

PROLOGUE

Listen to the Spirit

Listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

—REVELATION 2:7

Much of what we call Christian is purely and simply monastic.

—E. R. CURTIUS¹

Those who question the structures of contemporary society at least look to monks for a certain distance and critical structure, which, alas, is seldom found. The vocation of the monk in the modern world . . . is not survival but prophecy.

—THOMAS MERTON²

Cheap grace is the mortal enemy of our church. Our struggle today is for costly grace.

Cheap grace means grace as bargain-basement goods, cut-rate forgiveness, cut-rate comfort, cut-rate sacrament; grace as the church's inexhaustible pantry, from which it is doled out by careless hands without hesitation or limit. It is grace without a price, without costs.

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER³

1. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, 515; quoted in Leclercq, *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God*, 256.

2. Merton, "Letter to Jean Leclercq, July 23, 1968," in *Survival or Prophecy?*, 129.

3. Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, 43.

PERHAPS IT WAS A moment of inspiration, a whispering of the Spirit that prompted me to ask: “Is this a monastic moment?” during a trustees’ meeting of the Volmoed Community in February 2020. We were discussing the way forward as South Africa was about to go into its first lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasingly isolated from the world, we were unable to receive guests and provide the hospitality for which our community primarily exists. As a result, our revenue was rapidly dwindling, and the threat of staff retrenchment loomed. The normal was coming to an end and we were seeking to find our way into the future. Central to our discussion, apart from emergency fundraising, was whether we should become more intentional in character. If so, we were uncertain what this meant or how we should proceed. This book arose out of the ensuing conversation. I suspect it will strike a chord with others elsewhere who are engaged in a similar discussion.

Since its modest beginnings thirty-five years ago, the Volmoed Community today comprises a growing resident community, a relatively large staff, and many associates. Isobel and I became resident members in May 2003 after my retirement from the University of Cape Town.⁴ Week by week, Volmoed welcomes guests and groups, young and old, from across South Africa and the world, people of different denominations, some of other faiths, and many who are searching for faith and renewal. We pray together; host retreats, workshops, and seminars; and run art and youth leadership programs. But the COVID pandemic halted us in our tracks. We were forced to face an uncertain future. Was this, then, a “monastic moment” for us, as the Spirit seemed to be saying?

There were tentative nods of agreement among the trustees, though uncertainty as to its meaning. The fact that a few months previously a small group of Anglican Benedictine monks had come to live among us, and that the prior of the Taizé Community in France, Br. Alois, had recently visited, undoubtedly triggered off something in our collective subconscious. For soon we were engaged in an intense discussion about becoming a more intentional community in partnership with our monastic brothers as they daily live among us according to the *Rule of St Benedict*. But this required that we should know more about that *Rule* and where the brothers were coming from. So, let me take you back to where it all began.

4. See de Gruchy, *I Have Come a Long Way*, 237–43.

Where Heaven and Earth Meet

The beginnings of Christianity in Africa can be traced back to first-century Egypt. According to tradition, the Coptic church was established in Alexandria by St Mark the Evangelist around 66 CE. Scholars may debate that claim, but there can be no doubt that Christian monasticism began in Egypt in the fourth century, making Africa its birthplace. Today, there are many monasteries spread across the continent, from Cairo to Cape Town. Volmoed lies 120 kilometers to the east of Cape Town en route to Cape Aghulas, the southern-most tip of Africa. Close to Cape Aghulas is the Blombos Cave, a site of Middle Stone Age human habitation and, more significantly, of human creativity. Some even claim that this is where human civilization as we now know it began. It is likely that the caves along the coast between Blombos and Volmoed, and even those along the Onrus River, which runs through Volmoed itself, were paleolithic dwelling places.

By any account, Volmoed is a remarkable location in which to live and write, beautiful and bountiful, and famous for its indigenous flowers and adjacent vineyards. This explains why the valley in which it is situated is named Hemel en Aarde, a mystical place where “heaven meets earth.” People who come to Volmoed keep telling us that God meets them in this place. But earthly paradises are not exempt from sin and injustice, any more than monasteries, nor can beauty be fully appreciated unless coexisting ugliness is also recognized. In the early nineteenth century Volmoed was home to a leper colony, and the lepers lived at Volmoed because they were outcasts who were prohibited from living nearer to the fishing village of Hermanus eleven kilometers to the east. But around the year 1800, the British colonial government in Cape Town asked German Moravian missionaries from Genadendal, a mission station a day’s horse ride away, to serve the needs of the lepers, and it was these missionaries who named the place Volmoed—meaning “full of courage and hope”—and gave the valley its name.

