

# ***Clericalism and the Violent Sacred:*** *dipping a Girardian toe in troubled waters.*

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## ***Introduction***

“Clericalism” is not a “thing” that can be undone with a single silver bullet. It is a combination over time of a number of different things which have together metastasized into what now seems like an excrescence on the face of Christianity. The metastasis, for which “clericalism” is as convenient a name as any, maintains itself as something sacred. That is to say, it has become an apparently necessary form of the group’s fake self-transcendence, a form of idolatry. Like all forms of idolatry, it damages not only social relationships between people, but also their capacity to imagine. Since it is not a simple incubus, capable of being removed by exorcism, I propose looking at each one of a number of the strands of the metastasis so that we can welcome in something new rather than simply extirpating the old and leaving space for seven worse demons to arrive. For the purposes of this conference I’m attempting what in a business group would be called “blue-sky thinking”. Here I am calling it “Open heaven thinking” (following St Stephen and St John) aiming at a bestirring of the imagination in an attempt to work through, and beyond, our idolatry in this sphere. Nothing I say here has the pretension of being other than material to promote discussion, and I am probably wrong in a whole series of things that I say. I merely hope that the wrongness be of the sort that encourages mutual build-up rather than mutual down-tearing.

## ***1. The sacred and the holy***

One of René Girard’s key insights has yet to make its way into popular understanding. This is the insight at which he arrived while writing ***Violence and the Sacred***: that violence is the secret heart and soul of the sacred - or in other words that anything that is sacred contains violence. And, furthermore, that this is not an entirely bad thing. For the sacred contains violence in two senses: it is structured by and bears violence on the one hand, and it restrains and holds back violence on the other.

Here is the classic illustration of this: the contagious all-against-all of a frenzied crowd turns, for no apparent reason, into an all-against-one. Now the group finds itself in awed and unanimous peace before the cadaver of their victim. The givenness of this sudden harmony depends entirely on the cast-out-one, misconstrued as having had the key causative role in both the frenzy and the peace. The ritual repetition of this expulsive solution to the threat of further outbreaks of contagious rivalry among the group (sometimes called a sacrifice) is sacred in the sense that it is violent; and in the sense that by its carefully directed violence, it holds back the far greater violence threatening to morph into a frenzied all-against-all, the terrifying murmur of the *turba*.

Given this insight, it became necessary for Girard, as he explored the Jewish and Christian revelatory texts, to attempt to describe something that seems to share the structure of the violent sacred but is pretty much indescribable within its terms. His favourite example is the incommensurability of the term “sacrifice” when it is used with relation to the two indistinguishable prostitute mothers whose one remaining child is threatened with partition

by Solomon's sword. One agrees to the sacrifice of the child so that both women be equal, while the other agrees to sacrifice her claim to the child so that it may live. How can the one word "sacrifice" be used to describe two such different acts, and yet, what other word do we have with which to elucidate such a fraught space? By the end of his career, in *Battling to the End* Girard was happy to use the distinction between the sacred, which contains violence, and the holy, which is entirely without violence. A distinction also made by Emmanuel Lévinas.

I bring this up because this is not, at least not yet, a distinction which is firm in common speech. People, whether clerical or lay, religious or a-religious often use the words "sacred" and "holy" indiscriminately, as though there were no distinct anthropological heft available in the use of this or that word, in this or that case. I cannot claim they are wrong to do so, privileged as I am to be a native speaker of a language in which usage wins out against definition. However I would like to make the case for the usefulness of the distinction when it comes to theological analysis, and straightforwardly so when it comes to the discussion of clericalism to which we have been invited.

I will start with an example of the distinction already at work in Scripture. In St John's Gospel, with the terrifying murmur of the *turba* not far off, the worried come together:

So, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered the council, and said, "What are we to do? For this man performs many signs. If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe in him, and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation." But one of them, Caiaphas, who was high priest that year, said to them, "You know nothing at all; you do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish."

It is rather to the credit of the chief priests and the Pharisees that they do not come to Caiaphas' point of view by themselves. They are unsure of what is holy in the mix of things that are going on - signs are being performed which might indeed be holy, and the threat to colonial order might be an answer to genuine prayer and piously to be wished for, but of course all of this would inevitably invite a backlash from the colonial power. Caiaphas however is decisive (a word which itself comes from *decidere*, a form of cutting to delineate a difference) and goes straight to the nub of the violent sacred: that it is better that the all-against-all be resolved at the expense of one, than that it continue without resolution until all destroy themselves.

While the candour and clarity of Caiaphas' recourse to the violent sacred is remarkable, it is as nothing compared to the verses which follow, and which usually receive less comments:

He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that ἔμελλεν Ἰησοῦς ἀποθνήσκειν for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad.

I leave the central words in Greek since translators vary. As far as I can tell a good paraphrase is that Caiaphas prophesied that "Jesus was going - intentionally - to die for the nation in the

<sup>1</sup> 1 Kings 3, 16-28

<sup>2</sup> Jn. 11:47-50 RSV

<sup>3</sup> Jn. 11:51-52 RSV (with elements of the translation peeled back)

near future". In other words, Caiaphas was being prophetic *despite himself*: speaking, indeed, on behalf of the Most High, but in a sense that he could not possibly have understood. What I sometimes call the "Caiaphatic" and the "Melchizedek" understanding of priesthood here rub up together perfectly: the "sacred" demands that someone be put in the place of the necessary cast-out-one so as to maintain order; while the "holy" is someone voluntarily giving themselves over into occupying that same space so as to undo the necessity of it ever being occupied again. The result of this latter is that the "nation" will no longer be over-against other "nations". It will include all those out of every nation who learn to live together from this self-giving victim rather than constantly re-creating fake unity by casting out others. The Caiaphatic and the Melchizedek both point to something structurally identical, but with absolutely incommensurate meaning and consequence in each case.

I bring this out since this is one of the areas where Girard does not so much give us a richer reading of Scripture, as bring out something at which the Evangelist had arrived long before he and which is a generous heuristic tool for us to use in our reception of revelation. I hope that when we come to considering different elements of the "traditional" understandings of how our Church is ordered, we are able to ask whether such and such a practice is genuinely holy: coming from and moving towards freedom, with a certain lack of self-concern about any "sacrifice" involved, or whether it comes from a sacred necessity, imposing sacrifice on others.

