Christian ministry is widely perceived to be increasingly difficult, conflict prone, and personally challenging by many practitioners. At a time when the culture of managerialism is being widely embraced in the Church, and applied to intractable problems that are far too deeply rooted in change-resistant institutional cultures, we have a recipe for much superficial and frustrated activity. It is dangerous for clergy to be frank about these fears and burdens at a time when activist, program-centred approaches to Church leadership are being imposed from above and typically dodge the really hard work of cultural transformation. Without a more profound and searching engagement than is currently on offer, many programs for growth and change in the Church end up stillborn. It is an equally dangerous idea to insist on the inescapable necessity of hard-won self awareness and personal maturity on the part of clergy if today’s Church is to find a new confidence and direction, since this is the hardest and least program-oriented of solutions.

When asked to contribute to this themed edition of St Mark’s Review on dangerous ideas, I realised that a frank talk I gave earlier this year may well fit the bill. It is about what I believe to be really necessary for the ministry of our Church at this particular moment.¹ It draws not only on my reflections as a professional theologian, now occupied for some years in explicating and applying the mimetic theory of René Girard, but also on how I have become a better priest through personal engagement with Girard’s vision. I approach this topic not primarily as a theorist, then, but as a ministry practitioner whose outlook and approach have been transformed. Pope Paul VI said that people today want witnesses rather than teachers, and if they will listen to teachers it is because first of all they are witnesses. So I offer these reflections as a witness. But first, some definitions: of the mimetic theory, then of ministry.

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René Girard’s mimetic theory understands religion to be the primeval flipside of culture. Religion is the evolutionary development whereby humanity has survived its self-destructive violence. This threat of violence originates not in any innate aggression on our part, but in the instability of our desires, which follow the desires of others. This state of affairs makes us unique and creative creatures, able to learn, share and advance beyond the scope of animal instinct. Yet because our desires can compete, human groups are systemically prone to rivalry and violence.

The key to surviving the violent downside of our mimetic nature lies in an efficient mechanism for quietening such a crisis that was stumbled upon by our progenitors: the spontaneous discharge of pent-up violence onto a scapegoat. This apparent miracle of order springing from chaos as a result of such primal murders gave birth to our sense of the sacred, which for Girard yields various prohibitions, rituals and myths. These defining features of religion preserve the stable co-existence and tolerable diversity of every pre-modern culture.

The truth about this state of affairs came out slowly in history, but chiefly in the Judaeo-Christian scriptures. We began to learn from the psalms, from Job and from the Hebrew prophets that sacrificial victims are innocent. For Girard it was chiefly Jesus’ life and death that revealed the real sacred in the midst of this cultural by-product, the false sacred. Jesus’ kingdom was not made with hands—that is, it was not of human origin, it was not the evolved way of things. Hence we can dispense with a violent god, and certainly a retributively violent one. For Girard this is the message of the prologue to John’s Gospel (Jn 1:1–18), where the word of God suffers violence and exclusion at the hands of human beings, and not vice versa. Consequently, the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden by God is shown not to be the truth about how God deals with human sin. Rather, this expulsion proves to be our projection, our assumption about what God is like. It is an instance of méconnaissance, of mis-knowing, which is corrected by the New Testament’s version of the creation narrative, the prologue of John’s Gospel. Hence Girard puts paid to the whole theme of divine expulsion. It is not God who expels, but we human beings are the ones who expel, and we imagine God in our own image—as rivalrous, disapproving, and violent, just as we humans are.

Jesus’ death and resurrection, and the subsequent work of the Holy Spirit as God’s advocate for the defence of victims, releases a new reality
into history that eventually undermines this once-useful but fundamentally misconceived version of the sacred, since we now know how it works and can no longer uncritically rely on it. This revelation unleashes a dangerous threat of violent escalation into history, according to Girard, which is how he understands Jesus’ saying, ‘I came not to bring peace, but a sword.’

