

The Fifth

ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

delivered by

The Very Reverend Alan Jones

Dean of Grace Cathedral

San Francisco

at Westminster Abbey

on Thursday the thirty first of May, 1990

and subsequently at Lincoln Minster and Keble College, Oxford

The Eric Symes Abbott Memorial Lecture Trust was endowed by friends of Eric Abbott to provide for an annual lecture or course of lectures on spirituality. The venue for the lecture will vary between London, Oxford and Lincoln.

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Printed in Great Britain

For Their Sakes I Consecrate Myself

Priesthood and the search for a credible Catholicism

Last Christmas my family was given a holiday treat – a cruise along the Mexican Riviera from Los Angeles to Acapulco. We sailed on a British ship a few days after Christmas. On the Sunday I attended the interdenominational service led by the captain. I think he had confused the service with the burial office. There was no mention of Christmas. There were just a couple of prayers from the 1662 Prayer Book and we sang *all* the verses of *Onward Christian Soldiers*. I felt that I had wandered into a Monty Python sketch – an echo of what might have once been a religion. The sad and humbling thing was that the congregation didn't seem to notice or mind. No one was enraged or disappointed except me. I left chastened and ashamed. It made me wonder what it was that kept me in the Church at all. Why bother with it? I felt a bit like one of Iris Murdoch's lapsed priests – like someone who had ceased to bother yet wanted to try again. As her most recent fictional clergyman puts it, "I may even try to creep back into some cranny in the Anglican Church when the theologians have dismantled it all a bit more ...".¹ I would add, "And when the psychoanalysts and the mystics have made it more honest".

I am grateful for this opportunity not only to pay a debt to those who made me and keep me a believer but also to work my way through some tangled thoughts and feelings about how I stay a Christian and a priest. Like Jean Sullivan, the French Roman Catholic novelist and priest, "I write to lie a little less".² The biggest stumbling block to my belief has always been other people, yet my believing (such as it is) rests on the graciousness of others – some of whom went on believing in me when I could no longer believe in myself.

Eric Abbott is one to whom I owe such a debt. It is a privilege to be part of a tradition of which he is a distinguished representative. Others to whom I wish to say thank you are Herbert Kelly, the founder of the Society of the Sacred Mission (whom I never met), and Hugh Bishop, Principal of Mirfield when I was a student.

I want to share with you something of what has gone into the formation of my mind and heart as a priest in the context of my search – no, my longing – for a credible Catholicism. This, then, is not a lecture, in any formal sense. It is, rather, an interim report from a particular man who tries to follow Christ. This lectureship, after all, is in the memory of a particular man – a priest with his own peculiar history, his own unique sensibility. Eric Abbott believed in particularities. He believed that there was genuine divine commerce between persons. If I, therefore, tell you something of mystery, it is with the conviction that it will, in some measure, make connection with your own precisely because there is a larger story which unites us all. This, then, is a "thank-you" to Eric Abbott and others like him who have helped to form my soul, by setting it in a far larger narrative than I could have ever imagined on my own. The truth about ourselves is always elusive. That is why I would not claim that what I am telling you about myself and my experience as a priest is "true". It is simply the best I can do with what I have. Perhaps by telling it, I shall learn to lie a little less?

What of my own particularities? I am an American who was born and grew up in South London. The England of the forties and fifties was a place that, on the whole, was not sympathetic to things from across the Atlantic. It was the age of the "Ugly American" – brash and vulgar, he flaunted his post-war affluence before a struggling Europe. I grew up in a culture that was both contemptuous and envious of all things American ... not least in matters religious. I know that the nineties are not the fifties. Travel has brought us closer together and we all know that the ugliness of tourists isn't confined to the Americans. There is an emerging sense of a world community. We really are becoming one people. Prejudices have largely fallen away in most things although I

suspect that the one place where they linger on this side of the Atlantic is in the area of religion. After all, I come from the land of the vulgar and sweaty tele-evangelists.³

I want you to understand that I am now very much of an American, even though some aspects of American life are hard to take. The separation of Church and State is often taken to farcical levels; the brashness and vulgarity of the political process sometimes hides terrible corruption; and the supermarket approach to religion reveals a lowest-common-denominator consumer spirituality. In one community in Illinois recently, the only symbol for public display for the Christmas season the citizens could agree on was Frosty the Snowman. In America, there are also daunting psychological and social problems. People have little or no sense of history – I mean of their own personal history as well as of an historical perspective stretching over hundreds of years. People are free – free of history and, therefore, free to be alone, cut off – free to drift. And, therefore, not really free at all.

