

## **Ecclesiology and Indifference: Challenges for Gay and Lesbian Ministry**

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*Le héros souterrain est un être fasciné qui s'écrase piteusement et tragiquement sur tous les obstacles qui se trouvent sur son chemin, à l'instar du papillon de nuit qui se brûle à la lampe ou de deux Boeings s'encastant dans les tours de la puissance, et cela parce qu'ils s'occupent plus de l'obstacle que de l'objet. C'est parce que l'orgueil de l'homme du sous-sol est sans limites qu'il peut s'abaisser de la façon la plus abjecte. L'orgueil, et non pas l'égoïsme; la haine de soi, et non pas l'amour de soi. "Craignons celui qui se hait lui-même, avertit Nietzsche, cet autre grand spécialiste de la psychologie souterraine, car nous serons les victimes de sa vengeance." Jean-Pierre Dupuy "Anatomie du 11 septembre 2001: Violence, Religion et Éthique" in Cahiers du Grisè no 2, Juin 2002*

It is difficult to think of any subject which has been more used and abused than ecclesiastical language about sheep and shepherds. To such an extent that the very language of the Good Shepherd seems coated in kitsch. And, in the light of recent events in this country and elsewhere, tinged with a sad, and sometimes appalling, irony.

Nevertheless, I want to have a go in your midst at recovering some of the sense of this language as a critical tool with which we can begin to see our way forward and flex our imaginations a little as to what we might be doing in exercising ministry as gay and lesbian people, or for gay and lesbian people.

In the first place, a personal consideration, so as to enable you to reject, if you wish, everything I say hereafter. I am deeply committed to this language of sheep and shepherd, not merely because I am, and am delighted to be, a somewhat traditional Catholic; not merely because the sacred texts in which I dwell, and which I love, cause me to think in their terms; but because my experience has been one of being called into being through the phrase "Feed my sheep" such that I cannot make sense of my life except as an aspiring to make that summons flesh.

Let me explain. Eight years ago, while on an Ignatian retreat in downtown Santiago in Chile, I underwent something like a “collapse of world”. Following a particularly nasty outbreak of ecclesiastical homophobia which came my way, my sense of belonging to a religious order, and my way of being part of the Church were being completely reformulated. This happened as I received the grace of seeing that God has nothing at all to do with the violence which is meted out to gay people, that it is purely a human mechanism. And I was becoming able to detect the ways in which I had been complicit with that violence and those mechanisms owing to living with a bound conscience. At one stage during the tumult of this week-long retreat, I went walking in the early afternoon in one of the gay cruising areas of Santiago, which is also a popular walking spot, and watched a young man looking for a pick-up. I remember thinking that he was probably a soldier, since I had been told that Thursday was when the conscripts had their afternoon off, and the density of military-looking young men would mysteriously increase in the cruising area on that day.

Thinking to myself on my return to the Jesuit house where I was staying that such an afternoon walk was scarcely a proper way to be going about my guided retreat, I spent time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. And at some stage the words “Feed my sheep” came to me not from my own perturbation, but from Another, resounding like a gentle kettle drum in a silence beneath the jangling of a drum-less orchestra. And this of course threw me completely. Gradually, but completely. Since it seemed to suggest that my afternoon walk was not only one of mixed motives, as I would have been happy to admit. But that there was a loving regard for the men on that mound that had no mixed motives, and simply liked them.

I suppose it has taken me much of the eight years since that event to get some sense of what that regard is about. I notice that it seemed to be part of two experiences. The first was that of a radical separation of God from all the violence; the second was the seriously destabilising possibility of the divine regard looking on gay and lesbian people not with a frisson of disgust marked by condescension, but rather with straightforward liking, and wanting to create a shepherding for us, wanting us to be happy and free, as you do with someone you actually like. The first was the stripping away of something, and the second was the emerging of something different, a perspective which had simply been unimaginable from within the violence. Over time, I see of course that these are the same experience, and that it is the emergence of the gently positive regard

which is what leads to the radical separation, even though these may be experienced in the reverse order.

