



The FURROW

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William King

‘Low Morale’

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On a bright June morning we came across one another: the first day of the priests’ annual retreat now held in a Monaghan hotel instead of in All Hallows College – our stomping grounds for decades. Like other seminaries long closed and now enjoying a new incarnation as universities, All Hallows was off limits – *The Times* they are a- Changin’ as Bob Dylan puts it. So, we are latter-day children of Israel *by the rivers of Babylon*.

‘Where are you now?’ I asked – the small change of conversation between two priests whose paths cross randomly at some meeting, or at the side chapel of the Pro-Cathedral while robing for the Holy Week ceremonies. We were between breakfast and the first reflection held in the conference room, and not the elegant chapel of All Hallows. ‘Free time’ it was called in the *horarium* – a term that now seems like something found in an old trunk of seminary days.

He named the parish.

‘Alone, I suppose.’

‘Alone, but I get help from the Jays (Jesuits) – for however long that will last. Their days are numbered also.’

‘And you,’ he said, ‘you’re retired, I hear, so it must be all sweetness and light, and salad days.’

‘No, not at all. Believe it or not, I came out of retirement.’

His knitted brow said it all: ‘You what?’

And to take the edge off his bemusement, I tried humour: ‘Sinatra did it, why can’t I? I’m the same age as Dolly Parton and Dolly is still hitting the boards.’ But my effort to be a stand-up comedian met with a sudden death. He looked away in the direction of Shancoduff where Patrick Kavanagh made poetry out of bringing a *gabhail* of hay to ‘three perishing calves’.

My priest friend shook his head and smiled – out of politeness – I suspect. ‘No. I’d pack it in tomorrow morning if I could. And I’m not alone in that.’

He was at least fifteen years or more away from the canonical age – the time for a priest to hand in his badge and his gun to

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the bishop. I was well into my first curacy when he was making Confirmation.

‘No. It seems to me, we’re redundant: well, that’s the impression I get. For goodness’ sake, sure they don’t come near us until they want something, like a baptism or to fill out their marriage papers.’ He was now in the mood for talking and indicated the gravel path that meanders through the neatly trimmed lawn. And he related an incident that may have a resonance for many priests nowadays.

‘I brought a First Communion class and their teacher on a tour of the church recently. “What’s that over there,” a child asked me, pointing in the direction of a confessional.

“Come and take a closer look.”

‘We stood outside the confessional. “Now, children, what d’you think it is.”’

After studying the confession box, cocking their heads, like perky chickens, and straining their necks at the purple curtains meeting at the middle and resting on the half door, one bright spark shot up her hand. “Father, I know, I know. Oh, please, ask me. It’s a Punch and Judy show.” (Out of the mouths of babes and infants, Ps 8:21).

He looked at me: ‘See what I mean. I’d go now, but I’m only sixty-one.’

A SENSE OF LOSS

He kept showing up in my reflections that day and, like when one disturbs still waters with a rod, I brought other comments from priests to the surface – the most frequent and pervasive being – ‘*low morale*’. And I wondered if that phrase, like the bad penny, which one hears so often in clerical company, is a first cousin knocking at the door of a priest’s darkness. And if such is the case, it may not come as a great surprise.

For the last fifteen to twenty years, priests have been on the rack and, despite that, have continued bravely with their ministry. Some commentators claim that even in periods of crisis in our country’s history, priests didn’t have to battle against such a head wind as in today’s social climate. (Nevertheless, I’d take my chances any day against postmodernism rather than against Cromwell’s forces)

There was a time when the high regard for clergy was reflected in that barometer of social discourse – the cinema. In those days, we were ‘trailing clouds of glory’. Few, I suspect, would want a return to that!

There was Gregory Peck, the heroic figure who goes as a missionary to China in A.J. Cronin’s *The Keys of the Kingdom*. On *the Waterfront* depicted the fearless Jesuit, Father Corrigan, standing

bravely and alone against the exploitation of longshoremen in New York harbour. Now, apart from films like Jimmy McGovern’s *Broken*, the priest is represented as a figure of fun – or worse. In the main, the priests in *Father Ted* compose a gallery of eccentrics, likeable rogues, or half daft individuals. All that said, as satire, it is most enjoyable. But *Father Ted* or *Ballykissangel* should be the least of our problems.

