

Father Golden - The Person, the Context and Spirituality (1954 –1960):

‘Father Golden’, that’s what I called him. I’m aware of Vincent Buckley’s comment that Father Golden had reservations about seeing himself as ‘Father’ - ‘Cutting Green Hay’, 273. But there was certainly nothing about him or the times that would encourage young university students to call him ‘Jerry’ – wearing his collar as he did most of the time, prematurely (?) grey hair, the students’ habit from their years at school and parish, and he never invited it. He was chaplain to the university lay apostolate during all my years at the University of Melbourne, and the furthest student familiarity went was to call him, amongst themselves mainly and only rarely, ‘Goldie’.

No priest that I had been associated with in parish (Sunshine and Chadstone) Young Christian Worker (YCW) groups during 1952-1953 had had much, if anything, to do with lay apostolate groups up to the time of my involvement with them. Chaplaincy to parish lay groups was usually given to the curates and they had read of worker groups in Europe and were made aware of ‘Catholic Action’ during their days at the seminary. But they seemed to have little more than a formal, if friendly, understanding of the lay apostolate. Father Golden was different. He spoke openly about a distinction between lay and clerical spirituality, and he saw the distinction as an unfolding work of exploration. To pressure students to take particular social/political action was for him anathema: ‘manipulation’ of a person’s spiritual development was out because growth was predicated on ‘learning to see with new eyes’, through personal freedom to make your own choices in the context of ‘worldly’ involvement. To reiterate, that distinction between a clerical spirituality and a newly developing lay apostolate was paramount in his dealings with students.

So, how describe that distinction? He made clear that ‘The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius’, ‘The Imitation of Christ’, and other texts on spirituality were works to be revered. But he gave me to believe that they were not particularly apt texts for lay people. He did not oppose reading them and did not push alternatives. But he accepted that ‘The Incarnation in the University’, Cardinal Suhard’s ‘The Growth and Decline of the Church’, the works of Canon Cardijn, Father Yves Congar’s ‘The Lay Apostolate in the Church’ and so on, were going to be picked up and read by students.

Again, it was not Father Golden’s way to press on students the use of any special jargon. Much of his effort in fact went into trying to simplify the understanding of the apostolate, and those outpourings of anyone who gave talks about it.

An example of his own approach: One of Father Golden’s favorite put-downs was of a spirituality that he described as ‘God and me in a bottle’. True spirituality would only come from an engagement with the people, the world, around us.

Probably his most profound ‘message’ had to do with his view of ‘new life through baptism’. Throwing even young people into perhaps the deepest mystery of

Christian spirituality, he put this view to my group at its very first meeting. But he did it with simple explorations about how we acquire human life and then, how a new life, a new dimension, was introduced to us through baptism.

Similarly, he made it clear that the spirituality of the lay person was not just about Mass on Sundays and being hardworking and honest at your job – a sort of ‘obedience to your moral and canonical duties’. Somehow, through God’s action, the baptismal intervention was to raise our actions to another level, to find a fulfillment in ways not otherwise available to the un-baptised. Along with this perspective went a necessary exploration of the Church as the ‘Mystical Body of Christ’ and of the Trinity that also had major places in his thinking.

At the group meetings, we were encouraged to talk of our course studies, exploring ways to understand them in the light of these mystical truths. Probably we failed much of the time because a course like law, my course, was heavily ‘technical’. The underlying question we came to interrogate ourselves with was, ‘but what do you actually do?’ when you practice law – a question that confronted your own actions and mindset, and the workings of society. This tended to make us critics of the law as taught (the university as ‘a job factory’, ‘not about seeking the truth’). It was common for students who had completed a law course not to practice thereafter, but to move to another field. (I took 10 years of law practice to decide to move – in my case to town planning.) So in no sense were we people who were just ‘to fit into the system’ – an approach we saw as consistent with the people of God’s role as a ‘sign of contradiction’. Importantly, too, during times of questioning of our chosen discipline, it was often the totality of the experience of others in the broader apostolate (engineers, literary, historical, scientists) that provided an impetus and the enlightenment ‘to keep going’.

