

Towards Priests in Adult Communities

The book 'Towards Priests in adult communities' samples some of the diverse experiences which are part of the reality of the 21st. Century Catholic Church – many of the communities who are living these experiences are, so to speak, on the margin of the big church and would not warm the heart of the canon lawyers. The reflections offered in the book are an attempt to look, reflect and learn in a very positive manner – a challenge to reflect on these communities and a call to action. These are adult communities i.e. communities where leadership roles have emerged within these communities in all their diversity and all are responsible according to their talents. This is a far cry from the general run of infantilised Roman catholic parishes where a passive presence of the laity, is not only what is required, but is indeed what is demanded. The word 'Priest' in the original title 'Priest: Poet, Prophet and pragmatist' alludes to the present situation in the Roman Catholic church which, among other things, gave rise to this collection of essays. It is a church with a clear division between clergy and laity, a hierarchically governed church in which all authority is vested in a caste of male celibate figures. The fact that all members of the people of God, in community, in relationships, are priestly witnesses to the Kingdom of God, an active presence in the life of the community and our hope for the future, is paid little more than lip service. The centuries long development to this situation seems to have entered a Winter of decay with the dearth of a sufficient number of male, celibate, and sacral cult figures, leaving many communities bereft of the Eucharistic celebration which focuses their communal witness, in thanksgiving and praise, to the presence of the Kingdom in their midst. However, the bulk of the essays in this book represent the second half of the **original** title – 'Poet, Prophet and pragmatist'. They are positive signs of Spring, not a moan about the Winter. They are examples, in so many different ways, of communities becoming adult, emerging from the kindergarten atmosphere where the teacher knows all and has the final say on everything (In fact a very poor educational practice!) My question was: "What was the poetic vision that lies behind this?", "What motivated these communities to move on and, on the basis of diverse experiences of the reality of God in their midst to 'Sing a new song to the lord'?"

Certainly there was the hope stimulated by the breath of fresh air from Vatican 1, particularly its emphasis on the community as the people of God. There was also an attentiveness to the life and teaching of the early Christian communities and the realisation that many insights had been lost sight of in the course of centuries. It would be foolish to expect to return to a first century context. However, there is a growing realisation that all theology is contextual. A basic definition of theology is that it is a reflection on my experience in a community which has some kind of faith stance – in the case of the communities present in this book that faith stance is an attempt to be faithful to the preaching of the Kingdom as witnessed to by Jesus of Nazareth, a first century Jewish preacher. That represents a journey – the present conviction of the reality of God's presence in our life and communities as we evolve and grow into a future where that same presence is our hope and salvation. We cannot be content with freezing the video frame on a hierarchical picture which developed post fourth century and more markedly in late medieval times onwards. Nor can we accept a 'one size fits all' theology and practice - a universal institution

cannot be micro managed from the centre without killing off the very diverse forms of life, growing and nurturing in very different soils.

1. The bottom line in the motivation of these communities is the desire to embrace life in all its complexity and seek new ways of carrying out the theological task. The old orthodoxy took a rigid and dualistic approach to reality and that was reflected in church practice and discipline. Reality was seen in terms of conflict and opposition: Transcendence v Immanence. Sacred v secular, individual v community, spirit v matter, priest v laity, male v female. When this 'Either/Or' paradigm gives way to the acceptance of a 'Both/And' approach the community is stimulated by the realisation that these are the basic tensions that form the warp and woof of our very existence = these tensions are indeed creative, they are the challenges that lead us on as we seek to become what we can become, more and more fully human. The early Genesis creation text offers me a picture of the seventh day of the creation myth as God, who sees that all is, not only good, but indeed *very good*, rejoices in the diversity of creation and allows it to become what it can become. Life is about relationships and growing together.

2. One insight lost sight of takes us back to Paul in Galatians 3 :

But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian, for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith.

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Probably quoting a baptismal formula Paul speaks of our equality as baptised members of the people of God, of our equality in Jesus Christ as a result of our baptism. A renewed focus on baptism warns us against, in a dualistic fashion, merely spiritualising the notion of equality in a church which has become rigidly hierarchical – by law all lay councils are advisory only and, according to my parish priest, he has the final word in everything. All indeed equal in the body of Christ?

3. That thought leads us to the question of the individual and the community. Developments in church ministry have sharpened the focus on the individual and on **his** being called by God to priesthood (– we remind ourselves that the word priest is not used of any individual in the N.T.) If, however, leadership roles emerge from the coming together of community needs and whatever charisms and talents and gifts possessed by individuals willing to serve then, obviously, the call comes through the community – our thinking and practice must be incarnational. Priesthood in the absolute does not exist, only in the forms in which it is incarnated. Did indeed Paul practice a team ministry as he called upon his helpers, male and female. Also it is noticeable that cultic priesting is not on his agenda. Theology and practice is contextual and diverse.

4. Allied to this is a drifting apart of the sacred and the secular resulting in the elevation of a sacral figure whose main role is liturgical. The church building has become sacred space. The incarnational aspect of Christian thinking (and other) has been lost sight of. A complementary model suggests that what makes the building sacred is those who enter it. In the words of a character in an Alice Walker novel: "We go to church, not to find God, but to share God. The Eucharist is the focal point of

our coming together in thanksgiving and praise for the presence of God that we have experienced in our lives in community - it is there that we sing a new song to the Lord. If all communication is one way – six feet above contradiction - where is the sharing? We have spiritualised the concept of redemption, in a spirit/body duality and projected it into an eschatologised future out there. Redemption is about the whole being in the here and now and about becoming totally and fully human, male and female in our complex interrelationships and in the wider society of which we form a part.

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