

HOLY GROUND

Paul Andrews, S.J.

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Therapist. Directs Spiritual Exercises

*All we do our whole lives is go from one little piece
of holy ground to the next.*

J.D.Salinger

It is hard to argue with continuing formation. It seems to mean that we try to keep up-to-date, adaptable, and moving with the times. The phrase entered Jesuit terminology perhaps thirty years ago, and many Jesuits, including the writer, have carried the job of delegate or organiser or person responsible for the continuing formation of his brethren. For the most part it is unreal, because it implies that what authorities – the Provincial and his team – think up, actually has an effect on the personal development of Jesuits.

May I suggest, as the focal points of ongoing formation, those pieces of Holy Ground, those visions of the burning bush, of Salinger's remark. May I illustrate the suggestion from some salient memories: of a lovely encounter on the day I was priested; of falling in love and discovering that I could be attractive to women; of a particularly vivid sense of God in nature; and of coming to terms with failure after being sacked from a public position, and slowly coming through my anger to a realisation that it was a wise decision. These events were unplannable. They hit me out of the blue. They occasioned intense feeling, both joy and pain. They

changed my sense of myself and so, more than any courses, helped to shape me.

First blessing

Continuing formation implies that somebody is working to change your shape. But it does not happen like that, unless that somebody is God.

Most of the things that shape us are accidents, or unplanned episodes. What

happened on the day of my ordination to priesthood showed me clearly the gap between the planned procedures of the institutional church, and the delightful accidents that really change us.

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Priesthood started for me on 31 July, 1958. It had been a hot, stressful morning, that feast of Saint Ignatius. We had studied and prepared for this day over fourteen years, and were up with the lark. John Charles McQuaid, then archbishop of Dublin, arrived at Milltown Park punctually and quietly, creating around him an atmosphere of nervous awe. He muttered his way through the Latin ceremony of ordination. For us it was the third such ceremony in four days; in quick succession we had become sub-deacons, then deacons, and today was to be the priesthood. We were dizzy with dressing up, learning how to say the office, and keeping track of new obligations and rituals.

What a relief to escape from it all in the afternoon, and find my way alone to the Forty Foot for a swim. This was a rocky inlet of deep water on the edge of Dublin Bay, at that time confined to men. I left my new black suit on the rocks, and lost myself in the crisp, clean sea, glad to leave behind the warm pieties of family and friends, and feel my body come alive. Best moment of all was to climb out of the water and towel myself in the July sunshine, feeling the blood course through cold limbs.

The usual scatter of men was there, some friends, some strangers. As I stood holding my towel, one of them came up quietly. *Is it true you were ordained a priest this morning?* It is. *Then Father would you give me your blessing?* He knelt on the bare rock in front of me; I placed my hands on his head, closed my eyes and prayed over him.

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When I opened my eyes, I saw a sight which to this day fills me with amazement. There was a little cluster of men waiting for my blessing. Some I knew a drummer from a show-band, a Dun Laoire grocer, a barrister from Cork. The rest were strangers. They knelt one after the other, and I laid my novice hands on them. There was no cameraman to catch the scene: one man standing, half a dozen kneeling on the rocks in the warm sunshine, all naked as fishes.

I still have photographs of the rehearsed and solemn rituals of the morning. But that remembered image on the edge of Dublin Bay is more precious. What remains from ordination day is not so much John Charles, the muttered Latin, the over-rehearsed rituals – all that was transient. What remains is the faith of those naked men, and the fact that I still live with that body. It was the alternative church of the nineteen-fifties, a group without power or pomp or clothes: six men with a touching innocence seeking the blessing of a new priest, as they might relish the crust of a freshly baked loaf, or the first glass from a bottle of new wine. More than any of the morning's Latin ceremonial, they gave me a sense of the treasure entrusted to me.

Susan

Since that ordination day, the social role and status of the priest has changed radically in Ireland. ***When you stop being a separate caste, you have the freedom to be more of a human being.*** Relationships become warmer. What was taken to be natural in a celibate existence was no longer felt to be natural by many priests. There is a difference here between diocesan priests, who often live an isolated existence, and Religious priests for whom their community is an emotional support.

It was when I was away from community, as a doctoral student in England, that the issue became real for me. I fell madly in love with an English (devout Anglican) girl who worked with me and was untouched by the constraints that marked Irish girls in dealing with clerics (my female fellow-students at university in the 1940s used to say: *You never look above a Roman collar*). It was a straightforward struggle between my heart, which was singing with joy and poured itself out in poetry to Susan, and my head, which was quite clear that even apart from my vows, we would not be compatible. It was not an affair - we got no closer than poems and gentle kisses. The memory is still tender and joyful, but on my prompting we broke

it off, remaining good friends. That was long ago, and Susan, living on the off-shore island, is no longer in contact. When I last heard, she was with her third husband. Whether through grace or wisdom or both, I went on marching to the beat of a different drum. Even in the swinging sixties, my head was a better guide than my heart.

In terms of continuing formation, it woke up my heart, opened up possibilities that the formal training of the noviciate and later had left unexplored. I knew girls were attractive to me. It never occurred to me that I could be attractive to them. In the exhilaration of those summer days, and the deep ache that followed, my vow of chastity became real for the first time.

