

The Fall of Babel: Reflections on the Abbey Center Conference*

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The first conference sponsored by the Abbey Center is an occasion that could be recorded in a number of different ways. I have chosen to reflect on it as part of something that is happening to the Church at this very strange time in human history.

The cause of the Abbey Center is Thomas Merton, who certainly did not envision anything at all like the actuality of the gathering which took place in October 1992. He wanted a place where spirituality and science could encounter one another in a fecund peace, for the sake of a world full of genius but without clarity, apparently bent on suicide by greed and pride. He saw it all perhaps too simply, overestimating the honesty of scientists, the humility of those committed to spiritual pursuits, and the possibility of any of them hearing each other. A common language was necessary, he knew, both as a goal and prerequisite, and therefore very elusive, as in, for instance, so many "peace talks" fated to the frustration of mutual incomprehension and suspicion for lack of common language.

The first conference to be held, after careful and laborious preparation, to initiate the work of the Abbey Center, was at least evidence of two things. One was the intensity of the desire for the kind of encounters that Merton envisioned, even though in the event it became clear that nobody had a clear idea of what was involved. The other

was the strength of the resistance to packaged unity. Nobody knew exactly what they wanted, but equally everybody was prepared to struggle to discover a common direction, yet not at all prepared to accept unity prearranged.

It was a very diverse group, of different disciplines and traditions, different races and ages and political views, and lifestyles. Some, in the common gathering were vocal to the point of prolixity, others spoke when driven by frustration, others were silent. At meals, breaks and at small-group discussions, some who were quiet in the large group found time and acceptance to formulate ideas, begin to build consensus, recognize possibility.

The gathering reflected, in its frustration, its energy, its persistence, its anger, and its openness, a change in the character of thought and relationship in the Churches. The refusal to be manipulated, and the ability to detect and name manipulation, is a new phenomenon in Church affairs, especially in the Roman Catholic Church in which the manipulation of consciences in the name of unity and the will of God had been developed to a fine art. The gathering at Gethsemani discovered in its collective self a willingness to push through frustration and to risk what could seem a waste of high hopes and long journeys rather than settle for something less than authentic search.

Search for what? If the purpose of a gathering is to discover a common language, where do you begin? Evidently you *do not* begin, as had been planned, with texts in a prepared language, however seductively universal.

The group, with surprising (because undiscussed and spontaneous) unanimity recognized the themes proposed as begging too many questions—not a genuine common language but, in fact, the language of a very specific cultural stance. Clearly also, the group did not want to begin with a set of "problems." This is, of course, probably the most common way for a group to be convened; a "problem" is identified (by a pastor, a governor, a president for instance) and a group of people is asked to find solutions. In this case a number of one-day meetings had been held in different academic contexts to surface problems occurring in that milieu. A formidable compilation emerged of very real problems in the experience of those concerned.

But it did not take the Abbey Center gathering long to recognize that something was wrong. Its members were being asked to accept the problems as written, but what if the problems were not problems

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at all in the sense of "something wrong and needing to be fixed"? What if they were, perhaps, signs of health—a healthy reaction to attack, as a fever is a sign of the body's fight against infection? What if the breakdown of families, for instance, were a painful but healthy revolt against a deep sickness in the structures that impose gender roles?

Recognition of such undermining doubts and questions produced a result similar to the experience of the architects of Babel. Such a beautiful structure, so skillfully put together, so high and holy! Did some apprentice mason ask the terrible, innocent question that confounded the great men, like the child who, untrained in the necessities of social manipulation, exclaimed aloud that the emperor had no clothes? There was suddenly the frightening but also exhilarating realization that people not only did not have common political and social and cultural models, or common ethical definitions, but could actually *say so*, (in spite of being all Church people) and therefore clear the ground for some real building. The collapse of Babel is devastating but it is also liberating because there is no longer the need to pretend that everyone can actually live in this thing. If there is to be a common language, it will not grow because experts devise it and everyone else cuts the stones and carries them. It will grow because people learn to recognize common needs, emotions, aspirations, and so undertake—slowly and laboriously—common tasks that benefit everyone, creating common spaces that leave room for diversity and eccentricities. (The common language, ultimately, cannot be a high-rise block but probably something much more like a cluster of villages and small towns with fields around them and roads connecting them.)

