

Beneath the Surface: The Spirituality of Br Ambrose Treacy

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Br Ambrose Treacy lived a very busy life: travelling, opening schools, attending to the thousand and one things associated with his role as leader of the Christian Brothers in Australia. With so many things clamouring for his attention, how did he keep his balance? What was his motivation? How did he acquire the attitudes and values which enabled him to stay true to his purpose?

Ambrose grew up in a family and a culture where he absorbed the faith like breathing in the air. Trust in God was bedrock, a conviction which stayed with him throughout his whole life. Like Abraham of old, he believed that, no matter what, God would provide. This was not just a set of words for him but the rock on which he built his life. Allied to this was his strong connection to Mary, the Mother of God.

Attending the Brothers' school in Thurles was to have wider repercussions for Patrick than just acquiring an education. It determined his path in life. The director of the school was Br Francis Larkin (1817–1897) a man who, though teaching in a small country town, had seen a good deal of the world. Some years previously, in 1843, he had made the long journey to Sydney, Australia, as a member of the first community of Christian Brothers to teach the Catholic boys in the colony.



Br Ambrose Treacy

But by 1847 the position of the Brothers in Sydney had become intolerable because of misunderstandings with Archbishop Polding and particularly his vicar, Dom Gregory, OSB, about their way of life as members of a pontifical institute, and they returned to Ireland. Larkin, hardly more than 30, was appointed director of the school in Thurles; a task he fulfilled with great success, winning the support of the people. Patrick listened with interest to his stories of life in Sydney without any realisation that his own destiny lay in that far-off land.

The choice of a path in life is often a mystery. Why this and not that? Some people know from an early age the path they wish to follow. Others, suddenly thrust into a situation, know with incontrovertible certainty that they have found their purpose in life. And others again go through a long period of searching, hoping to find the way that will give meaning to their lives. What was Patrick's experience? Late in life he shared his story with one of his close friends.

Larkin had noticed that Patrick had qualities that would fit him for the life of a Christian Brother. He decided to put this option to him. Patrick was 17 at the time. They were talking in the parlour of the Brothers' residence but Patrick, though he could see the value of what Larkin was saying, was not ready to take the step that was being presented to him. As they spoke, Patrick noticed a picture of Mary, the mother of Jesus, on the wall, entitled *Mater Amabilis* (Mother most loveable). As he looked at it, an interior voice which he believed to be that of the Blessed Virgin, plainly said to him: 'If you do not become a Christian Brother you will displease me.' He accepted. That is the bones of the experience. This invitation was the experience that motivated him throughout a long and busy life.

In an area as sensitive and subjective as this, there is great room for delusion. Hearing voices can be a pathological problem causing extreme personal distress. How can one distinguish true from false words? This is an area of spiritual theology that has attracted the attention of many writers; some of them, like the great Spanish saint, Teresa of Avila, writing from personal experience. They tell us that when the inner locution (to use the technical term) is genuine, the words which God or his representative speaks are crystal clear; they carry with them the grace or power to do what is being proposed; and the person to whom they are addressed feels perfectly free to accept or refuse. In addition, the one to whom the words are spoken never forgets them. It is a mystical, unifying experience productive of much good.

A notable example of this in the Old Testament is the story of the prophet Samuel who was called by God to play a special part in the history of the Chosen People. In the New Testament, the outstanding example is that of Mary at the Annunciation and the effect that this had on all generations since. Examples of people called directly by God for a specific purpose are exceptional but not unknown. Mother Teresa was called in this way. Patrick Treacy was also called. Exceptional though this call was, Patrick would be the last person to think that there was anything special about him. God calls a person as he is, warts and all.

So the die was cast. With the approval of his parents Patrick made the necessary arrangements to enter the Brothers' novitiate in Mt Sion, Waterford. He had no knowledge of what lay ahead of him and no understanding of why God, through Mary, had intervened in his life. It was a step in the dark. His trust in Providence was absolute. This attitude would characterise his whole life.

