The Tao of the Cross and the Oxherding Parable

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– Frederick Franck

Publisher's Note: This book was written in 1996, and that date should be the frame of reference from which readers understand the text and the events described therein.

For me it started more than eighty years ago. In those years, the news had become so repetitious as to be hackneyed: "...tanks crossing borders...oil wells bombed...heavy civilian casualties...aircraft carriers ordered...."

I was born on the Dutch-Belgian border and was five years old when, on August 4, 1914, I was awakened by the roar of field guns. Kaiser Wilhelm's armies had invaded Belgium less than a mile from our doorstep. The next town, across the border, stood in flames. At once a continuous stream of wounded and dying soldiers on blood-stained stretchers, pushcarts, and horse-drawn wagons, as well as endless throngs of people fleeing their burning villages, poured across the frontier into Holland, which managed to stay neutral in World War I.

From my fifth to my ninth year, peering from our neutral grandstand into hell, I developed the violent allergy against wars, killings, and violence that I would never overcome, and with it started a lifelong questioning about what it might mean to be human.

My father being agnostic, we lived on a little agnostic island in the ocean of a Catholic culture that straddled the border. "If I live a decent life," he said, "should there be a hereafter—God or no God—I don't have to fear what can happen to me." I did not inherit his agnostic temperament. As by osmosis, I absorbed the symbols of the surrounding

Catholic culture. They served as the core around which first intimations of meaning, of the transcendent could crystallize.

Crucifixes and Madonna shrines stood on every crossroads, beacons in the Catholic ocean. Nuns were always herding little children through the neat park surrounding a famous "Calvary"—a row of fourteen grottoes of fieldstone and cement. In each one stood a gaudy plaster sculpture depicting a Station of the Cross, the suffering Christ surrounded by sobbing, hand-wringing women who, in one of the last grottoes, sustained a swooning Virgin Mary, her sky blue cloak undone, her heart pierced by swords.

Closer to home, on the Cathedral wall, the naked man was hanging, dying forever, pale hands and feet pierced by nails, blood trickling from crown of thorns and chest. I passed him twice a day on my way to and from school. Wasn't there some mysterious link between him and those soldiers dying on pushcarts, the wretched fugitives carrying their children on their backs? Were they not as heartrendingly vulnerable, as human, as I? At the end of the Calvary, he was entombed under a huge boulder, and that was the end of him. Or was it? For on Easter Sunday, with all church bells clanging, a solemn procession with velvet banners and brass bands, a hundred angels flapping tulle wings, priests in white albs swinging incense burners, shuffling notables in top hats, wound its way through our streets to celebrate his resurrection. He was risen! He was obviously unkillable—the Unkillable Human!

I wonder how old I was when I invented a symbol of my own. It was derived from the story that the fish was the oldest symbol of Christ—"ever since the catacombs," as was

always added. A bit later, somehow I must have picked up the term "Mystical Body of Christ." I had no idea what that might mean, but it had a musical ring, like an organ chord. Both images fused together into an immense fish, turquoise and silver. From each one of its million scales, a human face was looking out, white, black, yellow, live and dead faces. If you looked intensely, there were even squirrels, mice, insects peering at you. I saw the great fish swimming, sailing through the heavens, through the interstellar spaces. It must have been much later that I called it the Cosmic Fish. This Cosmic Fish never lost its meaning. On the contrary, when a lifetime later I read about the "total interdependence of all phenomena in the Universe," as it is formulated in the seventh-century Chinese Hua Yen School of Buddhism (known as Kegon in Japan), I recognized in my Cosmic Fish a symbol that was as Buddhist as it was Catholic. I have drawn it, painted it, sculpted it in stone, in wood, and a year or so ago I forged it, quite large, in steel. It must be the Cosmic Fish that prevented me from "joining" anything, from allegiance to any in-group, any political party, church, sect, or clique. I was to remain a loner in allegiance to the Fish, my all-encompassing Fish.

I was to outlive almost the full length of the twentieth century that only began in earnest on that 4th of August, 1914, when, on the pretext of the murder of an Austrian archduke in Sarajevo, the First Great Bloodletting exploded. It is sheer miracle to be here still, as the century is drawing to its close with Sarajevo once more in the headlines. Ever since that fateful August day, it has been a continuum of massacres, of subhuman savagery, of the manic desecration of life. It leapt from the insane battles of the Marne, Ypres,

and Verdun—400,000 corpses in one day—via Guernica to the massacres of Rotterdam, Dresden, My Lai, Mogadishu, Kigali. It tolerated the unfathomable evil of Auschwitz, Birkenau, and—having learned nothing—fifty years later that of Mostar, Srebrenica. It staged at Hiroshima-Nagasaki a preview of our species' auto-crucifixion, with no resurrection to follow. The Way of the Cross was never further away in this long life than the next newscast.

I am not sure now at which one of these trigger points of horror, some years ago, the stark images of the Way of the Cross, etched on the inner eye in childhood, sprang to life. It made me grab a brush and give it form—black ink on large sheets of white paper. Stripped to its bare essentials, it was a series of fifteen close-ups of the human face, the "face of faces," as the fourteenth-century mystic Nicholas of Cusa called it—the face that is "human beyond description."

