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FURROW

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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Philipp W. Rosemann
The Holy Well

Fintan Lyons
Food and the
Environmental Crisis

Paula Downey
In Search of Belonging

Gerry McFlynn
The Last Week

Mary T. Brien
Exegesis and Incarnation

Neil Xavier O'Donoghue
Redeemably Awful

Billy Swan
The Atheist, the Archbishop
and the Saint

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The Furrow

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The motif on the cover of *The Furrow* is from Jeremiah 4:3, which reads in the Vulgate:

Novate vobis novale
Et nolite serere super spinas.
Yours to drive a new furrow,
Nor sow any longer among the briers.

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The Holy Well as a Window onto Irish Life – Pre-Christian, Christian and Post-Christian (Part 2)*

Philipp W. Rosemann

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HOLY WELLS

After these historical distinctions, it may be permitted to offer some more general theological reflections which abstract from historical differences, attempting to paint a larger picture of the theological interest and significance of holy wells.

(1) The Catholic faith is characterized by a logic of hierarchical mediation – unlike Protestantism, in which the relationship between the individual soul and its Maker is lived in a much more immediate way. This explains a difference that used to be important historically: whereas Catholic lay people used to be discouraged from reading Scripture (because of its inherent difficulty and, thus, the need for guidance from appropriately schooled clergymen), the Reformation embraced the principle of ‘Scripture alone’ (*sola Scriptura*), contributing significantly to the dissemination of Bibles in the vernacular languages. Again, depending on the Protestant denomination, the number of sacraments – material vehicles for the communication of grace – is greatly reduced as post-Reformation churches emphasize the encounter with the Lord through his word.

It is within the typically Catholic logic of mediation that holy wells find their place. At holy wells, the faithful are able to worship the Lord through the mediation of local saints, who lived their lives on the same land as the faithful, leaving a mark of their saintly activities in the landscape itself – in the form of a well that they called up, or a rock that they moved. Blessing oneself with water from this well, or taking a little of it home, ultimately connects the worshipper with God himself, but in a very mediated (and at the same time immediate) fashion. The latter paradox indicates that God cannot be identified with the well water, nor is the well water

* Part 1 of this article was published in the February issue of *The Furrow*.

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itself divine; yet through the action of his saint, the Lord is in a very real sense present to the water from the holy well.

(2) A second dimension of the theological significance of holy wells relates to the way in which time is lived in the patterns, that is to say, the rituals and festivities celebrating the consecration of a well by its patron saint. Most of these patterns are held in July or August, which on the one hand appears suitable because the warm summer weather lends itself to pilgrimages, while on the other hand this timing of the patterns indicates that they represent Christianized versions of *Lúnasa*, a Gaelic harvest festival named after the god Lugh.¹ But this is not the main point here. Rather, the patterns exemplify a way of being in time that is sacred or liturgical as opposed to merely chronological.² Most of us, even those of us who consider ourselves practising Catholics, mainly live in chronological time, that is to say, time measured by technological means which is artificially divided into equal units: seconds, minutes, and hours. Such chronological time is perfectly homogeneous, in that the minute marked by 11:35 is not different from the minute identified as 23:35. In terms of natural time, 11:35 belongs to the morning hours, whereas 23:35 already falls into the night; chronological time ignores this crucial difference. We find it ‘unnatural’ to have to get up at 6:00 a.m. in the morning during the winter because it is still dark outside, but our schedule for the day, which is dictated by chronological time, does not care about our biological clock. Biological time derives its meaning from the cycle of life; chronological time ‘is money’, as the saying goes: it is – especially nowadays – an economic measurement of productivity.

Liturgical time is the deepest of the three, fullest of meaning. Liturgical time is structured by the recurrent remembrance of central events in salvation history, at the level both of the universal Church (Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter ...) and of the local Church (the feasts of St Patrick, St Brigid, St Finian; the pattern day of St Brigid’s Well in Mullingar; etc.). This time is not homogeneous: the significance of, say, Lent is radically different from the meaning of Easter or Christmas while the long stretch of ‘ordinary time’ between Easter and Advent is devoid of any major events in the salvation history of the universal Church. Locally, on the other hand, a pattern day in July or August can be one of the major feast days in the life of a parish. Liturgical time invites us to pattern our lives on the examples provided by the people of

1 See Patrick Logan, *The Holy Wells of Ireland* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks: Colin Smythe, 1980), p. 43.

2 Diarmuid Ó Giolláin briefly raises this point in his article, ‘Revisiting the Holy Well’, *Éire-Ireland* 40:1&2 (2005), 11–41 (p. 25). Ó Giolláin’s piece offers the best overview of recent scholarly debates on the subject of holy wells.

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Israel, Jesus and his apostles, the saints of the universal Church, and – last but not least – the local saints who brought the faith to our own communities. Like natural time, liturgical time is cyclical, preventing our lives from dissipating into shapelessness; chronological time, by contrast, proceeds in a straight line that extends beyond the horizon, petering out in an unknown future. Chronological time is therefore incapable of anchoring meaning.

(3) As already remarked above, the ritual activities that occurred at holy wells – pattern days in particular – were not always welcomed by the ‘official’ Church. One of the main reasons for this critical attitude had to do with the fact that pattern days typically combined elements of deep piety with worldly excesses. In 1825, Thomas Crofton Croker, famous for his influential collection of *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, shared the following impressions from a visit to the pattern at Gougane Barra, Co. Cork:

The door or opening to the front of the well was so narrow as scarcely to admit two persons at the same time. Within, the well was crowded to excess, probably seven or eight persons, some with their arms, some with their legs thrust down into the water, exhibiting the most disgusting sores and shocking infirmities. When those within came out, their places were as instantly filled by others. Some there were who [*sic*]³ had waited two or three hours before they could obtain access to this ‘healing fount.’ [...] Were this all, I could have beheld the assembly with feelings of devotion mixed with regret at their infatuation and delusion; but drunken men and the most depraved women mingled with those whose ideas of piety brought them to this spot; and a confused uproar of prayers and oaths, of sanctity and blasphemy sounded in the same instant on the ear.⁴

Maria Spilsburg Taylor, an artist contemporary with Crofton Croker, captured the atmosphere of the pattern day at Glendalough in two paintings, one of which is now held in the collections of the National Gallery of Ireland while the other is on display at the National Folklore Collection (University College Dublin).⁵ One may be surprised that in both paintings, the religious significance

3 Probably a misprint for ‘some were there who’.

4 T. Crofton Croker, *Researches in the South of Ireland, Illustrative of the Scenery, Architectural Remains, and the Manners and Superstitions of the Peasantry* (London: John Murray, 1824), pp. 279–80.

5 The painting in the National Gallery can be viewed at <http://onlinecollection.nationalgallery.ie/objects/8759/patrons-day-at-the-seven-churches-glendalough>; the version in the National Folklore Collection is accessible via this link: <http://www.duchas.ie/en/cbceg/12192>.

of the pattern day appears to be overshadowed by merry-making, with plenty of food, games, and performances.

The combination of piety and excess might seem strange and contradictory, as even we in our own day usually consider church-going to be serious business. In reality, however, religious devotion and worldly festivals form two sides of the same coin. In Christian ritual, the people of God come together in worship, praise, and occasionally religious ecstasy, in order to overcome the separation of the community through narrow egoisms and to form one body of Christ. In the festivals that occurred on pattern days, the people experienced themselves as a ‘biological collectivity’⁶ where drinking and fun of all sorts suspended social norms and divisions, dissolving them in laughter. The ritual and the festive sides of the pattern, then, accomplish a twofold liberation from the constraints of the narrow self: from ‘above’ (through spiritual union with God and neighbour) and from ‘below’ (through physical union with a ‘body’ of people).

