

21 February 2021

Dear Friends of Elmwood,

In a distant galaxy far, far away, long before the sagging and grey set in, I was a fresh-faced, youthful Minister. I'm not kidding.

I sported an auburn moustache. I'd grown it in a bootless attempt to look older than I was. Twenty years later, I got rid of it hoping to look *younger* than I was. ("Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, saith the Preacher.") What's more, I was brimming with Idealism and abounding in Ambition.

"You were? Really?" you ask. (I feel your scepticism from afar, Gentle Reader.) "We see the embers of Idealism in you, occasionally, yes, but none of us can picture *you*, at any age, animated by Ambition. Melancholy? Sure. Grouchiness? Definitely. But Ambition? No sir."

Hear me out. Hand on heart, I must and shall insist that I was driven to 'make a mark' back then, 'to be up and coming', and 'to be noticed'. How? By 'making a difference in the world', by 'moving and shaking things up', and of course by 'serving others'. In other words, to be an 'annoying prig'.

("Oh, now we get it. We can believe *that* about you," you say.)

Youthful Ego likes to hide itself behind altruistic turns-of-phrase, doesn't it? Not just in the ghetto of the Church, but in politics, in the professions, and in the faddish forms of volunteerism.

"What are you going to DO about it?"

One morning in those long-ago days, soon after shaving (but with moustache intact), I answered a knock on the door of the Manse.

Though it was dwarfed by the Church right beside it, this draughty Manse was the grandest house I'll ever live in. It had two sitting rooms (one meant for visitors), a large dining room, a massive kitchen, two staircases (one hidden), four big bedrooms, a spacious, finished attic, a cellar with an old cistern, a garage, and a large, fenced-in garden.

It had been built long ago, in the days when Ministers were Pillars of the Community and People of Note. No one still said this about Ministers anymore, not unless they said it sarcastically. But living in a grand house can foster delusions of grandeur.

"Yes?" I said, opening the door.

Before me stood three severe people. Each was older than I was. Their posture suggested lifetime membership in the professional class, worthy bearers of ‘titles’ prone to feelings of entitlement. An air of grievance wafted through the open doorway.

“Is your father home?”

“No,” I said. “My father doesn’t live here.”

“The Minister, then. We need to see the Minister.”

“I’m the Minister,” I said, expecting a demeanor of deference to descend upon them. It didn’t. For a brief but notable moment, they stared. Then, in a loud stage whisper, one of them spoke from the side of his mouth.

“Good God, he’s just a kid!”

They had come, ostensibly, because they mistakenly thought I was somehow responsible – and I was therefore the source of remedy – for a vexing problem that impinged upon the pleasure they were *entitled* to enjoy in the use of the property that was most certainly *theirs*.

It turns out they were neighbours, not of me but of each other, in a different quadrant of the city. A ‘halfway house’ for drug addicts had just been established there. It adjoined their properties. They’d found needles. In their gardens. *Used* needles.

“We have children. *Children*. Do you understand?”

I assured them that I did, in fact, know the dictionary definition of the word ‘children’, and, if pressed, I could identify one in a police line up. So yes, I understand.

“Well...?”

“Well what,” I said. My Inner Grouch awoke. I hadn’t even had coffee yet.

“What are you going to *do* about it?” said the side-of-the-mouth talker.

This was clever bait on his part. Was he a lawyer? I suspect so. This question – “What are you going to *do* about it?”, or maybe it was, “What are *you* going to do about it?” – played strongly to my youthful Ego, my vanity, my need to be noticed, to make a mark, to serve others, and to do ‘good’ in the world.

All of these ‘virtuous’ actions were predicated on my *need to be needed*. How did he come to know that about me?

A Naughty Nostalgia for Christendom

If you were to perform a ‘spiritual’ x-ray of many Ministers, you’d find the beating heart of this need. It itches for deployment in ‘deeds of worthy service’

and 'contributions to the common weal'. That is not a bad thing. Not at all. Many, many people have this need, and they deploy it in many useful ways, in work and leisure hours, as employees or volunteers, for the benefit of all. Done well, these deeds earn acclaim. And what's wrong with that?