Reflection on such an experience is inevitably very personal. I cannot speak for another's experience, and others present may perceive the event very differently. Perception of the tumultuous three days, with its struggles and anger and laughter and the final achievement of a sense of embarking on a new, long, arduous, scarcely definable yet possible task, is that the entire event hinged on the concept of identity. It seems that the breaking down of the earlier structure of the conference happened essentially because these had been built on an *assumed* identity (in both senses of the word "assumed") in the gathering. The work was to be defined in terms of a specific traditional-liberal-Western-Catholic-male-philosophical mind, and it was to conduct its deliberations in accordance with that identity. It was to establish common language on that basis and reflect on problems occurring

in that spiritual context. It was to have as its totem Thomas Merton—a monastic, Catholic, male, spiritual figure, generously embracing other traditions and many causes in his wide liberal sympathies. And all this was to be held together by the monastic setting, which was to symbolize peace, hospitality, continuity, non-consumer values (setting aside cake and cheese), and make it possible to leave outside (as some participants wistfully observed) the frenetic greed and conflicts of a sick society.

It did not work. It did not work because the kind of people who attended the conference knew (some at first not actually knowing that they knew) that clear identity is the first casualty of major social upheaval. All of them had experienced this in one way or another. Some had known it in severe and specific crises of conversion, letting go inherited identity in order to embrace God. For most of us it had been a more confusing and reluctant experience, a disintegration of certainties, a sense of imbalance, an inability any longer to claim nation or Church or family or gender or professional role as solid ground to stand on, with a label saying "American, Catholic, married, teacher. . . ." With loss of faith in such identities goes, often, loss of direction, of purpose, of value. What is this shell I live in? Does it even exist?

I am not saying that everyone at the conference was experiencing, or had experienced, this kind of cultural angst, but that this kind of experience—which is a collective social phenomenon of our time, not merely an accumulation of individual trauma—underlies the general resistance to being identified in this way. The suspicion of manipulative structure, the questioning of premises, sprang from the awareness that common language can only develop among people who either are clear about who they are, or, if this is not possible, are able to accept that fact and establish a working hypothesis from which to begin, open to correction but adequate and honest as far as possible.

This is, in fact, the situation that many of us are in. It is sometimes painful to the point of despair, but it is also extremely hopeful. It is possibly the only really hopeful phenomenon around, because it accepts the destruction of Babel, it knows that we are, at present, living in rubble and confusion, but not in pretense and vain glory. The danger to the world, and also to the Church (which has unfortunately adopted some of the world's worst mental habits) is that we continue to assume that a common language exists—the language of Western

culture, a language of dominance, hierarchy, competition and control which claims the right (and duty) to translate all other languages into its own. The hope actually lies in the loss of the identity that makes that assumption possible. Individually it is happening, and culturally it is happening, but when the symptoms of the needed loss of cultural identity appear we cry "problem" and set up a commission to fix it.

There is, indeed, a huge dilemma, for cultural identity of some kind is in fact necessary for survival, so the disintegration of that identity causes terrible, even lethal, symptoms. The drug culture, fundamentalist religion, the increase in casual violence and callousness (especially among the young), the rise of Neo-Nazism, and in many countries atrocious persecution and war are all the results either of the loss of cultural identity, or the struggle to regain identity, or what appears to be identity. For identity gives self-confidence and self-worth, the loss of it means loss of purpose, apathy and cynicism, chronic and even suicidal depression (individual or collective). And even the fear of the loss of identity results in a panic of hatred for whatever seems to threaten it: another ethnic group, a different religion or class.

