

Continuity and Change

I have been asked to offer some personal reflections so I must apologise in advance for the seemingly egocentric nature of this contribution. It is simply offered as a possible source of comfort to those who may be undergoing the bereavement of loss as they move out of the active ministry.

Many years ago, I resigned from the active diocesan ministry in which I had worked for 10 years. Although the transition from cleric to layman carried its own traumas, the most profound and the most surprising experience was, and indeed has proved continuously to be, that of a deep underlying continuity in my life. A continuity which I would like to try and explain.

I remember some time before my resignation sharing my reflections with my brothers and friends in the priesthood during a day of recollection. I had been invited to lead the day. I chose for my theme that of the celibate life and its significance. I attempted to describe it as a gift designed to 'liberate for freedom'. A state of detachment for service in love. A state in which the priest is able to reflect back to the people of God that Word which is already present within them and which precedes his own coming amongst them.

Christ is present, I recalled, in his Body, the Christian community; as really present as he is during the proclamation of the Word and the celebration of the Eucharist.

The priest accepts that presence from them and refocusses it only to return it. The demand is simply to become transparent to that presence, both in the proclamation of the Word and in its eucharistic celebration. His whole purpose is to live out the grace which has chosen him to be the medium and servant through which the Spirit of Jesus is brought into the lives of men and women.

His task is to empty himself and not get in the way. The possibility of the priest becoming such, lay simply in the extent of his capacity for self-effacement in the power of the Spirit.

On leaving the ministerial priesthood, I was soon to discover, as indeed Martin Luther had also found, that that demand was not one which was the fruit of a professional celibate clericalised status, but was a continuing commitment arising from the Sacrament of Order. If the institutional Church chose to try to limit the exercise of that commitment, so be it. My responsibility as a husband and a father and as a human being could only be to do my best to continue to exercise my priesthood within the constraints and opportunities of the new life which God had called me to. Celibacy was certainly not the indispensable condition of an existential priesthood as I came to experience it, although it clearly may be for others.

Married life carries with it continuous opportunities for self-sacrificing love. If we, as incarnational Christians, are to love, serve and enjoy God in our neighbour, where else can we who are married, find him more completely than in our closest neighbour, our spouse? What, I think, is helpful, is to convince oneself that to experience change, even a quite profound change, is normal in human life. It is not simply something to be undergone, but is often desirable, is quite healthy, is indeed rooted in the Biblical experience. The God of biblical revelation is a God who calls us into newness. What is important, however, is that the change should not be dependent upon total discontinuity, a rejection of everything that has gone before. We need to build links between the 'there and then' and the 'here and now'.

Those links lie within ourselves to discover. For some, it may lie in the exercise of leadership through political activity; through worship, spiritual direction or shared prayer; for others, it is expressed in teaching, social service, the caring professions. Every priest, celibate or married, male or female, must exercise the ministry within the constraints and possibilities of a particular life situation.

After over a quarter of a century of living out a married priesthood, it may be a help to share some of my experiences. Like most people, I have known moments of enormous joy and also times of

deep pain and sadness. After twenty years of a contented marriage which bore the fruit of four delightful children, my wife died of cancer after a protracted illness. Now, perhaps a little like Thomas More (I like to think so anyway!), I am once again happily married to Angela who herself was suddenly widowed and left with five lovely children. So there you are, this former celibate has been able to rejoice in two gorgeous wives and nine beautiful children! Although I do not think they would thank me for describing them as children! The youngest is now sixteen and the eldest twenty three. I do hope it is a good sign that three of them are now reading theology at University.

Now, back to my theme. In what ways has the Sacrament of Order continued to flourish in my own life? Sometimes it has done so in practical ways. I remember the few occasions when I was able to offer sacramental support and comfort to the seriously injured in accidents, etc. I remember the many times I was able to bring my first wife viaticum and the sacrament of the sick. I remember the blessing I was able to give to young children and to the new born. I recall the many occasions when in giving counselling, support and advice to my students, I have felt the power of priesthood very close. I have been fortunate in being able to teach theology in Higher Education during all these years and it is difficult to describe the satisfaction which that has brought. My experiences in politics as a member of the Labour Party standing as a candidate for election provided many opportunities for offering christian and priestly witness.

In some ways perhaps our state as married priests is a little like the hidden years of Jesus' priestly life. What I want to say more than anything to those whose wounds are still raw from experiences of rejection and shame, who perhaps also feel an emptiness in their lives deep down, is this: rejoice in your continuing priesthood and the eternal commission which Jesus gave to you through His Body, the Church. That commission is still laid upon you and its exercise will be surprisingly possible in all kinds of unexpected situations. In your liberation from the restrictions of clericalism, comes your freedom to be incarnated fully into human existence. I remember an occasion when the partner of a friend who was on the point of leaving the ministerial priesthood, said that she was dreading the day when he would say his last Mass, because it meant so much to him. My response was to say that such a day need never come. Whenever he is actively present during the celebration of the Eucharist, no matter how far down the Church he happens to be kneeling, he will be a concelebrant and offering that Eucharist as a priest. Nobody can ever take that away from him.

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