

The unexpected shape of forgiveness

(Contribution to the Syndicate Symposium on Martel's book

In the Closet of the Vatican curated by Sean Larsen)

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In his book *The Cassowary's Revenge: The Life and Death of Masculinity in a New Guinea Society*, the late Social Anthropologist Donald Tuzin describes what he found on his second visit to Ilahita, a New Guinea village, over a dozen years after his first, made in 1972. The males of the village had recently and suddenly renounced their secret cult, or "Tambaran", and along with that, their "men's house" from which the cult had emanated. By means of the cult and the house they had dominated the women of the village for generations. Indeed such houses have been prominent features of many Melanesian societies prior to western influence. It will come as no surprise to friends of mine that the mythology which the males handed on, centring around the Cassowary (a large and potentially dangerous flightless bird), seems to have been made to measure for a Girardian reading. But that is not my concern here. It is Tuzin's description of the various factors which had impinged on Ilahita life between his 1972 visit and the collapse of the cult which are fascinating: the presence of different forms of western life including, but not limited to, evangelical missionaries. The voluntary self-destruction of the men's house was one of the most visible symptoms of the complete collapse in the meaning of masculinity among the inhabitants, and the concomitant need for all of them to renegotiate all the dimensions of the meaning of being women and men. I once met one of the tribal men who experienced all this as a youth. He had, since the time of the collapse of "Tambaran" become an openly gay Qantas air steward. In less than forty years, he had thus lived through the identity changes which the last six thousand years or so have wrought among the rest of us.

This image, of the contemporary collapse of a stone age tribal men's house, was what came to my mind in the week of the launch of Frédéric Martel's book. The Western world's principal structurally visible remnant of the archaic sacrificial is in full collapse: the "men's house" that is the clerical structure of the Catholic Church, is fast becoming transparent. And with its transparency, all mystique is lost, and its intellectual stanchions - its bastardized scholastic "Tambaran" - revealed to be of astonishing poverty, and not really believed in, let alone practised, by the majority of those who dwell in it. Just to remind you: in the week of the launch, the Nuncio to France was first reported as being "handsy" with young male employees of the Paris mayoralty, and it quickly became clear that this was well known habitual behaviour on his part. Then the Holy Father openly discussed the emerging reports from different countries of

women religious being sexually abused by priests. Next the details of how Vatican Offices are to deal with the wives and children of priests became public.

Then came the Martel book, but within days it lost immediacy in the English language press as the Pell verdict was made public, and that vocal bulwark of the “men’s house” was led to prison. Days later, the book’s challenger in the French press was the surprise verdict against Barbarin, and its token award against him of 1€ per plaintiff. And so it has gone on, on an almost daily basis since then. Wojtyła’s catastrophically poor judgment was shown not only in his personal choice of henchmen and sycophants (note to Weigel: great men want nothing to do with those who call them great and are happy to be surrounded by those who disagree with them), but also in his prohibiting discussion of so many issues. This had the effect of impairing the median intelligence of those needed to navigate change. Those prohibitions stand revealed as the last fantasy-fuelled gasp of something that is now in visible and irremediable collapse. Thank God.

One can, and some do, read Martel’s book as an accusation against the world of systemic mendacity which it reveals. For my part, I read it as one of the events which signal that God’s forgiveness is at last reaching even the hardest-hearted parts of our Church. At the 2000 Jubilee Wojtyła apologised, and asked for forgiveness, for some of the sins committed by the Church over the previous half-millennium. Yet he expressed his bitterness at the gay pride march held in Rome that year. At the time many people asked: “Why doesn’t the Church apologise to gay and lesbian people?” My response at the time was: “The Church can’t apologise yet, since it has not yet been forgiven”. Now, with some of the antics of the then Secretary of State, Sodano, the then papal secretary, Dziwisz, the then Family Czar López Trujillo, and others coming into the light, we can see how true that was. The faces of flint, the elegance of cover-up, the sense of impunity, and the harshness of teaching: all these are cosmetic to the double lives of the unforgiven. For that is who you become while acting to kill your own soul, even as you gain the world. You become unable to apologise for the fake goodness to which your brokenness has addicted you.

At the time I gave that response - that the Church couldn’t yet apologise, since it hadn’t yet been forgiven - I did begin to wonder what on earth it would look like for it, indeed, to be forgiven. Inspired by a Sunday where the Gospel was “if any of you have faith and say to this mountain: be thrown into the sea...”, I started to pray that the clerical closet be thrown into the sea, and all of us released from its fear. I also prayed for forgiveness for this clerical world of which I am a member; and I did myself forgive those of its members who had treated me as a threat and an enemy, as I hope that those who have been pained by my own arrogance, and the univocal nature of my attempts to face up to all this, can forgive me. But I can’t say I had any clear idea of what shape that

forgiveness for us all would take. Not, I rather think, one of those kitsch penitential services in which senior clergy in their glad rags prostrate themselves upon the floor having previously concocted a perfectly harmless list of things they are apologizing for. The same clerics then pronounce themselves forgiven by God, without ever running the risk of giving protagonism to the fellow humans who might minister forgiveness to them - those against whom we have sinned.

No, what it looks like to be forgiven is: broken-heartedness. You do not apologise so as to be forgiven. Forgiveness reaches you as broken-ness of heart (contrition from *cor triturare*), and it is as broken-ness of heart reaches you that you can apologise - put into words what has been going on; recognise your sameness with your sisters and brothers; become equal-hearted with them. God's mercy is what creates equal-heartedness amongst us, because that is what God's mercy means: that God loves us as Godself.

