

finding naasicaa

letters of hope in an age of anxiety

charles ringma

REGENT COLLEGE PUBLISHING
Vancouver, British Columbia

contents

Preface		1
Letter One	An Opening Word for Naasticaa	3
Letter Two	The World Without and Within	7
Letter Three	Life's Meaning and Uncertainty	19
Letter Four	The Doing of Good and the Persistence of Evil	32
Letter Five	The Story of God and the Human Predicament	45
Letter Six	Faith and Doubt in a Perilous World	60
Letter Seven	The Sign and Contradiction of the Community of Faith	74
Letter Eight	Symbols and Countersigns of Spirituality	91
Letter Nine	Themes of Life and Threads of Decay	111
Letter Ten	Passion, Commitment and Disillusionment	125
Letter Eleven	Gratitude, Wonder, Creativity and the Dulling Power of Conformity	140
Letter Twelve	Mending and Bending	151
Letter Thirteen	Work and Play in a World of Inequality	162
Letter Fourteen	The Reign of God and the Human Enterprise	171
Letter Fifteen	The Galilean Prophet and the Timeless Christ	182
Letter Sixteen	Time, Finitude, Death and the Power of Hope and Transcendence	190
Afterword:	<i>Letter Seventeen</i>	199
Endnotes		203

faith and doubt in a perilous world

letter six

I still remember with great clarity our months on Mt. Tamborine inland from Queensland's Gold Coast. A good friend of ours had made available a pine cottage for a time of recuperation when we returned to Australia from years of service in the Philippines. Cold nights were spent in front of an open fire place. Days were spent wandering in the subtropical rainforests that had survived the push of development. But the idyllic setting was not the state of our hearts. We were in the midst of uncertainty. And once again, we were at a major transition point in our lives.

How different our lives have been to that of my parents after they migrated to Australia. My father lived in the same house, attended the same church and pursued one area of work. He did business with the same bank, petrol station and garage. His has been a life of regularity and continuity.

We had returned from the Philippines without any clarity as to what we would do once we were back in Australia. One chapter of our lives had closed. The other was still to be written. And the page was blank. In these kinds of transition points, faith and doubt co-mingle and run the risk of coagulation. Faith speaks of the hope that something will open up and work out. Doubt speaks the language of uncertainty and fear: there may be no future for us; this may be the end of employment and service. I don't know about you, but I think this movement of faith and doubt is very much a part of the human condition.

life's dialectic

You will have noticed, Naasicaa, that in my letters so far I never mention one theme without also referring to another that seems to be the opposite. So here I speak about faith and doubt. In the previous letter I spoke about the story of God and the human predicament. In a future letter I plan to speak about the sign and contradiction of the community of faith.

The reason I do this is because I believe that we cannot think about life in other terms. We cannot really talk about love without talking about indifference, or equally bad, about the power of hate. And faith cannot be reasonably discussed without probing the realities of doubt. Moreover, the two conditions cannot be wholly separated, for one cannot have faith without having doubted.

What I am talking about here is life's strange dialectic. I am not particularly referring to Hegel's paradigm of thesis, antithesis and synthesis nor agreeing with his notion of the movement of history to Absolute Spirit.¹ I think that is both a too-neat categorization and a too-neat idealization of the complexity of history. I am referring to the paradoxical nature of life and how polarities occur,

leading to new forms of understanding and integration. For example, when a major paradigm shift occurs in science or philosophy it is never wholly new, never an obvious extension of the old, but frequently an incorporation of elements of the old with the new.

At the same time, I am referring to the fact that life cannot be reduced to singularities and neat categorizations. Max Weber has rightly noted how Western thinking always moves to rationalization and systems.² And Kierkegaard has signalled the either/or orientation of our philosophical mindset.³ But we both know that systems have inner systems and create counter-systems and that often the question is not either/or but both/and.

I am also referring to the fact that so much of what we do in society has different and unintended consequences. By engaging in certain strategies we hope to achieve certain outcomes. But things don't always work the way we had hoped. In fact, sometimes we achieve the opposite of what we intended. Jacques Ellul is right in noting that many liberation movements in the modern world have only brought about greater oppression. He is also critical of the way in which we have attempted to manipulate our world while failing to realize that we were at the same time reshaping our own inner consciousness.⁴ I think we see these difficulties at the interpersonal level as well. We seek to be kind, but often end up spoiling the other person. We seek to help certain communities and groups of people and end up making them more dependent rather than empowering them. It seems that our attempts to do good don't always have good outcomes.

In Christian thought we also find a dialectic and the movement of reversal. The prosperity of Israel leads to decay, and the severe mercy displayed to Job leads to deeper faith. The experience of Israel in the desert is the place of purgation. The death of Christ issues in the resurrection.

The social power of the church leads to the loss of dynamic faith and the church in times of persecution spawns martyrs and renews its life and faith. In places of academic sophistication, theology has become sterile while in the slums of the Third World, new liberation theologies are born.⁵ I remember in the 1960s, while the theologians were pronouncing the God-is-dead theology, thousands of young people were caught up in the Jesus Movement and came to a living faith.⁶

In the experience of spirituality we find a similar set of paradoxes. In our certainties we can become rigid; in our doubts we can find renewed hope; and in our emptiness we may discover the very blessings of God. In the practice of asceticism, while living with less, we somehow gain more.⁷ And in grief and suffering we find not only comfort, but sometimes a whole new vision for the future.

All of this sounds somewhat strange. It is as if we cannot draw a straight line from point A to point B. Our culture, however, tells us something quite different. It constantly reminds us that we can get what we want. If we do this type of university course we will get a good job. If we use these kinds of products we will be well and happy. If we achieve these outcomes we will be successful. Our society tells us that we can be in control and that we can draw straight lines.

But I think that life is much more happenstance. I am not suggesting that we live passively awaiting our fate. It is important to plan. It is also important to pray. But there is a mysterious quality to life and we need to be open to the God of surprises.

general faith and doubt

Faith means to have trust and confidence in someone or something. I trust that the university lecturer will mark

my paper fairly. And I have confidence that the train, as indicated in the timetable, will stop at all stations.

Faith is not a strange dimension in our lives. It is the bread and butter, or in the language of other cultures, the rice and fish, of life. I, therefore, always find it very strange that people want to scoff at the idea of faith. They give the impression that faith somehow means that one has lost the ability to think clearly or one is some religious fanatic. But life is not sustainable if faith and trust are absent.

As you well know, Naasicaa, we all begin the journey of life trusting others, particularly the significant others in our lives—parents, siblings, extended family members and friends. We also trust the institutions and services in the wider community. And if we have doubts in our earlier years it usually has to do with self-doubt. We wonder whether we are good enough, smart enough and beautiful or handsome enough. And the answer that we usually give ourselves is ‘no’, we are not. This is a problem that we will need to discuss at another time.

As we grow into our teenage years we begin to question things. Our naive trust will have been wounded. And hopefully we will begin to grow towards a more mature trust. We no longer so readily take things at face value. We are more careful and more critical. So there is not only faith but also doubt. Mature trust is one that has stopped to listen carefully to doubt’s call, has processed that call and has moved forward. Faith and doubt are both necessary. The idea that faith is good and doubt is bad is clearly nonsense. One might as well say that daylight is good and darkness is bad. The only thing that is bad, as far as I can see, is that we have a naïve faith and spawn a cynical doubt. The one makes us blind to real evil. The other makes us deaf to genuine good.

So what I am pointing out is that faith and doubt are part of the normal rhythm of life. Faith makes us open

to others and to opportunities. Doubt makes us halt long enough to question and possibly reconsider. Faith helps us to participate and join. Doubt helps us to disconnect. Both movements are important. And surprisingly, doubt actually serves faith. If I want to move ahead but I have stopped long enough to question and explore my doubts and concerns and I decide to proceed, faith will be stronger for having doubted.

I think we do need to talk about the sources of faith and doubt. Here we enter the whole complex discussion of how we know something. Do I trust someone or something because I have facts or experience or intuition? Or is it a combination of all three? This is difficult to answer. The 'facts' of the case may have put a person on death row but each year some cases are overturned and people are found to be innocent. I may have seriously doubted whether a particular person was right for the job. But it turns out that he or she is an excellent employee. Or conversely, I may have had a hunch that something would work out, but in fact it didn't. I was mistaken.

All of this invites us into the complexity and mystery of life. Things are often less than sure. And things are not always as they seem. We know less than what we think. And we can make mistakes as much as we may get things right.

Naasicaa, if there is anything that I wish to say directly to you at this point, it is simply that you take time with the issues and decisions of your life. Don't jump into major decisions through external constraints or inner compulsions. Take time to wait, time to weigh things up. In other words, become a contemplative.⁸ What I mean by that is not that you become a monk, but that you take time to be still, to pray and hear what you should do. I am not talking about receiving handwriting on the wall, but

hearing the handwriting on the fragile texture of your soul and carefully evaluating the circumstances of your life.

religious faith and doubt

There are people who believe that these two words—faith and doubt—do not belong together in religious language. Only faith does. They regard doubt as something negative, maybe even evil. I don't agree with this viewpoint, and hopefully it will become clear when I attempt to explain why I think this way.

In the language of Christianity, when we speak about faith we usually mean two things. We speak of *the* faith, and by this we mean the *content* of faith, and we speak of *having* faith or trust. The Christian faith is not simply about feeling—though feelings are important—but is also concerned with beliefs and doctrines. So let me speak first about the content of faith.

