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# The FURROW

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*Mark Patrick Hederman*

## ‘The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck’

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# ‘The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck’ – *Reflections on Leadership*

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Mark Patrick Hederman

A few months after my eight-year term of office as Abbot of Glenstal Abbey had ended in August, 2016, I was asked by Bishop John Fleming of the diocese of Killala to address his priests as follows: ‘Having just stepped down from your role as a religious leader in your community would you share with us your reflections on being a leader in the Irish Church today and how it might look in the future?’

I agreed and set about studying the question in ways that the actual practice of governance had neither required nor permitted while it was in progress. I came up with some obvious ideas. The century we have just been through has made us more aware than ever before of how crippling and deforming institutions can be, and how difficult and dangerous it is for any human being to exercise power and wield authority. ‘Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely’: we heard it as a phrase in our heads; we have learnt it now by heart to our great sorrow. The Twentieth Century certainly clarified a few realities for us if it did nothing else. We have been taught painfully all the complexities and the subtleties of the corrupting nature of authority and power. Most of the inhumanity suffered during that last century was caused by ‘the cool, self-justifying, ruthless, selfishness of quite ordinary people’ ... like ourselves.

I had always believed that the authorities in the Church of Jesus Christ had only one role: to establish a household where the life and love of the three persons of the Trinity become the cornerstone. From what Christ has revealed, and the Holy Spirit has taught, this life is a mystery of love between persons, where no one lords it over anyone else, where no one is ‘superior’ to any one else, where the one in charge is the servant of all. Our mandate is to establish in this household of the Trinity right relationships in every sphere, to promote everything that encourages fullness of humanity and avoid everything that stands in the way of such fulfilment. All governance is for the sake of communion. The

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## THE FURROW

communion of God is compassion and love. We have to recognize that most often our false and inauthentic ways of dealing with each other stem from our false notions about God. Every person in authority in the Church should make it their daily concern to find out whether our institutions, our traditions, our rules, our rituals, our administrative practices are promoting this community's existence as persons in communion. If they are facilitating in any way prejudice, intolerance, elitism, discrimination, competition, domination, alienation, they should be removed. We may have turned the household of God into a prison for slaves rather than a runway towards freedom. God has to be allowed to overturn and transform any social, political, racial, psychological structures which have been put in place to gain control and exercise arbitrary authority over others. The Church should be a transparent and radiant icon of the Trinity in our midst. The Trinity is the revelation to us of the true meaning of the word 'person' and the true meaning of whatever we call 'love.' Of its nature it requires the elimination of whatever might reduce us to the prepersonal, the impersonal and the antipersonal.

But, hang on a second, there is something ringing false in all of this. What has been my actual experience over the last eight years? Let's go back to the beginning. In October 2008 I was elected fifth abbot of Glenstal Abbey in Limerick. It was a shock to me but, I think, more of a shock to the community who elected me. A bit like Donald Trump, I suppose, nobody thought so many others were going to vote that way. This vote could not be ratified in Rome, however, unless I, who had been a brother monk for almost fifty years, was prepared to be ordained a priest. When I examined this question, which up to that point had never been a difficulty for me, I was frankly stunned by my very cursory study. As far as I could determine, since the year 1983, which is only thirty years ago, a canon had been added to the Revised Code of Canon Law which regulates our lives as members of our church, and this stipulates that 'power' in the church can be exercised only by those who are ordained priests. As there were no impediments to my receiving the required sacrament, I agreed to be fast-tracked to ordination one month after my election. Such an anecdote in my own life raises serious problems for the Roman Catholic Church in general. I was determined to come back to this problem and examine it in greater depth once my mandate as abbot was over. And so here I am eight years later asking myself what was all that about.

### SACRED POWER

One possibility is this: a theological opinion about 'sacred power,' not sufficiently debated by theologians, has become standard and

has been incorporated into the Revised Code of Canon Law (1983), in particular in Canon 129, according to Ladislav Orsy, an expert in that same Canon Law. This canon specifies that only those who have received sacred orders are qualified for the power of governance, also called the power of jurisdiction. The canon further stipulates that although lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power, they really cannot wield it in any significant way because, legally speaking, ‘cooperate’ does not mean ‘participate.’<sup>1</sup>

Where this insertion into the code comes from is not clear; what is clear is that it is now irrevocable unless this recent incorporation into the revised code is rescinded. Priestly anointing is deemed necessary for legitimate exercise of divine power. You either have that power or you don’t; if you don’t, you can’t have any effective participation in government; and the only way to plug into this source is through priestly ordination. The logic at least is consistent.

