

In some ways it is all a matter of perspective. I did not always see as my moments of crisis or distress what others saw that way. What they must have seen as peak decisions for me were often only parts of a constant progression when viewed from the inside. In retrospect, I now sometimes think that my 'crisis' was more a social disjunction than a personal one. If all that sounds too enigmatic, perhaps just telling the story as I see it will provide some context for my assessment. Some years back I resigned from being a Catholic priest. For me, that was at once a big decision and, at the same time, the only reasonable course for me to pursue, given where I had taken my life to by that time. It was a big decision for a whole range of reasons. Being a Catholic priest had occupied nearly half my life. I had trained to be one for eight years, and had spent more than ten years working as one. Like many ways of life that make someone 'public property', the Catholic priesthood is more than a job. It is not just something one does, it is something one is. That is certainly a matter of self-definition, but it is also related to the way that the networks to which the Catholic priest belongs tend to define him.

Availability is a key to this definition. I remember talking to a friend who was an Anglican priest about the stresses of ministry in the Christian Church, about how lucky he was to be married and, by contrast, how difficult it was for Catholic priests because they are unmarried. He took the first and most obvious sense of my comment: how good it would be to have sexual companionship and personal intimate support, and that was what I thought I had meant to convey. But, as the discussion continued, I became aware that I was talking about more. I gave the example of my friend deciding that he needed a break, that he and his wife had not spent enough time together over a few days or weeks. He might set aside an evening in the vicarage for a quiet meal. They would listen to some music together and then slip off to bed. I asked what might happen if someone should ring to ask to come around for a chat about a pastoral problem. He could quite reasonably say that he was spending a quiet evening with his wife, and that he would deal with the matter another time.

I thought of myself when I wanted a break, opting for an evening in the presbytery for a quiet meal, some music and slipping off to bed, even if alone. I thought of a phone call such as the one I described. I knew how flimsy, both in my own eyes and in the context of the Catholic community's expectations of its priests, my explanation would sound.

This little event was an important part of the process of self-discovery for me. I presume most Catholic priests think about celibacy a fair bit. The metaphor of 'having someone by the balls' is strong in the language because having strong control over someone's sexual expression is so powerful a form of control over a person's life that one can hardly ignore it. Catholic priests impose celibacy on one another, and the language they use to talk about the imposition speaks of increasing availability to, and of being intimate with, *all* people. I found I was doing just the opposite: I was seeking more and more to protect myself from people generally, and seeking intimacy more in individual relationships.

I found myself thinking more and more about the structural implications of celibacy. Here, I was quite ambivalent. Since the time I was about twenty-four or twenty-five I have been aware that I am largely sexually attracted to men. Celibacy provides a structural haven for someone like me. For more than a decade I have been increasingly open to talking to people who cared to ask about my sexuality, and for the past five or 50 years I have been quite happy to tell people I am homosexual. But the question is rarely asked of a Catholic priest. Not many single men in their mid-thirties who do not go out with women enjoy that luxury.

The celibate Catholic clergy is part of an ambience in which it is not easy to discover and value one's sexuality-whatever that might be. Celibacy did not put me on the mat about my sexuality, and it gave me very little scope to explore what to me was an important part of my own individuality. I wanted to talk to friends about what I felt and thought, but my guilt and fear, together with the Church's subtle and blunt forms of social control, were enough for me to shy away from that course of action.

Contact with gay friends made me increasingly aware of the Catholic Church's role in the oppression of homosexual people. I read the nonsense the official Catholic Church spokesmen wrote about people such as myself, and about our 'unnaturalness'. I sat through the anti-gay jokes at clergy social functions. I felt more and more dishonest about being the official spokesperson of an organization that considered me and millions of others to be 'intrinsically disordered'. I became more and more angered by the nice distinctions: it was OK for me to *be* homosexual because I could not help that; but I simply could not *think* or *act* sexually because that was the material of sin.

My final appointment as a Catholic priest was in a situation where I had to deal day by day with young people discovering their own sexual identity. I was overpowered by their honesty, and grew to understand that Catholic teaching often spoke as little to their experience as it did to mine. I expressed disagreement with many of the precepts of the Catholic Church privately, and counselled other courses of action, as I am sure many clergy do, but I was aware that these views could not be expressed publicly. I felt pain alongside many gay people. At times, there was even a sense of my having betrayed the 'class' struggle.

