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Redefining the Ministry of Reconciliation

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REDEFINING THE MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

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I begin with a long overdue Toast to the Vatican, that agency of the Catholic Church which has been effectively promoting a creative rethinking of ministry in our times. I refer to parts of the Catholic world like Latin America where the Vatican's insistence on a celibate male clergy has created a drastic dearth of hierarchically ordained priests. As a result in many places, the people see a hierarchically ordained priest only on rare occasions. The church in these areas has not died. Indeed, the opposite. Vigorous base communities headed by theologically literate married men and women have sprouted. Liturgies grounded in scripture and targeted to the real needs of these people have developed and been enthusiastically embraced. They often meet two or more times a week, without reliance on "Sunday obligation" and they apply their faith to basic human needs and to the needs of this battered earth. Without the Vatican's theologically idiosyncratic insistence that the sacrament of marriage is an obstacle to ministry, this healthy development of a post-clerical Catholicism would not have come about. Without the Vatican's belief that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them - unless a married convener shortcircuits the process," without that weird distortion of scripture, this creativity would not have flourished. Credit should be given where credit is due. The Vatican's obstinacy is also changing the church in the United States. As hierarchically ordained priests disappear, lay ministry is filling in. From "priest ridden" to priest deprived has a positive side to it.

The Vatican's stimulation, however oblique, of this innovative sacramental ministry is congenial to sound theology and to the history of the early church. Scripture scholar John Donohue, S.J., states the theological principle: "From its very beginning the church embodies a principle of sacramental adaptation." In point of fact, ministry is one of the least defined categories in the Christian scriptures, second only to the meaning of "church." Look at the lists of ministries in I Cor. 12:28-31, Rom. 12:6-8, and Eph. 4:11. The lists vary without apology. We find apostles, prophets, evangelists, stewards, administrators, and more. One individual might claim several ministries. There is no indication of a fixed

blueprint for offices, destined for all time and you could pour over those scriptures forever without finding that the historical Jesus ever thought of or offered such a blueprint.

You can see this creativity at work in The Acts of the Apostles, chapter 6. The apostles decided that they were too busy with the ministry of the word to wait on tables. So they selected candidates of good reputation and made them the deacons responsible for this work. There was a democratic flavor to this process since we are told that the candidates pleased the entire multitude (v. 5) and an election followed. This creative and collegial innovation worked marvelously and we are told the number of disciples multiplied. The innovation did not stop there, for lo and behold, the table deacons soon also opted for preaching so that in our day the diaconate actually symbolizes the office of preaching! (Who was left waiting on tables? One suspects it was the women.)

There is a lesson here for all who would refashion ministry in our day. The refashioning is based on need, not on any preestablished set of “orders.” The offices in the church today, from pope to priest, evolved historically and were not found as such in the early church. Professor Sandra Schneiders heralds the freedom that reformers have. She writes: “Suffice it to say that there is wide consensus among reputable New Testament scholars that there were no Christian priests in New Testament times and therefore certainly none ordained or appointed by Jesus. The Priesthood does not emerge in the early Church until the end of the first century at the earliest and, even at that relatively late date, the evidence is scanty and unclear.” That there should be any “priests” in our modern sense in the ecclesial communities today is unsettled in Scripture. That there must be priests in our sense and that these priests must be male and unmarried and heterosexual are fantastic assertions that can find no biblical warranty.

We even accept historically conditioned notions of the Apostles and their alleged successors as though they had dropped from heaven. In one of the most slipshod arguments, it is said that priest must be male since Jesus selected all males as apostles. Wrong. Functions that we have come to consider priestly were never limited to the Twelve and there is no evidence that the Eucharistic function was ever performed by the Twelve. Again, Professor Schneiders: “The Twelve are immortalized as the foundation of the Church. As such they have no successors. And as disciples, apostles, teachers, early Church leaders, etc., in which capacities they do have successors, they are member of a wider group which was never all male.”

Reformers who would simply add the possibility of marriage to the definition of a priest are thinking too small. Appropriate sacramental adaptation might call for much more serious critique than that. One of the inevitable neighbors of religion is magic. There is more than a trace of magic in the understanding of what has been mischievously called the “zap” concept of ordination. Protestant and other Christian understandings of ministry are instructive in this regard and biblically well grounded.