Some theologians point out that such has not always been the case. Even women have not always been so excluded from governance, although experts really do have to travel back some centuries to produce any pertinent examples. The Empress Irene, I am told, both convoked and presided over parts of the Second Council of Nicaea in 787 CE.<sup>2</sup>

What the big deal was for me about ‘exercising power’ in a small rural community in County Limerick, Ireland, I’m not quite sure. I did find that I was suddenly expected to make public statements about everything and anything: ‘Why was Stephen Ireland playing mid-fielder for Manchester City and not playing for Trapattoni’s Ireland?’ ‘Is Barack Obama digging out of the hole — international as well as financial — that he inherited from George Bush or is he digging deeper into it?’ At least I understood the language in these questions; others were complete gobbledegook: ‘Should Google remove Buzz from Gmail?’ Other questions were of huge moral significance: ‘Should Shell be allowed to build a pipeline to deliver raw natural gas from the Corrib field to Bellanaboy?’ ‘Should Dustin the Turkey have been allowed to represent Ireland at the Eurovision song contest?’

- 1 Can. 129 §1. Those who have received sacred orders are qualified according to the norms of the prescripts of the law, for the power of governance, which exists in the Church by divine institution and is also called the power of jurisdiction. §2. Lay members of the Christian faithful can cooperate in the exercise of this same power according to the norm of law.
- 2 Gerard Mannion, ‘Changing the (Magisterial) Subject: Women Teaching-with-Authority – from Vatican II to Tomorrow,’ *Irish Theological Quarterly*, Volume 81, no 1, February 2016, p 17, footnote 52.

## THE FURROW

### NO FEMALE PARTICIPATION

Of course, in all such preoccupation, the elephant in the room is the glaring fact that in our church there is no female participation whatsoever at the level of government. I had, of course, noticed that when abbesses were elected there was no such determination to have them ordained before their mandate could be confirmed by authorities in Rome.

If you ask questions about this conundrum, lengthy and standard replies issue forth. The Catholic Church is the oldest religious institution in existence. It has over one billion members living in almost every country in the world. In its own eyes it is a divinely appointed institution, perennially guided by the Holy Spirit. It was founded by God, who came on earth in the person of Jesus Christ for thirty-three years to institute it. He handed over his authority to twelve apostles, headed by Peter, the first of now 266 popes who have presided over those 2000 years. Pope Francis I is the 266th Pope since 13 March 2013. Historical evidence suggests that this church is also a fully human organization which travels through history as a dweller on this planet, and is therefore prey to all the deficiencies and shortcomings of any such institution. Crimes and horrors have been perpetrated by its members and in its name. However, in spite of the aberrant behaviour of many of Christianity's adherents, the truth which it embodies and which is its direct source and origin is still the truth that can save us and save our world. And by 'save' is meant accomplish for us, in us, through us, the highest form of life possible to imagine, both now and in eternity.

That is the ultimate truth which gives us hope and allows us to adhere to a religion which others might find obsolete, if not even evil. And in case there should be any doubt about the Catholic Church's capacity to guide the faithful along the right path towards salvation, the First Vatican Council of 1869-1870, declared, as a dogma to be believed henceforth by all Catholics, the infallibility of the Pope, which means that when the reigning Pope 'defines' *'ex cathedra,'* that is in the discharge of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, and by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, that a doctrine concerning faith or morals must be held by the whole Church, then this is an infallible pronouncement binding all Catholics.

Doing a little bit more research on my own I discover that the principal document outlining the Church's teaching on the ordination of women, *Inter Insigniores*, was published by the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, in October 1976. The teaching was reconfirmed by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, of May 1994. He put in an addendum (n.4) that this

## 'THE BOY STOOD ON THE BURNING DECK'

was not just a disciplinary matter, open to further debate, but was a 'judgement to be definitely held by all the Church's faithful.'