Some of the key beliefs we have already touched on in the previous letter: God is the creator of all things and made all things good. We are made in God's image and are called to live life in fellowship with God. We resisted that call and sin, disobedience, alienation and fragmentation became part of our lives and our world. God, the redeemer, in 'his' love reaches out to us in forgiveness, healing and transformation. God did this particularly through the life-giving of Jesus, the Son of God. As those impacted by God's renewing work we are called into communities of faith for worship, teaching, sacraments, fellowship and service. We are called to participate in all of life, living to God's glory and the well-being of our neighbour. In faith we live to see God's renewing work in our world and await the final consummation of all things—new heavens and a new earth.

The *content* of faith is really a summary of the major themes in scripture. This content has been expressed in the creeds, such as the Apostles Creed, and in various confessions and catechisms. I was brought up as a young boy on the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Westminster Confession of Faith was familiar territory for me given my Reformed heritage.

The content of faith is also the province of theologians who have developed various key doctrines. They talk about Christology, the person and work of Christ; Pneumatology, the work of the Holy Spirit; Ecclesiology, the doctrine of the church; Soteriology, the doctrine of redemption; and Eschatology, the doctrine of the Last Things. And these key doctrines are by no means exhaustive.⁹ You will remember that in a previous letter I spoke about the importance of belief in the Trinity.

Across the various church denominations these key beliefs and doctrines and the various Creeds are held in common. But there are also important distinctions between Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism and then within Protestantism between Reformed, Lutheran, Evangelical and Pentecostalism. For many people this is all very bewildering. They ask, 'How can the one Bible spawn such diversity?' The answer lies not so much in the Bible itself but in the fact that theological traditions have developed at particular periods of history largely as a corrective to what the church had begun to neglect, and these traditions have taken on particular historical and cultural dimensions. Thus diversity lies more with us than with the Bible itself. But more will need to be said about this at a later time. What does need to be said now is that while diversity in unity is healthy, diversity leading to division and competition is a handicap and the curse of denominationalism. Little wonder that people are longing for post-denominational expressions of

Christianity. But more about that when I speak about the church.

So we speak about the *content* of faith. We also speak about *having* faith. Here we are talking about a person's existential experience of trust in God and scripture. So a person may say 'I trust God's promises' or 'I trust the words of the Bible' or 'I trust that God is there and that "he" loves me and all of "his" creation'.

The Reformer Martin Luther made much of the doctrine of justification by faith. This does not mean that *our* faith gives us right relationship with God, but rather that in Christ, God has made possible that we can experience God's friendship, renewal and healing. To know this, to embrace this and to believe this is to have faith and this faith is a gracious gift to us from God 'himself'. This gift is extended to all. God has no favourites. But gifts need to be received and we need to place ourselves open to God's generosity.

Now I believe that content and existential experience must go together. If we only have content then we may know much *about* God, but not know God personally. If, on the other hand, we only have the experience of faith, but no content, then faith may quickly evaporate into feelings.

So what about the matter of doubt, you may ask? Is doubt not the thing that wrecks religious faith? I believe not. It's indifference that wrecks faith. What destroys faith is not the questions we may hurl at God because we feel that 'he' has left us in the lurch. It's not our 'raving and ranting' that does the damage. God can cope with the disappointments that we throw 'his' way. But it is the turning away in cold detachment that begins icing the veins of our soul and narrowing the arteries of our spirituality.

The Psalms express not only the language of faith and trust, but also that of doubt. Psalm 73 struggles with the question of how the wicked can seemingly do so well while

the person of faith has nothing but troubles. The writer of this psalm admits that doubt has digressed into creating a bitter spirit. But in working through this doubt, the writer speaks of a renewed faith: 'Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever' (Ps 73:25-26).

Doubt is writ large on the pages of the Bible. The Hebrew slaves doubted God's ability to deliver them. Abraham doubts God's protective care. Job struggles when life has become so difficult and God is so seemingly far removed. Thomas, the disciple of Jesus, doubts the resurrection. Doubt is part of the journey of faith. Sometimes we doubt God's direction for our lives. At other times we doubt the goodness and care of God. And of course, we may have serious doubts about aspects of the church's teaching or direction.

So how can doubt serve faith? To answer this question I need to back up a little bit and speak about the way in which we may live the Christian life in our kind of world. Now while some Christians may say we can live assuredly and even triumphantly, I would disagree. We can only live the Christian life with difficulty, struggle and vulnerability.

This may surprise you, Naasicaa. You may have expected me to say that we can live the Christian life with great confidence. But I don't see that confidence in the major figures of the Bible, not even in the apostle Paul, who was so sure of his mission to speak about the Christ who had turned his earlier life direction upside down. Paul acknowledges that God's power is made perfect in human weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

I think that there are some important reasons why we can only live the Christian life in that kind of vulnerable way. The first is that we live the Christian life in faith,

hope and love. These are the fragile commodities of our existence. These qualities are there by the grace of God and are sustained and renewed by the Spirit. Thus so much has to be given and received again and again. Secondly, we do not have God as a predictable entity in our 'back pocket', so to speak. God is faithful in 'his' love for us and the world, but God is wholly mysterious. And God's way with us and the way God reveals 'his' purposes to us cannot be packaged or routinized.

But there is much more. First of all, the church in the West, but thankfully less so in the Third World, has become rationalized. We are not living in a church environment that nourishes the deep sources of faith. Instead, 'churchianity' is very much committed to a whole range of pragmatics. The life of prayer, solitude and meditation that nourishes faith is largely lacking from our religious diet. This has deeply impoverished us. Secondly, we live in a world where God's absence seems to be as evident as 'his' goodness. Our world is marked by difficulty and inequality. And there are no utopias, including religious ones. And finally, we have to acknowledge that in spite of God's goodness and grace in our lives we continue to see the realities of faith dimly and continue to fail in so many ways, particularly in the call to love others in the way we care for ourselves.

So I can't see how we can live the Christian life in any other way than in faith and fragility. So where then does doubt come in? Doubt is part of the human condition. It is a signal of our humanity. We are unsure. We falter. We question and doubt ourselves, others and God. Doubt makes us hesitate. It may make us stop. But our uncertainties can open for us an intermediate space where we have to process things anew. While this intermediate space may lead to the slippery slope of skepticism, it may also lead to renewal and recovery. So I come back to where I was earlier: a faith that has experienced doubt is a faith on the road to maturity.

a personal reflection

I was brought up in a Christian family and regularly attended church. I came to faith outside of these two institutions. That strange beginning tells me something about the way of God, namely, that we cannot put God in a box. The church is not the magic dispenser of God. The church at best can only be a servant of God when God chooses to work in and through it. Moreover, the action of God is not limited to the church. God works through and apart from the church. God will always be far greater than the religious institutions that we create.

In the beginning of the journey of faith I was enamoured with Jesus. I avidly read the gospels. I prayed and I experienced the presence of God in my daily life. I was on some sort of a 'high', almost like being romantically in love for the first time.

But the 'bubble' burst. And in looking back I later realized that it needed to burst. The life of faith is not simply one of feeling nice and safe with Jesus. The life of faith also has to do with risk, courage and service. Being enamoured with Jesus can never be simply for ourselves. Moreover, it's so easy to fall into the trap of thinking that the Christian life is all about good feelings.

It is easy to see this now. But at the time I felt quite abandoned. In fact, I felt God had forsaken me. And doubt set in. All my subsequent attempts to recover this early sense of the closeness of God failed miserably. And so a very different journey began—a journey not unlike an eaglet pushed out of the nest. Or was I merely a sparrow that had fallen out of God's hand, but remained in 'his' heart?

The ensuing journey of faith had everything to do with learning to appreciate and be safe in both the active presence of God and the passive absence of God. Putting it

this way probably sounds a bit odd. What I am trying to say is that I had to learn that God is present in 'his' absence.¹⁰ This is just like a person who can know the love and presence of her boyfriend who is presently in the United Kingdom exploring his family roots.

I always have to smile, Naasicaa, when you frown and your eyes flash. I can see a question coming my way. I appreciate the way you puzzle over things and don't settle for trite explanations. So you are right, I do need to explain what I mean by the presence of God, since I have used this phrase a number of times. And yes, it does sound a bit vague, even a bit weird.

Karl Rahner once said that Christians will have to become mystics in our modern world or they will probably cease to be anything.¹¹ I think he is right. Church dogma or liturgy or church structures in themselves will never be enough to sustain our faith's journey in a deeply secularized society. We have to have some sense that God is present to us. By God's presence I do not necessarily mean experiencing supernatural phenomena like a miracle and only then saying that God is present. Nor do I mean that God's presence can only be experienced in the sanctuary or in specifically religious activities. What I mean instead is an inner awareness that God is with us in the journey of life. This awareness is the fruit of the Spirit who indwells us and accompanies us.

I have experienced God's presence as much in 'secular' employment as I have in Christian 'ministry'. I express the previous sentence this way, but don't believe in the distinction. All of life is to be lived to God's glory and in service to God and others. In fact, sometimes God seemed nearer in the rough and tumble of the workplace than in the quietness of religious sanctuary.

So my faith's journey has already spanned more than forty years. I have no sense that I have arrived anywhere.

The struggle and the joy of faith simply continue. I want to be attentive to God, so I read scripture, pray and meditate. As I have gotten older I meditate more and talk less. I desire to see more of God's presence and rule in our world and so I serve broken people in a needy neighbourhood. And I love to encourage others so I am involved in theological education.

When I was younger and involved in urban mission I believed that we could change the world. Now I believe the most that we can do is small acts of faithfulness. Mother Teresa understood this well.¹² Her order cannot solve the problem of poverty in our world. But she and her sisters can live in a community of love and worship and extend that love to the poorest of the poor.