One can compare the two faces of the patterns with the relationship between carnival and Lent as it is lived in countries like Germany and Brazil. While Lent offers the opportunity to join Christ symbolically in the desert in the struggle against temptation, carnival is a celebration of transgression – an overthrowing of the social order (including the order of the Church) where authority and hierarchy are suspended.⁷

(4) Mortification is another phenomenon associated with patterns that may be difficult to understand in our own time. A recent commentary piece in the *Irish Independent* on the topic of euthanasia declared with great confidence, ‘Contrary to traditional teachings, there is no dignity in suffering’; the writer then went on to express ‘scorn towards those who say there is’.⁸ The pilgrims who still come each year to St Patrick’s Purgatory on Lough Derg think otherwise, as do those who perform barefoot the rounds at wells such as St Gobnait’s in Dunquin, Co. Kerry.⁹ In the past, visitors of holy wells frequently reported the sight of pilgrims circumambulating the wells on their knees, suffering terrible lacerations in the process.¹⁰ In such rituals, the pilgrim symbolically joins Christ on the Cross, for penance and in the hope

6 Ó Giolláin, *Revisiting*, p. 28.

7 The literature on the relationship between devotion and excess is extensive; I discuss some aspects of the phenomenon in my recent book, *Charred Root of Meaning: Continuity, Transgression, and the Other in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2018), pp. 186-97.

8 Ian O’Doherty, ‘Euthanasia will be the next big cultural battleground – and it’s time we faced that uncomfortable reality’, *Irish Independent* (December 3, 2019), 27.

9 Ó Giolláin briefly describes the latter in ‘Revisiting’, pp. 17-18.

10 See Ó Giolláin, ‘Revisiting’, pp. 19-20.

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of redemption. In this way, suffering is able to be integrated into the cosmic order and ultimately overcome, rather than staring at us in mere meaningless facticity. The latter is what shocks us today, in an age which has forgotten the value of many religious practices.

HOLY WELLS IN POST-CHRISTIAN IRELAND

To speak of ‘post-Christian’ Ireland is in some ways misleading and overly pessimistic: the question mark in the title of Vincent Twomey’s book, *The End of Irish Catholicism?*, remains very much alive.¹¹ Many in the Church are working assiduously to ensure that the Christian faith has a future in this country.

The continued existence of holy wells and their use for devotional purposes are one of the many signs that Christian practices are far from dead in Ireland. Louise Nugent has chronicled how the ancient practices associated with holy wells continue to inform contemporary life. Thus, for example, she has found that St Dominic’s Well at Esker, Co. Galway, remains an active pilgrimage site. Each year, on January 5th and 6th, Mass is said in the nearby Redemptorist monastery, which is followed by a procession to the well. There, a priest blesses the water, which farmers then fill into bottles to bless their buildings, machinery, and land. Throughout the year, the water is used to cure animals as well. Pilgrims believe that the blessed water from St Dominic’s Well has helped to cure diseases, and they share stories about such healings.¹²

While some wells continue to attract the faithful, others fall into disuse or are destroyed. An interesting third category consists of wells that become quasi-museums. This tends to happen in towns and villages which get tidied up and renovated in an effort to attract visitors, often to replace or at least supplement more traditional sources of income. Ironically, such an effort to save a well can actually destroy it. As the Brennemanns have described this kind of scenario, ‘In such cases the wells are taken out of the sphere of the sacred and placed into that of the secular.’¹³ God ‘dies’, as Nietzsche would put it, his transcendent mystery becoming inaccessible as sites of prayer and pilgrimage undergo commodification for the global tourism industry.¹⁴ One is reminded of the sad fate of many

11 See D. Vincent Twomey, SVD., *The End of Irish Catholicism?* (Dublin: Veritas, 2003).

12 See Louise Nugent, ‘Preserving an ancient practice: Farmer’s pilgrimage to blessing of the waters at St Dominic’s holy well at Esker’, *Connacht Tribune* (January 16, 2015), 38. Also see Louise Nugent and Richard Scriven, *Wells, Graves, and Statues: Exploring the Heritage and Culture of Pilgrimage in Medieval and Modern Cork City* (Scotts Valley, Calif.: CreateSpace, 2015).

13 Brenneman & Brenneman, *Crossing the Circle*, p. 109.

14 See Ó Giolláin, ‘Revisiting’, p. 34.

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famous churches and cathedrals, where signs have to remind visiting tourists not to walk around scantily dressed and to keep the noise down.

Finally, the Maynooth geographer Ronan Foley has considered holy wells as a stage in the evolution of what he terms ‘therapeutic landscapes’. His book on the subject includes chapters on holy wells, spa towns, Turkish baths, sea resorts, and modern spas.¹⁵ His argument is that the sites where water is sought for healing mind and body are subject to historic variation. At a certain point in Irish history, holy wells were the only places where those in search of healing could hope for a cure of their spiritual and physical ailments. Later, holy wells were complemented, and for some people superseded, by spa towns (like Johnstown, Co. Kilkenny, with Ballyspellan Spa), where waters with medicinal qualities became available for the first time outside of a religious context. Arriving in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, Foley argues that the paradigmatic site where healing waters are encountered is currently the spa resort – a large hotel, often in a scenic setting, complete with gourmet restaurant, gym, swimming pool, and of course spa. Notably, in these spas one can observe a return of the religious – or, shall we say, pseudo-religious – dimension of healing waters. Foley describes a contemporary hotel in Cork City where visitors of the spa must undergo a consultation with a doctor trained in Ayurvedic medicine. This doctor, having identified the visitor’s *dosha*, prescribes the correct combination of ‘massages, herbal medicines, stretches and oils’.¹⁶ The spa thus becomes a place where the patient is able to reconnect with his or her spiritual side as healing is promised for both body and soul. Whether religious practices that are half-understood and superficially transplanted from one side of the globe to the other can provide genuine healing is an open question. Closer to the truth may be a perspective which regards such spas as commercial sites that offer guests respite from their busy working lives, promising relaxation as part of successful lives of income-generation and consumption.

A WORD IN CONCLUSION

Perhaps most fascinating about the story of holy wells in Ireland is that the major phases which we have distinguished – pre-Christian, Christian, and post-Christian – actually coexist in contemporary society. The Christian holy well continues to attract visitors – not

¹⁵ See Ronan Foley, *Healing Waters: Therapeutic Landscapes in Historic and Contemporary Ireland* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁶ Foley, *Healing Waters*, p. 155.

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just tourists, but pilgrims seeking healing of body and soul. One is permitted to think that, on occasion, the rituals performed by such pilgrims will be reminiscent of pagan, magical practices, as when a particular number of roundings is considered indispensable for the success of a rite. At the same time, in certain circles in modern-day Ireland – possibly more affluent and urban – pilgrimages to holy wells have been superseded by secular ‘pilgrimages’ to exclusive spas.

All this is part of the complex fabric of contemporary Irish society as it attempts to find its way in the twenty-first century.

Changing Times. Our modern culture, with its increasing emphasis on individualisation and material and consumerist goals, has come to be seen by many as a world of greater uncertainty, disconnectedness and social fragmentation. We are undoubtedly still the same human race, but we simply cannot adapt as quickly as the technology we produce. As many of the advancements that have emerged since the advent of our technological era have brought about major societal changes at breakneck speed, many of us have been left without the tools or resilience to handle these rapid shifts. With the integration of smartphones and laptops into our daily lives we have become increasingly vulnerable to major threats to sustainable mental health such as online gambling, addictive gaming, excessive exposure to violent imagery, porn and fake news, online bullying, invasion of privacy, and the sedentary lifestyles that come from hours spent staring at a screen. We cannot deny the fact that it is our young people in particular who are bearing the brunt of these pressures.