Part of the disconcerting nature of this phrase “Feed my Sheep” was that I understood at once that it did not answer in any way the formal question which I was asking during the retreat, which was whether I really had a vocation to the Dominicans, or instead to the Jesuits, or whether I should really continue to be a priest at all. The resounding phrase was, as a very wise Benedictine friend pointed out to me, “wonderfully non-directive”. And, at the same time as it was an order which cannot be refused, it was gently inviting of creativity and discovery as to what it might mean. This is the sense in which I cannot let the phrase “Feed my sheep” go. I am peripheral to the phrase, whoever I am, and in its working out, I will be discovered to be. I have a vague sense that something like this is behind the notion of the ontological character conferred by the sacrament of order, but I may well be wrong about that.

Anyhow, the point of my sharing this with you is that I imagine that if I have had such an experience, then probably many others have had it as well. And such are some of you here, who are responding to calls within your different denominations’ reception of the Christian faith. What I want to indicate is that when we talk about ministry for gay people and lesbians, or lesbian and gay people in ministry, we are not talking in the first place about techniques, or ideologies. We are not talking about searching for ecclesiastical approval. We are not talking about “how far can I go” or “how much can I get away with”? We are talking about something much more basic. We are talking about being called by God, the Creator of the Universe, which is a certain sort of command, and one which, once heard, cannot be unheard, because along with it there goes the sense that whoever it is that “I” am to become, that becoming will never, however hard we may run away, or allow ourselves to be seduced by worry or fashion, become disentangled from this being addressed as shepherd-in-potential, which is what suggests forth shepherdliness in us.

Well, many of us, I suspect, get so far, and then become distracted by the apparent impossibility of the calling given the various ecclesiastical set – ups in which we find ourselves. And of course I am speaking here in the first instance from within my own experience as a Catholic, but am aware that in many ways the same issues are at work in the different forms in which Christianity is lived out in our countries at the present time. What I want to do is spend time with you today working to chip away at one of the principal obstacles to our developing healthy ministries aimed at producing healthy, happy, and free gay and lesbian multipliers of the

divine harvesting. The obstacle is, in a single word: fascination. And the cure is, in a single word: indifference.

In order to try and explain what I mean, I would like to go back to a very fundamental piece of Catholic ecclesiology, which is the thesis that Jesus founded the Church. What I would like to do is to defend this thesis in a rather strong form by recovering some hints of what Jesus seems to have thought he was doing. Far from this being an exercise in triumphalism, it is an exercise in showing that Catholic ecclesiology, and thus any understanding of ministry, is an understanding of how a new and potentially universal “we” comes into being which is always held in self-critical movement between the twin poles of the notion of Temple and that of Shepherd.

Let me explain with some background. What I would like to suggest to you is that Judaism and Christianity are both religions of the collapsing Temple. I mean this in the obvious sense that it was the collapse of the Temple in 587 which led to the creation of text-based Judaism, and the collapse of the Temple in AD 70 which led to the creation of Rabbinic Judaism. But also in a less obvious sense, which is that in both cases the collapse was seen not merely as a fact of history to be dealt with regretfully, but actually as part of the way in which God tries to get through to us, as part of God’s plan to get us beyond something unworthy of us. This strange, properly Jewish prophetic relationship with the collapsing Temple can be seen in the texts of the apostolic witness to the resurrection, which we call the New Testament, both in the mouth of Jesus’ accusers and in Jesus’ own words and action. First, let us step back a bit.

In Ezekiel Chapter 33, a fugitive comes from Jerusalem to the group of exiles by the river Chebar in the land of the Chaldaeans. He announces the fall of the city, not even bothering to mention the destruction of the Temple. This is not news to Ezekiel, who had already seen God in a vision detaching himself from the Temple and becoming flexible and mobile. It is after this that Ezekiel starts with his prophecy against the shepherds of Israel. You all know the passage:

Ho, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? <sup>3</sup> You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the crippled you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. <sup>5</sup> So

they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and they became food for all the wild beasts<sup>1</sup>.