I began this part of my letter by saying that I came to faith outside of the church. But for faith to grow one can't be a solitary as Dietrich Bonhoeffer has so clearly pointed out.¹³ So the whole of my Christian journey has involved being part of the church, intentional Christian communities and para-church organizations. One does need companions on the journey, and faith can only grow in community, worship and service. But more about that later.

the sign and contradiction of the community of faith

letter seven

I have to be honest with you, Naasicaa—this is probably the most emotionally difficult topic for me to talk about. This is not because, like so many others, I have been hurt by the church. The reasons are quite different. I have had such positive experiences of intentional Christian community that church has sometimes paled into insignificance. The related matter is that I believe that the church should be more of a community and less of an institution. And in working for that kind of transformation, I have often been disappointed and discouraged.

In some ways, I would like to pass over the topic of church because it has become problematic for so many in our contemporary society.¹ But we can't ignore this topic. While it is true that Jesus did not speak much about the church, but mainly proclaimed the Kingdom of God, he nevertheless founded a community of disciples of both men

and women. The opening verses of Luke 8 give us a bit of a picture of this community. And out of the mission of Jesus and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, the early church came into being. It has persisted ever since, in both good times and times of persecution and difficulty. So talk about the church we must. It is part of the Christian story.

the problem of the contemporary church

The church in the Western world is in deep trouble. Over the last couple of centuries, and particularly more recently, it has slipped from being a respected institution to being regarded as a largely irrelevant relic. It is seen by many as a narrow 'club' that has little to say to the pluralistic, cultural and technological world in which we live. And as the Western world increasingly has become more secularized, the church has become more and more marginalized.²

But this is not the only difficulty. Not only do those outside of the church generally disregard it, but those within the church are also struggling. In fact, the church has become a revolving door: many more leave by the back door than enter the front door.³ In many European countries, church buildings have become art galleries and restaurants—there was no longer a community of believers to sustain its spiritual life and structures.

There are many factors that contribute to people within the church experiencing difficulty. One is that members do not feel that the church empowers them for life in the real world. The scriptures are often not made relevant for the house spouse, carpenter, medico, business person, unemployed or politician. Secondly, a dynamic spirituality is often lacking. Church services are often liturgical and mundane affairs, with little sense of God's renewing and healing presence. Thirdly, the church—and by this I do not

mean the building, but the people of God—often lacks a sense of connectedness and community. The hour or so of worship once a week can hardly draw people into a sense of solidarity or sharing of a common journey. The other factor, of course, has to do with the busy lives we now lead. Those in employment are spending more time at work than before. Some are at work sixty hours per week. Add to this the pressure to upgrade one's professional life and the fact that both spouses are usually working, and there is little time for much else besides family, housekeeping and some recreation.

However, I think that the problems of the church in the West go much deeper. In response to the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on rationality and its critique of revelation and supernaturalism, the church sought to resist by moving onto the same page. And constant attempts were made to explain and defend Christianity in relation to the scientific mindset of the West. The Christian faith thus became more and more rationalistic. Furthermore, in the hundreds of years of colonialization, the church worked too closely with the colonial masters and was less than sensitive to indigenous cultures. This seriously damaged respect for the church for many people. And finally, the church has been largely unable to accept its post-Christendom condition. What I mean by this is that in earlier centuries, church and society more or less reinforced each other and the church was a powerful force in society. Now the church no longer has this sort of respect and influence, but the church is still trying to function as if the old realities are in place.

Karl Rahner has stressed that the church needs to embrace humbly its marginalized status and once again become the church of the 'little flock'.⁴ What he means by this is not that the church should become an inward-looking sect afraid of the 'big bad world', but rather that the church should reinvent itself from the grassroots up in order to

become communities of faith and integrity, resisting the powers of this age and living prophetic, counter-cultural lifestyles. But more of that later.

a prophetic beginning

The church is not a building—it is the people of God, those whose friendship with God has been restored and who come together for worship, teaching, formation, fellowship and service. In one sense the church has been there for a long, long time. Since time immemorial there have been people who were friends of God. Throughout the pages of the Old Testament we hear of God's desire that 'his' people should live to glorify God and be a light to the nations. And through Israel, God's welcome was extended to the stranger and sojourner and to the surrounding nations. The Old Testament people of God are the forerunners of the church.

Jesus sought to bring about renewal within the tired Judaism of his day. That the church came into being instead is the sad result of radical attempts at renewal, which have failed to bring about the desired transformation. So often the dysfunctional old persists and fails to embrace the new which seeks to make the old more whole. We also see this same story-line throughout the church's two thousand year history. When the church became tired, lukewarm and dysfunctional, renewal movements were resisted. As a result, we have the long history of sectarian movements—the Montanists, Albigenses and Waldensians. And later the Reformation burst on the scene.

Emil Brunner has pointed out that the vision of the early communities of Christianity was radically anti-institutional.⁵ The friends and followers of Jesus inspired by the Spirit formed households of faith. They opened their homes and their lives to one another. They shared a

common Eucharist, their goods and resources and shared the charism of the Spirit in building up their life together. The early church father Tertullian stated it well: 'Christians have all things in common, except their wives'.

The modality of these early households of faith had little to do with institutional realities, offices, clergy and structures. They operated much more as extended households. In fact, scholars of Early Christianity, including Edwin Judge, have pointed out that this was the basic structure of the households of faith of the Pauline mission.⁶ These households included family, extended family, friends, workers in the household industry and others. What is particularly striking about these communities of faith is their egalitarianism. In a patriarchal culture and in a society with strong divisions, the early churches broke social and cultural boundaries. Women prophesied and played a leadership role in some of the communities. Rich and poor shared a common Eucharist. And most amazing of all, Jews and Gentiles found a common friendship in Christ.

Within three centuries this had all changed. The church as 'little flock' became the church of the Roman Empire. The church as people of God became the church of priest and laity. The church as community became the church as institution. People sharing their charisms were replaced by church offices. Storytelling was replaced by creeds. The common meal of the friends of Jesus became the more formal eucharist. And sadly, at the end of first century, Jews and Gentiles parted ways.

My rereading of church history, Naasicaa, is that these developments are not terribly bad, but sociologically *inevitable*. These more 'solid' structures and realities have helped to preserve the church. Max Weber has a point that charismatic beginnings, while creative, are also most fragile and may disappear over time. The move to routinization

is both a form of preservation and stabilization, but also a process of rationalization.⁷

But the very strength of the routinization process is also its obvious weakness. Traditional forms and structures become the dominant realities, and the personalism that lies at the heart of the Christian story disappears, or is severely weakened.

The long story of the church is the persistence of its tradition and its perpetual disturbance by renewal movements. These movements stretch from the Montanists of Early Christianity through to the contemporary recovery of house churches in the First World and the base ecclesial communities in the Third World.⁸

why church?

If being a Christian has to do with being a friend of God, why do we need to think about church? Can't we all just be friends of God and live that friendship out in our families, places of schooling, work and in our neighbourhoods? This is a most attractive idea, particularly in our contemporary Western culture which celebrates individualism. Moreover, many in the West have become deeply sceptical of major institutions, whether that be banks, the International Monetary Fund, governments or church denominations.

It is interesting that Ernst Troeltsch, many decades ago, predicted the growing interest in this way of conceiving church. He saw that people would lose interest in the historic churches, as well as in 'sectarian' Christian groups and end up embracing an individualistic Christo-mysticism.⁹ Some of my friends have moved in that direction. Theirs has become a coffee-club Christianity of occasional informal times together with no teaching, formation, accountability or pastoral care.

These are attractive ideas. And as people disappear out of the backdoor of the churches this may well be a growing reality. But I disagree with this direction for two main reasons. The first is that it dynamites one of the most fundamental realities of the Christian faith: 'I believe in the communion of saints'. And secondly, it is, in the final analysis, an accommodation to dominant Western cultural values and fails to resist the powers of this age. Let me explain.

I will start with the last point first. An individualistic Christianity simply reflects and reinforces Western individualism. Now a focus on the individual is good and Christianity has contributed to a recognition of the significance of the individual through its teaching that we are all made in God's image and are people of dignity and worth. The philosophy of Kierkegaard is a philosophy of the individual, but always the individual before God.¹⁰ This is a healthy individualism because it sees the person in relationship.

What is unhealthy is the way in which this emphasis has degenerated into individualism, where the emphasis is on independence instead of interdependence, and self-reliance rather than on community and the inter-connectedness of life. The philosophy of Ayn Rand in her book *Atlas Shrugged* reflects this unhealthy emphasis. A Christianity that buys into these kinds of ideas, or at least into this kind of praxis, offers nothing by way of a countervoice to the trends in our contemporary culture, which have rent the very fabric of social cohesion. In other words, I believe the church should be a counter-community.¹¹

But the more basic concern is that this individualism violates the nature of God's redemptive activity in the world. This brings me back to my first point. God builds a people; God does not simply save individuals. Throughout the long biblical story we see that God forms community.

And there are very good reasons for this. Christian community not only exists for the building up, nurturing, care and empowering of God's people. It is also there for the corporate witness it can bring to the world. One individual can reflect only a little of God's manifold wisdom, love and care. A community can do this much more effectively. And such a community that is reflecting reconciliation, the sharing of resources, the welcome of the stranger and service to the world can be a challenge to the dominant values of our culture.

So why church? Dietrich Bonhoeffer reminds us that the Christian cannot be a solitary, even when one may be torn away from the community, as he was during his time in Tegel Prison.¹² The Christian is called into relationship with God and brothers and sisters in Christ, and also to extend this embrace to others.