MINISTRY REDEFINED IN TERMS OF MISSION

The major religions of the world, including Judaism and Christianity, deserve respect because they are classics of cherishing. They were all explosions of awe in the face of the gift of life in this little corner of the universe. These religions are

filled with renewable moral energies that need to be directed to the needs of this generous but half wrecked planet and its suffering peoples. The task is two fold: see what contemporary needs are and see how the moral visions of our faith systems can respond to them. Having done this, the question of whether the leaders and ministers who work on this are married or unmarried, gay or heterosexual are cast belatedly into the abyss of pathetic irrelevancy.

THE NEEDS OF EARTH AND ITS PEOPLES

Any discussion of ministry or of the relevance of religions to life must dare to look at the sun. The sun to which I refer is the current planetary crisis. The biggest crisis in 65 million years is upon us. We have seen the enemy and it is us. 65 million years ago, scientists opine that asteroids pummeled the earth, creating conditions that killed many species including the dinosaurs. Nothing that bad has happened since, til we got here. Our species is on a comparable catastrophic killing mission. If religions have nothing to say to this, they are useless. Let me force you to look at a short catechism of the earth's current needs. Then and only then can we talk of human rights and reconciliation.

WATER, SOIL, AND AIR

Our species is a threat to all of the foundational elements of life on earth: water, topsoil, and air. Similarly the fundamentals of our political economy are being dangerously transformed. This is the sun we have to look at for a moment.

This water planet lives on water or it dies. Less than one percent of the earth's water is usable by humans, and this treasure is unevenly distributed. Pure water is becoming scarcer than gold. The two water dangers are threatened supply and pollution. The Middle East illustrates the supply problem. Tony Allan, a water expert at the University of London, says the Middle East "ran out of water" in 1972 when its population stood at 122 million. At that point the region began to draw more water out of its aquifers than the rains could replenish. Today the population has doubled and the politics of water have grown intense. Water wars could be in our near future. Jordan's late King Hussein once said that water was the only issue that could lead him to war with Israel. Most of Africa, the Near East, northern Asia, and Australia suffer from chronic water shortages. On the pollution, side oysters and mussels, nature's water-purifying kidneys are becoming dangerously depleted. Meanwhile, farm and chemical wastes borne by land, sea, and air invade our precious sources of usable water.

All life depends on cropland and on that thin but indispensable treasure called topsoil. In 30 years, China, where one of five humans lives, lost in crop land the equivalent of all the farms in France, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands. In fact, 43 percent of the earth's vegetated surface is to some degree degraded, and it takes from 3,000 to 12,000 years to develop sufficient soil to form productive land. Our corruption reaches even to the skies. As Peter Barnes puts it: "At the rate we are burning fossil fuels--and moving carbon from beneath the ground to the atmosphere--we'll double-glaze the planet by early next century, with unknowable consequences."

Not surprisingly, people, in solidarity with the decedent earth, are dying too. When it comes to impoverishment, the rule seems to be women and children first! Four million babies die yearly from diarrhea in the euphemistically entitled "developing world." Dr. Noeleen Heyzer of the United Nations says: "Poverty has a female

face.” Women constitute 70 percent of the world’s 1.3 billion absolute poor, own less than one percent of the world’s property but work two-thirds of the world’s working hours. Microbes and viruses that found a life for themselves in the forests, have accepted deforesting humans as their new hosts. As Joel Cohen says: “The wild beasts of this century and the next are microbial, not carnivorous.” More than thirty new diseases have been identified since 1973, many of them relating to our new and ecologically dangerous lifestyles.

The elitist illusion is that we can make nations or parts of them into gated communities, veiling from our eyes the decay and the huddled and hungry masses, but we can’t. Poisons are as globalized as capital. They come to us in the strawberries and the rain. Professor David Orr gives us some of the scary data: male sperm counts worldwide have fallen by 50 percent since 1938. Human breast milk often contains more toxins than are permissible in milk sold by dairies...signaling that some toxins have to be permitted by the dairies. At death some human bodies contain enough toxins and heavy metals to be classified as hazardous waste. Jeremiah warned us that it is hard to escape the effects of moral malignancy: “Do you think that you can be exempt? No, you cannot be exempt.” (Jer. 25:5, 29)

