

Living the Priestly Heart
(Taken from Chapter 5 of David Ranson, “The Paschal Paradox: A meditation on contemporary priestly life,” (St. Pauls Publications, 2009)

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Feed my lambs.’ A second time he said to him, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ He said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Tend my sheep.’ He said to him the third time, ‘Simon son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’ (John 21:15-17)

Some time ago I came across this account of the film *Black Robe*. The main character in the story is a young missionary, part of the European expansion into Canada. He is named as Paul Laforgue, and he saw his mission as one to convert the Canadian Indians to Christianity. He was a sensitive and cultured man and at first seemed unable to appreciate the people to whom he had come to minister, people who lived in a Huron village 1500 miles from Quebec.

At some stage on a journey away from the village in which he was based, however, another tribe, the Iroquois, captured him. Eventually, he escaped. Full of doubt and despair, broken and overwhelmed with the sense of his own fragility, he arrives back at the village that in the meantime has become stricken with fever and European disease. For the first time, Laforgue sees the Indians as people, not just as a category of ‘souls to be saved’. He appears more vulnerable; his eyes convey compassion. His defences are down. He is powerless and poor.

The Huron Chief comes up to Laforgue and asks him a question. Surrounded by the sick of the village, the warriors and the medicine man, he asks, ‘Do you love us?’¹

The chief is asking in other words: ‘Will you now enter into communion with us as we are, today, in our neediness, in our disbelief, in our desperation? For this is the test as to whether you are truly with us, for us.’

‘Do you love us?’ This is the question of all of us. It is one of the deepest hungers of our heart: to know that, precisely in our neediness, in our brokenness, in our sin, we are loved.

The risen Christ, in his Body, the church – the community ‘rereading the scriptures with him in mind, the Church repeating his gestures in memory of him, the Church living the sharing between brothers and sisters in his name’² – continues to stand before us, and ask, ‘Do you love me?’

¹ Unhappily, I am not able to trace the source from which I sourced this account of the film.

² Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A sacramental reinterpretation of Christian existence* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995) 154.

As we hear this question, given us now from the communities to which we belong, we are brought to our priestly heart and its spirituality.

Being prepared to stand in our confusion, our fear, our struggle – our own empty tomb – being prepared to risk and let go, even of that which we had thought most precious, and ready to be blessed by a new experience of hospitality to what has come towards us unexpectedly, we are given back our heart.

Our heart is given us, though, only through such a paschal experience, and not despite it, or apart from it. Only now, then, can we reclaim the heart of who we are as priests: that which inspired us as boys and which still enfires us in our twilight; that which we practise in the complexity of an urban parish and, equally, in the relative obscurity of retirement.

Over the last several years, I have worked with various groups of priests around Australia, seeking to assist them to identify the core of their priestly heart. I have done this through leading them to listen deeply to their experience, and to identify the moments in the course of their priestly ministry in which they have felt most 'awake'.

'Becoming awake' is how I have come to like to understand the core of spirituality. The term 'spirituality', generally, is an incorrigibly difficult one to define – especially today when it enjoys (or suffers from) such populist currency.

In my work I have sought a definition that both does justice to the traditional and religious framework in which the spiritual life has been treated over the centuries, on the one hand, and acknowledges the pervasive contemporary interest in spirituality, on the other. I have found the definition that promises to engage both a perspective 'from above' and one 'from below' best resides in the experience of 'awakening'.³

Spirituality awakens us; it is the dimension of our lives that works to awaken us and to keep us awake to the deepest currents and springs of life. Indeed, in one of his characteristic drawings, the cartoonist Michael Leunig once portrayed one of the clearest definitions of the spiritual life that I have come across. In his portrayal, he has his figure, eyes wide open, haversack over his shoulder, following his duck (a symbol of the soul for Leunig), on a journey over what at first looks like mountain peaks. But close analysis of the picture reveals the mountain peaks actually to be the noses of the upturned faces of people that are asleep.

