

Rediscovering the Parish

(Part 1)

John Feehan is a well-known writer on the environment and lives in County Offaly.

Essentially nourished though it is through encounter with creation, the individual human can only find him or her self fully through the relationships in community in which those qualities of excellence appropriate to our deep response to God – the virtues – are exercised. At an earlier stage in human evolution, communities might be defined in relation to the portion of the earth's surface that provided food and shelter. Over time these communities learned to live sustainably and independently with regard to most everyday requirements: raw materials, agriculture, and arts and crafts.

Just as we can only be 'at home' when we are close to the natural world, we can only be truly at home in a place of such a size that we can get to know and relate to it and feel we have taken root: a place that is commensurate with our everyday life. My life is not lived among the stars or in the realms of the quarks, even though my mind can wander there and my life be enriched by that exploration. My life is lived in a particular place in a particular corner of the earth, on a scale that is defined by my biological nature. My ability to travel beyond the

horizon merely expands my understanding of the space it defines.

Once upon a time the word 'parochial' simply meant something pertaining to one's parish. Over time it has come to mean somebody whose outlook and interests are narrow, confined to the small area covered by the parish. Actually the area in which we are made, meant, to spend our lives – biologically, psychologically, spiritually – is the parish, not in the literal sense of a line on the map but in the sense of our horizon, where the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening. It is a flexible horizon that expands and contracts in time and place.

Body, mind and soul, we are made to live our lives anchored in this one place. Globalisation shows us all the





By Bryan Ledgard - <https://www.flickr.com/photos>

kingdoms of the earth, which can be ours if we bow down and adore the god of materialism. The great temptation – the little variant in our lives of the great temptation to which Jesus of Nazareth was subjected when, weak after forty days of fasting in the desert, he was whisked by the devil to a high place and shown all the kingdoms of the earth – is to allow ourselves to think that our human possibility is narrowed by this anchorage.

A plant can only extend its branches, reach its full stature and flower and fruit as it is meant to do, when its roots are firmly anchored and penetrate deeply into the soil of one place; our body, mind and spirit can extend to the most enriching limits only when

similarly nourished by one place. This does not mean that we turn our backs on the advances of science and technology, rather it means that we use them to serve that nourishment and are not used by them.

We have become so benumbed by our technologies that we are scarcely aware of it. We have become progressively distanced from nature's touch over this last century: first by radio, then television and now in recent years by the cybernetic revolution. I still find it hard to get used to people walking through a world of birdsong inside the sound bubble of their ear-phones; a mobile phone is all but implanted in their ears. The disembodied contact of Facebook or Youtube substitutes today for community.

For most of human prehistory and history, people's direct experience hardly extended beyond the seen horizon that was the edge of their little world, but they knew this world in the way the animal knows its defined niche. Their way of living was characterised by intimacy: an experienced closeness to the earth cut to our human measure. It was parochial, in the original and best sense of the word. First, there is intimacy in our knowledge of the people who live alongside us in this home place and share our lives, developed through shared work and understanding. Secondly, there is intimacy in knowing how to use the resources of this home place, timber and stone and soil, to build the fabric of the cultural landscape and sustain the community. They knew every bush and every stone, every slope and shadow, the variation of

its soils and what grew in them, and know it they must, because upon this knowledge their very lives depended. And yet it was a winged intimacy that extended far beyond a little earth-bound land circumscribed by the horizon, reaching as it did through imagination and intellect to frame this parish against the movement of the great lights of the sky and the seasons they controlled.

It was among such rural societies that the series of methodologies for right living that became the earth's great religious traditions crystallised. In the case of Christianity, the New Testament is like an extended farm tour. The politicisation of the great religious traditions on the other hand is an urban development.

*To be continued in next month's
Messenger*

Petitions

First Friday 7th February 2025

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Your petitions are remembered at prayer and Mass here at *The Messenger* office.

Send to:
The Editor,
Sacred Heart Messenger,
Milltown Park,
Dublin
Do6 W9Y7, Ireland