Now please notice this, the prophecy is *not* that because these shepherds have failed to feed the sheep, the Temple is going to be destroyed, and the flock of Judah carried off to Babylon. It's a bit late for that. No, this bit of the prophecy is simply the preamble to the real prophecy, it's the criticism of what is past in the light of what the prophet sees as already coming into being, a quite new sort of shepherding, one instigated by God himself.

What the prophet sees as coming into being is something quite new:

Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. <sup>13</sup> And I will bring them out from the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the fountains, and in all the inhabited places of the country. <sup>14</sup> I will feed them with good pasture, and upon the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on fat pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup> I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over; I will feed them in justice<sup>2</sup>.

It is this which is the real novelty, and it is in light of what Ezekiel sees as coming to happen in the future in terms of God himself coming to tend his sheep that the earlier critique was possible. And in Ezekiel's vision this leads eventually to a new and pure Temple in which God plants the soles of his feet so as to dwell in the midst of his people for ever<sup>3</sup>.

Now the interesting thing about this process in the life of Ezekiel is that until he had been able to develop an extraordinary indifference to the Temple and all that went on in it and around it, an indifference marked by his vision of the Lord gradually detaching himself from the Temple and then abandoning it all together, he had not been able to receive the vision of the Lord shepherding his people himself. In other words, the obsession with the presence of the Lord in the temple, criticised by Jeremiah as

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<sup>1</sup> Ezekiel 34, 2-5

<sup>2</sup> Ezekiel 34, 11-16

<sup>3</sup> Ezekiel 43, 7

well<sup>4</sup>, had to be worked through completely, and lost, before a new vision of what the Temple was really supposed to be about could be imagined, and thus worked towards. To put this in another way: the notion of “Shepherd” is always to be understood not just as a nice image among other nice images, but only makes sense *in critical juxtaposition to the notion of “Temple”*.

I put it to you that what Ezekiel was doing was working through a fascination until he was able to achieve a certain sort of indifference. I want to be clear here about how I am using the word indifference. There is a way of using the word indifference which suggests a somewhat petulant gesture of disregard: “You leave me cold”, said with a flick of the wrist. Indifference can suggest haughtiness, being “above” something. But I would like to ask you to consider it in a much stricter sense, one with which some of you may be familiar from St Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises. This is the sense in which something ceases to push any of your buttons either positively or negatively. You are neither repelled by something, nor attracted to it, it is just there, and whether it stays or goes is something which doesn’t matter. And the reason this is so is because your heart is pointing somewhere else, and whatever happens or doesn’t happen to this thing, you will in any case have your centre of gravity pulling you in quite a different direction, one which is in no way reactive, but creative of something else.

In this sense, indifference is at least as much a correction of love as it is a correction of hate. And that I think was the case with Ezekiel and the Temple. It was Ezekiel’s love for what was being lost, his attachment to something deeply ambiguous, at least as much as his fury at those who were involved in its desecration, which needed to be healed and ordered before he was able to share in the heart of God to see what God wanted to do, and what the real purpose of God’s love for his people was.

Now I put it to you that one of the most remarkable, and least remarked on, features of Jesus’ acting out, teaching and ministry, several centuries later and in a land marked by a new Temple, is his quite extraordinary indifference towards the Temple. He does not appear in any way fascinated by it. Neither attracted by it nor repelled by it, it seems to have had no emotional weight for him at all. So entirely free from fascination by it was he that he was able to act out the prophetic gesture of the cleansing of the Temple thus making present an understanding of Jeremiah 7 and, more importantly of Zechariah 14, where there are no

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<sup>4</sup> Jeremiah 7,4

longer any traders in the house of the Lord “on that day”. He was able both to teach in the Temple and to disregard it. He quite specifically taught his disciples to regard the Temple with sublime indifference, to be deeply unconcerned about whether it stood or fell, and certainly to attribute absolutely no divine significance to its standing or its falling<sup>5</sup>. I wonder whether when he watched the widow putting her mite into the Temple treasury and commented on her generosity, his comment wasn’t also tinged with a sense of sorrow at her wasting what little she had on something which was on its way to redundancy.

