

FROM HOLINESS TO COMPASSION

LIVING AND LOVING IN A MESSY WORLD

A renewed look at ministry in the Catholic Church

With the coming of Vatican II, people in the Church, and foremost those in ministry in the Church, have been faced with a need of rethinking and renewal. This has implied a “crisis”, a transformation, which has been far from easy. This process has asked us to look at the world, our lives and our ministry with new eyes. This reflection on the changes in the model of ministry wants to be a challenge to a certain Church model which primes “salvation” and “holiness” in the understanding of ministry and of the Church’s role. It then goes to propose that it should be “compassion” and not “holiness” that constitutes the root and the centre of ministry in the Church.

Our experience of the world:

Ministry is fundamentally a service that we perform towards the world in which we live. Our understanding of ministry will then necessarily be deeply conditioned by our feelings and our attitude towards our world. There is no doubt that there is, and there has always been, a lot wrong with our world.

Here are some of the things wrong with our world. It is

- A broken world under sin and death: a **DIA-BOLIC** world
- A world of broken promises and broken relationships (look at divorce rates). In Great Britain at this moment more than half of all the children are born outside marriage
- A world where brother kills brother
- A world where peoples cannot live together: racism, tribalism
- A world of greed where the rich exploit the poor
- A world where the old are neglected, women and children are abused
- A world with a culture of death, where 1 in 30 women abort every year
- A world of drugs, alcohol, trafficking in human misery, pornography (80% of all the Internet traffic)
- A world where 50.000 children die every day of preventable diseases and where AIDS is threatening a whole continent
- A world where 200 people control more wealth than the 2.500 million poorest people on earth (40% of the world population) of which half live in absolute poverty
- A world where community is dying overcome by selfishness and individualism
- A world floundering under individualism, social fragmentation and exclusion
- A world overcome by irrationality, randomness, anarchy and disorder
- A world which could be at the brink of destroying itself, through a ruthless exploitation of its resources and the waste of wars



We live evidently in a very sick, dysfunctional world: Our world suffers from brokenness, fragmentation and disintegration at all levels

- At the individual level
- At the social level
- At the cosmic level

The “traditional” understanding of the Church: Making things right through “social reengineering”

The established model of ministry at the time of Vatican II constitutes an integral part of a dominant “discourse” which sees the Church as God’s instrument to recreate the “perfect society” of the righteous in a world dominated by sin.

The mythical backdrop: Paradise lost

The way in which we look at the world and try to make sense of all the wrong things in it, is deeply conditioned by the creation stories that are part of our religious and cultural tradition. In the way that we usually look at the creation story, our God is a good God who created a paradise. That paradise is then lost because human disobedience spoils God’s good work.

The 12 first chapters of the book of Genesis tell the story of the terrible consequences of sin for our world. The sin of Adam seems to have opened the floodgates of human wickedness. The consequences are terrifying: suffering, violence and death.

It is interesting to note God’s reaction to what is going on in the world he has created. It seems to mirror what we feel when we become aware of the horrors that surround us. Our first reaction is, like that of God, one of repulsion and rejection. “Yahweh saw that human wickedness was great on earth and that his heart contrived nothing but wicked schemes all day long” (Gen 6,5). “Yahweh regretted having made human beings on earth and was grieved at heart. And Yahweh said, ‘I shall rid the surface of the earth of human beings whom I created – human and animal, the creeping things and the birds of heaven – for I regret having made them’ (Gen 6,6-7). It sounds a bit radical, but it reflects very well the way we very often feel about the world. It is natural to feel that we need to “flee” this world and take refuge into some kind of “restored paradise” in which we would live “in obedience” to God. This negative attitude towards the existing world, reinforced by Manichean influences (cf. St. Augustine) will deeply influence the way the Church will understand itself “in opposition to the world”.

