

# Ted, Thomas, and a Letter to a Local Church

Yours.  
Thomas R. Kelly.

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# Foreword

Everyone who knows Ted Harro knows that he loves to play.

Under Ted's leadership at Renovaré, I've had the delight of experiencing his creative and fun spin on everything from team-building exercises to strategic planning. He's a deep thinker, a devoted apprentice to Jesus, and a cornerstone in his church community.

All those characteristics—playfulness, thoughtfulness, devotion, experience, and giftedness—shine through the imaginative letter in this booklet.

## **Who is the letter for?**

Ted originally delivered these words as a spoken address to his home congregation, The Practice Church. The message felt timely and true for a broader audience, so we convinced Ted to share it—and an accompanying exercise—with you here in written form.

Just as Paul's letters mention real names and situations, you will see firsthand references and personalized humor sprinkled throughout the text. Ted was writing to lifelong friends and fellow disciples. We left those details in because they serve as a good reminder that pastoral letters worth their salt always come from a real context. They address real people the messenger knows by heart, not some abstract audience.

*And now this letter is for you.*

Find your story in it. Share it. Expand on it as you open your heart to whatever the Lord might say specifically to you and your group. Read it as the playful, prayerful, humble exhortation it was meant to be. And *be encouraged*.

Grace Pouch

*Content Manager, Renovaré*

# Introduction

I first heard the following words not long ago at a small gathering of people who—like me and like you—were desperately hungry for an even deeper life with God and others.

*Have you ever seen a miracle? I have.*

*Have you ever seen the water of ordinary human nature changed into the wine of divine creative living? I have.*

*Have you ever seen men and women whose outer world was repellent, or tragic, or barren, or hopeless, yet who walked serene, triumphant, radiant, released, undismayed, living constructively, as if they were already in Eternity, and drew not their encouragement from time? I have. We all have.*

*Such persons have meat to eat that the world knows not of. Their secret of life is not outside of them or around them, it is within them. In a rocky land, they have a well of water springing up within them unto Eternal Life.*

*Are you such a miracle of radiant eternity lived in the midst of time? Am I such a miracle? Are we people whose lives cannot be explained by our environment, but only by saying, The Eternal Life and Love are breaking through into time, at these points?*

I became acquainted with the author of these words, Thomas Kelly, as a Renovaré Institute student. Since then, Thomas Kelly—or TK as I call him—has felt like a friend.

If you aren't familiar with Thomas Kelly, allow me to introduce you. He was a little-known philosophy professor with Quaker roots. He lived in the early- to mid-twentieth century. If you're wondering whether he has something to say to us today, consider his world.

It was the time of The Great Depression and profound economic uncertainty; a time of political instability fueled by extremists on the left and the right; a time of demagogues rising around the world, especially in Germany, Italy, and Russia; a time when the ominous clouds of war were forming on the horizon.

Does this sound familiar?

A little back story on TK's life: he came from a Quaker background and originally got his doctorate in theology. Later, he gravitated toward philosophy and longed to be seen as one of the elite philosophers of his day. This led to an ill-fated attempt to earn a philosophy PhD at Harvard, ultimately thwarted by a disastrous oral exam where his mind was wiped clean of all he had prepared for the big day. The Harvard committee politely recommended that he not try again.

Kelly was devastated by this failure. But he eventually saw it as a great gift because it triggered a spiritual growth spurt unlike any he had experienced to that point. Most of his devotional writings flow from the period after his career meltdown.

Our friend and pastor, Jason, asked me to share what I thought Thomas Kelly would say to our little church. It's a little presumptuous to put words in the mouth of someone who isn't here to correct you, but I think TK would appreciate the attempt. So I offer you a letter from Thomas Kelly to The Practice Church—as best as I can imagine it.

Ted Harro

*President, Renovaré*

# A Letter to The Practice Church

Dear Practice Church,

Greetings!

I've been studying you from the grandstands of the Great Cloud of Witnesses, and I'm smiling. You're my kind of people, right down to your congregation's small size and the fact that you often spend time sitting in the round. Don't tell anyone, but you have a little bit of Quaker in you. (I'm ignoring your insistence on having a speaker each week, the background music you play during your corporate "silence," and your quasi-Anglo-Catholic-liturgical-lite service. But nobody's perfect.)

