

On venturing out

Since I was last here, the seminary, in Kuching, has acquired two dogs. I am told that a stray dog gave birth to two puppies in the College grounds and then disappeared. The puppies took refuge in a rainwater drain, but as they became hungry they began to cry for their Mum. The seminarians heard them and came to their rescue, but had great difficulty in persuading them to come out of their cold and damp home. Eventually, they were forced out using sticks, pushed in from the other end of the pipe, and they emerged in fear and terror. The seminarians built a kennel for them, but, a few weeks later, one of them developed a skin infection and so they were quarantined until it was over. Now, they are allowed to roam free, a lot of the time, but if anything frightens them, they run for their kennel and cower inside. They are, I think, like most of us, when we get frightened, we look for a familiar place, where we feel safe – even though it may be rather cold and restrictive – and this is true, not only of places, but also of moral and religious ideas.

Most of us learn our morality, and also about our faith, as children. We are usually taught, rather simplistically, in terms of black and white, terms suited to children, but not suited to adults, for, as we grow, we discover that the problems we face in the world are most often in shades of grey. For example, most of us were taught that it is wrong to tell a lie, but what do you, in a situation, where someone asks you about another person and you know that if you answer truthfully you will cause tremendous damage? We need more than these black and white "rules of thumb", if we are to live wisely in our world, for it is wisdom that brings the world to happiness, not black and white rules. These simplistic ideas need to be removed – especially, if you are involved in the training of priests, as I am at the moment - but that is not so easy. It is often far easier to get two reluctant puppies out of a rain water drain than it is to get simplistic religious and moral ideas out of people.

Some years ago, there was a programme on the BBC about educational process. They went to the Forestry department of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology on graduation day to interview the graduates. They had with them a small branch from a tree and, in the course of a friendly chat with the graduates; they casually asked them where the branch came from. Now, at the heart of Forestry studies is the theory of *photosynthesis* – that is, that the "woodiness" of a tree comes about when a tree breathes in carbon dioxide from the atmosphere, releases the oxygen and uses the carbon it. But, as children, we are nearly all taught by our parents that trees grow out of the ground – and so when these Forestry graduates were asked, "Where does this (branch) come from?" over half of them answered, "Out of the ground"!

The point, the BBC was trying to make, was that the things we learn as a child are rooted deeply within us and merely learning something to the contrary does not necessarily remove them; the new ideas are usually merely laid over the child knowledge and should we be suddenly confronted, with something which startles, we run for cover – back to the cold and restrictive ideas, which we learnt as a child. To live with wisdom, these skewed ideas of our youth need to be confronted head-on, if they are not to give us a lop-sided way of viewing the world.

One of the difficulties, in doing this, are other deeply rooted ideas, not so easy to see, but which set up a resistance to these efforts. The word "education" means "to lead out of". A good education is supposed to lead someone to discover themselves, drawing out their potential. But, because of the way most education is carried out, most of us have the deeply rooted idea that education is for putting things into you, not for helping you understand what is already there. Thus, in the realm of moral and religious teaching, it is thought that faith and

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morals is put into you in teachings, but the process is in exactly the opposite direction. We first discover ourselves to be a religious and/or moral person and then come to understand, what this is, using the teachings given us. This becomes quite obvious when you realise that religion and morality are much more akin to "falling in love" than to learning about quantum physics. When we come to love someone, we do not first weigh up the pros and cons of such an action and then choose to do so; instead, we discover, one day, that we love someone and then use our minds to try to understand what it is that has happened to us. To be religious or moral is fundamentally an attitude of respect/love towards the world; we, then, think about this and so learn how to put it into practice. However, because our education system, both secular and religious/moral, is, so often, the other way round, most of us have come to think that our faith and morals are the things taught us as a child. Thus, when those concepts for understanding our faith, which we learnt as children, are challenged, it can be very frightening. It can seem as though our very faith is being destroyed and the temptation is to run for the kennel, where we feel safe - and refuse to come out.

It takes a lot of friendship and patience to lead people out of the narrow cage, in which so many of the ideas of childhood have kept us, but it is very rewarding. As the cage of black and white ideas is gradually removed, we find that God is so much greater and more wonderful than we ever imagined. We also find that faith is so much more sure than they thought to it, for as Paschal says: *"The heart has reasons that reason does not know"*

Diary

I have been here for two weeks now, but am still finding it a little difficult to get fully into the rhythm of seminary life. It is not the studies or the prayers or the enjoyable community life – it is the sleep – or lack of it! I am used to going to bed and reading till about midnight, but here I have to be up at 5.30am and that means going to bed about 9.30pm and my body is having difficulty getting used to this change in routine. It is Sunday morning, as I write this; I had a Sunset Mass last night, so I did not have to get up early. I had a loving sleep till 9am – I feel wonderful!!

Last night, I went to the annual dinner here of the Family block rosary, invited by the chairman, who is an ex-student of mine. It was very pleasant for I met people I had not seen for many years. However, it was also a little startling, for with three or four of them, whom I knew as young men and women, I discovered they are now grandparents!!!! Wow!

God bless,

Terry

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