

THE INAUGURAL WALTER SILVESTER MEMORIAL ORATION

Beyond the Ash-heaps: A Priest, Two Popes and the Church

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Father Walter Joseph Silvester is rightly remembered for many things. But to people who may not have known him well, the first thing that would come to mind is very likely that he was a German U-Boat commander in World War 2. In that sense, the War was an essential element of the identity of this complex man, this great priest whom we remember tonight. Father Silvester was usually slow to speak of his wartime experiences, and one can only surmise why that might have been. But here I want to focus on his experience of the War, because it may provide us with a key to understanding the mystery of Walter Silvester.

He was born in 1919 in Breslau in what was then the German province of Silesia which is now Wroclaw in Poland. At the age of twelve, he went to the Pallottine College in Frankenstein, which hardly seems a promising place for a school. Yet here, I presume, the seed of his priestly vocation was sown. In later life, Walter claimed that from a very young age he had wanted to be a missionary priest. At first he thought of being a Franciscan, but – in his telling of the tale – the Pallottines were cheaper. At Frankenstein, he studied to the end of his secondary school years, which coincided with the rise of Hitler and Nazism in Germany. Once his schooling was finished, he had to do a six-month pre-military service in a youth labour camp. He then went to Olpe in North Rhine-Westphalia, east of Cologne, to enter the Pallottine novitiate. This was in 1939, just six weeks after the outbreak of war. A year later, the novices were conscripted for military service. Walter served first with the marine artillery and then on a mine-sweeper before finally joining the U-Boat fleet. He must have shown promise, because by the end of 1942 he was a Sub-lieutenant assigned to the Bay of Biscay, and in the following year he was appointed a U-Boat commander with more than a hundred men in his charge. The twenty-four year old Walter had clearly impressed his superiors as a man with the capacity to lead.

Yet drama was to follow. At one point, Walter was among a number of men condemned to death because they had exposed their submarines to save survivors from boats that had been sunk. At his court-martial, however, the judge commuted the death-sentence and ordered that Walter be sent to enter a heavily mined Russian seaport in order to photograph the harbour. This was not so much a reprieve as another kind of death-sentence. Yet every man in his crew volunteered to join him, and – still more surprisingly – the mission was successful. They got there and back, and Walter stormed into a future that led him to distant places. He was clearly a man for a mission.

With the defeat of Germany in 1945, Walter was imprisoned for five months by American forces in the Baltic port of Kiel, and was released shortly after his twenty-sixth birthday. He then returned to the Pallottine novitiate in Olpe to resume his studies for the priesthood. It is tempting to think that he just picked up where he had left off, that the War was a regrettable interlude that could now be

simply forgotten. But it was surely not like this. Walter's decision to resume his priestly studies must have been a different decision than his decision to begin, and it was made by a different man. Nothing was the same after the apocalypse of the War, and Walter Silvester was certainly not the same. How could he be after all that he had seen and done? In his decision to return to priestly studies, we see in the life of Walter Silvester a pattern of continuity and discontinuity which marked his life in other ways.

World War 2 was really the second part of a two-part apocalypse which began with the outbreak of war in 1914. Indeed, in some ways it is better to think of the two World Wars as a single thirty year war. The Great War of 1914-1918 was supposed to be the war to end all wars, but it was very far from that. In little more than twenty years, the conflict resumed in still more brutal fashion, culminating in the ash-heaps of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, which left many wondering whether it was possible any longer to speak either of God or to God. This was another way of asking if there was beyond the ash-heaps a future worthy of the human being.

These were questions from which Walter Silvester was not exempt. His answer – or at least one vital part of it – was to resume his priestly studies. The Second World War was not just another military conflict. It was the first time the planet had known total war, in which there were some 19,000,000 civilians among the 36,500,000 dead. At another level, the War was also a moral catastrophe. For those involved in its horrors, it was, as Tony Judt notes in his book, "Postwar", an experience of humiliation (43) and daily degradation (41). The War, Judt claims, created a world where "everyone had good reason to be afraid of everyone else" (37), and where "the state ceased to be the repository of law and justice" and "government was itself the leading predator" (38). This amounted to a systematic attack on human dignity as the Christian West had hitherto understood it. As such, it represented what the journalist Anne O'Hare McCormick called "the disintegration of the structure of life" (cited by Judt, 13), or at least the structure of civilised life as the West had understood it.