The church is God's idea. It exists for God's glory. It exists to sustain, nurture and empower God's people. It exists to be a witness and servant to the world. Karl Barth emphasises that the church is to be the continuing prophecy of Jesus Christ.¹³

So let's look at these three elements in turn. First, the invisible and eternal God is committed to visibility. God reveals 'himself' in creation, in 'his' laws, in the prophets, in Jesus Christ, in the work of the Spirit and in the church. The church's task is not so much to defend God or to explain God, but to *reveal* God. Secondly, Christianity is not simply about the religious consciousness of an individual believer. It is much more about God's big story of creating and sustaining a people who will honour 'him' and who will demonstrate their love for God in the practice of love for one another, a love that does not simply impact the religious dimensions of life, but all of life. What I mean here is that to be the people of God means to be called to solidarity, mutuality, caring, service and sharing.

And finally, the church does not exist in and of itself and for itself. The church is sustained by the love of God and the love we have for each other. And part of its existence is to be there for the sake of the world. Let me say a bit more about this.

Some Christians erroneously believe that the church should stay away from the world. They emphasize a holiness that means separation. We can think here of the Exclusive Brethren and the Amish. When you think about this, you soon realize how impossible this is. We still participate in the world even when we try to do so from a distance. And of course, the other problem is that when you chose not to participate, you are in fact committed to supporting the *status quo*. So to put this quite bluntly, this also means condoning the evil and injustice in our world. Not to resist the fallen powers of our world and not to work for social transformation is to support what is. This will not do if indeed we are committed to the values of the Reign of God.

Some evangelicals believe that we should only engage the world for the purposes of witness and evangelism. The task is to save souls from eternal damnation. While I do believe that our task is to share the good news of what God has done in Christ with others, I do not believe that that is our only task. I think that Nicholas Wolterstorff is closer to the mark when he speaks of Christianity being a world-formative religion.¹⁴ He is primarily reflecting the Reformed tradition. The purpose of the people of God is to live for God's glory and kingdom in every sphere of human activity: personal, family, social, national and international. And the community of faith is called to impact every sphere of life with the power of God's redemptive and reconciling love: the arts, economics, education, medical care, politics—the list is endless. In other words, God's good news is for our praying as much as our playing, our sexuality as much as

our work for justice, our personal lives as much as for the whole society.

But I think there is much more to the story than this holistic vision of the task and mission of the church. The church has a role in the work of societal transformation. In this, it follows the prophetic work of Christ. But the church also has a healing role. In this, it exercises its priestly ministry. I believe that the church needs to exist on behalf of the world and to make its pain and hopes its own. Jacques Ellul talks about the church standing in an intermediate position, where the movement of the Kingdom of God clashes with the worldliness of the world in its unbelief, independence and pride.¹⁵ But the church's position is much more precarious than that. It lives wholly in both the Kingdom of God and the worldliness of the world. And it is to be there as sorrow bearer, intercessor and witness. Being located in both, the church is both a sign and a countersign. It constantly runs the risk of being so heavenly minded that it is no earthly good, or being so identified with the world that it has become secularized and has become an ineffective witness to God's new creation.

renewal

I have worked for a number of years as a social researcher, looking particularly at how change can be implemented in social welfare organizations. One of the things that one soon discovers is that some organizations are socially healthy while others are quite 'sick'. The other discovery is that organizations are often resistant to significant change. There is no problem with tinkering at the edges, but more profound and necessary change is often resisted because it is too painful.

The church forms no exception to this general observation. It, too, is a very human organization and

institution. The church also goes through phases of health and ill health. In saying this, I am not suggesting that the church is exactly the same as a secular or community-based welfare organization. It isn't. The church consciously lives out of the belief that God's Spirit is present in sustaining the community of faith. But at the same time, the church is also a human social construction. We create the church's programmes and structures. So a church can also be spiritually and organizationally healthy or unwell.

When we look at the long history of the Christian church, we see again and again the appearance of movements of renewal which have sought to bring new life to the church. Sometimes the church itself was reinvigorated. At other times, this led to the formation of new churches. Here the Reformation is an example. And at other times, new forms of social organization emerged, such as Monasticism from the fourth century on, and now there are the parachurch organizations of the modern era. This persistence of the old and the radical call of the new has been the dialectic of church history. It is also the general movement of history.

There are a myriad of reasons how and why renewal occurs in the life of the church. The most fundamental is that God preserves the church by 'his' grace and Spirit. The other is that the church finds itself in times of social crisis and difficulty and seeks to respond and reinvent itself. Faith is often revitalized in those circumstances. The other factor, not unrelated to the above, is the persistent beckoning call of the gospels which ever call us to the way of faith that turns our values upside down.¹⁶

The personal and social vision of the Sermon on the Mount, the example of Jesus in forming a community practising common purse, the radical vision of the Jerusalem church in its practice of mutual care and sharing, and the egalitarianism of the Pauline house churches have beckoned Christians throughout the centuries to live a

more radical vision of what it means to be the people of God in the world. From the Desert Fathers and Mothers, the Monastic communities, the Anabaptists, the Moravians and up to the present house churches, intentional Christian communities and the base ecclesial communities of the Third World, Christians have sought to live out the *imitatio Christi* through communities that shared a common life of faith, fellowship and care and which sought to serve and transform the world through ministries of proclamation, prophetic witness, social concern and healing.

I think you know, Naasicaa, that we have attempted to be a small part of this impetus towards church renewal. This came about rather unexpectedly. I was not a minister in a church seeking to bring about changes—it was all very different. I was working as a detached urban youth worker on the streets of South Brisbane, which was then full of pubs, the poor, alcoholics and young people doing illegal drugs.

To get to the point of what could be a very long story, I discovered community not in the church nor in the seminary that I had previously attended, but on the streets amongst homeless young people and alcoholics. There is a powerful lesson in all of this and one that I have been trying to make throughout these letters, namely, that the goodness of God is not restricted to the community of faith. It is also in our streets and amongst people who are disadvantaged.

Now, I do need to qualify the above a little bit. I am not suggesting that the church has no sense of community. It has. But it often lacks depth, because amongst the middle class churches that predominate in the West, we worship as capable and self-sufficient people. We tend to keep our needs and issues pretty much to ourselves. The churches of the poor in the Third World are so very different. There people really need each other. And this is also true of the

blighted social reality of our inner city streets. Moreover, I am also not suggesting that I experienced no sense of community at seminary. I did, though not so much in our more formal classes. We often met with other students in our home for discussion and prayer, and there a sense of community had fertile soil in which to grow.

But what I experienced on the streets of South Brisbane amongst the poor so challenged me that I began to re-read the Bible and discovered there the emphasis on personalism, inter-relatedness, mutual care and sharing that lies at the heart of community formation. At that time, we lived with a group of other young people in an old Convent in this run-down part of inner city Brisbane, which more recently has become the prestigious place for the Cultural Centre, Museum, Art Gallery, State Public Library and the famous South Bank. From this Convent we contacted people on the streets, operated a drop-in centre, welcomed street people and drug addicts to our meal table and lived as an intentional Christian community, while hardly being aware that that was what we were. Simply put, we were seeking to practice the hospitality of God with the marginalized in the inner city. And Naasicaa, that is where your mother lived as a young girl.

Our experience of Christian community, later more fully informed by reading about the Anabaptists and the Moravians, became formative for our subsequent experience of what it meant to be church. And so various experimental projects came into being, which took the form of therapeutic Christian communities where we took in young people, particularly those with drug-related problems. Our own home was also set up as an extended household where young people off the streets could live in their journey towards wholeness.¹⁷ As well, an inner city, interdenominational church was formed along community lines. We were a part of that for some fifteen years.

You will remember that in an earlier letter I told you about our living in the East Vancouver neighbourhood. The church of which we are a part also has a commitment to community building. This occurs not only in the life of the church as a whole and through the small groups of which people are a part, but also in the formation of intentional Christian communities providing care for people needing help in working through problems and for political refugees seeking to make a new home in Canada.

You do know something about living in community, Naasicaa. Your experience of living with wider family and friends in North Sydney is a little bit like what I am talking about here. There are of course some important differences, particularly the religious dimension which lies at the heart of Christian community.

a fragile future

Church is the friends of Jesus. Church is the community of faith living in relationship with the Triune God and with each other for the sake of the world. Its fundamental nature is not institutional, but communal and relational. But this is no perfect society. Thomas Merton is right that Christian community is most basically a community of reconciliation and forgiveness.¹⁸ This community is called to be a sign to the world and should not be a contradiction or an offence.

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer has pointed out in his *Life Together*, the experience of community is always a gift of God's goodness. It is never the fruit of our clever organizational building and our psychological group dynamic strategies. And as Jean Vanier has so aptly reminded us in *Community and Growth*, community is the place where we are safe with our woundedness, vulnerabilities and disabilities.¹⁹

In the light of the above, what of the church in the third millennium? One does not need to be prophetic to see some of the broad brush strokes. The one is that the church in the West is a culturally captive church very much influenced by contemporary management models and with a strong entertainment and psychological flavour.²⁰ This church is hardly a counter-cultural force, notwithstanding the tremendous amount of good the church is doing in the general social welfare area. This church needs to be converted and needs to reinvent itself. The other is that the church in the Third World is more authentic, virile and sacrificial.²¹ I suspect that when the church in the West learns the lesson of humility it may well receive help and encouragement from the church in those parts of the globe.

Furthermore, it is clear that while we can continue to speak of a local church and of national churches, we will increasingly have to become aware of the global church. The church is a global movement. Gone are the days when the movement of the church was from the West to the rest of the globe. And gone are the days when a Euro-centric theology was somehow thought to be sufficient for the rest of the world. It is therefore imperative that the church moves beyond ethnocentrism.²²

The other major point is that while Christianity may be weak in the West, it is still a major force in the world. More than thirty per cent of the world's population regard themselves as Christians.

