

From Hospitalization to Hospitality.
On the Future of Christian Learning
A Commentary on Ivan Illich's Letter to Br. Robert Kelly SJ
by Barbara Hallensleben

No doubt there would be more attractive titles for a commentary on Ivan Illich's letter to Fr Robert Kelly SJ. Why not "De-clericalization of the Church" or "A Manifesto Against Gnoseocratic Bureaucracy"? The correlation of the words "hospitalization" and "hospitality" seems at first sight to result from coincidental circumstances, but in the end, it turns out to be a quite suitable conceptual framework for what concerns Ivan Illich in his entire letter. Only once in the letter does Illich mention "learning" in reference to the clergy. However, the last paragraphs move almost abruptly to this question. Formulated as a thesis, "The future of Christian learning depends on how I share it with others." "Christian learning" here obviously means, learning to be a Christian – within a Christian learning community.

The "learning" that Ivan Illich propagates differs in fundamental ways from the "learning" that he radically criticizes in the letter to Fr. Kelly: the institutionalized transmission of knowledge on the "curricular market", the classification into teachers and learners, who are thus subordinated, disciplined, and uniformed, the "curricular consumption" that entrenches an imbalance of power because it presupposes and produces a "gnoseocratic bureaucracy".¹ This is accompanied by the devaluation of learning that is acquired through sharing in a learning community.

1 Quotations without reference refer to the letter of Ivan Illich, see p. 19-29

1. Attempt of Retrieving Fr. Kelly's Honor

Before we go into more detail on the criticisms and alternative proposals of Ivan Illich, I would like to say a word in honor of Fr. Robert Kelly SJ. We know from the introduction of Fabio Milana that he is a contemporary of Ivan Illich, presumably ordained in the same year. Ivan Illich himself speaks, as it were, of “two Kellys”: of the “thoughtful, generous and delicate man and priest” who took the initiative and made much effort to visit Ivan Illich – and of the “contemporary type” that Illich also calls “a critter of my imagination”. The real person, Robert Kelly SJ, deserved a more detailed study that cannot be undertaken here. Easily accessible are the “Homily for Bob Kelly’s Funeral Mass” delivered by his confrere Fr Joe Keaney SJ at St Ignatius Church in Lusaka on 11th March 2005, and an obituary on the website of the Irish Jesuit Province, written in 2014 by Fr Charlie Searson SJ.²

The Jesuit we come to know in this way could well be described as a man and priest after the heart of Ivan Illich. Even if one follows the words *de mortuis nihil nisi bene*, the insights into Fr. Kelly’s personality, written not formally but warmly, paint the very individual picture of a man who by no means conformed to the institutional frameworks of responsibility and behavior. From 1951 until his death, i.e., for 54 years, he served as a missionary in Zambia, previously Northern Rhodesia. Despite prolonged infirmity and illness, Fr Kelly did not leave his chosen new home even to die. He loved school teaching and pastoral care, so that it became a renunciation for him when, with a mandate from the bishops of Zambia, he became head of the campaign against excessive drinking. In a country 12 times the size of Ireland, he visited every diocese regularly for 17 years. He also became known

2 Cf. <https://www.iji.ie/2014/12/02/irish-men-behind-the-missions-bob-kelly-sj/>, and <http://www.eprodoffice.com/bob/obituary.htm>; the following quotations are taken from these documents.

for his “popular books on spirituality.” Whatever colonial-paternalistic traits they may contain, they grew, matured, and were appreciated under the African sun.

The preacher of his funeral mass does not hide the darkensses of Bob’s soul: repeated and prolonged periods of depression exacerbated by an increasing physical deterioration. Perhaps this personal vulnerability opened his heart to the obvious and hidden sufferings of the people around him, who apparently appreciated and loved to visit him well into his old age. “He had no tolerance whatsoever for legalism, for pettiness, for narrow-minded people”.

