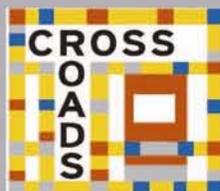


# Choruses from The Rock

T.S. Eliot



Comments by Monsignor Luigi Giussani



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## AWARENESS OF THE CHURCH IN THE MODERN WORLD

### IN *CHORUSES FROM 'THE ROCK'* BY T.S. ELIOT

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#### Comments by Monsignor Luigi Giussani<sup>1</sup>

*Choruses from 'The Rock'*<sup>2</sup> by T. S. Eliot can be read according to a sequence of three stages. It starts with the chorus in which the position of the Church is opposed to the position of a world that doesn't want it any longer (Chorus I). The Christians (Chorus II) must try to resist and live, to walk, to struggle in this world that doesn't want them any longer. But they are aware of all their limitations, of their defects, of the burdens they carry, that are their own burdens and inherited burdens. Chorus III explores the serious question that they also, the Church itself, the Christians themselves, are invested, are impacted by skepticism, by the skepticism and materialism of the whole world, of the whole society.

"Is it the Church that has abandoned humanity, or has humanity abandoned the Church?" The answer is affirmative in both cases. Where lies the emphasis of the poet's reaction? Eliot says that wherever the Church is rejected and wherever the Church itself is penetrated by the worldly spirit, by the "secular" spirit, humanity comes up short, the human suffers. "Life you may evade, but Death you shall not," is written in Chorus III. You can avoid the Church and its suggestions in life, and do whatever you want, but you cannot avoid watching everything that you create fall apart in your hands. The world not only doesn't want the Church, but persecutes it.

"And what do you want?" says Eliot. "Do you perhaps want the world to accept the Church? Why should it accept it?"

Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?  
She tells them of Life and Death, and of all that they would forget.  
She is tender where they would be hard, and hard where they like to be soft.  
She tells them of Evil and Sin, and other unpleasant facts.  
They constantly try to escape  
From the darkness outside and within  
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.

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<sup>1</sup> Msgr. Luigi Giussani (1922-2005) is the founder of the international Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation. The text is from a reading of the play to a group of university students in 1982.

<sup>2</sup> Excerpts of the *Choruses from the "Rock"* are taken from *T. S. Eliot The complete Poems and Plays 1909-1950*, by Harcourt Brace & Company

Men who persecute the Church dream of the elimination of freedom because the supreme ideal of this world is to create a world of automatons: “systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.”

The ultimate, deepest accusation by Eliot is: What is the truth of all this hostility and this plan? The rejection of Christ, the rebellion against Christ and thus the elimination of God because as Nietzsche already has said, if we abolish Christ, we abolish God.

Here comes Chorus I.

[...]

The endless cycle of idea and action,  
Endless invention, endless experiment,  
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;  
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;  
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.  
All our knowledge brings us nearer to death,  
But nearness to death no nearer to God.  
Where is the Life we have lost in living?  
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?  
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?  
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries  
Brings us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

[*“Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”; Andrei Sinyavsky says, in one of his “Scattered Thoughts,” that man dies with all his information.*]

I journeyed to London, to the timekept city,  
where the river flows, with foreign flotations.  
There I was told: we have too many churches,  
And too few chop-houses. There I was told:  
Let the vicars retire. Men do not need the Church  
In the place where they work, But where they spend their Sundays.  
In the city, we need no bells:  
Let them wake in the suburbs.  
I journeyed to the suburbs, and there I was told:  
We toil for six days, on the seventh we must motor  
To Hindhead, or Maidenhead.  
If the weather is foul we stay at home and read the papers.  
In industrial districts, there I was told  
Of economic laws.  
In the pleasant countryside, there it seemed  
That the country now is only fit for picnics.  
And the Church does not seem to be wanted  
In country or in suburbs; and in the town  
Only for important weddings.

[...]

Enter the Rock, [*the Rock is the Church*] led by a boy:

The Rock: The lot of man is ceaseless labour,  
Or ceaseless idleness, which is still harder,  
Or irregular labour, which is not pleasant.