– JOAN FREEMAN, in *Modern Culture and Well-Being*, ed. Catherine Conlon (Dublin: Veritas) p. 42.

Food and the Environmental Crisis: The Christian Approach

Fintan Lyons

What we eat or refrain from eating is today a significant issue for our health, whereas a generation or so ago concern for most people arose in relation to the regulations of the Lenten fast. Some will still recall the one full meal and two collations and the difficulty in deciding what these quantities amounted to. But of late, a whole new perspective has been added, expanding our concern beyond health issues and religiously motivated fasting to include the welfare of animals, the welfare of the planet and, ultimately, our survival as a species of planet dwellers.

There is growing recognition of the *interconnectedness* of all creation. Much research has been done on climate change caused by human activity and on the previously unquestioned practice of killing and eating animals. Many are now more aware than in the past that a malaise affects humanity in relation to its place in the world. Christians look to the Book of Genesis for an explanation of this malaise.

SCRIPTURAL GUIDANCE

The account of humankind's doings over the course of several chapters of the Book of Genesis represented an acknowledgement and explanation of the situation which actually existed at the time of the compilation of the text. It was an attempt to reach back into pre-history to a world where harmony was thought to have existed. The *first* account of creation in Genesis 1:28, where the Creator gave humankind its place in creation in relation to other creatures, is one which in all translations establishes humankind's supreme role. It states:

‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.’

Fintan Lyons is a monk of Glenstal Abbey, Co. Limerick. This article draws on his recent publication, *Food, Feast and Fast. The Christian era from Ancient World to Environmental Crisis* (Dublin: Columba Books 2020).

However, the next verse, 1:29 adds:

‘See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.’

As scripture presents it, in the beginning, humans were meant to rely on the regenerating resources of plants and trees. That was the situation in the ideal conditions of the beginning. The end of that account has God resting on the seventh day, not from a feeling of need but from delight in all he had created - and there is no mention of humankind sharing this rest. The account of God resting is, in fact, peculiar to the author of the first account of creation and elsewhere in the Old Testament, as well as in the New, God’s creative activity is continuous. When the Jews persecuted Jesus for working a miracle on the Sabbath, he replied: ‘My father goes on working and so do I’ (Jn 5:17). Accordingly, the *second* account of creation (Gen 2:5-25) gives the detail of how God continues to deal with humankind: ‘The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it’ (Gen 2:15). Humankind was not meant to live a life of indolence, but *work* would be a sharing in God’s creative activity. Later in Genesis, after the expulsion of sinful humanity from the garden, work was described as a frustrating and painful task. The earth would yield brambles and thistles and work involve toil and sweat (Gen 3:17-19).

The text of Genesis goes on to recount that as the generations succeeded one another, ‘the Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth’ (Gen 6:5) and sent the great deluge to clear away the evil civilisation which had developed. Noah, who was a man who ‘walked with God’, was chosen to inaugurate a new epoch after he and the survivors emerged from the ark and he had offered burnt offerings from the clean animals and birds; their fragrance was pleasing to the Lord (Gen 8:21) and led to his making a covenant with Noah and succeeding generations.

The new epoch thus inaugurated presumed the existence of the disorder caused by sin and the continuing need for sacrifice. The compilers of the text in effect defended the legitimacy of the religious institution and its laws that regarding the religious rites, which from the time of the covenant with Moses included sacrifices of well-being (or peace) where the flesh of the animal was eaten, though without its blood, after parts had been made a burnt offering. This had been part of the covenant with Noah:

‘Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth. The fear and dread of you shall rest on every animal of the earth, and on every bird

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of the air, on everything that creeps on the ground, and on all the fish of the sea; into your hand they are delivered. Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you; and just as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. Only, you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. (Gen 9:1-3)

FROM FRUIT AND NUTS TO MEAT AND FISH

The dominant role of humankind was asserted and animals could be eaten, but, fundamentally, the way the narrative developed involved recognition that life as lived was still marked by a fallen state and consequent restrictions. Life was not a fulfilled one because humans yearned for a life they could not have, that which was signified by the picture of the original garden, by the diet of fruit and nuts and by God's rejoicing at the work of his hands in the Sabbath rest. The *ideal* for humanity would have been to enter into his Sabbath rest. The Psalmist spoke of how things actually turned out, of how God was wearied of humankind. 'They are a people whose hearts go astray, and they do not regard my ways. Therefore in my anger I swore, "They shall not enter my rest."' (Ps 95:10-11)

The Old Testament established a culture in which the eating of meat had association with necessary sacrifice and would be based on what had become normal dietary practice. As a result, eating meat was not an ethical problem for the Judeo-Christian community when in time it emerged. They retained the meat (and fish) eating culture, and Peter's experience recorded in the Acts of the Apostles 10:13 established greater freedom for them with the elimination of the classification of clean and unclean.

ABSTENTION FROM MEAT

Despite acceptance by the Christian community, in monastic tradition and in ascetical circles generally there has been a settled conviction about the need to abstain from meat – a restriction imposed in due course on all Christians during Lent and on Fridays through the year. But such restrictions were frequently seen against a background of the need to do penance and of suspicion that the eating of meat inflamed the passions.

Those who abstained were not concerned with what some today would call 'animal rights' – a rather infelicitous term, as 'rights' is a concept that correlates with 'duties' and is not really appropriate in relation to animals. As it developed, Christian tradition did not extend the idea of 'right' to animals. In religious terms, the issue is not a potential community of rights but the *relationship* between humans and the rest of creation and this has begun to

FOOD AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

be studied anew in light of environmental issues, and also from a new interest in the nature of the human person. This involves re-visiting previously unquestioned theological positions derived from scripture and centuries of theological development. While the tradition of meat-eating is well established in Christianity, it must be open to *review* in light of the environmental and animal welfare issues. Some kind of restriction is needed to express a new vision of humankind's relationship with other creatures.

A GROWING INTEREST IN DIETS INVOLVING FASTING

The era of industrial development imposed such demands on the workers serving its progress that the need to maintain physical energy at maximum level made a fasting regime an illogical and even impossible way of life. In the post-industrial age of the knowledge and digital economies, work of a less obviously physical but sedentary kind has been found to be equally tiring; instead of exhausting physical effort, the minimal effort associated with work deprives the worker of the exercise the body needs and in so doing affects brain function negatively also. Rather than reducing the food consumed, the tendency in this situation is to use stimulants, such as coffee or even opioids, in order to improve the sense of well-being, and this affects the normal psychological balance of the appetite for food, leading to the excesses of over-eating in some cases and food deprivation in others. The high rate of obesity in Western society does bear witness to lack of discipline on the part of people without religious motivation for fasting, but it is also due to cultural factors which entrap people in unhealthy lifestyles.

There is a contemporary dieting regime which requires significant periods of fasting and is one of the more popular but demanding types of dieting at present. Intermittent fasting consists of having regularly scheduled periods of time when a normal pattern of eating is maintained, alternating with periods of restricted eating or total fast. It amounts to skipping meals for a day or so on a regular basis or taking only light snacks. Intermittent dieting is in fact similar to the fasting regime of monasticism in its early phase. At the beginning of the monastic life of one of the Egyptian monks, Pachomius (292-348), his mentor Palamon introduced him to the practice of eating each day in summer, but only every other day in winter.¹ When Pachomius founded his own community, he did not try to impose such a regime on his followers, recognising that different individuals had different needs. Similarly, today the

1 *The First Greek Life of Pachomius*, Armand Veilleux trans., CS 45 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980) 301

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one who engages in intermittent fasting will find it difficult to do so in a family or even workplace environment, so it can result in a certain amount of isolation which would be counterproductive to the overall objective of promoting one's health.