Fortunately God does not follow his impulse to destroy the earth. After a bit of head scratching, He decides to do something less radical than simply destroying the earth in order to eliminate all evil from it. God tries His first re-engineering trick by deciding to start all over again and recreate paradise. He chooses a “new Adam” who will take charge of a cleansed world. He chooses Noah, orders him to build an Ark, and then he puts the world into “a cosmic washing machine”.

Unfortunately, this does not work either. After Noah the world goes back to its old bad ways and, if anything, things get even worse after the flood.



Back to the drawing board and to some more head scratching. God starts having doubts about His ability to put the “whole world” to rights. Therefore He takes the fateful and very masculine decision of giving up on the existing world in order to concentrate on **social reengineering** on a small, manageable scale. This he does by carefully shaping a small “chosen, holy people”, separated from the evil world abandoned to the slavery of sin. God will use all His energy and power to make sure that this will be a **righteous people** who will follow God’s **right way**, in **God’s land**.

I believe that this is the model and the context that conditioned the self-understanding of the Church as the new “chosen people”. This provides the world view in which the Church has grown and in which we have been operating. The ideology of the “chosen people” has shaped the structuring of the Church, its institutions and its relationship with the larger society.

The Ark of Salvation: the "Joshua Discourse" and “religions of salvation”

The book of Joshua is a landmark in western civilisation. It has the first definition of what constitutes a “nation”. At first sight, the book of Joshua seems simply to describe how a people – God’s chosen people –, freed from slavery, conquers a land, establishes in it religious purity, and divides the land among its twelve tribes, with Jerusalem at its centre. But, deeper down, implied in that story, there is a discourse that defines the characteristic of a “chosen people”. The “chosen people” is founded on a notion of a single, correct, God’s eye view of reason and is set in a territory which has to be centrally organised, rigidly bounded and concerned with impenetrable boundaries. This is more than the Joshua story. It is the “Joshua Discourse”. This discourse underpins the attempt at recreating the lost paradise in a land where honey and milk flow and where the relationship with God, lost by the fall, is re-established. In the religion that results from this view, there is a hostile attitude towards the outside “world” and an overriding preoccupation with “salvation from an evil world”.

It is this model that overflows into the self-understanding of the Church, which develops an overriding concern with eternal salvation from an evil world. This salvation is achieved in a “middle-way house” which constitutes an “extraordinary” space “out of this world” – a “promised land”, an “ark” where the “chosen people” are saved. The world “outside” is rejected. The Church has to be separated from the sinful world by clear boundaries, God re-establishes control over His chosen people and resides in their midst. God creates in the world a “sacred space” and manifests himself in extra-ordinary places (consecrated churches), in extra-ordinary people (saints, consecrated people and ordained “celibate” ministers), and extraordinary events (miracles and rituals). All of which has its most exalted manifestation in the “miracle” of the Eucharist, to which only the “righteous” have full access. In all of this we witness God’s victory over sin and death and it is achieved through the infusion of His “grace” into the territory occupied by his “chosen people”.

As part of this plan, the societies where the Church is present need to be shaped according to the will of God, which has to be reflected in society’s laws and institutions: the “territory” that the Church occupies has to become a “Christian society”. This is the blueprint for “Christendom”.



Things have not gone totally according to plan. Both in Israel and in the Church, many fail to keep to God's narrow path. Many in the "chosen peoples" fail to become a "holy" people. Many fail to obey God's commandments, and, therefore, the chosen people becomes divided between the "faithful faithful", who accept God's grace, and the "faithful unfaithful", who "live in sin".

The proper managing of the separate, extraordinary and holy "chosen people" implies masculine values and preoccupations: order, control, neatness, rationality, unity, authority and power. Church members become increasingly concerned with individual salvation – a salvation, which depends on "**right thinking**" (orthodoxy) – knowledge of God's way - and "**right doing**" (morality in "rules of behaviour") – keeping to the right way. This "righteousness" can only be achieved by total submission and obedience to God's will, as manifested in the Church's doctrinal and moral teaching. Freedom was the cause of sin and death. Therefore the only proper use of freedom consists in renouncing our sinful freedom in total and unconditional obedience. Only in this way we can achieve salvation. The preoccupation with "right thinking", based on the notion of "absolute truth", tends to develop into dogmatism, and the preoccupation with "right doing" tends to develop into Pharisaism and scrupulosity. Together dogmatism and pharisaism breed a superiority complex, intolerance and the assumption of the right to conquer.