Over time, I felt increasingly guilty, frustrated, angry and finally assertive. It is paradoxical really. The more I became aware of the personal and structural ways the Catholic Church puts homosexuality down, the more assertive I became about my sexual choices. Perhaps assertiveness generalizes! The clearer the issue of my homosexuality while being an officer of the Catholic Church became, the more finely honed was my analysis of other structured rigidities of the institution. Many women are becoming aware of the ways in which their experience is denied or devalued within the Church and by the Church. I became increasingly aware of how their demands for attention to this issue were treated by many of my clergy colleagues. My perception of priests' responses to women's issues changed. What I had once seen as humour, I came to see at first as unreasoned patronization, later as defensive reactions, and finally as almost derision. To be fair, it was my perception that was changing.

A friend of mine, who trained to be a priest but left and later married, used often to discuss with me his reasons for going and mine for staying. I had the sense that change, even change of the structures, was possible by working on the inside. He had always contested this. I now feel that neither he nor I was right or wrong in any absolute sense. It seems to me that the question boils down to one of personal choice about where to direct energy, and over time my choice changed.

There is no doubt in my mind that within the Catholic Church the climate changed too. In the late 1960s and early 1970s there was an air of broadening possibilities gusting through the organization. I do not think that is the case any more. Internal discipline has been explicitly tightened. More and more I felt out of step, and less and less like staying in the parade.

Another major source of dissatisfaction for me had to do with the Catholic Church's relationship with other denominations and faiths. For many people the disunity that exists is a theological

issue. For me, it came not to be. I worked as a colleague with clergy and members of other churches and even other faiths. I found I had many more things in common with them than I did with a lot of Catholic priests. The fundamental issue dividing religious groups is one of power and control masquerading as 'truth'. In friendships, such motives are destructive. I found myself at first uncomfortable with, and later unwilling to comply with, practical Roman Catholic discipline in this area. To do so would have been to betray the real affection I had for many people among whom I worked. I saw that individual compliance was how the duplicity was maintained in the system. In many ways, the homosexuality issue was like pineapple in the refrigerator-lots of things ended up with the same underlying taste.

A colleague of mine, when I told her I was leaving the priesthood, asked me how I could feel so much about ideas. I think in her own gentle way she was implying some criticism. I am not sure that I do feel so much about ideas. It is more that in me feelings and ideas and images interplay powerfully. I feel and think and imagine until things come together in a way I can claim as my own. She might be right, in the sense that I could be characterized as being a bit rationalistic, and that might explain why I handled things the way I did.

In all this, I was fairly private. I talked through various components of the whole process with different people at different levels. I did not feel comfortable putting the whole thing together with someone else until I had it fairly sorted through for myself. A bit of that grew from distrust, a bit from self-confidence, a bit from foolhardiness, and a bit from having been generally all too public a person, I suspect. None the less, that was the mode I was happy with, and I am glad, looking back, that I did keep my own counsel to a large extent. I think it had a lot to do with me retaining a sense of control.

At the same time, I remember 'floating' elements of my dissatisfaction, even my considering leaving the ministry, for several months before I could say I had taken a firm decision. It was like rehearsing what I might finally conclude, and looking for reactions. By and large the reactions were not as extreme as I had feared they might be. I was scared that people would see me as betraying a trust. Some did. Most people, even those who thought I had betrayed a trust, encouraged me to make a choice with which I could be comfortable.

The process was not without its setbacks. One evening, after a few lubricating whiskies with a close priest friend, I began to broach my growing conviction that I should set a new path. The strength of his reaction startled me: it was less to my musings, and more to his own feelings. My initial comments seemed to rouse in him deep questions that he did not want to confront. He told me he did not want to speak about the issue, and I was almost in tears.

As time went on, I had periods of intense self-analysis, and became more and more meditative. A friend told me, half in jest, that I was promethean. The image played on my mind. I rediscovered the myth: fire stolen from the gods for people, the chains and the rock, the unremitting punishment, the unbinding. I found it exciting and illuminating.