Indeed, Girard is convinced that the Bible’s apocalyptic literature is best understood as a prediction of this unstoppable escalation to extremes, and must not be understood as if God were about to wreak an entirely human-like revenge. Rather, apocalyptic points to the collapse of the false sacred and its capacity to restrain human violence. Secularity, then, is the inevitable and proper fruit of the Gospel, according to Girard, which he understands to be the true meaning of Nietzsche’s twilight of the gods. The incarnation heralds the collapse of religion as a functional reality in its false sacred form. The incarnation represents God’s personal investment in humanity finding a new and lasting way to peace, beyond pagan religious ways of organising the world that we still see throwing up false gods: the growth economy, the security state, the Caliphate and so on. All of these multiply victims and, despite the false sacred collapsing, they retain more than a whiff of that archaic sacred aura.

Now, if that is the mimetic theory, how might we define ministry in light of it? Ministry is a sacramental manifestation of God’s breakthrough with humanity in Jesus Christ, through the Church. While the carapace of the archaic sacred remains, the Gospel inhabits it ecclesiastically in a different register. Sacrificial language and self-sacrificial dedication remain, but they refer to personal consecration, not sacrificial immolation. Ritual now serves to dramatise Christ’s new order rather than prop up the old pagan order. Prohibitions in the hands of Christians are best understood as prudent and practical rather than elemental and unquestionable. Hence the old way of organising the world is perpetually reimagined in the Church’s liturgy and ministry.

So ministry is the practice of heaven in the midst of earth, bringing God’s forgiveness and welcome in the midst of a world structured by aggressive tribalism and the legacy of sacred violence. Ministry is how things are done in the non-tribal tribe, as I call it, which is the Church. So while ministry is a religious undertaking, it is subversively so. Likewise, while it is a ritual undertaking, it is transformingly rather than conservatively so. And while it enforces prohibitions, we minister discipline only insofar as discipline serves
the cause of human liberation. Ministry belongs to the whole Church but it is embodied in the diaconate, the ministerial priesthood, the episcopate and in related ways via their functional counterparts in the protestant traditions. In short, ministry is what the Church does in Christ and in the Spirit for the mimetic transformation of our world, against the constant challenge of a collapsing but nonetheless stubborn false sacred.

**The challenge**

I regard God’s transformation of a world built out of the false sacred as the primary concern of Christian ministry. In particular, I want to address the specific challenges of false sacred imagination that remain influential in our society, even though their effects are now largely disruptive and damaging, because the false sacred can no longer structure let alone revive society. This is the effect of that sword brought by Jesus (Matt. 10:34), which destroys the false sacred and with it our capacity for sustaining a certain sort of peace. Here I find the most crucial imaginative and practical challenge for ministry in our Churches today.

The modern Western problem, according to Girard, is described by what he calls ‘metaphysical desire,’ or ‘ontological sickness.’ It arises because we no longer desire objects. Instead, we desire the desire of an admired person or group, our model or mediator. This foundational Girardian insight explains how advertising works, for instance, along with more romantic attraction than we would care to admit—do you remember that Rick Springfield song, ‘I Wish that I had Jesse’s Girl’?

Problems arise when the model of our desire gets in the way, in what Girard calls ‘internal mediation.’ The envy and rivalry that our mimetic desiring throws up under these conditions introduces a whole new dimension of desire. We become obsessed with our model, who can become our rival, our obstacle, maybe even our mirror double, to use various of Girard’s terms for this escalation through what he calls metaphysical desire towards ontological sickness. That is, our desire no longer fixes on any particular object, but on the being of our model itself. We come to desire vaporous things rather than actual objects, such as prestige, regard, the longed-for being that our model seems to have but not we ourselves.

The spiritual writer Jim Grote described the traditional seven deadly sins in terms of this ontological sickness. In lust, gluttony, sloth and the other deadly sins we crave the being of a model and we despise the limitations
inherent in our own actual circumstances. The idea is that a lustful, greedy and lazy life may come to seem attractive in light of attractive persons who model it for us, leading responsible people to abandon their sensible habits of chastity, modesty and diligence. Hence we pursue a phantom of someone else’s desire at the expense of our own success, wellbeing and that of others who depend on us.

