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The FURROW

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Bridie Stringer

Late Summer Frost

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This reflection takes its starting point from my evening walks in the Hampshire countryside during lockdown. Throughout this period of social isolation, I have been fortunate to have been able to walk for a couple of miles each evening and witness the arrival of new flocks of lambs, new herds of cattle, the harvesting of grain crops and the sowing of seed for the next growing season. I regularly saw my neighbour gathering fruit from her apple and pear trees and this year's generous harvest resulted in bags of free fruit for those passing her garden gate. She did not want any form of payment since she had an abundance and simply said: 'I now just need to get rid of them!' She told me about her recent visit to a favourite local café, reopened after the easing of restrictions and how she and her husband, as regular customers, had looked forward to their first visit there in six months. She had expected to be elated and overjoyed but, instead, could only feel a sense of flat disappointment and tried to understand why. She felt it was the inability to really communicate with others in the café, the nervousness about getting too close to other customers in case it made them feel vulnerable and insecure. We both agreed that this would not change for a very long time to come. What has all this rural musing to do with theology? The apple theme is one which I would like to explore and also the theme of people gathering.

Apple Theme

To begin with the *apple theme*, I am not in favour of a naïve reading of Genesis 3, in which a devious Eve offers fruit to her dim partner. Although this hermeneutic has been demonstrated forcibly in the writings of some of the most eminent Church Fathers, I would have hoped that, as a contemporary community of believers, we are now more nuanced in our reading of this mythical episode. Tertullian (c.160-220 AD), however, writing in the second century and credited with being the founder of Latin Christian theology describes Eve thus:

'You are the gateway of the devil; you are the one who unseals the curse of that tree, and you are the first one to turn your back

Bridie Stringer, formerly an associate lecturer in Pastoral Theology in St. Mary's University, is author of *Baptising Babies and Cleaning Gutters – A Fresh Appraisal of the Permanent Diaconate*.

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on the divine law; you are the one who persuaded him whom the devil was not capable of corrupting; you easily destroyed the image of God, Adam. Because of what you deserve, that is, death, even the Son of God had to die'.¹

The narrative of the Fall is no longer given the horticultural prominence it once had and, in today's Children's Bibles, Adam and Eve are generally seen standing side by side holding strategically placed sheaves of grass rather than guiltily gorging on forbidden fruit, whether Granny Smith or Pink Lady! However, Tertullian's perception of women as devious, seductive and untrustworthy is still very much part of contemporary pastoral debate. Women still struggle to have their status recognised as fully *In Imago Dei* and some sectors of the Church community prefer to cite St Paul's injunction as per 1 Corinthians 14 about women not having uncovered heads at worship and not speaking in the assembly. The progressive and liberal wing of the Church's *Magisterium* offers a more positive narrative, framed mostly around the status of the Virgin Mary and the 'genius' of women. Pope Francis certainly expresses this view, but herein lies a danger that, in putting women on a pedestal, they actually remain disenfranchised, whilst theoretically being valued.

This leads me into my *next* apple theme – the exhaustion of labouring in the field. For this, I look to the apple harvest described movingly by American poet Robert Frost in *After Apple Picking*, written in 1914. I have the words of this poem printed out and fixed to the wall beside my desk, as some lines resonate with my academic engagement with pastoral theology.

The first lines of the poem suggest that is all is not entirely as it seems. The jubilant celebration of the reward of hard work is simply not there, rather like my neighbour's first visit to her favourite café after the pandemic lockdown:

My long two-pointed ladder sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.

And later in the poem, the following lines are wistful and poignant:
For I have had too much
Of apple-picking: I am overtired
Of the great harvest I myself desired.

1 *De Cultu Feminarum*, section i.I, part 2 Translated by C.W. Marx <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/tertullian27.html> accessed 08/09/2020

I think that is probably where I situate myself in the great harvest debate about equality and inclusion within Church ministry. Should we stay with the ladder and the bucket in the orchard or accept that we can perhaps partake of other foods instead of apples?

The anticipation of the teaching document of Pope Francis, released in October, caused huge discontent because of its title *Fratelli Tutti* (literally translated as ‘All Brothers’ in Italian). Vatican News journalist Andrea Tornielli clarified the use of this title on 16 September:

‘We are waiting to know the contents of the encyclical, which the Successor of Peter addresses to the whole of humanity and which he will sign on 3 October at the Saint’s tomb. There have been some good discussions about the title and its meaning. Since it is a direct quotation from St Francis (taken from the *Admonitions*, 6, 1: FF 155), the Pope has obviously not changed it. But the formulation of the title in no way intends to exclude women, that is, more than half of the human race’.²

Admonitions, 6 was clearly addressed to St Francis’ fellow friars minor and this accounts for the gendered language in his salutatory opening words. The *Admonition*’s message is for the friars to be humble and not to seek glory for themselves. The actual words he uses draw on the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd:

