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The FURROW

+ Willie Walsh

Reflections from a Cocooning Space

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I recall the immediate weeks and months after my retiring as Bishop of Killaloe and the predominant feeling of being done without. It is common to many retirees to sense that loss of relevance amid days that are no longer filled with work-related activity. It comes as a bit of a shock to the system if you have been engaged in some sort of work for 20, 30, 50 years and it suddenly ceases. A large part of that shock is the realisation that the life you left behind goes on perfectly well without you.

Less than two months into Covid-19 restrictions and in my case that time spent cocooning, I have been reflecting on what all this means in particular for priests and my brother bishops as they are engaging in what might be described as a form of forced early retirement. The future lifting of restrictions is unsure and the future will be a future in which the effects of Covid -19 will still play a controlling role. The grim reality is that it won't go away overnight. The present with its restrictions and the uncertain future is something that is challenging to us as priests. It is something that worries a lot of priests and why wouldn't it?

How are priests coping with the present reality of closed churches, no baptisms, no weddings and a general shut down of usual liturgical events? It would seem that on the surface after a slightly shaky start priests are coping reasonably well. One must welcome the use of modern technology to broadcast Mass and other church-related activity. Covid-19 has caused many of us to shake off our lethargic approach to modern technology and words like Zoom, Webcam, Skype, Facebook, Twitter etc. are now part of our everyday lives. Many of us are surprised at how well we have adapted to this and realise that any previous reluctance to get involved stemmed more from fear of the unknown than our sense of incompetence. Social media is serving the Church well at this time and it is up to us to serve it well. We must be careful however that in promoting God's word we don't reach saturation point which often happens due to the proliferation of material on these media.

Bishop Willie Walsh is the retired Bishop of Killaloe.

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CHRISTIAN ACTION

Beneath the surface things may not be as bright or liberating for priests and I have thought a lot about this these past weeks. The first thing that strikes me is that (like the experience of the newly retired) people appear to be coping quite well without us. The world of faith and religious practice hasn't stopped. Dare I suggest that the People of God – whom we always see as the Church – are doing very well thank God. There appears to be more real Christian work going on at the moment than in so called normal times. We need only witness the heroic work being done by our health care workers, the work of neighbours looking after neighbours, younger people shopping and doing essential errands for us older folk and the thousands of individual acts of kindness happening on a daily basis. What message is all this giving to us as priests? It is certainly telling us that we don't have a monopoly on promoting Christian action. Christ regularly preached that the Kingdom of God is close at hand. I sense that the Kingdom of God is very close at hand when I see so many people acting in a Christian loving way towards each other. I have a sense too that the Kingdom of God is happening among us more intensely than I have experienced in my short 85 years of life.

CHALLENGES

I feel that Covid-19 and its ongoing restrictions has given us time to ourselves more than anything else. We talk casually of this as a time for reflection, but first of all, we need to come to terms with the aloneness, the loneliness and all that being home alone with ourselves means. Someone said to me that it is hard to occupy one's time and that "there is only so much Judge Judy, or episodes of The Chaser one can take!" Reflection comes only when we are at ease with this new reality of being by ourselves. Then and only then will we have peace, because as Yeats puts it, "for peace comes dropping slow,"

The subject for our reflection will have to be what our *priesthood* is all about in light of a much pared back life. I have as it were kept my hand in at various liturgical activities since retirement: Daily mass with a group of retired nuns, weekend Mass in a parish setting and involvement in sacramental preparation with a local Gael Scoil. I enjoyed it and found it very fulfilling, but even that scaled down version of ministry has now disappeared and I have had to readjust myself to life without it as well as adjusting to the reality of cocooning. I feel I am long enough retired to be able to cope reasonably well and I can say that thank God I find cocooning

to be a tranquil space. Don't get me wrong, I miss my life of that seeming eternity – two months ago. I miss the camaraderie of friends, I miss the excitement of the games of hurling long been part of my summers' down the years.

How is it though for the heretofore active and fully engaged priest whose pastoral life never left him a minute's peace? How is he coping with the crash-landing that lockdown etc. has been for everyone? Granted, he may still celebrate Mass and have it broadcast over webcam or radio. My experience of this is that it is a wonderful facility, but there is little sense of interaction, or visible sense of community worship at work. Just as we are rightly warned off touching these days, I think priest and people are deprived of the tangible when it comes to liturgy right now and somehow I think its absence will be more difficult for the priest.

