The Tensions of Ministry

Michael A. Conway

A living faith is gifted, lived, and transmitted from within the horizon that is culture. There is no faith life that is not expressed to some degree or other in the terms of the supporting culture. 'Living faith' – in the sense of being alive and life-giving and in the sense of being an action and an endeavour – is not only expressed in the terms of a 'living culture,' but it is, itself, nourished by that culture within which it sinks its redemptive roots. The achievements of any particular culture become the subsoil in which the life of faith renews the culture and is itself renewed by that same culture in every age.

In this article I would like to consider two achievements of contemporary culture that now have a powerful bearing on 'living' faith and, in the light of these, explore briefly a number of issues in the living out of faith.[1] The first achievement is what I will term the recognition of *singularity* as a way of understanding the human person in its total integrity; and the second is the importance of *story* or narrative in coming to a full realization (in both senses) of our personal identity. Against this background I'd like then to explore what I will call 'intrinsic tensions' in the living out of the life of faith. Whereas these 'tensions' hold in different and varying degrees for all who strive to live faith in our contemporary culture, they are thrown into sharp relief in priestly life, and here I will pay particular attention to a number of crucial issues. This is an initial attempt to reflect on material that is not only complex on a number of levels (theological, sociological, psychological, etc), but that looks to a future, which, although upon us, is not yet established in any definitive and remarkable way.

SINGULARITY

The French philosopher Michel Serres of the *Académie française* claims that the modern individual was invented by St. Paul; but

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1 This article might usefully be read in conjunction with Michael A. Conway, 'Ministry in Transition,' *The Furrow* 65 (2014): 131-49.

Michael A. Coway is a priest of the Diocese of Galway. He is Professor of Faith and Culture at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

it is really only in our own times that this individual has come fully into the light of day.[2] And there is, no doubt, a high degree of truth in this. Christianity has contributed from the beginning to our understanding of the human person, with notable figures such as St. Augustine making a significant contribution. In the European tradition, however, a very particular understanding of the individual and of the person began to emerge with the Reformation; this developed subsequently in the western world, especially in the wake of the Enlightenment, and has now come to full fruition in late post-modernity. In a nutshell, the leading insight is that the *singularity* of the human person takes precedence over all thought systems, over all socio-cultural organizations, and over all institutions.[3] The human person has a unique identity and an infinite value that, ideally, ought not be compromised in the clash with any system, any institution, or any group identity. Singular identity takes priority over corporate identity. There are, of course, occasions when this priority cannot be absolutely respected, but, where possible, the advantage will always favour singularity. This is understood, at its foundation, to be a mechanism that deals with the – all to obvious – power abuse that is endemic in systems of human interaction.

This valuation of singularity is often read in ethical and religious terms to be – in a mirroring gesture – the primacy of the 'otherness' of the Other over the Self.[4] Formulations of this kind owe a great deal to the philosophy of Emmanual Levinas and have filtered through to many discourses and disciplines in the wider contemporary culture. In a recent interview in the *New York Times Magazine*, Marylyn Robinson, for example, comments: 'Being and human beings are invested with a degree of value that we can't honor appropriately. An overabundance that is magical.'[5]

This concern with the singularity of the other (and derivatively of the self) is a unique achievement of European culture. No other culture, past or extant, has achieved this clarity of insight on the inviolability of the human person. No doubt, the remote origins are to be found in the Judeo-Christian idea of each person being made in the image and likeness of God, but in Europe this has been

2 See Michel Serres, 'Petite Poucette,'   http://elusnumeriques.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/Petite-Poucette-Essai-complet.pdf (accessed March 6, 2015).

3 See, for example, László Tengelyi, *L'expérience de la singularité* (Paris: Hermann, 2014).

4 The self is taken to be the originator of oppression, so that a prioritizing of the other is the philosophical (and even religious) gesture that counteracts any violation of the other by the self.

5 See Wyatt Mason, 'The Revelations of Marilynne Robinson,' http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/05/magazine/the-revelations-of-marilynne-robinson.html?_r=0 (accessed March 6, 2015).

thought through to a surprising level, beyond even the discourse of human rights. Of course, practically, the insight remains to some degree an ideal to be realized, but, nonetheless, *it is a central guiding principle for the European mind, and one that cannot be ignored in terms of engaging with, or responding to, that mind*. There is an inviolable integrity associated with individual persons and their freedom, no matter who they are, and it is now incumbent on communal structures to strive to protect this to and at the highest of levels.