In the novitiate of the Society of Religious Brothers (popularly called Christian Brothers) at Waterford, Ambrose (the religious name Patrick was given on entering the Institute) built on his family inheritance. As a novice he laboured to acquire the spirit of the Institute, a particular spirit of faith ‘which inspires its members to view nothing but with the eyes of faith, to do nothing but with a view to God, and to ascribe all to God; at all times entering into the sentiments of holy Job: “The Lord gave” to me, “the Lord hath taken away” from me: “as it has pleased the Lord, so is it done: blessed be the name of the Lord!” ’ (1832 Rule, Ch 2, art 2) Ambrose learned to live this way, making God central to everything he did. This particular spirit of faith is a preparation for an even more fundamental attitude: ‘the spirit of holy disengagement’ (arts 2 and 5). In modern terms, holy disengagement means freedom from selfishness and attachments so that one may serve God without any reservations. That Ambrose reached this deepest level of Christian Brother life is evident in the words of one of his co-workers, Br Fursey Bodkin: ‘A great feature in Br Ambrose’s character was his utter unselfishness.’

In his formative years Ambrose also took to heart the motto which Fr Kenny sj, gave to the Brothers in the early days of the Institute. He counselled them to live by the words of Isaiah (30 .15): ‘In quiet and in trust shall be your strength.’ One can see Ambrose in these words; never pushing himself forward, ever trusting, strong in the Lord. Though he was always busy he had a serenity even in the most difficult situations. The words of Isaiah call to mind Psalm 131.2, ‘I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a child quieted at its mother’s breast,’ and Micah, 6.8, ‘What does the Lord require of you but to act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God.’ Brothers of a later generation have seen their mission as summed up in presence, compassion and liberation, a modern understanding of the way that Ambrose lived.

A significant part of the spirituality which Ambrose absorbed as a Christian Brother is the awareness of Christ living within him and the people whom he serves. The Brothers begin and end the significant events of each day with the short prayer, 'Live, Jesus, in our hearts, for ever.' (1832 Rule, Ch 3, art 9) This prayer and its accompanying spirituality derive from St Francis de Sales, the 17th century bishop of Geneva, a writer whose *Introduction to the Devout Life* had great influence on Catholic spirituality. From St Francis, Ambrose learned the worth of the 'little virtues, whose conquest Our Lord has set forth for our study and labour. Such are patience, gentleness, self-mortification, humility, obedience, poverty, chastity, tenderness toward our neighbours, bearing with their imperfection, diligence and holy fervour.' (*Introduction* Part 3, Ch 2) It is worth noting that Ambrose was a contemporary of another great saint of the little virtues, Thérèse of Lisieux, though he would not have known her. Her strength also was in quiet and in trust. She was born in 1873, when Ambrose was settling into the monastery and schools at Victoria Parade, and died in 1897, while he was negotiating for the takeover of the Boarding School at Goulburn. Both were living a similar spirituality, the work of the Holy Spirit, who breathes where he wills. (1 Cor 12.11)

St Francis de Sales had a profoundly optimistic view of human nature, affirming 'that the capacities with which persons are gifted are God-given and are, in fact, the medium through which response to God occurs. Thus all human works are designed to be utilized, not bypassed, in the Christian life.' (pp 158-159) It is easy to see Ambrose in this quotation. The practical and the spiritual drew strength from each other.

Ambrose absorbed another Salesian lesson. St Francis wrote, 'You must not only be devout and love devotion, but you must render it lovable to everyone.' (De Sales to Madame Brûlart,

3 May 1604) Ambrose lived what Francis described—as this comment from Br Regis Hughes bears out.

His influence over others was very remarkable. Ruling a whole province and having to deal with men of temperaments and dispositions so widely different from his own, it was really wonderful how well he kept all together, and what a vast amount of sterling good work he got from persons so dissimilar in character. (T R Hughes, *Christian Brothers Educational Record*, 1913, p 43.)

Ambrose's approach to his mission is well expressed in the words of St Peter. 'Each one of you has received a special grace, so, like good stewards responsible for all these different graces of God, put yourselves at the service of others ... so that in everything God may receive the glory through Jesus Christ.' (1 Pet 4.10-11) Ambrose wanted the young Brothers to be thoroughly prepared for their great work. He told the Directors:

I feel that I would not fitly conclude this letter without directing the attention of the Brs Directors in particular to a point of very great importance, viz, the cultivation of the talents and capabilities of the Brothers entrusted to their care.' (Circular Letter 21 Sept 1879.)

