

# **The Contribution of Vincent Buckley to the Newman Society and the Intellectual Apostolate in the Fifties and Sixties**

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This paper offers my reflections on the influence of Vincent Buckley on the life of the Newman Society from this distant perspective forty years on. The term ‘intellectual apostolate’ was used at that time to refer to a shared understanding of how to live out our lives as committed Christians and Catholics. Constant reflection and analysis were undertaken in the individual Newman Society groups, and in the larger gatherings from many groups, and also at conferences across state boundaries. I shall attempt to shed light on Vin’s contributions as a leader of this Newman Society community.

I think it is important, and only fair, to note at the outset that as Vin spoke of ‘the folly of establishing a Catholic university’ in *Cutting Green Hay* (139), and as I am a psychologist at Australian Catholic University, he might well not have been happy with me as an author on this topic. In spite of this, I offer my thoughts.

It is not only psychologists who emphasise the importance of critically examining the perspective of the writer or commentator, and they are right to do so. Therefore, I believe that two introductory segments are needed: firstly, a few words about my place in the stories being reviewed, to enable the reader to see all too clearly both the positive perspectives and the limitations of what I can offer by way of reflections; and secondly, a snapshot, through my eyes at least, of what was the mindset of the Newman Society community in those years of the fifties and sixties in which I shared.

After these introductory thoughts I shall discuss Vin’s leadership through his shared theological reflection and comment on the qualities of this reflection that made his role a unique and significant one.

Before beginning my Arts course at Melbourne University in 1957, I attended the Summer School at Point Lonsdale, an annual summer camp to introduce freshers to the apostolate. It was not, however, my first experience of the ideas of the apostolate as I had grown up in the Dominican East Camberwell parish where the new theology of the laity had a strong hold, especially through the Young Christian Workers (YCW) group. My brothers were members of this group and Bill Ginnane, who was later a philosopher and one of the main leaders of the Newman Society, was a frequent visitor to our home. So, I was fertile ground for the revolutionary ideas of the apostolate, indeed I had already been inducted into them at school through the Young Christian Students movement (YCS). It was as a seventeen year-old student that I first heard Vincent Buckley speak. I attended many of the gatherings of the apostolate where he spoke, and began to contribute my own offerings of talks to the community. Within the university I made the transition from student to staff member in the Department of Psychology in 1960 and taught there until moving to Sydney in 1963. During those early sixties I lived in Carlton opposite Newman College and Vin was a frequent visitor to the home I shared with Marie McNally who was a tutor in the English Department before going to Cambridge. As you can see, my relevant experiences are mostly limited to the years 1957 to 1962. The important 1955 Conference articulating the core ideas of the Intellectual

Apostolate had already taken place but I was able to read the papers in *Incarnation in the University*. I knew Vin then first as a distant speaker, but gradually we became close until he finally helped to make the match of marriage between me and Gerry Joyce, thus influencing my destiny more than most! As was his wont on formal occasions, he stayed at a social distance on the day of our wedding but instead of being with us sent a poem via telegram:

The library books all burn with joy  
 The scalpels go berserk  
 For Gerry and Marie all alone  
 For private reasons of their own  
 Have taken a day off work. (unpublished 1964)

Secondly, a few thoughts about the Catholic culture of the era and the likely mindset of Vin's listeners. As a developmental psychologist I have studied the possibility of the emergence of a critical consciousness in adults and now, looking back on this time, I see that as students we were being encouraged into a transition towards such a consciousness. However, the Catholic culture was one of very strong conformity, especially in matters of dogma and liturgy. This allowed the leaders of the Newman Society to use this as a ground or base from which to invite us into new, revolutionary ways of thinking about our lives. I hope to show later in this paper that part of the longer-term influence of Vin and other leaders was a fuller flowering of this critical consciousness in members of the community, which later led many far down paths, including some that would, I think, have shocked Vin at that time.

The recent publication, *Golden Years* (Noone et al), in memory of our chaplain in those years, Father Jerry Golden S.J, reflects well these varied paths. Members of the community from that time, writing in *Golden Years*, reveal the lifetime-deep engagement with their intellectual work that was begun in the years of the Newman Society. Of course theology, especially biblical scholarship, has developed since that time, so the beliefs even of those who remained with the Church have changed greatly, as has our relationship with our beliefs. Then, we were receptive to thinking that assumed traditional Catholic beliefs, and the approach chosen by Vin as leader was one of theological reflection, especially on the Incarnation and its meaning for our lives in the university. I do not wish to overstate the common ground at that time as I know there was a diversity of views and beliefs but I want to suggest by this snapshot that shared faith allegiance was considerable within the group. We were mostly 'signed-on' Catholic Christians who were already used to examining our lives, though not yet in the ways we were to learn in the Newman Society.

