

The Thirty-third

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

BEATING THE BOUNDS:

Parish Ministry and Spirituality Today

delivered by

The Revd Richard Coles

Cleric, Broadcaster and former Communitarian

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and

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The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)

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BEATING THE BOUNDS:

Parish Ministry and Spirituality Today

Early in my church career, I was appointed Lecturer at Boston Stump. The post was a hangover from the fractious days of the seventeenth century, when Puritans attempted to exercise control of parish churches by putting in their own men as Second Presbyters, or Lecturers. Archbishop Laud dealt crisply with them before they dealt even more crisply with him. He once visited Boston Stump, where one of his successors in the See of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, was one of my predecessors in the Lecturer's Stall (and an honorary fellow of this college). Ramsey was perhaps the most luminous clergyman the Church of England produced in the twentieth century, and his little book *The Christian Priest Today* was very influential in the formation of Anglican parish clergy from the 70s on. Although eclipsed in our very different world, it is of enduring interest, I would say, and it certainly had a big impact on me at theological college thirty years after it was published. I felt greatly honoured when I arrived at Boston, to sit where Ramsey sat, and to talk to people who remembered him from those days. Mr Fox, who had sung in the choir for seventy years, was prepared for confirmation by him in the 1930s. "Wow! What was that like?" I asked. "I hated it," Mr Fox replied; "We couldn't understand a word he said".

The rather donnish Ramsey had been teaching in a theological college before he came to the Stump in 1937 - he soon became famous for his absentminded ways. On one occasion he realised he had left home without his keys so returned and rang the doorbell. His housekeeper, a nervous woman alone in the house, shouted from the hall "Dr Ramsey is not at home!" He replied that he was sorry to inconvenience her and would come back later. This is not a story retold in *The Christian Priest Today*, but I like to think that aspects of his experience in Boston informed his thought, and that perhaps he acquired there the insight that the priest needs to be learned in order to be simple. I certainly discovered that the intricacies of the textual transmission of the Greek text to Ephesians, so absorbing to me at that time, were not especially absorbing to the people in the pews, or not most of them, who wanted something that spoke directly to their lives and circumstances. What they wanted was a preacher who took them seriously.

This is not to say that the history of the textual transmission of Ephesians is unimportant, nor that the people of Boston don't merit a decent sermon - but it needs to connect. Not sell them short, or elide difficulty, but connect. Rowan Williams - has there been a more learned successor to Ramsey? - had the knack of doing justice to the topic, no matter

how obscure or exacting, while taking his audience seriously, whether it was Regius Professors of Divinity, theology undergraduates, the Mothers' Union, schoolchildren, or Melvyn Bragg.

We need to be learned in order to be simple. One of the great blessings of parish ministry, I have discovered, is saving theologians from ourselves, making the learned simple not by reducing the intellectually able to idiocy, but by obliging us to live and serve in mainstream life, rather than in specialist enclaves. I remember when I arrived at Finedon, my present parish, going to see a parishioner who was dying in a nursing home. He had cancer, and it had been a battle, but by now he was on a morphine driver and in and out of awareness. He was rather a traditionalist so I'd taken with the holy oil a BCP to read from the Psalter, which I knew he loved. I read a selection but when I got to the beginning of Psalm 131, *De Profundis*, "Out of the deep have I called unto thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice," he stirred and tried to say something. I pulled my chair up closer, and with great effort he said, "shut up you stupid prat". Actually he said something else, but it's not for here.

All priestly ministries adapt to circumstances. Between Boston and Finedon I was curate at St Paul's Knightsbridge, a very different sort of parish. Post-graduate preaching, if I may call it that, was part of its weekly offering, as was enthusiastic ceremony and liturgical soundness - we knew how to do that, and had the resources to do it effectively. Through building relationships of trust with people of means we were able to fundraise, and millions of pounds found their way to charities thanks to our ministry. Much harder was finding ways of exploring with the people who lived there the things that troubled them, caused them anxiety, or offered unexpected hope, for they were sometimes lost to, or obscured by, the prestige of the postcode, and the material rewards with which many in SW1 are especially blessed. How do you connect people to their deepest fears and obscurest joys when the world has already returned to them so flattering a reflection the idea that something might be wrong or missing is simply too elusive? One of my most enduring memories from that parish happened one night in the churchyard, which filled up in the hours of darkness with rough sleepers and the dramas they brought with them. The churchyard is overlooked by the Berkeley Hotel, one of the most luxurious in London, and if you were looking for contrast in the fortunes of people in the same place and at the same time this would do very well. It was especially acute that night because the G20 was on and Chancellor Merkel was staying at the Berkeley. I saw her arrive, with her phalanx of protection officers and staff, and she - clergy kid - looked over at the church yard and we looked back. How is that distance, forty yards geographically, unfathomable politically, to be parochially processed?

