CORNELIUS ERNST

SERMON PREACHED BY FERGUS KERR O.P.

at the REQUIEM MASS at Blackfriars, OXFORD,
on 26th January 1978

> *"Ultimately, I cannot accept the framework of experience demanded and presupposed by the orthodox ecclesiastical tradition. I think I must face this, with consequences I can't foretell. I have another tradition to which I am almost equally respectful–in some ways more so–the tradition of the human heart: novels, art, music, tragedy. I cannot allow that God can only be adored in spirit and in truth by the individual introverted upon himself and detached from all that might disturb and solicit his heart. It must be possible to find and adore God in the complexity of human experience. (Patrick White). On my deathbed, what in memory will I be grateful for? Where will my life have been most fully lived? And memory is a sort of history. The eschatological moment must be a fulfilment and consummation of human history and not its negation merely. Let me grasp this as true; then perhaps the pain may be more bearable. For of course there must be a negation and a separation at the heart of this affirmation and consent; and this remains the importance of the ecclesiastical tradition".*

That is a paragraph, without any editing, which Cornelius set down in a notebook in July or August 1972 (to judge from internal evidence). The exercise book is labelled "Meaning in theology": the first draft, probably of the book that we so much wanted him to write. He covered some twenty pages, in his slightly backhand italic script. His notes become increasingly cryptic and private. The text breaks off with the aphorism: "No human affirmation without negation".

Affirmation and negation, consent and separation: it was the tension, sometimes almost the contradiction, always in the end the productive and illuminating *difference* between one tradition and another, that characterised Cornelius Ernst as a theologian. His was the complex fate of a man permanently open to, because indelibly marked by, a radical diversity of traditions. He could not but seek the truth in the imaginative space constituted by the discontinuities between the several intellectual disciplines which he had mastered, by the interplay of differences between the various

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1978.tb02415.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

cultural worlds in which he was at home, and by his endlessly discriminating exploration of the diverse religious, theological and philosophical traditions with which, in always varying degree, he felt in sympathy.

The ecclesiastical tradition was for him, as my opening quotation shows, primarily a discipline, an ascesis, a negation. It was the sacrificial discipline required, accepted, *loved,* because nothing else could shape, control and direct that "complexity of experience"– that whole manifold of diverging traditions, perspectives and aspirations which were somehow, one day, to be unified in the light of the Gospel.

Cornelius was born in Ceylon (as it then was) in 1924. His mother was Singhalese. His father was a descendant of the Dutch settlers who ruled the island until the British conquered them. They continued to fill posts of authority and responsibility in the civil service and in the great commercial houses of Colombo. Cornelius's father became Government Agent of the Central Province.

Cornelius was sent to school in England, first to Colet Court and then to St Paul's. He was at home when the war began, and thus had to complete his schooling at Royal College, Colombo. As a student at the University of Ceylon he belonged to a generation who were among the first to call for an end to British imperial rule. He became a sympathiser-member of the local communist party and played a very active role for two years, instructing groups in the doctrines of dialectical materialism and assuring them of the cultural importance of Soviet Russia. His break with the Party came, characteristically enough, when he was asked to review a novel by Ilya Ehrenburg which had been awarded the Stalin Prize. He found it such a bad novel that he wrote a very severe review, which the Party officials refused to print. His sense of truth was outraged.

He was able to return to England in 1944. He visited his native land only once after that, in 1969, on his way to attend a theological congress in India. He went immediately to Cambridge. As he wrote some years later: "I shall always be grateful to Cambridge for what I learned there. If I were to try to sum it up in a phrase, I might say that I began to learn there how to reconcile freedom of the spirit with tradition. I read the works of the Danish Protestant Kierkegaard and the Russian Orthodox Berdyaev, and began to glimpse something of the uniqueness of faith and also to recognize that *Christians too were capable of intellectual exploration"* (his own italics).

This was surely one of the essential tensions in his life–between tradition and spiritual freedom, between the uniqueness of the demand of Christian faith and the complete openness of intellectual exploration. Only those who remember how he could switch, abruptly and even savagely sometimes, from being all but

authoritarian in his appeal to tradition to being radically sceptical and destructive in his questioning, far beyond the bounds of conventional theological exploration, can realise the tension that these sudden shifts displayed. For Cornelius, most contemporary theologians went either too far or not nearly far enough. He believed in a certain odium theologicum, and accordingly was frequently enraged by modern Catholic theology. The mention of Hans Kung was always enough to set him off. On the other hand, he could not abide uncritical traditionalism any more than theological liberalism.

