

Reflections on the conference – from a participant

I frankly did not know what to expect from this conference as this was my first Retreat Association one. I had been to many similar events before, and I had organised a number of conferences too, but I did not have any clear idea as to what was ahead of me when I arrived. I felt a little like a balloon when it is slightly deflated, slightly wrinkled and thickened at the edges, and not as bouncy as it used to be. Not an unusual state for a University chaplain at the end of an academic year, I guess. So I suppose I was expecting some kind of an expansion. And indeed, that happened in at least three distinct ways.

First of all, I somewhat expanded in the more obvious, tangible way, which will require a subtle adjustment to my wardrobe, or a lot of exercise. In short, the food was excellent.

But there were two other expansions, one more in my right brain, and one more in my left brain – if I follow the distinction presented to us by Ian McGilchrist.

On the left, more linear side, I realised one important thing. Balance, in all its variety of forms, depends on something essential but completely invisible – something that was not mentioned throughout the conference but certainly functions as the underpinning of any balancing act. It is gravity. Without that invisible force no balancing act can work. Here, one is reminded of the videos of spacecrafts in which people are floating in weightlessness; and one is dizzy and not quite sure which way is up. And clearly, for us Christians, that Gravity, with the capital ‘G’, needs no spelling out. God in whom we move and have our being anchors our existence and allows us to strike that right and elegant balance in life. Interestingly, with this underlying force defined, one is suddenly aware of the current culture where people are often floating weightlessly lost, getting sick and unsure which way is up, eventually even unable to understand any need for balance. Yet, back on Earth, rooted in creation, a way of life for which we were made for can be restored because gravity offers a foothold.

On the right, more allusive side, I became aware of a yet another surprising thing. I observed an amazing miracle so well illustrated by the seating arrangement. Here there was an Anglican sitting next to a Methodist, next to a Catholic, next to a Baptist, next to a Presbyterian, next to a person happy to fit all boxes, next to a person shunning all classifications. The few inches of space between the chairs were being filled with joy and laughter, mutual respect and worship of God. And looking at it from a distance, it suddenly dawned on me that God is so good at herding cats! Or should I say a ‘blessing of unicorns’, since the poet in residence reminded us of the correct collective nouns? Incidentally, I am told that a blessing of unicorns historically used to refer also to a horse-drawn carriage. Whether it is true or not, this reminds me of my Slavic heritage – a Russian Troika, a carriage drawn by three horses harnessed abreast. Interestingly, these three horses have to run at different speeds so as to pull the carriage: the side ones are necessarily faster than the middle one. They canter whilst the middle one trots. It is a wonderful visual image for us Christians, who can allow each other different speeds whilst hoping to pull the same weight together. We do not need to run with the same gait in order to move something forward.

So, looking at this conference, and remembering the generously leavened stories, if all this is not the stuff the bread of unity is made from, then I do not know what is.

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