## ***2. The shape of Christian revelation is fundamentally priestly***

Following on from this, I want to move in the reverse direction from those whose discussion of clericalism sees us heading towards a priestless Church. There is a strand of secularism whose focus is on identifying different forms of the sacred, which it quite rightly understands to be violent, and then seeks to abolish. The trouble is that the sacred violent forms then re-appear in different drag, but with very little change as to their working: the priesthood of yesteryear becomes the "productivity based" educational administration of today, or whatever. However, the Christian way of bringing into being the secular (the Christian *inventio* of the secular) takes a *priestly* form, since it understands that it is only really by subverting the archaic sacred from within, thus defanging its violence, that a relatively stable secular can be produced: that we can be led to an enjoyment of Creation untrammelled by gods. Hence the way in which the Melchizedek priesthood somewhat archaically transforms the place that the apparently "secular" Caiaphas was pointing towards.

First, then, it is worth remembering that the whole Christian "thing" is inscribed within, and transforms, a priestly imaginary. The doctrine of Creation is a priestly doctrine. The understanding of Atonement as renewing Creation is a priestly doctrine, as is the forgiveness of sin. The giving himself up to death of God as a human being so as to rescue us from death and its fear works out of the priestly imagination. What Jesus did as both the Real Adam and the Great High Priest was to give us, in his going to death and breathing out his Spirit upon us, the nearest analogy to what it means for God to create that we can receive. The least misleading analogy we have for God creating is: a human giving himself up to death out of love and breathing out his last breath in an act of trust that his life, thus given, will bring into being something loving, but which he does not control. Hence Jesus, in going to his death, was the Creator, as revealed by the Resurrection and the coming of the Spirit. The New Testament authors clearly understand Christian life to be a living on the inside of this reality. When Paul urges his listeners to become his imitators in offering himself up as sacrifice, just

as Paul imitates Christ; or Peter tells his that they are living stones of the long-awaited New Temple: both take for granted that to be in Christ is a fundamentally priestly form of life.

Not for nothing do St Paul, in Philippians (2, 5b-12), and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews (5, 5-10) bring out in parallel the essentially priestly trajectory of self-giving which was the mind of Christ. He did not consider equality with God something to be held back for himself, but emptied himself out, taking on human priestly garb, performing the sacrifice, and at its end receiving, as the Melchizedek High Priest at the end of the Atonement rite, the name that is above every name, no longer YHWH, but now Jesus. Indeed, much of the excitement of Early Christianity seems to have been precisely this: The ancient rites and figures associated with the Holy Place and the Temple, were mere copies, shadows and reflections of the Real Thing which happened in the different frame of time known as “Before the Foundation of the World”, a “before time” symbolically located in the Holy of Holies. The glory of these rites and figures have now been definitively outstripped, and they themselves rendered otiose, by the arrival in our midst and in our time of that very same Real Thing.

It is in this light that I would ask us to remember that the sacrament which all Christians agree to come first - Baptism - is a rite of priestly ordination. The ritual coming up out of the water for the Ancient Hebrew Priests was their ordination, after which they would be able to begin to live as “resurrected ones”, angelic figures able to share in the deathless life of God in the Holy of Holies and Temple worship, and to protect which they would need purification if coming into contact with blood or death. In the same way our Baptism is the rite by which we go down into the water to share Jesus’ death and come up empowered to live the risen life which has already begun in us, with death behind us. That we are then draped with angelic white is only a further part of this priestly symbolism. Every baptised person shares in the priestly life, and participates in the High Priesthood of the one true and definitive High Priest. Because of this there is no veil around the altar in our places of worship, because we are *all already symbolically in the Holy Place*. The “Holy, Holy, Holy” which Isaiah first heard the Seraphs sing in the Holy Place in the year King Uzziah died<sup>4</sup>, *we all sing with all the choruses of angels and saints* because we are the High Priest.

As I understand it (and I beg correction from genuine liturgical experts) whereas in the Temple cult the sacrificial portions were reserved for the priests, while the blood was sprinkled both over significant building parts and people, when Our Lord gave both portions and cup to those present at the Last Supper he was treating them as priests. Just as priests are we all who receive both the portion and the cup to this day. So, properly speaking it is true to say that there are no lay people in Christianity. And of course this also means that from the outset there has been no distinction of gender in the Great High Priesthood - οὐκ ἔνι ἄρσεν καὶ θῆλυ as St Paul reminds us in Galatians 3, 28<sup>5</sup>, as he deliberately undoes Genesis 1, 27 in a way which our modern binary fundamentalist co-religionists have yet to acknowledge.

Now, in some churches, following the secularizing model, the recognition of the universal priesthood of the baptised has led to getting rid of priestly signs and rites. Those going down that path have effectively diluted the priestly quality of the baptised: if all are priests, then there is no significant holy priestly “difference”. Nevertheless, the “Melchizedek priestly”, being so much the reverse of the Caiaphatic “way of this world” is properly kept alive by

<sup>4</sup> Isaiah 6.

<sup>5</sup> “No longer is there ‘male and female’” - by deliberate contrast with “male and female he created them” - the phrases are identical in the Septuagint.

*sign*. And to that at least the Catholic Church, in our own muddled, and sometimes simply pagan, way, has held fast. For a long time, our elders<sup>6</sup> have assumed that the principal way we live out our elder-hood in public is both by giving order to, and presiding at, the ceremonies in which the Great High Priest makes himself present among his faithful; but also, in as far as possible, by attempting to make sure that our lives are in some way a public sign and witness to the self-giving up unto death.

So, a twofold reality is being lived out, at least in theory. On the one hand, the Great High Priest is day by day acting out publicly “his” (gender-free) giving himself away unto death out of love for humans - that public acting out taking the form of the public social and political life of the baptised as they move charitably to stretch the new creation into including those who “are not” in the order of “this world”. On the other hand a small number of elders receive the laying on of hands which appoints them to perform as sign *in the midst of* the great body of baptised priests, and *towards* them, that which they, the great body, truly are themselves. This is so as to encourage, nourish and build them up for their public and social priestly ministry. Notice please that the laying on of hands at presbyteral ordination does not in any way add to the *priestliness* of the one ordained, for there can be no greater sign of being the Great High Priest than Baptism lived out to its fullest consequences by which we manifest that we have actually become that Priest, free to give ourselves up to death if necessary, because already inhabiting the deathlessness of the life of God. The martyrdom of Franz Jägerstätter was not one whit less priestly than that of Maximilian Kolbe.