Eventually the valley was proclaimed farmland and the lepers were taken and confined to the notorious Robben Island in Table Bay where, a century later, Nelson Mandela would be incarcerated. We at Volmoed cannot ignore that underside of Volmoed’s history as the graves of lepers on our property continue to remind us. And, today, for all its quietness and beauty, Volmoed is but a few kilometers from noisy and crowded townships where many live in shacks and are unemployed, some of them

refugees from elsewhere in Africa, but most migrants from rural areas. We are daily aware of this enormous social and economic gap and the urgent need for a more just society.

The Volmoed Community was born during the state of emergency in South Africa in 1986 when many people were traumatized during the final days of the struggle to end apartheid.⁵ Those who founded the community, Bernhard Turkstra, a hotelier by trade and a recent convert to evangelical Christianity, and Barry Woods, an Anglican parish priest, shared a vision of a place set apart for God's ministry of hospitality, healing, reconciliation, and hope. With few resources, but with the confidence of youthful faith, they managed to buy Volmoed, a defunct flower farm which boasted an old run-down farmhouse, a broken shed, and very few modern amenities. But it had a mystical aura and was surrounded by hills and caves where hermits would feel at home in "entertaining angels unaware," as some visitors to Volmoed claim to have done.

To make the vision he shared with Barry a reality, Bernhard and his wife, Jane, soon took up residency on the farm and pioneered the way. Within a short time, others, drawn from various churches and parishes, as well as from the local community and even from as far afield as England and Russia, shared in the venture, clearing alien vegetation, building accommodation, providing financial help, and participating in events. Legal documents were drafted to form a trust that could own property and open a bank account, and trustees were duly appointed. Soon others took up residency. Eventually Volmoed could accommodate sixty guests, and in 2002 its Chapel of Thanksgiving was completed and dedicated. But there was no handbook or *Rule* to guide the community. Everything depended on a shared commitment to Christ and the gospel, the wisdom of experience, and a desire to achieve its founding vision.

Isobel and I first visited the community the year it was founded at the suggestion of our son Anton, who was part of a youth group clearing the land of alien vegetation. We were accompanied by the distinguished American theologian Martin Marty and his wife, Harriet, who were our guests at the University of Cape Town. Not long after that visit, Marty contributed an article to the *Christian Century* in which he said:

Thomas Merton once wrote of his monastery in Kentucky: "This is the center of America . . . an axle around which the whole country turns." I have also thought of Koinonia Farm in

5. See de Gruchy and de Gruchy, *The Volmoed Journey*.

Georgia, Ghost Ranch in New Mexico, and Holden Village in Washington. One afternoon . . . I stumbled on such a potential center for South Africa . . . Volmoed they call it.⁶

Among other early visitors to the community were nuns from the Evangelical Sisterhood of Mary, a Lutheran religious order founded by Basilea Schlink in Darmstadt, Germany in 1947, at a traumatic time in a postwar Europe. It was also a time in which monasteries around the world enjoyed a revival. During their brief visit to Volmoed, the Darmstadt sisters also prophesied that Volmoed would one day become a community as well-known as the Iona Community in Scotland and the Taizé Community in France, confirming what Marty had written. But in those early days such prophecies, while encouraging, seemed far from reality as the struggle against apartheid intensified in what turned out to be its final phase, and as Volmoed struggled to find its feet and survive.

Yet, providentially as it now appears, it was during those traumatic times of transition from apartheid to the “new” South Africa that Desmond Tutu (now the Patron of Volmoed) invited the Order of the Holy Cross, with its mother house in West Park, New York, to send monks to South Africa. He believed that the building of a just society was contingent on spiritual renewal, and that a monastery could play an important role in the process. Indeed, Tutu’s own spiritual formation was profoundly influenced by the monastic tradition, as we shall later note.⁷ As it happened, on the very day that Nelson Mandela was released from prison in February 1990, Isobel and a group of other South Africans were on a Benedictine retreat led by Esther de Waal, the internationally known Benedictine associate (or oblate), along with Br. Timothy, one of the monks who had been sent to establish the monastery. When it was eventually established in rugged hill country outside Grahamstown (now known as Makhanda) in the Eastern Cape, the monastery was named Mariya uMama weThemba (Mary the Mother of Hope).