That was made all the more dismaying by the fact that the prime aggressor in both parts of the apocalypse was one of the great Christian nations of Europe, Germany. In that sense, World War 1 and World War 2 represented the collapse of Western Christian civilisation as it had been known; and nations and individuals reacted in different ways to the experience of collapse. For some there was the cultivation of a kind of amnesia, with a penchant for evasive myths which eased or at least sought to ease the terrible burden of responsibility. For others there was a kind of nihilism, a culture of hopelessness, a belief that the future had gone up in the smoke of war. As Judt notes, "violence bred cynicism" (37), and the cynicism was all the deeper because the violence was "a war of all against all" (ibid). For others again, there was a craving for security after such convulsions, a desire to find refuge in the banalities of daily living; and then there were those who turned their back on a ravaged Europe and set off on long journeys to other lands where the future might bring hope.

Where some took the path of evasion or denial, Walter Silvester set off instead in search of truth, even the truth which was deeply painful, especially perhaps for the German people, against whom retribution was sought and from whom expiation was demanded. Indeed, I have wondered whether in Walter's decision to resume his priestly studies, there was not some element of expiation or atonement. Where some took the dead-end path of nihilism, Walter took the path of Christian hope; he chose to affirm rather than to deny. Where some sought refuge in the ordinariness of daily routine, Walter chose to attempt something extraordinary. And he too set out on a long journey to the priesthood and beyond, a journey which would take him to this distant land, where he became in a sense one of the millions of displaced persons after the War. The difference was that he was displaced by choice, by his choice of Christian mission; and in that sense he was displaced not by personal choice, but by the choice of Christ himself. He was a man called and sent.

In later life, Walter recalled meeting the Führer to receive an award. He remarked that looking into Hitler's eyes was like looking into a void; there was a coldness, a lifelessness deep within. Among many other things, World War 2 in Europe was Hitler's projection on to the life of the continent of the lifelessness that lay deep within himself, what Pope John Paul II would later call "the culture of death". It was Hitler mysteriously drawing millions of people into the diabolical void which was deep within himself, the void in which death is thought preferable to life. In that sense, Walter's decision to return to priestly studies and to take the path of missionary priesthood was a rebellion against the void and its lifelessness. That was why so many people experienced him as so unusually full of life; that was his rebellion against what he had seen not only in Hitler's eyes but in the devastation which Hitler had wrought, even with the help of patently good people like Walter Silvester.

He was finally ordained priest in Limburg on 9 July 1950 and left for the Australian mission the following year. Where he might have expected to be assigned to the Pallottine mission in north Western Australia, the young Father Silvester was appointed first to Melbourne and then to Millgrove, where he established Pallotti College; and the rest, as they say, is history. Under his charismatic guidance, Pallotti College became a power-house far beyond Millgrove where it stands. In the footsteps of Saint Vincent Pallotti, Walter Silvester founded communities like the Mariana community of consecrated women; he gathered together and formed teams of lay missionaries, who served a couple of years of their life working among the Indigenous peoples of Western Australia. But such things are the tip of the iceberg. Much of what else Walter Silvester did is better known to some of you than it is to me; but in the end, the sum of all that he did is known only to God.

Ordained a priest in one kind of Church in a very particular time and place, Walter Silvester exercised the greater part of his ministry not only in a very different place but also in a very different kind of Church. This was largely because of the Second Vatican Council. His priestly life straddled the Council in a way that shows again the pattern of continuity and discontinuity which we have already seen.

There are many ways of interpreting the Council, but one of the most illuminating and important, I think, is to understand the Council as the Church's reaction to the two-part apocalypse of the World Wars, her response to the questions of whether there was now any future worthy of the human being. After the War, the Church simply could not put up a sign saying, "Business As Usual". Beyond the cataclysm, nothing was the same – not the Church and not the human experience of God. That was what the Church – under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit – recognised in the Second Vatican Council. In the Council, the Church took stock of the world after the collapse of Western Christian civilisation as it had been known and sought new paths into the future, new paths which were also ancient paths. The cry of Vatican II was, "Back to the sources"; and this implied a policy of "Back to the future", which is in the end the only way that Christians know.