So far so good - I hope and trust that I’m here giving no more than a standard Vatican II account of these realities, even if in a slightly different language. But this leaves open the question: if the laying on of hands (along with the other elements of the rite of ordination - marking of hands with oil, handing over the thurible, or of the cup and paten) does not add to the priestliness of the one being ordained, but is properly speaking an inflection of that priestliness so as to create a sign within the sign, what then is the power and effect of this sacrament? And what, if any, are the most appropriately sign-bearing forms of life for the one ordained?

Consider the great outbreak of retro and nineteenth-century dress codes, attitudes of separateness, deliberate obscurantism about emotional and sexual lives, pining for father figures, adherence to strict legalistic and catechetical definitions, all of which have been on the rise amongst our clerical caste since the Wojtyla pontificate. These suggest to me that whatever the power and effect of the sacrament, whatever the *character* it imparts, the sacrament’s hold on a person’s life seems so weak as to tempt us into a desperate grasping-ourselves-into-being by means of all this flummery. For we ordained do not appear to have received the functional identity for which many of us so obviously long. Rather ordination as an “elder” seems to leave us flailing around trying to make up by kitsch and by ideology what we lack as a project of life. But then maybe weakness is the point: maybe giving ourselves away to be a “no one”, who is “under” all, and so in no position to “order” except with the order that is the gift of the cast-out one; maybe that’s how the sign within the sign is supposed to be lived? Maybe the sign is only detectable over time by those non-ordained who are positively affected by it, and not at all by the ordained one themselves? I’m honestly not sure (and I am personally implicated in this at every level). At this point I merely want to bring out how open the question is, and how much room for discussion there is.

<sup>6</sup> We ordained are elders, ordained to the “presbyterate” or elder-hood. Our word “priest” is a development, via German, of “presbyter” and not of the word “hiereus” or “sacerdos” which properly speaking applies in the New Covenant to Christ only, and by participation in him, to all the baptised.

A further point is suggested by this, since we are no longer in a mediaeval world in which it seemed natural that the priestly and the royal power of Christ should be divided between kings and bishops. That arrangement meant that the priesthood and royalty present in all the baptised<sup>7</sup> was effectively sundered in such a way that “lords spiritual” had the “*potestas*” in everything relating to the care of the souls of the baptised, while “lords temporal” had the “*potestas*” over their bodies. In retrospect this ultimately had many a positive effect in the life of the West, for it pitted throne and altar against each other for centuries, thus ultimately delegitimizing both and bringing into being the cultural novelty of “freedom”. However it is clearly absurd in our modern societies with their vastly complex networks of power, bureaucracy, justice, employment, and finance that the baptismal power of all continues to be divided in this rivalistic way. For our priestly structure (our “clerical” world fighting for “its” rights and exemptions as though these were the rights of the “Church”), far too often sets itself up for a nonsensical rivalry in an entirely worldly fashion while preventing the rest of the faithful from discovering an authentic and truthful living out of how to be the genuine ecclesial countersign to the power of this world. Those whose Baptism has been inflected in such a way that they are supposed to be signs *within* the Priestly sign of the Body in fact act, by setting up Episcopal Conferences as lobbying groups, as though they alone are the properly authorised Priestly sign facing down the “Royal” sign of our politicians, most of whom are not Catholic, in order to get those politicians to make laws and create exemptions which allow that particular self-referential faux-priestly caste to determine what is or is not “the Church”.

The result, just to give one example, is the farcical situation in Indianapolis, where the local representative of the body of baptised males known as the US Bishops Conference, a large majority of whom are dishonest homosexuals, is attempting to enforce the lie which structures clerical homosexual duplicity, on educational establishments whose teachers and pupils seem perfectly aware that it is a lie. Apparently, the State of Indiana has not *yet* decided that the best interests of its young people (in being educated into what is true about themselves and others) outweigh the sacred need of dishonest gay men to play games with the future of those young people, alleging “freedom of religion”. But in what strange world does it seem normal that a collection of males, a large majority of whom are dishonest homosexuals, be allowed to decide the educational curriculum of young people in matters to do with their sexual, psychological and marital future health? Or to remove teachers who are able to give good witness to one or other form of how that might be lived out? And how long will honest Christians put up with this?

I wonder, in other words, whether the laying on of hands might also be for other forms of sign-bearing acting out, confirming the well-ordered living out of the much richer set of charismatic gifts to which the New Testament bears witness: teachers, “almsgivers”, healers, administrators and so on. The Order in question would not be the form of hierarchical order which has been assumed since the Middle Ages to be God-given, where the illusory strength of canonical “*potestas*” has come to substitute for the challenge to live the sign in appropriate vulnerability. Rather we may come to enjoy the beginnings of the non-rivalistic ordering of Wisdom-structured excellence in which different gifts turn different people into different dimensions of the sign as they turn those lives into signs of self-giving up to, and not run by, death.

### ***3. Freedom and change***

<sup>7</sup> We are baptised king, priest, and prophet, hence the differing mediaeval “*potestates*”: regnum, sacerdotium and magisterium - ruling, priesting, and teaching.

A further attempt to shift perspective before we actually look at the strands which have metastasized into clericalism: we suffer from a lack of awareness of quite how much freedom we have in dealing with and reimagining the life of the Church. I wish we would spend longer attending to the astonishing verses of St John<sup>8</sup> in which the Creator opens up what is sometimes called the New Creation, but which I think is better referred to as Creation, understanding that as something which is always *ahead* of us, and never simply *behind* us.

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them, "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

So, here in the culminating theophany of Holy Scripture, Jesus, the Lord formerly known as YHWH, appears in the midst of a kind of inverted Temple, where the disciples are inside a Holy Place which is an unremarkable room, and the doors are shut because of their fear of "the Jews", rather than "the Jews" being afeared to enter the Holy Place through the closed Temple Veil. This is the place, after all, from which Creation springs and the Creator is in their midst, first wishing them peace, for they are after all afraid. He hasn't come to ask them as he did on an earlier evening, whence their knowledge of their nakedness. We have gone back to before that. He shows them his hands and his side, so they recognise him and are glad. Again he wishes them peace, for now they will be sent out, but not in the sense of being expelled from the Garden, an angry sending of an as-yet-unfinished human. Here he is sending them as part of the creative act which he immediately shows by breathing onto, or into them - the Holy Spirit. I say onto, or into, since ἐνεφύσησεν is the exact same verb as is used in Genesis<sup>9</sup> where the Lord breathes into Earthling's (pre-gendered Adam's) nostrils. He then empowers them to open up and bring into being Creation through forgiveness, such that from now on it will be up to us humans to discover for ourselves who we are, what looks good and how to live out that goodness in the richest possible way. We will now be on the inside of the Creator Spirit and we are entrusted with responsibility. Our knowledge and flourishing will either be advanced as we learn to forgive and to be forgiven, or we will be held back by "sacred" structures of culture formed by rivalry and vengeance. And there is no outside *Deus-ex-machina* to put everything right instead of us. To the extent that we do not open up creation in this way, insiders in the Creator Spirit, it will remain closed down, and will circle round in futility. No more outside god, or outside laws, or outside rules, or outside determinations. All is in our hands.

