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Returning

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I recently returned to a conversation I had with a group of priests and male religious, recounted in *The Furrow*, November 2012. That conversation took place in wake of the Church abuse crisis and its impact on life and ministry back then. Eight years on, and in the midst of further turmoil, I was eager once again to capture what the mood might be. There was no room to gather in this time, given Covid-19, so I resorted to inviting thirty priests/religious known to me through work contacts, a mixture of congregational, missionary (Ireland, Africa, SE Asia), monastic and local diocesan, to engage separately with me via electronic means. In instances where the individual was part of a community or parish team responses reflected the collective view.

I began by asking how the pandemic was impacting their life, ministry and vocation as priest/religious, and how this experience might change their lives when returning? In general, the garnered information revealed understandable anxieties about the present and future, both for themselves and wider Church, but there were also some enlightened, if not prophetic, insights. What follows reflects what they told me.

ANXIETY

Common to most was the question *what should/could they be doing as priests/religious in this time?* Fears of the unknown and future uncertainties were most frequently reported, anxieties that led to ruminating about *how we might adapt to a new reality and what that reality might look like. Would there be a further reduction of numbers in church?* Also concerns about financial issues, sustainability, health risks in starting up again and compliance with protocols &c. A few spoke of disturbed sleep. It felt strange, even contrary, being sidelined at a time of public crisis – *why existing parish groups were excluded from outreach services?* The loss of

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faith gatherings as community in a *common sacred place* is deeply felt; warming to virtual liturgies a challenge for both people and themselves, as has the loss of connections with family and friends. *Even seasoned introverts get weary with themselves!* Tolerance of solitude wanes into loneliness, depressing for some.

IDENTITY AND PURPOSE

With little or no public ministry, many noted a void once the usual running around subsided. *Who are we now? The world has not fallen apart in our absence ... how essential/indispensable or relevant is what we put energy into? How are we to be priest/religious when identity of 'saviour mentality' no longer holds? Do we rush to protect and uphold what is falling away?* Coupled with such questions were uneasy feelings, perhaps more keenly experienced by missionaries, that many parishioners possibly felt abandoned by them, even rejected by the powerful symbol of closed doors, evoking a need to keep some door open.

However, many reported welcoming kind gestures of support from parishioners, which sustained morale in lockdown. Praying for parishioners and needs of the suffering world at this fragile time provided both transient respite and focus, strengthening their faithfulness to be their best.

LIFESTYLE

That *we are all in this together* has enhanced comradery, attentive to the common good. Such comradery is not without interpersonal challenges – *sometimes brings out the best as well as worst in us*. Many reported a strengthening of commitment to their way of life. There has been more time to pause and reflect, doing forgotten or neglected things, time to focus on other dimensions of life, more freedom to manage time well and with quality. A few discovered or were surprised by hidden gifts e.g cooking, writing etc. For some, the time has been reminiscent of formation, its rhythms, or has felt like a long retreat with a deepening of prayer life; religious spoke of their two wings, charism and fraternity. The rushing about and being scattered around, so typical of pre-Covid days, has allowed them reassess work patterns, alongside what matters in their own lives, such as standing back from a frenetic, hectic pace, to renew their relationship with God and review their ministry practices. Monastic communities described a deepening of the essence of monasticism in their already quarantined way of life. However, in general, bothersome questions prevailed, noting the need for balance, to reset focus on what is important – *the nuggets in front of our eyes rather than a more distant pot of gold*.

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MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

The desire to re-imagine ministerial priesthood struck a common note. Almost all expressed a heightened awareness of what had grown stale, and the desire, if not emboldened, to try even harder to re-imagine ministry. *Are we being called back to basics as reflective, sacramental presence...almost monastic in the midst of our communities, available to join with them in their celebrations and suffering in a common search for deeper meaning and purpose...particularly so for people on the margins?* There is a palpable sense that those sampled desire renewal with greater simplicity, more of the fullness of life bestowed by following the values and witness of Jesus, rather than an emphasis on doctrine – *to live each day in prayerful hope; to counter-argue through creative use of the gospel message; to reach those who most aspire to something other than contemporary value systems.* The majority now see their future relevance in dialogue with/inclusive of the wider faith community e.g. families, women, those on the margins etc. in a shared quest through uncertainty and doubt ... rather than a pedagogical approach to evangelisation. Recent use of multimedia has opened possibilities to re-innovate liturgy.

VOCATION

Many welcomed the opportunity to reframe understanding of their call. Vocation is seen as a dynamic – *'being' interacting with 'doing' ... staying tuned to see old things in fresh ways.* Finding God in each moment remains the same adventure as ever – *the unceasing Presence that makes all things new, often eclipsed/diminished by our own concerns and distractions;* Cultivating a contemplative spirit is also central – *a centre from which we reach outward, cultivating the freedom of the itinerant spirit in daily surrender to wherever God is leading, one day at a time.*

The need for emotional, psychological, as well as spiritual resourcing was noted. *Who or what am I in this time when duties that I perform are stripped away?* Those sampled saw the nature of God's call similarly, but nuanced for each in different ways – *along pathways towards well being, in the cherished hope of still bearing fruit in old age (Ps 92:14).* In uncertain times many expressed a wish for more flexibility in formation programmes and constitutions.