At a time when the Church may have been tempted to retreat into a self-protective world to lick her own wounds, the Council sounded a new call to mission. The Church, the Council taught, was not so much a self-enclosed city set high above the raging storms of history: "who is she that stands triumphant, rock in strength upon the rock, like some city crowned with turrets, braving storm and earth-quake shock?", as the grand old hymn once had it. The Church was rather "lumen gentium", "the light of the nations", the sacrament of the world's salvation to whom "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1) of the world were in no way foreign. In the end, however, the Council was a great proclamation that Christ was the only hope for a future worthy of the human being, the only way out of the deadly cycle of violence and the vortex of self-immolation that had engulfed the world. In that sense, the Council was a single great contemplation of the glory of Christ in the midst of all that was most sordid and depressing in the world. It was a soaring hymn to life in a world where death seemed triumphant.

Pope Pius XII had in a way anticipated the Council with the definition of the Assumption in 1950, the year of Walter's ordination. In the shadow of Auschwitz and Hiroshima, the Pontiff stood beside the Tomb of Peter and pointed to the woman crowned with the twelve stars and with the moon at her feet (cf Rev 12:1), the Mother of Christ assumed body and soul into heaven. This was something which the Church had always believed. But at a time when human life had never looked so cheap and human dignity had never been violated on such a scale, this was the Church's way of saying that, if you want to understand the truth of the human being, then look at Mary assumed into heaven and understand that, even though death may seem wholly regnant in the world right now, death is in fact not native to the human being. Death never was and never would be part of the Creator's plan. Life not death will have the last word, not just in the life of Mary but in the life of the world. The word of hope spoken by Pius XII in 1950 was taken up and amplified a few years later by the Second Vatican Council, which spoke so tellingly of hope and human dignity because it spoke so tellingly of Christ, of Mary and of the Church.

One of the Fathers of the Council was a young Polish Bishop who was almost an exact contemporary of Walter Silvester. He was Karol Wojtyla, then the Auxiliary Bishop of Cracow, born in 1920 just a year after Walter. His life too displays rather spectacularly the pattern of continuity and discontinuity we have seen in the life of Walter. The details of the man who was to become Pope John Paul II are too well known to need rehearsing here. But one thing that is clear when you survey his pontificate is that the whole phenomenon must be seen against the background of World War 2 and its aftermath.

Where Walter as a German stood on one side of the great conflict, Karol as a Pole stood very much on the other. Poland has always had the wretched luck of standing between Germany and Russia, and it has through the centuries paid a high price for its geography. But the German attack on Poland in World War 2 was something altogether new and more ferocious. To make matters worse for Wojtyla, the death-camp of Auschwitz was situated in his native diocese of Cracow. This means that John Paul II came to maturity in a world where human dignity was violated in unheard of ways. Even after the defeat of Germany and the supposed liberation of Poland, the horrors of the Nazi occupation were succeeded by the not dissimilar horrors of the Communist regime. This was the very bleak world in which Karol Wojtyla came to the priesthood and episcopate; it was the human void in which he was prepared for the papal ministry which would fall to him in the extraordinary circumstances of 1978.

His magisterium as Pope was prodigious. As an old Italian in the Curia once remarked: "Gesù ci ha dato il Sermone della Montagna, e adesso abbiamo la montagna dei sermoni" (Jesus gave us the Sermon on the Mountain, and now we have the mountain of sermons"). Yet for all its profusion, there was a great simplicity at the heart of John Paul II's teaching through the twenty-six years of his pontificate. It was a simplicity which looked back to the first page of Scripture where we read that the human being was created in the image and likeness of God, and chosen by God to be a co-creator (cf Gen 1-2). As a man who from his early years had seen human dignity grossly violated by godless ideologies, Wojtyla was dazzled by this vision of human dignity. What he also came to see was that the full grandeur of human dignity was revealed only in the Risen Christ: to see him was to see the full truth of God and the full truth of the human being. In a sense, this was all John Paul II had to say in the many things he said and wrote through the years.