[...]

The world turns and the world changes,  
But one thing does not change.  
In all of my years, one thing does not change,  
However you disguise it, this thing does not change:  
The perpetual struggle of Good and Evil.

[...]

you neglect and belittle the desert.  
The desert is not remote in southern tropics  
The desert is not only around the corner,  
The desert is squeezed in the tube-train next to you,  
The desert is in the heart of your brother.

[...]

Let me show you the work of the humble. Listen.

After the voice of the workers (the “humble”) who declare they are willing to build “with new bricks” where “the beams are rotten,” and with “new speech” where “the word is unspoken,” the voice of the unemployed comes onto the stage.

[...]

No man has hired us  
With pocketed hands  
And lowered faces  
We stand about in open places  
And shiver in unlit rooms.  
Only the wind moves  
Over empty fields, untilled  
Where the plough rests, at an angle  
To the furrow. In this land  
There shall be one cigarette to two men,  
To two women one half pint of bitter  
Ale. In this land  
No man has hired us.  
Our life is unwelcome, our death  
Unmentioned in "The Times."

[...]

“Our life is not welcome” (abortion and euthanasia), and “our death unmentioned in *The Times*.”

In this context, the impetus expressed by the workers (There is a work together/A Church for all/And a job for each/Every man to his work) is undoubtedly a marvelous summary of all our naïve aspirations to act, actually not too naïve. Certainly we must carry each other on our shoulders, for this struggle at which the first chorus has hinted, we must carry all that our friends, our brothers have done before and are doing now.

## Chorus II

Thus your fathers were made  
Fellow citizens of the saints, of the household of God, being built upon the foundation  
Of apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself the chief corner stone.  
But you, have you built well, that you now sit helpless in a ruined house?  
Where many are born to idleness, to frittered lives and squalid deaths, embittered  
scorn in honey-hives,  
And those who would build and restore turn out the palms of their hands, or look in  
vain towards foreign lands for alms to be more or the urn to be filled.  
Your building not fitly framed together, you sit ashamed and wonder whether and how  
you may be builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit, the Spirit which  
moved on the face of the waters like a lantern set on the back of a tortoise.

*[that is: if the Spirit has done all of this, it will well be able to build also our unity. This is in fact the answer to the situation of the world that our conference leads to: the only answer is the initial construction of a new humanity, that is the construction of our unity. No other image is possible. It is impossible. If we did not have Christ, we would only be desperate people, and if we did not have the Church and Catholicism, we would be desperate because we would not have Christ anymore.]*

[...]

And some say: "How can we love our neighbour? *[Here are our objections]*

[...]

You, have you built well, have you forgotten the cornerstone?

*[all the "activities" of the Catholics – but, have you forgotten the cornerstone? It is on the cornerstone, not on activism, that unity is built]*

Talking of right relations of men, *[liberation theology]* but not of relations of men to God.

"Our citizenship is in Heaven"; yes, but that is the model and type for your citizenship upon earth.

*[If we don't try to build the new citizenship on earth, we will not have it in heaven. This is the Christian concept of merit.]*

[...]

And the Church must be forever building, and always decaying, and always being restored.

*[But this is the moment in which the Church must be restored.]*

A little further Eliot addresses the men of the modern age:

[...]  
There is no life that is not in community,  
And no community not lived in praise of God.

*[as is well said in the book on the liturgy by Cardinal Ratzinger]*

Even the anchorite who meditates alone,  
For whom the days and nights repeat the praise of God,  
Prays for the Church, the Body of Christ incarnate.  
And now you live dispersed on ribbon roads.  
And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour  
Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance,  
But all dash to and fro in motor cars,  
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.  
Nor does the family even move about together.  
But every son would have his motor cycle,  
And daughters ride away on casual pillions.

Much to cast down, much to build, much to restore;  
Let the work not delay, time and the arm not waste;  
[...]