A sense of loss must surely be latent in those hold-all terms: *low morale* or *burn-out* or *keeping our heads above water*. A kind of mourning, if you like, for the times when, on a Sunday morning, a priest would, with confident step, approach the altar to a packed church and the full swell of the organ to greet him from high up in the choir loft. *Ecce sacerdos magnus*! Now he steals a glance at the same few, the *anawim* – the faithful remnant.

And in quiet moments of reflection, when he comes across the framed ordination piece and glances from one cameo to the next, he remembers those who have gone, those who had found the torc of celibacy tightening and who left to find, what they hoped, would be a more natural way to live. He remembers too the classmate who died alone: he was a fine footballer and a joker who lightened the rigor of seminary days.

And he sits in the silence of his presbytery and asks: Why has it come to this? Was it the spate of child sex abuse cases, and the spiriting of offending clerics from one region to another? But if he looks back at the past, and even if only an occasional student of Irish social history, he will discover the enormous power the Catholic Church gained in the mid-nineteenth century from its brave and generous response to basic human needs. He will learn about the huge sacrifices made by priests and religious to set up schools and hospitals. Nuns teaching piano or crochet after school hours.

He will recall the beauty in stained glass windows, the decorated altars at Christmas and the intimations of mystery in the cadences of the Latin Mass. All this conspiring to raise a struggling people from the drudgery of their circumscribed lives.

But he, the occasional student of history will also learn that, unlike John the Baptist, the Catholic Church refused to step aside and allow a country to grow until it was knocked off its perch over a century later (in the 1990s especially) by governments no longer afraid ‘of a belt of a crozier’.

One doesn’t need to do painstaking research into the changing face of Catholic Ireland to identify the shift in mood of the people. Local events however insignificant can reveal much.

In 1967, the sultry Jayne Mansfield, of Hollywood fame, was refused permission to sashay onto the stage of a Tralee hotel

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ballroom by order of the Bishop of Kerry. Contrast that with more recent times (and this is mingling fact with fiction) when a ‘dirty fillum’ comes to Craggy Island. The bishop orders Fr Ted and Dougal to protest. *Down with this sort of thing* is their manifesto as they – two ludicrous figures chained to a hand grip – stand outside the cinema. The Craggy Islanders bid the protesting priests a cheery ‘goodnight, Fathers,’ and pack into the picture house. Without knowing it, they were living embodiments of a postmodern culture.

So, in this environment of vast cultural change, when one ‘ism’ is following closely on the heels of another – *and your idea is fine so long as you keep it to yourself, thank you* – all has changed. We live in an age where the *grand narrative* meets with rejection. Narcissism is the new religion. So, is it any wonder that priests are despairing and would ‘retire in the morning, if I could.’ Most of the priests battle on bravely; some take comfort in retail therapy (‘a nice, new car’), and Netflix for the long winter nights.

Others too, when they realise, they can no longer ‘have the best seats in the synagogue,’ begin to claw back lost ground and become versions of Captain Mannering, the diminutive stuffed shirt in the television series, *Dad’s Army*. It’s not unknown for a priest with that mindset to arrive in a parish and to trample on the work of his predecessor and lay leaders by disbanding the pastoral council and then to go on a solo run: surely a most effective way of hastening secularism.

STRAWS IN THE WIND

So, if the condition of the priesthood in Ireland today is given expression in fragments such as ‘low morale’ or ‘keeping my head above water’ surely attention needs to be paid. Anecdotes, of course, do not constitute accurate information, but they hint that all is not well: that some priests may be lost. And if that is the case, then their capacity to meet the challenges of the modern world are sorely diminished. Even if only a minority can be described as in a state of ‘low morale’, they too deserve attention. Isn’t there an obvious biblical precedent: *the good shepherd* went after the one that was lost and left the ninety-nine in the desert. (Matt. 18: 10 – 14)

In keeping with the programme for renewal known as Building Hope in the Dublin diocese, with its emphasis on listening to the people of God, wouldn’t it be instructive for bishops and priests to take themselves off ‘to some quiet place’ for a period of prayer and reflection. And indeed, to avail of that occasion for priests to share their hopes as well as struggles, their dreams as well as their disappointments, and all done in a spirit of Christian charity.

The opportunity such an event provides would make the efforts at renewal more grounded. It is incumbent on Church leaders to apply the principle of listening to priests as well as to laity. Listening is the mood music in the leadup to the Synod and other similar movements in Irish dioceses. I wonder will this happen for priests.

Just before the dreaded covid 19 hit our shores, I attended a meeting to discuss the priest’s life today. We were about fifty to sixty: ‘bloodied but unbowed’; some had served their time in the parched lands of Africa.