All points are equidistant from God, of course. But in order for us, in parish ministry, to make the worldly distance manageable we need to configure ourselves to God, to surrender ourselves in our narrow dimensions to boundless grace, not to things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, but to grace - that's easy to say but how do you actually do it? Through the discipline of prayer. That prayer is corporate, when we gather for worship on a Sunday or for a wedding or a funeral, and in it the parish priest has a particular function, as MC, or *in persona Christi*, a summariser of the concerns of the community, or as the one with the instructions, and as any religious functionary will tell you (I know this because I had exactly this conversation with the *mu'addhin* of a mosque in Cairo) making that work for others involves an element of sacrificing it for yourself. To enable others to engage in prayer, to hear the word God, to feed them with the necessary food and drink of the eucharist - *boskē ta probata mou*, feed my sheep - requires a certain detachment, the detachment of a party host, who sacrifices her own enjoyment of conversation and canapés so that others do not want for nourishment.

Because of this, the nourishment - and the challenge - of *private* prayer are especially important for priests. It seems such an obvious thing to say, that the life of a parish priest is to be nourished by prayer, but it so often isn't. Diligence in observing our canonical obligations to say Morning and Evening Prayer daily, easily sustained in theological colleges or cathedrals or great foundations or university chapels, is much harder to sustain if you have twenty minutes between a Section 48 meeting and Deanery Synod, with the insistent beep of the answerphone in the background. Unmanageable demands on one's time has been the ruin of many a poor parson, but it's not only a quantitative problem, it's a qualitative problem too. Here's Eric Abbott on the subject:

‘Whatever we may say about particular times and methods of prayer, this much is essential, that each day should have some dedicated silence in it. This is the gift of our time to God. We are to put ourselves at God's disposal in the quietness. The prayer will be dispersed throughout our day, throughout our activity, but there will be some dedicated spaces of silence.’

Invitations to Prayer: Selections from the Writings of Eric Symes Abbott, Dean of Westminster, 1959-1974. Cincinnati, USA, 1989, p. 23.

In my view silence is essential to priestly prayer. It is its heart. By that I mean prayer that follows the conscious and (perhaps with practice) unconscious effort to empty space at the centre of our being in order that it may be filled. What a paradoxical enterprise that may seem. How can we empty ourselves - the emptied self is surely no self at all? I understand it to mean turning down the hiss and static of the world, the replayed

interactions, the things that have irked us, wounded our pride, provoked our nosiness, indulged our silliness, and as they fade to try to acclimatise ourselves to a silence in which God is heard. What does that sound like? Sometimes it is the ping of returning sonar, but returning in unexpected ways. 'What would Jesus do?', we ask, and the answer is always 'not what we think' - the counterintuitive returns of prayer agree.

Sometimes we do tune in to that special frequency among the hiss and static, like spinning the dial through weird shortwave radio stations and suddenly finding the shipping forecast, its accents clear and still. But most often it is just silence. I trained for ordination at the College of the Resurrection in Mirfield, an Anglican monastic foundation, where its students live as sort of para-monks, part timers, following the monastic regime, but with Saturdays and holidays off. We may argue whether or not a thorough training in the correct use of the thurible at Solemn Evensong is essential to be a Fresh Expressions Missioner in the Skegness Coastal Cluster, but enforced silence should be on the curriculum everywhere. First, it obliges us to silence ourselves - for some, like me, noisy in the world, that should be required by law; second, it raises our awareness of how we communicate non-verbally. Very quickly, living in a monastic regime, you begin to identify people not by their speech, but by their tread, their breathing, their smell; those who are expert in it become as perceptive as poker players for the unconscious tells that reveal the strength of our hand, the weaknesses of our peers', when we are excited, when we are fearful. When I hear stories about St Jean Baptiste Vianney, the *Curé d'Ars*, patron saint of the parochial clergy, so celebrated a confessor he could tell what ailed penitents before they even opened their mouths, I suspect he acquired that skill in the silence of the seminary (and, tell it not in Gath, the supernatural ability of confessors to see into the souls of penitents, a familiar trope, may reflect the prosaic reality that people mess up their lives in predictable ways).