Being an English-American (in contrast to an American Anglophile) means to have been formed by two very different cultures “divided by a common language”. I find that I am always being pushed into embracing wider allegiances. My faith is continually being stretched. I live in a particular place (San Francisco) where heroic secularism and individualism, the New Age religions, and the great religious traditions other than Christianity, all flourish. Seventy percent of San Franciscans have no religious affiliation whatsoever. People drift into Grace Cathedral who haven’t lapsed from any spiritual tradition. They do not reject Christianity. They do not know enough to reject it. They do not know even the outline of the story. One visitor asked me recently, “Tell me, what exactly did happen on Good Friday?” This, I understand, is becoming common in Britain. In David Hare’s play, *Racing Demon*, one character recalls his first visit to London. He was lonely and afraid and wanted to buy a crucifix. The girl behind the counter looked puzzled and then produced two crosses and said, “You won’t want this one. It’s got a little man on it.” This is the world I live in – perhaps it’s the world we shall *all* soon live in?

I don’t know what England is like now. If Jack Lively’s recent description of English society is anything to go by, it’s not very different from that on the other side of the Atlantic: “British society is characterized more and more ... not by undue reverence for social order but by the absence of any sense of social coherence or mutual obligation, not by over-concern with continuity and stability but by contempt for the past and indifference to any future but the immediate.”⁴ England sounds just like home!

The England of 1940-1960 made me and I am grateful. The Church of England, through some of its diverse adherents, formed me as a Christian and as a priest. I began in a fundamentalist evangelical Sunday school and was trained for the priesthood in an anglo-catholic theological college. The great thing about the Church of England of my youth was that one could run the whole gamut of the ecumenical scene and still remain an Anglican!

One person who helped me to understand myself was Herbert Kelly. He had a vision of Catholicity which he set in opposition to Catholicism (with an emphasis on the *ism*) with which I immediately felt at home. In 1919, he wrote “I came back to a new world. There was everywhere a real vision or feeling for Catholicity ... With reason, sense and patience, there might have been a real movement. Within ten years it was dead.” Kelly’s life might be described as a noble failure to champion a credible Catholicity in the face of ‘party’ Catholicism. The situation in 1990 seems as bad in this regard as it did in 1919. *Then* Kelly was bemoaning the fate of Anglicanism. *Now* Roman Catholicism (at least in the United States) is in disarray from which it seems it will never recover. A state of affairs, by the way, which many American Catholics applaud. What Kelly taught me is that only God is Catholic and that the Catholic Church hasn’t happened yet. This was a liberating lesson to learn in the midst of the Christianity of my youth which seemed rigid and very

class conscious. Kelly pushed me into being an ‘eschatological’ Catholic (that is the belief that the Catholic Church hasn’t happened yet – only God is ‘Catholic’); the kind of Catholic Christian who finds labels and parties diminishing and hurtful. Kelly also taught me the importance of thinking for myself and of being able to tell the difference between my thoughts and my obsessions. He also taught me to be unafraid of passion in religion.

In October 1917, in a typical Kelly outburst, he wrote:

“I want persecution. I want a few bishops shot against a wall. Priests in crowds ... You’d be astonished if you knew *how* serious I was in saying that. ‘Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins.’ Least of all sins like ours. The sins of ‘patronage’ cry to heaven for vengeance. The sins of gentlemanliness, the sins of professionalism, the sins of smugness, and comfort ... Mere disestablishment might do some good, but not much. You see it would leave all the dignitaries and professors, all the old gang, with their vested interests, to reorganize, as near as might be, where they were before ... I would gladly leave the Dissenters *their* endowments, *and* ours, Churches, Cathedrals, Vicarages, and we – what was left of us – would walk out into the streets and talk about God.”⁵

The martyrdom of bishops is not unknown in our own day – the people of El Salvador know of it first hand. I am reminded of Graham Greene’s reaction in the late 1930’s to a headline in the Roman Catholic newspaper the *Universe* – “Five Bishops killed in Spain”: “One feels wrong about the Catholic press trumpeting its martyrdoms. You don’t *complain* about death of that kind. It should be taken for granted.”⁶

