

Topic 8: Images of Faith and Faith's Images of the World

In this second topic in Part III begin to introduce what is in fact the central theme of this program, the theme of faith. Above all, I follow the work of a brilliant American Jesuit thinker, William Lynch, whose works on imagination and the in particular, whose book *Images of Faith* has made a tremendous contribution to fundamental theology by helping us re-imagine faith itself and also to re-imagine the way faith looks at the world.

I. Faith and the Imagination: How do I imagine faith? What are my images of faith? Do we imagine that having faith is like making a wish and expressing strong faith is like wishing really hard? I think this is a first mistake. A second is to imagine that faith is a form of secret knowledge, like getting the answers to the test before we take the test: we already know what is coming only we can't prove that we know it so we just assert that we already know how everything is going to turn out - and that is our "faith." In this view, faith always follows knowledge and adds some new content to what we already know. (This assumption runs into terrific problems in the modern, scientific world, where things previously thought to be true on the basis of "faith" are undermined by later scientific discoveries...) A third problem with the way we imagine faith: we imagine only its vertical dimension - faith is about faith in God, in the divine realm. We never imagine that faith is profoundly implicated in the way we imagine this world, that is, we fail to see that faith has a horizontal dimension. If faith is only vertical, then faith only has a soul and not a body.

Lynch begins to re-imagine faith as "the most primary, most elemental force in human nature." It is the life-force in its uniquely human embodiment. Lynch rightly insists that, as such, faith precedes what we ordinarily call knowledge and all the specific forms of knowledge. Likewise, it needs to be educated and it comes to be educated by knowledge of every kind, by other people, by certain forms of irony and, finally, by Christ. In other words, through the course of our lives which are structured by time we move through various important stages in the way faith imagines and engages the world.

Along with seeing faith as an elemental force in human nature, Lynch reminds us that faith does indeed have a body (or many bodies, many forms of embodiment.) Above all, faith is embodied in the social and political orders that structure life in the human city. Without faith there would be no polis, no city. Lynch will say that we can only build a human city by means of faith... faith in one another, faith in our common heritage and destiny. But what happens when this faith collapses?

And what is the relation of this body of faith to the possibility of developing authentic religious faith? It is terribly ironic that too often religious people assume that religious faith must turn its back on the human city, must ignore the body in order to properly pay attention to spiritual things... and these are people who subscribe to the doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection of the body!

II. Faith's Images of the World: Lynch's second great theme involves how faith imagines the world and the stages of imagining the world that we move through over the course of a lifetime. He sees our Jewish Christian heritage as a prime way of imagining the world and he unfolds four aspects of this. First, faith is a paradigm within which we imagine and experience the world. Second, faith is not a passive but is a creative paradigm; that is, it activates the imagination. Third, faith is a moving paradigm which will not be understood until it has moved through all the stages of one's own life and the life of Christ. Finally, Lynch calls faith "an ironic paradigm." Faith teases us, through irony, to see more than we presently see, to move from one stage until the next, until we can confront the ultimate ironies that characterize the teachings of Jesus - that to lose one's life is to gain life, that the first shall be last and the last first, and so on. We come to this profound understanding of faith through the ministrations of the ironic imagination.

It should be noted that doubt is not the opposite of faith. Doubt, or the presence of questions that trouble faith and push against it, helps to move faith into an ironic confrontation with time, with the world, and ultimately to move forward to the next stage of faith. Too often what we imagine faith to be is the rather rigid faith of a child; it does not have the wisdom, the sense of irony, the patience, or pliability or capacity to take risks of the mature faith that has confronted unexpected things, that has found ways to mediate between the limits of the present moment and the infinite possibilities that suggest themselves to us over the course of a lifetime. Finally, this rigid faith has not yet had to die to itself or to confront the ultimate human irony of death. But mature faith does just that: it enables us to deal with the curse and the tragic and finally with death itself.

III. Building the Human City: In his great book, *Images of Hope*, William Lynch writes: As I see it, we are always faced with programmatic alternatives: We can decide to build a human city, a city of man, in which all men have citizenship, Greek, Jew, and Gentile, the black and the white, the maimed, the halt, and the blind, the mentally well and the mentally ill. This will always require an act of the imagination which will extend the idea of the human... Or we will decide to build various absolute and walled cities, from which various pockets of our humanity will always be excluded. They will pose as ideal cities, and will exclude the

imagination, the Negro, the sick, the different. These totalistic, these nonhuman cities offer an extraordinary fascination for the souls of fearful men and we are fools if we underestimate how strong and seductive they can be. . . . Whatever form these non-human cities take they will always have to be self-enclosed, will always have their own defenses, and their own weapons. The citizens spend their time reassuring each other and hating everyone else. Actually they will never be safe and the final irony will be that they will have to make war on each other. Only the city of the human will be safe. . . .

I want to return to the metaphor of city, above all, the human city as the body of faith, as being of crucial importance to what we hope for and a vital task for faith itself. Human beings are called to build the human city, to build their civilization, to be citizens (note: the words city, citizen and civilization have the same Latin root *civitas*). We are talking here about the secular city in the best, fullest sense of that word, the city with its own proper reality... But it needs to be said that sometimes the human city is a very inhuman place, an inhospitable, even hostile, terrain. But this isn't its primary meaning. William Lynch speaks about the human city as the body of faith. Faith needs a body and its body is the human city.

Within the city we find the university, a place for conversation that seeks the whole of reality, the underlying unity of reality and of all that we know about reality. The word university is closely related to the cognate word universe. There are many ways to talk about the university and its very disciplines, but I want to hold up one image that is underutilized: the university is a community of memory. It is a place where we remember the human journey, how we got to where we are... it is a place where the human story is told and re-told. So along with being a place for the sciences it is a place for the arts and for a conversation between the sciences and the arts... A number of us have mentioned that this is precisely where theology plays a role that is crucial to the university as such...

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. William Lynch re-imagines faith as "the most primary, most elemental force in human nature." What is the significance of this claim and how are many "common" images of faith problematic?
2. What for Lynch is the "body of faith?"
3. What is the significance of this claim?