

Healing the Wounds of Clericalism

Clericalism, that distorted emphasis on the ordained minister at the expense of an appreciation of other vocations, remains a deep-seated problem in the church, and one found expressed in the attitudes of laity as much as priests. It is common for proposed solutions to be couched in terms like these: 'Our starting point should be baptism, not the ordained ministry, the priesthood of all believers rather than the priesthood of a few.' This focus on baptism is seen as the vocational equalizer that will help overcome clericalist tendencies in the church; and it is supported by sound theological arguments. Nonetheless, I would like to propose an alternative approach; one that is less popular, perhaps surprising, but ultimately more effective. What we need is not a baptism-centred church, but a marriage-centred church.

Now before you send up the cry: 'But not everybody is married!' please hear me out. The difficulty with the baptism-centred proposal is that, whilst it is correct, we are not in a position to implement it at this stage in church history. Why? Because our clericalist mindset has too strong a hold. Time and again, when we speak of a 'baptism-centred church', we are subconsciously saying 'Priests need to be taken off their pedestal and placed at the level of all the baptized.' Yes,

and that may well be a good thing. But we are still coming at the solution preoccupied with clerical status.

From there we move to statements like 'All the baptized (read: and not just the priests) have a special service to offer the church.' Again, true. But how do we define those 'special roles'? The typical list bulges with ministries visible at church: lector, catechist, pastoral associate, leader of this or that parish group. You also find thrown in terms like 'parent', or 'caring for children at home', or 'living the gospel in one's professional life'; but the awkward mix of familial, professional and parish duties gives rise to a skewed view: to live one's baptism is to serve the church 'like priests do' but which now we laity can do too, in our own unique way. Despite all good intentions, the benchmark remains clerical service and our world view hasn't shifted much at all.

What happens when we choose a different sacrament, that of marriage rather than baptism or holy orders, as our ecclesial reference point? First, our starting point suggests a relationship which, in some shape or form, impinges upon the existence of every person. And to where does the discussion move? To the very 'stuff' of life: love and sensuality, sex and babies, romance and commitment, bricks and mortar and mortgages. We find ourselves talking about the greatest wounds and the journey

to wholeness; about broken hearts and warring adolescents, infidelity and loneliness, ageing and death. We find ourselves arguing and agonizing over the place of those who are not married, or who were married, who don't have children, or can't, and those that do but wish they didn't.

In other words, a marriage-centred church gets us out of our clericalist headspace and into people's homes; it points us to the deepest relational challenges a human being could ever face. It radically shifts our theological mindset to one that is thoroughly trinitarian yet accessible to all: a 'theology of the belly button' whereby we see imprinted on each person, by the very fact of their creation, God's call to belong, to be in relationship, to love and be loved, to be 'family' in every facet of life... and that is what will ultimately heal our clericalist fixation. That is what will forge a new capacity to understand baptism, not as a church membership equalizer but as a glorious love affair with the people of God. Only then, when we have embraced a marriage-centred church, will we be ready to become a baptism-centred church. •