This concern with singularity does not mean, however, that the individual stands in splendid isolation over against the community, group identity, or society at large. In other words, the concern with singularity is not to be confused with a new form of individualism. On the contrary, each person is understood to be embraced by a community that values all other persons in their singularity and who, together, constitute common life. The essential axis in understanding a person-in-community is that between *singularity* and *solidarity*. One might say that the issue is not that of being-together, but *how one constitutes being-together*. At the core of this vision of communal life is a profound rejection of hierarchical, power-over, structures. The other is not at the service of the self or the system. It is precisely such structures that are inverted in contemporary culture; and with this the concomitant rejection of the dynamics of authoritarianism.[6] The idea that there is an independent, objective order that is available absolutely to each and everyone is a myth that has its origins in Greek philosophy (particularly Platonism); it has re-emerged more recently with a naturalist mindset that is rooted in the epistemology of the natural sciences. It has always been a temptation for Christianity to appropriate this myth (especially in its neo-Platonic form) in its own ascent to power. Against this, the personal dimension in any account of the human condition is not only not ancillary, but it is essential. That is why singularity matters. There is no credible (i.e. rationally justifiable) account that does not take cognizance of our personal moral intuitions, the meaning that things have for us, and those goods that we find to be morally and spiritually moving.[7] To omit such considerations on the grounds that they do not correspond to our epistemological premises or 'fit' our particular 'take' on the world is to choose wilfully blindness in the face of evident light.

6   To put this in more psychoanalytic language, this, foundationally, puts out of play the masochistic dynamics of the authoritarian personality. See Michael A. Conway, 'Priesthood, Authority and Leadership,' in *Performing the Word*, Festschrift for Ronan Drury, ed. Enda McDonagh (Dublin: Columba Press, 2014), 67-73.

7   See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self; The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), esp. 53-90.

Complementing this emergence or appreciation of singularity, there is a second achievement of contemporary culture, namely, the centrality of story or narrative in realizing identity.

IDENTITY AND STORY

It is really only in the twentieth century that the full importance of *story* or narrative has come to light as a way of approaching human identity. The insight is that for each person there is a story that is unique to that person. And nothing captures the *singularity* of the person more powerfully than the telling of that story. The singularity of each person is mirrored in the story that is unique to each person. A more upmarket way of putting this is to say that we have come to recognize the primacy of narrativity over metaphysics. And this is new. When I say this, what I have in mind is the idea that my personal story and your personal life story is prior to, and takes precedence over, any *closed structure of thinking* (and this can take multiple forms) that either of us might bring to our encounter or our exchange.

For the contemporary self, personal identity is more than anything else a narrative identity. 'Who I am' is no longer conceived as a static reality that reflects some kind of permanence, or universal stability, or absolute categories; rather, personal identity is in itself an unfolding reality. 'Who I am' emerges, unfolds, comes to light, and reaches fullness throughout my life. It is dynamic, self-evolving, and, always, to some degree, a mystery. 'Who I am' comes to light in the unfolding singularity that is me: that is the person that I am. And it is specific to each one, and different for each one. Our commonality, what we hold together and what holds us together, does not remove or obliterate our difference. And for us, meaning, as in 'the meaning of your life,' is established through this very unfolding.

In earlier dispensations and worldviews (including Christian versions) 'meaning' was anchored in the exterior and was beholden to others. This was often understood to be established by your place in the wider system, itself the expression of a cosmic order (and, therefore, unchangeable). Now that has largely been left behind, and meaning is almost exclusively understood to be an interior phenomenon. It is to be found within, not without. Meaning has migrated to the singular, to the personal, to the particular, and to the local. It can be a great challenge for us and for many of our contemporaries to find meaning (and to live a meaningful life) in these changed circumstances. This is so, since meaning itself is now a moving reality, always in transition as we ourselves progress and change throughout life. This very movement, when experienced as instability (as it often is), can be highly disconcerting and explains

why some in contemporary culture resort to fundamentalist stabilities (of various shades, some religious, some not) in order to shield the self from what can be experienced so easily as a precarious situation in terms of identity.