I foresee a future time when priest and people will see that one of the most lasting memories of this time will be the closure of Churches. I think it has raised lots of difficult issues for us as priests and we have been railroaded into thinking about them. Chief among these issues is the likelihood that churches will remain closed for a long time yet and then priests worry will people come back at all. This of course opens up that need I spoke of earlier, the need to reflect seriously on what our priesthood is all about, and it is that I have been thinking about a lot of late.

Most of us priests down the years have been occupied to varying degrees of busyness in serving people's spiritual needs as we perceive those needs. Certainly since Vatican Two the emphasis in our pastorates has been on serving, doing things for people – celebrating Mass, doing Baptisms, doing weddings, doing funerals, visiting schools, always doing, doing and also of course we look after the material side of things such as looking after the plant that is parish. It is worth asking the question whether in our pre-occupation with “*doing*”, do we appear to have given little time for reflection on our own priesthood and its true meaning.

I think many of us priests and bishops have found our niche in the service model of priesthood. We are comfortable or at least content to be busy with doing things for people and parish. It keeps us busy and creates its own kind of administrative demands that keep us further busy. I have heard some priests say “I have never been as busy” as they go about getting to grips with the demands of this crisis time and there may be the temptation even now to busy oneself with hitherto neglected administrative chores in order to keep us busy. Am I being unfair to ask whether we might be substituting one set of busyness for another?

I think before Covid-19 and since, we tend as priests to emphasise the “doing things” side of our ministry. This pause on the service

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side of ministry frustrates a lot of the would-be doers and indeed it worries them too as they sense their fading significance. I would rather that we see this pause as an opportunity and perhaps even an invitation to reflect a bit more deeply on the witness side of our priesthood. A fundamental part of a priest's calling is to witness to God in the World and now is a good time to reflect on that aspect of our priesthood. In these lockdown days in the solitude of my cocoon I ask myself the questions, who is Christ and who is Christ for me in my everyday life? My answers cannot be definitive and binding for anyone but myself, but I will share them with you. I am finding that my answer tells me that it is not what theologians are saying about Christ and it is not about various doctrinal positions in regard to Christ.

WHO IS CHRIST FOR ME?

Christ has to be personal to me. He has to be at the centre of my life and at the centre of my faith regardless of how weak my faith is at any given time. Christ for me is the Christ of Peter who answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." I believe that Christ is the risen hope of all humanity and it is Christ who is my saviour and my model. Furthermore, I want to deepen my friendship with Christ every day in the knowledge that this true friend will love me despite my weak faith, despite my sins and failures.

I don't think our faith is only about praying to or worshipping God. It is about the Christ who walked the roads of Galilee and who has a special care for the sick, the poor and excluded. Christ challenged us to respond to the poor, sick and outcast with respect, care and love. Christ didn't build places of worship and he wasn't an administrator seeking efficient ways and means. He simply met people where they were in their lives, he didn't lecture them about morality and he didn't judge them. Christ tried to ease their pain through healing, mercy, forgiveness and love. These are the basic Christian challenges for us as priests: mercy, forgiveness and love. In this time of pause we might reflect again on the person of Christ in our lives – the model for our priesthood.

PUBLIC AND PRIVATE DIMENSIONS

All people struggle with the private and public dimensions of their lives. The priest in particular lives with this very well defined duality. His public life is the self he presents to people in doing what he thinks people expect of him. We tend in our public persona to live up to others' expectations of us: to be respectable,

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conventional, good mannered and well behaved. As priests we often express this with the maxim: being all things to all men and women.

The private self is the one we don't present to the public. It is often the self that is less confident, the self that struggles with faith, life and so many aspects of our humanity. We don't show the side of us that carries fears and other burdens of worry and doubt. We don't want people to even think we might be feeling lonely, angry, embittered, unloved and unappreciated. Likewise, we don't want to make any public display of our own goodness and idealism which we see as part of that private self. This dichotomy between the public and private self is common to all and I am not suggesting that we are somehow insincere when we hide our private self from public view. The tragedy is that often we hide it from ourselves. I am suggesting (painful as it might be) that these days of lockdown are days when we are more in on and aware of the private self. It is an *opportunity* for us to reacquaint ourselves with our private inner life and to accept it for its intricate weave of darkness and light.

CONCLUSION

In terms of cocooning I am not at ease with the image that I am spending all my days worming away in my mind and seeking answers to questions that some of us never meant to ask ourselves. Yet, it is an opportunity not to be wasted and I would urge all priests regardless of their ages to take some time in creative solitude. Listen to the deeper thoughts and see the possibilities that lie in your own heart for a renewal of your priesthood at this difficult time in the history of our world. It would be a misuse of this time to simply see it all as a temporary aberration that we should sit out and eventually we will return to the way things were in the not so distant past.