I have interpreted this drawing as Leunig's inimitable way of declaring a truth that has become dear to me: the spiritual person is the one who lives their life awake, whilst the rest of the world slumbers. It is not surprising that elsewhere, Leunig prays, 'God awake us, and awaken with us'.⁴

Being spiritual means to be attentive to life – especially to the awakening moments that occur in our lives. These are the moments that, by their nature, draw us into a new way of seeing life. The awakening moments are experienced positively or negatively. They

³ See David Ranson, *Across the Great Divide: Bridging spirituality and religion today* (Strathfield, NSW: St Pauls Publications, 2002).

⁴ Michael Leunig, *The Prayer Tree* (Melbourne, VIC: HarperCollins, 1990).

come at times of great joy, or they come at a time of great sadness, such as at the loss of someone we love, a profound failure, or a difficult prognosis relating to our health.

Yet, in each of these awakening moments there is an invitation. To be spiritual is to be able to hear the invitation in these moments and to respond to the invitation. To be spiritual in our life is to hear the deepest potential contained in these moments, to be faithful to that potential and to act on it. It is worthwhile for us, from time to time, to think back on what have been the most significant awakening moments in our lives and to reflect on how they have continued to shape us. Or have they been forgotten and simply relegated to interesting but distant memories?

When we are able truly to hear the invitation that is given to us in the awakening moments of our lives then we do as Peter does in the gospel: we are casting our nets into the deep (cf. Luke 5:4). We are casting our nets into the unexpected places, discovering there far more than we ever imagined.

Lest we think that such an understanding of spiritual maturity is a late invention, I wish to contend that the metaphor of 'awakening' lies at the heart of the gospel. There, it is our encounter with the risen Jesus that awakens us. He is the One who comes to greet us, and who calls us 'to come and see' (cf. John 1:39).

The risen Christ, in the Spirit, continues to open our eyes and our ears so that we might see and hear, might listen more deeply, and might perceive more fully the truth of ourselves, of the world and of the divine promise that is offered us (cf. Matt 13:14-16). The risen Christ awakens us to the depth and to the height, to the entire breadth, of our humanity and our divine vocation (cf. Eph 3:16-19). Our discipleship of the risen Christ demands that we 'stay awake' in constant expectation of the varied ways in which his approach is incarnated within our experience (cf. Matt 24:42; 25:13; Mark 13:33, 35).

The Spirit thus 'rouses us from our slumber', from our passivity and inertia, and brings refreshed vision and new energy.⁵ It is St Paul who reminds us that we 'do not live in the dark' for '[we] are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake' (1_Thess 5:4-6; cf. Rom 13:11).

Thus, the paschal mystery finds its vitality in the way that the Spirit leads us from our slumber into a life that is fully awake. The Pentecostal miracle is the transformation of slumber, the New Testament metaphor for fear, into wakefulness, which is its metaphor for love.

What are those moments of 'wakefulness' and of 'love' in our own priestly experience? What are those moments in which we experience the risen Christ standing before us, in his Body, the community, confronting us with the question, 'Do you love me?', and thus awakening us to love in return? These moments will disclose to us the nature of our diocesan priestly spirituality.

⁵ This theme is eloquently explored by Jürgen Moltmann in his book, *The Spirit of Life: A universal affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992).

From the various groups with which I have worked, I would like to identify seven such moments that I believe reveal the diocesan priestly heart. In so doing, I am particularly grateful to the priests of the Dioceses of Broken Bay and Parramatta, and the Archdiocese of Brisbane. We come to the 'enfirement' of our hearts as diocesan priests:

1. in moments of sacramental celebration, particularly at the moment of eucharistic epiclesis and doxology, and in the recognition of the presence of Christ the physician in our celebration of reconciliation and anointing;
2. in our identification with, and in our building up of, community, through the incorporation of others into the community, and as our ministry gives shape and purpose and meaning to the community;
3. in our breaking open the Word for others, in the exercise of our preaching that strengthens the faith of others;
4. in the experience of being a privileged part of our people's lives – the 'little people' particularly – especially at the contingent moments:
 - at birth, in the celebration of new life at baptism;
 - at death, in the celebration of funerals;
 - in the journey of preparation for marriage;
 - in our accompaniment of those who are ill;recognising the goodness of others, their sustained commitment, and their trust of us – particularly with their own moments of transcendence;
5. in the fraternity shared with other priests, and in our relationships more generally;
6. in the experience of our own weakness, vulnerability and need of forgiveness accepted by God and others; and
7. at the times of our own celibate solitude, in prayer and recollection, in which we recognise the emptiness of celibacy as the space of rich hospitality.