But what of the finer points beyond these broad-brush strokes? Well, there are several. The first is that the church will need to discard the ballast it is carrying as a hangover from the Christendom model, where the church as a significant institution took on many of the trappings of power. The church of the future will have to become more anorexic. It will have to recover the essentials of the

biblical story and form communities that reflect the heart of Christianity.²³ Secondly, the church as a whole will have to become more biblically and theologically literate. One can't sustain a significant response to our modern world based on a Sunday School faith. We need a theologically astute people of God and this means both clergy and laity. Thirdly, the church will have to play a more formative role in shaping people's faith and spirituality. The disciplines of the spiritual journey, the matters of faith and healing, the journey in prayer and contemplation won't be caught by mere church attendance.²⁴ And finally, the church is fundamentally missional in nature.²⁵ It is not a pious club. The church will therefore need to recover its vision to be a signpost of the Kingdom, a sacrament to the world, the place of hospitality for the wounded and broken in our society, and it will need to challenge the idols of our time.

One thing is clear: no one who hasn't experienced the love of Jesus and the presence of the Triune God will want to join the church. While it should be a privilege to be part of the church, it is most frequently a cross we have to bear.

I can remember how in 1973 at the Aquarius Festival at Nimbin in New South Wales, Australia, we set up an intentional Christian community to be of assistance to young people with drug-related problems. Some of our contacts came to faith in Jesus, including Roger and Daphne, two wonderful hippies. I remember saying to them, 'Believing in Jesus is one thing—becoming a part of the church and serving the church will be a much more difficult challenge'.

The young Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as I have mentioned earlier, told his father, then a professor of Psychiatry at the University at Berlin, that he wanted to be a theologian and serve the church. His father was rather disappointed and told his son that the church was not a very good institution, to which Dietrich responded, 'Then I will work to change

it'.²⁶ It would be wonderful if you, too, could make your contribution, Naasicaa!

symbols and countersigns of spirituality

letter eight

When I was your age, Naasticaa, I was about to leave 'secular' work and head for mission work amongst the Aborigines in Western Australia. In looking back on that time, I am disturbed that I had the audacity to believe that I had anything to give to these people. I was still 'wet behind the ears'. On the other hand, it was not wholly of my own choosing. I believed that God had called me. And maybe, that is equally audacious! Does the God of the universe actually give puny individuals a 'word' that radically changes their life's direction? However preposterous that may seem, I believe that to be true.

As you know, I was born in Northern Holland in the province of the Friesian cows. My parents migrated to Australia when I was nine. At the young age of fourteen, I had completed my primary schooling and my father insisted that I go to work to learn a trade. I can still hear

my Dad saying: "That will always stand you in good stead". He was right. At the time, though, I thought he was totally wrong. And so I entered the Printing and Allied trades as an apprentice, while I really wanted to continue my schooling. To compensate I joined a library near work and foolishly began my reading with Plato's *Republic*.

I loved working in this creative field of printing and publishing and had no thoughts of doing anything else. But then I fell sick. It turned out that I was suffering from lead poisoning, for in those days we were still working with typesetting rather than with computers. While in the hospital, I had a premonition that I would leave the publishing industry and begin work with Aboriginal people. This thought was completely 'out of the blue', but that is what happened.

I share this because it gets us into the topic of spirituality. I was no mystic. The Dutch are pretty sober people and the Reformed Church, of which I was a part at that time, was not known for its religious enthusiasm. The mind was emphasized to the detriment of matters of the heart. And at this time, it was still years before charismatic renewal would impact the major denominations. And yet as a very young Christian, I experienced the strange sense that God was speaking to me and seeking to direct my life.

innate spirituality

I in no way want to give the impression that there was anything special about this experience of mine, as if other people don't have similar experiences. Nor do I wish to suggest that spirituality is unique to Christianity. It is not. All religions promote particular forms of spiritual expression. But even more fundamentally, I believe that *all* people have some form of spirituality.

All people have significant dreams and intuitions that prove to be important. All of us experience a sense of transcendence, when we come in touch with something beyond ourselves, and have a sense of spirit when we are empowered in particular ways. I believe that this is so because we bear the mark of God in the very fabric of our being, and that God's Spirit is at work in the world.

What I am saying is that spirituality is not the sole province of the specifically religious person. So we might think of a monk living a life of prayer and solitude and practicing the liturgical cycle as being a spiritual person and having a deep spirituality, whereas we may regard a person working at the stock exchange as having no spirituality at all.

This kind of categorization is most unhelpful, for the person working at the stock exchange may also be a person of prayer, while the monk may be living his life out of a routine that leaves the heart unaffected. But much more basically, the financial consultant may be seeing his or her work as part of their vocation: working with integrity, serving the wider community and doing this by drawing on creative and intuitive resources within. This is a form of spirituality.

Having worked in a number of 'secular' occupations, I have always been struck by people who are thoughtful, caring, creative and empowering. They may never regard themselves as being religious in any way. Yet the very way in which they live life and conduct themselves in relation to others is a form of spirituality.

There are a number of implications that flow from these barebones remarks. The first is that spirituality is a mark of our humanity and is not to be confined to the more overtly religious dimensions of life. Thus we can speak of a spirituality of everyday life.¹ The contours of this spirituality have to do with the affirmation of life and

the expressions of good in our world. Secondly, spirituality is a matter of one's entire lifestyle and not of a segment of life. Therefore it is that which textures and colours all of our activities, our praying and playing, our work and rest and the personal as well as the social dimensions of our existence.

a christian spirituality

Christian spirituality is the way we live life empowered by the Spirit. Christian spirituality is our innate spirituality informed and shaped by the gospel. This means that the Christian faith does not so much give us a spirituality, but restructures and reinvigorates the spirituality we already have. This of course also applies to other dimensions of our life. The Christian faith does not give us the ability to love. We already know how to love in particular ways. But the experience of God's love and grace in our lives helps to deepen our love and provides new sources from which love can spring.

So it is with Christian spirituality. One's relationship of faith and trust in God through the Spirit, one's participation in the community of faith and one's personal spiritual disciplines all become resources for the formation and sustenance of one's spirituality. About this I will have more to say in the latter part of this letter.

But I wish to add at this point that these are not *the only* sources for a Christian spirituality. One's general social context, but also the specificity of one's workplace and one's neighbourhood, may be extra sources for such a spirituality.

While this may not surprise you, Naasicaa, since you are a broad-minded person, there are other readers who may be quite surprised by what I am saying here. This is because they have the idea that Christians operate on the

basis that the general society has nothing to offer them. In fact, they believe that Christians live in the world as only wanting to convert the world, but are unwilling to learn or receive anything from others. This is not only how others see many Christians, but also how many Christians see themselves. I obviously don't belong to either camp.

Let me explain why I see things differently. God's good gift to me is not only the community of faith, but also the world with its natural and social resources. Christians are not only my friends and provide input and challenge, but people of no religious faith at all also provide friendship, help and care. Thus both the world of nature and the world of people are resources for spirituality.

But let me qualify this. I do believe that we should resist and seek to overcome the worldliness of the world. What I mean by that are values, forces and systems that promote chaos and death, rather than the good that God intends for creation and humanity. But we are invited to embrace the good that is in our world and see that as a resource for Christian spirituality. Thus, in the words of Reformed theology, we may speak of God's common grace as also formative and significant for our spirituality.

A number of things stand out for me in this regard. I have always loved nature. As a young boy, on most days I spent many hours in fields outside of the town of Franeker in Northern Holland. Nature spoke to me of beauty, life, sustenance and tranquility, even though as a young boy I would not have used such words. Nature, for me, was the visible *hand* of God. It was later, in coming to faith, that I discovered the *heart* of God. This love for nature has persisted. And while I love body surfing, it has always been the mountains of the Lamington Plateau in Southern Queensland that have drawn me. I have gone there for over forty years, not simply to walk and to see its beauty, but to be inwardly renewed and to be with God.²

The other thing that stands out for me has been the recognition that at times groups of people or particular social movements reflect values that are closer to the gospel than those being currently practised by the churches. I have already spoken in my previous letter of finding community amongst street people in South Brisbane rather than initially finding it in the church. To this I could add other stories: community-based organizations practising a level of care and empowerment that was far ahead of similar Christian organizations, co-operative movements, just banking. The examples of the practice of good by those who do not see themselves as part of the Christian story are endless. And then we may think of the way in which education, work and the arts have enriched and deepened our lives and brought us closer to the purposes of God.

In the above, I am, of course, speaking about my own experience and my own perspectives. There may be others who are not inspired by nature or by the way that people serve others in the practice of justice. What touches one person's heart and imagination may not deeply affect someone else. What I am saying, though, is that when we live with a sense of openness and reflection, then we can see the hidden hand of God in the rich texture of life. In fact, many have seen the hand of God in places of despair, which has led them to a deeper faith and hope.

sources for christian spirituality

What I have been saying in the above part of my letter is that the sources for a Christian spirituality are not only the reading of scripture, prayer and participation in the community of faith, although these are very important, but also that our connectedness to the earth, our roles in the family, our tasks in the workplace and our participation in the social movements of our time play an important part in

shaping our lives. But let me talk about the more traditional sources of Christian spirituality.

Christian spirituality has to do with the way in which we live our lives in God's presence in the midst of the world. It has to do with living every dimension of life—prayer and work, sexuality and politics, creativity and play, relationships and economics and solitude and social engagement—in the light of God's companionship, love and grace.

Spirituality is thus not the pious segment of our lives. It is *the whole of life lived in the Spirit*.³ Spirituality is, therefore, not simply the practice of the sanctuary, but the outworking of God's love in every dimension of our lives. This, of course, is not to say that the sanctuary is not important in the formation of our spirituality. Nor am I suggesting that the practice of solitude is not important. It is. But so is our work. We can be nurtured, formed and shaped as much by the practice of silence as by our participation in family, work and the general society.