MOTIVATION

This is all at the level of practice, but the issue of *motivation* is the fundamental one. In the Christian tradition or at least in that part of it where asceticism was not extreme and damaging to health, the motivation for fasting was part of an overall religious motivation to maintain control over all inordinate desires. As a monastic writer put it:

‘The appetite for nourishment is only one of the desires emanating from the human heart. ... Its incessant compelling urgency sets it aside from other desires. Some, like sexuality, are not less natural, but none of them is as immediately essential. From this results its key position and its value as a test for the whole moral effort.’²

The result of putting fasting in this spiritual context is that it helps to avoid the backsliding and ultimate dishonesty that have often been evident in the history of *outward* conformity to the fasts imposed by church authorities. In medieval and later times, the Lenten regulations which forbade the use of certain foods caused little hardship when ingenious methods were found to present others such as fish in many tasty forms – enough to satisfy a glutton quite often. Undertaking fasting for less than spiritual reasons - physical health or even a desire to improve one's self-esteem resulting from a more attractive appearance - is not likely to achieve lasting success, because to do so does not respond to the real need of the human person. There are many possible motivations which ultimately have to do with obsession with the self rather than a desire to live a life in conformity with God's law as revealed in Christ's teaching and example. In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (1993), Pope Francis spoke of the spiritual worldliness which can lurk behind ‘an obsession with programmes of self-help and self-realisation’ (no. 95).

THE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON FASTING

While restraint in eating for health reasons and in dietary programmes is on the rise, fasting from food and abstinence

2 Adalbert de Vogüé, *The Rule of St Benedict*, J.B. Hasbrouck trans. (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1983) 241-2

from meat for religious motives have declined greatly in Western Christianity, while holding up reasonably well in the Orthodox world.

The Second Vatican Council in the twentieth-century had brought radical changes. The documents of the Council put less emphasis on the institutional nature of the church and its prescriptive rules and more on its spiritual dimensions as the Mystical Body of Christ. The spiritual aspects of life were intended, however, to be manifested in external practices, including penance. The *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* – in the only reference to Christian fasting in the Council’s documents – stated:

‘During Lent, penance should not be only internal and individual, but also external and social. The practice of penance should be fostered in ways that are possible in our own times and in different regions, and according to the circumstances of the faithful. ... Nevertheless, let the paschal fast be kept sacred. Let it be celebrated everywhere on Good Friday and, where possible, prolonged throughout Holy Saturday, so that the joys of the Sunday of the resurrection may be attained with uplifted and clear mind’(no. 110).

The Council reference to ‘wherever possible’ indicated that more discretion was now left to the individual Catholic – as well as to national Bishops’ Conferences – with regard to fasting and abstinence. The decision of many Conferences to remove the obligation to abstain from meat on Fridays was a reaction to this situation in the form of a move away from external observances towards a more *internal* penitential practice. What appears to have been missed, however, is the symbolic importance for religious identity of a ritual such as abstention from meat. It was re-introduced by the Bishops of England and Wales in 2012.

Associating fasting with the liturgy, as the Council did, in the sense of a preparatory *fast* leading up to a *feast*, the fast in the absence of the Bridegroom (Mt 9:15), has always been the fundamental rationale underlying Christian fasting. This is something distinct from the asceticism that has been seen as necessary in the Christian life from the beginning of the Christian era. In the early centuries the nature of fasting did not have the exactness associated with later centuries – with the Lenten Regulations read out in church a generation ago. For example in the sixth-century, St Benedict in his *Rule* only required moderation in all things, and that in Lent the monk should deny himself ‘some food, drink, sleep, needless talking and idle jesting.’ He should ‘look forward to Easter with joy and spiritual longing’.

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GLUTTONY

Today fasting has become a *discretionary* discipline and individuals need to be sensitive to the ascetical requirements of Christian living. The temptation to gluttony is a real one. Gluttony is often described as one of the seven deadly sins, though more accurately in the Christian tradition it is described as one of the *capital* sins, because, according to Pope Gregory the Great, it propagates other sins, such as ‘scurrility and dullness of mind’.³ Gluttony is an abuse of the natural and legitimate passion for food or drink but can, if limited in its extent, be simply a case of eating more than is necessary or desirable for health. Because a glutinous act is connected with the need for nourishment, it may not be a serious perversion, and only to be considered a serious sin if it turns a person away from God and his commandments.⁴

Quantity, more or less, is not ultimately the issue affecting a person’s tendency to gluttony; the issue is a self-centred obsession with food. People can address this problem motivated by the desire to overcome self-centredness and become truly Christian, in a life centred on Christ and lived in accordance with his commandments. In the desire for conversion, *penance* in the form of fasting may then be undertaken for a variety of particular reasons, such as in memory of the passion and death of the Lord, as a sharing in Christ’s suffering, or as a form of reparation for sin.

Fasting undertaken as an individual ascetical exercise has a significant role in the Christian life, but fasting undertaken out of regard for the liturgical seasons, giving it a communal dimension is in fact the more fundamental option. The Christian identity is relational; Christians are members of the Body of Christ, connected to Christ and to each other. In the context of the food debate, especially in its global context, this idea of connectedness is fundamental and figures prominently in the Encyclical, *Laudato si’*.

LAUDATO SI’

In the Encyclical, Pope Francis addressed the issue of the global ecological crisis, exemplified by global warming, and the thinking needed to counteract degradation of the environment. His approach continued that of recent popes, who have applied Catholic Social Teaching to this issue. After an analysis of the economic and social problems which have given rise to potential disaster for

3 Gregory the Great, *Moralia on Job* 39.25

4 Denis Okholm, ‘Gluttony: Thought for Food’, *American Benedictine Review* 49.1, March 1998, 38-9

people and planet, he developed a theme based on the three terms, *interconnected*, *interrelated* and *interdependent*.⁵ His concern was to provide principles for ‘Ecological Education and Spirituality’ (Chapter Six), using those concepts theologically. His teaching was well summed up in one paragraph:

‘The human person grows more, matures more and is sanctified more to the extent that he or she enters into relationships, going out from oneself to live in communion with God, with others and with all creatures. In this way, they make their own that Trinitarian dynamism which God imprinted in them when they were created. Everything is interconnected, and this invites us to develop a spirituality of that global solidarity which flows from the mystery of the Trinity.’ (no. 240)

When Christians become aware of the challenge of the interconnected, interrelated and interdependent nature of life, the question arises about what they can do about it. Humans’ food culture cannot be blamed completely for the looming crisis, but the fundamental action of eating is the basic preparation for human activity. In the end is it all about one’s individual carbon footprint? Christians can of course, like non-believers, make serious adjustments to their lifestyle, but it does seem that the Christian community can play a part even *more* radical than just taking to heart the teaching of *Laudato Si’*, with its many insights and recommendations for environmentally sensitive Christian living.

Fasting is not the identifying mark of Christian identity. Feasting is, supremely so in the Eucharistic feast that, according to early tradition, nourishes even the body with immortal life. In the shared meal of the Eucharist, the church experiences anticipation in the eternal banquet. Nourished by it, it has the resources needed to bring about transformation of humanity into true fulfilment rather than disaster. There is need for the church as community to become more aware of its identity as a harbinger of the end-time, as a body which is not simply limited to a role of witnessing to kingdom values in its teaching or in lobbying the state. While still in the world the church can, by its feasts and the fasts before its feasts, bring to today’s crisis the enlightenment, the motivation and the energy needed to avert environmental disaster.

