

Shaken: To serve in an age of earthquake

by [Herbert O'Driscoll](#) in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

A few weeks ago as I came out of the local Cineplex, my eye was caught by a large display proclaiming the thrills and wonder of the movie *2012*.

According to an ancient Mayan story, 2012 is the year when the earth is to encounter some extremely unpleasant stuff, perhaps even its own demise. At least that is the simplistic meaning being adopted for Hollywood's purposes, and it makes for wonderful disaster movie material. Above me on the display, a city was being lifted into the air while at the same time being broken into vast separate pieces.

For me, the sight brought something different to mind. I suddenly became aware of the degree to which earthquake imagery had appeared early in my ministry and had shaped my understanding of who I was as a priest.

Ordained in Ireland in 1953, I served in active ministry as an Anglican priest until officially retiring in 1993. That puts me in the generation of clergy who straddled changes that have utterly transformed ways of ministry, understandings of faith, roles of clergy in society, relationships between clergy and congregations—everything! It was an extended period of theological and social earthquake. When Walter Brueggemann directs me to consider 587 BCE and look at the Judaism that existed before and after that cataclysm of invasion and exile, I think of the 1960s, when everything was changing: congregational life, my role as priest, the relationship of Christian faith with the surrounding culture. And nothing about the process was gentle!

Out of that experience, images of earthquakes became rich and vivid metaphors for ministry. One such experience came through on television news one day in the 1970s, when earthquakes were shaking regions of northern Italy. The scene had been captured on camera by someone in the rear of a crowd at an outdoor mass. On a hillside a rough altar of stones had been assembled and an elderly priest was about to elevate the chalice when an aftershock came. The tremor rippled through the crowd until it reached the priest. He staggered but succeeded in keeping the chalice aloft with one hand while supporting himself on the altar with his other hand.

I immediately identified with the scene. I understood my priesthood as being in such a world, a world in which foundations were being shaken but where my task was to reach for and hang on to what remained solid and lasting.

During a major earthquake in the Los Angeles area in the 1980s, a television crew gained permission to return to a shattered apartment with an elderly Hispanic woman who had escaped from the building. The woman stood at the back of what had been her living room and told how the dishes had rattled. She pointed to a deeply cracked wall as the next thing she saw, then told how she had run in fear for the door, which had buckled in her hand as she opened it. Outside she pointed to a concrete pathway that was twisted and broken and described how she had fallen as she ran. Then she stopped in front of a large opening in the ground. In a hushed voice she said, "I knew then that the earth had moved."

I could not help feeling that that simple statement summed up much of what Western Christianity had experienced in the latter half of the 20th century. Changes that had taken root near its beginning had gathered in strength and significance until, in my late years of ministry, I, too, could say that "the earth had moved."

The experience that binds such moments together for me came in a homily given by Michael Ramsey, then archbishop of Canterbury, at a world gathering of Anglicans in Toronto. It was 1963. John Robinson had just published *Honest to God*; Harvey Cox was about to publish *The Secular City*. The first of those now long-ago tremors had begun!

Ramsey was commenting on the 12th chapter of Hebrews. He explained that the writer was reminding his readers of something that had happened far back in their history. The earth had trembled and opened with terrible consequences. Then the writer goes further. The earth will be shaken again! Ramsey came to the point he wished to make: Why does God shake the earth? He went back to verse 27: "God shakes the earth so that what cannot be shaken may remain."

That moment has been a golden thread through my years of ministry. It defined my vocation, a vocation that I've offered again and again to others. To serve in an age of earthquake is to be forced to decide what it is, for each one of us, that cannot be shaken.