The main argument in both documents is that 'the Church, in fidelity to the example of the Lord, does not consider herself authorized to admit women to priestly ordination' (*Inter Insigniores*, Introduction). This argument is based on the fact that Jesus called only men to be part of the twelve, that the early apostolic community maintained this 'men only' norm, as did the subsequent tradition down through the ages. The document maintains that the practice of Jesus 'was not in order to conform to the customs of his time, for his attitude towards women was quite different from that of his milieu, and he deliberately and courageously broke with it.' *Inter Insigniores* acknowledges that contemporary questions concerning the ordination of women are posed in a way 'which classical theology scarcely touched upon.' However its conclusion is couched in absolute terms, repeated by John Paul II: 'I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women' (OS, 4). Despite the solemnity of the language, theological opinion is clear that we do not have here infallible teaching.<sup>3</sup> I suppose that is a tiny ray of light which the more optimistic might be grateful for.

### A NEW POPE

And then, five years after my own election as abbot, a new pope steps out onto the balcony and the whole world is awash with expectancy and joy. Four years later, Francis continues to confound. His simplicity, his charm, his authenticity are patent, and people can tell that his heart is in the right place. He has a pastoral concern for ordinary people and an open unguarded fluency when in conversation with those he meets. All this is wonderful, and most well-meaning people love his style. But there must be more than that, and the next few years will tell the story. Can he effect the changes in the Church which he has so eloquently articulated in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World, *Evangelii Gaudium*, which acts as a clarion call for 'a pastoral and missionary conversion which cannot leave things as they presently are' (#25). Can he get the Catholic Church to 're-examine' various 'rules or precepts' and 'certain customs' when 'considering a reform of the Church.' There are powerful forces working against this possibility. And, like everyone, he has his limitations. Coming from South America he may not share the hopes and aspirations of European Catholics, especially women. Francis told reporters when returning from Brazil in September

3 Gerry O'Hanlon S.J., 'Church, Women, Authority, Why Not?' *Doctrine & Life*, Vol 66, No 1, January, 2016, Pp. 33-45.

## THE FURROW

2013: 'With regards to the ordination of women, the church has spoken and says no. Pope John Paul [II] said so with a formula that was definitive. That door is closed.'

Many people today find it impossible to accept any such ruling. Democracy is the idiom of most civilized countries, and educated people are not just used to having their voices heard, but they regard it as their basic right to have a say in all important matters which concern their well-being. We, living as we do, in a Western European society have no difficulty seeing that women are perfectly entitled to, and capable of, any position of power or exercise of authority. Angela Merkel, Mary Robinson, Mary McAleese, to mention a few, have banished for us the mirage and mythology of male supremacy in any order or field. But we are a small proportion of the geography and the personnel which make up the 1.2 billion Catholics around the globe, the authorities tell us. We have to think of those countries and continents where the Catholic Church is making great strides. In many areas of this constituency little progress has been made in terms of women's liberation. We are asked to be patient and to wait until the rest of the world has caught up with us, or maybe that we might have caught up with them!

And so, we continue to look for tiny chinks in the armour, little rays of light that might signal an opening. Pope Francis in an exchange with Fr Antonio Spadaro, SJ, editor in chief of *La Civiltà Cattolica*,<sup>4</sup> has also said: 'the feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions.' That's fine but 'Only if we break through the theological mystifications and religious legitimisations of patriarchal authority and power will women be able to reclaim our dignity, authority and power as ecclesial subjects.'<sup>5</sup>

Robert McClory has an interesting take on the last sentence of Pope Francis in his conversation with reporters on his way back from Brazil shortly after his election, which I quoted above: 'Definitive' and 'infallible' are not the same thing. A door is not a wall. Anyone can open a door if they have the key.<sup>6</sup> There are powerful forces working against such a slim possibility. Can one man pit himself against the deeply entrenched conservatism of one of the largest and the oldest religious institutions in the world? Even more important, is he interested in doing so?

Whether he is or not, other inexorable forces are on the move.

4 English translation of this interview which took place 19th August, 2013, in *America* (30 September, 2013).

5 Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Claiming our Authority and Power,' *Concilium*, (180) 1985, p 50.

6 Robert McClory, 'Pope Francis and Women's Ordination,' *The National Catholic Reporter*, September 16th 2013. <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-francis-and-womens-ordination>.

