

A Magnificat Church

Mary sang her Magnificat because she was full of the good news which she had faithfully received. God told her that she was full of grace, that God regarded her lovingly and wanted her to be the mother of his son. Her 'fiat' made possible the coming of God's son among us. Her Yes to God's proposal put at God's disposal her heart, mind and body. Her body was to become the texture and tissue of her son's body. She could truly say: This is my body. This is my blood. Mary sings not only of her role of prophet of God's justice to the poor, but also of her role of priest who mediates God's coming among us.

The Magnificat, then, is the Church's first hymn. It celebrates the deeper significance of the virginity of Mary. It sings of the truth of all of us: that in the depths of each of us a daughter of God, a son of God, is waiting to be born. That is the Good News.

The revelations of the past few years of a long history of paedophilia on the part of the clergy have made it difficult to celebrate the son or daughter of God awaiting birth in us. Rather we are deeply disappointed, scandalised and aghast at what has happened.

Our Justice and Peace experience has not prepared us for this. Depending on circumstances, our experience of the institutional church varied and fluctuated over the years between almost complete marginalisation to wholehearted support. As J&P people we have struggled more for the life of the world than for the life of the church.

Our experience of Faith has given direction to the way we have related to the world. Our disquiet for the world has centred on four grand spheres of human life and struggle. The first is Poverty where we have participated in campaigns of solidarity, emergency relief, social development and structural justice. We have become acquainted with the Bottom Billion of our world and also with Bottom Britain.

The second sphere has been Peace where we have accompanied the afflicted and the wounded in places like Palestine and Darfur. We have given witness in places like the United Nations as well as in Faslane and Aldermaston. The Planet, the third sphere, has assumed a central place in our concerns. We have responded to the plight of the planet both personally in criticising our consumerist lifestyles and in campaigning to combat human-induced climate change, to defend fragile life systems and to promote local awareness and creativity to craft a culture of care for the Earth.

The fourth sphere is the Person whose plight originates in the sphere of poverty, of war and of planetary crisis. From that sphere come the child soldier, the woman trafficked into illicit sex, the war refugee, the flood or drought victim and so many more.

A fifth sphere has recently opened up: the Church. We are becoming aware that many persons experience the church as a place to flee from, a place where there is no welcome, a place where bodily and spiritual harm is inflicted. The institutional church is a communion of saints, of persons called to wholeness, sent to create a world of wholeness. Yet too many persons experience the church as dysfunctional. Among these are many women who give generously of their time and energy, innocent children abused by members of the clergy, gays and trans-gendered who experience suspicion and disdain. There are others as well: divorced and remarried persons, single parents, ex-clergy, women who have had abortions et al.

What will it take for the church to once again be able to invite us all to sing the Magnificat? She must look into the abyss of her own dysfunctionality. That dysfunctionality has four symptoms or manifestations. The first is authoritarianism. Jesus gave the apostolic community a share in God's authority to teach, rule and sanctify. From there emanates the institution's power and that power has been abused. The second manifestation, or symptom, is clericalism. If the priest is 'another Christ', then no one else can be. It is they who have the power of

Christ. Others must submit and obey. The third symptom is sexism. In our community it is the male who most clearly reflects the person of Christ. If God is male, then male is God. If God is straight, then straight is God. The final manifestation is dualism. In the dualist mindset the spirit is superior to the material. The body does not matter, only the spirit. Taken to an extreme, a priest could deceive himself thinking that overpowering the body of a vulnerable person he nonetheless leaves intact the integrity of the soul.

These are four marks of a dysfunctional church. A religious organisation characterised by these marks cannot relate in a healthy way with its surrounding environment. If it is alright within the church to undermine the Christian dignity of women, to disdain homosexuals, to ignore the needs of persons like the divorced, to put in danger the integrity of children, then it may also be alright to do so in the surrounding society. The Church cannot announce the Good News of freedom in Jesus Christ when she herself is enslaved to her own dysfunctionality. She cannot announce that all is forgiven unless she herself asks for pardon. She cannot be a light for the world if she lives in the darkness of her own institutional sin and mindset.

Mary's Magnificat could be heard as a "Damnificat" unless we help our leaders to realise what a state we are in. We are all made of the same clay. We have a world to build in justice, a society to construct upon a foundation of peace, a planet to renew and a church to live in wholeness as faithful sign of God's gift of a new humanity and new creation.

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