AGE AND MORTALITY

Categorising the over 70's an *at-risk* group, and isolation from vibrant faith communities, brought home the stark reality of aging and mortality. *Generative years cannot go on forever, but give*

way to harvesting time and consideration of life's labours. Yet, retirement is also seen as threat by some more eager to protect work interests beyond retirement years, for the sake of doing/gainful occupation. Overall, among older persons, there was need to put their life journey in perspective, time to revisit memories for both healing and celebration of significant moments, mourn regrets, and do what brought peace and contentment. Some of these elderly individuals reported that lockdown brought, in a surprising way, guilt-free relief from the sometimes relentless treadmill of pastoral demands and updating of skills, safeguarding training etc. – *a different kind of preparation is now needed consistent with our stage in life rather than rushing back to take up in the same way* – echoing words of Karl Jung (1933): ‘... we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life’s morning...’¹

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Many wondered when Mass stopped what prayer experiences people drew upon, and how that experience, without the intermediary role of priest, might impact when people return. *How might we recognise and safeguard that intimate relationship with God? How will we wean people off virtual liturgies?* Yet, given technology is primary for mission of the church, many felt a need for further training, technology no longer being demons but tools for mission of the Church, as noted in the growing technological lexicon e.g. facebook, webinars, podcast, zoom meetings, &c.

Church leadership appeared sparse during the pandemic. While recognising that everyone, priests/religious, people, Church and state were at a loss to know clearly what to do, nonetheless many felt the loss of spiritual leadership and a few reported lack of empathy/sincere support when most needed.

There was much talk of a need for *confidence building measures (re-skill, upskill, re-purpose etc.) to begin again in a different way. Will we be surprised by returning, renewed people? Might some estranged come back? Will people go elsewhere, or simply choose a la carte from the internet ... rather watch than attend as they wander around their living rooms?* There is an emergent competitive sense that people might choose a favourite church like restaurants and will be less tolerant of the diet of the *same old thing in the same old way, with further risk of plummeting numbers.*

Many speculate that people *long for a less binary, more inclusive Church.* The poignant image of a lone male celebrant beamed out on virtual liturgies in an otherwise empty church, evoked for some the stark reality of a male clerical Church, relative to the role of

1 Jung, K. G. (2001). *Modern Man in Search of His Soul*. Routledge, Abingdon.

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laity, especially women. That aside, there is also the realization that human beings are social animals – *they will return, but what would have changed for us/them in the returning?*

There is an expressed hope that when Church guidelines emerge, or shortly thereafter, some attention be given to a more holistic approach to re-formation to include physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual care for priests/religious into the future - *cultivating a culture of support so that the people we serve feel safe to articulate their needs in contemporary times, confident in our ministerial acumen and pastoral care in meeting challenges ahead.* Continuing to value, strengthen, protect team work and team communication are seen as vital into future building of faith communities in expanding administrative areas.

PATTERNS NOTICED

The perennial themes of 2012 repeat: care of relationship with God, care of vocation, care of self, care of role identity, communication and administrative challenges, aging and mortality. Perhaps what is different this time is less notional, with a greater conviction and urgency around these issues. A range of things were said, but three patterns in particular were noted – Bethany, Desert and Sent moments, which I describe below.

John 11:1- 44 chronicles a Bethany moment, the value of deep friendships, particularly at times of sorrow but equally cherished in times of joy and celebration. The effects on well-being of the void of intimacy with friends and family were noted. Priests/religious tend to live with a need for intimacy often hidden behind demanding pastoral ministry. Parishioners, people, are kind and generous but generally keep their distance. Cessation of ministry relationships exposed the limited rootedness many have beyond fraternity/parishioners/family. This expressed itself differently for different age groups. One elderly man spoke of his own Bethany moment, a yearning to reconnect to close childhood friends. Taken together, one is reminded yet again of the need for appropriate on-going emotional support and self-care. (cf. Adult Complaints Guide, March 2019, p.6).

Many welcomed a return to isolation during lockdown, responding to the Desert moment: ‘I will lead her [you] into the desert. I will speak tenderly to her [you].’ (Hosea 2:16). It seems all so human that the trajectory from seminary on into the field starts off full of boundless zeal, becoming ‘all things to all peoples’ (1Corinthians 9:19 – 23). As dilemmas arise through the middle years, doubt and questioning are inevitable. Zeal can dwindle, yet surge again, dependent on personality types or the advancing

threat of retirement. The discipline of prayer also shifts for many over the decades, the relationship with God off-centre as ego needs for productivity, achievement and success impose themselves. This desert time allowed many to re-experience the steadfastness of God in face of their straying paths and reset direction.

Many would agree that saying 'yes' to being sent (Samuel 1: 3) was not a haphazard, impulsive, momentary generosity. This initial Sent moment requires repeated 'listening', answering and re-answering along the way, each moment deepened by careful discernment and preparation. Many in ministry continue to benefit from aids like peer support, peer mentoring/ministry supervision, spiritual direction, etc. to sustain the initial 'fire in the belly'. The majority expressed a conviction that *now is a moment to take stock and regroup, recognising the potential for 'new wine'*. And, it may be asked - what of the inveterate 'old wine skins'?

CONCLUSION

The Pentecost narrative (Acts 2:1-13) is a reminder the Spirit does not evade us, but breaches the walls of our hiding places, inviting us to co-participate in reshaping the face of the earth; to make old things new, to heal wounds, to bring words of life and reconcile divides.

Many would argue that we are being challenged to think and act in new ways. Those who participated in this conversation exemplified a deeper listening and seeing in the midst of ambiguity and disorientation of this fallow time. As they envisage returning to their varying lived realities, questions reverberated in hearts and minds: *Who do we want to be? What will help us to live and sustain the rhythms and relationships that will characterise our future? What kind of Church do we want in the world we anticipate?* Perhaps now is a time 'to enlarge the place of your tent, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back ... (Isaiah 54: 2).