

The Oaks in Winter: A foreword to Michael O'Brien's book, *The Family and the New Totalitarianism*.

The sharpest trials are the finest furbishing,
The most tempestuous weather is the best seed-time.
A Christian is an oak flourishing in winter.

The words of the 17th century religious poet Thomas Traherne have stayed with me ever since I first read them twenty-five years ago. I have never forgotten them because they express in a few potent phrases a fundamental element of our Faith: we are a people who stand as a sign of hope, and a sign of contradiction, in the midst of this confused world.

I know little about the climate of England, where the poet wrote these lines, but I assume the British oak must be famous for standing sturdy against the North Atlantic rain; must shake its arms in defiance against the occasional fall of swift-melting snow. The poet's metaphor is a powerful one, and I have always loved it, though it lacks a certain accuracy for those of us who live in sub-Arctic regions. We too have oaks, the kings of the eastern woodlands, but they do not exactly flourish in our sort of winter.

A few weeks ago I went hiking with our children on a high hill that overlooks the valley in Ontario where we live. We approached the summit of a rocky cliff that faces the village. Above us on the crest there was a stand of oaks thrashing their burgundy leaves against a cloudy sky. They were among the last trees to retain their foliage, for the winds had combed the surrounding forests, tearing away the blanket of stunning colour which covers it for a few weeks each year.

In late autumn everything is stripped down to its essential form. On this particular day the rolling muscles of the earth were uncovered, the arteries of creek and river were laid bare; the light in the sky was alternately cruel and exhilarating, slate-grey with occasional gashes of cerulean blue. A hawk flew over, soaring on updrafts. A few last yellow birch leaves twirled by on a crosswind. It was stark and beautiful—so beautiful in fact that the children abandoned their customary galloping and noisemaking, and were content to sit and to see—to gaze with deep draughts of looking.

We sat on the edge of the cliff for a long time, and after awhile we prayed together for the people of the valley, for the many good enterprises that are bustling there. We prayed for our own needs, for the Church, and for families throughout the world. As we prayed, a gust of wind burst through the woods behind us. It was strangely warm, despite the cold day, and it carried the intoxicating smells of the ending year. Within that pungent aroma was the smell of acorns. A lovely smell, but one that contains messages about death and rebirth. It is a commonplace that written into creation are "words" from our Creator, but it bears recalling from time to time. God has designed all living things, even the simplest, to be messengers, to bear a kind of witness to larger truths. An acorn, a maple key, pips in a pine cone, even the lowly mustard seed—tiny, deceptively simple—contain a vast library of meaning. A seed is so much more than just a code-word for distant Spring. More than just a statement of faith on the part of a tree, a biological equivalent to the virtue of hope. A seed is a kingdom, a world really. It has the future wrapped tightly in every cell, waiting to unfold; entire forests lie buried in each small nut.

God is lavish. Many seeds are dropped onto the soil. Many do not sprout. Yet beneath the appearance of waste nothing is wasted, nothing lost. Giant trees crash to the forest floor, decompose and become the soil out of which the saplings arise. Similarly, in human affairs, movements are created, rise, do a work of God in the world, decline, go back into the soil, and provide the rich humus out of which new life springs. Generations come and go. Sun and rain, winter and summer, seed time and harvest. Always the Word of God remains constant. His people are called over and over, generation after generation, back into this constancy, back to this mysterious fluid stability—the only real security worth having.

It is important to remember this, especially now, for we are entering a period of extreme instability in the human order. The mighty of the earth are moving towards absolute power in an effort to establish control over what they perceive to be the chaos of the human condition. It is a harsh period, for winter seizes the hearts of many. Love grows cold. Honesty declines. Crime reaches epic proportions. Marriage is picked to pieces by analysts; the relations between men and women have become horribly complicated, fraught with tension, riddled with ideology. The family farm has given way to the factory farm. The village to the metropolis. The craftsman to the mega-machine. The shop to the corporation. Men hurl their malice upon each other in high-tech wars, though the machete is still in use here and there. Millions of children die unseen within the death-chambers of our clinics and hospitals, accomplishing, for sheer numbers, what Auschwitz, Bosnia, and Rwanda could not begin to do. Belief in human life falters, hearts are pumped full of dread. Theorists discuss ways in which the death of billions of human beings can be accomplished effectively, humanely—billions of miracles, billions of mysteries. And thus, more and more people are drawn into despair on one hand, or sensualism on the other, searching for the merest hint of the great fire of Love—a love that longs for them to turn to Him, if they would only believe.

