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CARDUS Roundtable
Soul City

Spiritual Friendship & Caring for the Soul of the City
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Several years ago one of Canada's foremost ethical thinkers commented to a gathering of largely left-leaning Christian activists that he sometimes thought they had done the job of translating religious language into a public language so well that their children no longer had even a feel for why the church, as local parish, should exist—much less why their parents continued to participate in the life of a congregation. He went on to say that one of his children had abandoned the church altogether and showed no interest even in talking about it. The other child had found a new church: working for the New Democratic Party. The NDP provided him with community, society, ethical work, and a sense of purpose beyond his own interests. The civil state has taken over most of the social and charitable work once the preserve of churches and this, to my colleague's mind, was an accomplishment of their activism. Given this accomplishment he also, being a fine liberal, continued to see important places within the public commons for churches and other religious organizations to provide alternative ways of doing such work. Public ways of delivering service are significant, but they need to be complemented by "religious" ways of serving the life of the world. What I think troubled him a bit was how all he had invested in both Christian thinking and action through church institutions and organizations was ending with his generation. I was startled by the anger many present that evening showed toward the church institutions they had served from the 1960s – 1990s. During those years they all had paid and pensionable positions in various denominations doing social justice and community development work. All this ended several decades ago for reasons beyond my consideration here, but it left each of them with deep individual bitterness and, as most of them said, some satisfaction that their children no longer cared about the church. I sensed a kind of spiritual anorexia, an appetite to take on each new cause and push it forward into the public square. Their preoccupation with the works of social justice, as good as that was, left little room for understanding or seeing the church as more than an ideological fraternity. The way the historical understanding of the doctrine of the church, the *ecclesia*, framed its particular ways of holding together the true, the good (including social justice), and the beautiful had disappeared from their consciousness. It may have even disappeared from their capacity as human beings called to communion and community. Over the course of that evening frustration and anger flowed out of a dry, withered place in their spirit.

Saint John Chrysostom (c.349-407), archbishop of Constantinople and Doctor of the Church, challenged his own bishops to resist a temptation offered by Emperor Arcadius, a temptation that would be beneficial to the building of church institutions and provide them with more public presence. It is hard, I should think, for bishops to resist an offer to develop institutions. The emperor had promulgated an edict banning all street people from Constantinople, "the city of the world's desire." He then turned and, with his left-hand, granted licenses to bishops to open hostels to house street people and give them a permanent address inside the walls of the great city. This may have been the beginning of the

church's engagement with empire (and nations) in providing social services at state expense. In response, the crusty archbishop preached a fiery sermon to his fellow bishops pointing out the implications: "If you do not have a bedroll, a loaf of bread, and a candle sitting in the corner of your home waiting for a stranger to knock at the door seeking shelter and sustenance, and if you do not invite the person who speaks a word to you on the street, as you are returning to your home, in the hope of receiving a little toward what is necessary to live another day, you do not have a Christian home." If the bishops accepted the emperor's offer they would be outsourcing an essential aspect of the Christian home. The natural unfolding of community, which only exists when the stranger is both present and a welcome part of our life together, would shrink. The poor would be institutionalized. Their bodies would be cared for but their soul would be starved. The face of the poor and the stranger would be hidden behind the mask of a needy case. And the Christian home would be robbed of moments of annunciation, those moments that arise in our life whenever we welcome the stranger and hear the human story, moments revealed to us in the narrative of Abraham and Sarah when they welcomed the three strangers who lingered by the oaks of Mamre (Genesis 13). The very church herself, in Chrysostom's understanding, would be transformed. Instead of being the *ecclesia*, the gathering of all for whom God's grace is sufficient whether they know it or not, it would become a fraternity of like-minded people, a religious fraternity at best.

Milton Friesen through his work on "Soul City" at CARDUS has invited us to rethink the way religion and faith communities contribute to the well being of cities. Certainly churches and other religious bodies bind some people together in richer communities than they would otherwise experience. Yet we must ask: Do we have room for the stranger? And if not, have our churches become religious fraternities? Tightly knit religious communities increase our capacity to care for others across race, class, ethnicity, and political and ideological allegiance. How intentional are we in exercising that capacity and engaging the gift of difference, including differences we fear? Most churches, it seems to me, still provide the worshiping community with a language of meaning larger than economics and self-interest. But this light is often hidden under a bushel of fear. This is the case especially when the church community has shrunk almost to the point of including only those who share particular ideological interests, where the majority live lives of comfort in isolation from the stranger, strangers they do not have to meet because the "suburban captivity of the church" has robbed them of the deep differences present but unnoticed on the streets of our cities.