In summary, 10 sub-points on what Father Golden and the Apostolate were about:

- 1. In coming to the Newman Apostolate from 2 years in the Young Christian Workers in Sunshine and Chadstone, I went from fairly sterile communal groups, with supportive but very raw curates, to a scene of lively, happy, stimulating activities and discussion, where Father Golden was clearly present, but by no means setting the agenda for the show;**
- 2. He, with others, placed a strong emphasis on notions of lay, as against clerical spirituality;**
- 3. We were to be ‘in the world, but not of the world’. How far we succeeded in that is a matter for a book in itself. I saw Father Golden discuss this idea with Father John Heffey, who had chosen to set up rural communities away from parish life, based on his (short-hand) view that ‘capitalism would beat the Church’, and it wasn’t fair to expect everybody to lead a heroic life in total confrontation with society. Looking at how things have turned out with society, the economy and all that, was Father John right? – though his own experiment is no longer extant! (The Australasian Catholic Record, deals with Whitlands, April, 2003, v.80,n2.)**

4. **The Incarnation, yes, was important to Father Golden – but it always seemed that the Sacrament of Baptism was more so when dealing with younger students, (seeing the world through the different eyes of someone who has entered a new life), and of course, the Mystical Body of the Church and the Trinity;**
5. **‘See, judge, act’ had been important in the YCW groups context – not to much avail according to Bill Ginnane, and my own experience. Bill Ginnane ‘replaced’ these with the 3 realities to which group life might relate, Christ, ourselves, and our milieu;**
6. **Working together with others – religious or not – who were seeking to achieve similar ends was a very firm approach which we were encouraged to pervade all our thinking; moving away from Catholic cliques;**
7. **It was an ‘intellectual apostolate’, that is, the core of its work concerned intellectual exploration and assessment, proposing, disputing, assembling evidence, learning to think, changing your mind, and so on. Terry Mahoney spoke of ‘the charity to think’ - partly, I suspect, in the face of the squeamishness of some who said that ‘we should be out there helping people by doing things’, and who curtly juxtaposed this as some higher form of charity to ‘just talking about action!’;**
8. **It was integrative in the sense that it encouraged students of one discipline to mix with and draw inspiration from students of other disciplines – again, breaking down barriers between myopic perspectives on one’s own field of study by rubbing shoulders with others and hearing out their concerns;**
9. **Study was not to be seen as fitting you out for some future professional role. It was an activity in itself in which you grew as a person.**
10. **The notion of ‘maturing’ in one’s religious understanding was important, that is, not remaining at the level of comprehension that one had as a child/school student.**

My Experience with Giving Talks Under Father Golden’s Tutelage

Father Golden encouraged younger students to express themselves and to explore views openly. It was not a case of saying something ‘correct’, but of talking out speculatively about our views and our stage in the learning process. I made two attempts at giving a talk.

The first was at a mid-year gathering at Cheltenham and the theme was ‘Hope’ – something that Vincent Buckley had written about and had raised as an important topic of the time. (Was it the nuclear weapons proliferation that was the main source of fear at the time?) I read Buckley’s paper and several other works and was asked (in my second/third year) to give a paper. My central idea was that (natural) hope differed from a euphoric sentiment of optimism by being grounded in some form of achievable object. I presented the paper to Father Golden the day before I was to deliver it. He was horrified – not, I’m sure, because I was spouting heresy, but because of the (no doubt) poor structure and obscurity of its message. But it was

too late to change the text, so I went on anyway. Father Golden remembered that one for future reference!

The second paper I was to deliver was to be at a summer camp, the next or following year. The topic was a perspective on the Church with relevance for students. I showed the first draft to Father Golden some weeks before the camp and he immediately took it apart. Over the days before the camp, he had me rewrite the paper four or five times, made radical change suggestions, not to my perspective, but again to the structure and clarity of the text. He was pleased with the result and, without doubt, this was the best lesson I had in clear thinking and presentation throughout my law course.

Father Golden: going out to the University?

In a sense, he didn't. He quite consciously chose not to spend time, take a room, be seen about the University Union.

Typically, he would indicate that he didn't want to get caught up in the sort of debates that students continually were engaged in – the Church and politics, abortion, contraception, sex, the arguments about the existence of God, etc. He thought of himself as no intellectual and there were others who could do a better job.

But going out to the university was in another and very real sense central to his mission. He did welcome and encourage participation by apostolate students in University activities, social work, and so on. A high profile event was when members of the 'senior' group organized 'A Mission to the University'. Father Golden was very supportive, though not a speaker. Another initiative of his was to prompt a couple of us to sell Catholic pamphlets outside the Union.

'Growth and Decline' of the Apostolate and Golden's Legacy

There are possibly three distinct periods in the rise and decline of the university lay apostolate surrounding Father Golden's period and in which he was a key figure.

The first period was from his 1950 appointment to 1953. This was a start-up time, immersed in institutional or group conflicts and definition of purposes - an inevitable situation while a new perspective on the life of the Church was emerging - and challenging or disappointing others who did not see eye-to-eye with Father Golden.

The second period I have dealt with to some extent above. It was the height of the apostolate's development, a period of consolidation of attitudes but also expansion as the numbers of students grew who came to engage in the so-called 'Newman Society's' groups.