Part of the reason many had difficulty grappling with the ideas of the apostolate was that there were no small steps of transition from *conventional thinking* to *critical consciousness*—'Third Order' to 'Fourth Order' complexity of thought as Kegan (188) describes it. We were thrown in at the deep end. And it was immediately emphasised by Vin that these were not just *ideas* (as would be implied by my writing so far) but *existential challenges*. He was asking, demanding even, that we not merely think about these things but that we transform our very lives in their moment to moment realities.

That such a transformation could not come from formulae was very clear. In his Introduction to *Incarnation in the University* Vin stated:

What these papers deal with is a mystery, a mystery created by the confrontation of social realities with transcendent spiritual forces. And you do

not meet the challenge of mystery by producing formulae; you meet it in a spirit of reverent investigation, a readiness to experience it on its own terms. (16)

Vin reiterated what Father Jerry Golden S.J had written in his Preface to this book, where Fr. Golden stressed a deepening spiritual life; one that does not leave out any areas of life, especially studies and university work which are the core for students and academics (9). Vin wrote later in *Australia a Society Afraid of Truth*:

The two thousand years which the world has lived since its redeemer came to it, to live in it forever, don't look to me like a series of...easy adaptations, but like a battlefield, on which human life remains pitifully deprived and stubbornly anomalous. Christ is in our midst, and we kill and torture one another. A world in which these things happen demands not to be made manageable with a set of formulae, but to have its hopes and its torments shared, in the only way an intellectual can share them, through a profound and imaginative understanding. It is our privilege, as Christians and intellectuals, to bear the burden and heat of mankind's day. (10)

Thus Vin constantly turned our minds to the world we inhabited, urging us to take responsibility in the depths of our souls and share the suffering and struggles of humankind. Personally speaking, I often found the beginnings of 'a profound and imaginative understanding' in his very words.

My re-reading of Vin's talks and papers written for the Newman Society has been a great pleasure, primarily because of the beautiful quality of his writing. Even though I cannot lay claim to being a literary critic I have entered into his work and appreciated its exquisite use of language appealing to mind, heart and spirit. He would introduce a concept and offer defining words. Then, just as you were thinking you might have a bit of a grip on it, he would, as it were, 'pull the rug' and make you undo your assumptions. He would introduce metaphors to take his listeners down new tracks of complexity.

This is exemplified in *Faith in the New Testament*. Vin compares the writings of Paul with John's gospel—a gospel which 'presents a theology of events': 'St Paul's concerns... are held more fiercely and urgently' (11). He writes further:

He [St Paul] tries to create, in a language which is at once strangely figurative and abstract, a conceptual context in which to give full meaning to the interior facts of the life of faith as he personally experienced it...The result is that he repeats himself, nothing is clearcut, everything sways and shudders in the fervent flow of his remonstrances, reminders, and attempts to formulate the movements of his heart. (11)

This tension between the conceptual-abstract and the figurative-experiential are found in more recent strands of two intellectual disciplines which explore in different ways the relationship between theology and poetic language and imagination: writings on the nature of theology are one end of the bridge, and literary criticism exploring poetry and the sacred form the other end. I would like to review briefly an example of each of these approaches, including one that explores Vin's poetry. The first I examine is one from theology looking towards poetry.

Frank Burch Brown has examined the view that conceptual understanding only is insufficient for theology seeking the fullness of understanding of faith. He notes early on in his paper that ‘scriptural language is, to a significant degree, the language of myth, parable, and symbol’ (41). He then argues that the 1968 work of Philip Wheelwright explicates the meaning of metaphor by distinguishing two kinds: the first, *epiphor* compares one thing with another, where non-literal similarity or equation of ideas allows new perspectives to be developed. He cites Shakespeare’s ‘All the world’s a stage’ (45).