In one version of Girard’s ontological sickness, we observe the phenomena that Sigmund Freud theorised as masochism and sadism. For Girard, however, these are widespread mimetic behaviours played out in public, not exotic private eccentricities confined to the sexual demimonde. According to Girard, masochism and sadism represent two ways of responding to indifference or else ill-treatment. The subject is in the grip of metaphysical desire, yearning for the greater being of their model, so they welcome indifferent, contemptuous and even violent treatment from the model because it confirms the superiority of the model’s being over their own, and hence the model’s worthiness. Indeed, anyone who treats this subject well cannot be a worthy model for their desire, hence their lifelong search for a more abusive partner, a more indifferent love interest to woo (or to stalk), a more impossible job to undertake, or a bigger risk to court, all because a deviated transcendence ensures that the great prize must always be just out of reach.

Even the ordinarily ambitious are like this. Girard says that if we are restless and seek the fulfillment that eludes us in the realm of career, we will start to knock ourselves against obstacles, mistaking walls for doors, as he memorably puts it. I did this myself in the late-nineties, a period during which I took first one and then another leadership job in theological education that wiser heads had left well alone. I was convinced that I had the right stuff and that these two no-win situations would let me prove it. With hindsight I learned how I had been fascinated by the obstacle, thinking that it was my way in to a realm of enhanced being, a cure for mimetic dissatisfaction and restlessness.

A parallel solution to craving the supposedly greater being of an abusive model of desire is to take on their abusive desire and become abusive ourselves. This is the sadistic option where, according to Girard, the key to the enchanted garden is perceived to be in the hands of the tormentor.

I have argued that some clergy demonstrate the masochistic option in terms of fawning sycophancy and even self-oblation before indifferent or else bullying laity and superiors as the price of career advancement, with
a harsh and judgmental God image often thrown in for good measure. Or else there can be the internalising of this abusive theology and structural violence in a pattern of bullying or abuse by clergy. In this sadistic version the weakness and vulnerability that abusers despise in themselves is assaulted in others, with one version of this abuse in particular now coming to light throughout the Churches.

Girard makes much of the New Testament word *skandalon*, and understands being scandalised as a key manifestation of metaphysical desire. We resent the success, power, and poise of others, perhaps their advantageous position—all the things we fear that we lack—and so we begin to obsess about them. Clergy can be sycophantic, as I have said, or they can react with hostility. And this hostility does not have to go as far as sadism and abuse. A milder version is to be the anti-hero, which Girard calls counter-imitation. The anti-hero divinizes their sense of impotence as critical lucidity. So here are two related mimetic patterns into which clergy can unhelpfully fall: the sycophant and the dissident, the company man and the angry young man. Even if the ‘man’ language does not fit them, I have observed that women clergy are also prone to these patterns of desire.

I used to be the angry young man, the one with the right stuff who deserved more acknowledgement. What I only came to realise much later was how badly I had misread the situation and myself, how a scandalised imagination was distorting my experience of the Church, and how I was making myself prone to conflict. This all came to a head in my last parish. I was not entirely responsible for it, and some healthy conflict was certainly overdue as longstanding issues of Christian immaturity in the culture of that parish had to be addressed. But, at least initially, I was not sufficiently self-aware to be the agent of that growth in Christian maturity.

I found myself involved in ever-more-unproductive conflict with some determined opponents who had enjoyed a position of control, and with their co-dependent supporters. They became my model of desire, as I was theirs, with the joint object of our desires being the control of our parish, and simply ‘winning’. We became rivals and increasingly indistinguishable mirror doubles. They schemed behind my back and sought to push me out. Likewise, I spent a lot of time working out how to get around the latest instance of spoiling behaviour, and when emotionally depleted I entered into some imprudent conversations with others that only served to spread the scandal. A fundamental error that I made was to think of these opponents as monsters, as
they no doubt thought of me. The bishop became unhelpfully caught up in this escalating conflict, and I very nearly came to grief, but, thanks be to God and to the mimetic theory in the hands of a wise senior churchman who took me under his wing, I began over a couple of years to learn the lessons that I am sharing here. My self-understanding and my behavior changed. I ceased seeing my opponents as monsters and began to regard them as just ordinary people like me caught up in an anxious and fearful pattern of desire. Thus, for the first time, I came to understand Jesus’ command to love your enemies and do good to those who persecute you (Matt. 5:44)—and not to judge, as if I was beyond reproach myself (Matt. 7:1–3).