It is miracle enough to have survived this century-long pandemic of rabies afflicting the human mind. Still even more wondrous is it not only to have seen but to have experienced first-hand, amid the nonstop bedlam, those innumerable acts of humanness, of compassion, mercy, and tenderness that kept, despite all, my faith in what is *human* in humans more alive than ever. I was privileged, moreover, to meet the three old men who embodied this humanness most compellingly: Albert Schweitzer, the Protestant doctor who lived his credo of "reverence for life" to the full; Pope John XXIII, the Catholic pope whose courage, freedom, tenderness, and humor proved to be as unkillable as his Master; and Daisetz T. Suzuki, the Buddhist sage who almost single-handedly initiated the West into Zen, into Buddhism's "wisdom that is compassion, the compassion that is wisdom." They were the

living embodiments of that humanness that speaks out of works of high art—Rembrandt's *Emmaus*, his self-portraits, all that Bach ever wrote, Beethoven's last quartets, Rilke's sonnets.

But I also was to meet it constantly in ordinary people wherever I went, whether in this country, Europe, or Japan, and these days more frequently than ever before. Everywhere people seem more likely to switch from conventional small talk to such matters as the roots of evil and violence, the fate of the Earth. They dare speak more openly of the soul, of meaning, of the spirit, than even ten years ago.

Could it possibly herald a quantum leap in our collective consciousness, a turnabout from a dehumanized, materialistic, mechanistic mentality to that which may still save us? For what can still save us is the rediscovery of the human in us as having absolute priority, in comparison with which all of our problems are secondary, be they economic, political, or technological—signs of the Unkillable Human?

Here I must stop and take you on a detour, for the story of both my Way of the Cross windows and those of the parable of the oxherd are inseparable from the story of Pacem in Terris. It starts with a winter hike through the hills around Warwick, New York, some thirty-five years ago. My wife Claske and I crossed a little bridge and spotted the wreck of a house. Its mortal remains were leaning awry on the banks of a river. It was love at first sight: not only was the Wawayanda the spitting image of the river that ran behind my great-grandfather's house, but the hilly landscape mirrored that of the borderland of my childhood.

The house had a taciturn dignity of its own. We could not get close to it through the deep snow but found an estate agent who told us that it dated back to about 1840 and had once been a tavern—"McCann's Saloon." We bought it for a song, sight unseen, pulled it straight, restored it, emigrated from Greenwich Village, and moved in. The first winter we spent in McCann's Saloon we were astonished to see that the trash heap across the river, camouflaged in summer by a jungle of poison ivy and sumac, was enclosed in massive walls of fieldstone. It was the ruin of a late eighteenth-century gristmill, as we found out when we became the proud owners of the authentic early-American garbage dump.

A dump is all it would still be, were it not for Pope John XXIII. But this may require some elucidation.

On October 12, 1962, soon after our return from Lambarene, after three years on the equator, where we had served on the medical staff of Albert Schweitzer's legendary jungle hospital, I was walking up Fifth Avenue to an appointment while leafing through *The New York Times* but stopped suddenly in my tracks when my eye fell on Pope John's epoch-making, profoundly moving opening address to the Second Vatican Council that he had convoked. I was so thunderstruck by this *vox humana* sounding, of all places, out of the Vatican that I called off my appointment, ran home, and told Claske, "We are off to Rome! Read this! This is going to be a watershed! I have to draw that man and his Council! He is much more than a pope; he is a prophet; he must be a *mensch*!"

It was easier said than done. The confab of some two thousand bishops and cardinals in St. Peter's was a tightly

closed shop. How I—neither cardinal, nor bishop, nor even card-carrying Catholic—could gate-crash it and draw the drama, its author, and its main actors during the Council's four autumn sessions from 1962 to 1964 I cannot go into here. But neither can I explain it, for it was sheer miracle, as I came to see everything that ever worked in my life as sheer miracle, for whatever I calculated and planned, however cleverly, backfired.

Was not outliving Hitler and Stalin sheer miracle? Or finding among a billion women Claske, without whom McCann's Saloon, Pacem in Terris, or drawing Schweitzer and his hospital, Pope John and his Vatican II, plus everything else that has been good in life would be unthinkable?

One may babble about karma, coincidence, destiny, and even synchronicity, but these are no more than synonyms for what is as awesomely miraculous as life itself. One of these miracles, perhaps the most puzzling, happened on June 3, 1963, when all day we listened to the radio, following Pope John's long agony until, in mid-afternoon, the news came that he had died. Only then did we open the mail, and in it was a letter from Rome announcing that it had "pleased the Holy Father to confer" on me, in appreciation of my drawings of the First Session of the Council—they had been widely reproduced—the Medal of His Pontificate. It was too much!

We drove to Kennedy Airport that night and flew to Rome. I had to draw this genius of the heart, this Bodhisattva Pope, this manifestation of the Spirit in our time, once more on his bier. I cannot think of anyone I loved more than Angelo Roncalli, John XXIII.

I. Condemned to Death

I. The oxherd has lost his ox—his true self.