What the parable of the Good Samaritan was for Ivan Illich, “the Story of the Prodigal Son” was for Robert Kelly. “One of the first times I heard him preach on the parable he asked the question, ‘What comes right after the part where the Father sees the boy while he was still a long way off?’ Hands went up and the popular answer was, ‘He ran to meet the boy’. Bob pointed out five important words in between ‘He was moved with pity.’” The preacher adds: “I was brought up thinking that holiness was to do with the number of hours one spent in front of the Blessed Sacrament or how hard one knees got from praying. Now I think it is much more to do with compassion. Having sympathy and empathy. Feeling for and feeling with. Be holy, as your Father is holy. Be compassionate as your Father is compassionate. Bob was that kind of holy man”. What more can “Christian learning” produce in the life of a priest and missionary?

What would Ivan Illich have said about the real Robert Kelly at his funeral? In any case, let us read the text “Dear Kelly” not as a letter to Bob, the Jesuit who matured in his own life and was led to missionary poverty, but as another reckoning with the “type”, the “pattern” that Ivan Illich recognized or thinks he has recognized in him.

2. The Purpose: The Mystery of God Incarnate in the Mystery of the Church

What deeply inspires Ivan Illich in his text remains largely unspoken. However, it is sufficiently clearly implied to name it and to recognize it in the other writings he addressed to fellow Christians: It is the “mystery of faith,” which is profoundly “the mystery of the Triune God or the Incarnation.” In contrast, the struggle against clericalization, against schooling, against bureaucracy, which seems dominant in the text, is not his main purpose. Rather, Illich desires to open the gaze to what needs to be disclosed in this struggle: the newness of Christianity. “I believe that the Incarnation makes possible a surprising and wholly new flowering of love and knowledge. For Christians the Biblical God can now be loved in the flesh.”³ This mystery can not only be an institutional witness as doctrine of the Church; it comes into being in the learning community of faith and does not stop at the visible boundaries of the Church.

Ivan Illich speaks discreetly because he does not want to institutionalize the mystery himself. He has no doctrinal answer to the question, “How do we pass on Christianity?” Rather, he speaks of what the church is not: neither “a godlike Byzantine court” nor a “medieval feudal system of fiefs”; it cannot take refuge in the invisible church of Protestant vision, nor the drastic visibility of new political forms, even “in the form of a service institution.”⁴ So what remains? It is the *casta meretrix*, the “chaste harlot,” which Illich learned about as the teaching of the Church Fathers through reading Hans Urs von Balthasar’s extensive article⁵ and which he loves and confesses

3 *The Rivers North of the Future*, ed. David Cayley, Anansi Press: Toronto 2005, 47.

4 *The Powerless Church* (2018), 162.

5 In: *Sponsa Verbi*, Johannes Verlag: Einsiedeln 1971, 203-305; quoted: Ibid. 161

as his mother.⁶ The recognition of his main purpose can avoid us from mistakenly thinking of Ivan Illich primarily as a social critic.

3. Diagnosis: clericalization, gnoseocratic bureaucracy

a. Illich's Diagnosis: The few pages of the letter gather variations on the theme that preoccupies Ivan Illich throughout: the perversion of the gospel through its institutionalization. It could also be called a darkening of the mystery or a destruction of the Christian learning community. This diagnosis is exemplified by various paths and aberrations of Christian learning.