Girard says that when Jesus on the cross asked his Father to forgive his persecutors, who knew not what they were doing, he was the first to identify the human unconscious. And the human unconscious, for Girard, is simply the reality of our mimetic entrapment in desire, envy and rivalry, rather than the vaporous inner realm theorised by Sigmund Freud. So I began to retreat from the state of what Girard calls monstrous doubles, to acknowledge that my opponents were a lot like me; to no longer burden others in my angry desire to prove my opponents wrong and myself right; and to stop being absorbed by the conflict. A turning point in the conflict soon arrived. Once I came to understand the barrier that I was placing in the way of its resolution, I was able to retrieve the situation. My changed behavior was transparent enough to win me greater support in the parish, while my opponents carried on as before and eventually lost ground. In time I accepted an invitation to move on and was able to do so at a time of my own choosing, without either having come to grief or walking away in disgust.

With hindsight, I regard that parish conflict as the making of me. Since then I no longer feel inclined to lay blame, or think that I have the right stuff, or seek to define myself in rivalry with anybody. Yes, cultural change is needed in the Church, and yes, there is a proper pastoral discipline that needs to be applied, but I would like to think that I now know how to serve these proper processes and not to hinder them. The reason for this is a transformation away from metaphysical desire. The nature of this transformation, as absolutely crucial for ministry, is what I now want to address. I will then conclude by setting out some of the good habits that mimetic theory has taught me.
The transformation

The transformation is a shift both in perspective and practice: head, heart and imagination. I am reminded of a book by Henri Nouwen that I read as a theological student, and have at last really begun to understand, called *The Wounded Healer*. The idea is that only through being a transformed person can you minister God’s transforming reality to others. Girardian theologian James Alison points out that Christ’s desire begins to shape our desire, and we find ourselves slowly changing in ways that may only become evident to us with hindsight. For Alison, following Girard, the sign of God’s presence with us is through our desire beginning to play out differently in our dealings with others, which is where the truth of who we are coming to be emerges bit by bit. Alison says that God, the ‘other other’, influences us through intruding new desires that change how we respond to the desire of what he calls the social other. So it is a slow, subtle and indirect process, and one not prone to easy quantification in terms of success. But, over time, we do recognise that our desires have changed. The mimetic dynamics that would once have enthralled us no longer carry the same fascination.

Girard and Alison point to biblical figures called to ministry who escaped dysfunctional mimetic entrapment. I mention three.

Alison thinks that Jonah has a lot to teach us. Jonah was scandalised by God’s call to preach repentance to the unworthy citizens of Nineveh, and his resentment burned so hot that he sailed off in the opposite direction. Something about his conflicted persona obviously attracted the attention of his shipmates, however. Those pagans knew exactly what had to be done and Jonah was made the scapegoat in his own version of a pastoral crisis, ending up being thrown overboard. But God did not give up on Jonah, holding him in being in the belly of the fish until he could change his mind and resume his mission—as Alison puts it, ‘spluttering up the beach to Nineveh.’10 I have come to see that an opportunity for me to undertake a period of theological teaching and writing after that last difficult parish appointment was a divine mercy of the Jonah sort, where I have been held in being so that I can further process all these ideas and undergo this transformation.

Girard discusses the Gerasene demoniac.11 He was the designated scapegoat who helped maintain a stable pagan sacred reality. He behaved insanely and self-harmed incessantly, which helped the rest of his community by contrast to feel sane and stable, relaxed and comfortable. Jesus’ intervention caused a crisis for that community because the man was
healed and the destructive potential of the situation was unleashed, as we see in the porcine apocalypse that followed. Thereafter the sanity and the stability of that community had to be maintained by other means, and the former demoniac was left behind as a witness to the only genuinely saving and transforming reality remaining to it, which was coming to share in Jesus’ own non-rivalrous peace with God. This is a demanding apostolic role, according to Alison, the ministry of this ex-demoniac. It calls for staying put in a situation so that it might slowly undergo transformation from dysfunction towards maturity, and thus find its way to the peace of God that passes all understanding. This is why staying put in ministry can be the most important thing that a priest can do, holding our ground as a witness and agent of personal transformation in the midst of a community that may not be fixable by any other means.

