

Time to revel in a little mystery

Religion unleashes a boundless curiosity in us that elsewhere is afraid to reveal itself for fear of appearing naive, writes **JOHN WATERS**

SINCE SUNDAY I have been in Rimini on the Adriatic coast of Italy, attending the 31st Meeting for Friendship Among Peoples. You may have read in *The Irish Times* that the meeting is organised by the Catholic movement Communion and Liberation (CL). This is true.

You may have also read that CL is generally perceived as “right-wing” and “conservative”. This is pure comedy.

Anyone who can come to the meeting, walk around the Rimini Fiera for an hour or two and go away thinking they have been subjected to a right-wing and conservative experience is in need of a crash course in the meanings of meaningless and redundant 1960s political terminologies.

The meeting is a byproduct of the inspiration of Fr Luigi Giussani, who, 56 years ago, founded the movement that eventually became CL because he had come to believe that Italian society had lost all sense of the true meaning of Christianity. Giussani perceived that the undoing of Christianity had been its decline into moralism and rules, precisely “the Pharisean tendency” from which Christ had come to save mankind.

Christianity, Giussani insisted, is “a happening, an event, a fact which first of all fills us with wonder”, and this celebration of wonder is the driving force of the meeting.

The other day, for example, I went for a second time to experience an exhibition on the life and work of the Irish-American writer Flannery O’Connor. Now there’s “conservatism” for you: a Catholic novelist whose characters seem to have been conceived at the very precipice of human possibility: strange, dark misfits torn between grace and meaninglessness, awaiting that moment of exceptionality when a choice will throw itself before them. Flannery O’Connor once said that if she had not been a Catholic, she would have had “no reason to write, no reason to see, no reason ever to feel horrified or even to enjoy anything”.

Is it possible for those of us who live in the nominally Catholic land from which her ancestors once hastened to gain any insight into such a judgment?

At the back of this statement is a hint for us: that we are missing almost everything in our fabricated society, with its pointless distractions and empty conversations.

O’Connor’s view of human reality was stark and lucid: at some point in a life the facts must be faced – either the Christian story is true or it is not. If it is, then there is nothing else worth bothering about; if it is not, then nothing is worth bothering about.

It is easy to be deceived by the content of the meeting, which on the whole appears to be a bumper accumulation of the things we deal with in our everyday culture. There are politics and science and art and music and literature and sport.

But the approach is different to conventional cultural approaches in that it opens everything out in the direction of what is unknowable. Everything that is touched upon is immediately seen to lead somewhere else, to become detached from the schemas our culture creates to accommodate knowledge that is reluctantly conceded as contingent or provisional or partial, but nonetheless claimed as a down-payment on omniscience.

What is unleashed within the human heart is the boundless curiosity that elsewhere is afraid to declare itself for fear of revealing what will seem like something shameful or baneful – ignorance or naivety or stupidity – but is really something tremendous, being connected to the values of humility and wonder which define the capacity for true knowledge. When these channels are reopened, the advent of new understandings is always exceptional, always an awakening, always a, yes, event that opens up questions about the meaning of all things.

The theme of this year's meeting, *That Nature Which Pushes Us to Desire Great Things is the Heart*, is in part based on a passage from Albert Camus's *Caligula* and in part from the response of Fr Giussani to a young woman who told him of her fear that the idea of the infinite nature of human desire was an illusion. He replied, in effect, that the true illusion was the pessimism behind her question. If she had the courage to follow Christ, she would soon discover this for herself.

This is a succinct judgment on our own culture of the present time. Our daily collective conversation seeks to insinuate the idea of purpose or destination without specifying what either of these phenomena might amount to. And so we have fallen into pessimism as insulation against the risk of false hopes. Everything is deemed to be "obvious" except the most obvious fact of all: that almost everything about the world is mysterious and awe-inspiring, and that this exceptionality must have a source in something that precedes what we think we know.

It is at this level of awareness that Giussani has pitched his tent and invited the world to come and look at everything again. If this is "right-wing and conservative" then so is the sun rising in the east.

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