5 See Dermot Lane, ‘Anthropological and Theological Reflections on *Laudato Si’* in Seán McDonagh ed., *Laudato Si’*. *An Irish Response* (Dublin: Veritas Publications, 2017) 31-54

In Search of Belonging: Cultivating Community in a Diverse World

Paula Downey

A friend who shares my fascination with living systems and how we might incorporate lessons from nature into how we organise, lead and change, has been intimately involved in establishing an ecovillage, a living example of a sustainable way of life.

It's been a rollercoaster ride, with highs and lows, twists and turns. When I asked what the biggest challenge has been his answer was 'community'. "*That's been the hardest part,*" he said, somewhat surprised himself. "*Not the fundraising or dealing with the council or building houses or growing food, but living community.*"

We talked about religious life and what I've learned in fifteen years of working with people as they attempt to live community intentionally. Though the secular and religious domains mostly operate as separate worlds they have so much to learn from each other. To me, religious life is a longitudinal study in conversational democracy, decision-making and community building, and the best example I know of our human efforts to hold together well. Authentic community, when it happens, is rare and hard won. Its ups and downs, imperfections and flaws have something to say to all of us, particularly at a time when external shocks and black swan events suggest that more than ever, we need to cultivate these capacities and skills to deal with increasing complexity and uncertainty.

*

I don't know what I imagined was happening behind the convent wall I passed each day on my way to school. A kind of prayerful tranquility, perhaps. I had never looked past the myth of perfection presented by the nuns who taught me. I suppose I bought the facade. Once I began to work with women who trusted me with

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their reality I often came upon another truth, although many put on a good face for outsiders like me. One provincial leader confided: “*Community really hasn’t worked.*”

Though this may be true for many and less so for others, community is clearly a mixed bag. Keeping up appearances or putting on a good face or hiding what goes on behind lace curtains is routine human behaviour. We all do it sometimes. The difficulty for those living a committed religious life is that its implicit promise was an oasis of authentic relationships, truthful sharing, deep listening and human kindness. With hindsight those dreams were probably unrealistic, but in any event top-down control and crazy rules actively discouraged real human connection and often put the nail in the coffin of community. No special friends. No walking in two’s, only three’s. No talking at all except at specific times. No conversations about family, or health, or politics, or faith ... nothing, in fact, that might cultivate the intimacy and sense of belonging people hanker after.

Yes, I know. *I know.* That was years ago. But we are all conditioned by conditioning we’re no longer aware of. It can be hard to break invisible chains. Many of the intra- and interpersonal skills necessary for meaningful relationship – openness, vulnerability, honesty, empathy – were knocked out of folks early on, or simply not cultivated. We all know what it’s like to be on the receiving end of immature behaviour by those who’ve learned to slither through situations rather than speak the truth and say plainly what they want and need. And it hurts.

‘Putting on community’ in any context quietly erodes the basis of real relationship. In a seasonal blogpost, sociologist Brené Brown confessed the pressure she felt to put on a show at Christmas and questioned whether the show really needs to go on. “When our lives become pageants, we become actors,” she said. “When we become actors, we sacrifice authenticity. Without authenticity, we can’t cultivate love and connection. Without love and connection, we have nothing.” She could have been writing about many of our lives.

One religious community, struggling with the question of how to restructure in light of declining numbers and increased frailty put it this way: There are so few of us, in theory we could buy a small hotel and move in. But the simple fact is, we don’t like each other.

I found this both incredibly sad and incredibly honest. It shines a spotlight on a growing human predicament: How can we live together in all of our difference? In an increasingly troubled world this seems like an urgent question.

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THE POWER OF CONNECTION

Human relationship is such a delicate thing. It's hard to explain why it works when it does, and hard to overcome difficulties and restore trust when it doesn't.

The capacity and potential of every living system – including human communities – is determined by the nature and quality of the relationships within it. And complexity science helps us to understand why. Scientists involved in the early explorations of complex systems discovered that if connections are too sparse, networks basically freeze; and if connections are too dense, networks churn around in total chaos. But when the soup of connection becomes just dense enough, new collective properties emerge. The emergence of surprising new possibilities in any system lies not in the individual parts or nodes of the network but in what emerges from the connections among them.

'Connection' it seems, is the invisible phenomenon that underlies our existence. Relationship makes things possible and like Goldilocks and her porridge, the ideal is neither too hot nor too cold, but just right. If a community is too closed in on itself, there isn't enough new oxygen and energy to provide the diversity and difference necessary to keep the system healthy. Meanwhile if there's insufficient internal connection because people hold back or withdraw, relationships can wither on the vine and the community's capacity and potential decline.

I vividly recall the moment when the power of relationship and participation in practice crystallised for me. It was a sunny spring day, the Chapter was now in its final furlong and Mary and I were making our way to lunch. I was interested to know how she felt things were going.

"Fantastic!" she chirped enthusiastically. Obviously I was delighted. "What is it that's working?" I asked, presuming it was something about the process that hit the spot. I couldn't have been more wrong. "We're talking to each other. We're really talking to each other!" She was glowing. "When we started working on this we weren't able to talk. We didn't know each other. We didn't trust each other. But just coming back together again and again, has opened us up. We're relaxed with each other. And we're actually ... *talking!*"

It took a few moments for the penny to drop. She wasn't referring to this Chapter process at all. She was talking about the previous five years where the clear focus had been on cultivating a culture of participation and engagement in the life of the Province as a whole. When we began I had no idea that women could live together for decades and never really know each other. Nor did I appreciate just

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how disenfranchised and disenfranchised people in religious life can feel. Naively, I presumed they would enthusiastically opt-in and participate given half a chance. And, while they did show up, the truth is it took several years to jumpstart a cold relational engine.

Although I often wondered aloud if we were making any progress, the leadership team wisely stuck with it, quietly keeping open the invitation to participate. And they were right. People kept coming back. It was gentle, unforced, but persistent. On the surface it may have seemed that nothing much was happening, but that sunny morning I realised that deep in the cultural soil something invisible had been growing all along: an esprit de corps that revealed itself at that Chapter in a powerful way. It wasn't perfect, but it *was* wonderful.

CREATING A 'THIRD PLACE'

Reflecting on this experience later I realised that we had somehow created a whole new environment outside what were often troubled and isolated communities, an environment that sociologist Ray Oldenburg calls 'the third place', a neutral ground outside the family or the workplace where people with diverse worldviews and backgrounds can come together in an inclusive way. The third place is not a place at all, of course, but a process. Something we *do*. While 'relationship' and 'community' are nouns, through a living systems lens they are more like verbs. And a third place doesn't just happen. We cannot legislate for it, but we can design processes and structures that deliberately invite meaningful participation and authentic conversation, and in the process cultivate spaces in which community becomes possible.

According to physicist David Bohm, the word 'participation' has two meanings. "The earliest meaning was *to partake of* as you partake of food. The second meaning is *to partake in*, to make your contribution. It means you are accepted, you are being taken into the whole." Perhaps the 'third place' we created was spacious enough for diversity and difference to be accepted and embraced.

Still, the fact remained that despite the felt sense of being part of the whole, there was a disconnect between the high point of these larger gatherings and the reality back home. In many ways the strength of connection outside primary communities highlighted the sometimes weak relationships within them. And while this 'place' *did* provide sustenance it couldn't resolve layered and complex problems back home.

BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME

Throughout religious life there are communities living with the poor behaviour of a few which can cause real distress for the many

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and which ultimately cannot be challenged because structurally, there are no consequences: nobody gets fired. Some respond to all of this by withholding themselves as a shield against being hurt. In the absence of connection, some essentially check-out, opting for what's often described as a "bed-and-breakfast" relationship and look for belonging elsewhere. Sometimes they're judged as "paddling their own canoe" without reference to their community. In other cases a legacy of unaddressed hurts has silenced some and caused others to abandon all hope that community is remotely possible. As in other walks of life, hierarchy has had an infantilising effect as everybody waits for somebody else to solve problems that only the people themselves can resolve. And so while some people describe community as "a good experience" for others it's been "a disaster".

These patterns are so common it seems to me they must be symptoms of deeper issues. At a fundamental level, community remains an unexamined question.

THE PARADOX OF DIVERSITY

In many marriages children act as glue. After they've flown the nest their absence can reveal relational gaps as empty-nesters come face to face with questions like, *Why are we here? What holds us together now?* Some stay put for convenience, some because it feels too late to move on. The marriages that thrive do so because the bonds are sturdy enough to withstand deep change and couples successfully renew their relationship for a new time.

An enormous part of living and working together successfully is determined by how we deal with *difference*. It seems to me that in religious life, the structures of the past, particularly the bond of shared ministries and the way that life in community was lived, often created the illusion of community, contributing to the assumption that community is something that just happens, something you *partake of* but don't have to *partake in*. Because of this, community is not generally understood as a way of working and being together; an elusive prize in an ongoing quest.

In addition, the absence of shared corporate ministry in recent years can reveal interpersonal diversity which is often experienced as something to be wary of rather than valued. As difference becomes a pressing issue for our entire species, this is but a microcosm of a much wider human problem. All over the world, at macro and micro levels, we are witnessing great fracture and division and all manner of social tension and aggression, as worldviews with their competing answers to life's questions, collide, and difference morphs into conflict.

In living systems, diversity is nature's best strategy. Make things the same and you make them weak. (Think, the potato famine. Or the perils of groupthink.) But when it comes to *human* nature, difference is hard, especially when it comes to our core beliefs which are so central to our sense of identity that instead of simply holding a belief, we often become it. The belief has us, rather than the other way round. Confronted by information that contradicts firmly held convictions, we will often ignore or deny or rationalise it away rather than live with the discomfort and dissonance it causes.

Dismissing new evidence or information may calm the dissonance we feel, allowing us to remain loyal to our worldview, but it also dismisses and invalidates the experience and identity of those with a contrary perspective and it blocks access to an alternative or expanded set of beliefs that might offer better ways to navigate the world.

One of the most contentious areas of difference I've witnessed in religious communities is the question of 'God', the Divine, immanence. No matter what any of us does or doesn't believe, no one can credibly claim to know who or what or if 'God' is. Indeed, not knowing is the essence of what it means to have faith. For some, 'God' is a dimension to be explored. For others, however, 'God' is a question that has already been answered. I have watched people quietly dissect each other with their 'answers' rather than live together in their not-knowing. For those who have committed themselves to a life of spiritual exploration, difficulties arise when their answers to questions of 'God' are not allowed to evolve and they find themselves living in a land of fixed answers rather than journeying together on a shared quest.

I recall one woman who faced this dilemma daily. Every evening, she could hear the sounds of the community downstairs, readying itself for prayer, and every evening she'd stand frozen at her bedroom door. Would she go down? Or wouldn't she? This ritual had long since stopped being meaningful for her. To join the community in prayer was to deny her integrity, her very soul. To stay in her room however, was to risk being subtly shunned and deny herself access to community and a sense of belonging. It was lose-lose all the way. And every evening, as she stood in the doorway, struggling, it tore her apart.

INTEGRATING DIFFERENCE

The hallmark of our development as human beings is our ability to take on more perspectives. It seems to be part of our hard drive that as we move towards more perspectives we move towards more

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compassion and greater complexity. What once seemed black and white begins to look a lot more grey.

This evolutionary process – from differentiation to integration – can be observed at every level of life. From the cells in our body to the entire universe, every living system begins by differentiating. At the moment of conception cells begin to form and immediately divide to become a liver or heart or skin. However these separate parts only become viable when they integrate into a larger whole. A heart cannot survive independent of the body. And as miraculous as it is, a heart is capable of far less complex activity than a human body, just as an individual is capable of far less than a larger group.

Crucially, in natural systems, ‘integration’ does not mean ‘uniformity’. By definition, integration means *integrating difference*. All living systems evolve to the degree that they can differentiate without excluding and integrate without forcing unity. It’s a skilful balancing act. And in human beings, it’s not a question of being more or less agreeable: some of us have the capacity to take on more perspectives, and some of us don’t. As elsewhere in the living world, evolution isn’t guaranteed.

THE PARADOX OF GROWTH

In his book *No Boundary*, Ken Wilbur points out that “A boundary line, as any military expert will tell you is also a potential battle line.... as an individual draws up the boundaries of his soul, he establishes at the same time the battles of his soul.”

In some religious communities, the battle lines were drawn years ago as they retreated into their rooms and into themselves. To avoid the battle they sustain an uneasy peace that consumes a lot of energy. In the vocabulary of living systems this is known as entropy: energy that is not available for the real work, a kind of tax on the system that is often expressed as apathy or half-heartedness or lethargy. Even in communities where there’s little negativity or challenge, harmony can easily drift into complacency.

We may prefer homeostasis but human beings grow through trauma and challenge. Our brain evolves when we are excited or demanded into growth. It’s a paradox. The more I experience difference the more I sense threat. But the more I move away from difference, the more I move away from my own growth. Our development and spiritual growth requires us to engage with difficult issues honestly, directly, face-to-face. Learning to have and survive tough conversations is what builds trust, deepens relationship and makes things possible.

The mutual trust between Albert Reynolds and John Major, for example, is widely believed to have played a significant part in steadying the diplomatic ground that led to the Downing Street

Declaration and paved the way for the Northern Ireland peace process. What is perhaps less well known is that the early days of negotiation were marked by rocky patches caused by missteps and misunderstandings. In an interview to mark Albert Reynolds' death John Major recalled a particularly incendiary conversation that moved their relationship into more trusting territory:

“I had accusations of bad faith to make against Albert and he had accusations of bad faith to make against me and we repaired to a private room and we had a pretty furious row. But the joy of the relationship with Albert from the start was that, in a fashion I can't quite explain, we were able to have the fiercest of rows without leaving scars and without leaving either of us less inclined to pursue the peace process than we were before. It was a clearing of the air... I understood Albert's difficulties and he understood mine, so when I accused him of bad faith, I knew why he'd done what he'd done and when he accused me of bad faith, he understood why I had done what I had done. That was what enabled us to have a row, sort it out and return to the table. It was a relationship unlike any other I had during my years in government. I think we can say without equivocation that during the Irish peace process we became friends.”

Human beings are good at creating sameness but not so good at including difference and in contexts like religious communities, where people are highly motivated by the need to be part of a group, the desire to belong often conceals a kernel of insecurity about being included and accepted. And so the natural human tendency to avoid conflict and unpleasant truths is often amplified.

It's true that difference disrupts and disturbs us but it also holds the possibility of newness and change. The skill is to surface different perspectives yet remain in relationship. Social scientists observing married couples discovered that enduring marriages are those in which the couple knows how to *fight well*: they're willing to fight but they know how to fight without sacrificing the relationship. They have a strong intuition about when it's time to stop talking and start fighting; and they know when it's time to stop fighting and start talking. Fighting and fighting well is a dance as delicate as a waltz or a tango. And just because there isn't a visible fight happening doesn't mean people aren't fighting.