I bring this out here because we often forget that Christianity births us into freedom, that the voice of God is one empowering freedom, that tradition constantly needs to be questioned as to whether it is contributing to freedom, or whether it is making void the word of God by adhesion to sacralty. And that is true of course of our growth into humanity by becoming persons who are less unfree as to what binds us down and ties us up. But it is also true of literally everything to do with the structuring of the ecclesial sign. The Acts of the Apostles and the early post-apostolic writings show just how free our sisters and brothers in

<sup>8</sup> John 20, 19-23 RSV

<sup>9</sup> Genesis 2, 7

the faith were. Much more than what they actually chose to do, the fact that they were able, after prayer and in consultation with the Holy Spirit and each other, to choose to do things: that is what is important. One of the first steps to facing the issue of clericalism, and really the most important, at least as far as I can understand it, is having our imagination set free from the remnants of sacred-seeming-things so as to be able to imagine the freedom of the holy. We should of course look back, in as far as possible, to determine what Our Lord wanted in choosing and structuring his followers. But we should be even more aware that what he most wanted was for us to be free to open up things as we go along, things which as he knew, *in his time* could never have been imagined<sup>10</sup>.

#### **4. Neither “secularity” nor “modernity” should make us afraid**

Why has the issue of clericalism come up as such a critical issue, that we should be talking about it now? In part, obviously, because Pope Francis has made it one of his preferred terms for referring to the general dysfunctionality of the institution he was charged by the Cardinal electors with reforming. But in part because he was giving us permission to observe the increasingly obvious nakedness of the Emperor without thereby feeling disloyal. But that visibility of nakedness has been a long time coming. And I consider it important that we understand the process. The “secularity” and “modernity” which so many decry as being to blame for the Church’s current troubles are closer to being our friends than our enemies, if only we can read them aright.

Girard’s insight into the violent archaic sacred was made possible by the fact that that archaic sacred was undone by Christ, once and for all. Jesus made visible the structuring principle of this world: “a murderer and a liar from the beginning”. By occupying the space of the all-against-one out of love for us, he opened us up to living out of love rather than in rivalry with death. As a result of this, over time all our forms of hiding from ourselves that we are all set up as rivals with each other, all potentially murderous in our rivalry, have gradually become visible as lies, however much we may try to repristinate them. Much of Girard’s work was dedicated to showing how one of the effects of the Christian revelation has been to set in motion a constant see-sawing of reactions to the loss of sacrality. Each one trying to create a new form of sacred as it became clear how little sacred was the last one. There is no serious history of the development of the life of Western Europe that doesn’t, for instance note that time and time again the Catholic church, and the papacy in particular, were agents of a particular form of *secularity*. In the gulf left by the collapse of the intellectual, legal and political edifices of ancient Rome, with their appeals to a numinous basis, it was the mediaeval papacy, seemingly aware that the creation of laws is the human, not the divine domain, which invented the legal system. It was the fervent imitation of this new legal construct by embryonic “nation” states that turned this entirely human law into the basis of states which eventually chose to cast off the political tutelage of the Church’s legal creation.

The bizarre feature of all this is that until recent times, and despite occasional and visible relapses into the most awful forms of the archaic sacred, such as the period of the French Revolution<sup>11</sup> known as the “Terror”, it has been the states that have become the apparent bearers of the Christian secular, while the Catholic hierarchy, time and time again, have seemed to be the bearers of some ancient sacred in need of protection, even while the very basis of their own teaching constantly undermines this. But please note: this is mostly a

<sup>10</sup> Cf John 14, 12; John 16, 12-15.

<sup>11</sup> The Aztec priests of the *Huei Tzompantli* of Tenochtitlán would have been quite at home here, correctly perceiving the goddess “Raison” as the European transcription of “Coyolxauhqui”.



matter of image, not of fact. In fact, as St Augustine knew, the line between “the City of God” and the “Human City” doesn’t run between Church and State but is to be found wending its way carefully through each one of these realities. Neither reactive Churches nor reactive states can be part of the sign of the beginning of gathered humanity reconciled with God. The fact is that the meaning of the Gospel, the life of God, the sense of the Spirit, is never to be found in reactive spaces. It is always and only found in the hard-won space where rivalry has broken down and forgiveness emerges.

Vatican II began to understand some of this as changes were introduced in clerical formation which were then, fairly rapidly, seen to have gone “too far”. Please notice that at the same time the rest of the Western world was engaged in a rapid process of “professionalization”, so the Church’s initial movement *away* from forming clergy as “persons set apart by an esoteric expertise” was genuinely a counter-cultural move, and one to which we will have to return in a different form. However, this was followed by the massive return to fake sacrality enjoined by Wojtyla and his fellow-travellers. Some would see this as the tide returning, but I think not. For whatever was wrong with that against which you are reacting, in as far as you react against it, you bear as trophy not the truth that you were trying to save, but the mirror image of your enemy inscribed within yourself. Reaction structures you in resentment, which in turn causes your truth to evanesce into kitsch.

Imagine a gorgeous old pier, standing far out from some beach. It seems to float, majestic with its gaudy lights and amusement arcades, its platform comfortably above the highest of high tides. When the tide is low, you can see seaweed, algae and waste matter wafting amongst the stanchions which hold the pier up. When the tide is high you have the thrilling feeling of being safe and stable in the midst of something constantly moving. The pier creates in fact an interesting ecosystem of life as fish and molluscs come and go beneath its farther reaches. But what happens when, as in a García Márquez novel<sup>12</sup>, some foreign nation “takes away the sea”? Then of course, there are no more tides, no more up and down, no more ecosystem. And suddenly, and for the first time, it becomes visible quite how weak and rotten are the columns holding the whole thing up. In fact, in places they have rotted away completely, and been replaced by molluscs and barnacles that were parasitic on the previous material. These have compacted together so well that that, ironically, the pier’s base has been kept in place by its enemies. Furthermore, for every day that passes once the sea has been taken away, the process of oxidation of the exposed remains accelerates. They become more obviously rotten, less capable of holding everything up, weaker, more dangerous. The sense grows apace that the gaudy glory of the pier and its entertainment, visited by far fewer now, - except the odd nostalgic, ransacking for baubles, and even they are wary of its fragility - is coming to the end of its days.