At times people – especially people outside the Church – were struck by what seemed to be the newness of John Paul's teaching on human dignity and the social implications of this teaching. Yet he was speaking directly from the Scripture in both Old and New Testaments; his teaching was as fresh as the Bible. A striking example of this is his theology of the body. It seems fresh, yet it is simply an explication of what is found in the first pages of Genesis, and an explication offered by a man who in places like Auschwitz had seen the human body desecrated in horrific ways. In grappling with the

question of whether there was a future worthy of the human being, John Paul II came to the answer that the Risen Christ is the only real hope we can find in the ash-heaps. Anything else would prove unworthy of the human being and would eventually decay into the ideologies which had wrought such havoc. This was as central to the teaching of Vatican II as it was to the magisterium of John Paul II. He said it very explicitly in one of the greatest documents of his pontificate, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, the letter he wrote at the end of the Jubilee Year of 2000. There he said that the Church must "start afresh from Christ", but what he said of the Church was also, in his view, true for the world. Christ risen is the world's only hope of a life that is bigger than death.

This was why he spoke so often of the need for a new evangelisation. This became the call-sign of his pontificate, and the full scope of the summons can be understood only against the collapse of Western Christian civilisation which came with World Wars 1 and 2. Beyond the collapse, a new beginning must be made. There had to be a new mission born from a new contemplation of Christ.

In his first Encyclical Letter, *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II spoke of Christianity as an experience of deep amazement at the grandeur of human dignity revealed in the vision of Christ (10). From this amazement came the energy for a new mission. Central to this mission would be the shaping of a new Christian humanism of the kind that emerges in the writings of the Pope himself. It may sound a little too academic to speak of a new Christian humanism; and yet its power – even its political power – appeared dramatically in the way John Paul II helped to unsettle and eventually dismantle the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe. It is impossible to gauge exactly the role he played in that historic process, but few would doubt that his role was crucial for many reasons. But the Pope would have said, I am sure, that the power working through him at that time was a power born of a vision of Christ – a vision of the human person and of the ecology of human society born from that vision, a vision more powerful than the godless ideologies of the world.

Stalin it was who asked mockingly how many divisions the Pope had; but what emerged in John Paul's pontificate is that the Successor of Peter has received from Christ another power which may look like powerlessness but which is in the end mightier than all the armies of this world. This power – the power of the Cross – was surely something which Walter Silvester came to understand no less than Karol Wojtyla. From vastly different viewing positions in the War, they saw the same thing. They saw the horror wrought by godless ideology, and they saw that Christ crucified and risen was the only way beyond the ash-heaps. The enemies became brothers.

Born seven years after Karol Wojtyla, eight after Walter Silvester, was another German – or better perhaps, a Bavarian – by name Joseph Ratzinger. He was something of a prodigy in the theological world, being named at a very young age a *peritus* or theological expert to the Second Vatican Council. It was Pope Paul VI who then plucked him from the halls of Tübingen to be Archbishop of München; and it was Pope John Paul II who chose him not many years later to be Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

This was a fateful choice, and their deep collaboration through the long pontificate was to prove one of the keys to understanding the Wojtyla phenomenon. The symbiosis was all the more remarkable given that Wojtyla was a Pole and Ratzinger a German. Here was the ultimate reconciliation of old enemies beyond the ash-heaps – a Polish Pope so heavily dependent upon the advice and support of a German Cardinal. Again, the enemies became brothers. Through many years, the two would meet each week, and I suspect that it was in these conversations that there emerged the great themes of John Paul II's pontificate. Here, I think, were forged the ideas for the Encyclical Letters which flowed from the pen of John Paul. In that sense, it is impossible to overestimate the contribution made by Joseph Ratzinger to the papal ministry of Karol Wojtyla. In electing him to succeed John Paul II, the Cardinals were surely choosing the path of deep continuity, which is why it is intriguing to see

Benedict XVI emerge as a Pope of quite different stamp, less heroic in scale than was his predecessor.

