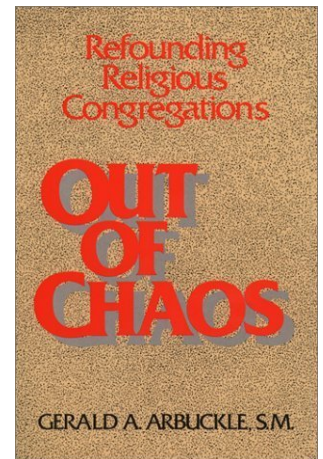


Review: Out of Chaos – Refounding Religious Congregations

I must admit, I didn't think a 1980s reflection by a Marist brother on the aftermath of Vatican II would be particularly relevant to today's task of dealing with ecclesial torpor. But there is wisdom and insight in this book that plays in the same space as contemporary texts on church leadership and mission action planning, and it does so in a distinct and provocative way.



I've come across Gerald Arbuckle before with regard to pioneering *dissent*. Here the keyword is the need for religious congregations to be **refounded**. "Congregations" in this context are Catholic religious societies dealing with the *chaos* (another keyword) they experienced after the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II occurred in the 1960s, this book was written in the 1980s, bringing with it the insight of a generation's experience.

The applicability in our own generation comes from the fact that the church of the Western World is facing its own existential chaos; our very reason for existence whirls about in a pool of semantics with people swimming in different directions as we begin to differ even on the most fundamental aspects of our *founding myth* (another keyword) or worldview.

What *are* we for? Even today I was referred to a survey that purported to discern the nature and effect of *discipleship* in a region. It was premised on a subjective sense of how the respondents' faith had grown and the "growth activities" they participated in. It's not a bad survey but the *essence* of

discipleship is actually missing. There was no reference to the Great Commission (where we are called to disciple *nations*), no engagement with following Christ on the path of suffering. It appears as subjective semantics with no foundation, chaos artificially blanketed by catch-all words and phrases that cannot tell a story that draws us beyond ourselves. We need *refounding*.

The refreshing difference in Arbuckle's approach is that it is fundamentally *spiritual*. I don't mean in an ethereal contemplative sense, but in the sense that he fully expects that the Spirit of Christ has been, is, and will be forming and preparing his people. This is a Catholic distinctive that we could do well to embrace.

In salvation history, God permits chaos to develop that people may rediscover that he must be at the very heart of their lives (e.g. see Dt 8:1-4) (Page 3)

As the Spirit leads us, so he understands that passing through chaos is painful. Refounding involves *suffering*: an antidote to the quick-fix and *cheap* mission action planning that pervades today.

So this book offers readers no dramatically simple or rapid way to begin and sustain refounding. In fact the road to refounding is a humanly complex and a spiritually painful one, for Christ calls us to a more intimate, privileged relationship with himself, which means being invited to share deeply in the purifying experience of his own suffering. (Page 6)

But "refounded" is an interesting term. I can see its value over "reforming" which connotes the continuous, ongoing, iterative, day-by-day *semper reformanda*. "Refounding" recognises the passing through of chaos, it reflects a season.

Arbuckle draws on the sociological concept of mythology to explain. "Myth" in this sense doesn't mean vague or imaginary legend, it refers to a founding "story", an "historically transmitted pattern of meanings." When I have come to a new church context I have looked for the "folklore" or "DNA" of the church, to seek to understand where the Lord has led it and is leading it. "Founding myth" is the same thing: it's the *historic story* that gives meaning and order and purpose to a group or congregation. In a season of chaos this story is lost, and *refounding* is not just to rediscover it, but to recapitulate it in a new context, a different world. It is to sing the ancient songs in a new land such that they are heard and joined. "Reconversion" is not an overstatement of how this can be described, as Christ is at the heart of our "founding myth."

Arbuckle's categorisation of "creation/regeneration myth", "character myth", "identity myth", "eschatological myth" and "direction myth" (pages 21-23) are useful in that ongoing discernment of "DNA" and "folklore." They are thoughts that I suspect I will return to.

The main component in Arbuckle's thoughts, however, is, I think, the most provocative. He considers that the main actor in the refounding process is not found primarily in councils, committees, working groups, or consultations (such as the many chapter meetings that apparently followed Vatican II), but in "refounding persons", individuals with a particular *charism* gift (page 89) to call the group to its reconversion.

Arbuckle appeals to a management speak of "pathfinders, problem solvers, and implementers" (page 30) that is now outdated. More helpfully, though, he looks to the OT role of *prophet* as exemplars of what he means. There is a pattern: from a season of chaos that is allowed by God "to develop as the preface or catalyst for a marked creative faith response from his chosen people" (Page 50), God calls the people, through his prophets, back to the "regenerative myth" in which

they repent and trust in the Lord's power alone.