And enforced silence obliges us to be attentive to others, to look for their needs without requiring them to tell us what they are. Silent Breakfast, one of the great gifts of the monastic tradition to the world, obliged us to be alert for who needed the marmite, when the milk jug required refilling, that our habit of slurping our coffee is experienced by others as a crime against humanity; and enforced a politesse, or at least a truce, which triumphed even over the seething enmities of theological college.

Those enmities and what lies behind them - the obligation to confront our own sinfulness - are hard to bear. Silence again allowed for that necessary examination of self to be conducted, if not unflinchingly, then with regularity. During a particularly exacting period in my formation at Mirfield, I found it necessary to rise even earlier than normal and get to the college chapel before mattins, to spend half an hour in silence

with the blessed sacrament. A Romanian monk, with us for a term, had given me a *metanoi*, a knotted string, which, in desperation, I would pass between finger and thumb, reciting on each knot the Jesus Prayer: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner”. I recommend it. I might have become a monk myself, had I not decided to double the dose and spend half an hour before Evensong too. In the summer months, my meditative state was disrupted by the arrival of an ice cream van just beyond the monastery wall, which played ‘The Entertainer’ so jauntily and with so much distortion it was like being shaken awake by the Swingle Singers. I resented it at first, and rained silent imprecations down on Mr Whippy, but eventually began to look at it another way, as a call from the world beyond the cloister, where people eat 99s and singalong and live life in its fullness.

It was a reminder too that silence is of course not the only thing that we should consider central to our priestly lives, our lives in ministry, our lives as Christians. It has always been necessary to evacuate the temple of our souls of money changers and diversionary entertainments and self-regarding stratagems so that we may make it our father’s house: but we are also, some of us, called to step into the noise - that has never been noisier.

Sometimes it is simply deafening. I don’t know if you are familiar with Tweet Deck, but I used to have it on my laptop for the fifteen minutes before it became obsolete a couple of years ago. It allowed me to have on my screen as I worked on a document, or avoided working on a document, Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, GoogleBuzz (whatever that was) open simultaneously in a crowded *perpetuum mobile*. A news feed from the BBC sent notifications to my screen too, and if it had been something that made sense to me, I could have had stock market figures scroll along the bottom too. It was a constant stream of information, a Piccadilly Circus of relentless distraction, and the effect was not to enrich my understanding but to impoverish it. It was like speed-reading the Icelandic Sagas.

I was glad to see recently some fightback in the jam-packed bandwidth of our digital discourse. Some young Quakers in Nottingham are putting silence on line, the recorded silence of their Meeting, gently occasionally interrupted by the sound of a page turning, or a chair creaking, or a prematurely released snore. It’s called the *Silence Special* if you’re interested, and you’ll find it a Young Quakers Podcast.

I like this approach - not to eschew social media as the work of the devil, but to find ways of pitching our tents in this risky new landscape.

I feel I have some experience here. As a priest who makes his living not only in

parochial ministry but in secular employment also (I am half time, or rather half stipend, Vicar of Finedon), I have an unusual hybrid ministry. It is both familiar - BCP Choral Evensong, Deanery Synod, Mothers' Union - and unfamiliar. I work in the media and consequently have a reach which far exceeds that of most parish priests. To what extent you can describe heavy Twitter use, or being the background conversation to middle class Britain's Saturday mornings, or dancing the worst *paso doble* in *Strictly Come Dancing* history, as ministry is an interesting question, but for better or worse I have become more widely recognised than is normal for my pay grade.

One of the obligations laid on those who appear on radio and television is to maintain a presence on social media - it has become a sort of currency, which in spite of having a wildly imprecise value, everyone wants, like Bitcoin. Facebook was first, necessary when I became Chaplain to the Royal Academy of Music, for it was the only practical way to keep in contact with students. Like many people over the years for me it has become a place of contact, for friends, for the exchange of ideas, for debate, and most of the time an etiquette adequate to the challenges of the medium has evolved to keep it viable. Not always.