Though utterly different in background and personality, Ratzinger was also a product of World War 2. Like Wojtyla and Silvester, Ratzinger cannot be well understood except against the background of the War. He was younger than they, but the German apocalypse seared itself deeply into the soul of the young Ratzinger. How could it not? He grew up in a world of lies, since the culture of lying was fundamental to Nazism. That is why his career both academic and ecclesiastical stands as an unceasing search for truth. Hence his critique of what he came to call "relativism", which in the end is the denial of truth. What he also came to see from his experience of Fascism – and also Communism with the division of Germany – is that, once the notion of truth is abandoned, then the way is clear for ideology to triumph as it did under both Nazism and Communism. Therefore, Ratzinger's unceasing search for truth has been accompanied by an incisive critique of godless ideologies, especially the godless ideologies of the West and the violence they spawn. This led to his first Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, in which the Pope proposes self-sacrificing love – in the end, the mystery of the Cross – as the only way beyond ideologies and their violence.

Like John Paul II, Benedict XVI has lived a drama which is more than purely personal. Each in his own way has also been part of a national drama with implications far beyond the lands of their birth. In John Paul II, it seemed, the whole of Polish history was gathered up mysteriously: he became Poland. So too with Benedict XVI. When he was elected Pope, one German newspaper ran the banner headline: "Wir sind Papst!", "We are Pope!". That says it all. The nation which had so disgraced itself and had been so humiliated in the World Wars and their aftermath was, it seemed, back at the heart of the human family. One of the Cardinals at the Conclave which elected Benedict XVI remarked that a question which he and other electors had to face before voting for Cardinal Ratzinger was whether the world and in particular Europe was ready for a German Pope. The answer was clearly yes, given that the Conclave voted so quickly and conclusively for Cardinal Ratzinger. It is one of the ironies of God that a Polish Pope should be followed by a German Pope in a world still shadowed in many ways by the World Wars. But it was scarcely less ironic that the two should have been such soul-mates and so creative a partnership through the long Wojtyla pontificate.

The Second Vatican Council represented the birth of a truly global Church, which was strangely prophetic in a world that was soon to be engulfed by the unstoppable process of globalisation. By "global", I mean a Church which was no longer Eurocentric, but in which the centre of gravity would be found elsewhere, or perhaps a Church which would have more than one centre of gravity. Certainly since the Council the notable growth in the Church has been in places like Africa and Asia. This is evident even in Australia as our congregations and our clergy display more and more an ethnic diversity that was unknown in earlier times.

Yet a sign that the Church has become truly global will perhaps be the election of another Pope, one who has not known World War 2 and is not a product of it. Beyond the pontificate of Benedict XVI, this may mean the election of a non-European Pope or perhaps a European Pope born after World War 2, a baby-boomer Pontiff. Who can know these things? But one thing is clear: the whole Church is now called to take the kind of journey that marked the lives of Walter Silvester, Karol Wojtyla and Joseph Ratzinger. Each of them left home: for Walter it meant a life in Australia, for Karol and Joseph a life in Rome. But the physical journey was symbolic of a deeper spiritual journey, the journey of hope beyond the ash-heaps. At the heart of that journey there was the mystery of the Cross: these three men in early life knew sorrow and suffering of a kind that could or should have destroyed them as it destroyed many others. Yet, far from destroying them, the experience of war's degradation created them; it made them stronger in character, clearer in vision, richer in hope. It certainly made them more memorable human beings and more evidently men of God.

The Church is called now to leave the Eurocentric world that has been home for so long, and to set out upon a journey like Abraham, knowing not where exactly we are going but that it is God who is leading us into a future where the Church will be truly global. On that journey, some things must be left behind, but other things must go with us on the way. Among these are the luminous qualities that made Walter Silvester and Karol Wojtyla great human beings and men of God, qualities which also mark the life of Joseph Ratzinger. That is why tonight's celebration is not just a moment of nostalgia; it is also a moment of prophecy, because it looks not only to the past in gratitude but also to the future in hope. In these three very different men, we see not only classic products of the Church that was but also prophets of the Church that will be.

I was asked to deliver an oration this evening, and that I have done. The word "oration" is linked to the less familiar word "orison", which means prayer. So before I return to the silence from which I came, let the oration become an orison, as I take up a prayer written by Saint Vincent Pallotti and doubtless known by Father Silvester, who would have liked the simplicity, the humility and the radical thrust of the words penned by the Saint who was his spiritual father:

Not the goods of the world, but God;

Not riches, but God;

Not honours, but God;

Not distinction, but God;

Not dignities, but God;

Not advancement, but God;

God always and in everything.

Amen.