I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it calls itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can (…)  

In these words of James Joyce’s hero Stephen Daedalus, we find contained the very core of the “helplessness of Christianity in the face of the modern tragedy of man.” What is “the helplessness of Christianity” and what is “the modern tragedy of man”?

Stephen Daedalus was mesmerized by the creative possibilities which language offers.

To none of his former fervours had he given himself with such a whole heart as to this fervour; the monk now seemed to him no more than half the artist.

Young Stephen Daedalus does not want to serve that in which he no longer believes. And he ceased to believe in his church because he deemed that only as an artist, and not as a monk, is man completely free. What is it that an artist possesses, but that a monk or priest lacks? Why is Christianity “no more than half the art”? In Greek, the word “ποιητής” means both creator and poet. Is Christ not only a Redeemer but also a Creator, a Poet?

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1 The sermon was delivered in Oxford, at Balliol College Chapel, May 29 2011.
And if Christ is also the Archpriest, does He not suggest that to be a priest one needs to become a poet? What if the problem was not in Christ, but in the clergy and theology that have distorted Christ’s image? And this is the main reason why Christianity, in the words of the famous Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev “has not yet revealed itself in fullness, as an experience of freedom”.

According to the Fathers of the Church, man is a priest, a priest of creation. But what if in their primordial connotation the terms priest and poet were interchangeable? What if God created man as a poet of creation? Perhaps Joyce’s vision of man as poet is much closer to the original Divine plan than the disfigured concept which mainstream Christian theology advocates? Is it inconceivable to be priest and poet at the same time?

One of the best writers of the Victorian period and a member of our college, G. M. Hopkins, struggled with the co-existence of these two vocations in his life and never achieved a peaceful synthesis of the two. In one letter Hopkins writes:

You give me a long jobation about eccentricities. Alas, I have heard so much about and suffered so much for and in fact have been so completely ruined for life by my alleged singularities that they are sore subject.

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5 The Meaning of the Creative Act, p. 158.

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Fr Sophrony Sakharov, the great Russian mystic and mystical writer of the twentieth century, claimed that unless one becomes a poet one cannot be a Christian. Are these words solely a romantic vision of the synthesis of Christianity and poetry? As we know, before entering into the Jesuit novitiate, Hopkins burned his Oxford poems. Almost in similar fashion to Joyce, who was also to become a Jesuit priest and had received education at the Jesuit College, Hopkins wrote these tragic words to one of his friends:

I want to write still, and as a priest I very likely can do that too, not so freely as I should have liked, e.g. nothing or little in the verse way, but no doubt what would serve the cause of my religion.7

Is Hopkins saying that one can serve his religion only by losing his freedom? In another letter Hopkins describes the destiny of the artist in the Church, saying that the “flower of the youth of a country in numbers enter the Jesuit order”. “Among these how many poets, how many artists of all sorts, there must have been!” exclaims Hopkins - he continues:

But there have been very few Jesuit poets and, where there have been, I believe it would be found on examination that there was something exceptional in their circumstances or, so to say, counterbalancing in their career.8

I have asked about the modern tragedy of man and the helplessness of Christianity. The core of this tragedy is that man refuses to be only free from; that is, to be free from passions, but also desires to be free for: to be

free for infinite creativity. “Freedom is the power to create out of nothing,”\(^{9}\) wrote Berdyaev, and this is so because God’s freedom lies in His capacity for \textit{creatio ex nihilo}. However, in Christianity we find hardly anything else but the law and the redemption. Berdyaev observed:

\[ \text{[Nietzsche] burned with creative desire. Religiously, he knew only the law and the redemption in neither of which is the creative revelation of man. And so he hated God because he was possessed by the unfortunate idea that man’s creativeness is impossible if God exists.}^{10} \]

Being created in the Divine image, man needs to create in the same manner as God if he is to feel free. However, we have in front of ourselves the created world which allegedly limits our freedom. Are we to conclude, then, that the Christian God has not endowed us with genuine freedom?

Nevertheless, what if the medium of the created world does not limit human freedom; what if in the framework of language, harmonies or colours it offers infinite creativeness? In his novel \textit{In Search of the Time Lost} Marcel Proust wrote about an imaginary composer, Vinteuil:

\[ \text{He knew (…) that the field open to the musician is not a miserable stave of seven notes, but an immeasurable keyboard (still, almost all of it, unknown) (…)}^{11} \]

\[ \text{Unfortunately Christianity failed to clarify the fact that the medium of this world provides unlimited possibilities. Christianity understands human} \]

\(^{9}\) Op. cit., p. 78.

\(^{10}\) Op. cit., p. 106.


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being as a priest of creation and in this vocation man’s greatest freedom is hidden. Since this is the best that Christianity has to offer regarding freedom, we have to see if the human priesthood conceived in this way is really creative.

Some of the most influential modern thinkers claim that man is a priest because he carries bread and wine to the altar, which are the symbols of all creation. Man offers them to God and prays for their sanctification. It is significant that man does not offer to God plain wheat and grapes but first makes them into bread and wine. The subsequent crucial action of transformation is, however, performed solely by God. Man’s duty, it seems, is only to perform relatively passive prayer—and to be baker and winemaker.

St Maximus the Confessor, one of the most significant Church writers, viewed man as an incomparably more active being. What does it mean to be active in man’s case? Man is first of all the “living being endowed with capacity of logos”, with the power to create and interpret meanings. This is why the inner meaning of the Eucharist and of the priesthood is to redeem all creation, in the words of St Maximus, by “giving to the Lord the

12 “In the Eucharist we do not offer to God simply grain or wheat and grapes, but bread and wine, i.e. natural elements developed and transformed through the human labor.” John Zizioulas, Proprietors or Priests of Creation?, Keynote Address to the First Plenary Session of the “Baltic Sea Symposium” on Religion, Science and the Environment, June 2, 2003, p. 8.

13 “According to this determination, man is τὸ ὑπὸ ῥήματος ἐξελθόν—the being that emerges from itself, emerges in such a way that in this emerging (σέφυσι), and for it, it has the word.” Martin Heidegger, Parmenides, translated by André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis 1992, p. 68.
And “the intellectual meaning of things” is that what Hopkins called *inscape*, what Joyce called *quidditas* or *whatness*, what Proust named *the general essence of things*.

The medium of the created world not only does not limit, but requires man’s inborn impulse towards poetical *creatio ex nihilo*. According to the Fathers, the world is the Divine work of art and God is an artist *par excellence*. Heidegger observed that “the thinking of being is the primordial form of poeticizing…” To give the intellectual meaning of the Divine work of art is possible only by creating art. And by being a poet one is a priest of creation. “The poeticizing essence of thought preserves the sway of the truth of being,” writes Heidegger. Salvation of the world depends on our capacity to see the truth of its eschatological being and to think it and name it poetically. But man’s priesthood is not just a reiteration of Divine ideas. Berdyaev claimed that God has limited His own freedom, thus giving to man absolute freedom. God wishes to be surprised by man’s poetical priesthood.

Fr Sophrony Sakharov was right – man is priest only if he is a poet of creation; and poet is someone capable of ever-new creation, capable of surprising even God, which is freedom in its supreme form.

14 *Questions ad Thalassium* 51; PG 90, 480A.
Christianity ought to discover itself finally as a religion of the poetical priesthood; not only as a religion of freedom; but as a religion in which freedom is an absolute imperative. Otherwise it will continue to be “helpless in the face of the modern tragedy of man”. And the flower of the mankind of every generation will say: “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe.”