Kelly would have liked a few martyrs. The Church always needs blood of one kind or another. The silly partisanship in the Church drained away its life, and Kelly found ludicrous the tests some devised for finding out whether a person was a ‘true’ Catholic. For example, many of his contemporaries thought of ‘the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament’ as the test of tests for the truly Catholic. He was not against it but against a policy of deliberately defying and antagonizing bishops – a policy which, ironically, marked the ‘Catholic’ Party in the Church of England at the time. Perhaps it still does? The issues have changed but the mentality is there – the advocating of a one-issue orthodoxy. In a letter, August 1918, Kelly maintained that

“the whole hope of Catholicism lay in ... a quiet, patient, reflective reasonableness – instead of this dogmatic infallibilism, based half on authority, but per consequens on party instinct ... I should be much less inclined to be sure I was right, if the other side were not so convinced they were. It is their infallibilism and violence, and contemptuousness for reasonableness and thought which alienate me.”

Kelly’s universal sympathies (in espousing Catholicity over Catholicism), his valuing the life of the intellect, and his *passionate* faith, all spoke to me and helped to set me free to believe, to *bother*.

The stir caused by Richard Holloway, the Bishop of Edinburgh, in his hall for an open and intelligent Catholicism is a case in point. Holloway showed himself to be a true disciple of Herbert Kelly and many of the letters to *The Church Times* appealing, of all things, to the Vincentian Canon and suggesting that those who are in favour of the ordination of women are merely giving in to ‘the spirit of the Age’, made one wonder if anyone had read or thought anything since 1919. Perhaps that is why too few can, for example, recognize the rigorously orthodox mind of the Bishop of Durham. Orthodoxy requires two things of us: a symbolic understanding of reality (which means a refusal to look at things with a literalist squint); and acceptance of the fact that *history* ‘contaminates’ *everything*. There is no pure form. Because of this, our faith demands hard thinking. It demands our going through personal pain to the point where psychological, spiritual and theological truths coincide in one grace-filled moment. The liberals need to relativize the

present as well as the past. The conservatives need to understand that they are no less trapped in the spirit of *some* age or other even if it doesn't happen to be this one. In the middle of all our confusion there is deep personal pain – much of it faithless and unnecessary. Part of it is the refusal to face and know ourselves. Those who have helped form me were unafraid of a certain kind of pain.

Americans are often accused of being too 'psychological', and they are sometimes. Yet the English aren't or weren't 'psychological' enough. As distasteful as it may sound, it would do a great deal of good to subject some so-called theological statements to rigorous psychological analysis. Self-knowledge shows us that we are not one but many selves. So with the forms of Christianity. There are many of them and its various contents are sometimes disturbingly contradictory. As true and as obvious as this is, we, in practice, often fail to take seriously Christianity's multiplicity and contradictions. Its many cultural manifestations are startling. A long hard look at the cluttered magnificence of Westminster Abbey should make one pause in claiming that Christianity has any one single abiding content. God is One. We are legion.

I think of how the Englishness of the Christianity in which I was formed has affected me. I go back to when I was eight years old in the choir at St Mary's Wimbledon. When those middle-aged men in their three-piece suits – their watch chains draped across their bellies – read the lessons at high matins, the Old Testament prophets sounded as if they (the prophets) had all gone to minor public schools. Accent contributes to the meaning of text. In the United States, the *Baable* (sic) is a different book from the *Bible*. "All fleuush is as grass" (sic) is different text from "All flesh is as grarss" (sic). Nuance and texture make a great deal of difference. These peculiarities and particularities mean a great deal to me. The people who have influenced me most were startlingly particular yet transcended their peculiarities.