The restoration of God's order in the chosen people demands an extraordinary display of sacred power. God's grace reshapes the world through incarnation and pentecost; through the delegation of God's power into a sacred hierarchy which has control over the channels of grace: The sacraments. The "sacraments" are God's given tools to establish the boundaries of God's space, to distribute power and roles; to maintain that space; to keep order and to re-establish the order lost. The sacraments are the privileged instruments of social engineering and social control. In this way God's "sacred power" becomes embodied and expressed in the exercise of hierarchical clerical power.

If we have the disgrace of "falling from grace" into sin we need to have recourse to the sacrament of penance. The sacrament of penance is the means to restore those who stray to their place into the holy church as righteous people. Only the "righteous" can be considered full members of the Church and be assured of eternal salvation. The sacrament of penance gives to the clerics who administer it tremendous positional power to control social behaviour as only proper behaviour gives access to communion and ultimately to eternal salvation. Clerics control the "keys of the Kingdom"

Through total obedience to the hierarchy, the practice of the sacraments and orthodox beliefs we become assured of eternal salvation from this evil and sinful world.

I believe that in structuring the Church through the centuries, and in spite of the attempts to find alternative models after Vatican II, most people in the Church still function at the level of thinking and organisation shape by the Joshua Discourse. The monarchical and feudal states developed along similar lines. The "Joshua Discourse" has shaped very radically the way in which we define a "people", and consequently the way in which we define the Church as the "new chosen people": monarchical, hierarchical, clerical, and male dominated.

Many people will react to this presentation accusing it of being a simplistic distortion of catholic doctrine on the Church and of ministry. It is true that the sophisticated "theory in



use” of official teaching and catholic theology will not completely recognise itself here. But I believe that what I have presented is very much the “theory in practice” that constitutes in reality the dominant ideology in the Church as it underpins the reality of clerical power and control.

Moreover, it is not difficult to see how this “chosen people” discourse influences and shapes the understanding of ordained ministry. In this model, the overriding preoccupation of ministry becomes salvation after death through the pursuit of “holiness” and the “engineering” of holiness in the people entrusted to our ministry. Ministers have to be the exemplary “faithful” in total obedience to the “rules” and to the hierarchy, living “uncontaminated” by the evil world, hence the insistence on celibacy.

The self-understanding of the Church necessarily reflects on its understanding of mission. Mission, in a church shaped by the “Joshua Discourse”, is the bringing to those outside the Church the means of salvation, by the implantation in their midst of all the Church structures in order to expand the boundaries of the chosen people by christianising the world. The Church is understood as the exclusive ark of salvation. This is the implantation model of mission, which was the only model of mission until the time of the Vatican Council and it is still today the understanding of mission most prevalent in the minds of most people in the Church.

The main preoccupation of this model of the Church and of ministry is the transformation of an evil world by “putting things right” through the pursuit of “holiness”. It is in that way that we ensure our eternal salvation “in paradise”. Faced with the horrors of the world explained as a sequel to the disobedience of Adam, the prevalent message in this model is the one of Moses to the people ready to enter the promised land: “Obey and you will live”, and “Be holy as I am Holy”. The main preoccupation of the faithful and of their ministers in the Church becomes, in this context, the attainment of “eternal salvation” through the pursuit of righteousness and holiness in a society that has to be shaped by God’s commandments.

Ministry: working “for” and “social engineering”

Underlying this model of Church and ministry, there is a cultural lock-in into a cosmology deeply influenced by the understanding of causality in Aristotelianism and which is also at the base of Newtonian physics.