Pope John Paul II has often pleaded with the peoples of the West, most urgently in his encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, to turn away from their massive consumption, their omni-economies, their addiction to comfort heaped upon comfort—to all those things that secretly contribute to the piling of victim upon victim in the dark places of our society, and which openly push us all toward another end of things. He asks us to build more human-size economies, more responsible ways of living, to create a civilization of love in the midst of what he calls a "culture of death." He asks the impossible of us, because it is precisely the impossible to which we are called.

The Holy Father speaks often of the coming of the third millennium, and he does not want us to wait passively for it. He sees it as a time for a new evangelization, as seed time, as a time of flourishing. But he knows also that there will be a death involved, a death to our selfishness. Advent, placed so strategically at the dying of the year, is good training for this. We must not be like the ancient pagans who watched the coming of winter with a kind of terror-stricken obsession, mesmerized by the specter of death, enslaved to death, sacrificing their children to the insatiable appetite of death. During Advent, we learn to gaze into the growing dark with Spring in our eyes. Impossible? Yes, it is. But Christians must always keep an icon of the impossible in their hearts as a model of the true shape of reality, so much bigger than our terrors.

This is the time to recall that Mary's womb contained the impossible, the unthinkable. In that sacred little room of hers was nurtured the seed that would save the world from darkness. Encoded there, as if on a double helix, were the martyrs and mystics, the cathedrals and the statues, the Christian East and the West, the songs of the monks, the encyclicals, the poems, the millions of children who might not otherwise have been. Is it

any wonder that we are rather fond of her? Is it any wonder that at Christmas we think of her so much? Is it so odd that we should call her Mother?

Joseph too—small, hidden man from the least of villages—he contained the heart of the true father, and made it possible for a new world to come into being. Joseph—foster father to a fatherless world, living icon of the Father. He remained open to messages and thus helped make it possible for God to come as man. His obedience protected the very existence of the child. His vigilance, his justice, his love, made it possible for the child to grow into a man. What a marvel this is—and what a scandal. Why all this weakness? Why the poverty, the smallness, the hiddenness? It does not make sense: God born in a cold time. Heaven come down to earth in a season of peril. The savior of Israel revealed as powerlessness during the final ruin of the nation of Israel—for those people, our elders in the faith, it was the End. Therein lies the puzzle, the paradox, and the scandal: he came at the worst possible moment, let us say even the impossible moment, and the world, which was powerful and sick unto death, burning and dying in its sins, was born again.

It is hard to get your mind around it. It has to be heard again and again: God's strength is to be found in weakness. Nazareth of Galilee was the place where that small, clear, indestructible message was first lived. It is lived again and again in each generation, often in the face of overwhelming odds. Civilizations rise and fall. Saints and tyrants, kings and poor men are born, grow old, and die. Cultures, theories, opinions, fashions, theologies, movements, rise up and disappear again. That is why our faith can never be merely a system of religious thought, a set of ethics or a beautiful culture—as necessary as those are. When everything is stripped down to its essential form, our faith is a belief in Jesus, true God and true Man, the only Christ, dwelling in the heart of His Church, He who was, who is, and who is to come. That is why our home is the universal Church, the throne on which He reigns, a Church that is within time and yet outside of time. That is why we can say that the Church is a billion people gathered to worship the Eucharistic Presence of Jesus lifted up over the world on a papal altar in glorious Saint Peter's, and at the same time it is a battered priest dressed in rags saying a clandestine Mass in a ditch in a concentration camp.

The Church passes through eras in which she glories in the summer's triumph, and other periods when she goes down into the cold earth, apparently beaten. It may well be that her highest glory is to be found precisely there, hidden beneath a carpet of leaves, to all appearances dead, but very much alive, waiting for Spring. In this regard, I think often of one of the thousands of unknown saints who are buried outside Rome, a martyred girl lying in the catacombs of St. Callistus, in a tomb inscribed with words that leap like fire across the ages: "Sleep, little dove, without bitterness, and rest in the Holy Spirit."