Every time the Jewish people experience chaos or weariness and then resurrection to test Yahweh's love, they relive the primal events of their creation in sacred time. (Page 50)

These refounding prophets are therefore "Israel's creative, dynamic and questioning memory" (page 57) who simultaneously criticise the people for the gap between the vision of who they are and their reality of who they have become, and energise the people to bridge that gap through faith by giving them hope (page 58).

The prophets reject the distorted culture in which they live, for they measure it against the vision they know can and should be realized, if the creation myth is taken seriously...

They break through the chaos of confusion, of numbness and denial, by pointing out the way the people must go in order to return the culture to Yahweh-centered foundations. (Pages 58-59)

He takes this thinking, applying it to his post-Vatican II situation, and then generalises to consider the "role of the refounding person." The description is apt:

There is a fire in these people, a Gospel radicality that inspires the converting, disturbs the complacent, the spiritually lethargic, those who deny chaos both inside and outside themselves and those who compromise with worldly values. They can be feared, like all innovators, because they dare to push back the frontiers of the unknown – chaos, a world of meaninglessness – in the name of Jesus Christ. (Page 88)

And he summarises their characteristics (Pages 96-97). They are close to people, especially the poor, and with a finger on the pulse. They exercise creative imagination and perception

as to how “people... are starved of Gospel values” and “they are able creatively to construct new ways to respond to this deprivation.” They are committed to hard work. They are committed to small beginnings. They tolerate failure. And they are community-oriented; like the prophets before them:

Prophets are not loners, even if they are marginalised or threatened with death by the people for whom they work; they earnestly seek to summon the people into the deep covenant communion with one another and with Yahweh. (page 59)

Now all of this *could* be a disconcerting propensity to look for “supermen” and “superwomen” to come and refound us, a guru mentality that speaks more of worldly celebrity than anything else. But where we might look for “super-apostles” Arbuckle wants us to look for a genuine apostolicity.

He recognises that the refounding charism is predicated on a level of faith (helpfully enumerated on page 99) that expresses a “driving selflessness” made manifest only through a union with Christ in his suffering. He posits “a shattering failure, or rejection by one’s own congregation” as a near necessity to deal with pride and to allow a “refounding person an ultimate jump into a more perfect faith, a faith that moves one into the darkness of belief and away from one’s own false securities” (pages 105-106). Such persons are often marked by loneliness and “a strong urge to escape the prophetic responsibility” (page 106).

The reality is that we all know people like this; we look up to them, and as we grow we begin to realise the cost they have counted and respect them even more. They are not gurus, but gifts to God’s church.

The detail of Arbuckle’s treatise goes into further description, even advice, for refounding persons, and also their superiors. He puts a significant amount of work into

analysing the cultures of contexts and considering where relational and structural facilitation may or may not be effective. But above all, he recognises that there will likely be **conflict** between the refounding persons and their superiors

He notes that true refounders do not deliberately bring discord, but also recognises that the inherent passion and charism will “inevitably cause tension, difficulties, and even conflicts” (page 107). In the face of rejection he urges the refounder towards prayerful discernment and submission, but without quenching the fire. Different authority lines can be pursued, and withdrawal “to a new congregation or reform within a tradition” might be necessary because “religious life does not demand an absolute commitment” (page 109). This is strong, refreshingly unusual stuff.

For the superior authority figure, Arbuckle urges them to recognise, release, and cover the prophets that God will raise up. This is an obligation on the superior who might otherwise risk quenching the Spirit. This counters an attitude that suggests the role of the Superior is to repress, so as to ensure the prophetic refounder may emerge from that repression with a seemingly-helpful humility and holiness. Arbuckle rightly counters that such an attitude is dangerously simplistic (page 118) and effectively pharisaical. Yes, discernment is needed, but in the end the refounding should not be quenched.

Throughout history, anything charismatic has always been a point of concern and fear for churches and ecclesial organisations. We’ve all seen excesses of exuberance. We are quick to counter with common sense, and to speak from the known. But Arbuckle is right, in times of chaos what is known is fleeting and we need to re-find our foundations. We know what they are in the abstract – biblical Truth, salvation in Christ, the present and coming Kingdom of God. But grasping them, embracing them, embedding them, being *rooted* in them

and *living* them is simply something the church is not doing very well. Whether you call them prophets or apostles or refounders or reformers, we *do* need godly men and women, who have been led through refining fire, through whom God will minister to and lead us. Inasmuch as they bring us to Jesus, they should be recognised, supported, released, and even followed, out of the chaos that so marks our time.