Newtonian physics and mechanics have shaped the Industrial Revolution. Among its presuppositions there is one that says that basically we face two states which are totally incompatible: control and disorder. Every machine needs total perfect control so it can work. Any failure to control disorder will bring mechanical breakdown. Through control we assure linear and foreseeable outcomes. Lack of control introduces non-linearity, randomness and disorder. There is nothing “in between”. It is amazing to see how the understanding of the Church as the “exclusive means of salvation” parallels the Newtonian understanding of machines. The Church also thinks that there are two “states” totally incompatible with each other: grace and sin, obedience and disobedience. Sin is the radical deadly disorder that comes from the inordinate use of freedom. Grace, that comes to us through the efficacy of the sacraments, controls the disorder of sin through making us “holy” and obedient to God’s law and submissive to God’s truth and, in that way, we achieve salvation.



People in ordained ministry are entrusted with the proper functioning of this salvific causality chain. Priests are responsible for the proper functioning of the “salvation machine”. Through the proper “confection” and “administration” of the sacraments and through “orthodox” teaching they ensure the proper transmission of God’s grace and the transformation of the chosen into a “holy people” in “obedience” to God’s law as mediated by the Church.

It is their place in this hierarchy ladder of transmission of grace from God to the people, that invests the clerics with power and authority over the people that they “govern”. From their place in that ladder they toil **for** the people, being responsible for their actions to their “superiors” in the hierarchy, who have invested them with that power, and ultimately to God. It is that **FOR** that is the main characteristic of this form of ministry, which is akin to social engineering.

The Church as “chosen people”: An ideological “lock-in”

This discourse about ministering in and to a “holy” chosen people, separated from an evil world in order to attain eternal salvation, is an ideological “lock-in” that blinds those affected by it to its “dark side”

- 1 Need to protect at all costs the institution and its claim to holiness
 - covering up of abuse: rotten apple syndrome
 - secrecy and non accountability
 - pharisaism: white sepulchres.
- 2 Obsession with control: freedom as the cause of all evil to be replaced by blind obedience. Total intolerance to internal dissent. No room for real participation: people always reduced to the state of “obedient children”. All that constitutes different aspects of unethical leadership.
- 3 Obsession with sexuality, and with purity and inferiority of women: dysfunctional relationships, male chauvinism and abuse.
- 4 Superiority, confrontation and right of conquest.
- 5 Monopoly of government by the ordained ministry combined with the conviction of being in “possession of the truth” results in Dogmatic authoritarianism.
- 6 Ruthless use of positional power (disguised in the language of “service”): access to sacraments and power positions restricted by clerics to the “righteous”.

The Church finds itself locked in an either/or, black or white world. The Church, as God’s chosen people, claims to occupy a “holy territory” from which it wages war with the forces of evil.

What risks to be lost in this “discourse” about Church and ministry

This discourse that I have described as the “Joshua Discourse”, has underpinned the understanding of the Church as an Ark of Salvation, hierarchically controlled by a clerical male class, which is very much the dominant official discourse still today, forty years after Vatican II.

Here are some of the themes of the New Testament which appear to be neglected by the “holiness” discourse:



The centrality of Jesus' table fellowship with sinners

- The primacy of service and the radical challenge to power by the powerlessness of the cross, symbolised in the washing of the feet
- The fundamental equality of all God's children
- The condemnation of the "righteous people" (pharisees...) by Jesus
- God's unconditional love of the world
- Being forgiven sinners

All these and many others themes of the New Testament seem to demonstrate that possibly the "politics of Jesus" were precisely a radical challenge to the "politics of holiness". Jesus seems to criticise radically the "politics of holiness", which drove the "religious people" of Israel to an obsession with religious purity and the exclusion of the "impure". It is precisely his opposition to that "official" religion that will put Jesus onto a tragic collision course with the religious establishment and will finally lead to his death.

