

## **REFLECTIONS** **of a Minister in Secular Employment**

*Michael Ranken*

*As a tribute to Michael and his inestimable contribution to MSE, I have surveyed past editions of the Newsletter / Journal for a piece that sums up his experience of being an MSE. This, from No. 28, November 1988, fits admirably. Ed.*

1. I am a qualified analytical chemist who has worked for 37 years in food technology, food manufacture and control. For 8 years I have also been a priest. But food technology comes first – not just in the count of hours spent hitherto but every working week in the hours spent, attention given, subjects worked on and cared about, people met, measurements and calculations made, books and papers read, satisfactions enjoyed.

Of course, I do other things too, including ministerial and ecclesial things, also home and family activity and a few extramural commitments, hobbies and relaxations. I understand about keeping a balance among them all, but my wife says that I'm not very good at it (*broad editorial grin of recognition!*).

Still, the food technology is the biggest piece of my life, perhaps a similar size to the marriage-and-family piece but bigger than the gardening piece or the canoeing piece or the watching-good-films piece, and bigger than the church piece. Of course, I try to be engaged on only one piece at a time and then it gets all of the attention, commitment and care that I can give. But the relative size of each piece over a week or over a year stays roughly the same.

So I actually don't have much time for church matters. Or energy, or intellectual capacity either. However much of those I give to the church, much more is given elsewhere.

2. I try, as I believe most people do, to do each thing, big or little, as well as I am able. But I do keep doing bits badly. It is called sin. Most things turn out defective.

More daunting, whatever I do, in food technology or in the church or anywhere else, there is always far, far more which I can see but cannot possibly do. I just have not the ability, or work to which I am already committed consumes all my capacity. Even when I work with others, the group is limited in the same ways. Nothing is done completely.

3. Add those together and see – church activity which (even when taken in the broadest sense) is relatively small in the economy of my life, defective in execution and microscopically small compared with the real possibilities and needs.

Yet I believe that God calls me to such a ministry, small, partial and defective, in the church, and that it includes such things as this Newsletter, our past and future MSE Conferences, the NSM and MSE meetings I am invited to from time to time, and my share of doings in the diocese and parish church. But He also calls me clearly to minister in the work which is the greater part of my life – to find Him there (way ahead except when He comes up on me by surprise), to proclaim His glory, celebrate His presence and mediate His grace. And to do so in the language of food technology, almost incomprehensible to most clergymen but not to my working colleagues.

4. The Good News is "the Kingdom of God is upon you". Now. Not some time after you're dead. Not some time after we've destroyed the planet. Not some time when there aren't any more wicked people in the world. Now. Look around you, the fields are white. (Last week I was given a photograph of the most splendid Brussels sprouts, covered in snow). Not completely, not everywhere at the same time, not yet – but now!

5. What do I see when I see the Kingdom of God? I see what Jesus saw and told – people doing ordinary things, in the street, on the hillside in the office, poor people coping with rich people's decisions, kings making big and arbitrary demands. Goodness continually being created out of chaos. Many things defective, most of the defects discovered and admitted, some of them put right and all

of them forgiven. Nobody and no group or institution supposing itself either perfect or complete but each one "good enough" – each one knowing that since all are partial, all need the others to make everything complete, and that since all are defective, all need continually to forgive and be forgiven by others.

I see glimpses of that Kingdom every day, inhabit it briefly, work in it, and meet remarkable people there. They give enough strength to cope with the grot which keeps obscuring the vision.

6. And how much joy is added now by insights which come bursting in while working among all of you, struggling to see our Friend and Brother more clearly, follow him more nearly.

***A favourite of Michael's was an abbreviation from Psalm 119 from a Mission de France Newsletter:***

Du raisin la loi fait du vin  
De l'épi loi fait du pain  
De l'été la loi fait l'autonne  
D'un baiser la loi fait un homme  
De ton Dieu la loi fait un frère  
La loi est un chanson d'amour

***Michael's translation:***

Your law makes wine of the grape  
Your law makes bread of the grain  
Your law makes autumn of summer  
Your law makes a man of a kiss  
Your law makes a brother of God  
Your law is a love song for life