At these 'moments' we recognise the presence of the risen Christ with us. At these moments our hearts burn within us as priests – as they did for the disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:32). They are the 'moments' that keep awakening us, as priests, to the deepest currents of life and those that ground us with a sense of purposeful passion. These are the genuine priestly moments of our life, the moments in and through which the one priest, the true priest, Christ, stands before us and asks, 'Do you love me?'

These moments will continue, too, to be the way of holiness for us, as diocesan priests. Our holiness as priests will be manifest to the extent that we have given ourselves in ever deeper ways to these daily moments, stayed with these moments, and allowed them to be sacramental of Christ's presence to us, and sacramental of his continuing call to us.

Standing on the shores of our own lake of Tiberias, the risen Christ, through his dialogue with us in his Body, the church, invites us to reconsider these moments, to own them in an ever deeper way.

For us, as diocesan priests, it will be the parish, where this heart continues to be exercised. The parish is our spiritual home – however parishes might be imagined in the future. The parish of the future will be different from that in the past, and we will need to envisage our leadership of the parish of the future in different ways from those in the past. As indicated above, our leadership will, at the very least, need to be seen within the exercise of a community of ministries.

It is a good opportunity, then, to reflect on the importance and the spirituality of the parish for us. The parish is, for us, that shore of the lake of Tiberias where the risen Christ waits to awaken us and sustain us in wakefulness. Again, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin recently provided a worthwhile comment on this:

The parish of the future? I have no concrete model, because there is no one-size-fits-all model. There will be various models. No individual model, no individual spirituality, no one strategy or structure has a monopoly role in the Church. We need to be open to new models, diverse models.

This does not mean encouraging exclusiveness or sectarianism among movements or ecclesial groups. The parish must become the primary place in which these various communities will come together in communion. The parish will be a community of communities. It will be that place open to all, where all will come together, with different talents, with different charisms, with different individual God-given capacities and bring them to the one table, the one sacrifice which embraces, nourishes and saves....

Parishes face huge challenges. The ones which rise to the occasion with innovative responses do well; the parishes which remain closed in on themselves, where there is no conversation, not even among priests, are those where signs of tiredness are patently in evidence.⁶

In reflecting on the importance of the parish as our spiritual home as diocesan priests, I refer to recent work by Daniel Ang. In a reflection about parish life Ang acknowledges that:

Parishes are extraordinarily complex realities. Indeed, we remind ourselves of the distinct constitution and concerns of urban and rural parishes, the many social, economic, historical, and cultural influences that shape the life of these communities ... The practical activities of the parish are also manifold in character and degree, and include the support of ministries and devotional practices, management of significant financial and human resources, decisions regarding maintenance and mission, execution of legal responsibilities, the development of relationships with associated schools, social service agencies, information and referral services, and responsibilities to the diocese and the broader Church, as

⁶ Diarmuid Martin, 'The Parish: A new mission field' (speaking notes) Melbourne, VIC, 11 July 2007. See <http://dublindiocese.ie/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=687&Itemid=372>.

well as to the local community in which the parish proclaims and lives its faith.⁷

But even in the face of such complexity, Ang identifies the central importance of the parish in our life of discipleship:

It is in the parish then that the self-promise of God is made palpable and readily encountered in the world by the vast majority of Catholic people. It is most especially in its celebration of the Eucharist, the most intensive event of the Church's life, that the parish fully realises and makes apprehensible the one Church as a sacrament of Christ, 'who is the light of the world, from whom we go forth, through whom we live, and toward whom our whole life strains' (*Lumen Gentium* 3).