Theophanies

When, towards the end of his life, Ignatius Loyola described his pilgrimage, he picked out a couple of defining moments in his formation: the near-psychotic agonies of Manresa; the vision of God in all things beside the river Cardoner; the sense of calling at the chapel of La Storta. These were not continuing formation courses organised by higher executives, but ***touches of the divine, what might be called theophanies***. On an appropriately much lower level, I would point to something parallel in my pilgrimage.

You have heard about the Jesuit who planned to ask his superior for permission to fish while praying, then changed his request to *May I pray while I am fishing?* In fact the two go together. This is in part because of the lovely surroundings of fishing in Ireland. The trout may be small but the rivers and lakes are magic. I remember fishing the Liffey at Ballymore Eustace, and pausing to eat a sandwich quietly on the bank. I noticed movement, and looked round to see a beautiful fox cub sitting not ten feet from me, studying the river like me. The theologians would have called it a theophany, a vision of God. Saint Benedict encouraged his monks *vacare Deo*, to find leisure for God. Fishing does that.

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One summer I was fishing Lough Carra on my own. It was too fine and bright a day for fishing. The wind dropped round noon, the sun shone from a cloudless sky; we were, as the poet put it, as idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean. Better abandon any hope of catching trout, and just

enjoy the lovely lake. After a while in the midday heat I shipped the oars, lay down in the bottom of the boat and dozed.

I woke up aware of some tiny movement. The sun was still warm, the lake still windless. Looking down at my legs, I saw a beautiful big red damselfly (sometimes called dragonflies) had settled on my trousers just above the knee. She too seemed to be drowsy in the sun, and slowly and gently I moved my finger up behind her and touched, then stroked her long red body. Instead of flying away, she arched her body, in evident enjoyment. I had never before got on talking terms with an insect, but she and I were certainly in communication. After a couple of minutes she fluttered her gossamer wings and flew away, but it was only to circle round me and land again on exactly the same spot on my trousers. Again I stroked her gently, and again she responded with a luxurious curling of her body. A second time she flew away, circled, and landed on the same spot. The encounter was repeated again and again. The day seemed endless. I was in no hurry and neither was she. When she came back for the thirtieth time I stopped counting – till our conversation was rudely interrupted.

There were other boats on the lake, and one of the anglers grew concerned at the spectacle of my boat out from the shore, with nobody visible on board – lying on the floor of the boat I was out of sight. He motored alongside, and hearing him I stuck my head above the gunwale. *Oh*, he called. *I was worried. Have you nobody with you? I have*, I said, *but she's left the boat for a bit*. He smiled and motored off, scratching his head.

On this small planet, so heavily manipulated that you can have strawberries at Christmas and turkey in June, where the seasons have lost much of their meaning, fishing remains tightly anchored to the phases of nature. In October, when the trout are preparing to spawn, you put away your rod, tidy your fishing bag, and settle down to tie flies for the winter. You accept the discipline and frustrations of the closed season, and yearn for March and the prospect of further theophanies.

Disappointment

In St Luke's Gospel, the Prodigal Son reaches a low point and realises: *I have sinned against heaven and disappointed my father*. There are billions of people who feel that life has somehow cheated them. ***Coping***

with disappointed expectations is either formative or destructive. At a certain point, like John the Baptist sending messengers from prison to Jesus, they say to themselves: *Is this all there is? Is this as good as it gets?* They look back on a marriage that has broken or fallen short of expectations; or at a career in which they hit against a glass ceiling and failed to win the promotion they coveted; or at a religious vocation in which they often fell short of their ideals. Or they feel they somehow let down their children.

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There is a moment of truth here. This may be what Jesus meant when he urged us to carry our cross. It was not a call to take up special penances. The biggest cross is our own selves, and it does not grow lighter with the years. As Rita Hayworth said: *Old age is no place for sissies*. In that extraordinary parable, the Prodigal Son tries to make an apology to his father, but he gets nowhere. His father will not listen to the self-blame of his son. He hugs him, decks him in the best robe, and arranges a celebration.

Look at a cross-section of middle-aged and elderly people. How many of them might admit to disappointment. Are there any who do not carry some grief or wound in their heart? It was only when the smiling and heroic Mother Teresa died that it emerged that she had lived a life of spiritual desolation and torment. In a poignant poem my dear friend Páidín spoke of himself: *Inconsolable that I am I*. The Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it sharply in one of his sonnets of desolation:

I am gall, I am heartburn. God's most deep decree
Bitter would have me taste: my taste was me.

It may seem hypocritical or attention-seeking for me to speak of disappointment. I have lived a long and pretty happy life as a Jesuit, loved many friends, written a best-selling book, directed schools and governed communities, visited many beautiful places on the planet, expressed myself in countless courses and articles, and come close to some ten thousand clients through spiritual direction, therapy or supervision. Yet wounds to the ego can still rankle.

Life's disasters have a different flavour in retrospect. When I was moved from a headmaster's job, I was resentful for months. It took me that long to see that I was not suited for the job in the first place. Looking back I am grateful that I was rescued from it – and that was through a decision of

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my religious superior, and my own vow of obedience. Just as the Susan episode made chastity real for me, this sacking from a public position made obedience real. ***It is only through failure that we can identify with the suffering Christ***, and come a step closer to that self-emptying that Ignatius put at the heart of the Spiritual Exercises. It is the most central element of continuing formation. Even disappointment can be a piece of Holy Ground.