Yes, the sea has gone. The sea in question being the various forms of hierarchy, structure, expertise, communications and institutional “belonging” that seemed to give our lives structure and meaning such that we at least gave the appearance of not being entirely run by what each other thinks or does. The visibility of the rottenness of Church structures is only an advance guard of something similar happening in all our forms of life: widely shared and undulating patterns of desire have rendered null both written and unwritten constitutions - that of the US and the UK for a start, leaving us with a strange mix of reactive populism on the one hand and a nostalgic inability to bite the bullet of having to start again from scratch. Girard illustrated, using Cervantes and then the great nineteenth century novelists, a world where we had “external mediators” - hierarchies, institutions and so on with which we were

<sup>12</sup> *El otoño del patriarca* 1975

not equal, and so, however much we imitated them, we didn't enter into real rivalry with them. He showed how during the course of the nineteenth century, that broke down: we all acquired stronger and stronger "internal mediators" - others who are close enough to being like us that we are sucked into truly painful rivalry.

The same development of mimetic desire has continued apace throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. And the "others" who moved us are no longer our slight social superiors or inferiors, but the massive social other which surrounds us and gives us being, the jostling swarm of networks playing to every one of our passions. These passions are bereft of any of the bulwarks against them by which our structures used to constrain us from within. In the midst of this we attempt to hack out identity or meaning either by latching onto some sort of victimage, (thereby having a convenient "they" by contrast with whom to justify every whim); or glomming onto absolute belonging (to a political leader, or cause, identification with which is watertight), so that I have a strong and impenetrable "I". The hatred of some Catholics for Pope Francis is, I think in part, because they want a strong and impenetrable "structure" to belong to, whose safe hierarchy and fixed teaching meet a felt need to give solidity to their "I". They are genuinely dismayed when the Pope himself refuses to play the part in their psychodrama that they need him to, because he too knows that the sea has gone, and his job is to confirm the brethren in a world in which only example, relationship and interindividual teaching and sharing will make sense to people. Yet paradoxically those most keen to restore forms of structure that have gone forever wage their campaigns in the same passionately networking ways that guarantee that such structure will never again be more than cosmetic.

In this world, pretensions of hierarchical "knowledge" cannot survive interindividual learning. The gay question is by no means the most important question facing the Church, yet it is a very accurate hermeneutical flashpoint by which to understand what is going on. It is not for nothing that a large group of closeted, mitred gay men have spent the last forty years or more trying desperately to demonstrate that their "teaching", so convenient to their career paths, is not from them, but from God<sup>13</sup>. This has failed absolutely as it has become ever more apparent and visible that it is quite simply the ideology of the closet, and that anyone in any sort of genuine interindividual relationship with any real gay persons knows that God is to be found where love and vulnerability turn into truthfulness of lives lived out in generosity over time. It is not the fault of these sad, sad mitred men that the acceleration of mimetic desire has been so intense, such that what used to be lived and acted out in proxy drama on the grand stage of political and religious life, is now acted out in self-naming persons, and in-between every relationship and every family. It is not their fault that their long-avoided first-person participation in truthfulness has become ineluctable. Any fault only really comes into play in their impenitence even as it becomes clear that the old game is up.

So what next?

## ***5. The heavenly parameter***

The priestly vision, which I set out earlier, reaches its fullest expression in the Revelation to St John. It is the vision of the New Creation which has been brought into being by the self-giving up to death of Jesus, represented in a variety of different ways, but principally as the Great Angel, and therefore the Heavenly High Priest, who is also the Lamb standing as one

<sup>13</sup> Cf F. Martel *Sodoma* Robert Laffont: Paris 2019 *ubique*

slain. Eventually Azazel (the one for whom the “scapegoat” stood in the Levitical rite) is cast away forever, and we are shown the New Jerusalem<sup>14</sup>. The description of the new city<sup>15</sup> is the perfect illustration of how the priestly imagination brings into being a certain secularity. The Holy City is a perfect cube, with each side some 1500 miles - a way of introducing the fact that the City and the Holy of Holies (itself a perfect cube) are now co-extensive. The description of the walls and gates as being made out of the precious stones which formed the High Priest’s breastplate means that the walls, which are never shut by day, and there is no night, are those who have become living stones as livers-out of the High Priest’s life.

There is no Temple in the Holy City for the obvious reason that the whole city, synonymous with the whole of the new creation is the Holy of Holies, in which God and the Lamb are omnipresent. And there is no need of created light in the city since the glory of God is reflected through the Lamb, who is of course being lived out by those out of every nation and people and tribe who are inscribed in the Lamb’s book of life - which is to say, by everyone present. Jeremiah’s prophecy<sup>16</sup> that no longer would we need to teach each other has finally come true since we are all taught by and share the teaching of the Lamb who has made us into peacefully co-existing interdividuals.

I bring this out, since it is probably a good thing that we should bring into our discussion of clericalism not merely our fantasies of left or right about the sort of Church we want or think appropriate, but also some sense from the Apostolic Witness of what it is, bigger than any of our fantasies or hit-lists, that is coming upon us, birthing us into itself in the midst of the apocalyptic futility of the winding down of the old. It is, quite literally, to this sort of “open-heaven” or “eschatological” imagination that we have both a privileged access, and something of a duty to attend. We are after all being called to re-imagine how we are to live out the sign of this reality in the midst of current turbulence, so let us be clear about what sort of thing it is that we are becoming a sign, and how we can best order it.

Much discussion of clericalism and the ordering of the life of the Church has followed on from the notion that sexuality and gender are the key problems we are facing. I would like to suggest, once again following Girard’s thought, that this presupposition is in fact the remnant of a sanctified Freudianism which understands sexual desire to be the key human desire, and therefore the one whose correction is the principal function of a hierarchically opportunistic Church order. However, what if imitation leading to rivalry were the key motor of human life? One which is capable and has been capable, of inflecting sexual desire and gender expression in many different ways over the millennia? If that is the case, if it is true not that sexual desire leads to rivalry, but that rivalry inflects sexual desire in such a way that sexual issues are symptomatic rather than causal, then I suggest that what we are looking for in any and every future discussion of Church order are ways of publicly living out how Our Lord’s coming is already making us into *signs of the overcoming of rivalry*. For it is in the overcoming of rivalry thanks to our being forgiven by our Crucified victim that we are to become the sign of the reconciliation of all humanity with God.