Twitter is much more difficult because the whole world is invited to join in. You can limit participation through blocking and muting, but I try not to, most of the time, preferring to engage rather than ignore, although sometimes I feel like the idiot who keeps getting out of his armchair to answer the door to kids playing Knock Down Ginger. My followers, as they are called, people who choose to read my tweets, number about a hundred and sixty thousand, which is sixty thousand above the amount you need for corporate interests to come after you offering money in exchange for you tweeting your enthusiasm for their products (something I have never done, but it tells you something of the influence Twitter is seen to have by people whose business it is to use influence). Perhaps more significant than its impact as a tool for the marketing of products is the influence of Social Media on the flow and perception of news - indeed, those two elements - marketing and news - have come together in ominous ways, as we discovered when the scandal broke surrounding Facebook's relationship with Cambridge Analytica and its alleged effect on the US presidential election, and the suspected use of Twitter in Russian cyber ops to the same end. Even more ominous perhaps is Twitter's significance in framing debate. It does this in ways that are obvious - the storm of indignation it can provoke so quickly and so powerfully it can put down the mighty from their thrones in under forty-eight hours - and more subtly. More and more journalists spend more and more time monitoring Twitter rather than going after stories in the field - for reasons of cost and convenience - and consequently arguments and advocates best adapted to Twitter come to shape the debate significantly. Twitter

has waxed, and looks set to wane, but by harnessing the power of the internet it has changed the world. Something else will come along in its place, and the cleverest and earliest adopters will take advantage of its peculiar technology - WhatsApp is a good example.

What has this got to do with parochial ministry? It depends on what constitutes a parish. Traditionally it is a certain population of people living in the same place to which a parson is appointed on behalf of the bishop for the cure of souls. Over the years civic and political significance as well as spiritual significance emerged in those relationships and structures. Beating the Bounds, when the parson toured the edges of the parish and whipped children as he went to impress upon the community precisely where they met the edges of the neighbouring community, demonstrated how those interests aligned.

Engaging with emerging media - broadcast, social, digital - is another form of this, I think; testing where the boundaries lie as we seek to maintain our witness to the kingdom in the structures of the world. Sometimes this is simply a matter of adding our voices to a debate - recently I have been very much engaged with a Twitter row about the use of food banks. Our church, like many others, supports a food bank; I, like many parish priests, know people who use them, including one who is in full time employment as a nurse in the NHS, but as a single mother with steeply rising childcare and housing costs, has found herself more than once using a food bank in order to feed the family. It scandalises me that a highly trained nurse in full time employment cannot afford to pay the rent and feed the family and I said so on Twitter, which started a debate about whether people in full time employment qualify as users of food banks - they do - and how typical they are of food bank users - not very - and, more broadly, what kind of a society do we want to live in and how we are to fund it. To raise those questions is *absolutely* what parish priests do, and in my own parish we have records of my predecessors doing the equivalent two hundred years ago. Bishops, of course, debate these questions very ably at a national level in the House of Lords; but Twitter is I think in some ways more influential, in that it reaches more people, and because of its power to shape national debates.

It can also shape our local debates. My ministry in Finedon has other boundaries too. I have been on the board of our local housing association for seven years, and am now its patron. It started with a transfer of social housing stock from the local authority to a social enterprise to bring the energy and know-how of the private sector to create public benefits. All things considered, it does it very well, and we have not only upgraded our properties to improve tenants' lives, but have been able to build houses and flats to meet soaring demand. It's not in my official job description as Vicar of Finedon, but instead

of just wringing my hands about the housing crisis I am actively involved in putting parishioners and local people into houses - and my public profile allows me to advocate for social housing nationally in these straitened and politically hostile times. My Twitter reach and media profile has also led to my appointment as the Chancellor of the University of Northampton, an upgraded collection of vocational colleges in local specialisms - leather technology, early years education, the automotive industry, nursing, social enterprise - so that my parishioners and others in the county and region can achieve qualifications to gear up their careers in their respective fields. Early years education has also been a priority in the parish, where we have sold land belonging to a church charity and built a nursery school so that children in the parish, who have had very different outcomes in our VA primary school depending on background, enter school more levelly equipped to engage with learning.