And I think it is worth stopping to consider how very odd an attitude to the Temple this is. It has in fact been just about possible to tell the story of Jesus without reference to the Temple as anything other than a building which happened to be there. We don’t take seriously the accusation that Jesus sought to destroy the Temple and indeed, we often read the New Testament as though the Temple were merely part of the background. But this is very odd if we consider that for those who lived in Jerusalem the Temple must have dominated everything. Not merely because of its size, or the economic importance of the market in sacrificial beasts which it spawned, or indeed because of the smell resulting from blood and carcasses.

More important than that, the Temple was the centre of mimetic fascination. What do I mean by that? Well, I mean that it constituted the centre of a pattern of desire which drew people in and gave them a sense of belonging which fused together learning, divinity, national identity, career, money, reputation and so on. It must indeed have been fascinating. It can easily have become an obsession to watch what was going on, who was in, who was out; which one of the crooked placemen who ran the joint was in which faction, which faction was coming out on top, what this meant for the future of the people, and so on.

Now I put it to you that to have been indifferent to all this in the sense which I have ascribed to Jesus, is something very remarkable. Yet that seems to me to have been the case. In Mark’s Gospel Jesus comes in to Jerusalem in Chapter 11, and then in verse 11, it says:

And he entered Jerusalem and went into the Temple; and when he had looked round at everything, as it was already late, he went out to Bethany with the twelve

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 13 and parallels

That is all, no special visitation. Just looked around and left. And the next day his cursing of the fig tree seems to suggest, and was certainly taken by the apostolic group to suggest, that his action of the cleansing in the Temple was to be interpreted as declaring the Temple to be henceforth null and void. Zechariah's "In that day" had come. In response to Peter's pointing out the blighted fig tree the next day, that is to say, the day after "In that day", Jesus doesn't appear to answer straight, but gives an answer about prayer which presupposes no longer regarding the Temple as a place of prayer (it had after all been made into a den of thieves, as he had pointed out), but praying "whenever". Indeed Jesus' line about "whoever says to this mountain "Be taken up and cast into the sea"" makes much more sense in this context if the "this mountain" in question is not any old mountain ambling by on its way to the sea, but *the* mount on which the Temple was built.

Now if all this works by resonance and subtlety in Mark, John spells it all out rather more clearly. He states quite straightforwardly, in the context of the cleansing of the Temple, that Jesus has come to replace it<sup>6</sup>. That Jesus regarded his programme as one of creating a new Temple in his body. It is why in John's Gospel Jesus is crucified at the time the lambs are being slaughtered for the Passover in the Temple. He is the Temple, just as he is the Lamb, just as he is the Priest. What he also is very directly in John (as by allusion in the synoptic Gospels), and this is what I would like to bring out here, is the Good Shepherd who is feeding the sheep<sup>7</sup>. That is to say he sees himself as fulfilling the passage from Ezekiel which I quoted to you earlier. He is the "I myself will search out my sheep" and he is Shepherd not merely by teaching disregard for the Temple, but by himself becoming the Temple, by himself being the sacrifice which brings to an end the cult of the Temple *as centre of mimetic fascination*.