So what might it look like if “the fullness of orders”, received by the local “overseer<sup>17</sup>” were given to that person in as far as they show signs of becoming a person skilled at enabling

<sup>14</sup> I take for granted here Margaret Barker’s proposed re-ordering of the verses of the last pages of the Book of Revelation in her *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* T&T Clark, Edinburgh 2000 p 316-317

<sup>15</sup> Revelation 21 onwards

<sup>16</sup> Jr 31, 33-34

<sup>17</sup> “overseer” or “visitor” are the ordinary translations of “ἐπισκοπος”, which has come down to us as “Bishop”.

others to work together, at bringing together into the sign not only those formally “canonically” linked to the local “sign of being called out into a gathering”, but those apparently “denominationally” separate? A candidate for such a post would not only have borne witness to a process of having become suitable by their own loss of rivalry with others. Given that the post is one requiring not only a certain temperament forged over time into character, the candidate would also have peer-approved experience of a learned skill set. As the modern “Art of hosting”<sup>18</sup> movement has shown: independent secular groups have begun to work out the processes and the skill set needed, with the first steps being an ability for the person concerned to host themselves and to be hosted: kinds of vulnerability and sensitivity requirements which would be complete novelties in many parts of our Church life.

The centrality to Church “order” of the overcoming of rivalry is of course what allows different gifts to flourish, since neither its holders nor its recipients have any need to be jealous of each other. For this reason, once again, it is likely that appropriate candidates will be those who have shown themselves to be content to live with, and share life among, those who “are not”, the unimportant, the marginalized and so on. It is when you have discovered that the true joy of the Gospel is there, that you are unlikely to be tempted into rivalry with those who seek their “glory” from the order of this world. Having lost your envy, you are likely to be able to perceive the gifts of others, and be their booster, making it easier for them to live out their non-rivalistic gifts. And of course this discussion could move in the direction of how the one bearing the fullness of orders would have the task of meeting the needs of each eucharistic community to have presiding celebrants who are not a cause of disunity or rivalry. In as far as communities are able to come up with such a person themselves, that person’s role can be recognised by ordination. In as far as they need help overcoming division, the overseer will work to find and ordain someone who meets the need. Obviously, gender, marital status and sexual orientation are neither positive nor negative criteria in themselves: the ability to bring a community to live and worship together harmoniously is the criterion.

## ***6. some pretentious little proposals***

Finally, I’d like to make some very brief points about some of the strands of what has led us to where we are and how they might be reimagined. But first, an obvious warning.

There is no such thing as the right way, or the only way, or the orthodox way, or the correct way, or the traditional way for the church to be ordered, ministers chosen, overseer-visitors appointed. There are only slightly less-inadequate ways, from generation to generation, as we try to understand how to live together as sign of the incoming kingdom. The best systems will be gamed by charlatans, while the worst occasionally throw up saints. As we face up to undoing the different strands which have led to the current sacralised metastasis, in search of holier ways of doing things, let’s be aware: our undoing of the sacred in order to bring in the holy is more than likely, if history is any sort of guide, to lead to new forms of metastasis of things, each of which by themselves might be holy, into new forms of the sacred. A modest awareness of the potential for dangerousness of the apparent good, and a constant vigilance about our involvement in such things will not be enough to stop this, but, and however poorly I exemplify a self-critical spirit, we cannot do without them.

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.artofhosting.org/>

Let's get three obvious and simple points out of the way early on, for without them, nothing budes.

a) The clerical closet

Is it a sign of the holy, or of the sacred, that such a large proportion of the senior clergy in our Church are closeted gay men? Is their dishonesty sacred, or holy? I would suggest to you that our systemically lived dishonesty is a symptom of a structure born of the violent sacred, demanding a certain sort of sacrifice to keep alive a fake order. It does not come from the holy insouciance of those who are prepared to occupy the place of shame so that others may not have to be shamed again. Current teaching proclaims that sacred order demands that gay people sacrifice who they think, feel, and know themselves to be on the altar of an *a priori* definition (that of the objective disorder of the stable inclination which most of us call an orientation), and attempt to become something that they are not. Until this is replaced by holy teaching, then of course the very worst elements of clericalism will continue to undermine the credibility of the Christian faith. Holy teaching will recognise that given the lack of anything in divine revelation about the lives and loves of the people we now recognise as LGB and T, we will have to work out what God wants for us and from us by a thoroughly participative and observation-based understanding of "natural law". This will need to be worked through first among all the baptised, before it can be lived honestly among the small subsection who are ordained.

b) Baptised women

Second, women are already the High Priest, and have been at least since the first woman was baptized. That having received the whole, they cannot then receive an internal part of that whole, makes, as cultural shifts towards equality continue, no sense at all. Of course women can be ordained elders in the Church. Furthermore, the whole movement to turn a binary in the book of Genesis - one that was already undone by Paul<sup>19</sup> - into a constitutive feature of *everything that is* reeks of a desperate attempt to force a "sacred" definition onto reality. As opposed to learning from what *really is* what is truly holy and God-reflecting. Jesus was perfectly happy to use maternal language to describe what he was doing in going to the Cross<sup>20</sup>. He may even have described himself maternally while on the Cross<sup>21</sup>. Certainly Isaiah foresaw the founding event as being maternal<sup>22</sup>. So the claim that women cannot act "*in persona Christi*" or perform "*vis-à-vis*" the faithful in the priestly sign of self-giving up to death is grotesque, especially when we consider how many women over the ages have died in childbirth so that their children may live.

The question of the practicality of how this is to be widely accepted runs up against the pivotal point of John Paul II's view: he considered that he lacked authority to make the change. Arguments from authority are, as Aquinas points out, the weakest form of argument. But this does suggest that the task is to remind the holder of the Petrine office that the office really exists in order to allow us to learn where we have been wrong in holding to something as holy, when it was in fact merely sacred, and then to help us all move along into the opened heavens. That at least is what happens in Acts 10, where Peter recognises that the "Holiness

<sup>19</sup> Cf footnote 5 *supra*

<sup>20</sup> John 16, 20-22

<sup>21</sup> John 19, 27 (with the suggestion that in each use of "behold" he was asking his mother and John to look at *him* in a new way, which then led to their being newly related to each other *in him*).

<sup>22</sup> Isaiah 66, 7-8

Code” was in fact Sacred, not holy, and uses his authority to unbind the gentiles, thus opening heaven for them, and almost all of us.