The search for an alternative model of Church and ministry

The alternative model that, tentatively, I want to propose here has become necessary not only because we have to try to take on board scriptural themes neglected by the "holiness" model, but also because a number of the premises underpinning that model have crumbled:

- The conviction of the need of the church and its sacraments for individual salvation has been replaced by an amazing wave of "salvational optimism", in the words of Karl Rahner. This is a nail in the coffin of clerical control.
- The missionary experience and the growth of multi-cultural and multi-religious societies has confronted us with a deep feeling of the presence of God's Spirit outside the boundaries of the Church.
- The growing awareness of the incredible depth of suffering and mess in our world (World Wars, Holocaust, genocides, absolute poverty, refugees, wars, racism, abuse of the weak and the small, abuse and discrimination of women, drugs and alcoholism epidemics, AIDS...) challenges our capacity for compassion and shakes any simplistic conviction that we can "right" the world: this world is necessarily a "dia-bolic" (this word means "broken") world that we cannot escape.

My question is: can we look at the Christ event and at the cross with new eyes and explore a different way of being Church and of ministering in it? I believe that the cross invites us to a paradoxical journey that challenges our traditional understanding of Church and ministry.

From "holiness" to compassion.

Living in ambiguity and paradox: A God who loves sinners

We come then to an attempt to recover aspects of the Gospel message neglected in the prevalent hierarchical and clerical discourse. Gradually I have come to suspect that there are other ways to look at the foundational "myths" of our Christian faith in order to make sense of biblical themes apparently neglected in the prevalent ecclesial discourse. It is with great apprehension that I undertake this journey because I am aware that I am abandoning the "orthodox" path in order to explore "unorthodox" territories.



A paradox: God creates a messy world and loves it

Faced as we are with a very messy world we can take two opposite attitudes and have two different readings of the scriptures. The one that we have analysed leads to a rejection of the world and a search for holiness by belonging to a “chosen separated people”. God created paradise. We lost paradise through our disobedience. We have to try to recreate paradise and escape the messy consequences of our disobedience by obedience to God’s will in a “new promised land”. This is the reading that underpins the preoccupation with “holiness”. It is all very straight forward and very neat.

But there is the possibility of reading the creation account and God’s attitude to the messiness of the world in a radically different way. Perhaps the story of the creation of the world does not end with original sin and the loss of paradise. The story of the creation of the world develops throughout the first 12 chapters of Genesis and presents us with a paradox and a warning. The paradox is the fact that a Good God in fact creates a broken and messy world. God’s world is a messy, broken and “dia-bolic” world and God does not reject it. The mess is an integral part of the world and therefore we have to learn to live in the mess. The warning is never to try to escape the messiness of the world by looking to recreate paradise in some pure and holy place. Paradise is irretrievably lost. This is in fact very much confirmed by tragic historical experiences. The utopic attempt to recreate paradise on earth will always result in monstrous dystopias (remember the Third Reich, Pol Pot’s Cambodia, Russia’s communism, the Iraq war to export “democracy”....). What is common to all the dystopias of history is that they were attempted by groups that thought that they were a “chosen people” with a mission to engineer a “perfect society” on earth.

The Incarnation: Joining the mess

The story of the re-engineering of a space for “holiness” neglects the most fundamental twist in the story of the relationship of God with his world, viz. the fact that nothing of what God did to try to put the world to “rights”, from outside so to speak, has really worked. That is why, after trying so many tricks, God simply gives up social re-engineering and simply decides to “join the mess”. God loved so much his messy world that he sent his son unto it, as John very clearly tells us.

The incarnation of the Son bridges the divide between sin and grace, light and darkness, life and death by the simple device of “God becoming a mess”. This is perhaps the meaning of the “kenosis”, the humbling of God that proves his acceptance of his messy world, his “prodigal son” (cf. Phil 2, 6-11). I wonder if in the embrace of the prodigal son by his father, we do not have an inkling of the relationship of our Father with his “messy” creation. In the light of this fundamental option of the Son to share in our mess, everything makes sense: the denunciation of the “righteousness” of the priests, scribes and pharisees; Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners; Jesus becoming “impure” by touching the “impure” and, finally, his “messy” death on the cross.