FREEDOM TO FIGHT

Adam Kahane is well known in the world of complex collaborations in high conflict environments. For years he advocated that to make progress we need to talk and collaborate with the enemy but

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in his most recent work he has revised his thinking. The sweet spot, he now believes, is not simply talking but finding a balance between talking and fighting. “The mistake I was making in my collaborations was to reject fighting as uncivilized and dangerous, and therefore to push it into the shadows. This didn’t make the fighting disappear; it just drove it underground, where it would be exercised less consciously and cleanly . . . By contrast, collaboration that cycles generatively between talking and fighting enables a social system – a family, an organization, a country – to evolve to higher levels. We cannot make progress without employing both talking and fighting.”

It’s a lesson I too learned the hard way. In the months after that high point Chapter experience, I discovered those five years of participation and collaboration had been concealing an unexpressed fight. The leadership team had presumed everyone would want to participate and collaborate. And so did I. To create space for members to develop their voice and a sense of agency I encouraged the team to step back and lower their profile, which they did both willingly and skilfully. For almost everyone this was a liberating move. But to those who wanted to be actively led, who preferred their leaders to be presidential, it looked as if the leadership team had “disappeared”. To them, this new way of leading – cultivating the capacity and creativity of everyone – didn’t look like leadership at all. When leaders stop thinking for us and ask us to think for ourselves, not everyone is able to step up and step in. Some of us like being told what to do. Indeed, some of us like telling others what to do. And so they staged a coup d’état and reinstated an old, familiar kind of leadership.

Reflecting on that experience I realise we shouldn’t have taken progress for granted. We should have acknowledged that change inevitably means loss as well as gain. We should have addressed the disappointments and downsides upfront. In short, we should have surfaced the hidden fight. But that experience also confirmed that religious life is just a *microcosm* of society in general and whatever the context, change is a long road with peaks and troughs. As a species we are standing at a cultural crossroads and we must find a way to get past the inertia of the present and redesign our organisations and communities for a very different future. As we do, we’ll have to learn how to create spaces safe enough for change to take root and not to fall back; to be willing to fail and willing to learn; to sustain our efforts and grow our capacity; to experiment personally and collectively and have the courage to do our learning in public, so that those lessons become fuel for future efforts.

And so, in that spirit, I offer this story of *success, failure and learning*.

The Last Week

Gerry McFlynn

to shouts and songs of
joy and palmed 'hosannas'
he enters on an ass

he'll have his royal moment
despite what fate dictates
he is a king about to die

some bread, a cup of wine,
beginning of a meal that
cannot end

blood, prayer and olive
trees tell me that he finds
it hard to die

a gray dishevelled day
in the distance a tree
sways heavy with grief

a day out of time
even nature acknowledges
death's brief victory

Still, I often raid his tomb
and help myself to miracles
some parables...

enough for LIFE

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Exegesis and Incarnation

Towards Recovering a biblical Perspective on Consecrated Life

Mary T. Brien

It is common knowledge that Consecrated Life/Religious Life as a valid vocational path is questioned in our world today. It is questioned by non-believers, as one would expect. It is also questioned by believers and by some well-meaning Catholic Christians. For example, when a young lady known to me left her well-paid job recently to join a contemplative community, many of my friends thought it a waste of a life! “After all, couldn’t she do more for society by joining a missionary or ministerial group where she could make a difference in people’s lives as a teacher or social worker or medical professional?” And the same questioners say to me: ‘What are you doing, Mary, in Presentation, that you could not do better, or at least just as well, if you were less restricted?’ I smile, evading a lengthy answer that might be better suited to another time and place. But it sets me thinking about those two sample responses as significant pointers to some of the issues surrounding the specific identity of consecrated life within the panorama of Christian callings today.

I suspect that such responses are representative of a wide section of public opinion, within and beyond Christian circles, at the present time. At one level, they both make a plea for ‘usefulness’ to society as governing criterion; at another level, they both overlook what is at the heart of consecrated life. There is no reference to ‘vocation’ or to ‘calling’ or to the faith-dimension involved. On the positive side, the fact that consecrated life raises questions today is reassuring. Any radical form of Christian living is meant to raise questions. The day when this ‘life-form’, which we call Consecrated Life¹, does not raise questions is the day when it will have lost its power to attract.

1 Sandra Schneiders uses ‘life-form’ as designated descriptor of consecrated life. See Sandra Schneiders: *Finding the Treasure* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist), 2013, xxiii.

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EXEGESIS AND INCARNATION

A NARRATIVE OF HEROIC PROPORTIONS

Taking ‘usefulness to society’ as a desirable component of ministerial consecrated life (and there are some valid reasons for doing so), inspiring examples exist on our doorstep. If Irish social history is invoked, a narrative of heroic proportions emerges. Consecrated women and men have laid the foundations of educational, medical and social services in Ireland, beginning with Nano Nagle in the eighteenth century.² Practically every town and city in Ireland is witness to this fact. Visionary people who followed Nano Nagle - Edmund Rice, Catherine McCauley, Mary Aikenhead - and many others like them - established schools, colleges, hospitals, refuges, and services long before the state got involved. They did what needed to be done, in response to the Spirit’s leading, and they did it generously from their own resources, sometimes supported by voluntary contributions or family funds. Followers of these heroic women and men managed and staffed institutions and outreach services, worked long hours in difficult conditions and, until relatively recent times, received no financial support from central authorities. Many of these pioneers died young of malnutrition and of tuberculosis. A visit to a convent or monastery graveyard, noting the early ages at which many died, can be instructive. The full extent of this voluntary contribution by Religious Congregations has yet to be researched, properly documented and publicly acknowledged. But the facts speak for themselves.

One might expect such a narrative of heroism to inspire new vocations to consecrated life in one of its ministerial forms. Not so, according to statistics. The argument works in reverse. Now that the state has largely assumed responsibility for the services formerly provided by ministerial religious communities, the question becomes: “Why might anyone consider joining a religious community today, when it is possible to do all the good that the religious sisters, priests and brothers once did, or even to do better than they did, and get paid for it, without any of the restrictions imposed by religious rules or the hardships of yesteryear?” Surprisingly, this line of thinking has taken hold in families, church circles and even in some religious communities today. Again, the narrative revolves around *usefulness*: since the state now provides the services once rendered by ministerial religious congregations, there is no need for such ministerial vocations today or into the future. The corollary then becomes a plea for phasing out, for

2 While exemplars such as Margaret Ball (d.1584) and others died as martyrs two centuries earlier because of their stance on Catholic education, their efforts did not result in a formal change to the system. Nano Nagle is usually credited as pioneer of a system of Catholic education in defiance of the Penal Laws.

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saying that consecrated life has had its day, closing convent and monastery doors, refusing new entrants and ‘making space for the new to emerge’ (a vague phrase which has gathered much traction in current conversation on the ‘vocations crisis’ and which merits some unpacking). In a word, the message reads: Convents and monasteries are not needed anymore. Consecrated life is for archiving, not for serious consideration as a viable way of living the Christian life.