What most fundamentally nurtures and forms our spirituality is the friendship we enjoy with God. The incarnation speaks of God with us, the coming of the Spirit speaks of God within us, and the promise of God is, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you'. To put that only slightly differently, spirituality is living with and being sustained by God's embrace in our lives.

All the sources of Christian spirituality are meant to *mediate* God's presence. The reading of the story of God reminds us of God's passion, ways and promises. It tells us something of who this wonderful God is and the way in which 'he' has acted in history to bring us from chaos to the *shalom* of 'his' Kingdom. Scripture in its stories, history, poetry, prophecy and apocalyptic themes gives us the heartbeat of God. This is God pulling back the curtain of 'his' mystery.

There are a number of ways of reading scripture that can enrich our understanding of the wisdom of God. The first is a general reading for familiarity. It is surprising, but the majority of contemporary Christians have never read the Bible in its entirety. This is all the more surprising since many believe that the Bible is the word of God and should be listened to and obeyed. In my family of origin, we read portions of the Bible each day at meal times and read from Genesis to Revelation. The meal was to nourish us bodily. Scripture was to nourish the soul.

What I was not taught in my family of origin nor in the church that I was a part of was a second form of reading—reading scripture meditatively. This is called *lectio Divina*.⁴ Here one might linger with a small passage or even a brief saying and reflect on it. Drink it in. Absorb it, if you like. This practice has long been a part of the Monastic tradition. The value of reading scripture in this way is that a key thought or idea can sink more deeply into the fabric of our lives and become a part of us.

A third way of dealing with scripture is the more academic approach. Here we recognize that the Bible is a very ancient book coming from times and cultures very different to our own. Not recognizing this means that we run the risk of reading our contemporary ideas into scripture. For example, when we see the word 'household' on the pages of the New Testament, we probably think 'nuclear family'. But at that time, a household consisted of family and extended family. It probably also included aunts and uncles, house servants, the workers in cottage-based industry, travelers and visitors.⁵ So the conversion of a household to Christ was much more than a private family matter.

The purpose of a scholarly approach allows us to seek to understand the Bible in its ancient cultural settings. It also allows us to look at the Bible more systematically

by bringing together all of the prophetic writings, or all of the Pauline letters, or weaving together major themes that occur in the Old Testament and New Testament. Sadly, this approach, while the 'bread and butter' of those studying to become clergy, is sorely lacking amongst the women and men in the pews of our churches. The 'laity', as a consequence, are largely biblically and theologically illiterate.

A further way of reading scripture is a contextual approach. Here we recognize the socio-cultural context in which we find ourselves and identify the strengths and problems of our time. We bring these issues to the scriptures, plumbing this ancient yet ever-relevant book for answers to the questions of our time, circumstances and world.

What I am suggesting is that scripture as a source for spirituality should be engaged in *all* of these ways. We don't just read the Psalms for personal piety. We also read the Prophets for social transformation. In a holistic Christian spirituality we do not wish to disengage the personal from the social. A spirituality of personal piety should have everything to do with the pressing issues of our time, including the gross injustices that continue to characterize our world. After all, the great commandment is to love God *and* our neighbour.

In my previous letter, Naasicaa, I have said quite a bit about the church, the community of faith. I don't want to repeat that here. But I believe that participation in the community of faith is an important resource for spiritual growth and development. I have in mind here participation in worship, teaching, the sacraments and fellowship and sharing. While Cyprian's statement, 'He who hath not the church for his mother, hath not God for his father', is a bit of an overstatement regarding the role of the church, the church is not an optional extra in our spiritual formation.

But here I do not have in mind the contemporary consumer church, where religious professionals provide us with religious services while we remain largely uninvolved and unrelated to one another as members of the church. What I have in mind is church as community where we worship, learn and pray together and where we share life for support and encouragement.

There are also more personal resources for Christian formation: prayer, the practice of solitude, reading the classics of spirituality and engaging in the other Christian disciplines such as fasting and the practice of other forms of asceticism. But more of that later.

a personal reflection

I believe that the initial movement in coming to faith leads to communion. One longs to be with the God of one's discovery in prayer and reflection. This was certainly true of my experience. I avidly read scripture, in particular John's Gospel. I prayed a lot. And I longed to be with God in the comfortability of a newfound friendship grounded in God's love and grace so freely extended towards me. Over time, I began to live my life out of that communion.

But in Protestant and Evangelical churches, emphasis is often placed on another theme: that of service. Spirituality is linked to service and the theme of communion often becomes submerged or neglected. Unfortunately, I was influenced by this kind of thinking. As a result, ministry and mission became more important than fellowship and communion.

This had some disastrous consequences. What I was doing and achieving in urban ministry became at times more important than my friendship with God. And ever since, this has been a great struggle in my Christian journey. I believe that action should come from contemplation.

What we do should emerge out of our friendship with God. But so often this becomes twisted the other way round. We do all these things and then ask God to help us.

I think that P.T. Forsyth has put this in a proper perspective. He writes, 'It is truer to say that we live the Christian life in order to pray, than that we pray in order to live the Christian life'.⁶ Or to put that differently, God desires our friendship, not simply our works. But I will say more about prayer and contemplation later.

A further challenge in my own spiritual journey was that I was never prepared in my Christian formation to anticipate and face 'the dark night of the soul'. I was taught that God would always be there in 'his' mercy and love and that I would grow to Christian maturity through participation in the life of the church, personal devotions and service and obedience. I was left with the impression that this would be a smooth and steady journey upwards. I was in for a shock and surprise.

There have been a number of times where I have experienced what I would now call the absent presence of God. At the time, I had no words for this experience and I have been at a point of despair thinking that God had left me. And of course, it had to be my fault! After all, I was far from loving God with my whole being and my neighbour as myself.

I have subsequently learned, particularly through the writings of St John of the Cross, that there are times when God withdraws the active signs of 'his' presence. The wisdom of this is that we learn to trust God not for the good feelings that 'his' presence brings, but that we love God for who 'he' is.⁷

There are related lessons in the journey of faith. The one is that we learn that God does not automatically guard us from the brokenness and madness of our world. In other words, bad things do happen to 'good' people. The other

and related matter is that Christians do participate in suffering, whether that be their own or that of others.

One of the surprises for me in this area has been the discovery that at times the suffering of others can impact us more deeply than our own problems and difficulties. When the other person, with his or her needs and fragility, comes to roost in our inner being, we seem to be able to display an amazing capacity for care and identification. And for a brief time we 'carry' that person. Rollo May called this the exercise of nutritive power, which seeks to give life to the other.⁸ Psychologically this is the exercise of the vicarious dimension of life. In terms of Christian spirituality, it is receiving a prayer burden and concern for another that leads us to act on that person's behalf. That this is temporary and transitional should be obvious. We can't live long-term with the acute pain of others. And we can't live indefinitely *for* others. This would lead to unhealthy dependencies. Thus we have to grow to live *with* others and to live interdependently.

Throughout my journey of faith I have often thought about the loneliness of God. In saying this, I in no way wish to deny that God is a community of persons. Nor do I wish to suggest that God needs us, in the sense that God is somehow incomplete without our responsive love and worship. I believe there is nothing inherently lacking in God. But I do believe that God has opened 'his' being to relationship. God's loneliness lies not so much in the fact that there are not a lot of people who acknowledge 'him'. There are millions, more than thirty percent of the world's population, in fact! The loneliness lies elsewhere. It lies, first of all, in the otherness of God and the mystery of 'his' being. We will never fully understand or comprehend the being of God. Secondly, it lies in the malignment of God. God has been blamed for it all: wars, repression of beauty and sexuality, fanaticism, narrow-mindedness,

fundamentalism. This list is endless. In our modern world, Nietzsche has been the great maligner, although a more careful reading suggests that Nietzsche was more frequently upset with Christianity than with Jesus.⁹ Thirdly, and for me the most important, the loneliness of God lies not so much in 'his' misunderstoodness, but in his voluntary powerlessness. While I do believe that God is all powerful—after all 'he' called the cosmos into being—in the way that God deals with us, 'he' has chosen the way of vulnerability.¹⁰ God could come to us as commander, but chooses to be lover. God could come to us as demander, but chooses to be giver. 'He' could come as judge, but instead offers forgiveness and grace.

What particularly strikes me about God's vulnerability is that in Christ God has made available redemption and freedom for all, oppressors and the oppressed included, but God in no way forces 'his' blessings upon us.

My prayers, as a result, are not only for myself and others. I have also learned to cry for *God*.

themes for a spirituality

There is much more I could say about my own journey of faith, but the above will give you a bit of a feel of some of my perspectives. In this part of the letter, I would like to say a bit more about some of the important themes for a Christian spirituality. And the best way to come at that is to use a number of important metaphors.

I want to begin with the hospitality of God. Christian spirituality has to do with welcome. It is being welcomed 'home'. This welcome presupposes our lostness and the generous and seeking heart of God. It is a welcome to an embrace and to a table. True hospitality is a welcome to heart and hearth.¹¹ With the welcome into God's friendship comes the invitation to enjoy God's generosity. And the

biblical story is full of words that speak of *shalom* and blessing.

Secondly, Christian spirituality is an exodus spirituality. This has multiple layers of meaning. Its primary meaning is redemptive. God in 'his' grace sets us free from our captivities and idolatries. The social, psychic and spiritual powers that seek to shape and trammel us, leaving us unfree and driven, are subverted by the Spirit's renewing power. We can breathe the fresh air of women and men released from the caverns of our folly and dependencies. The secondary meaning of an exodus spirituality is that having been called out of our captivities, God now calls us from our familiar preoccupations, places and relationships to join with others in their quest for wholeness. In other words, our freedom frees us to serve others. God's redemption is such that it draws us into the purposes of God for the blessing and transformation of our world.¹²

A further metaphor in Christian spirituality is that of the desert. Spirituality is asceticism. I don't mean an asceticism that is seen as the precursor to God's blessing. To put this more bluntly, it is not a spirituality where I deny myself in order to get something from God. It is the other way round. It is having been so greatly blessed by God's generosity that I will say 'no' to things in order to make greater room for God and to serve God's kingdom. Moreover, the desert reminds us of the empty place, the lonely place and the place with no resources.¹³ In the spiritual journey we have to learn to live with open and empty hands. We have to learn to come to still places in order to hear our own heart and the heart of God.

