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Welcome by Way of a Proem

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WELCOME BY WAY OF A PROEM

Fifty years ago, the Second Vatican Council published *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The assembly of bishops linked “the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties” of all within the modern age with those of the followers of Christ. In doing so, they were careful to give particular attention to “those who are poor or in any way afflicted.”¹ This expression of common struggle and common joy can be acclaimed when attentiveness fully opens upon the stranger who crosses—out of contingency or out of will—one’s path.

In order to ‘*Be attentive*’ – the first step forward according to Bernard Lonergan’s transcendental calculus – one must step into the unfolding encounter from the default of love.² The Council declares in article 28 of the constitution, “Respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters.” The very ability to engage in dialogue is predicated upon “such courtesy and love.” Father Henri Le Saux, writing from the same era, notes that to be *present* “does not simply mean taking an interest in others, or being serviceable to them when the opportunity arises. Rather, it means concerned for them in the compass of the interest that I entertain towards myself.”³ For Le Saux, one enters “an ontological attitude of service” – what authentic evangelization would term – *love*. When this attitude is

disrupted, either by will or by circumstance, “new ways for being present in all in the Spirit” become warranted, ways which Le Saux avers, will awaken anew “all human beings to the saving Presence.”⁴

But to seek these new ways, one must be attentive to the realities which “fail to touch,” and to be aware of this failure, one must, in turn, open one’s ears and one’s heart to the griefs and the anxieties of the sheep calling out beyond the fenced pasture (Jn 10:16).⁵ Pope Francis calls us to break free of the temptation to be “religious narcissists,”⁶ and to go out and “bridge distances,” “to try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved.”⁷ To reach out and to literally touch “the suffering flesh of Christ in others” requires proximity. This requires that one come to the person who crosses one’s way, and to stop, to be present, and not to simply avoid the encounter or its implications (Lk 10: 25-37). This requires one firstly to listen, as all followers of Saint Benedict are instructed in the opening prologue to the Rule. This asks that one listen lovingly and respectfully to all, even to voices “strident and uncivil,” voices that David Tracy claims give voice to “all those considered ‘nonpersons’ by the powerful but declared by the great prophets to be God’s own privileged ones”—“the victims of our discourses and our history.”⁸

Inviting its readers into a space of unfolding attentiveness, *Obsculta* is proud to include an archive piece from the seminal year 1972, as well as contemporary voices, voices that do not stand with certitude and militancy, but voices that ask self-critical questions on behalf of the aforementioned victims of our indiscretion. These students push through the impulse of disputation to focus instead on

the underlying sanctity which St. Bernard of Clairvaux writes, “comprehends if the incomprehensible can, after a certain fashion, be understood at all.”⁹ They approach the difficult theologically, in the language “of the vocative,” in language from the heart.¹⁰ Prayerfully, they approach the suffering flesh. At times critical, at times faltering, their language, though imperfect, points nonetheless to true inquiry. Their concern calls us all back, in the end, toward Christ, and the double command to love: “rend your hearts and not your clothing” (Joel 2:13), and “desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings” (Hos 6:6).

This year, a group of graduate students entered into a long-distance conversation with men on Death Row in Tennessee. This engagement was at the behest of one of the prisoners, a fellow Catholic, who challenged one of the students, over the summer, to find a way to exhort the school of theology to reach out and to help the men walk in the words of Pope Francis’ exhortation. Included in this volume are the words of some of these men – at times shocking, at times full of doxology – words full of candid openness, words that ask to be attended to, in prayer and with love and respect. This call and response, this intertwining between prisoner and student, creates what John McKenna calls a “point of convergence,” not unlike what he claims the Eucharist to be, a site where “Christ’s offer of himself and the assembly’s believing response to this offer find expression.”¹¹ Assembly stretches across state lines and across razor wire.

The site “where two or three are gathered in my name” becomes that new way which Henri le Saux writes of. This same consideration to stretch is found in the foundational pieces concerning Christology, liturgy, and issue of presencing Christ, whether severally or communally, to an ever-unfolding modernity.

Enjoy the explorations that follow.

Much *shalom*.

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Notes:

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Holy See, Vatican Archive, 1965), sec. 1, accessed March 7, 2015, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. Hereafter, the document will be cited parenthetically. i.e. (GS 1).

² David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 19. Tracy quotes directly from Lonergan, citing page 231 in *Method in Theology*: “Be attentive, be intelligent, be responsible, be loving, and, if necessary, change.” Though these words are not evident on page 231 of the 2013 reprint of the book, Lonergan’s grounding of all within love is evidenced in chapter 4 of his opus; cf. Bernard J. F Lonergan, S.J., *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), chap. 4, esp. 104–124.

³ Henri le Saux, O.S.B. (Abhishiktananda), “The Theology of Presence As a Form of Evangelization in the Context of Non-Christian Religions,” in *The Eyes of Light* (Denville, NJ: Dimension Books, 1983), 49.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵ Nb.— All biblical references will be based upon the NRSV, and will appear parenthetically.

⁶ Francis, homily, morning Mass, January 9, 2015; cf. Vatican Radio, “Pope Francis: Only the Holy Spirit Opens Our Hearts to Love God,” accessed March 7, 2015, http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/01/09/pope_francois_only_the_spirit_opens_our_hearts_to_love_god/1117555.

⁷ Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (Holy See, Vatican Archive, November 24, 2013), sec. 24, accessed September 26, 2014, <http://www.vatican.va/evangelii-gaudium/en/>.

⁸ Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 79.

⁹ Bernard of Clairvaux, *De consideratione*, 5.30, quoted by Don E. Saliers, *The Soul in Paraphrase: Prayer and the Religious Affections* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 78.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. 5.

¹¹ John H. McKenna, C.M., “Eucharistic Epiclesis: Myopia or Microcosm,” *Theological Studies* 36, no. 2 (1975): 272.