Compassion and reconciliation

The cross is then the proof that God does not reject the world. God embraces our mess.



God “becomes sin” for our sake. God does not condemn nor judge. God is compassionate. The mess of the world is the necessary condition for God to reveal his true nature as a merciful and compassionate God. The cross is the symbol of the cost to God of that compassion. God’s compassion manifests itself in totally embracing this sinful and broken world through Christ’s “kenosis”.

In a dia-bolic (broken) world, the cross is the proof of God’s sym-bolic (this world is used here in its etymological meaning of “bringing together”) immanence in the world. In the cross, God re-conciles (“cross-stitches”) the world introducing in this dia-bolic deadly world a leaven of forgiveness, healing and eternal life. It is through this compassion – this “suffering with” the world – that the world becomes whole. God does not engineer from outside. God heals from inside.

The Church: a compassionate space “at the edge”

“As the Father sent me, so I am sending you”. The Spirit of compassion is a leaven that grows into a community of forgiven sinners where our dia-bolic and deadly sinful reality becomes the place where we encounter the living and compassionate God, enabling us to experience God’s compassion and then to offer that same compassion to the world at large. Grace is the flip side of sin. Death and life, sin and grace, Cross and Resurrection, belong together. Death -and the shadow of death (the diabolic)- which is central to our human experience, is lived in sure hope of Life (the symbolic) - which is central to our faith experience.

What we start to realise is that all reality is bi-polar. We do not live in an either/or, black or white world. We live in a both/and, black **AND** white world. This demands a radical conversion of our way of seeing the world and of our understanding Church and ministry. The Church is not called to be a “holy territory” for the “righteous”, but a compassionate space, where forgiven sinners live in continuous tension at the edge between grace and sin, life and death. This is the edge where Christ “becomes sin” for our sake and where the Father embraces the prodigal son. It is this interaction at the edge that got its clearest expression in Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners.

Bi-polarity is at the heart of the discoveries that have shattered for ever our either/or Newtonian understanding of the world where there is no in-between control and disorder. DNA, the “signature” of life is the interplay of two spiral strands. Quantum physics shows that, at their most basic level, matter and energy are indistinguishable. The stability of the stars and planets depends on an ever-changing interplay between centripetal and centrifugal forces. But the most intriguing and suggestive discovery has been made by chaos theory: it is the discovery that between the perfect linearity of control and the total non-linearity of disorder, there is an “edge”, called the “edge of chaos”, where the energies represented by linearity and non-linearity combine to form bi-polar processes, which have been called “Lorenz Butterflies” (alluding to their shape and to the name of their discoverer). This discovery has allowed us to have a “new look” at the world and to discover how much in the world lives at the edge of chaos. Life itself is the result of the interaction between integrating and differentiating. Planets do not move in a fixed orbit but in a chaotic edge between the centripetal forces of gravity and the centrifugal energies of speed. The heart beats on a chaotic edge, which makes it tolerant and responsive to the different demands of



our environment. And so on with many different vital processes. The more we look, the more we discover how relevant chaos theory is to the understanding of our world and to the processes of living and organising. All organisations in order to survive and thrive have to move at the edge of the chaotic interaction between purposefulness (fidelity to one's identity) and responsiveness (capacity to adapt to a changing environment).

The clerical model of ministry is based on the mistrust of freedom as a principle of disorder (sin) and on the need, therefore, to control it through the imposition of total obedience. In this way of looking at things, there is nothing between a "state of grace" and a "state of sin". What I am proposing here is that the Church and its ministry have to be situated at a "chaotic edge": a compassionate space at a dynamic edge between grace and sin, where the freedom of a wounded humanity meets the free embrace of a wounded and compassionate God. Grace and sin are the two poles of God's reconciliation with us in Jesus Christ. The cross, at the edge of the interaction between life and death is the most striking sign of the space where we have to live on our way to the Kingdom.