In August 2013, ten years after we moved to Volmoed, Isobel and I went at the invitation of the monks to their monastery to lead workshops on Julian of Norwich (1342–1413), about whom Isobel has written and taught me much,⁸ and on Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945). Little did we know that six years later, the monastery would relocate from Makhanda

6. Marty, “Hope and Courage in Volmoed.”

7. See Battle, *Reconciliation*, 128–33.

8. de Gruchy, *Making All Things Well*.

to Volmoed in 2019 and take the name St Benedict's Priory. And to my delight, one of their gifts on arrival was a little book written by a member of their order, titled *Bonhoeffer: Prophet for Our Time*.⁹ Another gift is the priory library, now housed beneath the chapel in their scriptorium, a treasure chest of monastic literature. And, of course, their gift of conversation—when silence permits—has added depth to my reflections.

The presence of St Benedict's Priory on Volmoed also brings stability in times such as these. Benedictines generally stay put. That is a remarkable gift in a global culture where people are always on the move and members of congregations continually go in search of a better preacher or choir. The gift of stability was especially welcome because the arrival of the priory coincided with the retirement of Bernhard and Jane Turkstra and their decision to leave Volmoed at the end of 2020. Quite apart from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, our new normal would certainly not be the same as the old, even though the vision of Volmoed as God's place of healing, reconciliation and hope remained its lodestar. But where was the Spirit taking us?

As the process of discernment began in earnest, following the meeting of the trustees, a group of pilgrims arrived at Volmoed. They were doing the Pilgrimage of Hope, our regional answer to the Camino de Santiago di Compostela. Volmoed is one stop on that lengthy trek from various points of departure to Cape Agulhas. At their request, I spent some time sharing with them our thoughts about this monastic moment. There was immediate resonance. As we journey through life, they said, we need places that provide space to catch our breath, unpack our backpacks, drop our burdens, and open our hearts. We need time to reflect, pray, and gather strength for the journey ahead. We need to regain hope. We need the rhythm of monastic *chronos* to cope with the *kairos* times in which we live.

Kairos: A Critical Time

This Monastic Moment might have been triggered off by the Volmoed Community's need to discern the way into the future, but it is also a response to what the New Testament calls a *kairos* moment in history, that is, a critical time of judgment and opportunity.¹⁰ Unlike *chronos*, marked

9. Spencer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer*.

10. For a more detailed discussion of the use of *kairos* in the New Testament, see

by the daily rhythm of life or the regular sound of monastery bells calling us to prayer, *kairos* refers to moments in chronological time when all hell is breaking loose and we are called to change our ways before we are dragged into the abyss. *Kairos* is apocalyptic time, and it is here and now.

Today, the environmental crisis is the cosmic framework of this *kairos* moment, and the COVID pandemic its wake-up call, dramatically revealing the fault lines of injustice that define global society. Such is the time in which we need to listen again to biblical texts such as those that St Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480—ca. 547) used in the Prologue to his *Rule*:

Let us get up then, at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say: *It is high time for us to arise from sleep* (Rom 13:11). Let us open our eyes to the light that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge: *If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts* (Ps. 94[95]:8). And again: *You that have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches* (Rev. 2:7).¹¹

South Africa faced a *kairos* moment in 1986, the year the Volmoed Community was born, when the country was plunging ever deeper into civil war. In response, the apartheid government twice introduced states of emergency. This gave the security forces unlimited power to try and stop the inevitable. Many opponents of apartheid were arrested, imprisoned, or murdered. It was then that a group of theologians published *The Kairos Document* calling on Christians and churches to resist the state and support the liberation struggle.¹² They distinguished between state theology, which sanctions the state; church theology, which sits uncomfortably on the fence; and prophetic theology, which supports the liberation struggle. This typology recurs throughout church history and is part of the narrative that follows. It is appropriate, for as Thomas Merton (1915–1968) believed, the future of monasticism lies in its being prophetic, not captured by the state or comfortable in the world—which is equally true for the church itself.

Jesus of Nazareth arrived on the scene of history at a *kairos* moment. Palestine, an outpost of the Roman Empire, was restless as heavily burdened peasants were reduced to poverty, priests did their devotions but passed by on the other side, zealots plotted rebellion, and some of the

Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*.

