

High Sierra

When we were young enough to travel Jane and I often visited the high Sierra meadows above Squaw Valley. Mid-July is when so many of the mountain wildflowers blossom amid the rocks and along the margins of the higher lakes. Tiny splashes of scarlet, lavender, white, yellow, pink, blue, purple, flaming orange, of larkspur, mountain geranium, Sierra shooting star and other small blossoms are scattered across the landscape.

Which reminds me of a dream I once had that I have told of often before, one of those turning points in life. It came to me a few years after I had resigned the priesthood and been laicized. In this dream I found myself saying Mass once again (after so long an interval) - standing at the high altar of a cathedral, facing a dimly visible congregation. Naturally, not being familiar with the new Vatican II text, I wasn't sure what to read, what gestures to make . . . and so I froze. Then as I looked down at the Missal I noticed that it was the old Latin Mass after all, the one I was familiar with.

It was open to the central prayer of the Mass in Latin: *Te igitur, clementissime Pater*. I thought: "Hey, I can do this!" - when suddenly every letter on the page changed into a flower, row upon row of violets, primroses, wild iris. I froze again! I whispered to the young priest beside me: "What do I do?" The young priest turned his palm to the page and replied, "Read what it says."

We are heirs to a religious tradition that began with colorful, dynamic stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abraham and Sara, of Jacob's wrestling with an angel, of little Moses hidden in the bulrushes. We are heirs to the tragedy of Saul, the passion of David and Bathsheba, the poetry of the psalms, the metaphors of the prophets. We are heirs to the Gospel parables, narratives of healing and forgiveness, of human transfiguration and resurrection - in other words, images that present a profound understanding of our human condition and ever so gradual access to fullness of life if you can inhale their scent. It was in this meadow God wished us to graze. Yet down through the centuries by way of habit we allow these enticing, *deeply rooted* blossoms to recede into line upon line of alphabetical signs, "dead letters"- or into the brief "answers" of our catechisms - where it all goes impersonal, no longer reverberant. So no wonder younger people wander off looking for the insight to be derived from crystal gazing of one sort or another.

Obviously this was a problem even back in the days of the prophet Jeremiah: "Woe to the shepherds who mislead and scatter the flock of my pasture," to which there follows a promise: "Behold, I myself will gather the remnant of my flock . . .and bring them back to their meadow; there they shall increase and multiply." The grand effort of Vatican II a mere sixty years ago was to nourish the meadow of our tradition so that it might blossom up to its real potential - and in some way "perfume" the "air" we breathe. Pardon me while I go outside for a moment to see if there is a colorful scent in the air.

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