The second category of metaphor is called *diaphor*:

Unlike epiphor, diaphor creates new meanings through (that is, *dia*) the sheer juxtapositioning of seemingly unlike, heterogeneous semantic elements the referents of which are linked less by similarity or rational connection than by sheer contiguity and intuitive affinity. (45)

Brown notes that ‘epiphor and diaphor are both operative in the best metaphoric discourse’ (46) and that this necessarily introduces semantic tension. Metaphoric language then complicates meaning in a way that changes—*transfigures* is his word—the ideas being communicated. Metaphor adds resonance and goes beyond conceptual content:

With regard to our modes of *understanding* religious truth, it seems reasonable to conclude that the epiphoric element within metaphor discloses that which we recognize as like, or analogous to, what we already know: God’s love as like a parent’s love, for example. On the other hand, the diaphoric element within religious truth and language is that which confronts us as paradoxical, turning our rational norms upside down and defying explanation in terms of our previous understanding. It points to the dimension of radical mystery within knowledge itself: that the last shall be first, or that the God who is present is also hidden. (49)

There are glimpses of such a diaphoric element in Vin’s account, quoted above, of his reading of St Paul. To listen to Vin’s presentations was to be drawn into the paradoxical nature of religious faith and into a desire to seek deeper understanding and engagement.

Brown goes on to argue that metaphor is not merely a helpful additive of some kind to the work of the theologian but a necessary partner in this work which involves ‘an inner, hidden dialogue’ (53) between the two. Because the experiential element of the person is important, concepts alone cannot do justice to understanding:

...our understanding of theology is necessarily dialogical, depending in part on our capacity to bring to it understandings vividly informed and transformed by the metaphoric media found both in culture at large and in explicitly religious language, art, ritual and worship. For...it is metaphor and poetic art which does in fact convey through the medium itself the dynamic qualities of the life experience it shapes and interprets. (55-6)

I would argue, in agreement with Brown’s thesis, that the fine conceptual analyses of apostolate leaders such as philosophers Bill Ginnane and Peter Wertheim needed to be complemented by the richness of Vin’s poetic presentations to touch people’s lives at their deepest places. Having briefly explored some theological perspectives on poetry, I turn now to the other end of the ‘bridge’—poetry’s outreach to the sacred.

In his 1968 work, *Poetry and the Sacred*, Vin explored the nature of religious poetry and distinguished between the poet who ‘can open up personal experience, generalize and re-create the “holy places of his private universe”’ and those who ‘open on to a universe in which blankness, or stoicism, or the pragmatic need for human kindness seems the dominant feature’ (76). He identifies the former as religious poetry and the latter as non-religious. He expresses a strong hope that both kinds of poetry will emerge in the future so that, ‘if we get it...we shall be seeing again...creative artists leading theologians out of their conceptual dilemmas’ (76). This resonates with the thought of Brown who argued that concepts alone cannot do justice to understanding (55).

This writing of Vin’s prefigures the second of the recent strands I want to include—one which brings directly into conjunction poetry and the sacred. Lyn McCredden’s 2007 article chooses Vin’s work as the first to consider and she focuses on *Golden Builders* (1976), a work which comes later than the period of the Newman Society being considered here. However, her reflections reveal the transcendent nature of Vin’s poetry:

Muscled, loud, shattering construction and change are everywhere, but so is the possibility of holiness in the city. The poem [*Golden Builders*] works through literary echoes...as the place where an active vision of redemption must be sought or made. Christ’s directive to ‘the experienced’ on behalf of ‘the innocent’—‘Feed My Lambs’—recurs through the sequence, and the poem at this level offers to find or make or be such nurturance. (‘Contemporary Poetry’ 155)

McCredden notes the shift in faith stance from ‘the arguably dogmatic tenor of Buckley’s earlier poetry’ to greater ‘vulnerability and ambivalence’ (157). There is consonance here with my earlier point of a transition to full critical consciousness *and beyond* taking place in those years when she identifies a stance that embraces the sacred alive with paradox and uncertainty:

We are asked to confront in the poem’s last image not the certainty of belief, a reassuring, eschatological God sitting in triumph in His eternal City, but the grave. The narrator confronts the possibility of death, but equally of resurrection, the use of the personal possessive ‘my’, referring both to ‘Lord’ and ‘grave’ is indicative of the unflinching, steely-eyed hope with which the poem is invested. (157)

I see in McCredden’s appreciation more than a reflection of the text but a mirror of Vin’s life work ‘to *be* such nurturance’ [italics mine] through his speaking and writing.