There are other ways in which Twitter can align the things of the kingdom with the things of this world. For example, it has become a custom for me on Good Friday to tweet the Stations of the Cross, only I do not use traditional iconography but news photographs from the previous year that strike me as illustrative. I have found that inviting others to follow Jesus' walk from judgement to burial using, this year, imagery that began with the death sentence handed down to an opposition politician in South Sudan and ended with the burial of a victim of Russian sponsored bombing of Syrian rebels in Douma, affects and moves them in unexpected ways; especially, I have found, people who are not even remotely religious, let alone churched. I think it has an impact partly because it makes spirituality - and by that I mean the apprehension in this world of the things of the next - seem not entirely irrelevant, or abstract, or quaint, to many people who would unthinkingly regard the Church of England and spirituality as unrelated categories.

I think it also expresses an immensely powerful and distinctive Christian doctrine; that human beings are irreducible in dignity. We are created in the image of God, who in spite of our extraordinary failure to understand that, empties himself to become one of us and saves us from the worst we can do. To look unflinchingly on the lowest, most degraded, most despised among us, and insist that it is God looking back at us is our most distinctive 'offer', as they say, to a culture in which humans are routinely treated as numbers, Human Resources, cost-occasioning liabilities, units of economic production, data streams, and - at worst - collateral damage.

The reason I have many followers on Twitter is because I have access to mainstream media. On Radio Four, Saturday by Saturday, after nearly ten years I have become a minor part of middle England's breakfast time, like smashed avocado on sourdough;

and through television, on panel shows like *QI* and *Have I Got News For You*, and the heavily formatted prime time shows like *Strictly Come Dancing* or *Masterchef*, I am the novelty vicar of the moment (although the admirable Kate Bottley is sure to eclipse me ere long); but it is as one of the God Slot regulars on Chris Evans' breakfast show in Radio Two, *Pause for Thought*, that priestly ministry is most recognisable. We contributors are invited to write a script of 300-400 words on something timely and of note and to deliver it live at the end of the programme to the ten million or so tuning in. I have in the past resolved to avoid the God slot for fear of being marginalised, but that was a mistake, judging from the reaction *Pause for Thought* gets from the audience, more mainstream than *Thought For The Day's* on Radio Four, and better disposed, I'd say, to hearing religious people talk shop than the *Today* programme's listeners (and presenters). A tricky consequence is that it brings to my inbox unmanageable requests for pastoral care. Technology allows us to speak directly to millions of people, but returns, via email, needs which we cannot meet. It is a notable property of radio that it sounds with peculiar intimacy in the ear of a listener and encourages a very personal feeling of connection with the speaker (which can elicit intense irritation as well as sympathy). I try to deal with this as best I can, to refer enquirers to their local clergy, but that may not be what they want. There are other pastoral demands that arise from within the places I work, where inevitably one becomes a sort of unofficial chaplain. Sometimes this is to care for colleagues in bereavement, and I have on occasions acted as a sort of translator, standing between a family, with religious expectations, and colleagues and friends and partners with none. I have also been involved in disputes at work, and am currently helping run a group which is fighting changes forced upon us by the clumsy application of tax determinations which fail to understand the reality of freelance work in broadcast media. Hostile headlines might portray this as moaning of millionaire tax dodgers, but the reality for the vast majority of people who are not well paid, is penury thanks to unforeseen and in our view unlawful and unjust tax demands, to the extent that they are losing homes, risking their mental and physical health, and obliged to use food banks to feed their families. That is a recognisable, if unauthorised, form of parochial ministry.

Putting labour disputes to one side, my work at the BBC, co-presenting *Saturday Live*, while not preaching from a pulpit, is I hope continuous in some ways with a parish priest's calling, in that it seeks to elicit from people their story, especially people whose stories have not been heard before (even if the demands of the form require that story to be delivered, even chivvied, in five minutes rather than the hour I would have with someone who came to see me in the Vicarage). I also like the way it treats on more or less equal terms the famous and the unfamous.