Of all the apostles, it is Paul who comes to mind when we reflect on Ambrose's life. Paul was remarkable for his journeyings, his writings and the challenges he faced. So too was Ambrose. It is doubtful if anyone else in Australia in the second half of the 19th century travelled as extensively as did Ambrose. And while no one would claim that Ambrose's letters reached Paul's theological heights, there is no doubt that they were an essential part of his mission. In Second Corinthians (Ch 2) Paul gives a long list of the trials he had undergone. Ambrose too had been in danger often. He too had known perils from, if not false brethren, then very critical ones. And like Paul he had, for over 30 years, the daily burden

of responsibility for all the foundations. (R B Healy, Christian Brothers Educational Record, p 172.)

Ambrose resonated with the words of St Peter, 'Love the brothers, have compassion and be modest and humble.' (1 Pet 3.8) Br Regis Hughes has left this memory:

No father could be kinder or more indulgent to his children than he was to the Brothers. If a Brother were somewhat rundown from overwork in school Ambrose was ever ready to take his place ... He was always the first himself to wait on anyone that was sick and to perform for him those thousand and one little services that spring from the affection of a truly loving heart. It was marvellous too how often he used actually [to] forestall us in many of our bodily needs and ailments. ... He was very good at contributing his own share to the enjoyment of a festive evening either by playing on his violin or by recording some of the many droll episodes that had come under his notice in his collecting tours. (Christian Brothers Educational Record, 1913, p 49.)

While Ambrose used all that was available to him in the work he was doing for God, he attached little importance to his own contribution. This is not the same as a poor self-image. Ambrose knew his worth and his abilities. But he believed strongly that he was only an instrument in the hands of God, from whom all good things come. The older he was, the more profoundly did he realise this. At root is a fundamental truth which every person wrestles with in the course of their lives. Is what I am doing just an ego trip? Or is there a genuine giving of myself to others and to God? It ties in with the Lord's words, 'Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' (Jn 12.24)

In one of Ambrose's reports to the Superior General on the state of the Province, he listed the number of Brothers and the work each was doing and the positions they held either in school or in the community or in the novitiate. How did he describe

his own work? General management, a humble assessment. (Christian Brothers Archives Rome, Folio 213/2342)

Three Brothers who knew him well are unanimous in recognising his humility. Br Fursey Bodkin, never one to exaggerate, had this to say:

Ambrose never seemed to think of himself in any of his undertakings but did everything for the glory of God, the good of the Institute and the advantage and convenience of the Brothers.

Br Regis Hughes, of a more poetic bent, wrote:

His lowly opinion of himself and the humbling offices he performs about the house and yard, especially when anyone is sick, are worthy of the praise of the angels.

And Br Joseph Barrett, who could be critical at times, reflected:

His one idea was working for the greater glory of God. As to what the work might be he was indifferent; he would as readily assist in cutting down a tree as in regulating for the foundation of an establishment.

Considering the origin of his vocation, Ambrose had a singular devotion to Mary, the Mother of God. They were always close. Significant moments in his life coincided with one of her feast days. He left Ireland for Australia on the Feast of the Assumption, 1868. He laid the foundation stone of Victoria Parade, his first building in Australia, on the Feast of the Presentation, 1869. He dedicated the Parade to Mary Immaculate when it opened in 1871. On one of his first visits home to Ireland from Australia he obtained the picture *Mater Amabilis*, so significant in his vocation, valuing it as a sacred treasure and keeping it with him throughout his life. His favourite prayer to Mary was St Bernard's *Memorare* which, from the beginning of his work in Australia, he said in the chapel with the community every morning after breakfast.

Ambrose would not have claimed that his spirituality was in any way original. It was of his time, similar in many ways to that of his Australian contemporary, St Mary MacKillop. What was significant, in both cases, was the sincerity with which it was lived. It was as down to earth as bread and wine; a refreshment when all was well and an essential support when the going was hard. And as can happen to bread and wine, it was part of the raw material of a remarkable transformation, by the grace of God.

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Returning to Australia he worked in communications for the Archdiocese of Sydney and then moved to Darwin, where he came to appreciate the splendour of the Australian outback. Brother Treacy's story captured his imagination many years ago.