11. Benedict, prologue, verses 8–11 (*RB 1980*, 159; italics original).

12. Kairos Theologians, *The Kairos Document*.

more pious fled into the desert to live in caves near the Dead Sea. Those were apocalyptic times awaiting a messiah, times of fear tinged with hope for the dawning of a new age. Jesus proclaimed that this new age was at hand, and called followers to become part of it; it was a kingdom unlike any other, for it did not derive its authority from worldly powers. So Jesus's disciples had to choose between obeying God or Caesar, for they could not serve two masters. But if they followed Jesus, they would have to deny themselves and take up their cross. Persecution would be their lot, and martyrdom their badge of honor.

Christians were regularly persecuted in the Roman Empire during the first two centuries after Christ. Then, in the fourth century, when the empire in the West began to decline and power shifted to Byzantium in the East, an apparent miracle occurred. In 312, after he had defeated his rival Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge, Constantine became emperor, converted to Christianity, and unbanned the church. Following a brief hiccup during the reign of Julian the Apostate, who had little time for either Christian superstition or indolent aspiring monastics, Christianity finally became the established imperial religion, giving birth to Christendom. This happened during the reign of Theodosius (r. 379–395), when paganism was outlawed and heresy became illegal.

The future of the church, previously a marginalized and persecuted sect, now seemed assured. Christians were in a privileged position, but the church was also co-opted to serve the empire. This had enormous consequences for the future of Christianity, establishing a principle and a process that would enable Christianity to spread far and wide, but always living between compromise and conviction. With the dawning of the Constantinian era, it became increasingly the case that if emperor, king, prince, or chief (they were invariably male) converted to Christianity, the population followed suit. But what did this mean for Christian discipleship, and how could this new alliance be justified?

Prior to his victory, Constantine had received a vision in which he was told that he would conquer “in the sign of the cross,” which was then explained to him by Christ in a dream. At any rate, that was the story as told by Eusebius of Caesarea (c. 260–c. 340), the first church historian and apologist for state theology. Constantine's heavenly vision of the cross at the Milvian Bridge, said Eusebius, was a sign of God's favor. God gave him the victory and, from then on, he would reign under that sign.¹³

13. Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians*, 611–16.

But this effectively removed the “scandal of the cross.”¹⁴ It was now costly *not* to be a Christian. Prophetic witness gave way to fence-sitting. But Eusebius’s state theology—the first of many variants in church history to justify imperial, colonial, or state power—gave birth to what I call the *triumphalist heresy*, one of several perennial heresies that have plagued Christian faith, though not one condemned by any council of synod. We shall meet it frequently in what follows.

Heresies: Gnostic & Triumphal

Heresy (*haeresis*) literally means choosing the wrong direction at a cross-road. I am fully aware of the dangers in identifying heresies, not least of which is the persecution of those found guilty, and the self-righteousness of those who represent “the truth.” After all, who is to say whether the road on which we choose to travel is the wrong one or not? Simply to accept what others claim to be the truth without questioning it is seldom a good idea. Doubt is the handmaiden of faith, and dogmatic certainty without love and humility is but a clanging cymbal. As the sociologist Peter Berger once said, the heretical imperative is both inevitable and necessary.¹⁵ Heresy in science can lead to new discoveries, just as heresy in religion can uncover truth. But heresy, like fake news and alternative truth, can also have destructive consequences if not checked.

Not so long ago I was engaged with others in a heated debate about whether the Christian justification of apartheid was a heresy.¹⁶ It was as intense as any debate about heresy has been since the first Christian centuries. But it was necessary to pull the rug from under the feet of those who claimed that the policy of apartheid was Christian. Apartheid was no more Christian than is racism or sexual discrimination, or the justification of Nazism by German Christians. Opposing and rejecting heresy does not mean that heretics should not be heard, nor does it give anyone license to persecute them. But neither should it prevent us from trying to distinguish Christian truth from error, especially when error leads to injustice in the name of Christ. The Christian justification of war, crusades, pogroms, and the like, are nothing but heresies to be rejected. But

14. See 1 Corinthians 1:23.

15. Berger, *The Heretical Imperative*.

16. de Gruchy and Villa-Vicencio, eds., *Apartheid Is a Heresy*.