## 'THE BOY STOOD ON THE BURNING DECK'

Times have changed; both the world and ourselves are different from what they were one hundred years ago. The task of spiritual leadership is not to silence but to discern, where and when, to whom, in whom and by whom, the Spirit is speaking. The task of the spiritual leader is to read the signs of the times. 'All authority comes from God (Romans, 13:1).' Again, this has become something of a cliché. But if we really take it on board it leaves no room for shared sovereignty. At the head of his people on earth, God puts authorized agents who are not political figures, they are mediators, interpreters, ambassadors. Pontifex, the word we use to describe the Pope, means in Latin, a bridgebuilder, a passageway between two worlds.

We have to decide whether we intend to work from a nineteenth or a twenty-first century template. And certainly for anyone claiming to be 'Catholic' refusal to embrace universality must go against the thrust of conviction that his salvation should reach to the ends of the earth. It is important not to allow the perception of a reactionary ghettoized minority to be foisted upon us by the media and some hostile public opinion. The world itself is the universal religion that precedes all organized religions. Nature is the first scripture wherein we read the word of God. And, we have to face reality; another unfortunate but understandable difficulty is that the word 'Catholic' can have bad press in the twenty-first century thanks to the catastrophic revelations of evil-doing in the recent past, which has undermined trust in the institution as such. Banner headlines, cartoons and caricatures, depict The Catholic Church, for the Pantomime which the Press is keen to promote, as Wicked Stepmother of every fairy tale, *Cruella de Vil*, or the strict governess in General Montgomery's autobiography who used to get up every morning and say: 'Go out and see what that child is doing and stop him!'

If we wish to remain conservative and old-fashioned, at least let us not be sectarian and supportive of values and lifestyles which have been rejected by the majority of twenty-first century people. Otherwise we are categorized as out-of-date leftovers from a previous era, such as the Amish communities in America and Canada. These were founded in the Seventeenth Century and they steadfastly refuse on principle to move into the Twenty-First. They use horses for farming and transportation, dress in a traditional manner and forbid electricity or telephones in the home. Church members do not join the military, nor do they apply for Social Security benefits. They refuse to take out insurance or accept any form of financial assistance from the government. They value rural life, manual labour and humility, and they discontinue formal education at the age of fourteen. We might be less identifiable and



## THE FURROW

less obvious retros but nonetheless determined to remain behind where the nineteenth century left off.

### THE FEMININE UNDERVALUED

Our cultures in the past have undervalued and degraded the feminine, both as internal part of each one of us, and as incarnated in over 50% of the human race registered as women. We should no longer make such stark divisions between the two genders but should recognize the continuity of the spectrum in which we all share, in varying degrees. Each of us is situated somewhere along a spectrum of masculine and feminine traits and characteristics, making each of our particular identities as unique and unrepeatable as a finger-print.

We need different strategies, policies, norms and behavioural patterns, to live together in harmony, not just as one tiny island community, but as part of an ever-expanding and, at the same time, interconnecting universe. The Twentieth Century was a crucible. The world which has emerged from this time-machine is changed, changed utterly. There is no going back; our only way is forward. Discovery of the world of the unconscious; full acknowledgement and acceptance of the dimension of femininity, both inside and outside of ourselves, with all this implies in terms of gender balance and sexual diversity; recognition of the immensity of scientific discovery; and humble apprenticeship in a laboratory of ever-expanding technology; these are some of the characteristics required for access, capability and survival in the new world we have inherited.

Of course it is possible to remain stubbornly ensconced in a preferred world of the past, to batten down the hatches and create an 'old-world' milieu for ourselves and those who care to join us, but such a King Canute-like attitude can only be a holding operation, the waves of change must always eventually submerge even the most resolute dug-out.

A balance between two such tendencies should be achieved and maintained, even if this has never been done before. The human species is in charge of its own cultural development. It is not like the animal kingdom, prisoner to the laws of its nature, to the instinctive coding in its DNA. We can invent whatever culture we choose to endorse, provided we have the collective will to do so. But to do so we must change our paradigms. The suggestion that because there are two forms of the one species, male and female, our culture must be either matriarchy or patriarchy, that either the women must dominate the men or vice versa, is simply to transfer the worst features of the culture of the past onto all culture of the future. Domination is the hall-mark of the patriarchal paradigm. It

should be replaced by a paradigm of partnership. And this goes for any form of leadership in the world today.

