

Grant us the space to become what we will become.

My title arose from a certain cross fertilisation of activities and ideas. In July I attended a meeting of the European Federation of Married Priests at the Franciscan Friary of Chant d'Oiseau in Brussels. I was there as representative of Advent, the English association of Roman Catholic married priests. Thereafter I was preparing a Sunday liturgy for a small congregational community on the subject of 'Creation and Sabbath' while, at the same time reading the book by John Boswell on Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe (a). Aspects of the thinking involved in all three areas seemed to be useful in thinking through a response to the ministerial crisis in the Roman Catholic Church.

1. At the Brussels meeting reports from member groups highlighted the present crisis in respect of ordained ministry- that the exodus from ministry had not ceased as was sometimes said and that recently we had attracted some younger members (under fifty years of age). The response of the institutional church focussing on the reorganisation of dioceses and parishes could only be described as the strategy of downsizing. That may seem a solution in the eyes of the institution but, granted the average age of serving priests, would only serve as a temporary stopgap as funerals continued, The representatives from England reported on an invitation in England to a symposium held by the movement for married priests on the effects on parishes which had no priests. Notable was the example of one parish which had built up a good working community which effectively ran the parish through a very active parish council, a priest entering only for Sunday Eucharist. When placed under the neighbouring parish priest all of this community involvement was effectively stopped. Finally there was a detailed and a very complex discussion on working towards common theological positions. The crux question was: "Ex priests OR priests for ever?". For years we have sought to avoid the label 'Ex priests'. The thinking was that no one must be allowed to eradicate the script of our lives. Now we should perhaps reflect further and prepare for a development in our thinking. The thought that we are 'priests for ever' suggests that at ordination we are ontologically changed. This is based on a model which derives from a theological position of the Middle Ages: The dualistic thinking about body and soul and the notion of a character imprinted on the soul. It is also based upon the following hierarchical model; the myth of a call from God – the myth of apostolic succession – the notion that the mandate for priestly ministry came from above and was conferred at ordination. What is entirely missing in this model is the community aspect. Yet, the ultimate basis of ministry is not ordination, though that has its place, but baptism. One need only look to such texts as Romans 12 and 1Corinthians 12 which speak of the variety of gifts being put at the service of the community. If we are not liturgically functioning in a community are we priests (whatever that means) or ex priests? In what ways do the numerous pastoral or ministerial roles that we fulfil differ from the roles fulfilled by other baptised members of our community? This is not to deny our specificity, that we have lived as active priests. Though a very inadequate summary of a very complex discussion, this offers us a base for reflection at our future meetings. In addition, thinking again of the contribution of the Dutch Dominicans, does it not also point the way forward – if we have no priests for our communities, find and ordain the leaders in these communities to preside at our Eucharistic celebrations.
2. John Boswell's closely argued book, not only assembles the evidence for same sex rites of union with detailed philological arguments, but much more interestingly for my purpose he compares the rites for both heterosexual and homosexual unions. It is clear that the understanding of marriage in the Greco-Roman culture was very different from that of the modern age – not the consequence of romantic love, but rather marriage was a matter between families. The Church with modifications took on the practices and thought of the

society and culture in which that Church was incarnated. Christians were married according to the civil laws of the time. At most there developed the custom of asking for a blessing. Only gradually and for variety of reasons do we see the church taking power over the institution of marriage. Before/After marriage is a characteristic of the modern period with more focus on the rite of marriage. The Hardwicke Marriage Act of 1754 made a ceremony a legal requirement in England and Wales i.e. registration to deal with the problem of secret marriages. The Council of Trent in 1563 had made the ceremony a requirement for Roman Catholics. Before that 'common law marriage' was the norm. An obvious comparison to be made is the history of the development from the more charismatic ministries of the Pauline Epistles to the more institutionalised and priestly ministries of later periods.

3. My thinking on 'Creation and Sabbath' suggested some basic ideas. Over the past several generations creation theology has been very much marginalised in studies in biblical theology – marginalised in favour of those moving and stirring accounts of God's dealings with Israel in and through her history as God's people. Now biblical scholars place Israel's creation faith at centre stage – it is the bedrock upon which all else rests, the faith that it is Israel's God who created all the wonders of our universe (b).

When we think of creation in Torah our thoughts turn to that great, almost architectural account in chapter I of Genesis. Our bible begins with God's involvement in the activity of creation. There is no reflection on God before creation'. The first line of Torah reads: "When God initially created the heavens and the earth" (bereshit bara 'elohim...). As one Jewish source puts it, the first letter (beth) is closed behind and open in front. Out of that opening comes that very orderly and stylised account of the six days of creation, after which God rested. In days 1-3 God created the basic elements of creation – the firmament, the earth and the sea – it is a work of separation and dividing (the repeated 'badal'), bringing order into the formless waste (tohu wabohu) that existed before. Thereafter, in days 4-6 God populated these regions and God rested on the seventh day. There are the repeated formulae: 'God said', 'it was so', and 'God saw that it was good'. Finally God saw all that God had made and it was very good'.