Now this is an enormous difference to earlier modes of understanding the self, where personal identity was conceived principally in terms of stability, and in terms of one's belonging in certain socio-cultural systems. One had a definite place in a greater picture. You found that place early in life and largely kept to it for the remainder of life. Eric Fromm, in his enormously influential book, *Escape from Freedom*, commenting on medieval society, remarks that 'everybody in the earlier period was chained to his role in the social order. A man had little chance to move socially from one class to another, he was hardly able to move even geographically from one town or from one country to another. With few exceptions he had to stay where he was born. He was not even free to dress as he pleased or to eat what he liked.'[8] Not only that, but given that one belonged to a whole, which gave one meaning, each person was for all intents and purposes identical to his or her role in society.[9] There was no real, recognizable distance between the *person* and the *role*. (You will, I suspect, still recognize some of these dynamics in many forms of community living, where meaning is often still rooted in role.)

Now, however, identity – like learning – is a life-long enterprise. It is never entirely stable, or given, or fully known. It is not fixed in some celestial realm that would be put out of joint if you were to act against some hidden, yet to be revealed, normativity. There is no blueprint that you must follow and to which you must conform. It is, rather, an unfolding that belongs in a wider current of unfolding, that includes, for example, family unfolding, communal unfolding, and, for some, ecclesial unfolding. There is now a path to be taken that is not pre-ordained, and that is indebted as much to personal encounter, endeavour and achievement, as it is to the socio-cultural matrix in which one might find oneself. Identity emerges and is shaped by the commitments, the aspirations and the directions that one freely takes in life. All of these are variables, and there is no pre-given 'form' or 'ideal' to which one might map one's identity. And even one's so-called 'mistakes' belong to the unfolding that is identity, and, in fact, can be the most revelatory in terms of finding out 'who I am.' A famous actor in the 1930s, Miss [Tallulah] Bankhead remarked: 'If I had to live my life again I'd make all the same mistakes; only sooner'!

This means, significantly, that the questions that arise for the

8   Eric Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Avon, 1965), 57.
9   Ibid. 58.

contemporary mind, particularly the most personal ones that have to do with one's interiority, with identity, with self, and with God, cannot be answered or resolved in general or universal terms, in any metaphysics, but are met, discussed, unravelled, and provisionally agreed upon in an unfolding story or narrative that is constitutive of one's life. This mirrors a moral orientation that, like a fingerprint, is unique to each person. And, clearly, this unfolding cannot be pre-empted by anyone else or, indeed, by any discourse from within any particular social grouping – and this includes the ecclesial community – to which one belongs. If another attempts to do so, it is an abuse of singularity.

The essential point of this understanding of identity as unfolding is that the 'truth' is in the narrative that accompanies it: your truth is your story; or better: the truth will be your story. I discover 'who I am' in the language and in the story that I tell myself, and that I partly tell to others, about my identity. This happens, mostly in conversation with significant others. I learn what anger, fear, anxiety, hope, love, God, and so on, are through my conversations and in my experiences with others. Interlocution, communication, talk, is now the transcendental condition (in Kant's sense) for identity; and for discovering and establishing truth in the moral order. I cannot come to know 'who I am' if I am not in conversation with an other. Of course, the others in any such conversation are multiple and vary from person to person: they may include family, friends, colleagues, those who share common interests, and, for many, religious leaders or friends who have a particular sensitivity around such questions. There is also the interior conversation that I have with myself and, for some, with my God. Gradually, the uniqueness of my identity emerges with an unfolding singularity: and this requires that each person engage creatively with his or her own life. I emerge as a self only in relation to my chosen interlocutors, and I am free to choose whom these might be: this is not something that I will do lightly. And it is a life-long task.

TENSIONS IN 'LIVING FAITH'

I'd like now to explore what this changed and changing understanding of identity, meaning, the self, and the other might mean for Christian living in a new setting that is shaped by these achievements. And to do this, I'd like to discuss a number of 'tensions' that I see as *necessary* to healthy, creative living, and more specifically to a healthy contemporary life in priesthood. I call these 'tensions' *necessary* because the art of living – and it is an art – is holding the two poles of each tension in place at the same time, even though at the level of abstract reflection they stand in opposition to each other. This requires a certain confidence in one's

own ability to take full possession of the singularity that is one's person. The temptation will always be to surrender to one side of the tension at a cost to the other, and in so doing compromise your singularity and betray authenticity.[10] Further, when you do this, you damage seriously your creative, nurturing, life-giving energy. So I deem it vital that we learn to negotiate these tensions. I can only just sketch some basic tensions here, and these are not meant to be exhaustive.