The psychoanalyst, James Hillman, writes of the person who is transparent, of the one who knows, first hand, the pain and the necessity of self-revelation which is an act of love. Hillman wants us to shift our ideal from the *enlightened* person to the *transparent* one. I do not mean the "Enlightened Man who sees, the seer, but the Transparent Man, who is seen and seen through, foolish, who has nothing left to hide, who has become transparent through self-acceptance; his soul is loved, wholly revealed, wholly existential; he is just what he is, freed from paranoid concealment, from the knowledge of his secrets and his secret knowledge ..."⁷

I am told that Eric Abbott was very much a private and concealed man. Yet he and Hugh Bishop shared the gift of transparency, in that they both have the gift of seeing and seeing through others. There was something in them one could trust. And that, in the end, is what I want. What or who, in the end, can I trust? How far can I trust the bits and pieces of the story of how my faith came to be the way it is? In the England of my youth, being a Christian meant being a 'good chap'. In America, it means believing that (as one Texan Methodist theologian puts it) "God is nice and we're to be nice too!"⁸ Our Christianity is inevitably polluted at worst, and grounded at best, by a *particular* time and place. That's why I believe that my life has been graced by particular people – Herbert Kelly, Hugh Bishop, Eric Abbott, Monica Furlong, Alan and Margaret Webster, Esther and Victor de Waal, and a host of others. What have they done? They have, formally and informally, been my spiritual guides. They have graciously introduced me to a new narrative for myself. They have shown up the distortions in my version of my story, and have saved me from myself.

The way I understand my first twenty-four years growing up in England is full of lies and half-truths. It's like seeing oneself in the broken fragments of a distorting mirror. We need the perspective of others who love us to show us a truer picture. My spiritual guides have looked right through me and been instruments of healing and forgiveness. Iris Murdoch puts it well in her *The Message to the Planet*, "When Ludens asked whether looking at people in silence could do them

good, Marcus said ‘I believe so ...’”⁹ I have been looked at lovingly in silence and been healed. Eric Abbott was such a contemplative. There are people like that who are, for me, the best evangelists. Such a contemplative attitude is all too rare in the age of “poor, little, talkative Christianity”.

So, I am multiform in my Christianity – English/American; Protestant/Catholic; Orthodox/New Age; Anglo-Catholic/Evangelical – inconsistent yet with continuity. I am a walking miracle of grace in an ecumenical zoo. I am not *one* thing. I have found congruency with Plymouth Brethren, Baptist ministers and Tibetan monks. I am fiercely defensive of the Catholic Faith against Vatican and London heresies. I have my prejudices and I am always looking for a theological fight yet I also ache for the time when the tribe gathers around the alter ‘fire’ to share stories and to break bread. What I find is the constant reconstruction of the horizon of my expectations – the unnerving formation and alteration of my perceptions. What is constant? What is changing? I cling to the illusion of fixed phrases and forms. I am blind to my endless experimentation with values. What abides in the conflict of interpretation? In the middle of all this chaotic relativism is there universal significance? Yes – there is, and it is mediated through persons. Catholicity is about incarnation and the truth of God is revealed in and through our being members one of another. I need reminders of the mystery, hesitation and hiddenness of my experience – especially religious experience. My reminders are the Hugh Bishops and the Eric Abbotts of this world – actual people, as silly, as arrogant and as compromised as they are sometimes.

What has it been like to be a priest in the middle of all this? I have been one for nearly twenty-five years and I have experienced a great many changes – internally, in my own spiritual life – and externally in the institutional Church – during this quarter of a century. There is a great deal of pain in the churches about the ordained ministry.

In 1989 the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in the United States issued a report, “Reflections on the Morale of Priests”. Evidently morale is very low among the Roman Catholic clergy. In fact the report “is a powerful argument against anyone’s considering the ordained ministry in the Roman Catholic Church”.¹⁰ The picture of the priest is depressing. In a round of booze, golf and television, relieved by saying mass and being caught up with the trivia of parish life, the priest gets on with it the best he can. One is either a priest of the old school (depressed and alcoholic) or of the new (socially ‘relevant’ and bursting with psychobabble). Why be ordained? It seems silly to be held hostage to such a pointless enterprise.

Twentieth century novelists have described the modern priest’s inner and outer worlds only too well. J.F. Powers, the author of *Wheat that Springeth Green*, has been described as a kind of literary anthropologist, “giving us an affectionate portrayal of a down-at-the-heels subculture, his seedy priests like once mighty medicine men of a tribe now relegated to the reservation, its rituals mainly of interest as representations of the past.”¹¹

The Roman Catholic document refers to “the fragile psychological state of a number of candidates to the priesthood in the Western world” – and, we might add, of those who are presently priests. Perhaps this is not a good time for priesthood? The “modern character (to quote the same document) is largely distinguished by the rejection of absolute norms and a reference to the past as a source of wisdom; it is marked by an individualism and subjectivism, a reduction of all things to technology and to the principle of efficiency, a pursuit of ‘novelty’ and secularization in general.”¹² Modernity has been described as the state of affairs in which nothing is sacred. In that sense, modernity has no time for nor need of priests.

