

SEVEN LAST WORDS

Charlotte Hunter Tansey was a founding director of the Thomas More Institute (TMI) sixty-five years ago (1945). Fr Eric O'Connor, S.J., was its President and Dean of Studies until his death just before Christmas 1980. Charlotte was then President and Director of Studies for eighteen years until her retirement in 1998.

I begin with a confession: standing before you is a long-time friend of Charlotte Tansey. Soon after I was ordained, 37 years ago, we met at TMI. She has been a fine colleague, a staunch supporter and challenger, an elder sister. Without being together much, we have lived much together. And I never left TMI without an armful of well-chosen new paperbacks.

This sermon is to honour Charlotte and celebrate her life among us as fellow-learners, friends and especially family – her sisters Barbara and Carol, many nephews and nieces and godchildren and in-laws. The sermon is entitled **Seven Last Words**. The seven last words of Christ on the Cross¹ somehow synthesize his few intense years of going “about doing good and healing” (Acts 10:38). But these seven are at the same time the first words (prolegomena) of his risen Life, and of ours. Similarly, I want to evoke seven words² which for me sum up Charlotte's long full life, point her to new life face-to-face with God, and serve as a kind of heritage for us.

1. The first word, **Learner**, already evoked, can be translated as curiosity at the centre of one's life.³ From the very beginning of my involvement with TMI and my friendship with Charlotte, I have been in awe of the planning which took place with great and stressful creativity every summer. “The process for planning and offering different courses each year came from a wish to focus on some immediately significant concerns just under the consciousness of people, not what they would ask for, but what they would recognize as wanted when provoked by a little cluster of preoccupations. The great effort was for the creation and annual re-creation each summer of the whole endeavour.”⁴ The purpose, she said, was “to create a context in which persons can report and converse from the depth of life experience.” It is then “a rare triumph” for each one to pay “attention to one's own fullest wish to understand and appreciate” (Cathleen Going). Appropriately, therefore, Charlotte's own life-long struggle was to remain, herself, a learner rather than succumb to the easier (also more lucrative and prestigious) temptation

¹ 1. Father forgive them, for they know not what they do (Luke 23:34); 2. Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise (Luke 23:43); 3. Woman, behold your son; behold your mother (John 19:26-27); 4. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Matthew 27:46 and Mark 15:34); 5. I thirst (John 19:28); 6. It is finished (John 19:30); 7. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit (Luke 23:46).

² 1. Learner; 2. Adult; 3. Virgin; 4. Community; 5. Courage; 6. Knowledge; 7. Love.

³ J. Marin O'Hara, *Curiosity at the Centre of One's Life: Statements and Questions of R. Eric O'Connor* (1987).

⁴ The quotations not referenced are all from Charlotte's article on the twenty-fifth anniversary in 2005 of the death of Father Eric O'Connor, S.J., for *Promotio Iustitiae* (Jesuit Curia, Rome) which I used to edit.

of being a professor or, after her retirement, the suicidal temptation of shutting herself into her own certainties.

2. **Adult.** Elders among us will remember – younger ones will be surprised to discover – the context in which Charlotte became an adult and in which the TMI was born. “We lay people, mainly in our twenties, came together in 1944 with a common yearning to join the civilization by ‘getting to know’ more profoundly. Our appetite was a response to a decadent Thomism, to insufficient exposure to several sciences, and to a great deal of dogmatism.” As Catholics they longed for a wise Mother Church, not a smothering one who kept her own childish and cut off from the world. Such yearning and striving culminated in the 1960s with Vatican II in the Church and the Quiet Revolution in Québec.

The struggle for maturity is not new. In our first reading, Thérèse Mason described: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child.” Childishness consists in parroting concepts and fashionable clichés rather than rejoicing in ideas that meet real questions. But for an intelligent young woman in Church and society at that time to “put an end to childish ways” and become an intelligent adult, was not easy. It too takes a lifetime. Twenty years ago, Charlotte said about herself: “I don’t mind someone knowing more than I do, if I can speak too.”⁵

Listen now to a mature French Canadian priest who testifies, “Charlotte gave me very good advice when I was an undergraduate student 25 years ago, advice that freed me to trust my thoughts and feelings.” Free to trust – that is adulthood!

3. The third “last word” may startle you, it is so unfashionable: **Virgin.** Virginity is a state of life which Charlotte chose in order to dedicate herself to the first two, **Adult** and **Learner.** In this regard, she spoke about the early community of TMI: “We were predominantly celibate. This made us more flexible about the time we worked. Our home responsibilities did not catch up with us for years, until relatives aged and their health declined.” So God somehow consecrated Charlotte for the work of liberating his people from mental slavery.