Notoriously, when in the synoptic Gospels Jesus inaugurates the Last Supper, he is doing something very remarkable as a way of interpreting his own forthcoming death. He is inaugurating a new cult in his body which goes the reverse route of the sacrificial process. Where the movement in all religions seems to have gone from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice to lesser forms of sacrifice, Jesus traverses exactly the reverse route. He substitutes a human being at the centre of the cult to be the lamb, and makes the cult unnecessary by showing what it is that we do when we sacrifice, that is, we hide over murder. And he does this so

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<sup>6</sup> John 2, 13-22

<sup>7</sup> John 10 but see also Mat 9,36; 10,6; Mk 6,34; etc

that we never need to sacrifice again. What we do instead is to celebrate the being-set-free from sacrifice by repeating with gratitude the way Jesus chose to make his self-giving apparent, which is simultaneously not a sacrifice at all, in the world-religions sense of the word, and the one true sacrifice, since it blows apart the world of sacrifice.

From now on the Temple is wherever ordinary human beings are engaged together in prayer, in treating each other in a way which builds up, and wherever they are together undoing the world of violent sacrifice.

Now what I want to bring out here, and have done so far too sketchily, is something which I think to be of very great importance for those of us who are working at imagining a ministry for gay and lesbian people, or indeed exercising ministry as gay and lesbian people. The Church is founded in a certain sort of deliberate creating of an unimagined new Temple by someone whose imagination was free to create this radically new understanding of a shepherding of God's people. And his imagination was free because it was absolutely untouched by, unshaded by, uninfected by, fascination with the sacred mimetic centre which seemed to so many of his contemporaries to be so redolent of the mystery of God's presence. And as with any such centre of mimetic fascination, it was simultaneously something which drew people in and repelled them. Jesus was entirely free of that. Free to let the Temple be, to declare it desolate, and instead to lead people into something which was perfectly compatible with Temple worship while the Temple was around, but in whose light Temple worship was of fading importance, so that when there was no longer a Temple there, there was no need to reinvent it, since "the newer rite is here".

What I want to emphasize is quite what a remarkable, and apparently secularizing move this is, this relocation of the Temple onto Jesus' own body, the replacement of Temple sacrifice with a single human "sacrifice" to be re-presented continuously as a way of inhabiting the time in which the sacred is in perpetual collapse. And quite how deliberate this move of Jesus seems to have been<sup>8</sup>.

Well, does it need me to spell out the point? I think we find ourselves inhabiting just the dynamic which Jesus inaugurated, calmly and deliberately, of living in sight of the collapsing Temple while acting with deep indifference to it as he went about the shepherding of his sheep whom the false shepherds and hirelings had abandoned.

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<sup>8</sup> John 10, 17-18

Now: how we understand what Jesus is doing here is, I think of vital importance for fundamental ecclesiology, and therefore for the root understanding of any of our ministries. If we see Jesus as in some way “dissing” the Temple establishment and the Temple and setting up a different sort of Temple, one based on his body, as some sort of protest gesture, then we are describing a reactive Jesus who is in some way moved by the Temple establishment and the Temple, someone for whom those things have power. And it means that there is something rebellious in what he is doing, something of a shaking of a fist at a wicked other. And of course we will do likewise. Which means that whenever we find ourselves faced with some Temple-equivalent in our Christian lives, then we will see the task as being to set up a rival altar which is “right” and not weighed down by those awful shepherds who have abandoned their sheep and feed only themselves.

I rather think that Jesus understood perfectly well that to set up a rival altar is merely to re-create a new centre of mimetic fascination which is still tied in to the old centre of mimetic fascination as something in rivalry to it. So what Jesus is setting up is not a new centre of mimetic fascination, but something of no fixed place at all, something which looks like the ongoing undoing of our fascination with a sacred other and thus our becoming free to imagine how we might feed sheep.

In other words the “New Temple” is not a “Temple” at all. It is the constant undoing of the human tendency to get sucked in to centres of mimetic fascination, thus having our intellects and imaginations dulled, and the constant opening up of our intellects and imaginations towards the engaging in a new form of shepherding, leading people away from being trapped in sacred structures and forms of behaviour run by stumbling blocks. And this is what Church is.