Vin constantly resisted any tendency on the part of his younger listeners to take on the ideas of the apostolate as an ideology, which is probably the natural tendency of young adults confronted with attractive new systems of thought (and part of the problem, perhaps, with the introduction of post-modernism to young students). Taking it on as a system would have protected us from facing the transformation needed in our lives. Vin always challenged us to own the problems ourselves: ‘Nothing is gained, all that is best is lost by pretending that the problems are external to us, do not have their expressions in the roots of our own lives’ (*Incarnation* 18).

As well as *Incarnation in the University*, many of Vin’s talks to the Newman Society remain available in their original print form in private collections. Thanks to Geoff Lacey of the University of Melbourne, I have been able to access eight of these talks and have drawn on

them for my reflections. Topics were sometimes more inward looking, as in *Witness*, and *Spiritual Formation*, at other times they looked outward as in *Action in the Apostolate*, *Australia, a Society Afraid of Truth* and *Notions of the Sacred*. In coming to grips with the existential challenges, the inner and outer worlds were never really separated. The redemption he spoke of for the world always begins in us.

Vin's analysis was not that of a logician, though always logical; not that of a psychologist, though always psychologically astute. Nor was it that of a theologian, but always that of a theologically reflective Catholic Christian who 'owned' personally every idea he proposed. Vin always communicated to his listeners that the struggle of a Christian life began with himself, and then those he was addressing, and the community with whom he (and we) lived and worked. But he gave theology and theological reflection a central place:

Consequently, if we are to have an intellectual apostolate at all growing in one place, it must begin with theology: not so much with a theological system but with a theological awareness, a theological vision of the realities with which the institutions of that place pre-occupy themselves of their very nature. (*Incarnation* 17)

Too often, giving priority to theological awareness *had* gone along with what is now called somewhat clumsily a 'top-down approach' in which theological systems are the resource for 'the answers.' This is an intellectual exercise of getting hold of the ideas and then applying them 'correctly', as if this could be done. And this is the formulaic approach that Vin negated. He recognised the absolute necessity for a 'bottom-up' approach that began for each one with their own inner struggle but didn't stop there. Indeed, the inner transformation is inextricably linked with our interactions with others in our world. So, the apostolate had at its heart a communal focus both for spiritual formation and for action. The bringing together, the muddying, of inner and outer was a constant theme: 'It [was] seen that the bringing of new life to the milieu entailed unmistakably the gaining of a new life oneself' (*Incarnation*, 19). It is in terms of lives lived, but not as individuals: Vin asserted that 'true growth takes place only in a community' (*Incarnation* 19).

My thesis that Newman groups were a ground for intellectual and personal growth can be elucidated by reference to developmental theory: it can be argued that they provided the very combination of challenge to our given subjectivity and supportive continuity to 'hold' us through the process of transition (Kegan 342). To experience strong challenge to one's assumptions and ways of knowing can lead to anxiety, grief and fragmentation if there is not ongoing confirmation of one's growth. This is true for children as they grow through pre-logical and concrete logical thought, though parents are generally available to provide the holding environment. For adults, young or old, to continue their growth in meaning-making there is still a need for a supportive community to help hold the person through the break-up and re-formation of meaning. Perhaps this is part of Vin's insight that true growth only happens in community.

In thinking about Vin's own meaning-making, as evident in the early writings mostly under consideration here, it seems to me he was still in transition between a full critical consciousness and being, as it were, an uncritical insider mentally to the dogma, traditions and culture of the Church. Vin did not have the benefit of recent biblical scholarship, which has contributed so much to the maturing of people's Christian faith, where the fruits of that scholarship have been made available to them. The tension of transition appears, for example, in Vin's talks, given at that time, which reveal a deep respect for the clergy and lay dependence on them, even as the laity were being urged to take responsibility for their lives.

It is reflected in the manner of his biblical references, which were rather literal, and in his insistence on the importance of the priest: as chaplain for the community but also as a spiritual director for individuals. I say this, not to denigrate priests or their role but just to suggest that for many priests and people, the relationship has changed. I also notice his suspicion of the narrative of the Fall and Original Sin. He writes:

It is likely that such a ‘terrible aboriginal calamity’ did occur to the depths of the created universe; but my statement does not rest on such a belief. What nature was like before the Fall does not matter in one way; at least we know that, now, she ‘groans and labours’ for her deliverance. (*Incarnation* 46)

We were then in the throes of modernity but we can see that Vin foreshadows later post-modern thinking that brought about the possibility of changing our relationship with our beliefs. He wrote: ‘But our lives are not merely an acceptance, they are also a search; not merely an assenting, but also a questioning’ (*Witness* 9). This questioning and search needed to take place in the presence of a deep awareness of God’s Providence—what Vin described as the practice of the presence of God in the world and an acute sense of fact as providential (*Witness* 9).