MORE PEOPLE, LESS EARTH

Meanwhile, there are more of us and in many places far too many of us. It took 10,000 generations to reach the first two and one-half billion; it took one generation to double it. World population is like a triangle, with the reproductive young at the wide base and the old at the narrow top. Until the model comes closer to a rectangle, with a more balanced distribution of young and old, the growth will not stop, nor does anyone expect it to. Because the population of the industrialized nations is expected to decline over the next 50 years and because the world annual rate of increase has slowed in the last two years, we begin to hear a gospel of consolation proclaiming the end of the population problem. This is illusory. As Gennifer Mitchell says: “Over the next 25 years, some three billion people--a number equal to the entire world population in 1960-- will enter their reproductive years, but only about 1.8 billion will leave that phase of life. Assuming that the couples in this reproductive bulge begin to have children at a fairly early ages, which is the global norm, the global population would still expand by 1.7 billion, even if all of those couples had only two children--the long term replacement rate.” Since most of that increase will occur in the overstressed poor world, the proclamation of the end of the population crisis is strategic myopia. The United Nations projects that world population will reach 9.4 billion by 2050 and nearly 11 billion eventually.

Note that I refer to the “poor world,” not to “the third world.” It is no longer meaningful, I submit, to divide the world up numerically into first, second, third, etc. If we insist on the numbers we would have to admit that there are third world sections, often based very much on color lines, in our first world. Briefly the problem is this. 82 percent of the world’s wealth goes to the top 20 percent. The remaining 18 percent is divided among the starving remainder of humanity. In ancient Israel and in the Jesus movement, the poor are the apple of God’s eye. Obsession with the contemporary plight of the poor is the heart of any Christian orthodoxy and any reform of ministry. If you talk about reconciliation and human rights and ignore that ongoing holocaust, you are fiddling while the world burns.

A MINISTRY OF RECONCILIATION

Paul does us a nice favor in 2 Cor. 5, by giving us a short creed and definition of Christian orthodoxy. Unlike the later post-biblical creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, this creed has only three articles. It starts with the assertion that God was in Christ Jesus. (That would be a bit too unexclusive to satisfy the Nicaeans but it served the vigorous Corinthian church fine.) Secondly, God's passion is the work of reconciliation. Thirdly, and here is where all Christians get ordained, God has given all Christians a ministry of reconciliation. There it is; orthodoxy and ministry defined tout court. I make bold to commend my *The Moral Core Of Judaism And Christianity* (Fortress, 1993) for a fleshing out of the rich unfoldings of the biblical ministry of reconciliation. Briefly here, let me assert that the ministry of reconciliation is conceived as a mission to the heart. Ministry is mainly a work of conversion, and the prophets set the tone.

The important concept of conversion has fallen victim to individualism. Conversion of socially entrenched valuations is an area needing attention if this earth is not to die, and our religions are not yet even amateurs at it. Old Israel drew the broad lines for a social psychology of conversion. The foundation is this: prophecy, the effort to supplant the dominant consciousness with an alternative social consciousness, seeks a revolution in affect. The target is "the heart." (Isa. 51:7; Jer. 4:4; 4:14; 31:35; Amos 6:6) Israel knew that moral knowledge is born in the affections. The foundational moral experience is the experience of the value of persons and of this privileged earth. Valuational patterns anchored by interests real or imagined will not be changed by information or reasons unless these move the heart. Technical intelligence has so impressed us Westerners that our epistemology is distorted. We think of knowing in fleshless terms and wonder if computers can do it. The ancients were not so shallow.

For major cultural change--culture being what people love and hate collectively--there must be seismic affective shifts. For suggestive starters we can follow the prophets through four doorways into the heart: delight, anger, tears, and mind-blowing shock. Those who can effect these affective miracles are by their very talent ordained to do so.

Delight is a form of pleasure shock. Aquinas mistakenly traced it to dilatatio in Latin which means stretching or broadening. It was a happy mistake. Delight stretches us so we can receive a new and congruent good. This can be verified because when delight stretches us to new awareness, the stretching is sometimes so great it produces tears. Orgasm and pain produce the same grimace. There are practical conclusions to this. Without the stretching caused by delight there is no learning. Theology, preaching, or liturgy that does not delight leaves us as it found us, or worse. No delight, no growth was Thomas' point. The literary power that pulses from Micah to the Psalms to the Sermon on the Mount give us lessons on delight-filled, passionate teaching. Cor ad cor loquitur; only the heart speaks to the heart. All true learning is a passionate eureka! Neurophysicists tell us that emotion is the key to lasting memory. It is also the key to moral growth. Boring, pedantic theology, dry sermons, rote religious education anathema sitis!