The very first weeks of our movement talking about the sentence “nobody knows his neighbor or cares about him,” I remember that in the first group, in the first weekly meetings where we did not know what to say, I used to insist on this, “You have been together in class for six, seven, eight years, and you don’t know each other, everybody is absolutely not interested in the other except for the dark connivances of certain dumb invitations or certain pseudo-help to get a good grade and that’s it.” This was the first accent that helped those very first to understand, to discover the necessity of something more among them. But where to look for it?

Later on we will read the description that Eliot gives, on one side, of the invasion that the world has made into the Church itself. This is the reason why, we can say that the Church has abandoned humanity through what we can call the "Protestantization of Christianity." Such a process has, in fact, emptied out the fundamental characteristic of the Church, which is the unitary construction on the cornerstone—unity. And Eliot on the other side in the following chorus, the Third, describes the disaster of mankind that ends up in death, the disaster of man that sees the destruction of what he creates.

The Word of the LORD came unto me, saying:  
O miserable cities of designing men,  
O wretched generation of enlightened men,  
Betrayed in the mazes of your ingenuities,  
Sold by the proceeds of your proper inventions:  
I have given you hands which you turn from worship,  
I have given you speech, for endless palaver,  
[...]

Will you leave my people forgetful and forgotten  
To idleness, labour, and delirious stupor?  
There shall be left the broken chimney,  
The peeled hull, a pile of rusty iron.  
In a street of scattered brick where the goat climbs,  
Where My Word is unspoken.

[...]

In the land of lobelias and tennis flannels  
The rabbit shall burrow and the thorn revisit,  
The nettle shall flourish on the gravel court,  
And the wind shall say: "Here were decent godless people:  
Their only monument the asphalt road  
And a thousand lost golf balls."

Chorus: We build in vain

*[here is the great challenge, but this is a challenge also to our personal life]*  
unless the Lord build with us.

Can you keep the City that the Lord keeps not with you?  
A thousand policemen directing the traffic  
Cannot tell you why you come or where you go.  
A colony of cavies or a horde of active marmots  
Build better than they that build without the Lord.  
Shall we lift up our feet among perpetual ruins?

[...]

Where there is no temple there shall be no homes.

*[there is no dwelling place for man]*

Though you have shelters and institutions,  
Precarious lodgings while the rent is paid,  
Subsiding basements where the rat breeds  
Or sanitary dwellings with numbered doors  
Or a house a little better than your neighbour's;  
When the Stranger *[the Christian community]* says: "What is the meaning of this city?  
Do you huddle close together because you love each other?"  
What will you answer? "We all dwell together  
To make money from each other"? or "This is a community"?  
*[the socialist answer]*

*[Thus the Stranger seems forgotten and ostracized in an age of man]*

[...]

Engaged in devising the perfect refrigerator,  
Engaged in working out a rational morality  
Engaged in printing as many books as possible,  
Plotting of happiness and flinging empty bottles,  
Turning from your vacancy to fevered enthusiasm  
For nation or race or what you call humanity."

“O my soul, says the poet, “be prepared for the coming of the Stranger,/Be prepared for him who knows how to ask questions.” And anyway, the Chorus reminds men, who do not want to hear those questions, that life you may evade, but Death you shall not.” She also points the way to the temple.

“You will not deny the Stranger,” the Third Chorus concludes. It is a great responsibility and a fascinating mission for our pettiness.

At the beginning of Chorus V Eliot writes, “O Lord, deliver me from the man of excellent intention and impure heart: for the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.” Excellent intentions are what we would call today common virtues; that is, the moralistic attitude. Defend me from the man that wants to save moral values but has an impure heart. The impure of heart is the one who does not recognize the fact from which all virtues derive....If an intellectual, for instance, has a great esteem of man, which is a created reality, a natural reality, but he doesn't accept, does not recognize that man is a creature who has been created, that is, does not accept the objectivity of human dynamism, then what virtue will be stressed by this intellectual, this leader? He will stress the virtues that he cares about. If for instance he's a man leading a government, he will stress the virtues that are useful to his government; that is, those that tend to maintain the status quo. On the contrary, he will try to obliterate those that bother him, that create problems.