#### c) Celibacy

One of the remarkable things in Christ’s teaching, hidden by centuries of readers unable to control their legislative urges, is how laid back he is about marriage, marital status and related matters. If we can say three things with certainty about this teaching, they are that: no one is obliged to be married; no one is obliged not to be married; and only those who are married can decide, together, whether they really are married (i.e. no outside party has any authority in the matter). What all three positions have in common is that they undo the world of enforced or expected marriage, as well as the world where third parties are able to intervene to break up a marriage. The freedom at the core of this has been the secret to the constant destabilization of social expectations and reciprocity which has characterised the cultures affected by Christianity.

It is clear then, that the freedom not to be married is a great freedom, especially where there is a strong social and cultural imperative enforcing marriage. I remember hearing with awe how jealous the local Pakistani Muslim women were of the freedom of their Catholic women neighbours who had joined a religious order. The Catholic women were free from having to live under the day-to-day authority of males, except the relatively distant Bishop (as it happens a kindly gay man), and no one could force them into marriages or childbearing. I cannot imagine a future Catholic set-up where the freedom to remain unmarried is not preserved and given a highly honoured status.

Having said that, it is clear that once you try to tie a holy freedom of this sort to becoming a pre-condition for a job for which it is in principle unnecessary, then you are creating a world which demands sacrifice to create and maintain a certain sort of fake order. You end up with something like what we have now: a lot of gay males who are unmarried (so formally speaking celibate), and yet unable to be honest about their sexual and emotional lives. Furtiveness means that those involved never grow up. All the while genuinely celibate straight men are passing rare. And of course, all except the few genuine straight celibates are subject to various forms of implicit or explicit blackmail. The effect of all this on the tendency to cover up for abuse has been well documented.

So, I would suggest that anyone who actually values celibacy as a genuine gift from heaven should be extremely keen on its detachment from being a requirement for any position at all. The moment something earthly is a reward for it, then it becomes a transactional part of the sacredness of a system, losing any value as a sign of anything beyond that transaction. As Fr Daly’s excellent articles in the *National Catholic Reporter*<sup>23</sup> have pointed out, the Latin-rite obligation to celibacy for priesthood is directly causative of a culture of dishonesty and freedom from emotional and sexual accountability. Those involved are not bearing witness to the “gift of celibacy”, they are bearing witness to the power of an institution to demean its members into a culture of dishonesty.

#### d) What Signs?

<sup>23</sup> On 7<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2019 respectively.

Whatever the economic and inheritance matters involved in the history of how obligatory celibacy became the official norm for Catholicism in Western Europe, some claim could be made, at least at a certain time, that celibacy was a *sign*. In other words, the person who freely took upon themselves the option not to marry was engaging in a form of eschatological disruption of the expectations of society, and was acting out, in their own body, a Christ-like self-giving up to death with insouciance for descendancy and heredity. That the life of a minister of the Church be a sign of that which is taught and proclaimed is obviously highly desirable. After all, it is perseverance in witness, not formal written or spoken teaching, which is the absolutely indispensable element to the Church's continuing in faithfulness until the Lord's coming.

It should be perfectly clear that in the modern social and cultural circumstances certainly of most "Western" countries (and that includes many in the Global South), being a single male or a single female is not a sign of anything at all. It is simply the increasingly common state of life of a huge number of citizens, when not the majority, in social and economic systems which have made single apartments the most normal form of dwelling. Single dwelling means that there is a guarantee of privacy for the sexual and emotional elements of the life of single people such that there is no public control over the relationship between the single status of a person and their sexual habits or emotional involvements. All this would have been unimaginable in, for instance, the much more publicly shared sleeping arrangements of the middle ages or early modern Europe. So singleness (celibacy) is, by itself, no longer available to be used as a sign regularly associated with the public ministry of the Church.

The question then arises: what would be good as a sign or signs that we might associate with the public ministry of the Church? Someone who had shown themselves capable of continual generosity while habitually living in poverty? Someone who had given up a promising career path to do something for others which brought with it no kudos? Someone who has had a heart broken open while serving a prison sentence? Someone whose perseverance in a twelve-step programme has made them reliably merciful? I don't know the answer to this, though I would myself hope that part of any such sign would be that the candidate was living as someone forgiven: who was able to tell a story of themselves as a sinner who had discovered themselves loved as such: for whom the term "sinner" is a relief rather than a form of self-laceration. But we need to consider much more richly the sphere of *sign* as it relates to Church Order.

#### e) Employment

Currently, the Church is an awful employer. The notion that clerical employees don't need ordinary, secular employment contracts, and ordinary, secular guarantees because they have a "filial" relationship to their Bishops doesn't pass the first sniff-test of plausibility. Their own honesty is too often used against these "sons" for them to have any "filial" respect for their line managers. Currently the clerical system is a "total" world in which living, salary, employability, and pension all depend on a façade of compliance with the (sometimes deeply personally problematic) mitred CEO of the local franchise. All this is passed off as a holy form of life. The priest has staggeringly few "rights", and canon law can be very easily manipulated, or simply ignored, by the CEO for almost any number of reasons, or non-reasons. Any change in the priest's opinion about a number of things not central to Christian faith could put all of these in danger. Any change in marital status would lead to loss of employability and might lead to the loss of all pension savings from previous years. And so on. The Irish civil court which took the view that canon law has the same legal worth with

relation to the civil world as the internal rules and regulations of a Golf Club had it exactly right. It would seem to me evident that in any discussion of the future of ministry there be no exemption from the rights and duties of ordinary employment legislation in the country in question. Whatever the shape of the sign which we are to vivify, it is not a real sign of anything holy if it leaves those who are effectively employees subject to arbitrary and unjust treatment without any appeal outside a total system. That is the last remnant of the idolatrous “perfect society” model of Church and it has no place in our post-Vatican II περιπατεία ἐν Χριστῷ.

f) Voluntary work

Should those who receive the sacrament of orders be principally volunteers, who earn their living in whatever way suits their talent (Paul was a tentmaker), so as to be no burden on those whom they evangelize, teach, build up? If they are, how are we to avoid it being easier for those of stable economic background and good education, so more easily able to finance themselves, being dominant in the clergy? Traditionally, at least until recently, entry into the clergy was a form of upwards mobility for provincial youth (and especially gay provincial youth, since their straight confrères would so easily and so often leave formation to get married after having obtained the philosophy degree which gave them an access to an otherwise unattainable middle-class life). Now in many countries this is less plausible as educational possibilities have grown, and gay people even in remoter provincial regions have less to fear, and more to aspire to, outside Church employment. Might it not be part of the response to this that it become much more common that the ordered community ask people whom they know to become their ordained ministers? In which case the ordered community would have to take the initiative of discerning what sort of person from what sort of background amongst those available to them is appropriate.