Hugh Bishop taught me that to be a priest simply means to be in love. I realize that this language makes certain people in the Church nervous because of our fear of the erotic which we continue to confuse with the narrowly sexual. But we *do* have a need for people to take the risk of deep friendship. The Church needs lovers. This was Hugh's overriding metaphor. Being a priest meant accepting all the ups and downs of a love affair. I remember a meditation on the priesthood which he gave in the chapel of the College of the Resurrection in 1963. It was on the text: "For *their* sakes I consecrate myself" (John 17.19). These are the words of Jesus as he prepares himself for his Passion. These words had and still have a profound effect on me. Over twenty-five years ago they struck me (a very idealistic and naïve twenty-three year old) with tremendous force. It may seem outrageous for us young men, all those years ago, to have taken the words of Jesus' great prayer as our own but we did. I do. I don't do it consistently or very well but I do. We were taught that at the centre of priesthood is self-offering. The self-understanding of the priest is shaped by the knowledge that every human being is given a priestly identity: he or she knows what it is to be blessed and to bless in return. An ordained priest (like every human being) needs to be someone who is in touch with the delight and joy at the heart of things.

Eric Abbott, Hugh Bishop, Herbert Kelly, Monica Furlong all teach me something about failure and weakness. I take my sins seriously but none of them outweigh the love at the heart of things – none of them invalidates the *Way* I am following. I am not always attentive. Sometimes I walk with my head bowed – sometimes with my head high. I need help. I need friends of the soul.

Spiritual friendship is far too rare. We suffer from the consequences of an over-professionalized view of the priesthood. Much of its passion has disappeared. The status has virtually gone. Even jokes about vicars and bishops are rarer than they were. My own unhappiness with being ordained has tended to be merely a reflection of my own unhappiness with myself. My issues are spiritual and psychological – internal rather than external. This is not to say that there aren't external problems with the institutional church. In my more jaundiced moments all I can see are its petty politics, its lack of nerve, its general and pathetic veniality. Then there are the bishops, who (at least in the United States) tend to see themselves merely as managers; some are liberal demythologizers who, with secularizing zeal assault the old and naïve certainties of their flocks; others remain stiff and ignorant 'traditionalists'. But I cannot maintain a jaundiced view for long – not least because such a view is a distortion and the maintenance of a twisted vision is a terrible strain. Bishop-bashing has always been cheap and easy and, in the end, unsatisfying. Lies and half-truths take a great deal of time and effort to keep up. This is as true for institutions as it is for individuals. These half-truths are not the issue anyway. The issue is far deeper and has to do with our self-understanding as persons, with our sense of identity in God. It has to do with what Kelly called Catholicity – wholeness in all its senses – personal and communal, intellectual and emotional, private and political.

Priests, of all people, should know, first hand, about the peculiar spiritual gifts of powerlessness, ignorance and dispossession that are given us when we understand ourselves to be defined by boundless mystery and a limitless horizon. Such gifts bring us up from ruin to restoration. A genuine sense of priesthood is often born out of a feeling of failure and an experience of ruin. I don't mean that there has to be some public scandal or that the failure and ruin have to be visible. I am speaking more of an inner experience of spiritual bankruptcy which lays the groundwork for the deeper experience of grace. All Christians are invited to learn one of the powerful lessons of the Gospel: the privileged access to the grace of God is through our being in touch with our greatest weakness. Millions have and are recovering their sanity and proper self-love through all the various twelve-step programmes originating with Alcoholics Anonymous. They know that the road back is through the narrow door of powerlessness.

Eric Abbott was a great spiritual director and, as such, knew, first hand, of the divine power available to us once we have come face to face with our own powerlessness. Monica Furlong, in her biography of Alan Watts, shows us the mirror image of a person unable to face his own terrible aching need.