Little girl, overcomer of lions! She will rise on the Last Day. We will see her face to face. We will chat with her, our small sister, our mother in the spirit. She too is the Church and she too is Nazareth. So also are my daughters, climbing the mountain, playing in the wind. So also my sons. So too, your children. Yes, the Church is all of us. She is, indeed, the "people of God." And yet, so much more than just the sum of her members. She is an incarnation of Christ in us and us in Christ. Whenever we make a separation in our minds between the "People of God" and the "Mystical Body of Christ," as if the Church and Jesus were two uneasily yoked entities, we get into trouble. We begin to misread reality. We deepen the wounds from which the Body is now bleeding so copiously.

The Church in Nazareth is composed of the extraordinary sacrifices of a victim soul, unknown to anyone except God, and also the trillions of ordinary diapers changed by parents, offered up as a sacrifice. It is to be found in the great thing done well for the love of God: the genius's sculpture, the essays of a brilliant theologian, the missionary's journey. But her secret glory is the "little" thing done well for love of God, the weeded garden, the patient attention to an old person's reminiscence, the "small" temptation resisted, the teaching of a child to pray.

If Nazareth tells us anything, it is that such things can determine the future of the world. Nazareth is a mother's hug and her saying, "I know it was an accident," when you knock over and smash her statue of Our Lady. It's a nice sandwich in your lunch box, and a new baby brother. It is giving life during a season of death, and being willing to pay the price. It is the holy folly of caring for the stranger dying of a shameful disease, loving him as if he were a son or daughter. Or the laborer trudging off in the dawn to a day of toil for the sake of his family. It is worship and tradition, creativity and fun, and exhaustion. It is adoration. It is consolation and desolation. Nor should we forget popcorn and a new box of crayons. It is weeping by an open coffin and it is laughing at a newborn's small pink toes curling and uncurling around your finger. It is being thankful to God for existence itself, and telling Him. It is making a hearth full of sweet fire in your home—the domestic church. And it is zeal for the House of the Father—the universal Church. It is defense of the truth, and mercy for the sinner. It is a courageous bishop teaching with fidelity, and a layman listening with attention. It is the wedding night and the confessional. It is a nun at worship, a mother in labor, a craftsman with his tools. It is a wild birthday party. It is a rag-tag family sitting on a mountain praying for their brothers and sisters.

On that blustery afternoon, the children, being less ponderous than their father, could take only so much stillness. They scattered across the mountain top in search of discoveries. I was happy enough to just sit where I was. Eventually they all came back with things to show. Some had gathered oak clusters, brownish-purple or wine-red. Pockets were crammed full of acorns, some old and black, missing their berets, others green and jaunty in fresh caps. One child had found a miniature garden of moss, from which red trumpets blared their soundless music. The youngest lad braved the prickles of a juniper bush and pried off those old dead berries that look so deceptively like blueberries. He chewed the bitter mash for a few seconds then spit it out violently. At that point his older sister ran up to us. She had found a white fungus growing on a stump, and demonstrated how you could draw on the surface, as if on a blackboard. She drew a tree, a sun, a house with smoke coming from the chimney and, underneath it, her name. These frail letters inscribed on the surface of creation tell a story larger than the sum of its parts. "I am," they proclaim. "I was here," they say. "The world is beautiful. It makes me happy and I love it!" And perhaps at a deeper level, it reveals the soul's awareness that, "He who made the mighty oak made me."

The Church may go on to the third millennium and convert the world, or it may shrink to a small remnant of believers. We do not know. Only Christ knows. But of this we can be sure: the family will remain what it is—an oak flourishing in winter. The family will continue, as it always has, to make the seeds of the second spring that is coming after this present winter. When the tyrants and the propagandists and the experimenters have all gone, when the hatred and hopelessness has exhausted itself, the earth will grieve and be born again. The Church and the family will remain. Then, all who have sown in struggle will reap a harvest in joy.