All leadership is influenced by the times in which we live. No person in any kind of leadership today can ignore the principles of democracy which prevail in most parts of our Western world. Democracy can mean many things to different people. At its tritest it means the will of the majority. Nowadays this often prevails and is understood by many to be sacrosanct. This can never be the principle of spiritual leadership. In the past we may have absolutized the will of the superior as the one ordained by God to rule the world, whether that person was king or queen, patriarch or pope, the pendulum has now swung in the opposite direction and we have absolutized the will of the people as the ultimate gauge to all authority. To sacralise the will of the majority in the way we sacralised the absolute will of the superior in the past is equivalently dangerous. However, there are certain roads that have been travelled, certain gains that have been made and very few of us are prepared to go back on these.

#### A GAME CHANGER

*Time* journalist Jay Newton-Small, in her book, *Broad Influence*, argues that once women’s participation reaches at least 20% of a group, they can ‘change the culture and influence outcomes.’ Women bring particular skills and perspectives, including facility to communicate and propensity to listen, readiness to compromise, and ability to form alliances. Their presence is a game changer.<sup>7</sup> Each country, including our own, should do statistical analyses to find out where we stand on the spectrum of such percentages. Here in Ireland for the first time last year, in 2016, there were, for instance, more women solicitors than men. This is a first for any legal profession in the world. However, Senator Averil Power holds that figures for female representation in parliament place us ‘way behind parts of Sub-Saharan Africa.’<sup>8</sup>

There is little doubt that the patriarchal society of the last two-to four-thousand years, with its excess of male power and energy, has been responsible for many of the world’s current problems: ruthless pursuit of power, destructive exploitation of the natural world, insanity of nuclear weapons, violence between nations, denigration of women, child abuse, racial oppression, isolating competitiveness and soulless materialism. And in this system, it must be admitted, there are women who are, and have been, quite as ruthless as men. However, as of now, in most developed countries,

7 Jay Newton-Small, *Broad Influence: How Women are Changing the Way America Works*, New York, Time Books, 2016.

8 *Irish Independent*, Saturday Review, 6/2/2016, p. 2

## THE FURROW

the majority have come to accept that, at every level of our socio-political structured life, the percentage of female participation should increase to tipping-point if any radical change for the better, and especially for equality and parity between men and women, is to take place. This is not simply a numbers game, it is about the quality of life which all governance is there to effect.

If such 'men' remain in charge, if such a psychology is deemed essentially and biologically 'masculine,' then it is no wonder that women are appalled by the reality that only 12% of those working in the higher echelons of computer technology, for instance, are women. What kind of monsters are the male psyche likely to produce, and what kind of world are they likely to usher in for our children? Men do not ask themselves questions, some analysts tell us, about the likely results or consequences of their investigations and experimentation; they concern themselves simply with what can be achieved, with what combinations can be elucidated, with what the furthest horizons of our inventive powers can accomplish. Such uncontrolled and irresponsible craving for novelty, at the control board of the most advanced technological capacity to create should give us pause.

In laboratories throughout the world, scientists are learning how to engineer living beings. They can break any law of so-called natural selection with impunity, without even a thought for an organism's original characteristics. For instance, Eduardo Kac, a Brazilian bio-artist, [living in Chicago] decided in 2000 to create a fluorescent green rabbit. He contacted a French laboratory and offered to pay them to engineer a green rabbit according to his specification. The geneticist, Louis-Marie Houdebine, took an ordinary white rabbit embryo, implanted in its DNA a gene taken from a green fluorescent jellyfish, and produced, as a combination, the rabbit called Alba. The lifespan, or indeed quality of life, of the new creation hardly concerned the laboratory technicians. In 2002, a US reporter made contact with INRA (French National Institute for Agricultural Research), where Houdebine works, and was told that Alba had died. The only evidence provided was a quote from Houdebine: 'I was informed one day that bunny was dead. So, rabbits die often. It was about four years old, which is a normal lifespan in our facilities.'