At Cambridge, Cornelius began to practise as an Anglican, with the help of the Anglican Franciscans. But within weeks he began to see that "Christian doctrine needed definition and authority—I began to feel my need for the Church". His need for the Church was thus felt from the beginning in terms of *definition:* the negative function that was to remain the importance for him of the ecclesiastical tradition. But only those who know from within what complexity of experience is like would be in any position to criticize this view of the Church. It would sound narrow only to people who have no radical diversity in their inheritance to accept and interpret.

After reading Newman's *Apologia,* of which he had received a copy quite by accident (from a Jewish friend), he was, as he said, "like so many others, deeply moved by Newman's complete intellectual honesty and his purity of mind". A week or so later, "it became quite simply and luminously clear to me that I had to be a Catholic". He sought instruction from the chaplain (then Monsignor Alfred Gilbey), and on the same day decided that he wanted to become a Dominican.

The other permanent mark that Cambridge left on Cornelius was the year's experience of attending the lectures of Ludwig Wittgenstein—from which he "became acquainted with a new standard of philosophical integrity and depth". Consider the tension that this must have created: the tension between fidelity to the Church of definition and authority and fidelity to the new standard of philosophical integrity and depth. But—fides quaerens intellectum—there was no other possible tension more creative and illuminating for him, as we who learned from him all know. There is no use in pretending that it was not sometimes a difficult tension for him to bear.

Cornelius was ordained at Blackfriars, Oxford, in 1954, and three years later he was sent to Hawkesyard, then the philosophy house of the English Dominicans. I was among the first of his students and we spent the year working mostly on St Thomas's commentary of Aristotle's *peri psuches* in conjunction with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* and increasingly against the background of the writings of Martin Heidegger. The following year Cornelius was

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freed from teaching to complete his translation of the first volume of Karl Rahner's *Theological Investigations*. In 1959/60 he was set to teach the neo-scholastic courses *de ecclesia* and *de revelatione*, and certainly recreated them memorably. He remained at Hawkesyard until he moved back to Oxford in 1966 as Regent of Studies. He carried a heavy burden of teaching, in lectures and tutorials, until, at his own request, he moved in the summer of 1975 to the peace and quiet and solitude enjoyed by the chaplain to the Dominican contemplative nuns at Carisbrooke in the Isle of Wight. Quite unexpectedly, he died a few weeks after his fifty-third birthday, of heart failure brought on by a viral pneumonia, on 17th November, 1977.

There are of course many ways of being a theologian. What is characteristic of the way that Cornelius chose, the way (rather) for which he was clearly destined, and the way that he traced for those who were among his students, was that he sought always to retain the tension: to bring out and to keep in play the differences, the discontinuities, between all the various cultural and religious traditions and disciplines with which we are now confronted. One can mention only in passing his longstanding interest in Buddhism, his knowledge of Judaism, his interest in mathematics, biology, music and languages. He was a very competent exegete, especially of the writings of St Paul and St John. After all, can one ever understand the work of Paul without having some real experience of profound inner tensions and contradictions such as he evidently had? Can one ever understand the writings of John without being able to enter into the deep conflicts, the stresses and strains, out of which the Johannine theology was shaped?

From start to finish, however, if one reads through the forty essays and papers that Cornelius published over the last twenty years, it is always Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and St Thomas, who figure. This trajectory may be traced from "Transcendence and Spontaneity in the Metaphysics of Morals" (Dominican Studies, 1954) to "Metaphor and Ontology in Sacra Doctrina" (The Thomist, 1974): his two most substantial papers, apart from his little book on grace, his volume in the new English Summa, and his introduction to the Rahner volume—all of them, whether singly or together, only a painfully meagre record of his work.