Shortly before Fr. Kelly's unexpected visit, Illich tried to reconstruct the emergence of nursing orders since the 12th century based on the "rules of hospital communities". This coincidental fact will become a symbolic reference for the rest of the letter. As usual, he works in accordance with his historical training through a careful study of sources. Due to an error in the transcription of the manuscript or an inattention, the printed text mentions the name "Raymond de Guy", while obviously he deals with Raymond du Puy (1083-1158/60), the second Grand Master of the Order of Saint John. The latter created a new tradition by establishing a hospital for crusaders near the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem and extended the care of the sick to their military protectors. The main thesis is more broadly elaborated by Ivan Illich in "Medical Nemesis" (1975): Hospitals make people sick. They divide humans into the healthy and the sick, the sovereign and the dependent, the normal and the deformed. They segregate the sick "from the rest of society" and hierarchize the relationship to their caregivers. Ivan Illich bears the sensitivity to these is-

6 As William T. Cavanaugh says, the Church can only celebrate her mystery in the sacrament and live it in the form of penance. *Migrations of the Holy*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, MI, 2011.

sues in his own body: disfigured by a rampant tumor on his face, he nevertheless refused treatment by medically trained experts.

A second part of the diagnosis relates to the example of Fr. Kelly. The pastoral terminology of “care for people” from a position of a missionary, corresponds to the logic of medical care transferred to the soul. Illich follows the reasoning he tirelessly used against the crowd of enthusiastic North American short-term missionaries: In well-meaning selflessness, they come, after all, as ambassadors of North American lifestyles and economic interests to people “who had little use for you” – without seeing themselves as learners and receivers. The criticism here is not so much directed at Fr. Kelly as at those who are responsible for his education and especially his “continuing formation”: “How sad is the state of the church when, after years of isolation and intellectual starvation, lack of books and dependence on journalistic accounts of church and faith, overwork and aging in the wilderness, it has nothing better to offer you in your sabbatical time than a renewed return to the curriculum market.” R. Kelly appears here as a victim rather than a perpetrator.

After this “prelude,” the main part of the text analyzes the emergence of the Church’s “professional education” for the priesthood in seminaries. In its institutionalization, albeit several centuries later, Illich sees a parallel to the emergence of almshouses and hospitals since the Middle Ages. The seminary is a kind of hospital for priests and missionaries. The image is also used in the early period of the Jesuit Order by Jeronimo Nadal who calls the colleges *hospitalia spiritualia*⁷, which the Jesuit must leave when they have fulfilled their purpose – in order not to withdraw unnecessarily from the practice of the mission.

7 MHSI 90, 55.

As usual, Illich's brief explanations are based on broad historical studies. He rightly traces the origin of the seminaries to the Council of Trent. The appearance of Protestant preachers and their radical criticism of the church increasingly shifted the emphasis to "right doctrine," which had to be appropriated through obedience to the Magisterium and theological studies. "Until the late 16th century, you became a priest the way in which you became a healer or cobbler or musician – by picking up what it takes for the task." Of course, Illich does not ignore the historical circumstances that suggested such a new education. He attributes a special position to the educational efforts of the Jesuits insofar as they were concerned with the "training of elites," not with the compulsory schooling of all parish priests. His criticism is directed against the circumstances, consisting of a growing "tendency to put the emerging profession under ecclesiastical control". He questions the "cocky innocence" of a church that binds its fate to a clergy which is not required by the Gospel, but whose "competence, status, function and income are determined by a factor which is radically alien to the first three quarters of the history of the Church", and even more alien to the contemporary world. Indirectly, we learn of Fr. Kelly's counterarguments, primarily through reference to the inevitable "professionalization" of "modern times." This argument gives rise to Illich's reversal of perspective: the "secular trends" should be seen as a consequence rather than a cause of ecclesiastical bureaucratization. The renowned historian Wolfgang Reinhard agrees with Illich: In his view, the church reform instigated by the Council of Trent was accompanied by socio-historical changes. It is not only an internal church measure, but an administrative reform with typical early modern features; in this respect it is

structurally related to measures of early absolutism. The power over the faithful as subjects is clearly concentrated

with the parish priest and the bishop. The theologically controversial but administratively consistent Council decree ‘Tametsi’ allows for the first time a complete control of marriages. The various types of registers that must be kept in the future record in principle the ecclesiastical life of all parishioners completely – a simple and effective kind of written administration. Through synods and visitations, a flood of regulations rains down on the clergyman for all the details of his official conduct. If his training shows gaps, he soon has at his disposal manuals for various sides of the pastoral profession. In short, the Catholic Church, which had already served as a model for secular administration, is gaining new modernity through bureaucratization.⁸