“To accept spiritual guidance from a teacher was to put himself back in a state of dependence, and there was in him a mixture of longing and fear, of self-destructive wilfulness and calculated self-interest, which made it too difficult to accept help ... He had to be independent and self-sufficient because any kind of dependence brought back the guilt and shame of dependence ... To refuse so much wisdom and loving care, however skilfully he rationalized it, reduced him to isolation, which, for all his marvellous openness, produced a kind of rigidity, the rigidity that comes from self-sufficiency, from always ‘knowing better’.”¹³

Many a priest has neither the inner resources nor the means of asking for help with regard to his or her passions and longings. We do not know how to tell the truth about ourselves and our world. In the United States, we may laugh at the fundamentalists like Jimmy Swaggart and Jim Bakker but their problems are only ours writ large. And if we clergy fell untouched by any of these problems we might ask ourselves how much wildness and passion there is in us? How far have we fallen away from our first love?

We become priests for a variety of motives – motives largely hidden from us at the time. One of the monks of the Society of the Sacred Mission at Kelham told me years ago, “My son, never examine your motives. They’re bound to be vile and disgusting!” How did I dare offer myself for ordination? I was nineteen and didn’t know better.

I remember being interviewed for ordination at a selection conference in Warminster in 1959. I was brought face to face with a deep issue of faith which had to do with what I believed about my father. I was asked what seemed a peculiar question about him by an archdeacon – a southerner Anglo-Catholic. “I see”, he said (reading from my file) “that your father died several years ago. Where is he now?” I was dumbfounded. My father was a bricklayer. I remember him always coming home late for Sunday dinner – sleepy and full of beer. He never went to church and had little time for religion. I fudged my answer. “I don’t know, father”, I replied. “You don’t know!” exclaimed the priest in mock surprise. “He was baptized wasn’t he?” I mumbled “Yes”. “Then he’s with God in heaven.” This chance question (maybe it was only a trick one anyway) about the whereabouts and status of my dead father set me on a path to discover a generous and Catholic theology. It wasn’t that the unbaptized were in hell (a view that is still horribly alive) but that my father was loved by God. This incident drew me into the arms of a generous Catholicity and turned me into a virtual universalist, although I am sufficiently theologically sophisticated to allow for the possibility of someone saying “No!” to God and to love for ever. My old dad was in heaven! I didn’t realize Christianity – especially in its Anglican form – could be so hospitable and generous to include someone like my father. I didn’t think he’d be allowed in! The Jesus of my childhood and adolescence, after all, was of a different class. This Jesus was good at games, was well-connected, and had read theology at Oxford. Where would my dad and a million like him be welcome? Not here surely? Yet such is the Catholicity of God. All are welcome. Such is God’s ‘lack of taste’. I very much regret that I allowed the English class system to sour my faith. Such a souring was and is a waste of time and energy.

All the priests who have influenced me struggled with wounds and weaknesses. There were the ones who drank too much (“the whisky priests”), others for whom sexuality was an abiding wound. There were the lazy, the prophetic and the neurotic. There were also the doggedly loyal ones who, nevertheless, ran foul of the system. All in all there has been a great deal of pain and waste. Some were scholars, others were unreflective activists. Some were family men, others homosexuals – those who denied it and those who came to terms with it, and to love themselves as

God made them. There were the genuine celibates who had found a way not to suppress their sexuality but to channel it. There are now the women who have demonstrated that their ordination moves us closer to that Catholicity for which the world longs. All touched me deeply and I am grateful to all of them for being as humanly human as they knew how. They taught me that God is *always* trying to reach me and that God is continually giving himself to me. Now there are my priest-friends living with AIDS – all of them an inspiration.

All in all the so-called failed ones who touch me most are those who struggled to be *in* their bodies – real and enfleshed human beings, with temptations, appetites and longings that were large and demanding. I think of a good friend who recently came to the end of his rope. He had just been elected a bishop – the pinnacle of all that he thought he desired. Much to his amazement, he turned it down, and went into a terrible depression. One afternoon, not long before Christmas, he entered the abyss. He stole twelve pairs of white socks from a department store, tried to buy a revolver to kill himself, and finally was caught being propositioned by a male prostitute in a public lavatory. He press had a high old time. His bishop gave him wonderful support, as did his wife and family. He sought and got spiritual and psychological help, and he is now more than on the road to recovery. He knows what it is to be healed and forgiven. He is a free man. I'm not suggesting that true priesthood resides in our falling apart, going crazy or becoming self-indulgent. I simply insist that whatever kind of priest we are called to be, our vocation must take into account our fully humanity – its longings and its passions.