It is harder to see the continuity between parish ministry and *Strictly Come Dancing* (although church fêtes have inflicted plenty of dreadful, if less widely displayed, indignities on clergy). *Have I Got News For You* is tricky too, a bear pit, where politicians and comedians contend, and if you are neither, but signed up to the mission for reconciliation, you have to be very careful. You could, of course, just say no, and I do to many things, but I try to find ways of saying yes, partly because media careers require constant stoking, partly because narcissism is a hungry beast, but also because I think it is valuable to have a place in the mainstream. Say yes, if you can. It is also absorbing to try to find ways of being authentic to our calling while alert to the possibilities and risks of operating in these new environments. In this I feel like a missionary of the 1880s, sitting in the back of a canoe heading up country into the unknown, the BCP in his bag, the jungle pressing in, with strange and threatening sounds (even if in my case that would more likely be the theme tune to *I'm A Celebrity Get Me Out of Here* than the battle cry of a Bugandan warrior).

This may look like I am trying to have it both ways, trying to make sense too easily of an unshifting paradox. There is a tried and trusted way to be a parish priest - simply by being one. One of the more difficult truths of my performance in the role is that I am not around as much as I should be. "How do you fit it all in?" people ask, endlessly, and the truthful answer is by letting people down and neglecting important things.

Michael Ramsey, again:

"The Gospel you preach affects the salvation of the world, and you may help your people to influence the world's problems. But you will never be nearer to Christ than in caring for the one man, the one woman, the one child. His authority will be given to you as you do this, and his joy will be yours as well."

Michael Ramsey, *The Christian Priest Today*, London, 1972 p. 42.

And his forgiveness will be required too for the times we have failed to care adequately (there's some consolation in knowing I'm not the only one - the present Archbishop of Canterbury last year described parish ministry as so insatiably demanding it was the most stressful part of his clerical career - *The Guardian*, 10.7.17).

The parish priest is always caught between irreconcilable demands - to be the good shepherd, the tireless missionary, to preach in and out of season, to be silent, to be heroic even unto death, to be the self-effacing servant, to walk with the mighty. I think often of the example of George Herbert who walked away from the mighty and a career in the Jacobean court to become a simple country parson, the Rector of Bemerton, for three

short years before his death from consumption. We know this from the recollection of his friend Nicolas Ferrar, who set up the experimental Christian community at Little Gidding, not far from my parish, and from the wonderfully readable but perhaps not wholly reliable memoir by Izaak Walton, the angler. We may argue why he took that path, and how hagiography and the expectations of readers tidies the mess of his or anyone's life, and what boon it is to one's priestly reputation to die before you make a total mess of things, but his example is powerful. Not as powerful, however, as the body of work he left, his poems, and for which he is rightly remembered as the one of the greatest priest-poets of his age (or any age). As a parish priest myself, I think the peculiar energy of his poetry comes from the paradoxical existence Christian discipleship, priestly vocation, mission, and parochial responsibilities, obliged him to live - the ultimately unbearable tension of being called to a perfection we cannot attain ourselves. With Sir Thomas Wyatt's rather workaday poem about strumming a song of unrequited love upon his lute surely in mind, Herbert strummed his, not in a lament of love unreturned but in celebration of love fulfilled.

Awake, my lute, and struggle for thy part with all thy art.
The crosse taught all wood to resound his name, who bore the same.
His stretched sinews taught all strings, what key
Is the best to celebrate this most high day.

From George Herbert's *'Easter'*: gut under tension, braced wood, to suggest the song of glory arises from the cross, where those unbearable paradoxes arrive at their resolution. *O crux, ave, spes unica* - O hail the Cross, our only hope.

I was involved with the television series *Rev*, a serial comedy which told of the life of a parish priest in a failing central London parish. Much of the comedy and the pathos of the series came from his struggle to maintain a faithful ministry amid the growing indifference of the world. To the surprise even of BBC2, which made it, it was a great success. It surprised me too, and what I discovered was that while our doctrine and our liturgy and our place in the world may grow decreasingly interesting to everyone else, fascination with people who make the commitment to it endures, rises even. Why? Because the collapse of institutional religion does not mean the hunger it once provided for vanishes. It intensifies. Feed my sheep, Our Lord commands, so we must seek the flock wherever, it may be, in obedience to that call.
