

Daniel's reflection for week beginning 27th March – Sabbath Time

Mr Casey was always courteous. He was the conductor on the Bus Eireann that dropped me at Lisivigeen, near Killarney, for my first ever summer holiday, eight miles from home. I was seven then. Our farmer friends were waiting at the crossroads. Mr Casey helped me down the three steps of the bus with my strapped and bulging suitcase. We waved him goodbye and set off across the fields for the farmhouse. No emperor ever rode more imperiously to his destiny in a golden chariot drawn by elegant thoroughbreds, to the music of the spheres, than I did, that August evening, in a bumpy old cart behind a farting old donkey.

The euphoric bubble quickly burst. As I unpacked my bag I discovered, to my horror, that I had forgotten the Chef Sauce. Let me explain. Chef Sauce was my life. Without it I could not eat anything. Our small shop, in those Second World War days, stocked a very limited supply just for me. In my mind I could see those two squat bottles with the smiling chef on the front, still standing on the shelf at home. Eight miles each way, this time on a bicycle, was a long way for my kind host to go to collect my golden nectar.

Intense efforts were made, some decades ago, to canonise a very holy and zealous missionary. His cause was scuttled when the Devil's Advocate (a prosecutor figure whose job is to prove the candidate unworthy of such a distinction – a role, incidentally, that has recently been made redundant by John Paul III!) discovered that he had once written home, in some panic, from pagan territories, for the pipe (his Irish duideen) which he had forgotten to pack. His undoing was tobacco – mine will be, when the time comes (!), Chef Sauce.

The memory of my first holiday reminds me of the universal need for some kind of 'sabbath time' in our lives: a time to withdraw from the relentless action of our routine commitments so as to understand better the nature of our daily treadmill; a stepping out of the parade so as to see it more clearly from a distance; a moment of difference in order to explore the sameness of the repetitions of our lives. Our new Pope has recently returned from a 17-day holiday of 'repose and reflection' in the Italian Alps. I like to think that the words 'vacation' and 'sabbath' carry the hope of our holy time (kairos) transforming what we do in ordinary time (chronos).

It seems to me, as a pastor, that many Catholics are defining a new shape for 'acceptable' Church practice. There is a growing *sensus fidelium* concerning the regularity of Mass attendance. Many now worship, not every Sunday, but maybe once every two or three Sundays. There is, however, a very sound reason for the Church's insistence on 'weekly attendance'. This time of worship can be seen as a precious oasis to flavour the rest of our week with the true spice of life; a breather to explore the love and meaning at the heart of all that we are and do; a small sabbath to reveal God's signature at the end of each page of our week-day pursuits.

The much-mentioned spiritual hunger of people today is not, I feel sure, for more religion or Church activities. It is for contemplative space, for an inner freedom, for tastes and glimpses of their own elusive beauty. During a real vacation, a real sabbatical, we make room for dreaming, for rediscovering our inner child, for playing safely with bare feet. If sin, in scripture, is about 'missing the mark' - something that happens when we follow misleading maps and unreliable compasses - then sabbath-time is for a lot of re-routing, for some fairly urgent U-turns and for finding a way out of the many newly-discovered cul-de-sacs we have long been lost in.

In a Tablet article some years ago, the Benedictine Sister Joan Chittester pointed out that we have substituted more labour, hard play or work-out leisure for soul-searching and reflection, for intimacy and awareness. Our culture turns

the Sabbath into a race for escape, an opportunity for more addictions, a collection of distractions. We cannot stop to do much about anything. We do not stop at all in fact. We work every day of the week and pack even more into the week-end, using it to mop up what spills over from the working week. We take the children to play in the park while we sit in the car to finish writing a weekly or monthly report. The Sabbath has become catch-up time instead of reflection-time. We have lost a sense of attention, of living in the present, of what the Buddhists call 'mindfulness'. No wonder we can come to the brink of human cloning and hardly notice it; that we can watch the oppression of half the human race and take it for granted; that we can allow our leaders to lead us into an unjust and unnecessary war – one which we are already deeply regretting.

As well as holidays, Sundays and daily meditation-times, Holy Days of Obligation are also meant to provide us with essential sabbath-time. These Days were intended to be an opportunity for remembering a different life-rhythm, for resisting the relentless drive to over work, for arresting the way that our daily routine takes over. 'If you don't live your life, your life will live you'. Such Days are so important because they keep us focused on a reality, a way of being that includes, but transcends the usual patterns of days and weeks. They take us back to our sources in God and remind us of our destiny in heaven. And, in between, they keep before us the comforting assurance that, whatever the mountains we have to climb, we are not alone, that our lives are permeated by the Holy Spirit.

Dr Eamon Duffy, in another Tablet article in the nineties, railed against the powerful lobby that sought to abolish the remaining few Holy Days in the Roman Catholic calendar. He admits that they are awkward and burdensome. They cause problems for the conscientious; they are ignored by the lax. But he sees them as one of the few witnesses against the relentless dominance of the economic in our lives. In them, the ancient rhythm of the Christian liturgical year breaks through, interrupting our restless routines and thereby giving a deeper meaning to the often-shallow business of living. The inconvenient demands of Holy Days of Obligation – forcing us to rearrange our routines at some cost to conscience and pleasure – are not, in fact, outmoded restraints on our liberty. They are exactly the opposite. They are important reminders of our human dignity and freedom, signs of another and greater time-table, a re-remembering of those eternal values that we truly believe in, but which get repeatedly submerged beneath the torrents of relentless functionality.

I am anxious to clarify that there is nothing dualistic about the emphasis on sabbath-time. There is no inference that 'chronos' time is inferior to 'kairos' time. They are both endemic to the creative heart of God. But because, for all kinds of reasons - the main one being original sin - our gullible hearts are too easily led astray, there is a vital need for sabbath-time, or, if you prefer, eucharist-time, to realise the hidden worth and infinite value in what we often regard as the most ordinary and boring dimensions of the lives we live. God comes to us disguised as weekdays.

There was a white man, with many possessions, trying to get out of Africa. He was in a big hurry. Loaded down with trunks of booty and bars of gold, his native helpers were struggling to reach the coast in time. The last ship would soon be leaving port, before the storms came. Day and night they travelled, urged and goaded on by their anxious, greedy boss. They were exhausted and disoriented. One morning, within sight of the ocean, and after a brief pause during the night, the workers refused to move. Threats of lashings had no effect, neither did promises or bribes. Nothing would budge the silent tribesfolk. They had moved to another place inside them. After hours of acrimony, confusion and desperation, the truth emerged. The unfamiliar pressures and deadlines had wrought havoc in the spirits of the natives. They had refused to move, they said, because they were waiting for their souls to catch up.