When I was ordained in 1966 I tried to leave my longings behind. I denied the hunger. My evangelical training gave me no help understanding my sexual longings. Over the years all this had to be worked through. My longings had and have to be honoured and retrieved. I thought "If they really knew what I was like they'd never allow me to be ordained."

I felt this fear at my ordination – an Anglo-Catholic liturgical opera – at St Peter's Streatham, badly played and under-rehearsed. I didn't so much think that I was making a mistake as the bishop (Mervyn Stockwood) was. I took with me from my ordination the wounding burden of my secret self. I was burdened with an unfamiliar and cumbersome *persona* and had neither the skill nor the wisdom to wear it for the love of God. What I also took with me from my ordination was my desire for security and power. This desire was killing me spiritually and had to be confronted and redirected. What I had to learn was the true nature of power perfected in weakness.

Catholicity is particular, earthy, grounded. It is about that 'admirable commercium' between God and us. We start with a common humanity, with common longings and common wounds. The truly Catholic priesthood requires the ordinary stuff of friendship and love. Priests need them for their own sake even more than for the sake of others. If they aren't warned by them, the priest becomes (as Francis MacManus describes him) "a naked animal raging with the cold and with his own released wildness".¹⁴ Blood must be allowed to flow through our veins.

All of us have our peculiarities and particularities, our vulnerabilities, impairments and disabilities. Eric Abbott knew that friendship, spiritual direction, prayer, relaxation, the ability to have fun and to give ourselves to others, save us from being suffocated and overcome by a sense of failure – seduced by the voice inside us which tells us that we are no good. We are forced to terrifying questions. Will I make it? Will I fail? Will I be abandoned? How will I visit the sick? How will I sit with the dying?

For me, priesthood, seen from the inside, is nowhere better expressed than by the American novelist, Frederick Buechner. Let me cite just two examples: his story about how one minister learned the mystery of his calling, and his account of his father's suicide.

In the novel, *The Final Beast*, Rooney, troubled by an act of adultery in her past, has run away. Her pastor goes after her and finds her in the home of her friend Lillian and she (Lillian) speaks to him while Rooney is upstairs.

“O Lord, how advice bores me, especially when it’s good. And yours was good enough. ‘Go back to your husband.’ That probably didn’t come so easy, did it? ‘Forget your infidelity.’ ... It’s so modern, and it’s so sane, and it’s just the advice she’d want if she wanted advice. Only give her what she really wants ...”

“Give her what, for Christ’s sake?”

“For Christ’s sake ... The only thing you have to give.” And then she almost shouted at him. “Forgive her for Christ’s sake, little priest!”

“But she knows I forgive her.”

“She doesn’t know God forgives her. That’s the only power you have – to tell her that. Not just that he forgives the poor little adultery. But the faces she can’t bear to look at now. The man’s. Her husband’s. Her own, half the time. Tell her God forgives her for being lonely and bored, for not being full of job with a house full of children. That’s what sin really is. You know – not being full of joy. Tell her that sin is forgiven whether she knows it or not, that’s what she wants more than anything else – what all of us want. What on earth do you think you were ordained for?”¹⁵

I can’t think of anything more glorious for a priest to do – to declare, “Go in peace, the Lord has put away all your sins. And pray for me, a sinner.” I cannot think of anything more terrible than not to know its joy.

Buechner’s father’s suicide is a deeply sad commentary on a man, incapable of forgiving himself.

“It was not for several days that a note was found. It was written in pencil on the last page of *Gone with the Wind*, which had been published that year, 1936, and it was addressed to my mother. ‘I adore you and love you,’ it said, ‘and I am no good ... Give Freddie my watch. Give Jamie my pearl pin. I give you all my love.’”

“I adore you. I love you and I am no good.” The priest is there to name that last phrase, “I am no good”, as a lie. It is a deep and cruel lie tormenting and ruining many a human being. Eric Abbott was among those who named the lie and I am grateful.