There will be no going back to the way we were. Please God in time, a lot of the good things of our past will be restored. As priests though we have to live with the knowledge that we cannot go back to the way things were. This is why I am saying that this is a valuable time to reassess much about the service side of our ministry, but we should begin to do it from within and move forward by working with our lay sisters and brothers and in consultation with them. It would be a pity to make the mistake of seeing our outward shifting of church furniture as an adequate response. A new world lies ahead of us and we are called to be brave in facing it. The image of the worm in the cocoon persists and perhaps in time we will walk clothed in raiment of new silk spun from within these cocooning and other spaces. We live in hope of a better day.

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POSTSCRIPT

Some weeks after I penned these reflections, my last remaining brother died. John was in a nursing home and sadly caught the Covid-19 virus. As a family, we therefore faced the dreadful experience which so many other families have undergone in recent times with its attendant pains, especially not being able to visit the loved one, or accompany them on their journey out of this life.

In our case, it meant that his closest and immediate family could only visit him from a distance and this, in reality, was to stand outside the window of his ground-floor bedroom. They “visited” on a near fulltime basis during the final days of his illness. Sadly, due to “cocooning” I was unable to visit him at all and this added greatly to my own and my family’s upset.

Celebrating his funeral Mass under the now familiar safe and necessary conditions was a very difficult experience. I admit to being taken aback at the first sight of his immediate family, undertaker and pall-bearers all wearing gloves and masks. It was not what one expected ever to see in the context of celebrating a funeral Mass.

The face masks in particular fulfilled the correct safety protocols but also created a sense of strangeness and an impersonal atmosphere we don’t associate with any Church Liturgy. I felt no physical connection between my family and myself from my position on the altar. On a personal level, I felt the *disconnect* left me feeling very alone and unsure as to whether anyone was even hearing me – the usual body language of eyes and faces that show connection, interest and empathy were simply not there.

That was from my viewpoint. My family told me that it was quite different for them. They did not have my feeling of disconnection. Unlike me, the face masks were not what they saw. No, their view was of the altar and celebrant as in any normal celebration of the Mass. They were grieving their husband, father, uncle and friend and the funeral liturgy brought them its own unique modicum of comfort as it does to anyone who is bereaved regardless of circumstances. I found comfort in that.

Funerals in the atmosphere of Covid-19 restrictions are not easy but people are adapting with grace and composure as they express their sorrow at the time of losing a loved one. There is never a good time for such loss and people rise as best they can to the immediate tasks of bereavement – funeral arrangements, the funeral and all the tasks that accompany it.

Covid-19 leaves a mark by perhaps putting a brake on the accustomed expression of grief and how we “do” funerals in this country. It can only be temporary but perhaps a longer temporary

than we imagine. I look forward to a post-Covid 19 time when there may be a day set aside on a National basis to remember all who have died from this terrible virus. It will be a good mark of respect for all of the dead, those who are bereaved and the many care providers. It would also coincide with the great amount of individual remembrance ceremonies that will be taking place in the aftermath of these times.

May all our dead rest in peace.

Jesus and Fasting. The gospels bring new insights into the relation between food, feast and fast. As in the case of Jewish religion, fasting is present in the story of Jesus and his disciples and in the Acts of the Apostles, but is not featured prominently. While Jewish contemporaries had a tradition of fasting on two days of the week, Mondays and Thursdays, Jesus appears to have had a detached or even a critical attitude towards that aspect of the religion to which he belonged. Matthew's gospel recounts the incident of the disciples picking ears of corn and eating them as they passed through the cornfields on the Sabbath (Mt 12: 1ff). Luke's account brings out the breach of the Sabbath prohibition of manual work; they were rubbing the heads of grain in their hands. (Lk 6: 1). The important detail, only in Matthew, is that they were hungry, it was not a casual violation of the Sabbath law against work. So Jesus defends them against the criticism of the Pharisees by referring to the precedent of David who, when he was hungry, took the sacred 'bread of the presence', which was forbidden to all, except the priests. Jesus – who in Matthew's gospel was a defender of the Law – now reformed it by quoting the example of the breaking of an important law by those who were hungry.

- P. Fintan Lyons, OSB, *Food, Feast and Fast*. 2020 (Dublin: Columba Books) p. 41.