts to what is remembered as heard from the Cross. “And can that tongue adjudge thee unto hell,/which pray’d forgiveness for his foes fierce spite?”, recalling us to the first word of Christ from the Cross in the devotional sequence; “Father, forgive them.” Thus the octet ends with two rhetorical questions that respond to the opening question. We are asked to attend to the Passion of Christ. Are we frightened by what we see and are we condemned by what we hear? The opening words of the sestet are emphatic in their answer: “No, no.” And emphatic *no* to both. Instead the sonnet ends with the deeper

³⁵ *De Trin.* I, x, 20, Erich Przywara, *An Augustine Synthesis*, Sheed and Ward, 1977, ‘Man in God’, p. 489.

³⁶ This belongs to another modern tendency: the dominance of therapeutic culture over and against the ethical as identified by a number of writers, notably Paul F. Gottfried and Christopher Lasch.

lesson of love. What seems hideous and ugly is actually beautiful and true and good. "This beauteous form assures a piteous mind."³⁷

The idea of the primacy of contemplation is not at the expense of action. It is more a question of their interaction and interrelation. The love of God and the love of neighbour are inescapably bound together. We forget that our busyness often separates us from any kind of ethical relationship with one another. A time of sitting and listening holds out the possibilities of the redemption of our distracted, mindless busyness. Sitting and listening belong to our being collected rather than distracted even in our busy lives.

The twelfth century Cistercian monk, Aelred of Rievaulx, captures best, I think, the interplay of action and contemplation which belongs to the Catholic Church and faith.

In this wretched and laborious life, brethren, Martha must of necessity be in our house; that is to say, our soul has to be concerned with bodily actions. As long as we need to eat and drink, we shall need to tame our flesh with watching, fasting, and work. This is Martha's role. But in our souls there ought also to be Mary, that is, spiritual activity. For we should not always give ourselves to bodily efforts, but sometimes be still and see how lovely, how sweet the Lord is, sitting at the feet of Jesus and hearing his word. You should in no wise neglect Mary for Martha; or again, Martha for Mary. For, if you neglect Martha, who will feed Jesus? If you neglect Mary, what use is it for Jesus to come to your house, when you taste nothing of his sweetness?³⁸

This conveys a counter-cultural truth about the contemplative activity which redeems all our distracted busyness. The busyness of Martha is brought into the collected restfulness of Mary, attentive and sitting and listening to the words of Jesus. It is the one thing needful. Is it not what is necessary and needful for us as a society of catholic priests? Is it not the *unum necessarium* of the SSC itself? Such is "the mercy that has no end".

Fr. David Curry, SSC
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³⁷ Donne, *op.cit.*, p. 443.

³⁸ Aelred Squire, Aelred of Rievaulx, A Study, Cistercian Publications, 1981, re: Sermon 19, *In Assumptione Sanctae Mariae*.