What will the priest of the future look like? To paraphrase Karl Rahner, tomorrow’s priests will be (otherwise they will not exist at all) persons able to listen, to whom every individual matters even though he or she be of no social or political importance; persons in whom one can confide, who practise the holy folly, or try to, of bearing not only their own burdens but also those of others because he or she knows the mystery of substitution. The priest of tomorrow will not join in the neurotic pursuit of wealth and security but will refuse the pain-killers for the dreadful disappointment of existence. He or she cannot be an ecclesiastical civil servant but will be a person who because of inner experience believes, hopes and loves.¹⁶ “Let us go on together (wrote Eric Abbott) even if the way be dark.”¹⁷ Journeying together, after all, is what Catholicity is all about. And Eric Abbott was an inspiring and loving companion who is trusted in the future because the future belongs to the God who is truly Catholic.

My experience of the ordained priesthood – God’s peculiar way of saving my soul – has been one of deep failure with regard to my discovering a credible Catholicism. I have come to believe that Catholicism-as-ideology is, in fact, a seductive and damaging addiction. I am, however, continually ‘surprised by grace’ – being formed by particular souls (like an Eric Abbott) who teach me that Catholicity is both a given and a gift.

I would like the French priest, Jean Sullivan, to have the last word.

“But can we expect all university professors to be pioneers, all parish priests to be prophets, all bishops to be successors of the apostles? Each of them has been recruited haphazardly, with his own share of good will, insight and blindness, his own wounds and ambitions. I’m not shocked by this. I’m not preaching purity. Jesus is delivered up; he always will be ... what is ... amazing is that always, within the womb of illusion and hypocrisy, lost in the crowd, there have been saints. The word has never ceased finding its way into the flesh of men and women. Our task is to live the benediction and the insurrection at the same time, the love and the humour, the unimportance of everything and its infinite importance.”¹⁸

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END NOTES

¹ Iris Murdoch, *The Message to the Planet*, (London, Chatto & Windus, 1989), p. 561.

² *Morning Light*, Paulist Press, 1989. Jean Sullivan (1913-1980) was a French priest, novelist and essayist.

³ What is the British equivalent? Perhaps, for every fallen American evangelist, we could find a crazed or broken English vicar? Several years ago Alec Vidler (another great soul) was one of the many visitors to the United States who came for a short visit, didn’t like what he saw and wrote about it! An English priest, who has worked extensively on both sides of the Atlantic, said to me recently: “For the English, any experience of America is a non-experience!” This may be both unfair and untrue but it, nevertheless, *feels* true for some of us.

⁴ “Is Windsordom worth it”; a review of Christopher Hitchens, *The Monarchy*, in TLS March 16-22, 1990 p. 271.

⁵ HK to SSM Oct 4, 1917. And in a letter to Father Timothy Nakamura, 22 April 1922, he commented: “What is Catholic must be simple and common. But it must also be scholarly, it must be social as well as individual. It must be modern as well as old and orthodox ... If you make Catholic truth a very small thing, so you can say: ‘Oh, this is Catholicity,’ God will laugh at you.”

⁶ Norman Sherry, *The Life of Graham Greene Vol I, 1904-1939*, (New York, Viking, 1989), p. 699.

⁷ James Hillman, *A Blue Fire*, ed. Thomas Moore (NY, Harper and Row, 1989), p. 284.

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas.

⁹ Iris Murdoch, op. cit., p. 353-4.

¹⁰ *The Religion and Society Report* (Deerfield, Illinois, the Rockford Institute, May 1989).

¹¹ See J.F. Powers’ novels and commentary by Dan Wakefield in the NYTBR. “Mr Powers’ religious vision is not the dark and bloody ground of O’Connor’s Christianity, but rather the gray, twilight landscape of a once-bright but fading faith.” Quoted in the *Religion and Society Report* May 1989.

¹² Ibid. pp. 36-7.

¹³ *Zen Effects*, pp. 84-5.

¹⁴ Francis MacManus, *The Greatest of These* (Cork, the Mercier Press, 1943), p. 73.

¹⁵ Marjorie Casebier McCoy with Charles McCoy, *Frederick Beuchner: Novelist and Theologian of the Lost and Found* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, 1988) – see pp. 114-5.

¹⁶ Paraphrased from Karl Rahner’s *Servants of the Lord* (Herder and Herder, 1968), pp. 111-12.

¹⁷ *Invitations to Prayer*, Selections from the Writing of Eric Syms Abbott (Cincinnati, Forward Movement Publications, 1989), p. 85.

¹⁸ Op. cit. p. 23