There are many religious public goods that, while often under the radar of public officials, are obvious to anyone who takes the time to look. Charitable work—largely as triage—continues to garner attention, support, and service. How well do these works of mercy move beyond service and shape opportunities for the flourishing of friendships and the enlarging of community? Some healthcare institutions including hospitals, long-term care, and hospices remain under the administration of faith-based organizations. With the new legislation on physician-assisted death they face new challenges and new opportunities. Have they moved beyond the good and necessary care of the body to a practice of integrating those who suffer into caring communities where solidarity in the human struggle turns patient and professional into guest and host nurturing an enlarged capacity for the faithful to linger close when the guests have entered their particular Gethsemane?

Educational institutions including K-12 (Catholic, Reformed, Evangelical and Pentecostal, Muslim, Jewish) exist in various parts of Canada and some of them shape the religious and civil formation of the young in ways larger than what is normally done in public institutions. The perennial question for faith-based education remains: How well do such institutions nurture the spiritual formation of the young so the understanding of their faith is large enough to counter the common fears propagated in our world? How well do they educate the young about the fragile gifts of the civil life, as limited as they may be, in modern liberal democratic society? The same set of questions can, of course, be asked of our faith-based universities. The response of various religious organizations to the current refugee crisis our world faces has been noteworthy. Christian churches, while caring for the immediate needs of those who come, also are responsible to be open to spiritual friendship with the strangers in our midst so that a deep and palpable sense of belonging enlarges our new life together. Are we up for this? It is simply too easy to focus on works of mercy in lieu of integrating an ethos of spiritual friendship. Yet the church's contribution to the life of a city does not depend on global or local crises—it also cultivates a quieter means of public edification. An overlooked part of the social capital of churches in the modern world is their historic contribution to the shaping of cities with an eye to the beautiful. Do faithful communities also have a capacity and a responsibility, on behalf of the whole of the city, to provide the beauty of holiness in the places of worship they build and for the encounters within its precincts? Chrysostom tells us that “art is given to us by God so we may hold the world together.” A renewed sense of this public vocation of churches enhances the life of all, whether they simply pass by on the street and give a moment's attention to the loveliness of a church or enter and hear and see and dwell in the presence of beauty in word, song, music, painting, sculpture, and all the other ways Christians have come to encounter and express that “beauty which will save the world.” Chrysostom lived in and loved both Antioch and Constantinople, even though he was kidnapped and taken under force of arms from Antioch to serve in the imperial church in Constantinople and then, some years later, taken again at the hand of his own bishops and marched out of Constantinople into an enforced exile that led to his death. We know this because he includes in the liturgy that bears his name a petition that Orthodox faithful pray weekly: “For this city, for every city and land, and for them that dwell therein with faith, let us pray unto the Lord.” Along with the prophet Jeremiah (29:7), we are invited to pray for the city and anoint it and all those who make it their home with the oil of gladness.

In both their worship and their theology Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and other religions invite the faithful to engage the sojourner, stranger, enemy, and the neighbour we are free to choose and those we struggle to recognize as neighbour. Our traditions have spiritual disciplines to nurture the capacity of the faithful for spiritual friendship. We need to recover and renew an evangelical (in the ancient sense) vision and mission that sees the local world as the place of our belonging, the locus of our daily pathways where enmity may turn to empathy, loneliness to friendship, and service to relationship. We need to reaffirm our local world as our immediate place where we may work and be present to the healing of neighbourhood. Neighbourhood only exists where there is difference, and to choose and bless those who are different is a call of the Gospel. We are called, or so it seems to me, to find ways of working across denominational and religious lines and across the liberal/conservative divide in ways large enough to break down the secular/religious silos

that so often frustrate our capacity and desire to nurture healthy and textured communities. And we need to think seriously about the “suburban captivity of the church” where the church has passively gone along with the urban developer’s preoccupation with creating bedroom silos, fraternities of self-interest, and economically homogenous places. Churches are responsible to work to transform the suburbs in which they are located into human-scale cities and recover the pathways and meeting places where we can come to know and share in the joy and sorrow of others with whom we are not like-minded.

Churches and religious communities have a larger set of concerns and an understanding of excellence (virtue) than those which typically inform developers and city planners. How to call these gifts forward and develop the skills necessary to participate in city planning, neighbourhood (re)development, and suburban transformation ought to be part of a new evangelical mission. The good news is that life is richer when we live in modest-scale neighbourhoods which are not characterized by like-minded similarity but are rather full of difference, and thus replete with experiences of surprise and moments of annunciation. Churches also exist for the life of the world, for the city and their local neighbourhood. What would our neighbourhoods look like and be like if local churches developed a tradition of neighbourhood festivals anchored in the idea of conviviality, a day or two a year in which the faithful would invite whomever happens to come along to a time of eating and drinking together, in a space open to hearing the human story and deepening how those stories dance with our own story of sorrow and joy? This would be a new way to express the understanding that lies at the heart of our religious traditions: that churches exist for the life of the world, and that through this understanding the faithful live as friends to all—including “the least of these my brothers and sisters.”