

On Brother Roger

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It is a very great privilege to be asked to take part in the commemoration of Brother Roger, one of the truly great figures of modern Christianity, and to reflect a little bit on why he still matters as a theologian. He wasn't, of course, in any imaginable sense an academic theologian. He wasn't somebody who was writing his work full of footnotes, somebody who quoted a lot of other people. But he was most emphatically someone whose life and priorities were dictated by a sense of what mattered in Christian theology. And in these short remarks today, I don't want to offer a kind of systematic theology coming out of Br. Roger's work. I don't want to try and trace themes through his copious writings and try and put them in some kind of system. But I would like to pick up one or two themes in his writings, not least in his earlier writings and some of his journals, which I think may have been forgotten or overlooked, as the Church has moved on and as the community has moved on, and see what kinds of prompts they give us, in our thinking now and for the immediate future.

Quite obviously one of the most significant and central themes in the work and the life of Brother Roger might be described as solidarity. He speaks again and again in all his writings of how there is something in the very fact of the church that challenges tribalism, that challenges confessionalism. To be part of the Church, to be committed to the Christian Gospel, is to be committed to solidarity, with one another, with the entire human race. And there are moments where he has some quite sharp things to say about those who, as it were, prize authenticity above solidarity. If you pursue for you as an individual, or you as a community pursue authenticity for its own sake, you may find yourself carving a path which is in opposition to real solidarity. You may be blocking out somebody else's possibilities, and we'll come back to that a bit later. But, at the deepest level, where this solidarity comes from is conviction. To see the other human being is to see God. It's as basic as that. And when we have learned to see God in other human beings, then we have to find a way, as Christians, that embodies that. So that embodies the welcoming, the receptive and generous vision which that implies.

A divided Church, a divided Christian community, can't really embody solidarity at the end of the day. So, if there is a pressure, an imperative, around ecumenism, or a reconciliation between the churches, it isn't, he says very explicitly, it isn't about finding allies to fight alongside against some others, against Marxists, against secularists, or, we might say these days, against Muslims or other non-Christians. It's not about coreligionists. Quite the contrary, Christian ecumenism is discovering a fellowship among ourselves, as believers, which spills over constantly towards feelings of solidarity towards every human being. It's the very opposite of taking up a stance of repudiation or negativity. And that's why, especially in those early works, and his early notes and journals, Brother Roger talks so often

of the Church's vocation to catholicity. Catholicity, in the very broad sense, is about unity with human beings as such, because it is in human beings as such that we encounter the presence of God in Christ.

Now that strong emphasis on solidarity, which challenges some of our theological tribalism, again, it drives us more deeply into theological considerations about what the church really is and what God's act in the Church really is. That emphasis on solidarity continues in our present day to be, I think, a major challenge for us. What is it now? What is it in our present world to have a heart for all? What is it genuinely to put ourselves in positions where we can grow in imagination and empathy in putting ourselves in the shoes of those who threaten us, who make us feel uncomfortable, who often literally threaten our existence? To put it most sharply, what is it for a Christian to live in solidarity in Iraq, let's say, or Syria, with neighbors who seem to want to exterminate the community?

I don't think Brother Roger would have given anything like a glib or easy answer to that, but he would simply have said, the very character of the Church is to be there in solidarity. We have to work out the difficult details of how to live it, how to pray it, and how to resource ourselves among ourselves with the joy and the strength that we need. And certainly, in thinking about this theme, I'm very struck by how many echoes there are between Brother Roger's work and the great encyclical which Pope Francis issued in 2013, *Evangelii Gaudium*, the same emphases on solidarity, universal solidarity, on welcome, on generosity, and on the sense that the Church is not there to win arguments or win battles, but to be itself. And that leads me to my second word or idea from Brother Roger, which dominates so much, especially his writings in the 60s and 70s, and that's a stress on the powerlessness of the Church.

At first sight that might draw a wry smile from some. Many people thought then and they think now that the Church is far too powerful. And Brother Roger would not have denied that, in all sorts of contexts, in Europe and elsewhere, the Church did have a great deal of uncontrolled power in the past, and even in the present. But he believed very strongly that the Church which could speak to a suffering and needy world, especially to the world of the poor, is a Church which had stepped back from certain kinds of power, certain kinds of overt public coercion, which was aware of and positive about its own marginal status in western society. It wasn't embarrassed by that or panicked by that. And I think his emphasis on the necessary lack of power in the Church, is a very good corrective to the anxiety that so often pervades Christianity in the cultural west these days. We're losing ground, we're losing power, we're losing influence, we're losing social solidity. Brother Roger is inclined to say to all that, so? Why is that a problem?