As a recovering philosophy professor, I like to organize my thoughts into categories. I have three categories of reflection for you in this letter: affirmations, encouragement, and challenges.

## AFFIRMATIONS

First, affirmations. I see that what draws you together is your common *hunger*—even *desperation*—for God's deep work in your lives. You're not going to church for appearances and you have no interest in superficiality. Good for you! This desire—to have such an encounter with God that our lives *burn with God's very presence* and are *illuminated*

by “The Light that has shown since before the dawn of time”—is not a *churchy* desire. It is a *core human desire*, common to all humanity, whether they know it or not. Your community is made up of people who do know it, this hunger. Your longing for God is beautiful and full of possibility.

Your hunger is manifested in your focus on inner transformation. You love a good talk and you are eager to learn. Some of you can’t resist a good C.S. Lewis quote or a reference to the *Lord of the Rings*. But I can see that what you’re really after is *communion*—with God, with each other. You have learned that insight is good, but it is *second prize* to Presence. So you organize your corporate life to *meet* God in worship, practice, and the Table. And you *meet* each other through (a laughably long) passing of the peace and small groups. Well done. Never lose that focus on inner transformation.

I also notice that your community has complete disregard for proving yourselves by becoming big, famous, or influential. I know from personal experience first the pain and then the freedom of obscurity. In my professional life, I spent decades fueled by ambition. Most of my best growth as a human came after a catastrophic professional failure that catapulted me into complete obscurity. With the benefit of hindsight you get on this side of the grave, I see hiddenness as a gift. It starves the barking dogs of throbbing ambition. I’m glad you are free from that torment.

### ENCOURAGEMENT

Now, a word of encouragement. I see your congregation and even eavesdropped on a few conversations. I know your concern for the Dear Ones in your life, particularly children and grandchildren who have turned from the Way. I know your longing that these lost sheep would come back to the fold. I know the temptation to feel desperate, even hopeless.

My era, like yours, was filled with economic uncertainty, political upheaval, and geopolitical instability. I worked with young adults

for most of my career. I saw them, especially in my politically and socially active Quaker tradition, leaving church in alarming numbers. Many of us older types scratched our heads. We tried everything, including what I call “jitterbug strategies,” to attract young people back. It didn’t work.

It took me a while, but after listening to a lot of college students I realized they didn’t leave because church was *too deep*. They left because church was *too shallow*. They left because they were facing huge, fundamental questions about life and reality and they didn’t see Christian communities that addressed those questions head-on or modeled lives deeply changed by God.

See your young people for who they are and for what they’re facing.

I’ve been told of a character named Elmo who communicates on “Twitter” or “X” or whatever you call that strange broadcasting network. As a philosopher, I’m not sure what to make of a red puppet who talks about himself in the third person, but I hear he “posted” (?) a simple question for anyone to answer. “Elmo is just checking in! How is everybody doing?” I think your term is that his “feed blew up,” which I understand to mean he received many replies. (You 21st-century people baffle me.)

One person responded, “The world is burning around us, Elmo!”

Another said, “Every morning, I cannot wait to go back to sleep. Every Monday, I cannot wait for Friday to come. Every single day and every single week, for life.”

This is the reality your young people are swimming in. My students and friends had similar realities: a downturn called the Great Depression, the rise of fascism and demagogues (perhaps you’ve heard of Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin), and war looming on the horizon. It was overwhelming and could lead to despair. I confess I spent many an hour lonely and discouraged.

But then I realized that this situation contains opportunities for any group—like you—that is focused on rooting deeper into the Great Mystery who is Christ, Sustainer of all things.

You see, in a strange way, *reality is on your side*. Superficiality doesn't stand up well to a world on fire. The state of your world drives people—especially young people—to seek satisfying answers to fundamental questions. Reality turns people into seekers because it makes them *desperate*. This is why revolutions are often driven by the young. They are desperate for better answers to the reality they see.