As with these assemblies, ours had a sober beginning, but it didn’t take long to work up a head of steam; one man’s courage to speak out emboldened others. Those who spoke – a fair sampling of the gathering – described their feelings of isolation, periods of frustration and loss of energy, and loss of interest too in their calling. Some described mental breakdown and seeking comfort out of a bottle, others, like in *Othello*, ‘*loving not wisely but too well.*’

The contributions were not for the faint-hearted: the stream of expletives would make Joyce’s *Ulysses* look like a handbook for the Legion of Mary. Over the top? Maybe, in places, but that was at once, necessary and cathartic.

When the dust had settled and the air, blue as a Dubs football shirt in a rainy Croke Park, had fallen away, one priest opined: ‘isn’t it a pity that no bishop was present to hear all this.’ And so said all of us.

SCAPEGOATING

To pick out weaknesses in Church leadership, of course, and to attribute clerical pains and frustrations to authority figures solely is both unfair and inaccurate and reflects a woeful ignorance of life’s crooked path. When a young man steps inside the door of a seminary for the first time (in my day, at around 18years) he brings in his inner holdall a register of disappointments, anxieties, shadows of sorrow or, conversely, an outstanding (and maybe inordinate) belief in his own ability.

Many entered seminaries with a ‘flawed pedigree’. One doesn’t need to be a card-carrying Freudian to know that the absence or failures of the real father can be imposed onto the seminary president or the bishop. The many ways in which the script and the *personae dramatis* of the human drama, we call the family, impacted on that young man of 18 must be grist for the mill of any enlightened spiritual programme. The value beyond price of such a journey is that it may free the candidate (and later the priest) from shadow boxing.

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This insight, nevertheless, doesn't absolve Church leaders from taking a closer look at the condition of the priesthood in Ireland today.

THE CARE OF PRIESTS

As a woman who is committed to the mission of the Church, said recently at a deanery meeting: 'why can't a bishop sit down with his priests and ask: "well, what is it like for you?"' Or as the good people of Derry put it: 'how's it about ye.'

Much is made of the diocesan commitment towards the care of priests; conversely, priests themselves are sceptical about the way it is constructed and carried out. They claim that those who are delegated to the ministry of tending to the 'wounded healers' lack the ability, the training, or the understanding of what is required for such a role. Limiting this ministry to the ordained too is also considered a mistake: ordination *per se* doesn't confer the skills for much needed direction or counselling.

It would seem a no-brainer to suggest that a priest, in a climate that is indifferent, if not hostile to what he represents would need to be heard in strict confidence by one who is familiar with the vagaries of the human mind and the mysteries of the immortal soul. One who avoids judgement while not flinching from responding in a way that will facilitate greater self-understanding and freedom for the enrichment of a priest's life and ministry.

Strangely, there seems to be a reluctance among priest to pick up the phone to seek help to do God's work more effectively. In casual conversation, I asked a senior priest: 'do you think many go for spiritual direction or to a counsellor?'

His laugh was derisive as if he found my question thoroughly naive. If he is correct, it's a pity, because then the riches of the inner world are never harvested, and we are flying by the seat of our pants.

'To thine own self be true,' says Polonius in *Hamlet*, 'and it must follow as day the night, thou canst not then be false to any man.'

But long before Shakespeare wrote his play, Luke 17:21 records Jesus as saying: 'the kingdom of God is within you.'

CONCLUSION.

Church leaders need to provide a forum where priests can speak the truth of their unease; promote a climate that would encourage them to hear the stirrings of their souls and hear their confusion about being missionaries in a world, not so brave or not so new as

it imagines. The *fervorino* delivered before lunch on the last day of the annual retreat hardly meets that requirement. Something more is needed for priests to taste the splendour of the *Elected Silence*, the poet Gerard Hopkins so deeply desired. That might be a fruitful beginning that could lead on to the birth of the great promise in Ezekiel: 36:26,

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Religion and the Twenty first Century. It is surely ironic that as indifference to and disengagement from religion grows in Ireland, the need to understand religion, its politico-cultural significance, its enduring appeal for millions around the globe, and its role in society is being increasingly recognised by academics, diplomats, government advisers and policymakers in the major capitals of the world. What is becoming increasingly evident is that we live in a world where religion is very important: nearly every news bulletin is a reminder of this.

- T P O’ Mahony, *The Politics of God: The Rise and Rise of Political Religion*, Dublin: Veritas, 2023, p 173/4.