... it is by *this* moment, *this* community, *this* people, that the extraordinariness of the Christian event, Jesus Christ, manifests itself.

This brings us to the spiritual essence and possibility that parish communities forever hold. As Ang observes, 'What lies at the heart of each and every parochial community is not simply a geographical jurisdiction but a fundamental network of relationships'. Therefore:

... prior to initiatives and well-made plans, the parish itself is called to be characterised by intimate relationships of fundamental trust and openness, infused by what John Paul II describes as a 'spirituality of communion.' This way of being and becoming, properly ecclesial and concretised in the local, historical community, involves the recognition of the indwelling mystery of the Trinity as at the heart of the Church's communion, in particular the deepest agency of the Spirit in the relationships and events of community life. This spirituality promotes an intense commitment to listening and availability to all the faithful.

Parishes are, therefore, where we, as diocesan priests, experience the invitation to that communion which is the mystery at the heart of the triune Mystery.⁸ Indeed, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* calls us those 'responsible for a community and . . . [men] of communion'.⁹ This is our diocesan vocation and what it means to be the indispensable sacramental embodiment of the community's priesthood, spoken of above. Others may have other ways by which we journey into that triune Mystery of promise, but we are those who will do so within local parishes – even in their very complexity and ambiguity.

Yet, in all their complexity and ambiguity, their confusion and sometimes apparent mayhem – and perhaps precisely because of these very factors – parishes are an essential ecclesial revelation and expression. As Ang affirms:

⁷ Daniel Ang, 'The Living Catholic Parish', draft paper, March 2008.

⁸ On the spirituality of communion underscoring parish life, see also Francis Cardinal Stafford, 'The Parish: a "Spirituality of Communion"', in *Mission and Evangelisation*, Michael A. Hayes, ed. (London: Burns and Oates, 2004) 81-102.

⁹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 43.

... parishes admit a deeper and dynamic relationality between persons which comes as both gift and calling, an invitation to continually press toward the fullness of God's Trinitarian life. Only such a spirituality can discern the riches of contrast and the impairment of contradictions, embrace legitimate difference, without dissolving them into officious consensus, and achieve coherence while remaining open to the destabilising power of the prophetic. A mature spirituality of communion and catholicity in our parishes sets a task for each member of the community – that is, the project of ongoing receptivity to the Spirit which speaks not to individuals in isolation but to, and through, a people of faith in mutual relationship with one another.

Of course, the promotion of a spirituality of communion is not to propose a utopian vision that skirts the struggles of parish life or downplays the centrality, or urgency, of its mission in the world. As a pilgrim people, we are only too aware that our communities will remain unfinished and imperfect, '[traveling] through trial and tribulation until we arrive at the light which knows no setting' (*Lumen Gentium* 9).

In parish life, however, we are particularly brought to that experience of ambiguity between a pastoral reality, on the one hand, and an eternal insight, on the other, as I spoke of above, and which I suggested constantly recurs in our priestly and pastoral experience. As Ang observes:

As a crucible of flesh and blood human beings, the parish will inevitably be subject to a measure of natural tension and misunderstanding in communal life, and even the apparent monotony that can accompany the exercise of lasting commitment. In fact, a degree of alienation or dissatisfaction will always result of our membership of any body or organisation that exceeds our control.

In this complexity and ambiguity of parish life – on the one hand, so fraught with tension and misunderstanding as people struggle in the experience of community, yet, on the other hand, containing this extraordinary potential to be mirrors of the communion of relationships which is characteristic of the triune Life – we come up against what I call the 'scandal of resurrected life': the risen Christ incarnates, enfleshes in an historical reality that which can be experienced with such ambiguity.¹⁰

This scandal can be too confronting for those who want a risen Christ presented in an immediate, ethereal – kind of 'unblemished' – way. If we want to touch the risen Christ we must be prepared to confront an all too human reality: the present community of disciples, the church. Again, the gospel texts are clear: the risen Christ remains the crucified One, the wounded One.

