

Daniel's Reflection for week beginning 27th June

STORIES IN THE SUN

There's something about summer evenings that provides the space to remember stories. When our minds let go of the feverish lists that fill the working mornings of our life, we find a queue of shy visitors awaiting their turn to heal, comfort or amuse us. Such visitors come as stories - sad and happy, as memories that bless and burn, as special moments carrying traces of light, shadow and humour.

One story concerns a parish in the aftermath of Vatican11. A new parish priest was dismayed to find a serious quarrel among members of his congregation. During Sunday Mass half of the people stood up to receive Holy Communion while half knelt down. All decorum was lost as each side criticised the other with religious fervour for ignoring the true tradition.

Seeking guidance, the young priest took a representative from each side to visit the parish's founder, a 99-year old Canon living in a nursing home. "Canon, isn't it true that the tradition was always for the people to stand while receiving Holy Communion?" inquired the man from the standing-up side.

"No," the old man replied, "that was not the tradition." "Ah, then," cried the kneeling representative, "it is the true tradition for people to receive kneeling!" "No," said the Canon, "that was not the tradition." "But, Canon," pleaded the anxious priest, "what we have now is complete chaos. Half the people stand and sneer while the others kneel and glare!" "Ah," murmured the old man, "that was the tradition."

Here is a pre-Vatican11 story that is definitely not suitable for nourishing ecumenical relationships. 'The old monsignor glanced with pride at the graduating class. "And so, my girls," he said, "you will go forth now to begin your lives as young women, as good Catholics, as toilers in the vineyard of the Lord. Rose Mulvaney; stand up, dear Rosie, and tell us what you will be doin' now that you're goin' to leave us."

"Oh, I shan't really be leaving, monsignor," said Rose Mulvaney, "for I have made a sacred vow. I'm going to take the veil and be the bride of Christ all my days."

"Bless you, child, bless you," murmured the monsignor. "Nelly O'Rourke, rise and tell us what road you are hoping to follow."

"I'm going to Sacred Heart College," said Nelly, "where I shall study to be a teacher and devote my life to evangelizing and catechizing." "Splendid, splendid!" beamed the monsignor. "And you, Katie Moore, rise . . ." Up stood Katie Moore, the most elegant and prettiest of them all. "Tell us, Katie, what is your hope and vision?"

Katie, in a firm voice declared "I am going to become a prostitute!" The class gasped. The Reverend Mother froze. The monsignor let out a shriek and fainted. The girls rushed to revive him and Katie Moore patted his cheek. The old monsignor opened his eyes. "Katie, Katie, I cannot believe it, Katie. What did you say?" "I said I'm going to be a prostitute" she replied. "Glory be!" cried the old monsignor with a relieved smile, "I thought you said you were going to be a Protestant."

In the seventies and eighties, in the afterglow of the Council, many priests were 'leaving to get married'. My mother was keeping a close eye on me! I was somewhat surprised one evening, during our second Irish Coffee, to hear her story about the bishop's Confirmation visit to a parish priest working in a very distant parish in the middle of nowhere. During the week-end visitation the bishop was very impressed by the pastoral commitment of the priest and his attention to all the needs of the parishioners. Several times he asked him how he coped with the pressure, the loneliness, the absence of familiar creature comforts.

The priest invariably replied that he owed much of his sanity, strength and commitment to devotion to his rosary. The bishop affirmed his great faith and blessed him. As he was leaving the bishop requested a glass of water to prepare himself for the long journey back to the city where he lived. 'Rosary, Rosary,' called out the priest, 'a glass of water for the bishop.'

My mother was a great one for praising. She loved to affirm people. I was once complaining to her about feeling unappreciated by my parish priest and the parishioners of an East-Leeds parish. 'Start telling them all how wonderful they are,' she wrote, enclosing some lines she liked.

If with pleasure you are viewing, any work that I am doing,

If you like me, if you love, tell me now.

Don't withhold your approbation till the priest makes his oration,

And I lie with snowy lilies o'er my brow.

If I earn your praise bestow it, if you like me let me know it,

Let the words of true encouragement be said.

Do not wait till life is over, and I'm underneath the clover,

For I cannot read my tombstone when I'm dead.

Before she died at the age of 97 I asked her to write a few pages of her life-story. There was a theme of determination running through her account. I had always admired her courage. 'If you do not want to be criticised,' she wrote, 'say nothing, do nothing, be nothing. And even then you will certainly be criticised.' She firmly believed that jealousy was a powerful, widespread but hidden virus. In clerical circles, she reminded us, it is usually dressed up as something else!

She recalled the suffering caused by the birth and life of my brother Joseph who had Down's Syndrome. She quoted an Arab saying from Mary Craig's book Blessings: 'Too much sunshine makes a desert, and the human heart is very often a desert. Sorrow irrigates the desert.'

Another very human story was told to us, rather sportingly I thought, by a bishop about a priest who had an appointment at His Lordship's residence at 9.30 on a Monday morning. The priest was very uneasy about this encounter. He had been reported by a parishioner for saying Mass facing the people, and in English. The bishop in question was a well-known Latin-lover. The housekeeper told the priest that all appointments were cancelled; the bishop had died during the night.

The priest blessed himself and muttered 'Glory be to God'. Ten minutes later the priest was back at the door with the same request. The housekeeper repeated the sad news. But when the priest returned once more she lost her cool and shouted 'I've told you twice already. The bishop is dead. What's wrong with you?'. The priest smiled apologetically and explained, 'I just love hearing you say that.'

Olympic news is dominating the sports pages these days. The Beijing Paralympics are about to begin. Having Joseph in our family, the following story from a local 'Special Olympics' always appealed to us because of its unusual truth. Eight contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100m sprint. At the sound of the starter's gun they all ambled off, prepared to try their best, but without the desperate need to win.

All, that is, except one boy who immediately stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over, and began to weep. The other seven heard the boy crying. They slowed down and paused. They all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with the same condition as my brother Joseph, bent down, kissed him and said, "This will make it better." Then all eight linked arms and walked together to the finish line. There was no jealousy here! The cheering in the stadium, it was reported, went on for a long time.