Apart from all this, my intuition is that we all have to come to terms with a deeper unconscious reality which turns itself into the psychic situation of Western culture in general today. It is clear that the patriarchal dominants of Western society are declining and are rapidly being eclipsed by the long-suppressed matriarchal equivalents. In symbolic terms, this would mean that the Father is failing, losing his power, and the Mother is rising up as never

## 'THE BOY STOOD ON THE BURNING DECK'

before, claiming her rightful place with a fury and vengefulness that come from centuries of oppression. We find this reflected in many aspects of contemporary life: in the new concern for Nature and ecology; in the revolution in sexuality and the new attitude toward the body and the instincts; in the liberation of women and the rediscovery of female power; in the concern for creativity and free expression; in the revival of occultism, magic and natural religion. A Special Issue of *The National Geographic Magazine* for January, 2017, is devoted to 'Gender Revolution: The Shifting Landscape of Gender.' It is no longer a question of men or women, there is a spectrum of sexual identity which introduces us to a new vocabulary of possibility unimaginable thirty years ago. Agender, Cisgender, Transgender, are three of a list of twenty-five different identities. Whether we like it or not, we live in an age where the feminine is on the ascendant in a massive archetypal battle, which we belittle to our cost by reducing to a mere struggle between men and women. This underworld heave is happening within each of us and the so-called feminist movement is only a symptom of it. Gender is not the same as archetype. Male and female, masculine and feminine, are principles within each one of us in differing proportions and modalities. This struggle affects all of us and each of us individually. It is as if Donald Trump were the last hurrah of the old male chauvinist patriarchal paradigm. I don't think he has any idea of the forces already unleashed and now encircling him as an identifiable and antagonistic catalyst, and I don't hold much credence in his capacity to withstand the onslaught his very presence will have unleashed. Liberation of femininity affects the whole human race and its transforming power is beyond our socio-political imagining.

### PLATE BOUNDARY

It is as if our world were precariously poised, metaphorically speaking, on two tectonic plates as far as socio-political awareness is concerned. On the one hand you have the more advanced and sophisticated cultures, such as many of us in the so-called 'first-world' enjoy, where democracy has become the accepted idiom. Then you have the Catholic Church, and many others who, in certain respects, have not yet moved out of the nineteenth century. But, at this time, it is as if these two tectonic plates were on the move. The place where they could meet is called a *plate boundary*. Plate boundaries are commonly associated with geological events such as earthquakes. In this instance, the plate boundary could well be located here in Ireland where we have one section of our people living in the third decade of the Twenty-first century and another portion planted squarely on the other tectonic plate in

## THE FURROW

the Nineteenth. When previous tectonic plates separated, some millions of years ago, the cliffs of Moher on the west coast of Ireland represented one half of the divide and Nova Scotia in Canada became the other, with the Atlantic Ocean in between. We may have to experience an even greater divide if the two tectonic plates I have been describing collide before the Church realises that such danger is imminent. Dr David Barker, responsible for the 2004 Report of the Church in America, refers to the 'perceived wisdom that culture change takes 200 years in the church.' 'This is no longer an acceptable point of view; it is an excuse for inaction,' he warns. The Catholic Church in Ireland has probably five or, at most, ten years before being reduced to a tiny irrelevant minority.

**Simon of Cyrene.** I met Simon afterwards, I'd known him for a while. He never struck me as the courageous type. He'd like to be in the know and generally stood where he'd have a good view. That was his downfall that day, as the soldiers hadn't far to stretch to drag him to the cross. He told me he was petrified. There was no gentleness in the soldiers, and he didn't know what they wanted. 'Pick up the cross', they shouted at him. 'Why, what have I done?' he replied. He told me they said nothing, just placed the cross on his shoulders. At first it didn't feel that heavy, but then he realised that Jesus was carrying the bulk of the weight. He told me that he tried to take more of it as they went on but that, no matter how much of the cross he carried, the weight didn't increase. 'I wonder', he asked, 'is that because Jesus was carrying the weight for me?' Strange, they say Simon helped Jesus but, as Simon recalls it, Jesus helped him. Either way, they travelled together. I asked whether Jesus had said anything to him. Simon told me 'No, but to be honest, he didn't need to. We both knew what was happening'.

- VINCENT SHERLOCK, *The Stations of the Cross* (Messenger Publications) p.15. In this book the author follows with the woman taken in adultery, imagining her watching Jesus on the way to Calvary.