This, indeed, can be a difficult word for those of us who may have personally experienced the church, institutionally, not as a conduit for a discovery of the risen Christ but rather as an obstacle. Yet, theologically, this stumbling, stuttering, motley group of

¹⁰ See David Ranson, 'Meeting the Resurrected Christ', *The Furrow* 56 (November 2005) 610-16.

people, full of idiosyncrasy, vulnerability and ambiguity remains *the* sacrament of the risen One. Thus, our desire to greet the risen One meets a challenge: Can we love the church in all its paradox?

This paradox has been powerfully expressed in a number of ways. Bishop Geoffrey Robinson, former auxiliary bishop in Sydney, once declared, 'Nothing is more beautiful, nor more ugly than the Catholic Church'.¹¹ Such declarations can be shocking. They are *meant* to shock us, jolting us from the illusion that the risen Christ meets us without ambiguity.

As diocesan priests we have a particular genius to enter into this paradox. Our spirituality is forged out of holding it; and in some ways we are to be its guardians. On a daily basis, we enter into this paradox, enabling it to work, not only for ourselves but for others. Living in the belly of paradox is our spiritual heart.

What is it, though, that enables us to do so – especially at those times when the tension of the paradox seems to be too great, overwhelming, threatening to rupture instead of being held together?

The quality of our love. We cannot be those 'men of communion' unless we are men of love. We, therefore, come back to the question with which we began: Do you love me? This is not only the question Christ asks of us directly. It is the question that he asks us in his risen Body, the church. It is the question we are asked from the midst of our communities, with all their imperfection and inadequacy.

We are called to become men who can love, and who, by our loving, witness to the risen Christ. We must be careful, therefore, that we do not fall victim to what enabled Edward Hoagland to remark:

I tend to gaze quite closely at the faces of priests I meet on the street to see if a lifetime of love has marked them noticeably. Real serenity or asceticism I no longer expect, and I take for granted the beefy calm that often goes with Catholic celibacy, but I am watching for the marks of love and often see mere resignation or tenacity.¹²

Standing on our own shore of Tiberias, we need more than resignation or tenacity. If we are going to be able to answer the question that the risen Christ poses us there, we will need to be men of passion. Of this passion there can never be enough. And we can be men characterised by passion only if we are men who love.

Arthur Jones relates a poignant story that James Moroney tells about himself. As a young priest, Moroney was to give a homily at Santa Susanna's, the American church in Rome:

¹¹ The full force of this statement is given elucidation in Geoffrey Robinson, *Confronting Power and Sex in the Catholic Church: Reclaiming the Spirit of Jesus* (Mulgrave, VIC: John Garratt Publishing, 2007).

¹² Quoted in Wilkie Au, *By Way of the Heart* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990) 141.

'I was convinced,' he [Moroney] said, straightfaced, 'that as soon as I opened my mouth a fire would ignite faith upon this earth, that people in far-off lands would fall to their knees and be converted.

I began preaching. After about five to ten minutes, I noticed people pinching their babies to make them cry and setting off their wrist watch alarms. I got angry. I was so furious that I don't think I even listened to the last two pages of my text as I gave it.'

Mass done, he went back to meet his preaching mentor, Fr Jaime Madrid, at the North American College in Rome. 'How did it go?' Fr Madrid asked. And Moroney replied: 'It was one of the worst experiences of my life.' Madrid asked, 'What do you mean?'

'They're stupid,' Moroney answered. 'They didn't understand a word of what I said.'

Madrid said, 'Did you love them?'

'No', said Moroney. 'What do you mean, did I love them? I was casting pearls before swine.'

Madrid repeated, 'Did you love them?'

Moroney said, 'No, I didn't love them.'

Madrid told him: 'If you don't love them, you don't have a right to open your mouth.'¹³

¹³ See Arthur Jones, 'The Good Liturgy Guide', *The Tablet* (17 January 1998) 74.