

CONFESSIONS OF AN OLD PRIEST

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(On July 11, 2006, Fr Hugh Murray CM spoke at a " Spirituality in the Pub" Session at Goulburn NSW. The topic for the evening was "Living a Life of Faith -Reflections of an Old Catholic Priest".. The article below contains the substance of the material shared that evening).

When I was celebrating having been a priest for fifty years, I was forced to examine my conscience about many things. One of them was a careful look to see whether what I said conformed to what I believed.

Those ancients among you who have known me throughout the ages, might well say that it was about time. I have enjoyed being a kind of a rebel, and there have been many things the Church does and says that cause me disquiet.

Good News and Bad News

Probably, it would be good to state right now that I still consider myself a Catholic. This must be good news for people who think like I do, and bad news for the ultra-orthodox. The good news is that there is plenty to argue about and discuss in the sometimes waffly, and sometimes just plain wrong data, that emanates from the bureaucracy of the Catholic Church whether it be at Parochial or Pontifical level, or anywhere in between.

The bad news for the many who will not think things through, is that one of the Anointed of the Lord does not have the whole of Truth, and

Confessions of an Old Priest

must be considered as a suspect in his not following the current party line.

One of the reasons for my not being a Pastor of a flock is that I have a strong distaste about taking an oath on matters that are not yet clear or merely hypothetical.

Not so long ago, I spoke to a group of people about these matters. To preclude possible scandal, I opted to address them not as priest, but as an old man telling the story of his journey. I was not preaching about what was right or wrong but was stating simply the nature of the meanderings of this old mind.

An Other Country Experience

I suppose it all started some thirty years ago when I went to another country to study counselling. Here are some of the good things about that.

I was in my forties, not too old for this dog to learn new tricks. I was away from familiar places and people with which, and with whom, I had developed a culture of life and beliefs. Some wonderful teachers presented me with new thought. I was exposed, by psychological insights, to a me I had never met before. I was compelled, by being in a big new world, to take responsibility for the existent me. My teaching in a foreign school and practicing some of my new skills in a London psychiatric hospital completed the study. It was a wonderful time to be alive.

Tom Stoppard modified that last half line in this way: “It’s the best possible time to be alive, when almost everything you thought you knew is wrong.”

Confessions of an Old Priest

The last thirty years has been spent in trying to check out truth to the extent that this aging mind has been able.

When I was a seminarian, we had a Rector who got very cross indeed if he found that one's reading was confined to one's textbooks. I must confess that this suited me very well. Had I been more diligent with the textbooks, you may not be reading this today. One of the subjects we had to study (at the age of 18) was Cosmology. The mystery of *Creatio ab Aeterno* quite eluded me although its impossibility seemed quite clear to the Ancient Greeks. One of those who taught me Philosophy is still alive. I think he is still shaking his head about the intransigence and obtuseness of those who could not or would not grasp the wisdom of the ages.

Perhaps it is time to stop dwelling on the very distant past, and hark back to the times when I came home from abroad. I was sent to be a schoolteacher and found myself involved once more in the essence of matter.

Piece by piece, in that thirty years, I have become intrigued by the way we take measure of matter. I have become enthralled by the magnitude and microtude of things other than the ideas of the mind. I have come to be so unsure of the certainty of the senses and to wonder at the mystery of what is, or was, or whatever may be.

Grasping at Reality

The last hundred years or so have witnessed the cleverness and the bitchiness, and the madness of the very gifted. We mere mortals have done our best to grasp the concept of more than three dimensions, to encapsulate the apparent reality of unlocality, to comprehend the notion of the Big Bang and Black Holes. From all of these, there seems no escape, nor, for me, escape from the fairly fixed belief that Behind

Confessions of an Old Priest

It All, is MIND minding and BEING being. This and ALL else is mystery.

Some years ago, I tried to put some of this in verse:

Relativity

I think somehow God stretched himself,
Reflecting, as the Godhead could,
While Love smiled and Thought could see
What They with some Other, yet might be.

Then moment came, time matrix wrought,
Space made for Another who knowing naught,
Grew in time, so vast, so vain,
To think naught else was there to reign.

And then the New-Thought stretched itself,
Reflecting (as evolved it could),
On stars that far outstretched the mind:
Out There The Other did it find.