One cannot talk about Christian spirituality without talking about prayer and contemplation.¹⁴ Prayer is not beseeching God to wrench things out of an unwilling hand. Prayer is a communion that flows from friendship and fellowship. Prayer is being with God in conversation,

and as such, prayer involves talking with God about all of our lives, not only what we need. While prayer has to do with speaking, contemplation has to do with listening and reflection, with being attentive to God. But contemplation also means being attentive to our hearts, others and the heart cry of our world. In this reflective posture we seek to hear and to discern. Thus often contemplation leads to prayer.

I further believe that Christian spirituality is fundamentally relational and communal. It is not a spirituality of the solo hero performing the herculean task. This is not to say that there have not been outstanding leaders in the life of the church—we need only think of St. Augustine, St. Anselm, Teresa of Avila, or more in our time, of Thomas Merton, Mother Teresa, Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Christian spirituality is a spirituality that draws on the biblical witness and the better moments of the history of the church. It is thus a spirituality of the ‘communion of saints’. Moreover, this spirituality will always seek to include others and draw them forward. It reaches the hand out to others. It is inclusive and not exclusive.

In my various other letters to you, Naasicaa, I have touched on the fact that I believe Christian spirituality to be rooted in everyday life. While some older Christian spiritualities are very esoteric, I believe that Christian spirituality is more a bread and butter spirituality. Perhaps this idea turns you off? By this I do not mean that it is mundane and boring, nor am I denying that it is transcendent and mysterious, belonging to the Spirit world. But I do mean that it has to do with life here and now and not simply with the life to come. I don’t believe that we should live the Christian life in order to go to heaven. I believe, instead, that we should live life as if heaven is already partly present. This spirituality, therefore, is not only for the monk or priest. It is for the ordinary person: the student,

the motor mechanic, the politician. It is a spirituality that encourages us to think about our relationships, work and leisure—every dimension of life.

This means that this spirituality is holistic. It does not segment off one area of life. It encourages us to think about our motivations, choices, occupations, relationships and our life's orientation. It sees life as interconnected. My life with God has something to do with my relationships with the neighbour. Prayer has something to do with politics.

Finally, Christian spirituality is eschatological. What I mean by that is not simply that it looks forward to the world to come, though this is part of it. We do not simply live for now, but also for God's final future. But what I also have in mind is that this spirituality has to do with the present work of God's Spirit in our lives, in the church and in history. The Spirit opens us to the world of dreams, the wisdom of intuition, the gift of discernment, the reality of healing. The charisms of the Spirit are the pinpricks of God's final future. These gifts of the Spirit enrich our lives. They carry us beyond the rational into the mysterious workings of God.¹⁵

countersigns

I have spoken about the symbols of Christian spirituality in the section on themes and metaphors. This section, of course, was by no means exhaustive. And we could use other symbols: that of bread and wine in the Eucharist, water in baptism, the dove in the coming of the Spirit. The language of the Bible is rich with images expressing the way God works in our lives, the church and the world.

But what do I mean by countersigns? Simply put, I believe that there are spiritualities that are not the conveyors of life, but of death. And the place to focus, first of all, is not on the outside world, but within the church itself.

Subtle counter spiritualities can occur when the church has become unhealthy and is no longer empowered by God's Spirit. The most basic forms of counter spiritualities I have in mind are legalism, rationalism, misuse of institutional power and the personality cult.¹⁶ While all of these are equally dysfunctional, the misuse of power is often the most serious, because it is claimed to be exercised in the name of God. It is always amazing to me how the most enthusiastic groups of Christians often take on 'cultic' overtones because they have failed to convert the power of control into the power of servanthood.

Your mother would have told you, Naasicaa, that in the late 1960s through to the 1980s we worked with young people in the drug scene. Many of these young people had explored various esoteric religions, had sat at the feet of various gurus, had ingested hallucinogenic substances and had dabbled in various forms of occultism. None of this was particularly impressive. In fact, for the majority, this dabbling had been downright dysfunctional and dangerous.

You are frowning again, Naasicaa. And rightly so! You think what I am saying is too negative, even judgmental, perhaps? This dysfunctionality could simply have been the problem of the young people themselves, rather than the religious systems they were exploring. And the problem could have been the drug concoctions they were taking. In other words, if they had embraced Buddhist spirituality, for example, they would have reflected the signs of life, rather than the contours of death.

I agree. There are life-giving spiritualities other than the Christian one. So what then should one look for in a spirituality and what should one avoid? Let's start with the latter.

A spirituality is death-dealing if it fragments major dimensions of one's life. For example, it might have answers

for one's peace of mind but not for one's body, relationships and place in the world. Secondly, it might be fundamentally narcissistic. In other words, it might only have the 'me' in view in terms of self-realization and self-enhancement, but fails to have a heart for others. Thirdly, it is death-dealing if it is elitist. So appealing but so dangerous are the groups that claim to have the only inside information and the only ladder to the esoteric world. Fourthly, a spirituality is unhealthy if it is isolationist. What I mean here is that it might sever friendships, family networks and one's connectedness with the wider world.

There are, however, other signs of death. The most basic is a spirituality offering self-enhancement through self effort with no redemptive dimension. There is no recognition of our own sinfulness and folly and no empowerment for our inner transformation.

This brings me to what we should look for in a spirituality. It must empower me in all the dimensions of life—my relationships, my inner well-being, my relatedness to the world. It needs to provide answers for the negative powers at work in my life and for my own brokenness. It needs to be defensible in general discourse. I can't just say this is my own thing without being able to talk about it and open it to scrutiny and discussion. Spirituality may be personal, but it is not secretive.

The above are some bottom-line issues. You need to know, Naasicaa, that I am quite sensitive to the way in which we can open our lives to the spirit world. This world I believe to be as real as the world of technology. It is a world that can enrich us, but it can also bring us into bondage. Over the years, I have had to perform exorcisms with people who opened their lives to powers which they thought were beneficial, but were in fact malevolent.¹⁷

In doing a lot of thinking about all of this over the years, I have come to a simple conclusion. Because the

spirit world is like entering a dark tunnel in which you don't know beforehand whether it leads to an oasis or a desert, light or further darkness, freedom or bondage, it is important to have a guide and it's important to know this guide. If the guide is a self-indulgent guru living a life of luxury gained from the adoring faithful, then I have serious doubts about this guide and where he or she may wish to lead me.

This is why I have put my hopes on Jesus as my guide to the world of the spirit. His life of love, compassion, wisdom, service to the poor and healing is a powerful sign that he can lead me to the spirit world of the Good Spirit. In fact, Jesus promises that he will pour out the Holy Spirit upon us. But more about that in another letter.

I have reread parts of this letter while back in the Philippines. I am teaching a module course at Asian Theological Seminary, where I taught full-time for six years in the early 1990s. It strikes me how the world of the spirit is much more familiar to Asians and also others in the Third World, but less familiar to us in the First World. The West has long been subject to a period of rationalism and rationalization, which has made the world mundane and devoid of awe and wonder. Mystery has been strangled by so-called scientific predictability and the spirit world has become a strange domain for us. Although there are many signs of hope, post-modern Westerners are exploring more open, intuitive and integrative approaches to life.

We have much to learn and unlearn. What I find interesting is that the Bible is not a Western book. It is 'Asian'. Maybe in the future it will be Asians, or others from the Third World, who will teach us about prayer, meditation, the supernatural, and the realm of the Good Spirit—the Spirit of God.

a concluding comment

The heart of spirituality has little to do with certain religious practices championed by the respective religious traditions. The heart lies elsewhere. True spirituality is to live a life of love that comes from being loved in God's embrace. It is this embrace that empowers us in the journey to wholeness and frees us to love others. In the words of St Augustine, love is the movement from *cupiditas* to *caritas*, from self-centered love to other-centred love.

This same church father made the further observation, 'When there is a question as to whether a man (or woman) is good, one does not ask what he (or she) believes . . . or hopes, but what he (or she) loves'. And it is this observation that leads to the heart of the gospel: to love God and our neighbour as ourselves.

Christian spirituality is the following of Jesus empowered by the Spirit. Its contours are love, forgiveness and peacemaking. It seeks to honour God and to serve the world. There is nothing easy about this kind of spirituality. It is not a Saturday picnic. Rather, it is a life marked by the cross of Christ.

notes

Letter One

1. See in particular the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, especially his *Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

2. See Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Letter Two

1. See N. Wolterstroff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).

2. See R. J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983).

3. P. Berger & T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Doubleday, 1966).

Letter Three

1. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (London: SCM Press, 1962).

2. See Zygmunt Bauman, *Post-Modernity and its Discontents* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1997).

3. See Eberhard Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Biography* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000). See also my *Seize the Day with Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

4. See J.M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper San Francisco, 1986). See also my *Let My People Go with Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

5. See in particular Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1963).

6. See Max Weber, three volume *Economy and Society* (New York: Badminster Press, 1968).

7. See Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1973). See also my *Resist the Powers with Jacques Ellul* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

Letter Four

1. See J. Grant-Thomson, *Jodie's Story* (Sydney: Anzea, 1991) for something of this story.

2. See Mende Nazer, *Slave* (London: Virago, 2004) as an example of contemporary slavery.

3. See R. Bellah, et. al., *Habits of the Heart* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

4. See E.A. & J.D. Whitehead, *Community of Faith: Crafting Christian Communities Today* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992).