The third period, from 1961 to 1966, is again not a time about which I can contribute. 'Cutting Green Hay' deals at some length with events as they unfolded into a sorry conclusion for the idea of the apostolate.

Golden's Legacy? There's not much doubt that the apostolate, with the benefit of Father Golden's guidance, sensible wisdom, determination to see students grow in character and conviction, has left its main legacy in the lives of individuals. The old 'apologetic' approach to the Catholic faith – defined answers to specific questions – has been erased from those students, to be replaced by a serious opening to a more mature evaluation of what life throws at them. Anyone who thinks that this should have meant the creation of 'an army of thinkers' willing and able to staunch the withdrawal of intellectuals from the formal expression of Catholic practice – and no divorces, no abortions, no contraception – will be disappointed. But that could be the price of allowing growth and change in response to those living with us.

Father Golden – A Man for the Future?

I have a suspicion that he would be embarrassed by a commemoration event which might be in danger of turning him into 'a celebrity'. He was always looking for development in ideas, as guidance for the future, whenever people gathered in conferences. The way I would posit the situation is, 'What of the future, Can he be described as a Man for the Future?' OK, he was a nice guy, with a quirky sense of humour. So was he in tune with the way the world and society was unfolding? I'd like to approach the subject on three levels:

1. **Discussion and action generated in small groups.** This was a Father Golden favorite. The modus operandi that Father Golden so strongly endorsed has proved durable. Drawing inspiration and strength from working together in small groups with others of a similar inclination/agenda has become so well recognised as to be commonplace. My experience in policy work in government and with NGO's shows it to be a most productive methodology – a way of moving ideas and commitment along. And certainly a way of confronting the most pervasive of society's entrenched positions. Similar fruitful group experiences are being documented all the time.
2. **The 'God debate'.** Philosophers and theologians are better able than I to document how this debate has waxed and waned over the past 50 years. Clearly, we're at one peak in the debate at the moment. My memory tells me that Father Golden avoided getting involved very much (if at all) in such discussions in his time. We were all pretty convinced of the perspectives that the community of the baptised offered us and only, I think, Bill Ginnane publicly turned the issue over. (Maybe there were others?) So it was with some surprise that I read (in the '60's) a piece by the Canadian theologian-sociologist, Father Gregory Baum, himself having attended the Vatican Council, pointing out that the Council had

not dealt with the subject of the existence of God. ‘Why should they? I thought at the time. I don’t know what Father Golden would have thought.

But one way or another, the question of the existence of God is around to challenge people. And I’m not just referring to the slash and burn pieces of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. For me, the scientific case of fine and civilised people such as Edward O. Wilson needs to be treated with respect: In ‘The Creation’, he points out that the Holy Scripture says that ‘God made the Creation’. “But no, I say respectfully, ‘Life was self-assembled by random mutation and natural selection of the codifying molecules.’(p112). Wilson, with humility, is prepared to acknowledge he may be wrong. So are others such as Terry Eagleton.

Now, is it such scientific arguments that have opened up big areas of popular disbelief in God? Or are there other reasons such as ascribed by Patrick White in ‘Riders in the Chariot’ to one of his characters, ‘the confident young man...who turned sceptical, not of his religion, rather, of his need for it?’ Or is it because John Heffey’s prediction that ‘capitalism will beat the Church’ is coming to pass – by which he meant, in part, that the attractions of consumerism, etc., would be irresistible? I’m not sure how Father Golden would have handled these ‘assaults’. But I am confident that he would have found Wilson’s call for people of faith to work together with scientists ‘to save life on earth’ as something he could relate to.

3. Which leads me to my third and last discussion of Father Golden as a man of the future: what I call human-earth connections. Did he share Vincent Buckley’s amazingly radical (for Christians) insight as expressed in ‘Cutting Green Hay’? (Or was it just another of those thoughts of Vin’s that Father Golden – half-jokingly – admitted to not understanding?) Buckley expressed it in the context of positions taken at an early 1960’s UCFA Conference: “The most vehement clashes”, says Buckley, “came between those who read literally the biblical injunction to ‘subdue the earth’ and those who declared the earth sacred. All those who had a hand in the mechanization of man were after mastery. It is the otherness of nature, not its beauty, that calls for reverence. It is spiritually inadequate to see the world as lying outside ourselves to be controlled. It is not inert, it lives for completion, reharmonising.” Whether Father Golden saw the force of Vincent Buckley’s statement about the human-earth connection, I don’t know. But we do know that he lived a very frugal life, and that no other way of living could be more apposite for meeting today’s growth and consumption mania.

In the circumstances, Father Golden – as with other priests who lead a genuinely frugal life – deserves our gratitude and recognition.

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