In 1973, three of us newly-ordained Jesuits became involved at TMI in the planning of the Jesuit Congress, whose chairman was Fr O’Connor. Grateful for our work, he invited Charlotte, Cathleen Going and the three of us to a Spanish restaurant. While studying the menu for a while, Eric’s attention was caught by the paella. “You had it before,” commented Charlotte. Looking relieved, Eric asked back, “And please do you remember, did I like it?” She reassured him that he had and thus freed him of the burden of choosing; he ordered it and enjoyed it again. To which one of the young Jesuit companions commented, “That’s as close to marriage as we are allowed to get” and the vignette remains a lifelong beacon for our vowed chastity. To be *alone for others*⁶ is great sacrifice and can be of divine fruitfulness.

4. So, fourthly, **Community.** In today’s Gospel, two disciples puzzled sadly over “all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, and asked them, “What are you discussing with each

⁵ Convocation address some 20 years ago.

⁶ Title of the autobiography of Tony Walsh, fellow-traveller in Québec society and church.

other while you walk along looking sad?” Later, to celebrate and indeed complete their learning, they sat down together at table for the breaking of the bread. For Charlotte, *discussion + dinner = community*, a circle of learners become friends and fellow guests at table. In her Psalm 22, “I can know community with many strangers, and have been accepted to speak and to listen” and to dine.

But community is no easy formula either, and with her retirement 12 years ago, it got put to a terrible test and practically wrecked. Listen to her disappointment penned in a poem around 1999 as she laments: “... jolts to lives completed, reluctant celebrations, broken intimacies, faith surprised.

I had thought insight conceived mercy, then action,
that they surged like twins from the womb of time,
but Caesarean it is, if at all.

The word is frozen in the heart.

Petals curl inward without light.”⁷

So if the first three words – **Learner, Adult, Virgin** – generate community, community is neither automatic nor static. When crucified, it can rise again only with the Divine gift of forgiveness. For Charlotte finally to accept this grace, to forgive others, meant for her to grow more pure, more mature, more open than even she had ever dreamt possible. And so it was.

5. The fifth word is **Courage**. What is courage? St Augustine tells us that Hope has two beautiful daughters: their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see to it that they not remain the way they are.

Charlotte’s primordial anger was directed against the impoverishing disorder in people’s minds and hearts, whether bad habits acquired from poor teachers or laziness or self-interest. And her courage stopped at nothing in the campaign to rattle loose those apparent certainties which block further learning or – as Bernard Lonergan, S.J., her greatest mentor, would say – block self-appropriation and self-transcendence. Personally I am very grateful, even if I sometimes felt more the victim of her courage than its beneficiary.

In the Eucharist after the Our Father, we shall greet one another with the traditional “peace of Christ!” According to Charlotte, Christian peace remains prone to misunderstanding as sheep-like complacency and passivity. So today, when we greet one another, let us add courage and wish one another “Peace and courage of Christ!” which includes Charlotte’s.

6. The sixth word is **Knowledge**. Charlotte can borrow the words of St Paul to report from the depths of her life experience: “For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part, but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end... For now we see in a mirror, darkly, as in a riddle, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

At the Jewish General two Thursday evenings ago (19 August), in company with Moira Carley and Brian McDonough, we heard Charlotte declare: “I have always wondered what the latter moments of life would be like,” and now she was discovering how her whole life, in its diminishment and suffering, in its unfinished learning and still growing

⁷ Charlotte, From *Three Voices to Each Other*, November, 1999.

knowledge, had become a total prayer. Moira was singing, “Take, Lord, receive all I have and possess - my memory, understanding, my entire will - you have given all to me, now I return it - dispose of it entirely according to your will.”⁸ So to discover oneself and realize that “I am a knower” can be true, if you struggle as Charlotte did, and evolves at every stage.

Charlotte prays in her Psalm 22: “He who is unknowable wishes to be known. / He is my teacher, and what I shall want / may be caught up in mystery beyond my horizon.” All the years until the end, God “beckons towards life and wonder beyond measure”⁹ and now these are the new beginning.

7. The last “last word” is **Love**, obviously, is it not? Charlotte loved very very deeply, through all and in all and above all a great lover, but not romantically! She railed against surface culture, and sentimentality she could not bear. But she desperately wanted people to love right, which they absolutely could not do if they were not attentive, intelligent, reasonable and responsible. Now “give me only your love and your grace, that’s enough for me - your love and your grace are enough for me. I want a funeral Eucharist,” she told Moira, “I want all the trimmings” – including, I hope, this sermon!

On that Thursday evening ten days ago, Charlotte was more alert and seeing better than she had in a very long time. She was in a lot of pain, constant she said and all over. Most moving for me was her declaration that she had been waiting for me and, with our encounter, I wished her to feel liberated and free to let go and pass over.

After the seventh and final word of **Love**, let me quote the **Hmmm** she kept saying: Hmmm, I hear you. Hmmm, I am considering what you say. Hmmm, I accept everything, my heart is burning within me, and even now there is still more. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Michael Czerny, S.J.
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⁸ St Ignatius of Loyola, *Suscipe* (Take and Receive), to be sung at the Offertory.

⁹ “The Good” alleluia verse of the funeral liturgy.