1. INTERIOR CARE VERSUS EXTERIOR DEMAND
The first tension that I would like to highlight, I'm going to call the tension between 'interior care' and 'exterior demand.' It is between the Self – your self – and the community within which you live and/or exercise your ministry. Within about a month of a new job or a new appointment in ministry you will begin to experience this tension; and sometimes even a lot earlier! A scenario might run something like this: colleagues with whom you work, and live, and pray, and those to whom you minister will begin to make demands on you and your time, and have expectations of you; and these, at some point, will go beyond a healthy configuration of your capacity to respond. In itself, there is nothing wrong or dysfunctional about this; it is, if you like, a simple fact of life and, even, a ratification of your good work! The richer and more effective, for example, that your work or ministry is, the greater will be the exterior pressures that will come upon you! The difficulty is when it becomes an exterior pressure that invades your space and your person to such a degree that it begins to suffocate you.

At that point, it requires a counter-pressure, which can only really be anchored in your interiority. It is a matter of attending to and nurturing your interiority so as to be in a healthy position to address appropriately the external pressure that is having an overbearing impact on you. This amounts to a building up, so to speak, of the 'within' so that it can set appropriate limits on the 'without.' This nurturing of the interior self necessarily means making deliberate choices, when responding to exterior demands. You cannot and you ought not try to respond to everything and everyone. The quality of your life and your ministry is not measured in such quantitative terms.

And the balancing of interior care and exterior demand is unique to each person. It is each person's responsibility to find, configure, and secure the point of balance. And nobody else can know what the healthy parameters of resolution might be for you. Others can, of course, assist you, enable you, and so on. In terms of those who work in ministry, naming, clarifying, and responding

10 See Conway, 'Ministry in Transition,' 134-36.

healthily to this tension is an adult task of all ministry. And you should not apologize for undertaking it. Moreover, the balancing itself changes throughout life. The point of balance for someone, for example, who is just out of college and working in ministry, will not be the same as for that same person working in a different ministry two decades later. And whereas the earlier task of finding that initial balance is especially significant in terms of learning the art itself of balancing, each new constellation of life makes its own demands in terms of finding and establishing again a new and healthy equation. And most importantly, you must responsibly and critically make your choices in the expectations that you are going to respond to – in more classical language, there is a process of discernment that is very important. Avoiding making a responsible choice, pandering to popularity, or reacting only to the loudest voices is the most irresponsible way of choosing. Inevitably your choices will lead to disappointment and even frustration for others. It is, however, your own integrity in resolving this tension between 'external demand' and 'interior care' that will enable you to lead a ministry that is at the same time self-nurturing and life-giving for others.

It is evident that one must be careful, too, about the expectations that one might have of colleagues in ministry. And, perhaps, it is worth being at least alert to the difficulty that many have in ministry, particularly priests, in finding the equilibrium in this tension. I suspect that this is particularly acute for younger priests, who often find themselves in situations that in the recent past would have been carried and responded to by a much greater number of clergy. The numbers have changed, but the expectations – even at a macro-ecclesial level – remain largely the same.

If you capitulate in this task and avoid taking responsibility for this tension, you will not only be very frustrated by your ministry and in terms of your own identity, but you run the risk – depending on your circumstances – of succumbing to exhaustion and even burn out. This is a more difficult way of learning that you need to take responsibility for this tension as it plays out for you.

2. 'PERSONAL CONVICTION' VERSUS 'TRADITION'

I now come to a second tension, again, that is *necessary* and for which you need to take responsibility in terms of your singularity. It is the tension between what I will term 'personal conviction' and 'tradition.' When I say that it is necessary, I mean that the tension itself is life-giving: it 'should' be there. It is a 'good' and not something to be avoided. You grow as a person (and as a priest) in contemporary ministry in negotiating this tension for yourself and for those among and with whom you minister. It also underlines

that you matter: you, the person that is you, are of absolute value. And again healthy living is not to be had at the poles of this tension, but in negotiating a new and creative reality between the poles.