Anger bristles through the prophets, and why not? The biblically astute Thomas said that anger looks to the good of justice, so that those who do not have it in the face of injustice, love justice too little. Thomas loved John Chrysostom's dictum. "Whoever is not angry when there is cause for anger, sins!" Therapeutic culture

sees anger as a malady to be cured. Prophecy sees it as the awakening of the soul and the passionate key to conversion.

Tears. We have everything to fear from the tearless. The old Catholic liturgy had a prayer begging the gift of tears. This prayer used to befuddle me as a young victim of our jejune Anglo- Saxon culture. The prayer begged divine power to break through the duritiem, the impenetrable hardness of our hearts and bring forth a saving flood of tears. Unless “our eyes run with tears and our eyelids be wet with weeping,” we will come to a “fearful ruin.” (Jer. 9:18-19)

Finally, shock. Shock specialists is what the prophets were and what ministers and priests have to be. Simple, sensible approaches won't do it and so the prophets turned bizarre and eccentric. Isaiah wandered around “naked and barefoot” for three years. (20:2-4) Micah was also drawn to the stalker tactic: “Therefore I must howl and wail and go naked...” (1:8) The nudity caught on. When Saul stripped himself naked the people asked: “Is Saul also among the prophets?” (1 Sam. 19:24) Jeremiah harnessed himself to a yoke and was seen, understandably enough, as a “madman.” (27:2-3;29:26) Ezekiel cut off his hair with a sword and scattered it to the winds. (5:1-2) Jesus was so intemperate he was seen as “a prophet like one of the old prophets.” (Mark 6:15) He was a scandal because as Walter Brueggeman says he violated “propriety, reason, and good public order.” And so did they all. Ministry must always be against the grain.

To what end all this outrageousness? The prophets intuited that only outrage speaks to outrage. Outrageous insensitivity is thick-shelled. Only shock gets through. The Berrigans spoke and no one listened; they burned government records and were heard. Martin Luther King preached and enjoyed anonymity; he led a boycott and was killed by the overwhelming impact. Notice that it is not either/or, but both/and. The Berrigans continued to speak, and King continued to preach with even more effect until he met a prophet's death. Prophecy is essentially eccentric, coming from the Greek, outside the center. The center is where the addicts of comfort and safety dwell. Prophecy leaves them and pushes to the edges where new horizons can be seen. Resistance to the dominant consciousness anchored as it is in ill-gotten privilege is the essence of prophetic eccentricity and the prime goal of Christian ministry.

These four hints on how to move the tectonic plates of our cognitive affectivity present huge challenges to our inbred stoicist epistemology and to any rethinking of the meaning of ministry. They threaten our confidence in logic and technique. They call attention to our almost total neglect of the constitutive role of affect in all moral and religious understanding and hence in all religious and moral education. They reveal our poverty in the realm of ritual and liturgy. We are queasy when we hear that Hindu ecologists use dance, song, art, and drama more than lectures to raise ecological literacy and develop social conscience. (EuroAmerican Catholics are, perhaps, a rather frigid, poetically limited bunch, and the enforced celibacy of the clergy did not help.)

CONCLUSION

Can any of this essential reimagining of the church---and nothing less than that is needed-- with a consequent rethinking of ministry--be done in the Roman Catholic church of today? Possibly, but only on a very local basis. Vatican power can reach even into this Congress of the International Federation of Married Catholic Priests

and silence the prophetic voice of Bishop Remi De Roo. Other communities born of Jewish and Christian spirituality may offer more promising venues for reform. Mature people will make varying decisions on that. At any rate it must be said that those Catholics who look for reform from a new pope or a new bishop are mistaken.

When I taught at Trinity College in Dublin, one of my colleagues was a Presbyterian theologian named Terrence McCaughy. He was present in a conversation among Dublin Catholics who were all expressing hope that the next archbishop of Dublin would be a progressive. We were in a pub at the time and the sanctifying grace of stout was promoting candor. "I hope the next archbishop is not at all progressive," said Terrence. "I hope he is just awful. Then maybe you Catholics will finally live up to your baptismal promise of maturity and start reshaping this church yourselves." I commend to you this McCaughy Presbyterian Irish wisdom.

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