Let me try and spell this out for us as gay and lesbian people becoming involved in ministry, responding to Our Lord’s commanding invitation: “Feed my Sheep”. If we are to be truly faithful to Our Lord’s founding of the divine shepherding, which is the Church, then one of the things we must let go of is our own tendency to attribute qualities of “Temple establishment” to our own churches. It is not what they say they are, or how they act, which are our problem, but *our imagination* of what they say they are and how they act. Because it is not they who are going to circumscribe what we say or do, but our imagination of who they are, and the authority which our imagination gives them over our lives.

This seems to me particularly vital for gay and lesbian people in ministry, but also for anyone in ministry nowadays. Any healthy ecclesiology must consider not only the traditional questions of Church order and so on resulting from Christ's foundation of the Church, but also the structure of desire in the participants with relation to the sort of institutional life which is their current Church order.

Let me try and make this clear. If we have a model of Jesus who is not indifferent to the Temple, but who is in rivalry with it, then we will also see the Pope and the Vatican, if we are Catholic, or whatever the equivalent is in our denomination, as occupying the place of Annas, Caiaphas and so on, and we will attribute to them a power, and an authority and a coerciveness which we can resent, and our imaginations can work full time in thinking about how awful they are and how heroic we are in standing up against them. In fact we will not have left the Temple at all, to take part in Christ's shepherding, but will still be utterly locked in to the centre of mimetic fascination, with its draw and its repulsion, and our sense of being good and bad will be utterly dependent on it.

And here I would like to make a point which is easy to make as a Catholic, but I hope that you will find ways of translating it into your own denominational understanding. The point of the Pope and the Vatican is not that it is the Temple, but that it is Peter. And the whole point of Peter is that he is not something splendid and heroic and imposing, but something weak and unheroic and vacillating. That is to say, just the sort of person with whom we cannot maintain real communion unless we learn to like him without paying too much attention to whatever bit of braggadocio he and his groupies have come up with. And we learn to like him not because he's nice or good, but because God has chosen to make God's strength and salvation available to those who are able not to mind being in the company of the unheroic, the vacillating, the weak. And of course it is the unheroic, the vacillating, and the weak who behave like bullies, and the stronger we are, the more adult we are, then the happier we are just to let them be and not behave in reaction to them.

In other words, if we read Peter as the Temple, and allow ourselves to get all sucked in to sacred rivalry with him, then we will never grow up, but will always be self-indulgent children needing a love/hate-figure. If on the other hand, we learn to see the Pope as Peter, a fumbling figure trying to work out what to do as the Temple keeps on collapsing around him, rather as we ourselves are trying to do, and not let our over-charged imagination of him "get to us" then there's a chance that we'll start to be

able to see that our developing a ministry doesn't depend on him or his approval at all! We don't need the Temple's authority to develop a shepherding. On the contrary, receiving Christ's heart for his sheep means receiving an authority to develop a shepherding in the midst of the collapse of the Temple. We can trust that if a ministry is from God, it will eventually be found to be in harmony with the universal *ecclesia* which is emerging as those called out of darkness together to share in God's unimaginable light<sup>9</sup>.

Now, what I would like to suggest is that Our Lord's instruction "Feed my Sheep" will always and inevitably be given to us within a dynamic of learning to look away from the Temple, and developing a heart for the sheep. Which means that it will always be lived by us within the process of learning a certain sort of indifference to "Church-as-Temple" and of learning a growing sense of affection for what I would call "Shepherding with Peter", whoever your Peter is.

It is from within this process that we will find ourselves actually able to imagine something new for the Sheep whom we have been told to feed. It will be new because our imaginations will not in fact be locked into producing something in reaction to what we think of as "Temple", and will begin to be being opened out to having a heart for the sheep. And that is what this is all about. I would contend that we know of no heart-for-the-sheep, and can receive no heart-for-the-sheep that does not also come into being through our undergoing the process of de-toxifying our patterns of desire with relation to the "old sacred" and its imagined institutional structures.