5. See Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Bantam, 1968).

6. For one person's downward mobility see Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak: A Spiritual Journey* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) and my *Dare to Journey With Henri Nouwen* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2000).

7. See Rollo May, *Power and Innocence: A Search for the Sources of Violence* (New York: Norton, 1974).

8. See Leonardo and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988) and my *Cry Freedom with Voices from the Third World* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1998).

Letter Five

1. See my good colleague's work on this topic: R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

2. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

3. See Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962).

4. See the discussion on Feuerbach in Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: IVP, 1973).

5. Consult J. Hick & P. Knitter, eds., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* (London: SCM, 1987).

6. See Thomas Wolf's telling *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (New York: Bantam, 1988).

7. See T.R. Henn, *The Bible as Literature* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1970).

8. See J. S. Croatto, *Exodus: A Hermeneutics of Freedom* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1981).

9. See my book *Life in Full Stride* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2004).

10. See Robert Banks, *God the Worker* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1992).

11. See Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982).

12. You may wish to read Colin Gunton, *The Promise of a Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997).

13. See Athol Gill, *Life on the Road: The Gospel Basis for a Messianic Lifestyle* (Sydney: Lancer, 1989).

14. See her *One Heart Full of Love* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1988). Also see my *Wash the Feet of the World with Mother Teresa* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

15. See Donald Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978).

16. You might like to read this amazing story in J. L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Present Day* (Peabody: Prince Press, 2004).

17. See Henri Nouwen, *Sabbatical Journey: The Diary of his Final Year* (New York: Crossroad, 1998) for a discussion of this kind of vulnerability.

Letter Six

1. See F. Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), vols. VII–IX. For a discussion on Hegel, see pp. 159–247.

2. See R. Bendix, *Max Weber: An Intellectual Portrait* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1962), 49–79.

3. Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or, Vol. II* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1959).

4. See Jacques Ellul, *The Technological Bluff* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990).

5. See A. T. Hennelly, ed., *Liberation Theology: A Documentary History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).

6. One book that reflects something of that very varied movement is Arthur Blessitt, *Turned on to Jesus* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971).

7. See Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk: New Directions, 1961).

8. Here you may wish to read Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) and my *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).

9. For a helpful statement of theological themes within the Evangelical tradition, see Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2000).

10. Here the writings of St. John of the Cross may be helpful. See particularly his 'Dark Night of the Soul' in *The Complete Works of St. John of the Cross* (Westminster: The Newman Bookshop, 1946).

11. Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1971), 7:15.

12. See Malcolm Muggeridge, *Something Beautiful for God* (London: Collins, 1972) and Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love* (Novato: New World Library, 2002).

13. See Dietrich Bonhoeffer's classic, *Life Together* (London: SCM, 1954).

Letter Seven

1. See my *Catch the Wind* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).

2. See Darrell Guder, et. al., *Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

3. See Alan Jamieson, *A Churchless Faith* (Wellington: Philip Garside Publishing, 2000).

4. See Karl Rahner, *The Shape of the Church to Come* (London: SPCK, 1974).

5. See Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (London: Lutterworth, 1952).

6. See Edwin Judge, *The Social Pattern of Christian Groups in the First Century* (London: Tyndale Press, 1960).

7. See Bengt Holmberg, *Paul and Power* (Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1978).

8. See R. & J. Banks, *The Church Comes Home* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1996) and L. Boff, *Ecclesiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).

9. Quoted in D. F. Durnbaugh, *The Believer's Church: The History and Character of Radical Protestantism* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 23.

10. See D. J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

11. You might like to read the challenging small book by E. Arnold, *Why We Live in Community* (Farmington: Plough Publishing, 1995).
12. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Collins, 1971).
13. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1962), IV/3, II.
14. N. Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983).
15. Jacques Ellul, *The Presence of the Kingdom*, 2nd ed. (Colorado Springs: Helmers & Howard, 1989).
16. D. Kraybill, *The Upside-Down Kingdom* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1978).
17. See my 'Lower the Drawbridge: Bring Social Justice Home', *Renewal Journal* 3 (1994), 3–9.
18. You may wish to read Thomas Merton, *The Monastic Journey* (London: Sheldon Press, 1977).
19. See also Jean Vanier, *From Brokenness to Community* (New York: Paulist, 1992).
20. John Drane, *The McDonaldization of the Church* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000).
21. To gain some sense of this regarding Latin America see G. Cook, ed., *The New Face of the Church in Latin America* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1994). For Asia see S. Athyal, ed., *The Church in Asia Today* (Singapore: Asia Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1996).
22. See D. W. Ferm, *Third World Liberation Theologies: A Reader* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1986).
23. You may wish to read J. O'Halloran, *Small Christian Communities: A Pastoral Companion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996).
24. See the little classic by Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).
25. Craig van Gelder, ed. *Confident Witness – Changing World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999).
26. A good read of the Bonhoeffer story is R. Wind, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Spoke in the Wheel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

Letter Eight

1. See R. Paul Stevens, *The Other Six Days* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
2. I touched on some of these themes in my book *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).

3. See L.S. Cunningham & K.J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996).

4. For a brief discussion, see Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology: The Theology of Yesterday for Spiritual Help Today* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley, 1997) 86–89.

5. For the general setting of early Christianity see S. Benko & J. T. O'Rourke, eds., *The Catacombs and the Colosseum: The Roman Empire as the Setting of Primitive Christianity* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1971).

6. See my *Whispers from the Edge of Eternity: Reflections on Life and Faith in a Precarious World* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005), 113.

7. St. John of the Cross, *Dark Night of the Soul* (New York: Riverhead, 2002).

8. Rollo May, *Power and Innocence* (New York: Norton, 1974).

9. Fredrick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 7: 404.

10. See J. Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993).

11. See Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1975).

12. See the wonderful little classic of Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937).

13. You may wish to read about the Desert Fathers. See Helen Waddell, trans., *The Desert Fathers* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

14. Thomas Merton, *Contemplative Prayer* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1969).

15. S. Chan, *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

16. See J.D. Faubion, *The Shadows and Lights of Waco* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

17. M. Scott Peck, *People of the Lie* (London: Rider, 1983).

Letter Nine

1. G.E. Ganss, *Ignatius of Loyola: The Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1991).

2. H-G. Gadamer, *Heidegger's Ways* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 63.

3. D. Keirsey & M. Bates, *Please Understand Me: Character & Temperament Types* (Del Mar, CA: Prometheus Nemesis, 1984).

4. D.R. Riso, *Understanding the Enneagram* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990).

5. An interesting read is the theologian Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (London: Collins, 1962). And a writer who was very helpful to me in younger days was the Swiss psychiatrist Paul Tounier. You would enjoy his *The Meaning of Persons* (London: SCM, 1957).

6. See my *Gadamer's Dialogical Hermeneutic* (Heidelberg Universitätsverlag: C. Winter, 1999), 44.

7. You may wish to read the interesting book by Janet Hagberg, *Real Power* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1984).

8. You may enjoy his *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (London: Fontana, 1964).

9. D.M. Thomas, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn: A Century in his Life* (New York: St Martin, Press, 1998).

10. Henri Nouwen, *With Open Hands* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1972).

11. M. Scott Peck, *In Search of Stones* (New York: Hyperion, 1995).

Letter Ten

1. You may want to read A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987).

2. For two thoughtful books about living life with passion and commitment, see Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (London: SCM, 1959) and Donald Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1978).

3. For something of the history of this see J.J. Suurmond, *Word and Spirit at Play* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

4. A helpful book that sets out the prophetic vision of the Old Testament is Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1978).

5. Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 2005).

6. The person who has written well about this is Segundo Galilea in his book *Following Jesus* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1984). See my *Wash the Feet of the World With Mother Teresa* (Colorado Springs: Pinon Press, 2004).

Letter Eleven

1. One of the books that inspired us was Edith Schaeffer, *Hidden Art* (London: The Norfolk Press, 1971).

2. One of Jacques Ellul's helpful books is *The Presence of the Kingdom* (New York: Seabury, 1967).

3. You may want to check out Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Seabury, 1975) about the power and possibility of questions.

Letter Twelve

1. See M. Kelsey, *Encounter with God* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1972), 110–117.

2. Letty Russell, ed., *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 139.

3. L. S. Cunningham & K. J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 123–142.

4. M. Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1997).

5. P. D. Hanson, *The People Called* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

6. G. Hancock, *Lords of Poverty* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1989).

Letter Thirteen

1. See R. Banks, *All the Business of Life* (Sydney: Albatross Books, 1987).

2. See my *Resist the Powers with Jacques Ellul* (Colorado Springs: Pinon, 2000).

3. M. J. Dawn, *Keeping the Sabbath Wholly: Ceasing, Resting, Embracing, Feasting* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

Letter Fourteen

1. See the classic by N. Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Paladin, 1970).

2. Leo Tolstoy, *The Kingdom of God is Within You* (New York: Noonday Press, 1961).

3. Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), 181–184.

4. For the above themes and emphasis regarding the Kingdom of God, see H. A. Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991).

5. R. Kinsler & G. Kinsler, *The Biblical Jubilee and the Struggle for Life* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1999).

6. A. Gill, *The Fringes of Freedom* (Sydney: Lancer, 1990).

7. See Jacques Ellul, *The Subversion of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986).

Letter Fifteen

1. N. Perrin, *The New Testament: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), 283–284.
2. R. Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Sydney: Anzea, 1979).

Letter Sixteen

1. J. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993).

Letter Seventeen

1. See my *Seek the Silences with Thomas Merton* (London: SPCK, 2003).