Girard is also very struck by Peter, the father of the institutional Church, who was mimetic, rivalrous and violent, but who was converted. Peter was swayed mimetically by the crowd in the high priest’s courtyard and he betrayed Jesus on cue, but the risen Jesus got through to him, ending Peter’s rivalry so that he could become a life-giving leader in the Church. I like to think that when the risen Jesus at the end of John’s Gospel asks Peter if he loves him ‘more than these’—more than the other disciples, that is—and Peter simply replies that, yes, he does love Jesus, without comparing himself to anyone, Peter demonstrates that he has turned a corner. Now, having abandoned envy and rivalry, Peter shows that he is ready for the high office of feeding Christ’s sheep. Mind you, Peter immediately makes a small stumble in his moment of scandal concerning the beloved disciple—asking ‘What about him?’. Jesus tells him to get a grip, to remember that Jesus’ desires and not anyone else’s are his sole concern now. Peter’s little lapse is a timely reminder about how easy it is for us to slip back, if we are not careful, despite all the progress that we might have made.

The late Girardian New Testament scholar Robert Hamerton-Kelly describes the spiritual transformation involved:

> Since sacred power depends on the conspiracy of all to maintain it, those who withhold consent from the conspiracy are dangerous and their gracious irony threatens the foundations. They are the ‘nothings’ that God uses to bring the ‘somethings’ to nothing (1 Cor. 1: 28).
The goal here, for James Alison, is to refuse to be run oppositionally—that way, instead of being symptoms of the system, we become, as he puts it, symptoms of God’s desire. Alison sums up the task of ministry according to the mimetic theory: it is the role of professional hypocrite publicly being set free from our own hypocrisy, as a truthfulness that is not our own comes upon us.14

Surely Pope Francis is living proof of this. His leadership is every bit as unsettling to many around him as Robert Hamerton-Kelly would predict. But Pope Francis’ humble, joyful and supremely transformative witness as an apostle of Jesus Christ is only possible because of what he learned through the experience of conversion. The once insensitive and conflict-prone Jesuit leader Jorge Bergoglio, like Jonah, was held in being during a period of exile in the outpost of Cordoba until the mimetic knots in his nature and approach were untied, whereupon, like Jonah, he was able to resume his mission in Buenos Aires with great effect.15

The habits
Finally, I want to share with you some worthwhile habits that seem to go with these insights into mimetic theory and ministry. The heart of it is learning how to negotiate metaphysical desire and not fall into the ontological sickness that forfeits perspective, becomes obsessive and loses touch with Christ and his desires.

In the face of mimetic rivalry, Girard offers two key pieces of advice. First, focus on the object, not on the model.16 If we are in a conflicted and potentially rivalrous situation with someone, focus on the issue at hand, not on them or anything to do with the troubled relationship. Turning away from the object to the model would serve as a hook for mimetic rivalry to latch onto and escalate. An example. If I want to avoid arguing with my adopted sister, it is best simply to stick to the specifics of our aged mother’s care needs. To help rather than hinder my mother, my sister, and myself, I have to remember that it is not about me, or my sister, but our mother. If conflict flares up anyway, Girard’s next piece of advice is to abandon disputes before the mimetic doubles emerge and all hope of sticking to the matter in hand is lost—simply to not allow mimetic rivalry to take over.17 Better to lose gracefully with few if any casualties than to lose yourself and probably the situation.
But what if we cannot walk away, as when firm discipline is necessary and someone has to be dealt with, sacked perhaps, or at least called to account for something even though we know that there will likely be hell to pay? Then we should act as decently, cleanly and objectively as possible, not being deflected by the escalating personal desires that surround the situation. Winston Churchill was criticised for the notably respectful tone of the letter he wrote to his Japanese counterpart to announce Britain’s declaration of war, to which Churchill replied that if you have to kill a man, it costs you nothing to be polite.

