

THE HENHOUSE DOOR

Coping With change - by Brendan Hoban

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Someone told me a story recently about a man who always finished off the work of the day by closing the henhouse door. No matter how busy he was, no matter what distracted him, he just couldn't go to bed without pulling shut the rickety door of the henhouse. Or, as he put it, 'closing on the hens'. It became part of the ritual of his life. At that precise point in Irish rural life when the eggs in the fridge began to replace the eggs in the henhouse, a decision was made to let the hens die out. When his last feathered friend expired, the family wondered how he was going to retire for the night without the practised ritual. They shouldn't have wondered. Hen or no hen, the same ritual continued. Every night for as long as God gave him breath, he persisted in closing on the non-existent hens. The ritual had become part of himself.

You'd imagine that it could hardly be clearer that closing on the hens was no longer necessary and a short discussion would free people from a senseless activity. The problem though is that the obvious is not always recognisable from the inside. The perception of things from within the caste can be very different. If you are part of the building up of a tradition, it is very difficult to become part of the dismantling of the same tradition. If you give a wedge of your life to any activity, it is extremely difficult to stand back and set that work in realistic context. And the bigger the institution, the more sacred the tradition and the more difficult it is to ask hard questions about it.

What happens is that a philosophy, an approach, a way of doing things becomes a tradition which in turn solidifies into a ritual. The ritual becomes part of a mindset, a way of looking at life and at the world that responds in a knee-jerk way to every occasion, every possibility that life raises. And anyone who points out that the last hen

has died speaks a language that those stuck in the mindset simply cannot understand. The emperor, his clothes and all that!

Apply that to the Church. In times past we lived a very controlled and self-contained world. Every question had an answer, every problem a solution, every dilemma was resolved. It was a fail-safe system tediously worked out to meet every possible quirk that life or nature would throw up. We were so confident in our 'church world' that we often distracted ourselves with nonsensical questions like trying to fathom out how many angels could stand on the head of a pin!

That enclosed, self-contained world bred a mindset and a series of rituals that became sacrosanct. Women covering their heads in church, celebrants half-way through Mass getting into a dither because they began to wonder whether they were wearing the right colour vestments, communicants wondering whether it was 59 and a half minutes since they had their breakfast or would it be the required hour if they waited at the end of the Communion queue, adults running in and out of the church in an effort to pile up indulgences ... customs and practices that seemed central to the compulsions of life and that now in retrospect seem dated and peculiar.

In a world where moral problems no longer seem easy to fathom, where the dilemmas of life offer no clear solution, where the carefully worked out wisdom of the past often seems bizarre in its simplicity, in that kind of world it is difficult to venture out of the cosy, self-contained world of the 19th century, and the mindset that comes with it. So you'll find people getting apoplectic about a priest not wearing his black suit and his Roman collar and priests going through rituals well past their sell-by date ... and nobody wants to name the difficult truth that the hens are long since dead and gone.