The German language has taken up this trend even more than other languages, which use the terminology of service (ministry) for the ordained representatives of the Church, while in German the word “Amtsträger” prevails, in which the canonical term of the ecclesiastical *officium* is remotely heard, but even more the structural parallel to modern “clerks” in a bureaucratic system.

b. Extended diagnosis: Ivan Illich’s diagnosis finds confirmation and extension in the comprehensive commentaries by Peter Hünemann on the genesis of the “Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests” *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (7.12.1965) as well as on the “Decree on Priestly Training” *Optatam Totius* (28.10.1965) of Vatican Council II.⁹ The very duplication of the decrees shows that the renewal of the ecclesiastical ministry is essentially made dependent on a renewal of the

8 Wolfgang Reinhard, *Gegenreformation als Modernisierung? Prolegomena zu einer Theorie des konfessionellen Zeitalters: ARG* 68 (1977) 226-252, p. 234-5.

9 Herders *Theologischer Kommentar zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, Vol. 3 (2005) 315-489 (quoted as OT + page) and Vol. 4 (2005) 337-580 (quoted as PO + page).

corresponding formation. The Decree on formation was even the first to be adopted.

With many historical details, the commentaries highlight the same basic features that Illich emphasized. Peter Hünemann also sees an interaction between the crisis of faith itself and the crisis of clergy: “The two phenomena are indissolubly linked. The crisis of presbyteral ministry, however, is more clearly tangible compared to the crisis of faith of the church, because it is an institutionalized quantity that is much more accessible to empirical recording than a general ecclesial crisis of faith” (PO 343). The related temptation to correct symptoms rather than deal with the root of the problem is evident. The result of the ecclesial modernization is an “ecclesiastical civil service structure of the clergy” (PO 348), brought about in the context of ecclesiastical efforts from the 19th century onward to affirm the independence of the church from state authorities through its own governance structures. In this context, priestly education, in particular, was conceived in “intensive demarcation from the secular modern circumstances of life” (OT 333) and frequently linked to the struggle against so-called “modernism.” Thus, the other-worldly and supernatural image of a pure and holy priest was solidified: “Between a priest and an ordinary righteous person there should be a difference like between heaven and earth” (Pope Pius X., quoted: OT 338). The excessive demands by this ideal and the disastrous forms of hidden compensation have intensified today to the extent that the priest’s form of life is no longer embedded in and supported by social, or even ecclesiastical, forms of community. Against this background, the “wave of laicizations” (PO 344) after Vatican II is not to be seen as a lack of fidelity to the vocation, but rather as an outbreak from an inherently contradictory system.

With this development, a “diocesan clergy”, ruled and controlled by bishops, found its origin.¹⁰ As a consequence, an “increased immaturity of the Christian laity” took place (PO 348-9). The centralized regimentation of seminary education produced “a universal, monolithic concept of the Latin Church” (OT 333) that pushed uniformity right into the rhythm of the seminarians’ lives and into the control of textbooks. “This centrally controlled education is not only being imposed in the emerging industrialized nations of Europe and North America. Rather, it is being urged with vigor in the other continents and missions in Africa, Asia, or Latin America” (OT 333). The special characteristics and needs of local churches were not sufficiently considered. Ivan Illich was already confronted with the “products” of this standard education as a young priest in a New York parish with a Puerto Rican population, and even more so later in Mexico. He discovered and criticized this “pattern” in Fr. Kelly. Illich experienced how this system proved increasingly incapable of carrying out the transmission of faith through administrative clerical acts. The “learning community” propagated by Ivan Illich had become a one-way street of hierarchical transfer of salvation.