So, understand what's really going on with your young people: they are “freaked out,” to use your vernacular. They are asking the Big Questions (even if in private)—questions like *What's the point of life? Is anyone trustworthy? What does it even mean to be a good person, and how do I become one?* They're looking for answers that they can see in real lives, not arguments, not entertainment, not catchphrases or platitudes. They're looking for people who are everyday miracles, people who can be stable and serene in the midst of chaos and calamity. They're looking for *spiritual grownups*.

You have people in your community who are demonstrating this life even now—Amy and Pat, Sarah, Bonnie and Mike, Greg and Dawn. I'm sure there are more. What I'm trying to say is that *your little church could be part of the solution—helping young people to come to the Eternal One as you long for them to do*. By building on what you already have—this hunger for Divine Presence, this focus on inner transformation, the resulting spiritual depth and stability—you may be able to provide living answers to your dear ones' unspoken questions.

In my day, some Quakers decided to remain in Nazi Germany even as the world was falling apart around them. These German Quakers were friendly to their Jewish neighbors, which came with a cost. I remember my friends, the Martins, in 1938, unplugging their phone and whispering when they really wanted to talk about what was going on. These were real people taking real risks because they loved Jesus and their neighbor more than their own comfort.



Hardship is a furnace; it refines and reveals. Your life has to be genuine, your connection with God deep, to stand up in a world aflame.

Your dear ones are growing up in troubled times. You see it in their anxious faces and lonely hearts. They look around and see so much falling apart. They wonder if they can trust any institution—any church or government or university—or if they're doomed to face a wobbly world on their own.

They wonder if democracy will survive,  
if anyone will know real from fake,  
if the earth can handle humans.

They wonder if they should trust any leader ever again.

You can show them a different way. You can demonstrate a rootedness that brings hope. You can *be* a miracle—not by disregarding reality, but by digging down into the Reality beneath today's circumstances. You can show them what a life looks like when all of those bad things *may* happen and still *all shall be well*.

#### A CHALLENGE

Now a challenge. Don't ask a Quaker philosophy professor to write you a letter without expecting a challenge. (After all, our tradition was born out of a belief that the godly passion of all groups cools and calcifies over time.)

You *could* be a place, a people, who demonstrate a different way. But *are you going as far as you could?* Is your *individual inner transformation* translating into *collective transformation* as a community? Is it naturally overflowing on those around you, those outside your warm, huggy congregation?

It is strange to bring this up because I confronted the opposite problem in my Quaker congregations. They tended toward social activism and would forget to begin with a deep connection with God—the Inner Light. I wonder if you have swung the other way. In your quest

for personal growth, don't forget collective transformation *and* compassionate outreach.

Among the many risks of life with God is a tendency to privatize our experience. My friends in Nazi Germany or Quaker forebears who worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery would tell you we must seek inner transformation and collective transformation that affects the world.

Don't misunderstand me. I'm not suggesting some vague and grandiose ideal to "change the world." You cannot love the whole world, much less change it. That's God's job. But God has a habit of putting a particular passion—what I call a "concern"—into each person and community. When your concern becomes clear, invest in it fully and without any guilt for the many things that are *not* your concern. You can look kindly on other people's and churches' concerns, even praying for them as you're able. But you can't and shouldn't carry it all. In the end, we're simply seeking a life together where *we are acted through* by a very active God.

How, you may ask, do you foster a more miraculous life together without exhausting effort or rah-rah campaigns? If you know us Quakers, you won't be surprised at my answer: *cultivate a listening life*. Learn to listen to God. Learn to listen to others. Learn to listen to God together. Learn to listen to God working in and through others.

Yes, it's that simple. But it's not easy. You're wise enough to know that simple things can be quite difficult.

Since your name is The Practice Church, I imagine you are hungry for some practical advice on how to cultivate that listening life together. I'll offer what I learned about life together for what it's worth. Here's something you could try.

I've heard you say Sunday isn't the main event of your church's life. I agree! However, your gatherings *are* places where your community could go *even deeper* together, could feed the hunger for living a miraculous life. By the end of my time on earth, I would ask myself a few simple questions about my times together with other fellow seekers:

- Did we collectively seek God's will?
- Were we expectant that God might do something in and among us?
- Were at least a few of us prepared and praying for God's Tangible Presence?
- Did we avoid trying to impress each other, thereby creating space to be impressed by the One we seek?