This is a situation I once discussed with James Alison. I was in the midst of my aforementioned parish conflict and I asked his advice about standing up to a situation of extreme and unremitting bullying without either capitulating or else pouring fuel on the conflict by getting too personally caught up in it. His answer was along the lines of explaining the power of conflict to escalate and take us over which, like the fear of death, lies in our fear of losing ourselves. We stage a desperate attempt to save the being that we fear we are losing. But just as death holds no fear for an imagination caught up in the absolute vivacity and deathlessness of God, so conflict will never overwhelm an imagination grounded in the surety of God’s desire for us, of God’s being which is non-rivalrously on our side. In other words, death is just biology, and conflict is natural, too, given the sort of systemic dynamics that we inhabit. So to either capitulate or else overreact to the bullying would be to overstate the threat involved in a natural, explicable and manageable process. Conflict demands calm resolve and self-mastery, not flailing around in the grip of being scandalised.

Here I am helped by Jesus’ advice that we be as cunning as serpents yet as gentle as doves (Matt. 10:16): to be alert to the problems of mimetic rivalry and escalation, and to take prudent steps to slither out of harm’s way while being mimetically secure enough to respond gently in the face of provocation. In that way we can avoid being caught up with our rival in an escalation that will not serve to bring the best outcome for all concerned.

Three habits come from this set of insights, which strike me as largely inseparable.

First, we learn to inhabit ourselves rightly. By this I refer to the capacity to be the calm, non-anxious presence that the family systems theorists extol. Their networked understanding of human influence, dysfunction and restorative action is explicable in terms of mimetic theory. So is their
insight that if we are calm and sure of ourselves, not swayed by the mob or mimetically caught up in its violent-tending dynamics, then we will have a calming influence on others and help prevent the situation from being hijacked by mimetic rivalries.

Second, we learn to inhabit the institutional Church rightly. For James Alison the right ecclesial virtues are hilarity, pathos and irony. These attitudes come from learning to see with Easter eyes, compassionately, alert to God’s future, and hence less prone to being disappointed, scandalized, fixated on whatever is wrong, and deluded that we either can or must fix everything ourselves. Instead, as we come to share Jesus’ desire and that of his saints, who loved and yet transformed the Church, we find ourselves able to feel sadness and compassion rather than anger over what is amiss, irony over the fact of so much godliness and beauty woven through with so much cluelessness, and hilarity over the grace of God that puts up with us in love—along with all the other ordinary, fallible Christians, including our opponents.

Third, to rightly inhabit ourselves and the institutional Church, we must learn to inhabit God rightly. Apart from the spiritual habits of daily office, spiritual direction and regular confession that I learned at theological college and have practiced for nearly thirty years in the priesthood, I am now learning a new habit of contemplative prayer. I have been using the John Main method, based on repeating the mantra ‘Maranatha’ over and over for 20 minutes most mornings and evenings, but of course there are other methods. For all the mimetic restlessness of my mind that regularly refuses to be still, nevertheless I have already confirmed in my own experience of this prayer what the Desert Father John Cassian taught long ago concerning temptation: that it is more reliable to displace temptation through contemplation than to fight it. By displacing it we allow our desires to be led away towards God’s desire, but by trying to fight it we remain mimetically entrapped in the desire we fight: scandalized, powerless and un-free. I am becoming convinced that contemplation represents a necessary means for allowing our desires to be conformed over time to Christ’s desire. Indeed, I have begun to refer to contemplation as ‘mimetic dialysis’.

In closing I want to emphasise the Christian orthodoxy of everything that I have been commending here. Girard is convinced that the sort of progressive Christianity that prefers psychotherapy or ideology over scripture and tradition may be sacrificing the most radical resources of all. But that
is another dangerous idea, to be pursued another time: that theological orthodoxy is more edgy and exciting than the various rationalistic, ideological or therapeutic reductions that were popular in theology during the last decades of the twentieth century. Finally, here is a summing-up of the dangerous idea that I have been setting out here: in the face of widespread cluelessness about how to move things along in the Church, René Girard’s mimetic theory provides those of us in ministry with intellectual, spiritual and personal resources that are scriptural, experiential and, in that sense, scientific, while keeping us close to the heart of theological orthodoxy. Its insights work, too, and to that I testify as a witness.

Endnotes

1. The substance of this paper was an address given in March 2016 to an ecumenical gathering of clergy and community-based change facilitators sponsored by Fr Chris Bedding through the Anglican Parish of Darlington, Perth.
2. For an overview see, for example, René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, edited by James G Williams, Crossroad, New York, 1996.