‘Let us all, brothers, consider the Good Shepherd who to save His sheep bore the suffering of the Cross. The sheep of the Lord followed Him in tribulation and persecution and shame, in hunger and thirst, in infirmity and temptations and in all other ways; and for these things they have received everlasting life from the Lord. Wherefore it is a great shame for us, the servants of God, that, whereas the Saints have practised works, we should expect to receive honour and glory for reading and preaching the same’.³

Having now engaged with the new papal encyclical, it seems clear that Pope Francis has chosen the Italian message of his saintly predecessor to remind us of his own earlier exhortation *Laudato Si*, which again deployed the words of St Francis to urge the People of God in our time to honour and care for the earth. In *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis highlighted Jesus the Good Shepherd to be our pastoral exemplar and in *Evangelii Gaudium* (*The Joy of the Gospel*), he urged evangelisers to ‘take on the smell of the

2 See *An encyclical for all brothers and sisters* <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-09/pope-francis-fratelli-tutti-encyclical-all-brothers-and-sisters.html> accessed 23/09/2020

3 <https://www.franciscans.ie/the-writings-of-st-francis/#7> accessed 23/09/2020

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sheep'(EG24).⁴ I think that, with these precedents to go on, the disaffection of the feminist lobby regarding the letter, before its release, were rather *unwarranted*.

Fratelli Tutti is a rich compilation of Catholic Social Teaching as expressed by the Holy Father when addressing delegates at his audiences over the seven years of his pontificate. It draws on the priorities and aspirations expressed in the Vatican II documents on how the Church as a body interacts with the world and how we as individuals relate to one another, the community in which we live and the wider world. It is a document which is anthropological, sociological, philosophical and theological ... as many 'ogicals' as you can mention. In some respects, this can be a disadvantage since it seems to fire on all cylinders at once and can be received as repetitive, too all-embracing and lacking in specific courses of action.

GATHERING THEME

It will be interesting to see how the encyclical is contextualised by local episcopal conferences and diocesan leaders in order to guide their flocks in what is now being described as 'the new normal'.

It is to this topic that I steer the next section of my reflection. I am drawn to the teaching of the original Francis by his celebration of all things – animal, vegetable and mineral. His integrated pantheism (God in everything) helps us not to crudely differentiate those things which are of the body and those of the spirit, those of humanity and those of the rest of creation. This was brought home to me forcibly in the use of the Prayer of St Alphonsus Ligouri⁵ during the live-streamed Masses of the lockdown. The version acknowledged by the Redemptorists themselves is given in the endnote. However, I have noticed that some dioceses nuanced the wording in a more pastorally pragmatic way so that their communities might feel *less* liturgically impoverished through their inability to physically attend Mass and receive Holy Communion into their mouths.

Some dioceses used 'come at least spiritually into my soul' and to many attending live-streamed Mass, this may have seemed like a grudging compromise, especially since it also included 'Never permit me to be separated from you'. Although this is in

4 Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*(EG)2013 http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html accessed 23/09/2020

5 My Jesus, I believe that you are truly present in the Most Blessed Sacrament. I love you above all things and desire you in my soul. Since I cannot receive you sacramentally now, come at least spiritually into my heart. As you have already come, I embrace you and with all my being unite myself with you; never let me be separated from you. <http://www.redemptorists.co.uk/news/news-items/1935-pope-francis-recalls-st-alphonsus-prayer-for-spiritual-communion.html> accessed 23/09/2020

the original Ligouri prayer, there are perhaps overtones of blame which, in the present context, are somewhat pastorally inept. Other dioceses used the words: ‘passionately desire to receive you’ whilst omitting ‘... at least ...’ and ended the prayer with the words ‘... so that I may unite myself wholly to you, now and forever. Amen’. I think these distinctions also played out in the initial debates about the need to close church buildings in the interests of public health. Some took the view that it was a denial of people’s rights to enter sacred space for seeking solace in private prayer, whilst others emphasised the danger of touching pews, door handles and the social responsibility of keeping others safe from harm. One episcopal leader took the view that the physical was perhaps being prioritised over the spiritual. My own view is that, in many respects, Jesus did precisely that in his own ministry. Otherwise he would not have raised the dead or cured the sick, as the former were already in ‘a better place’, spiritually speaking, and the latter, if not cured, would soon be joining them there. Instead, Jesus showed the spirituality of *service* to the body and, thereby, the spirit and did not dichotomise them.

The physical consumption of the consecrated species is of course fundamental to Catholic practice, but it is the meaning of the act which should be prominent, particularly at a time when physical participation is impossible. We are urged at the end of the Eucharistic celebration to go out and be what we have consumed – the Body of Christ. In other words, we are called to enact in our own lives what Christ is to his followers – a gentle guide and an embodiment of his mercy and kindness. We can still do this enriched by our commitment through spiritual communion.