But the 'world' rarely – i.e., almost *never* – knocks on the door of the Church, never mind a Minister's Manse, requesting advice or demanding action to solve a 'worldly' problem.

The Manse I lived in, back then, and the Church adjoining it, was built to be as solid and formidable as Post Offices once were. So were City Halls, Railway Stations, and the Main Branches of the Banks. They were more than functional office blocks. Their design and ornamentation symbolised *society's* building blocks.

Churches, in those days, were never innocuous, private institutions. Those who built them built as grandly as they could because they believed the presence and activity of a Church, just by being what it was and doing what it did, would nourish the welfare of the whole society, just as much as any City Hall did – more, in fact.

The Church that adjoined the Manse I once lived in had been, in its infancy, an outpost of the Church of Scotland, long before there was a 'Canada' or an autonomous Presbyterian Church in this land. To this day, the Church of Scotland carves up its wee nation, geographically, into contiguous parishes, rather as the public institutions of health, education, and law do in their own jurisdictions, each with its appointed hospital, school, and police station.

It used to be understood that every Minister of a Parish Church in Scotland assumed responsibility for the spiritual care and social welfare of the *whole* parish, meaning 'everyone who lives within its bounds', whether they sat in the Church's pews or not, whether they were Christian or not, whether they were 'worthy' or not. I rather like that.

It's a legacy of Christendom. Christendom's roots were deep in the soil of Medieval Europe. In the Middle Ages, everyone from Monarch to Peasant was deemed 'Christian', not just by default but by law. One's place in the Church was coterminous with one's place in the Realm. One didn't *choose* to be Christian or 'join a Church' in those days, any more than you and I *chose* the nation we were to be born in. The Medieval Church was as much in the air and water, as it were, as it was in the sanctuary and altar, infusing the entire culture and touching

every corner of society. One 'became' Christian in the same way we learn our native tongue. This is what made it 'Christendom'.

You could still see the last faint twitch of Olde World Christendom, before it died, in Quebec before the 'Quiet Revolution'. In Roch Carrier's book for children, *The Hockey Sweater*, there's a priest who's so wrapped up in the life and welfare of his parish, as priests were back then, that he not only performed the 'priestly bits' of his job (hearing confessions, catechising children, celebrating mass each day, marrying and burying his flock); he also oversaw the school, helped administer the hospital; and engaged in what we'd today call 'social work' and 'legal aid'. But more than all that, he tied up his skates and refereed their hockey games, still wearing his cassock, of course. Who would lie to a priest by saying he wasn't offside?

Clergy are now taught to disparage Christendom. We're told it was a big, fat mistake, a 'power grab' by the Church, or at least an illicit marriage with 'Empire'. It fomented a million problems. This is the received opinion.

There's a huge and important truth embedded in this opinion, but I dare not go into it here. The point is that right-thinking people 'just know' that any longing for Christendom's glory days is both 'politically incorrect' and 'ideologically unsound'.

So, why am I sometimes nostalgic for that lost, illicit world, for something I didn't even experience? I'm not supposed to feel this way, am I?

Maybe it's because Christendom needs the Church, and the Church needs its Ministers, and Ministers need to be needed. We all do, don't we?

The Last Part, I Promise, in Place of a Proper Ending

So, I smiled my polished fake smile at those early morning visitors on the doorstep of the Manse. Had I awoken in a time warp? Had our world travelled back into Christendom? Were they appealing to my powers as a *parish* Minister with a share of civic responsibility for the welfare of all?

Well, no.

"You want me to do something about this? OK, but I don't understand. I have no knowledge or oversight of this halfway house for drug addicts. Have you taken it up with City Hall?"

It turned out that because I was Chaplain of our little Boy Scout Troop (who have their own chains of command apart from the Church), and because the Boy Scout Troop had raised funds on 'Apple Day', and because they had

donated those funds to the halfway house for addicts in a different quadrant of the city, these three serious, professional people believed I had an arcane, influential powers that could immediately remedy their immediate problem.

"I'm sorry for your trouble," I said. "I truly am. But I don't have the power to help you." And as I closed the door, I thought, "He's a side-of-the-mouth talker, yes. But maybe that guy isn't a lawyer after all."

Yours in the faith,
Andrew