Challenged once for his skepticism about progress, Malcolm Muggeridge said, 'I do not believe in progress. I think human life is a drama. Some ages play it out better, and some worse than others.' More and more stories and rituals and symbols re-emerged and had enormous emotional weight for me. Christian symbols took new meanings: I think I preached better at this time than I had ever done before. There was a sense of personal urgency in my stripping of the ornamentation and seeing the drama unfold.

Things came to a head in some ways because I had formed what I now see as a self-defeating relationship with a man with whom I knew there was little realistic future. He had been quite honest about the matter on that level. In another sense, I am sure now that he took advantage of my vulnerability. I needed a bird with a broken wing to distract me, and so to some extent I used him too. The experience set me thinking about a series of similar relationships I had had. They had all eventually been truncated at least partially by irreconcilable conflicts in my expectations. I remember driving to the beach one day, a drive of several hours, to visit a friend and colleague who was holidaying. At one point, I said aloud, 'No, that's enough!' to my whole situation. When I arrived, I told the woman I was visiting of my resolve, and experienced a great sense of relief. I think the phrase is 'a bear was lifted from my shoulders'. My friend was critically supportive, but above all showed that she was relieved for me too.

While none of this had the air of crisis to me, I think it is fair to say that my health suffered in the final two years of my working as a priest: lots of minor colds and flu. Even my mother expressed concern! I had had a minor bout of reactive depression about four years previously, and had learnt to recognize the body signs that told me to slow down. I feel that if I had not taken my decision when I did another bout would have been on the way. Of more concern to me now, I had taken up smoking again during this time, after stopping for seven years, and am still struggling to break the addiction. My drinking behaviour had changed from years ago, and had become what I would call reactive. I recall occasions when I deliberately drank alcohol to alter my mood, or to relax myself. I still drink, but almost exclusively now as part of social rituals, and I drink much less.

Once I had a clear sense that my decision was taken, I knew that three projects awaited me, and I set about them: I had to inform a whole range of people of my decision, to make practical arrangements for my future, and to put affairs in order in my several work areas. I can understand why for many people the two and a half months over which I did these things would seem like the time I was under stress, but for me the perspective was very different. I was reveling in a newfound sense of freedom. I almost enjoyed the status of the 'priest who was leaving' and the chance it presented me to tell my story.

I was selective in the way I told it. Naively, though I think to some extent successfully, I wanted to have some control over the way that the news got around. There were people who mattered to me to whom I wanted to talk in person before the Church grapevine did its worst. I was aware that some people were already privy to varying parts of the whole story, while others were not, and would be disappointed by that very fact. There were people who had shared rather intimately in the story whom I wanted to protect. And I wanted to protect my friendships, my reputation and myself. I had a very powerful conviction that I did not want the work I had done vitiated, and the friendships I had formed besmirched by the new decision I had taken. I wanted to be able to continue to value my ministry, which was, up to that time, the most significant undertaking of my life.

Sometimes there was the great relief of 'spilling the beans' and the surprise of experiencing the incredible love of people manifest in their acceptance and practical support. Some encounters are tattooed in my memory: the older priest who told me he did not really understand, and yet embraced me awkwardly and uncharacteristically; my mother and father, my brothers, who while sometimes disappointed, responded with practical help and very regular contact; the chap for whom I had been something of a mentor and for whom my lasting friendship was cemented by

tears shed in a wine bar one night after work.

Sometimes, there was rejection that hurt sharply. Some Church people felt that my decision having been made, I should leave immediately. They told me that my continued presence was destabilizing for the people among whom I worked. I think they were wrong. I know that those who made this criticism were not the people to whom I was ministering at the time. A formerly close friend and mentor refused social contact with me because I was no longer part of 'the team'. Some close colleagues became quite distant: one told me of himself what I felt was the case with others, that he felt that association with me might reflect on his own sexual preferences. Some people reinterpreted previous events in a new, unfavourable, and often incorrect, light.