When I say 'personal conviction,' I have in mind those fundamental insights and understandings that each person arrives at through the journey and the story of life. Sometimes it means that you see and understand things very differently from everyone else. Sometimes such insights are profoundly personal and are not shared with others. Sometimes, you may not even feel safe in sharing your personal convictions with those about you. It is a matter, if you like, of an 'interior theology,' which is totally free and rooted in the deep fabric of your own life, faith, and being.

With the Christian tradition, we have an enormous richness in terms of lived Christian experience, in terms of ideas, in terms of structures, in short, in terms of an inheritance. The difficulty with, and limitation of, this is that it can blind us to the creative element in the present. The life of faith is not a re-enactment of a drama that has already been written, rehearsed, and staged. Rather, it is a living reality in the present that is at once a re-appropriation of a past and a realization of something absolutely new in the present. Its very novelty can escape the framing of our language and categories, precisely because it is new. We often see and recognize the journey of redemption (both personal and communal) only in hindsight, where (and because) death has been the place of resurrection.

The two levels – the personal and the communal – do not, however, stand absolutely apart. Your precise present is essential to ecclesial, communal life, even if your contribution, or what you are about, never emerges into the full light of public visibility. We are not hosts to a tradition that might use us parasitically to perpetuate itself; nor for that matter are we cogs in an ecclesiastical or civil machine. The game of chess is not a game played by kings, queens, and bishops: they, too, are on the board! We are all on the chessboard together and the game is played with each of us having our particular and irreplaceable place. We are each and everyone co-creators of the tradition; each one having a unique contribution to make to this ever renewing life of faith. Tradition is not something that is given to us absolutely: it is a life within which we find ourselves – in every sense – and which we, for our part, live in order to renew. This *living out* of faith (in both senses of living the faith and living *ex fide*) demands that we, for our part, make it our own, that we find our path in the light of tradition, and that we boldly contribute to its realization for our own times. This is a task for each one of us that is rooted ultimately in our singularity. Tradition should not be conceived as a prison; it is, rather, a richness to be explored and digested. We are not incidental

to the tradition as it is realized in our times; it lives essentially through us, for us, and in us. This is what it is to be the body of Christ in St. Paul's sense. And once again, no one can take your place in resolving the shape and the form that your life will take not only in engaging the richness of the past, but also in rejecting something of what has been inherited from the past. This tension is visible as a tension between 'creativity,' on the one side, and 'stability,' on the other. If everything were 'stability' (i.e. tradition as given absolutely), it would in principle be the stone-dead stability of death, and if everything were 'creativity,' it would be an unstructured chaos. It would also be exceedingly difficulty to reach the depths of Christian life, if you could not rely on, and benefit from, the experience of other, earlier Christians. There is already an existent scaffolding for Christian living that has been built by others and that enables us in our building of the Kingdom.

Each of us contributes – in all kinds of unseen ways – to the interior life of the Church. The life of faith is not a material reality that we like puppets transfer from one generation to the next. Notwithstanding the etymology of the word tradition, the life of faith is essentially something other than a mere passive 'handing on'; it is, rather, a living reality that lives through us in such a fashion as to respect completely and enrich the mediation that is our human person. The life of faith is a reality that is re-created through our living out of our faith and through our ministry – in other words, through our person, through our action, through our thought, and through our interior life. Like a fingerprint, this, in its total complexity, is unique to each one of us. Christian life is always new, fresh, creative, and different from what went before. '"Listen up," Francis told thousands in St. Peter's Square on Pentecost Sunday 2014. "If the Church is alive, it must always surprise," he said. Then came the mischievous grin. "A Church that doesn't have the capacity to surprise is a weak, sickened, and dying Church. It should be taken to the recovery room at once."'[11]

Again, to capitulate in the task of negotiating this tension – as, for example, in a traditionalist stance – is to run the risk of letting your most creative energy die in you. It is to neglect irredeemably your interior creativity. And the danger is that this would be to repress dimensions of your self that would seek satisfaction in the deadly darkness of your life, rather than in its transparent light. Robert Louis Stevenson's story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde captures well this dynamic.[12] Indeed, psychoanalytic readings of this story cast

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11 **Austen Ivereigh,** *The Great Reformer: Francis and the making of a radical Pope* (London: Allen & Unwin, 2014), 391.