A typical situation is that of the well-known Italian writer, Italo Calvino, who a few years ago wrote an article in *Corriere della Sera* in which he magnified, he exalted the dignity of man. But where does the dignity of man come from? According to that article by Calvino, it comes from the social formation: man is conceived in function of social reality, it is social reality that develops him and gives him dignity, so that we should not talk of natural rights. Abortion, then. Nobody, in fact, has a right to life: thus abortion is allowed, if dignity is conferred to the person by society and if society decides that in its origin the person must possess a certain psycho-physical balance, or else it is better to suppress it. Nobody has the right to say: “I am here, you cannot touch me.” In this case Italo Calvino has had excellent intentions, those of affirming the dignity of man, but an impure heart because he has not recognized the fact from which the dignity of man derives.

All those nowadays who affirm the so-called “moral virtues” act in this way. They have excellent intentions but an impure heart because the root of the common virtues, but also of the uncommon virtues, is an objective reality that does not depend on society but depends on the creatural reality that man has been made by God.

Thus, “O Lord, deliver me from the man of excellent intention.” An excellent intention is that of having a state technocratically efficient, with an adequate industrial functionality, and to affirm the technocratic value which is a necessary factor for the increment and the power of a people. But if in the name of all of this one has to neglect, for instance, the people who don't have certain abilities, or the people who don't have the possibility to defend themselves... “Deliver me from the man of excellent intention and impure heart: for the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked.”

Wicked is he who does not recognize, he who invents, who decides by himself. Protect me then from the enemy who has something to gain and from the friend who has something to lose. That is, from the friend who, as long as I am good for him and correspond, he defends me, but when I don't correspond anymore, he abandons me. Protect me from the friend who has something to lose.

So "Those who sit in a house of which the use is forgotten" is a definition of today's Christians, those who stay in a house whose use has been forgotten, whose origin, whose nature is forgotten. Then to these people one can say, "Do this and that...behave this way and that way...be careful of these virtues," but the origin of their experience and their dignity as Christians is not taken into consideration.

Those who sit in a house of which the use is forgotten: are like snakes that lie on mouldering stairs, content in the sunlight.  
And the others run about like dogs, full of enterprise, sniffing and barking: they say, "This house is a nest of serpents, let us destroy it,  
And have done with these abominations, the turpitudes of the Christians." And these are not justified, nor the others.

*[They want to destroy the house of the Christians because they don't correspond to their secular ideals. These are not justified, these "barking dogs" around and they say, "Let's abolish." "These are not justified; neither are the others." They are not justified, those who cry out against the Christians, but neither are justified the Christians who lie there like lizards, who don't do anything anymore because they have forgotten the value of their house.]*

And they write innumerable books; being too vain and distracted for silence: seeking every one after his own elevation, and dodging his emptiness.

[...]

The man who has builded during the day would return to his hearth at nightfall: to be blessed with the gift of silence, and doze before he sleeps.

But we are encompassed with snakes and dogs

*[on one side the snakes, on the other the dogs]:*

therefore some must labour, and others must hold the spears.

It is a time in which one cannot sleep anymore. On one side, we have snakes, lizards; on the other, there are the dogs that bark. Thus one has to act. And this seems to me a beautiful definition of the situation in which the Church finds itself today—the Christian event today. Another Chorus, number VI, refers to the destiny in time of the Christian fact.

It is hard for those who have never known persecution,  
And who have never known a Christian,  
To believe these tales of Christian persecution.  
It is hard for those who live near a Bank  
To doubt the security of their money.

[...]

Do you think that the Faith has conquered the World  
And that lions no longer need keepers?

*[It is at this point that Eliot takes a stand, as I have already mentioned, about how modern man looks at the Church. "Why should men love the Church?"]*

[...]

They *[the men who reject the Church]* constantly try to escape  
From the darkness outside and within

*[because if there are no objective criteria of good and evil there is darkness and confusion]*

By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.

*[Everybody dreams social structures with a good outcome regardless of freedom. Nobody would need to be good any longer They all dream of social structures that produce a good outcome independently of freedom.]*

But the man that is will shadow  
The man that pretends to be.