Perhaps our understanding has been that a distant God created all that came into existence there in the beginning and then God rested because it was complete, even perfect. The task was done and we have a very static picture of creation which focuses on what happened at the beginning. Certainly the image of God in Genesis 1 is that of a monarchical figure. However, certain considerations might nuance this view.

- Scholars have been accustomed to say that the first account in Genesis 1 is a later, priestly, almost ritualistic account and that the earlier Genesis 2-3 account, perhaps as early as the monarchy, offers a very different picture. That indeed may be so. However, in Torah they are placed side by side and must be read together. Moving from one account to the other we are told that God rested on the seventh day.
- On the 6th day God speaks: "Let us make Adam in our image and likeness" and God did so. Various explanations have been offered for this plural 'let us make'. The simplest is that, at the creation of humankind, God communicates with the Gods. The creation of humankind is a work of communication and relationship.
- Adam is created in God's image and likeness. There have been contorted attempts to explain the nature of this likeness. However, look at the context – It is that of God, in discussion with the heavenly beings (Gods or not?), discussing what is to be created. The image and likeness consists in our being co-creators with God in the ongoing process of creation. This human creature has, like God, a royal, kingly role in creation. Adam rules in creation but what type of rule?
- A few points from the Genesis 2-3 account may suggest an answer to that question. Elsewhere in the Hebrew bible the chronological sequence is broken and we are pushed back in the sequence and given a different perspective on what has gone before. Here we are pushed back to day 6, the creation of Adam and offered a complementary perspective.

Adam may be the apex of creation but Adam is placed in the garden to till it and look after it (shamar). Adam is to promote the welfare of the land and promote its wellbeing. God brings various creatures to Adam to be companion to Adam, Adam names them (a very important task) but God has got it wrong –they are not suitable and we have the creation of ‘ishah (woman) from ‘ish (man) – another play on words, just as ‘Adam’ was so named because he was brought forth from Adamah (the earth).

- I am suggesting a view of creation which is not the completed work of a distant God. Turning to the seventh day of creation when God rested may develop that thought further. God certainly did not rest because, as it was put in a school examination answer, “God got tired of creating the world and took the Sabbath off”. Nor, I suggest, did God rest because all was finished, perfect even, and complete. Coming after the ‘good’ and ‘very good’ judgments of God, God sits back to take delight in the created universe. God also allows space to creatures to become what they will become. We have, not a static completed perfection, but a much more exciting and open ended universe developing to the order which God intended.

My title, which developed from these reflections, is *not* a prayer to God. It is rather a plea to the authorities in our church in crisis. Tradition is not an absolute unchanging clinging to the past. A living tradition sees the need for dialogue between two horizons – that of the past developing tradition and that of the cultural and social situation of today (c). This is not to pass judgment on past developments. They arose out of cultural and social situations which were very different from today and responded to the perceived needs then. Today, for a variety of reasons, communities are being deprived of the Eucharist because the old ways are not providing a sufficient number of priests, found and trained according to rules that developed through time and were never absolutes from the beginning. Now one need only look at the dedicated band of lay leaders in our communities. One need only explore the new model of ‘Church’ which was emerging in the period of the Second Vatican Council. This points up the illogicality of asking the congregation to increase its prayers for so called vocations – does God need to be bludgeoned into sending labourers into the vineyard of God? Rather let us be truly incarnational in our thinking. God acts in and through our judgements, our efforts, allowing us to become what we will become. The church authorities must accept that challenge – the leaders, the workers are there in the vineyard. Use them and let us become what we will become.

(a).John Boswell: Same Sex Unions in Premodern Europe (Vintage Books 1995).

(b) Several representative titles where a much more relational organic view of creation is presented. Note the models used are not descriptive but heuristic devices to explore the wonders of God and the universe.

Carol J. Dempsey, Mary Margaret Pazdan (Editors): earth, Wind and Fire. Biblical and theological perspectives on Creation (Michael Glazer 1989)

Terence E. Fretheim: God and World in the Old Testament. A Relational Theology of Creation (Abingdom Press 2005).

Sallie McFague: The Body of God. An Ecological theology. (SCM Press 1998).

(c) Anthony C. Thiselton: The Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description with special reference to Heidegger, Bultmann, Gadamer and Wittgenstein. (Grand Rapids 1980).

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