In the main, however, my new openness seemed to set the stage for a surprising openness in others. People told me that they loved me and a few that they were in love with me. Women and men with whom I had shared a tacit understanding of our homosexuality spoke with me about it for the first time. I felt tremendously affirmed, if a little awkward, in situations like this.

Church authorities responded in mixed ways, sometimes with great support, sometimes in a disconcertingly detached way, some with embarrassment and retrospective prognostication, none very unkindly. I have the sense that some felt that I had left raising the issue until too late, that they were too directly confronted with a fair accompli. In a fashion they were right, and I understand that they felt excluded at a time when they might have liked to offer support. From my perspective, I think they had little appreciation of how their actions were constitutive of my dilemmas, of how central the issue of control was to my discontent. I did not want to be treated as another problem. Some of their reactions confirmed my implicit reticence.

I chose to tell my news publicly to the congregations where I worked some weeks down the track. By that time I had told the people I had wanted to tell personally, because, as they say, 'The only secret is the one you tell no one.' I felt good about my decision and wanted that to be known. I did not elaborate all the reasons for my departure that I have set out above; they seemed either superfluous or too intimate for general consumption. I was happy to speak at length about my reasons to people who approached me later in a situation where I had some control over exposure. I felt good when people wished me well, thanked me for past help, expressed sorrow at my departure and appreciation for my work. On balance, I read a supportive acceptance of my decision. However, I was aware that less accepting sentiments would be expressed other than to me personally.

Some gossip and ghoulishness did emerge. I had thought my own dirty little secrets dirty enough, but was surprised at the range of stories that came back about whom I was having an affair with, about what past events had really meant, about the range of offences I was to be charged with. I am glad that these things came to my attention only very late in the piece. By then I was very confident in my choice, and could find them quite amusing. I do not think I would have been amused when I was much more tentative. I worried about the hurt they might cause to people I was close to, but I thought myself through that one. I had spoken directly and truthfully about the matter myself, and would continue to do so. Others would have to bear responsibility for stories they had fabricated. The problem was very transient by any estimation.

I worried about the Church's choice of my successor. My concern was that they would use the occasion of my departure to reverse the fairly liberal orientation I had contributed to in the areas in which I had worked. I was very pleased when someone was chosen who would obviously

stabilize the situation without changing its direction. The need to have my past affirmed was very strong in me, and I am glad that, at least partially, I contributed to that happening. It made me much more confident in assessing the future.

In the month before I finally left, my attention turned to practical matters. Would I remain in the city I had worked in? Leaving the priesthood meant I left my job and my home in one fell swoop. I had no savings to speak of. What would I do about accommodation? What finance could be arranged? What job prospects were available? On these issues, I was not private at all. I canvassed them broadly among friends, and was amazed at how things seemed to slip into place. To say that is slightly simplistic: some slipped, some were enticed, some were bludgeoned. I planned very systematically, but practical support was superabundant, sometimes even where emotional support was slow or not forthcoming.

I remained in the city I had worked in. There was no sense in which I wanted to turn either from my past or my decision, and I felt that I needed my family and friends-my support networks-more than ever. I saw no value in my cutting myself off from them. I was prepared to accept that others might cut me off, but, on the basis of reactions to that point, I was confident that I had more to gain than lose. I chose to continue involvements in various organizations on the premise that my life had taken a different direction rather than that I had become a different person. Sometimes this was accepted, other times not. There have been moments of anger, frustration and sadness, when I have come to acknowledge that some people will not accept this distinction.

Several years farther on, where do I stand? I am very happy in the new direction my life has taken. I feel enormously less stressed, and still experience a great feeling of liberation. I sometimes miss the life I once led, and find photographs from that period very moving. I have a great sense of reverence for supportive friendships that have deepened through the events of that time and since. There have been rearrangements in my support networks, new challenges and projects. I have formed a relationship, which is central to my life and a great source of joy. I am happier in myself than I think I have ever been, and part of that happiness comes from the experiences that I had in my time of turbulence.

I have never tried to systematize my thoughts about my experience before, and I have found it both difficult and extremely rewarding. On reading it over, I find my account at once true and inadequate. Yet, in the writing, some things have become clearer to me. I would like them to be of some help to others.