A significant indicator of the Council’s will to reform lies in the programmatic transition from the term “priest” to “presbyter,” as already evident in the title of *Presbyterorum ordinis*. Instead of emphasizing the cultic authority of the priest in categories of an objective, supernatural efficiency, “the concept of presbyter goes back to the basic experience in early cultures that the elders (men or women) knew how to tell the ancient stories that expressed the identity of a culture in terms of experience and condensed it atmospherically” (PO 414; Ottmar Fuchs). The term was also used in the Jewish syna-

10 PO 348; cf. Erwin Gatz, *Der Diözesanklerus*, Freiburg i.Br. et al. 1994, especially 39-57.

gogue communities and was adopted into the Jewish Christian communities. The *presbyter* corresponds far more to the image conveyed by Illich of a Christian who has matured in faith, who shares his experiences with others in a Christian community, and who receives ordination for the sacramental services required therein – which Ivan Illich did not consider superfluous but presupposed.

Ivan Illich knew the reform efforts firsthand. So, he also knew that though they were formally accepted they were not fully implemented in the aftermath of the Council. Already in purely linguistic terms, the change from “priest” to “presbyter” did not happen. Indeed, a reverse dynamic can be observed: The “sacerdotal” terminology gained primacy again, paradoxically because of the effort to renew the diaconal dimension of the ministry. In the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 29, “the diaconate is restored as a distinct and permanent level of the hierarchy.” In the same context, the Council introduces a distinction which was subsequently also established in the “Catechism of the Catholic Church” and in canon law:

At a lower level of the hierarchy are deacons, upon whom hands are imposed ‘not unto the *sacerdotium*, but unto a ministry of service.’ For strengthened by sacramental grace, in communion with the bishop and presbyterate they serve in the diaconate of the liturgy, of the word, and of charity to the people of God.¹¹

Now there is even a hierarchization within the sacrament of ordination between “higher” and “lower” levels. Priests and bishops are associated under the generic term “sacerdotium”.

11 Even the official English translation on the website of the Vatican uses “priesthood” instead of “sacerdotium” and “group of priests” instead of “presbyterate”: https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

The confusion, especially in translations, is great and nearly insurmountable because there is no generally recognized theological terminology. Even in theological literature “sacerdotal” is often translated as “priestly”, whereas it should actually mean: “pertaining to bishops and priests (as distinct from deacons)”. Instead of giving the whole “clergy” a “diaconal” character, the opposite happens: there is a new “sacerdotalization” of the sacrament of ordination. The Catechism of the Catholic Church summarizes the development, giving to this innovation a supposedly permanent and unchanging character:

Catholic doctrine, expressed in the liturgy, the Magisterium, and the constant practice of the Church, recognizes that there are two degrees of ministerial participation in the priesthood of Christ: the episcopacy and the presbyterate. The diaconate is intended to help and serve them. For this reason, the term *sacerdos* in current usage denotes bishops and priests but not deacons. Yet Catholic doctrine teaches that the degrees of sacerdotal participation (episcopate and presbyterate) and the degree of service (diaconate) are all three conferred by a sacramental act called ‘ordination,’ that is, by the sacrament of Holy Orders (CCC 1554).

The degradation of the diaconal ministry continues in that, according to the Catechism, deacons serve bishops and priests, while, according to the Council, they serve the People of God together “with the bishop and his presbyterate” in all dimensions of ecclesial life: through service to the liturgy, the Word and in charity (LG 29). In this sense, the development of the diaconate can be seen as key to today’s reform of ecclesial ministries, or to put it more clearly: as a way to de-clericalization.

4. Therapy: Hospitality

According to his own perception, Ivan Illich must be cautious in the transition from diagnosis to therapy. We know his leitmotifs, which are central and explained in other works: Conviviality, friendship, celebration. These echo in the letter to Br. Kelly, but the focus is on hospitality as a learning community.