In any case, one thing that seems clear as we learn more about child abuse is that the volunteer professions (speaking loosely) have heretofore had almost zero oversight as to the personal, emotional and sexual lives of their employees. This seems true of Catholic clergy, foreign aid workers, scout leaders, youth pastors and sports coaches (for instance) at almost every age level. I would suggest that the time has come for us in the Church to make a discernment-based (and not rule-based) public accountability of emotional and sexual life (both physical and, increasingly importantly, virtual) the appropriate setting for the life of an ordained minister. This rather than marital status, sexual orientation, or “continence”. Honest weakness shared with others is rarely a problem. Gilded dishonesty kept private behind claims of “celibacy” very often is. I know it would be difficult to structure this public accountability without it becoming sacrificial in its own way, nevertheless a promise of some sort of previously agreed shared accountability of sexual and emotional life seems a much more appropriate commitment at ordination, and certainly at episcopal consecration, than the often fictional promise of celibacy. The burden should be on the diocese to enable its ministers to grow appropriately rather than constantly being left to pick up the tab of the damage from its failure appropriately to oversee the lives of unaccountable bachelors.

g) Administration

In almost all cases the establishment of dioceses leads to formidable administrative tasks. Issues of finance and fundraising, property management, personnel recruitment, training, school and hospital management, legal matters and so on, ad infinitum. In short, the diocese



is a complex institution. All institutions are sacrificial, tending to shore themselves up against rivals, seeking to cut corners, downsize, re-allocate funds and co-opting those who work in them to behave in ways that outsiders would find surprising. It could not be otherwise. Yet there are such things as very good administrators. A really good administrator in a state institution, or a private company would be sacrificial for the benefit of the state budget, or political interests on the one hand, or the returns for the shareholders on the other. A really good administrator in a Church institution is properly beholden to the greater glory of God, which is only reflected to the degree in which the administrator seeks to undo the sacrificial quality of institutional life at every opportunity. This is a very subtle and very specific skill set requiring special training. I can well imagine that such a gifted administrator, or administrative team, having shown themselves particularly proficient in a small diocese, be sought out by a larger, and more complex diocese in which their talents and expertise can grow.

However, it seems to me that the gift of being an administrator, and being ordained as the one in overall charge of creating spaces of non-rivalrous living in unity, more often than not do not belong together. Any more than administrators are necessarily good teachers, or good teachers are good administrators. In my (limited) experience Bishops tend much more often to be franchise administrators than pastors or teachers. What they call being a pastor, or being a teacher is usually some form of adhesion to canon law, or repetition of some self-referential church document. However we reimagine the living out of the fullness of Orders, it seems important that we stop pretending that Bishops are teachers or pastors merely by the fact of being Bishops. The Holy Spirit is not a cookie-cutter gift giver. And it seems important that we dedicate time and resources to ensuring that gifted administrators learn to run our institutions in ways that go against sacrifice, whether or not they be ordained, or with whatever sort of ordination we discover appropriate for them.

#### h) Education

A brief comment about the sort of education needed for forming ministers, whether full-time or part time, whether volunteer or paid. One of the sad effects of the 35 year great trek backwards following the election of John Paul II has been the separation of theology into ordination studies, on the one hand, following an increasingly clericalist path, and broader theology for lay people, which in turn has become increasingly niche-based in reaction to the misogyny and homophobia promoted by the official syllabus, and is sometimes plain uninterested in basic Christianity. Somehow we've got to get back to an ecclesially shared theological education, transmitting the Church's faith concerning Christ, and centred around preparation for a lifetime of reading and expounding the Bible texts and celebrating the Signs which will be the lot of ordained and non-ordained Christians who are seeking to live out the Sign that is the local Church in their lives.

I received a privileged theological education by virtue of being a more-or-less discreet male homosexual clerical candidate, alongside the majority of my classmates, mostly more discreet homosexuals than I. I am ashamed I didn't pick up sooner how unjust the system of which I was and am a beneficiary was and is towards women in particular and lay people in general in terms of the economics of theological education. How are we to structure and finance shared theological education which is for adulthood of faith of all the faithful, with no distinction of gender in the classroom and without "ordination track" courses reserved for those to be ordained? All of this to guarantee a shared faith lived in the local church, as well as to promote the good storytelling and preaching necessary to help create good witnesses.

i) Accountability

And finally, the most difficult and tentative one of all. How are we to be self-critical and order our self-criticism? If we have learned one thing over the last years it is that we are incapable of regulating ourselves. Bishops cannot regulate themselves, being in this just like Banks, Lawyers, Insurance companies, Aircraft manufacturers, Pharmaceutical companies, the Press, or any other institution. At the moment even the best available plans for the accountability of Bishops do not escape the sad inside/outside dichotomy: if we voluntarily cede any critical power to people outside the institutional power structure, we are effectively ceasing to be a self-determining institution in our own right and become vulnerable to any number of hostile takeovers. On the other hand, if we don't cede critical power, then however widely we spread it within the institution, we still run the risk proper to all institutions, that self-regulation becomes a sophisticated form of cover-up. So whistle-blowers and truth-tellers will not trust the "self-regulators", since there is still such a large power imbalance in the whole system.

Given the genius of Church thinkers from the apostolic, through the patristic period and well into the middle ages in coming up with genuinely creative solutions to some of the most interesting institutional conundrums: producing new legal structures, new formations of ways of living and so on, we might ask: are we still that Church? Or are we an ecclesiastical museum, conserving the forms of the past without any of their inspirational dynamic? It would in any case be a good test of whether we are still that Church that we manage to create a way, or ways, breaking through modern dichotomies concerning secularity, power distribution and the inside and outside of institutions, in which the voices of our marginal ones, our victims, our differently-abled ones and so on, can be kept continually alive for us. Not with victimary bleating, but as a gift, as sacramental pre-representations of the Judgment which we will all undergo. With these voices being afforded a real bite on the tendency of all institutions, and indeed all humans, to self-referential and ersatz totality. The challenge of self-critical institutionality, if met, by us and then imitated by others, will be yet another of the Gospel's amazing contributions to a relatively benign secularity.

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*Madrid, August-September 2019*