Next time you're asking yourself *How was church?*, you could ask those questions. If you do that regularly, your capacity to listen to God and others will grow.

Above all else, *be the kind of people who are open to miracles*, especially the miracle of someone who can face reality with equanimity and joy. Desire those miracles. Seek those miracles. Celebrate those miracles.

As my friend C.S. Lewis would say, *further up and further in*.

I'm cheering you from the stands.

TK

## Final Words

Of course, I haven't met Thomas Kelly (yet), but I've come to know and love him through his words. With the firm belief that Thomas Kelly's message back then holds wisdom for us today, I have taken the liberty of addressing our fellowship in his voice. It was a playful, prayerful exercise for me to imagine what he might say to us. But I want to end with something he really said.

A person's final words can be tinged with wisdom from the life to come. Thomas Kelly died suddenly at the age of 46. Here are the words he wrote the weekend before his death.

*“The Light for which the world longs is already shining. It is shining into the darkness, but the darkness does not apprehend it. It is shining into the darkness, but the darkness is not overcoming it. It is shining in many a soul and already the new order has begun within the kingdom of the heart. It is shining in many a small group and creating a heavenly-earthly fellowship of Children of the Light. It will always shine and lead many into the world of need, that they may bear it up into the heart of God.*

*With trembling awe at the wonder which is ever wrought within us, we must humbly bear the message of the Light. Many see it from afar and long for it with all their being. Amidst all the darkness of this time the day star can arise in astounding power and overcome the darkness within and without.*

*It is given to us to be message-bearers of the day that can dawn in apostolic power if we be wholly committed to the Light. Radiant in that radiance, we may confidently expect the kindling of the Light in all [people] until all [humankind’s] footsteps are lighted by that Light, which is within them.*

*Our fellowship groups are small, but they can be glorious colonies of heaven, cities set on a hill. It is a great message which is given to us—good news indeed—that the Light overcomes the darkness. But to give the message we must also be the message!”*

Lord, may it be so in each of us,  
among us as a church, and through us.

# A Practice of Preparation for Worship Together

The Practice Church has a motto that “Sunday isn’t the main event, our ordinary lives are the main events.” TK would probably agree. But worship orients us for ordinary moments. Most of us live apart from each other during the week. Gathered worship is our chance to come into the Light of God’s Presence together to receive his guidance. To be changed. Like the first believers at Pentecost, we are filled and empowered in community.

So when we come to a worship gathering...  
Do we show up ready to receive,  
show up expecting God to move,  
show up ready to respond to that movement?

Here’s one way we can.

Next time before a church service or small group gathering, experiment with Thomas Kelly’s approach to preparation: Walk through the day ahead—from the moment you wake up, to your arrival at the meeting, and to your exit at the very end.

**WHEN IS THE NEXT TIME YOU WILL BE  
GATHERING FOR WORSHIP?**

However you schedule your life—  
calendar app, scraps of paper, old school Daytimer—  
make a reminder for yourself to engage in this  
Practice of Preparation upon waking  
on the day of your next meeting.

### **MOVEMENT ONE**

As you wake up...  
Welcome the Light of God's presence  
into your entire being.  
Pray aloud—perhaps whisper—*Take all of me.*

### **MOVEMENT TWO**

On your way to the gathering...  
Picture the physical place.  
Ask God, *Surround and fill this space.*

### **MOVEMENT THREE**

As you come into the presence of others...  
Imagine God's Light—the Light that warmed you this morning—  
radiating outward to everyone you greet. Look around.

Pray for one person you know very well.

*Your will be done, Lord.*

Pray for one person you don't know as well.

*Your will be done, Lord.*

Pray for one person serving.

*Your will be done, Lord.*

### **MOVEMENT FOUR**

At the end of the service...  
Experience God's smile toward you like the sun.  
If anyone asks you, "How was church?"  
simply respond, "Wonderful!"



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THOMAS KELLY

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