

Just Man Dreaming

God dreamed of you before you were conceived . You are made in the image and likeness of God, i.e. to be a dreamer. But what sort of dreamer? Like St Joseph. Which is appropriate in this year of St Joseph.

Note the sequence in Matthew 1:- 18-21. Joseph was already a fair-minded man before the dream. We have to bring to our dreaming for the Church a non-antagonistic them and us frame of mind. Then dream, which is the opportunity for the Holy Spirit to penetrate our consciousness.

We can distinguish Holy Spirit dreaming from the fantasy of slumber by seeing whether our dreams are in harmony with the Scriptures and the tradition of the Church with a capital T. This includes the Second Vatican Council which Pope John Paul II described as “normative”.

If our dreaming is harmonious with Scripture and Tradition then, as in Matthew 2: 13-14, get up and do something about it.

Essential Women

The passage in Luke 8:1-3 is truly shocking. *Women* disciples join the itinerant preacher and healer travelling around Galilee, breaking all social taboos. What restrictions on women in today's Church are simply social and religious taboos?

Pope Francis formally allowing women to be inducted as Acolytes and Lectors, and in appointing a woman as Under Secretary for the Synod of Bishops is starting to remove such restrictions.

The women of Luke 8:1 - 3 provided the financial resources for Jesus' missionary journeys. That is, the Jesus movement, literally and metaphorically, depended on women. It still does depend on women, beyond finances. How can this be recognised and enhanced?

These same women were witnesses to Jesus ministry death burial and then the empty tomb_ Luke 24: 1 - 12. They believed that Jesus prophecy of the same had been fulfilled, though they did not see Him. It was the men who did not believe, dismissing the prattle of

the women as “delirious” (in the Greek). How dismissive has the male leadership been of women over the millennia, only making concessions in the face of sanctity (Catherine of Siena, Therese, Mary McKillop)?

In St John’s gospel 20:11, 14 -18, it is Mary of Magdala who is featured. By the way, nowhere in the Gospels is she described as a prostitute. Was this part of the male patriarchy subjugating her to their own ambitions?

The fact is, Mary Magdalene was *deliberately chosen* by Our Risen Lord to be the first witness to His conquering of death, even though Jewish law did not regard a woman as a credible witness. He appeared to her, told her not to cling to her old relationship with Him (“Mary-- Rabbi”) and to tell His male followers what she had seen, and heard from Him.

St Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century rightly called her “The Apostle to the Apostles”. And Pope Francis has elevated her feast day to the same status as that of the male Apostles. What if this had been emphasised right from the start and continuously over two millennia?

So, in dreaming about women in the Church, these passages from Luke and John are very legitimate starting points. One can ask of those who wish to suppress full participation of women in the life of the church: “Well, what is *your* starting point?”.

If it is mere tradition (for example, no women in the sanctuary) it should give way. If it is tradition with a capital T, then that is another matter as the Holy Spirit guides the Faithful as a whole over the centuries. I define the latter Tradition as that which is held in common by the Roman Catholic and Greek and Russian Orthodox Churches (for example, reserving the priesthood to males). That is a more defensible starting point.

Build My Church

One can read Matthew 16: 18 with catholic emphasis on “Peter” and “this rock”. Or, one might emphasise: “I will build *my* church”. Only the Church built by Jesus Christ can successfully assault the gates of Hades----- the abode of the dead, in Jewish thought the barely existing.

The gates of Hades (everything that is dehumanising) will withstand a church built on a Roman imperial or mediaeval or Renaissance or modern corporate model. The model has to be such that Our Risen Lord would recognise it as “*my church*”, i.e. harmonious with the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles.

We have heard this expression before in the story of St Francis of Assisi: “Francis, rebuild *my church*” and the Saint did so imitating the poverty of Jesus and exalting the Creator in the Canticle of the Creatures. Both these emphases are to be found in Pope Francis’ concern with the poor nearby and on the peripheries, and in ‘Laudato Si’.

As to the Gospels, I dream of a Church more in harmony with John 8:1 -11. Note the sequence. Jesus first engages the woman in conversation, refuses to join in life-threatening condemnation, i.e. treats her as a human being and saves her and *only then* tells her to sin no more. Too often, Church leadership sounds as if starting from that end and then wonders why people block their ears.

As to the Acts of the Apostles, I dream of a church more in harmony with Acts 15: 4-8,12-13,19-20. Note :

- (1) there is nothing wrong with vigorous debate;
- (2) the contribution of Peter, Paul and Barnabas is from their lived experience and observation of the work of the Holy Spirit. Only later does James note that the Jewish Scriptures support this. So *start* with honest recognition of the work of the Holy Spirit in the contemporary culture, not with some theological construct, and then check that it is harmonious with the Scriptures, especially the New Testament;
- (3) the periods of silence are significant as indicating taking time to absorb the contribution of the other in the debate---the “deep listening”;
- (4) there has to be a definitive resolution by someone in leadership, in this case St James. For us ultimately it will be the Bishop of Rome exercising his Petrine ministry;
- (5) only then can we hope to be able to say: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us”!

These are some of the elements we would look for in a synodal Church. This word comes from the Greek syn= together, hodie= path or way, i.e. on the way together. I like this expression as a reminder that the earliest Christians were simply called “The Way”, and Christ is The Way the Truth and the Life.

Both Pope Francis and Cardinal Grech (Secretary of the Synod of Bishops) have emphasised that “particular”, i.e. local ,churches should engage in synodal mode at various levels from the parish to the diocesan. They should not wait for some template to be imposed from the top, but the Secretariat is happy to collaborate with, and learn from, the experience of the local churches.

Keep Rowing!

In Mark4:35-41 Jesus requires his disciples to row from the Jewish side of the Sea of Galilee, i.e. *familiar* territory, to pagan territory on the other side, i.e. *unfamiliar* territory. On the journey they are buffeted by storms.

Can anyone deny that the Church is travelling from familiar territory to the unfamiliar and is being buffeted by storms of various kinds?

The disciples find Jesus asleep and wonder whether he is concerned about their fate. May we suppose that Jesus was dreaming, i.e. in deepest communion with His Father and the Holy Spirit undistracted by the raging storm. Once roused, He naturally saves them and brings them to a fuller understanding of Who He is (1 Timothy2:4).

But, this is my main point, He does not allow his disciples to row back to the familiar shore. He does not allow them the luxury of nostalgia. They must keep rowing, perhaps with their backs to the unfamiliar shore, but He in the stern can see exactly where He wants them to go.

To bishops and clergy rowing to the unfamiliar shore of transparency and accountability rather than the familiar shore of edict and obedience, Our Risen Lord commands:

“Keep rowing!”

To males in the church rowing from the familiar shore of female subservience to the unfamiliar shore of females asserting their baptismal and social equality, Our Risen Lord commands: “Keep rowing!”

To those in positions of authority in the Church rowing from the familiar shore of uncontested decision-making to the unfamiliar shore of synodal debate Our Risen Lord commands: “Keep rowing!”

To those rowing from the familiar shore of development taking priority over the environment to the unfamiliar shore of spiritual and moral ecology Our Risen Lord commands: “Keep rowing!” (And we may land on the shore of Our Common Home , the subtitle of ‘Laudati Si’!)

To those rowing from the familiar shore in the Barque of Peter who find themselves in a flotilla of “other boats [which] set out *with Him*”, (our fellow Christians), pulling on our oars to the unfamiliar shore of unity without uniformity, Our Risen Lord commands: “Keep rowing!”

We must all keep rowing, but do so in the faithful confidence that the One in the stern is the Lord of the cosmos whom even the storms obey.