The mystery of faith, to which he wants to give central attention, cannot be taught in a doctrinal way. He himself struggles with this difficulty in his fascinating contribution “Aesthetic and Religious Experience.” The first part, given as a lecture in 1966 in the context of a conference of the Mexican Institute of Psychoanalysis”, offers a general sense of the “mystical experience” in its basic features, beyond all cultures and religions. The mystical experience corresponding to the mystery “can be hoped for patiently, but it cannot be produced nor obtained. Furthermore, it cannot be known whether it will happen or not, let alone when it will happen”.¹² Exercises of prayer, renunciation, and concentration can only dispose one for it, though a constant distinction from pseudo-mystical experiences remains necessary. In the second part Illich turns to the explicit Christian faith, presenting it based on the Gospels as the message of the dawning kingdom of God, which – as usual for Illich – is described by the parable of the Good Samaritan as the kingdom of love and is presented in analogy to the general mystical experience. Readers who share the Christian confession will, in particular, sense how Illich struggles for words and prefers indicating a way:

The individual can attain faith only through the Church. ‘Church’ here relates to a community of believers [...] it is not a community of concepts, images or symbols, but the fraternal identification with the form-of-life of a brother

12 The Powerless Church (2018) 73.

and whose expression is ‘the kingdom’ [...] Historically, Jesus did so. And today I cannot do this but by means of communion of faith and messianic hope of a fraternal community.¹³

The perspective from the letter to Kelly is quite concrete. Being Christian is the fruit of a learning community between brothers and sisters. It happens through “appropriation” in shared life. This form-of-life gives access to the love of the incarnate God, the experience of the mystery, which is celebrated in the sacraments, so that it can be rediscovered as an everyday experience of the kingdom even in the garbage dumps of slums. The inconspicuous word “to pick up,” which can be used for quite incidental everyday discoveries, becomes a motto in Illich’s letter to Fr. Kelly: Pick up what is before your eyes, even before your feet. In “Christian learning” the depth of what is constantly happening in “human learning” is revealed – before it was deprived of its mystery by institutionalized schooling.

A key word in Illich for his alternative is “hospitality.” He argues for “hospitality” instead of “hospitalization.” While we tend to point out “that there are certain acts of charity that ‘cannot be done simply by plain hospitality,’” Illich favors the opposite perspective: Would there not be countless acts of charity that could be done more effectively and humanely by hospitality than by specialized institutions that lead to segregation from the life of the community? Another Bob – Robert J. Fox - reinforced Illich’s position. When asked by Illich what he had learned in his training as a social worker, this Bob replied, “I have figured out how orphans are made”.¹⁴ Contrary to plans to build new orphanages, Illich points to the centuries-old tradition in Puerto Rico of taking in as “godsend

13 Ibid. 87.

14 Ibid. 169.

(hijos de crianza)” those who had been made homeless for any reason, be it hurricane or migration. He is not wrong in his observation that hospitality today is “largely reduced to invitations to Christmas dinner”. Being host and not educator – this is what Illich would like to see as the hallmark of a non-clerical church, but also of every kind of learning:

Even today, higher education depends crucially on hospitality and friendship and lifelong personal practice in those virtues that ground the independent attitude of heart and mind on which ‘study’ depends in the age of artificial intelligence, sociobiology, and the apocalypse of science.

“Hospitality and Pain” had already been Ivan Illich’s topic for a lecture in Chicago in 1987, at the invitation of David Ramage of McCormick Theological Seminary.¹⁵ Here Illich traces in detail the “history of hospitality, Greek, Hebrew and Christian” (2). “Hospitality extends to equals” (10). Yet paradoxically, through their vocation to follow Christ, Christians lose the traditional capacity for hospitality that characterizes antiquity: The Christian “is homeless, and his lifestyle too is ‘inhospitable’ in the mode of hospitality flowering under the aegis of Zeus. [...] He is called to recognize that instead of hospitality he can give himself. By vocation, then, the Christian is unsettled and homeless, equally with his ancestor a pilgrim. He is called to live like Jesus, his brother, who has no place to lay his head, but who gives of himself bodily to the point of death on the cross” (6). Even more than their house, Christians open their hearts to brothers and sisters as “equals”