If you want to see what I mean, then try this thought experiment for yourselves. And, if you need to, please translate this thought experiment out of Catholic language and into the terms of reference of your own denomination. Just imagine that the Holy Father were to die, something which will happen sometime, one supposes, (rather against the evidence). That all the Cardinals get together to elect his successor, and that during the conclave there is a virulent outbreak of influenza in Rome which kills off all the Cardinals, and all the Vatican employees and a whole lot of others as well. Suddenly they aren't there.

What would this mean? How would you deal with it? Would you be able to imagine yourself reacting as though this incident had no religious significance at all as regards the continuation of the Christian Church? Or

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<sup>9</sup> cf 1 Peter 2,9

would you be plunged either into deep mourning or hysterical rejoicing, or a strange mixture of both? If the latter is the case, then of course you are seriously tied in to the Temple. If the former is the case, then it is because you are already imagining what it is up to you to be doing in order to feed God's sheep, and you knew perfectly well before this influenza epidemic that ever since Jesus' death there is no longer a sacred centre, no longer an approving regard of a sacred establishment which you need in order to feel OK about what you are doing.

It is a good thing to do to conduct the experiment of imagining that there is no mimetic centre of fascination any longer, and therefore that shepherding is up to you. If only because as we start to imagine that, we may realise how utterly dependent we are on approval from the other, on being told that I am OK, on feeling that I have a career path, and so on. And then we may get to realise that "Feed my sheep" is something that can only be done in the midst of the collapse of all that, of all the way I have allowed my imagination to be tied in to something.

Then, as you start to realise that it is all up to you, that Rome, the Cardinals, the Pope, the Vatican, the Bishops and so on, are dead to you, you might find yourself able to begin to re-imagine them not as a sacred burden of approval or disapproval weighing down on you, but as brothers on the same level as you, making available a gift to you, more or less incompetently to be sure, as you are seeking to make available a gift to others.

Now please notice something about this word "gift". We can hear it as another disguised form of burden. But supposing that the other which is Church is other to us not as "sacred temple" but as gift, then that of course means that we can take from it what we perceive to be good<sup>10</sup>, and receive what we need to receive, and sometimes just be grateful for the offer, but take a raincheck. But we can also be aware that such and such a thing is not helpful, and yet not get annoyed with those who try to give it a little too insistently – that insistent giving is their problem not ours. It means that if we disagree with something, then what we are doing is ... disagreeing! Which is what adults do, helpfully, within a project for which they share responsibility. This is not dissenting, which is what subordinates do within a project where the responsibility is always with the higher-ups. And there are as we know, but rarely remember, no subordinates in the Shepherding, "For you are all siblings"<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> "test all things and hold fast to what is good" 1 Thess 5,21

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 23,8

This seems to me to be very important for us now, as we begin to find ourselves free to imagine what it is that we would like to do for our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters, what forms of shepherding we would like to invent for them, how we are to receive the heart of Christ for them in concrete practical forms, aware that it depends on us, and that it is a kind of crazy joy to be free to create such things. In order for us to be free to be bold and creative, I think we need to learn how to re-imagine Church as “gift of shepherding along with Peter in the midst of the collapsing Temple”, and not “coercive Temple whose approval we are condemned to seek, and whose impositions we are condemned to resent”.

Resentment is a pattern of desire such that someone is much more occupied with the obstacle to their project than with the project itself. The sign of grace is when someone finds that that their desire has been reformed, so that what had seemed like an obstacle becomes relatively indifferent, and they are ever freer to open up a new and creative project. The difference is that between the pattern of desire which creates suicide bombers and that which creates ministers of the Gospel.

So I ask you to share in my prayer, that “The mountain be cast into the depths of the sea”, the fear be lifted from all our hearts and that we may develop the daring, viscerally-moved, shepherdly heart of love along with the creative projects such a heart will enflame as we follow Our Lord outside the camp<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Heb 13,13