Yet often the identity that gives confidence and strength is a false identity, based on evil premises: the "master race," the "dominant sex," the "most powerful nation," the "upper class," all mean that identity depends upon the suppression and oppression of some other group or person. Real social and individual health does not and cannot grow from such deeply deceptive systems, yet the destruction of them is, it seems (and for many it really is) the destruction of all that makes life worth living. That is the paradox—the specific paradox of this time of the end of the millennium, but which will no doubt also affect many decades of the next if the earth is not first made uninhabitable by behavior motivated precisely by the need constantly to support the illusions of such false identities.

This is the reason why the confusion and the partial recovery of the Abbey Center conference is so encouraging and why it matters that the pursuit should continue. I doubt if most people present thought of their experience in those precise terms. What is described here is my perception, expressed in terms which are familiar to me because of other work in which I have been engaged and also from reflection on personal experience. But what I perceive essentially is that what such a gathering can do, when there is an adequate level of mutual respect and trust, is to allow the loss of identity to be apparent,

and analyzed. Then perhaps the basis of a common language can emerge.

My reason for suggesting this possibility is the location of the Abbey Center and the symbolism of the monastic phenomenon, which is not, fundamentally, that of an island of peace and sanity in a crazy world (though it may often be that, as it has been before), but a place where individual identities are fluid, and the common identity is explicitly expressed in the values of the Gospel. This does not mean that monks are necessarily individually any better than anyone else at letting go of their false identities, but there is a sense in which they actually do so, whether they like it or not. And it does not mean that monasticism has always, or even often, expressed its common identity in values and behaviors like those of Jesus, but that all the same its purpose is explicitly that. For Jesus was a person who had real problems with the identities he had to shed and those that were thrust on him, but he attempted to share with others a language of common identity whose source of security, continuity, and strength was God and other people, experienced as inseparable spiritual/practical reality. So it is conceivable that in a setting which explicitly symbolizes that kind of identity there can be a source of spiritual security of the right kind, sufficient to allow people to deal with the loss of false identity. It seems that out of the attempt to express the reality and the implication of such an experience, the rudiments of genuine common language could emerge.

All of this makes sense if Thomas Merton is the catalyst. One can imagine his half-startled, wry amusement at such an idea, but with perhaps an acknowledgement of its justice. For this was a man who had trouble all his life with identity, trying on one and then another, passionately believing that each one was the real one, until it let him down and something else showed through. And then there were all the identities that were pinned on him by others, in which at times he had believed and at times had created, anyway. Perhaps in the end his extraordinarily wide appeal grew from the painfully acquired ability to let go the struggle for identity, and yet live in one or another as it was required, seeing, therefore, some value, however paradoxical, in each. For it is only when the ultimately unreal, even if just and adequate, identities are known as merely tools that people can speak to each other as children of God. If the tools are good tools they give confidence and enable people to meet one another and work together

with proper pride and with joy, as people do who are committed to some undertaking which absorbs their energy and devotion. Their language is then the language of their common work and dedication, they meet each other with pleasure and fellowship and—yes—love, and all the identities they bring to this are somehow both relativized and cleansed. (People who need to cling to oppressive identities to survive cannot do this, anyway.)

Identity and language—they go together because language is forged from common experience, and our chosen or inherited or imposed identity dictates the kind of experiences we can have and the things we can say. So the relativizing of identity and the shedding of false identity makes possible the undertaking of work which is liberating, hard, and absorbing, as some began to discover at the Abbey Center Conference. Part of the paradox is that the undoing of false identity is *itself* the work that is necessary, and the sharing of that work begins to create the stumbling words of a new language.

This is a frightening undertaking because it can only go forward if there are no preconditions, no reserved and untouchable areas. If we redefine "problems," if we will not settle for given language, where will it all end? What will become of family, of Church, of nation, even of self? This work is probably the most important that human beings can undertake, as many mystics have known, but they were always regarded as eccentric if splendid, which left the rest of us in safety. Now we are no longer safe, there is nowhere left to turn but back to the beginning, and the Word, and an open-ended search, not for individual enlightenment but for a possible—just possible—salvation for all.