15 Accessible online: <https://chamberscreek.net/library/illich/hospitality.pdf>; quotations indicate the page number of this paper. Illich refers to several historical studies and specially recommends the reading of H el ene P etr e, * tude sur le vocabulaire latin de la charit e chr tienne*, Louvain 1948.

in following Christ, and this community is called “church”.

An abysmal ambivalence opens up here: on the one hand, “compassion” in its deepest sense leads to the stigmata of St. Francis, who bears the wounds of Christ on his own body. Compassion as hospitality could be transformed precisely by its excess into the hospitalization as “charge of care” (9). Even more: the “management of pain” in the form of “heroic mercy” began at the same time to bring forth the “techniques of inflicting pain” in the form of torture. “Compassion and torture are in no way mutual cause and effect. But they both witness to a unique embodiment of the self that emerges only in western cultures.” Illich concludes: “The history of pity, of mercy, of compassion, as well as of hospitalization, medicalization and ever more subtle forms of torture makes me certain that the West – its origins and culture – cannot be understood without looking attentively at the pursuit of glory and the depths of horror which, in their extremes, lie far outside the amplitudes that Plato, or even Job, could perceive” (17).

Ivan Illich’s proposals are not recipes that guarantee success through application, but signposts to a mystery. Access to it does not depend on the number of guests, but on a shared openness to this mysterious presence of God in our flesh: Where it is lacking, “the reform of the Church becomes a miracle rather than as wonderful as it has always been”. The transformation of hospitality into hospitalization put the church in danger of “apostolic castration”, so that it is no longer able to transmit faith. Only the new transformation of “hospitalization into hospitality” can therefore give back to the Church its missionary power that Jesus entrusted to his disciples: “Did he not trust each of his disciples to gather with those whom they met? Did he not [...] encourage personal hospitality to those who had left their own homes for his sake?”

Yes, church reform requires de-clericalization. But far more important is the practice of a new attitude, which Il-

lich characterizes here as hospitality. It is the inner form of a Christian learning community that has abandoned the hierarchical divide between a “teaching” and a “listening” church in favor of listening together to the Word of God and turning to the incarnate God in brothers and sisters.

A final clue follows in the last paragraph of the letter, which begins by addressing “Bob” again. It almost sounds like a return to the concrete person to whom Ivan Illich has offered hospitality, while at the beginning he addresses “Fr. Kelly” and the “Kelly of his imagination.” Indeed, the last paragraph is about the inevitably concrete practice. As Ivan Illich tirelessly points out, faith does address the sick of the world to be cared for and hospitalized, but the one who has fallen among the robbers, whom I meet here and now by the way-side of my path. Hospitality is concrete – and thus it is finite and limited: I might provide food for seven people, not seven hundred. Two books I can read and take to heart, so that they become a stimulus for faith and prayer. With Lee, Bob and Dara I can celebrate among friends, not with “humankind.”

A simple rule follows: Create facts! As banal as this instruction in the P.S. of the letter may be, it carries the whole weight of Ivan Illich’s theological reflections. God has “created facts.” He has become flesh: *Verbum caro factum est* (John 1:14). This expression often has the connotation of impatience or even disobedience to rules that should have been followed. To “present someone with a *fait accompli*” tends to be seen as an unkind snub. For Ivan Illich, a *fait accompli* apparently is an action that gives flesh to Christian faith through attention in love, through the celebration of the mystery. For those who are caught up in the logic of “hospitalization,” this approach can indeed seem snubbing. “For God’s sake”, Ivan Illich here is ready to snub the Pope himself, if necessary.