How can I, from this later point in time, evaluate Vin’s influence? One question concerns how to separate his influence from that of the other leaders. I know I can’t do this. Individuals can and do offer testimony and recently some have done so in the 2008 *Golden Years* book. The argument I am putting forward here comes from my own experience and from reflections on his writings for the apostolate: namely, that he brought to the leadership the heart and mind of a poet, so beautifully communicated in all he wrote and spoke. His words express the very aesthetic he desired in seeking a Christian Humanism:

Christian Humanism ... is not only a way of looking at things, but a way of living; it involves not only a set of cultivated interests, but also a vision of the world in terms which are ‘aesthetic’ as well as moral...The Christian Humanist...must insist on the need for gratuitousness, for the giving of oneself to one’s values as to a process of redemption rather than a fixed order which is neutral as to redemptive power. (*Incarnation* 50)

We know that this was explicitly important to him as it was reflected in some later writings such as *Notions of the Sacred*, in which he deplored the loss of beauty and poetry in the revised English language of the post-conciliar liturgy, including the translations of the Bible: ‘Thank God so many of the old pressures towards an oppressive drama are going; but is dull prose the only alternative to bad poetry?’ (11).

His poems bring to life in a different way what he expresses in his talks. There also with intensity and passion, flare and image, the human condition of searching and suffering, struggle and failure are evident.

In ‘Late Tutorial’:

I cannot, but speak measured foolish words:  
Shelley was fitful, Keats a dozing fire.  
Pass with the light poor comrades, You and I  
Follow but feebly where our words aspire. (*Masters* 1)

One of my favourites has always been number 10 of the ‘Eleven Political Poems’ for Brian Buckley: ‘No New Thing’. Here he decries lives of blind routine, faithless and hard-hearted

living, and hypocrisy—they all ‘crowd in nightmares to my side’. They oppress his writing in this poem until his final defiant declaration of his work—‘the building of the honeycomb’ (*Arcady* 55). Sweetness and light.

I have now already embarked upon the second part of my thesis, namely to claim that Vin himself was more than the poet-leader I have earlier suggested. He was an exemplar of the vision he proclaimed. Having considered expressing my thoughts about him in this way, I was somewhat shocked to see in his own writings a near-condemnation of the idea of exemplars, certainly as necessary for a person’s spiritual growth. An exemplar, taken as a model to be imitated in detail, would go against Vin’s vision that all Christians immerse themselves in their milieu to grapple imaginatively with its values and creative possibilities in ways that bring redemptive grace. It would seem too close to the formulaic approaches he warned us against. If, however, an exemplar is thought of as a fine and true example of the values and beliefs espoused by the person and one whose life’s work shines out mirroring that meaning, then I think we can see in Vin an exemplar.

John McLaren in his recent biography—*Journey without Arrival: The Life and Writing of Vincent Buckley*—has followed Vin beyond the years I am writing about and records him as looking back very negatively on this time in the apostolate. He quotes Vin as saying that it ‘had been marked by “cant and bullshit,” and a ‘kind of youthful triumphalism’ (66). McLaren further reports Vin’s retrospective judgement that the apostolate ‘had no solution to problems the members identified’ (66). It is not clear when Vin expressed these views, but I suspect that the negative and condemnatory attitude apparent may have borne some relation to current frustrations in his life at the time. I think many of the professional lives of members of the community, referred to earlier and reflected in *Golden Years*, strongly demonstrate a contrary view. Going out from this community, for example, have been academics in the fields of philosophy, literature, geology, history and psychology, and professional men and women in engineering, law, medicine, surgery, education, economics, social work and more. They have grappled with faith and its relevance to their lives, reaching many different places of belief and unbelief, but none would say, I think, that their time in the Newman Society had not affected them and their life’s work deeply.

Finally, some, insisting on his human weaknesses, may wish to counter the idea of Vin as any sort of exemplar; but I would say that in these he showed us precisely the struggle that we all have to make, to battle with our demons. I quoted earlier Vin’s warnings against pretending that the problems are external to us. While his writings reflect a clear vision, we know that life itself was never a pushover for Vin. Perhaps Vin’s struggle was more public than it is for most of us, or maybe it is that I knew him well through some of his worst times.

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