It was not the Wittgenstein who (as he himself feared) has only sown a bit of jargon, which has bloomed academically in many ways but particularly as a well-meaning branch of the philosophy of religion. The Wittgenstein that Cornelius respected was the iconoclastic and destructive thinker and questioner whom Alice Ambrose has described (in the Muirhead Library volume, 1972)—whose work would have put an end to the kind of philosophy that now even appropriates his work to prolong its own existence. Heidegger is the other great philosopher of our time who has

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sought to make an end of philosophy. They are both men, it may be noted, who had painfully to learn from their own mistakes. And only those who have known what it is to recognize their own mistakes can ever begin to know what it is to learn. But they are iconoclastic thinkers and radical questioners, as different from each other as could be, but again it is characteristic of Cornelius that he should have made them his reference points, or (rather) that they should have inevitably become so for him. He could never have practised only one way of doing philosophy. For him one way could only be travelled in the light of another. From the conflict of styles, and from the difference of perspectives, the light would come, and no other way.

But finally, of course, it was to St Thomas Aquinas that Cornelius kept returning (his main attraction to the Order I imagine). Characteristically, however, as he said in his beautiful address on Radio 3 (published in *The Listener*, 10 October 1974), "it seems essential to any right understanding of Thomas to begin by acknowledging his remoteness from our world, by undergoing the acute discontinuity between his world and ours, rather like the social anthropologist making a field study of a pre-literate society". The foreignness, the strangeness, of a text was what Cornelius always sought first to stress. You had to understand how remote an idea was before you could be allowed to make it your own. You could never identify anything without seeing its difference. For that matter, perhaps, you had to be a stranger in order to be a friend.

What he envied, in St Thomas, was that "view of the world in which the world effortlessly shows itself for what it is, flowers into the light". He sought "that intuition of claritas, transparent radiance, which was Thomas's original and originating vision". It was only that now, with Thomas's medieval world so remote from us, with Plato and Aristotle and the whole of European metaphysics displaced, with Catholic Christianity itself temporarily in question, and with the whole of the West cast into solution, "any vision of the world will have to provide for the simultaneous and successive manifestation of multiple worlds". It was the sheer complexity of theological work now that Cornelius recognized. But the difficulty of the work was because of the simplicity of the ultimate vision. The human mind, as St Thomas liked to say, cannot see anything simple except by way of making it complicated. And if one may be allowed to thank God for the standard of theological integrity and depth which Cornelius traced for us in his fidelity to the complexity of experience, one may be grateful also that the simplicity of vision was surely granted.

For what, in memory, on his deathbed, *was* he grateful for? I don't know. But on his bedside table there lay his rosary beads, from which he was never parted. There was a slim paperback pub-

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lished in India, containing the poems of the fifteenth-century mystic Kabir, who worked out his own synthesis of Muslim and Hindu beliefs and drew freely on both these disparate traditions in his poetic vision—a significant enough fusion of perspectives. And finally there was the new Penguin volume of the poems of Henry Vaughan. Cornelius always left a marker in the place in a book where he left off reading. The marker this time was a card bearing a prayer to St Thomas: Sancte Thoma ora pro nobis. And the poem at the place Cornelius left off reading is a perfectly fitting cadence with which to conclude:

Quite spent with thoughts I left my cell, and lay
Where a shrill spring tuned to the early day.
I begged here long, and groaned to know
Who gave the clouds so brave a bow,
Who bent the spheres and circled in
Corruption with this glorious ring,
What is his name, and how I might
Descry some part of his great light.

I summoned nature: pierced through all her store,
Broke up some seals, which none had touched before,
Her womb, her bosom, and her head
Where all her secrets lay a bed
I rifled quite, and having passed
Through all the creatures, came at last
To search myself, where I did find
Traces, and sounds of a strange kind.

Here of this mighty spring, I found some drills,
With echoes beaten from the eternal hills;
Weak beams, and fires flashed to my sight,
Like a young east, or a moon-shine night,
Which showed me in a nook cast by
A piece of much antiquity,
With hieroglyphics quite dismembered,
And broken letters scarce remembered.

I took them up, and (much joyed) went about
To unite those pieces, hoping to find out
The mystery; but this near done,
That little light I had was gone:
It grieved me much. At last, said I,
Since in these veils my eclipsed eye
May not approach thee, (for at night
Who can have commerce with the light?)
I'll disapparel, and to buy
But one half glance, most gladly die.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1978.tb02415.x Published online by Cambridge University Press