At the core of our faith there is a "sym-bolic" event, which is the core of the "Christ event" and the heart of our "sacred story": The life-giving death of Jesus on the cross. A compassionate God and a sinful world are reconciled in a redeeming embrace in God's Spirit. This movement, of which the cross is the centre, is the expression of the life dance of God himself: the continuous exchange of love between the Father and the Son represented by the sign for the infinite in mathematics and by the Mobius strip. The bi-polarity that we increasingly find in the structure of the world is possibly the most important hint that the world has been created in the image of the Trinity.

Ritual as healing (sym-bolic) play in a "transitional space"

The challenge that we face as the community of followers of Christ is to let ourselves be entrained into the dynamic of compassion represented by the cross. We have to continue to enter the brokenness of humanity to continue the mission of Christ through "re-stitching" the world. We have to answer to the suffering of the broken world bringing to it reconciliation and healing.

We are enabled to be a compassionate presence on the edge between Church and broken world by rituals. Ritual is a formal "symbolic exchange" in a transitional sacred space where we "play" by representing the "symbolic events" that are at the centre of our faith. In ritual, we take off our sandals and enter the burning bush to feel God's compassion for his broken children and to be sent, strengthened by that compassion, to free God's children from their task-masters.

Ritual brings healing (the sym-bolic) to a broken world (the dia-bolic) as a result of "entrainment": the progressive synchronisation of our broken reality with the life-giving rhythms pulsing through the cross. As the cross "re-stitched" the world, we start through ritual to be put in a dynamic in which we start "cross-stitching" our lives, our communities and our world according to God's Trinitarian living pattern. Ritual produces a "convergence" by listening to the rhythms of a living God: through ritual the believing community, as belonging to a sinful world, enters little by little into God's dance (perichoresis, circumsessio) and shares in God's compassion. "Have in you the feelings (the gut feelings) that were in Christ Jesus" (Phil 2,5).



A Dutch scientist called Christian Huyghens by chance discovered the importance of “entrainment” in our world. He had put two pendulum clocks in a wall, and he observed that after a while the two clocks started to keep the same beat. If he then upset the clocks, they would start to beat again in synchrony after a while. He deduced that somehow the clocks were listening to one another to synchronise their rhythms. Further studies have shown how extensive this phenomenon of entrainment is. It explains, for instance, how thousands of starlings can fly in clouds, react to danger and change direction together without collision; how dolphins can seem to dance together; how fireflies in a forest can switch on and off at the same time; and how music influences our mental and emotional states.

We can also be entrained into the heartbeat of Jesus which is in fact God’s heartbeat: it is in the “listening” of prayer and ritual that we can become “compassionate as our God is compassionate”. In ritual we get attuned to the rhythms of God’s life in the midst of death and we celebrate the compassion that is in God as revealed in Jesus and given to us in his spirit. Ritual is thus symbolic and healing in the midst of a broken and diabolic world.

In ritual we are entrained into a new life with a new heartbeat: We undergo a conversion, a change of heart

- Through celebrating (playing a sacred drama) life, reconciliation, forgiveness and healing
 - At the individual level
 - At the communal level
 - At the cosmic level
- To re-committing to life, reconciliation, forgiveness and healing
- To living life, reconciliation, forgiveness and healing

By welcoming God’s compassion in our lives, we, as forgiven and forgiving debtors, accept to die that others may live and become thus themselves agents (symbols and sacraments) of reconciliation and healing.

Ministry in a messy world: the recovery of compassion. Life “at the edge”

The understanding of the Church as a compassionate space in the way suggested here has very radical consequences for the understanding of the Church’s rituals (the sacraments) and of the Church’s ordained ministry.