With that in mind, it is perhaps worth considering what the *future* holds for our worship as the lockdown eases. Will we revert to what we knew before as the only authentic expression of our belonging or will we include other forms of expression and witness? Will canonical penalties for not attending Mass be reapplied for those who fail to attend and will we undertake a system of liturgical rationing so that those who book their places can ‘get Mass’ and ‘get Jesus in Holy Communion’, while others do not?

A recent pastoral letter by one bishop, inviting his people to return to worship used the tone and tenor of the Prophet Joel: “‘Come back to me” says the Lord’ etc. Again, like the use of the Ligouri prayer, this seemed to reproach the absent brethren for something over which they had absolutely no control. There are some faithful members of the flock who will not be able to attend Mass and receive Holy Communion for the foreseeable future – those with serious medical conditions or with family members who must shield because of health challenges. To be told that ‘it is

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in our churches that the Lord sanctifies, teaches and guides us' will be particularly dispiriting for this parish constituency.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES

As we consider the post-Covid Church, I think it reasonable to wonder how clergy will feel enabled to equip the members of their communities for doing the work of God in settings which are now very different to this time last year? There is a mourning for the loss of ritual and liturgical identity as well as bereavement caused by Covid deaths but there are also perhaps opportunities to engage in debates about social responsibilities, the dignity of work and the common good. This was brought home to me at my local live-streamed Mass of the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday when the celebrant advised his online congregation that Mass would be paused shortly before 8.00 p.m. in order for those who wished to take part in the weekly street applause (known as the 'Clap Out for the NHS') to do so. Mass would then resume at a couple of minutes past 8.00p.m. The priest himself, fully vested, went into the street and applauded too. Here, although none of the community was physically present, we were all gathered together in spirit and honoured the health service foot washers of our own time, who were, in effect also gathered at the Lord's table since they were in our thoughts and prayers.

LITURGY OF THE HOURS

As we know, the sacramental imagination can be engaged in many ways outside the confines of church buildings and my own prayer practice of many years, the *Liturgy of the Hours*, has been particularly comforting during the period of isolation. One of the catechetical opportunities posed by Covid19 is for this *Prayer of the Church* to be given more prominence, as it does not require mediation by vested clergy in an empty church. However, in order to avoid the dissonance which I noted earlier regarding sinful Eve, it would be helpful for the *Divine Office* to be updated in more inclusive language and to avoid the patriarchal misogyny which is found in the Psalms, Intercessions, and Antiphons of the current edition. To give but a couple of examples. The *Benedictus* for 24 September, the Feast of Our Lady of Walsingham, is prefaced with the following:

The door of Paradise was closed to all men because of the sin of Eve; it has been opened again by the Virgin Mary.

The words of Psalm 141:5 in Sunday Evening Prayer (Week 1),

taken from of the Grail edition of the Psalms express sentiments which resound very negatively for women who are oppressed and abused: 'If a just man strikes or reproves me, it is kindness.' The Anglican Psalter and the Anglicized Catholic Bible (NRSV) express this sentiment differently by offering dynamic equivalence: 'Let the righteous strike me; let the faithful correct me.' At a time when new translations of Lectionary texts are being chosen by Bishops' Conferences, it would perhaps be prudent, and indeed courteous, to consider dynamic equivalence over and against texts which owe their origins to convoluted Latinate translations and pre-Vatican II ecclesiology.

DOMESTIC CHURCH

Liturgy is of course an embodied practice, involving ritual, shared meaning and symbolism. Some of this ritual can be adapted for the home setting as acknowledgement of our identity as a community of believers. Many older Catholics will remember the small holy water fonts which used to be fixed to the wall by the front door for visitors entering and leaving the house to dip their fingers in and bless themselves. Another religious artefact, particularly appropriate for this time of year is the Advent Wreath. Constructing a small Advent wreath with purple candles for the dining table and lighting the candles (one per week of Advent) might also be a helpful catechetical tool in the 'domestic church'.⁶ This could be accompanied by a reading from some of the scriptural texts of the day. As one of the participants of a theological online community noted recently, this type of lived out faith is very much rooted in our Judaic roots where the Shabbat meal can be seen to prefigure our sacramental Eucharist. This meal was presided over by the head of the household, and all family members had a role to play in terms of tasks to perform and words to say.⁷

BACK TO APPLES

To bring my reflection to its conclusion, I again return to the poetry of Robert Frost, whose 1916 poem *Putting in the Seed* resonates with my Hampshire evening walks and our hopes for better times:

How Love burns through the Putting in the Seed
 On through the watching for that early birth
 When, just as the soil tarnishes with weed,
 The sturdy seedling with arched body comes
 Shouldering its way and shedding the earth crumbs.

6 See Making the most of Advent - YouTube from the Centre for Applied Theology 21/11/2020

7 See What to Expect at a Shabbat Dinner – Kveller accessed 25/11/2020