5. In the school of faith: The Christian Learning Community

Ivan Illich does not abandon us with his few hints in his letter to Fr. Kelly. He entrusts the necessary next steps to the creativity of his readers because there is no other way. The “facts accomplished” have to take place in the context of those who are concerned. The emerging program of church reform is more modest and more demanding than would be the striking call for “de-clericalization.” In essence, his proposal to turn to “Christian learning” goes back to the early days of Christianity. In a phase in which, on the one hand, Christian faith had found its institutional support after a period of persecution in the Roman Empire, and at the same time the migration of peoples was uprooting and unsettling whole peoples, the monastic father Benedict founded his monasteries as “schools of faith,” as learning and living communities in which the mystery of the Triune God and the Incarnation could be “picked up” in the daily routine of praying and working together. Rule and form-of-life coincide in the Benedictine tradition. Already the prologue of the Rule constantly urges the practice of faith in action, culminating in the invitation:

Therefore we must establish a school for the Lord’s service. In drawing it up, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. But if something a little difficult, suggested by a reasonable balance, may be introduced in order to amend faults and to safeguard charity. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the onset. But as we advance in the monastic virtue and in faith, the heart expands, and we will run the path of God’s commandments in the inexpressible sweetness of love. So never departing from the teachings of God, and

faithfully observing his doctrine in the monastery with perseverance until death, we shall share in the sufferings of Christ, so that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom. Amen.

The emphasis is not on hierarchy among the monks, but on learning together from Christ. It is not by chance that hospitality is one of the central characteristics of the Benedictine tradition: “All guests who come to the monastery are received like Christ” (53rd chapter), that is, with the love of the Incarnate God emphasized by Ivan Illich.

Today, to speak with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we are “thrown back to the beginnings of understanding,” and this understanding can only take the form of the concrete, humble form of learning communities in faith. Disciples of Jesus are “pupils,” and none of them is to be called “teacher,” because “only one is your teacher, Christ” (Mt 23:10). By this essential reference, all the structuring elements of the Christian learning community are kept in mutual humility.

For whom the perspectives outlined in the letter to Fr. Kelly are not concrete enough, there will be rich material in Ivan Illich’s contribution, “The Vanishing Clergyman,” which, not coincidentally, sees the Christian learning community growing from *diakonia*. Without using appeals like “should” or “must,” Ivan Illich speaks in the affirmative prophetic future tense:

The ‘diaconia’ will supplant the parish as the fundamental institutional unit in the Church. The periodic meeting of friends will replace the Sunday assembly of strangers. A self-supporting dentist, factory worker, professor, rather than a church-employed scribe or functionary, will preside over the meeting. The minister will be a man mature in Christian wisdom through his lifelong participation in an intimate liturgy, rather than a seminary graduate

formed professionally through ‘theological’ formulae. Marriage and the education of growing children, rather than the acceptance of celibacy as a legal condition for ordination, will confer responsible leadership on him” I foresee the face-to-face meeting of families around a table, rather than the impersonal attendance of a crowd around an altar. Celebration will sanctify the dining room, rather than consecrated buildings, the ceremony ...¹⁶

As the focus is on Christian learning, let us finish with his following remarks about Christian learning, leading us back to primary concern of the divine mystery within the life of the Church:

Personal maturity, theological precision, contemplative prayer and heroic charity are not specifically Christian. Atheists can be mature; non-Catholics theologically precise; Buddhists, mystics, and pagans heroically generous. The specific result of Christian education is the *sensus ecclesiae*, ‘the sense of the Church.’ [...] This ‘sense’ is the result of reading the sources of authentic Christian tradition, of participation in the prayerful celebration of the liturgy, of a distinct way of life. It is the fruit of experiencing Christ and the measure of prayer’s real depth.¹⁷

Is Ivan Illich right? We will never know unless we embrace his invitation to hospitality.

16 *The Powerless Church* (2018) 109.

17 *Ibid.* 117.