*[Man as he is will always prove wrong the ways of looking of the ideologies that pretend to be]*

And the Son of Man was not crucified once for all,  
The blood of the martyrs not shed once for all,  
The lives of the Saints not given once for all:  
But the Son of Man is crucified always  
And there shall be Martyrs and Saints.  
And if the blood of Martyrs is to flow on the steps  
We must first build the steps;  
And if the Temple is to be cast down  
We must first build the Temple.

This is the clearest page on anti-triumphalism. So many times we have been accused of triumphalism because of our will to affirm the Christian fact in time and space, in history. On the contrary, our desire to build is profoundly anti-triumphalistic. Because the idea of history that Christianity has is this continuous possible repetition of cycles and of destructions. Our will to build the temple is not triumphalism.

Maybe it will not be useless at this point to read the passage by Eliot that is the pivotal point. This is Chorus VII, where the poet sketches in a splendid synthesis the history of religions.

In the beginning God created the world. Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness was upon the face of the deep.

*[Desert because there is no man; empty because there is no meaning, because meaning is perceived in the consciousness of man]*

And when there were men, in their various ways, they struggled in torment towards God  
Blindly and vainly, for man is a vain thing, and man without God is a seed upon the wind: driven this way and that, and finding no place of lodgement and germination.  
They followed the light and the shadow, and the light led them forward to light and the shadow led them to darkness,  
Worshipping snakes or trees, worshipping devils rather than nothing: crying for life beyond life, for ecstasy not of the flesh.  
Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep.

And the Spirit moved upon the face of the water.  
And men who turned towards the light and were known of the light  
Invented the Higher Religions; and the Higher Religions were good  
And led men from light to light, to knowledge of Good and Evil.  
But their light was ever surrounded and shot with darkness  
As the air of temperate seas is pierced by the still dead breath of the Arctic Current;  
And they came to an end, a dead end stirred with a flicker of life.  
And they came to the withered ancient look of a child that has died of starvation.

*[Rituals that had no ability to enliven the human again]*

Prayer wheels, worship of the dead, denial of this world, affirmation of rites with forgotten meanings

*[The contrary of that for which they were born: the search for meaning]*

In the restless wind-whipped sand, or the hills where the wind will not let the snow rest.  
Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep.

*[The desert and the void have come back. The desert and the void have been confirmed — above, inside, below, around, all attempts of human interpretation —the major religions.]*

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and of time,  
A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history: transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but not like a moment of time,  
A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of time gave the meaning.  
Then it seemed as if men must proceed from light to light, in the light of the Word,  
Through the Passion and Sacrifice saved in spite of their negative being;  
Bestial as always before, carnal, self-seeking as always before, selfish and purblind as ever before.

Yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their march on the way that was lit by the light;  
Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other way.

*[The ascetic struggle has been introduced into the world by Christianity has come back like at the beginning]*

But it seems that something has happened that has never happened before: though we know not just when, or why, or how, or where.  
Men have left God not for other gods, they say, but for no god; and this has never happened before  
That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first Reason,  
And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or Dialectic.  
The Church disowned, the tower overthrown, the bells upturned, what have we to do  
But stand with empty hands and palms turned upwards  
In an age which advances progressively backwards?  
[...]  
Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the deep.

*[he is back to what it was at the beginning].*

Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the Church?  
When the Church is no longer regarded, not even opposed, and men have forgotten  
All gods except Usury, Lust and Power.

The Christian event is an historical drama, of history, in history. The Christian event is an encounter with a physical, bodily reality of time and space that can be touched, seen, experienced, heard, which is the sign of God-made-man, in which this God-made-man is present. The encounter is with an integrally human reality.

Only those who have the original humility – the humility that make us remaining as we have been created – can have and accomplish this encounter. Humility cannot but accept. Not with the qualitative leap of virtue, but with the same “quasi-mechanism” for which it exists. Thus humility is the first mark, the first imprint of God in man: the original one, the one at creation—humility that accepts. But this encounter, that reveals man to himself, and reveals it the more you remain faithful to it, the more you walk with it, can only occur if you are humble, like John and Andrew were, like Mary was.