12 For a reflection on this story, see Robert Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, ed. William Booth (Shaftesbury: Element, 1992), 63-81.

a telling light on the dangerous dynamics of repression in the self and the grievous consequences for one's interior health, that may, in turn, be acted out in the most dysfunctional of ways. Addictions, for example, among clergy are often rooted in a fundamental dis-empowering of the self that has not been addressed and along the lines that I am suggesting here.[13] Sometimes an unhealthy understanding of 'service to others' masks a serious neglect of the self, which, then, in time, leads inevitably to an abuse of self and of others. There is a fatal symmetry between how one cares for oneself (body, mind, and spirit) and how one relates (and ministers) to others.

So that's the second tension: and once again it is important to underline that no one can speak or act for you in resolving this tension. Your singularity and your story are the parameters of resolution.

3. THE 'SELF' VERSUS THE 'INSTITUTION'
The third tension that I would like to highlight is connected to the second one, but requires, I would suggest, an independent consideration: it is the tension between the 'self' and the 'institution' or better the 'institutionality' of the ecclesial community.[14] This tension might be characterised equally as that between 'authenticity' and 'conformism.' On the one hand, you need to be faithful to yourself, to your vision of who you are and, in particular, to how you live out your humanity in relation to others. This involves your discovery of, your nourishing of, and your responding to your own life of faith. This is the deepest level of your humanity and calls for the highest level of integrity, at least in the forum of your interiority, where you enjoy absolute freedom. The concern with *authenticity* that has emerged in our culture will only underline and ratify this for you. This is one pole of this particular tension. The other is what I am designating as the 'institutionality' of the ecclesial community. This stands for all the structural elements that serve the proclamation and living out of the Gospel. And these are often presented in a 'power-over' form, which underscores their capacity to limit our action and being in the world. The ecclesial community in its widest sense requires the element of 'institutionality' to be effective in the dynamics of history. The so-called 'institutional Church' was consolidated in the Middle Ages in conjunction with the Feudal system of social order and continues to be a vehicle of enormous power; and this especially so for the lives of priests. The power that these elements exercise is, however, ambiguous:

13 See, for example, Marie Keenan, *Child Sexual Abuse and the Catholic Church: Gender, Power, and Organizational Culture* (Oxford: OUP, 2011).
14 See Conway, 'Ministry in Transition,' 140-41.

it can in extraordinary ways be a vehicle in the realization of the Kingdom of God, but it can, equally, be used to silence, sideline, and even alienate the prophetic or creative voice in the Christian community. It is naïve not to recognize this clearly. The technology of control and 'power-over-the-other' that is endemic to this element of 'institutionality' means that to some degree or other one must always consciously keep it at a distance: the temptation to power-over-the-other is always present. The highly influential American poet and essayist, Robert Bly, who has done enormous work on men's psychic and spiritual health makes an extraordinary observation about men's relationship to institutions and what men might need to do in terms of their spiritual growth:

> A man has an effect on 'the world' mainly through institutions. So we could say that in the second half of life a man should sever his link with institutions … severing ties with institutions is not a habit in the United States, where a man ordinarily becomes more deeply embedded, whether it be an insurance company or a university during his forties and fifties than he ever was earlier.[15]

Although this observation is made with respect to the US, it can just as easily be applied here in Europe, and one might easily add the Church in its institutional form to the listing of institutions to which men, and especially priests, can become addictively attached at a cost to their own spiritual integrity.

Each person in ministry is always inevitably embedded in the 'institutionality' of the Church, and it is vital (both for ourselves and for the sake of others) that we keep something back of ourselves from this embedding. This is to preserve our human integrity (which cannot ever be subsumed by this element of 'institutionality') and safeguard others from the dynamics of the will to power-over-the-other. There needs to be a corrective moment, so to speak, in the dynamic that would absolutize the 'institutionality' of the Church and turn what is only a 'means' into an 'end.' In other words, one needs to avoid the idolatry of 'institutionality.'