This is what has been my experience on reading Martel's book. And on noting such responses as I have been able to observe. Cardinal Salazar in Bogotá made the frankly absurd claim that Martel's revelations about López Trujillo were an "absolute calumny", claiming, without any sense of irony, that López Trujillo was "if anything too radical in his positions against homosexuality". However, at the same time, a young priest in Colombia wrote to tell me that, shocked by what he had read about Lopez Trujillo, which was absolutely new to him, he had confronted the Bishop of his diocese and another official, both of whom had spent time in Medellín as priests while López Trujillo was Archbishop. Both of them confirmed to him, timidly, that it was all true, and that they had known about it at the time. Hints of penitence begin to appear.

There have been some strangely allergic reactions to what has been revealed by journalists whose *modus vivendi* with the reality described (and about which many of them had considerable knowledge) has clearly been shaken. And yet, I'm very glad to say there has been no official pushback, or attempt to deny, by Vatican high ups, as far as I can tell. Hans Zollner, a leading figure in the fight against clerical cover up of child abuse gave what I surmise to be the most appropriate answer when asked in Madrid about the wave of revelations concerning homosexuality. He denied both that homosexuality leads to abuse, and also "that the media is seeking to destroy the Church with this theme". Because journalists are just doing their duty. "They don't invent the scandals, it's we who create them". It is this, as far as I can tell, that seems to be Francis' policy amidst the upsurge of new awarenesses which are forming us: let it all come out. Let us spend time in shame, with all the different sorts of false sacred exposed as what they are. Let us not rush to hide our shame by being seen to be "doing something", which will merely be decorative. Something in which we

will still be operating out of the old clerical software. Let us instead allow ourselves to know as we are known.

I think this is the right response. And I can see why it is so infuriating to those for whom cosmetic change accompanied by the maintenance of doctrine as it is, is so important. For Francis' response tacitly recognises that in a whole series of areas, the doctrine, the discipline, and the practice of the Church *all together* and in practical terms *inseparably* are part of a false sacred which is in collapse. Forgiveness looks like the coming to life of a living heart amidst the fragile remains of an idolatry that had, at one time, seemed so strong as to be invulnerable. It is not only the "men's house" that collapses but the whole "Tambaran", the sacred ideology that had served as its specious justification. And this collapse of idolatry happens relationally. It is to do with people within "Tambaran" quite suddenly finding themselves looking at themselves through the eyes of those who are like them, and finding themselves uncovered, unable any longer to believe in their own self-justifications. Only those who are able to trust in something bigger than the "Tambaran" are able to navigate these waters. And for what are we given a successor to Peter if not for this?

Consider the knock-on effect of just one element of this relational visibility. In the world outside the clerical structure it is not merely the case that there are gay and lesbian people who have active sex lives and are open about their marital or partnership status. It is also the case that a not inconsiderable number of such people, in many countries, have come to be considered quite highly among their straight peers and compatriots because of their honesty and trustworthiness. It is not accidental that among the most trusted voices across politically divergent US news broadcasters are Anderson Cooper, Shep Smith, Rachel Maddow and Don Lemon. Even those opposed to them on ideological grounds no longer attack them on the basis of their sexual orientation, because they know that those who have gone through the hard work and risks of becoming comfortable with public knowledge of their minority orientation are perceived as highly trustworthy. The same phenomenon is visible in the basic trustworthiness that is perceived in the Buttigieg Presidential candidacy, and the Varadkar and the Bettel premierships of their respective countries. Those who are trustworthy in small matters, such as sexual orientation, come to be trusted in greater matters. Meanwhile, an institution for whose survival trustworthiness and witness is all, and which has a never-ending supply of potential gay truth-tellers, has literally no publicly authorised gay figure who is able to speak truthfully in the first person. Why should anyone trust on great matters those who are manifestly unable to be trusted on small ones? How not to live in shame as we face this!

It is through this mutual visibility that comes the recognition that we've been silly. That we've been playing games. That we are ashamed of who we are and

what we've been doing. It is as if we've been caught by an adult glance that we thought we were evading, but which has suddenly shown up. And now that is there, we no longer know who we are or how we should be. Nowhere is this clearer than in portentous defences, trying even to implicate God, of the boy's club rules governing our clerical sexism. For the adult view is revealed to be as female as it is male. All of those portentous defences are finally better described as "silly" than by any more grandiose or opprobrious word.

This for me, then was the surprise of Martel's book. It led me through the recent homosexual history of the senior authorities of my Church. But in doing so, it led me through the history of my adult life. Both as regards the places I've lived in, and the people I've met, or heard about. But much more mercifully than I could have expected. In Martel's pages, I was shown, as in a mirror, every form of emotional and erotic contortion I've lived over those years. There was scarce a one that has not been some part of my life - some part of a failure to grow up. Only the highly-monied and drug-fuelled aspects of clerical homosexuality having been quite beyond me. But in Martel's pages, I saw myself in my cohort, my classmates, those of us who have been part of this story over the last fifty years. And I know that in no longer having to pretend that all that Martel shows is not the case, in standing revealed as silly, in having been shown up as playing harmful games that demeaned others and myself, forgiveness is coming upon me, slowly but surely, and it is coming upon all my confrères.

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Madrid, April 2019