We little knew time-space was bent,
That Thinker, Thought, and Love-Who's- Sent
Meant us be present while They played:
The Thinker, Thought, and Love, arrayed.

That seeing God reflect might mean
Much mystery solved and bond between;
That We and They, thrice wholly bound,
Could risk to share some holy ground;

Confessions of an Old Priest

That We and God might share delight,
That risk be made to give insight,
To let the One hear Other's say,
And love to show each other's way.

Theological Education from Owner's Manuals

My upbringing was patriarchal, in a modified Australian way. God was Father, Jesus was Son, and The Holy Spirit seemed to drift between. I do not think I had ever seen a Bible until I was seventeen. I certainly did not grow up with the concept of Bible being literally true. My studies for priesthood were taking place at a time when the Catholic world was just starting to accept that it did not possess all Biblical Knowledge. There were hints that Others had access to scholarship.

We had theological manuals not unlike Owner's Manuals provided by carmakers of today. Above all, they announced at the head of each page that This was totally Certain, This, a little less so, this, one could accept or reject at will. The Proof Texts were "dug up" out of the Bible. Context seemed to matter very little. There was no room for doubt. Examination tested the ability to regurgitate rather than to ruminate.

The ensuing years brought broader minds and methods, but the implied certainties of the formative years were protected by what we call today "Catholic Guilt". How dare one doubt the wisdom and communication with the Lord shared by Visionaries and The Fathers (rarely The Mothers) of the Church and some remarkable Nutters. Bit by bit, what counted was not necessarily what was true, but what This Eminent Author thought or That Distinguished Writer held

The Futility of Experts

It has been said that where half a dozen Rabbis gather, there one has at least fifteen opinions, all of them based on solid tradition. It seems to me that Catholicism has gone the same way, but the number of the Thinkers has diminished, and that the Books that are Read and Quoted from are all “in house”. Have we huddled around them to a point where we are no longer aware that the Sun has Set or even that the Sun Is.

The English speaking world has been waiting for some years for the Experts to do a decent translation from Latin of the texts of the Mass. The Experts are still fighting and the day is coming soon when wearied brains have given in and we are to be afflicted with “And with thy spirit.” And “that the Son is CONSUBSTANTIAL with the Father” whatever that might mean to the few youth that still frequent our Churches.

Never mind the few youth. I have some passing acquaintance with Greek philosophy that allows me to have some knowledge of what we are reciting. As for the truth, I might have some closer concept were I more certain of what substance means.

Despite well-meaning attempts to have it otherwise, I think that the Church has not propounded any “de Fide” truths on moral matters. But listening to some homilies or reading some Pastoral Letters, one could be forgiven for thinking that there is no room for further understanding.

It is my belief that we, the Official Church, have been guilty of imposing beliefs and attitudes totally at odds with the Coming of the Kingdom. Her, our, treatment of Sex has some beautiful things to say but at the terrible expense of the rights of human beings who do not fit the “establishment” paradigm.

Face to Face with the Big Questions

The extent of the brainwashing I felt I had endured, did not become clear until an occasion a few years ago when I had a cardiac arrest. Fortunately, it happened in hospital during an attempt to insert a stent.

I understand from those who were around me at the time, that the incident took about fifteen minutes to resolve. In many minds, I was clinically dead, but when I became myself again, whatever that might mean, I found myself bound and burdened by my life story, to the extent that I wondered why God had not loved me enough to show me something of the Heavenly Court, or the sound of music and the peel of welcoming bells. Did God hate me to a point that I was to be excluded forever? Was I really such a bastard? Was there really a God? Was there some existence hereafter?

The questions plagued me for years. I began to challenge in my mind, everything that I had been told. I found myself unable to think of God as Father, but as Being. I challenged even the way I said Grace, and spent unimaginable ages at Mass muttering against a Creed that I was beginning to think was mostly nonsense.

I read books that assured me that the only language I could use for and about God was analogy. My prayer became just a wondering, thoughtful, loving contemplation about God who wondered, thought and lovingly contemplated the results of sharing his/her/their Being. Here indeed was mystery. What a total waste of time and effort thinking it was graspable. Over the years, doubt about explanation has been compounded. The idolatrous idea that I might fully grasp any truth, has been laid to rest.