Ultimately this is a matter of personal authenticity and of allowing and enabling the singularity that is you to take its legitimate place in the economy of redemption. The challenge is to find your place in this tension between 'authenticity' and 'conformism' without compromising your singularity.

4. THE SPIRIT-SELF VERSUS THE BODY-SELF
The final tension that I would like to explore briefly – and once again without abandoning either pole of the tension, but holding them

15 Bly, *A Little Book on the Human Shadow*, 80.

together in a personal synthesis that is unique to your singularity – is the tension between what I will call the Spirit-self, on the one hand, and the Body-self, on the other. When I speak of the 'spirit' in the Spirit-self I have in mind what in German is called '*Geist*' or in French '*l'esprit*,' which has a wider connotation than the English word. It is the 'pneumatic,' the life principle, understood in the widest sense. And when I speak of 'body' in the Body-self I mean your rootedness in the created, cosmic order and this embraces your physical body with all its passions, affective needs, emotional dynamics, and your wider embodiment in a family, in a community, and so on. Greek thought was not able be hold this tension: it strove to suppress one pole and attain completely the other. Indeed, this goes some way in explaining Nietzsche's comment that: 'Plato is a coward in the face of reality. Consequently he flees into the ideal.'[16] The body and the created order needed to be escaped so as to live in the spiritual realm of the transcendental Ideas. A neo-platonic version of this survives in contemporary culture (and even in Christianity). In our education system, for example, there is a particularly high premium placed on intellectual achievement over other achievements: it has even been said that we really value only one side of the brain! One of the great scandals in Christianity is that it integrated into its *Weltanschauung* so much of this deep distrust of our embodiment in the created order – and particularly in the somatic body – despite its being a religion of incarnation, which values the category of the 'body' in so many profound ways. There is an almost demonic fascination with the Ideal and with it a deeply disturbing prioritizing of the mind over the body. And the irony is that from a certain point of view the body as a source of truth is far more reliable and truthful than the mind, which can easily suppress, deceive, and mislead: that is the principle of the lie detector!

The Trappist abbot, André Louf observes that 'it is false to live from a high ideal … We must learn to live from our deepest longing, from our wants and our needs. They must come to the surface; they must be given their rights. Since it is through them that our genuine human life flows in all its depth.'[17] No matter what our feelings and desires might be, we need to honour them, respect them, and discern for ourselves (often with the help of others, of course) what it is we are going to realize in the journey and story of life. The Christian worldview has yet to find a healthy relationship with the somatic in all its richness. And I imagine that

16 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, in *Werke*, vol. 3 (Köln: Könemann, 1994), 379.
17 André Louf, *Demut und Gehorsam* (Münsterschwarzach: Vier-Türme-Verlag, 1979), 24.

something of the deep unrest that goes with this particular tension is particularly acute for priests, who are often manipulated by society and ecclesial institutionality to gravitate exclusively to one pole at a cost to the other: we are men, who happen to be priests, not priests who happen to be men.

I do not need to rehearse the obvious debates here beyond observing that each person must learn to honour both poles of his or her identity and hold that tension between the Spirit-self and the Body-self. It is vital to achieving a healthy balance in terms of our humanity, and no one can take that task from you or dictate to you as regards the position that reflects your singularity and that is in harmony with your story.

And again, if you capitulate in this task and value or neglect one pole at a cost to the other, it is destructive of your identity and of your person as a single unity. It also sets up interior battles that cannot really be resolved in a fashion that permits a credible quality of life.

Let me re-iterate as a final point that the tensions that I have been exploring are a *good*. There is no given ontic map that could resolve these various tensions in a definitive way for anyone. We do not live by an ideology of any kind. It is inherent to personal freedom, conscience, and integrity that only you can find the constellation that is life-giving and healthy for you. This is your dignity as a person.[18] Through these various tensions, you are creative of your own life, of the life of those whom you love, and of the wider community within which you serve in ministry.

> I would love to live
> Like a river flows,
> Carried by the surprise
> Of its own unfolding.[19]

FLUENT – *John O'Donohue*

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18 See Ladislas Örsy, 'The Divine Dignity of Human Persons in *Dignitatis humanae*,' *Theological Studies* 75(2014): 8-22.

19 John O Donohue, *Conamara Blues* (London: Bantam Books, 2000), 41.