If the sacraments are primarily formal instances whose main purpose is to entrain us into the dynamic of God’s compassion in different and complementary ways, the only condition for full participation in the rites is to be and to feel in need of God’s compassion. The model of the rites is the sinners’ encounters with Jesus and first and foremost Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners. If this perspective is right, there is no justification for the barring of people in second marriages from communion, or in forbidding intercommunion between Christians who suffer from their divisions. It is also necessary to unlink the ritual of reconciliation from participation in the Eucharist. Both are, each in its own right, rites of healing and reconciliation. The condition for participation in communion is not to be “righteous”, but to be in need of compassion. It is by experiencing God’s compassion that we are enabled to bring God’s compassion to others. By entering into Jesus’ politics of compassion, we are freed from all anxiety about salvation through purity and holiness



understood as rejection and separation from an evil world. We can also let go our obsession with “right thinking” and “right doing” without slacking our tension towards a search of fidelity to “God’s will”.

It is also clear that we have to distinguish the service (ministry) that the Christian community is sent to offer to the world and the services (ministries) that are needed for the nurturing of the formal structures and rituals that the community needs to be enabled to carry out its mission. A formal distribution of roles is needed for a “representation” of the “Christ event” in the rituals that make and celebrate the Church. The most formal and central role in all the rituals is the symbolic representation of Christ himself. This is the role for which priests, officially authorised by the Church, are ordained. But in principle, anybody that the Church chooses can perform this role. There is no evident reason why the person fulfilling this role has to also have the responsibility of “teaching” and of “governing”. This is what happens in today’s practice and is enshrined in Canon Law. The services of “teaching” and of “governing” can be carried out by non-ordained persons endowed with the talents and the expertise needed for those tasks. There is no reason either for the person representing Christ in the rituals to be celibate. Celibacy is a charism and a possible way of life in itself but there is no compelling reason why it should be linked to the priesthood once the obsession with holiness (as being separate, different and “extraordinary”) and ritual purity has been abandoned. And evidently, there is no reason for women not to be priests if we acknowledge the fundamental equality of all God’s children.

The fundamental problem with the clerical model of authority and control is that it carries the formal and necessarily hierarchical role that priests perform in the Church’s rituals by “playing” to be Christ, to the informal life of the community and its mission to make God’s compassion active and present in the world. This is the mission that we are all entrusted at the edge between Church and society and where, as baptised, we all, ordained and lay, share in radical equality. At this level, nobody should be called father, nor teacher “because we are all brothers” (using non-inclusive biblical language).

Outside the ritual context, the priest should be just a member of the community in fundamental equality with all other members, without any asymmetry of power, collaborating with all other members of the community, each one with her or his own gifts to be a compassionate space at the edge between God’s pilgrim Church of forgiven sinners and God’s broken world.

Working with God and with one another in the task of human horticulture

We are then challenged to attune ourselves to the suffering of the world and to embrace it bringing God’s compassion. We listen to God telling us as he told Moses: “I have heard my people cry. And I want you to go to them”. We give up our obsession with controlling peoples’ lives and trying social reengineering to produce a perfect and pure world. We dare to start **human horticulture**: mucking in and getting our hands dirty. Aware of being a “messy” people, we dare to join the mess of other peoples’ lives with one fundamental preoccupation: to be **WITH** them and in that way to bring to them, in word and deed, the Good News of a God who tells us: “I know that you are a mess, but I love you”. In order to do that, all of us, men and women, we have to give up our dominant male preoccupation with power, neatness and control, in order to recover our feminine qualities of nurturing and



caring, and putting up with children messes. It is only in that way that we can bring liberation and healing to an oppressed and broken world.

Our call is a call to collaborate with God and with one another (being “syn-ergoumenoi” - co-workers - in St. Paul’s word) in picking up all the broken bits and pieces of this world and, by cross-stitching all those diverse broken bits, to start recovering the resplendent image of the living Trinitarian god who begot the world. We have to be carers, nurturing community by healing the connective tissue of the world, through “the love in between”.