And in 1958, he has a comment in one of his journals, about a pastoral letter that was issued by Cardinal Wyszyński in Poland, about what it was like to be the Church in a communist era

in Poland where the Church lost its social influence, and lost its public power, and yet it discovered new resources in precisely the suffering the marginality, in not being at the center of things. The Church, in other words, is not what it has, it's what it is. It has or hasn't members, influence, power, those are things it has. What it is is different. What it is is a sign of human hope, solidarity. The paradox is that the more the Church recognizes its poverty, its lack of obvious political power, the more anxiety is taken away, the more it is what it's meant to be. The more it's transparent, the more it is basically transparent to the poverty of God, God who doesn't give what he has, but gives what he is. And if God is alive and at work in the church, God is giving what God is, not what God has.

All of that vision is part of understanding why it is crucial in the Christian framework to believe that nothing and no one is dispensable. We believe that the variety of human experiences, the variety of human lives and cultures, can all be touched and transfigured. Not colonized, not taken over and re-shaped by force, but transformed from within, by this sense of a God who wants to give nothing but life, and a church which exists simply to be the gift of that life. Beware then, says Brother Roger, of tactics and strategies in the Church which polarize. Once again which set authenticity ahead of solidarity. He has in his journals some rather wry remarks about how the Reformation was bad news for everybody in one way. The reformers, by insisting on biblical literacy, insisting on biblically-based reform, drove their Catholic opponents. And, says Brother Roger, they denied, in effect, the bible to Catholics, since Catholics were so busy reacting against the biblical theology of the reformers, that they blocked off what had already been turning into a biblical revival among many medieval Catholics. It's a very ironic, and, as I said, a rather wry, observation of the way in which we define ourselves in such a way that the other group or the other person has no alternative but to define themselves as what we are not. The reformers say, "We are all about the Bible." Catholics attempt to say, "Well, we are not at all about the Bible." Likewise Catholics say, "We're all about sacramental life." And the temptation is for Protestants then to say, "Well in that case we're not very interested in sacramental life."

It's a caricature, we all know that. But we all recognize, I think, that the mechanism is quite deeply at work in us. Brother Roger wrote about the reformation, but Protestantism locked Catholicism in, in an attitude of defences, and the Protestant and the Catholic have to give one another the grace and the space to be what they are positively and not just what they are negatively and defensively. All of that reminds us that ecumenism and mission are indispensable. The Catholic vocation, once again, is not just to be a big global church; it's to be constantly moving out to the people of God who are marginal. Catholicity means pushing the boundaries. It means stepping across comfort zones and rediscovering God in the ones you would be more comfortable forgetting. It's never a matter of internal Christian victory or defeat, or anything like that. And that's where it connects with Christian unity. We're not free if we are constantly preoccupied or obsessed with victory and defeat. We have to learn once again to be with God, in God, what we are, free to be what we are, as God is free to be

what God is.

And I think that's why Brother Roger says one point, that it is a great danger of an ecumenism without hope, that is, an ecumenism which simply goes on doggedly discussing, doggedly negotiating but doesn't really have a global vision, certainly not a global vision of something that can be realized. The fact, the reality, of the community of Taizé, was meant to be a kind of protest against an ecumenism without hope. It was a way of saying, "Look, here is what the Church might be. Here is the present sign: people living in solidarity as a community, and expressing that solidarity with young people, marginal people, poor people, right across the world." A present sign. This is the Church, here and now. That, of course, is what is happening at every celebration of the Holy Eucharist, a present sign. A unity, a catholicity that isn't just an idea, a program, a distant horizon, but is happening here and now.

And so, I believe that a great part of the theological legacy of Brother Roger is driving our attention back to those deeply interconnected themes: solidarity, powerlessness and poverty, and the liberty that comes from those things. All of them ways, as again Pope Francis's encyclical very strongly outlines, all of those ways of understanding that the life of the Church is the life of God in the world. That is what it has to be. First, last, and always, a sign of what can be achieved when God's life lives among us. The love and devotion and the universal respect that Brother Roger won through his many years of service and witness, I think, are for all of us part of that sign, part of that gift, and that sense of a life coming alive among us that is more than just the life of a human individual but a life lived in the solidarity of God with his creation which he loves.