One further dimension of the ‘vocations crisis’ is worth mentioning. It feeds into the narrative. It is one which is rarely mentioned or pursued, even in research-based analyses of the issue. It is the *parallel crisis* in vocations to Christian marriage and family life. Statistics show that in Ireland, between 1986 and 2011, there has been a 360% increase in the number of co-habiting couples. This means fewer married couples. The percentage of church marriages (Roman Catholic) in the total population in 2018 was 47.6%. The percentage of broken marriages between 1986 and 2011 was 500%. The number of single-parent families has grown much faster than the number of two-parent families and the divorce rate among married couples and co-habiting couples continues to rise.³ Other factors, such as the numbers of Catholic voters in the Republic of Ireland who voted for abortion and for same-sex marriage in recent referenda, and the numbers of declared Christian families who no longer attend church or support it in any meaningful way, confirm the thesis that a ‘vocation crisis’ applies in Christian marriage and family life also. This is not a comforting message. But it is highly relevant to the topic under discussion.

BACK TO BASICS!

To be baptized into the Christian community is to be gifted with the life of faith, with participation in the life of the Risen Lord. This means being established in a vital relationship with God in Christ, a relationship which colours every aspect of one’s life, investing every action or happening with eternal value. It is pure gift – ‘new creation’ – to be treasured and nurtured in every way possible, whatever one’s situation and for the whole of one’s life. It may be understood as a way of seeing and hearing and responding which is ‘beyond’ the mundane, which is ‘tuned in’ to another reality – the voice of God. The baptismal rite, by the anointing of the senses, proclaims this important aspect of the sacrament. It opens up an infinite horizon. Baptism initiates one into a relationship with Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is profound, foundational, transformative. That relationship is nurtured in Christian family

3 See the breakdown of CSO figures as offered by Iona Institute, www.ionainstitute.ie

life and in Christian community through personal response to the inspiration of the Spirit, through Word and Sacrament, through communal struggle and communal celebration, through self-gift in love and service, through prayer, practice of the virtues and through understanding of, and allegiance to Christian creed, code and cult. The vocation of the baptised person is to make *visible* in the world the life of the risen Lord. What a vocation! Little wonder that Pope Leo the Great could exclaim with astonishment, “Christian know your dignity!” This primary baptismal vocation is fundamentally and vitally related to any consideration of what we currently call the ‘vocational crisis’, whether in Christian marriage, priesthood, vowed life or singleness

RE-DISCOVERING ‘A CULTURE OF VOCATION’

For baptised persons who take their identity seriously the choice of a way of life – whether to marriage, singleness, priesthood or vowed life – is a matter of *discernment*. This means, in practice, tuning in to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit regarding one’s calling. This is hard work, because prayer is hard work. Discovering the many ways in which God reveals God’s own self and God’s designs for one’s life is an exciting journey. It may be long and dark and tortuous for some. For others it will be clear and compelling. In all cases it means discovering one’s vocation, talking and thinking vocation language. “To what way of life am I called? How do I know?” These are deep questions that touch the core of who we are as persons and they have vital links with our own deepest desires. Very often discerning persons discover that God’s call to them corresponds with their own deepest desire. Today there are programmes and courses and resources that help in the very important process of seeking out God’s designs for one’s life. Thanks to the insight given to St Ignatius of Loyola for the Church in the sixteenth century, it is possible to ‘read’ one’s calling from God by a simple process of discernment. It is possible for any serious seeker to search out through prayer and discernment the direction in which God is leading each one. But it cannot happen outside of the domain of faith. It presumes a heart and mind open to divine invitation. It presupposes ‘a culture of vocation’, with relevant support in family, parish and Christian community.

DISTINCTIVE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE GOSPEL

The Apostolic Exhortation known as *Verbum Domini* (in English, *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*, 2010) presents a credible way of understanding and distinguishing at least

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some of the variety of callings within the baptismal kaleidoscope. This 84-page document, which includes a bibliography, is written in a fresh and informal style. It situates all Christian vocations, whether to marriage, singleness or consecrated life, within the realm of encountering the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. For example, Sections 75-85 deal with the biblical formation of Christians, the Word of God and vocation, ordained ministers and the Word of God, the Word of God and consecrated life, the Word of God in marriage and family life. All genuine responses to the Word of God whether in marriage, ordained ministry, singleness or consecrated life, are portrayed as interpretations of the Gospel. The Christian spectrum of vocation offers the possibility of many distinctive interpretations of the Good News. Within this theological framework, vowed life is presented as a viable and publicly professed interpretation of the Good News of Jesus, as a way of making the Gospel visible and 'readable' in the world. The vowed life is actually described as 'a living exegesis' of God's Word.

Number 83 of *Verbum Domini* reads

It (the vowed life) is born from hearing the Word of God and embracing the Gospel as its rule of life...A life devoted to following Christ in his chastity, poverty and obedience thus becomes a living 'exegesis' of God's Word.

That is an *astounding* statement about consecrated life, as encouraging as it is challenging. Encouraging, because it clarifies things! It gives a clear rationale for a way of life which is often misunderstood. Challenging, because, according to *Verbum Domini*, the call to vowed life is an invitation to become 'a particular reading of the Gospel'.

To express it differently, those who are vowed to the following of Christ in celibacy, poverty and obedience are, by that very fact, *distinctive interpretations of the Gospel*. Christian marriage is, of course, another distinctive interpretation of the gospel, as is the single life of any baptised Christian. The baptismal call to holiness remains foundational for all interpretations of the Good News. Each interpretation is distinctive. There is no hierarchy and no competition.

INTERPRETING THE GOSPEL

If the issue of vocational discernment is lifted above and beyond immediate utilitarian considerations, consecrated life is judged for its intrinsic value as a specific interpretation of the Gospel.

For example, a person discerning a call to consecrated life will firstly ask how s/he is hearing God's call to the *Sequela Christi* in lifelong celibacy, simple lifestyle and shared accountability in community. Within that framework (an interpretation of the life of Jesus) a variety of services may be discerned, depending on one's gifts and the needs of neighbours in a specific time and place. But the identity of the vowed life as a particular 'reading' of the life of Jesus (a particular 'take' on the Gospel) ought to be the central concern, and this as response to a special, divine invitation. Otherwise, ministerial consecrated life runs into an identity crisis around 'usefulness' or 'relevance' in a world of competing needs. Vowed life, considered solely in terms of service to society, cannot and does not seek to compete with privately funded NGOs or state-sponsored development programmes. It is not, primarily, about providing useful service, although service to neighbour will be an essential component of vowed life, whether contemplative or ministerial, because love of neighbour is at the core of the Gospel. Consecrated life, in its varied forms and expressions, is about making the Gospel visible, tangible and accessible in our current church and world. Viewed in this way, it is a fruitful 'breaking open' of the Word of God, a presentation of a specific version of the Gospel for people to read, an exegesis or interpretation of the Word which raises questions and translates into a particular type of Christian witness.

EXEGESIS – WHOSE BUSINESS IS THAT?

One could be forgiven for thinking that exegesis is the business of biblical scholars and preachers and perhaps for some folk who live in the ivory towers of academia! The word itself comes from a Greek word *exegesis* – and its corresponding verb *exegesethai*, meaning 'to extract the significance of something', or to draw out its meaning. As we know, *everyone* who reads or proclaims the Word of God intelligently, everyone who teaches or preaches with a text from Sacred Scripture, everyone who listens or ponders the Word in prayer is, by doing so, an exegete. He or she is drawing out the meaning of a particular text, relating it to everyday life – the life of yesterday and of today. In one sense, we do it all the time. And, of course, the Word of God is always and everywhere relevant, if only we interpret properly, because Jesus Christ is the Word of God and the revelation of God – 'yesterday, today and forever' (Heb13:8). And, apart from a few superficial publicity-grabbing movies, nobody today, scholar or saint or artist, will deny that Jesus lived differently: He was celibate for the whole of his life, yet he loved beyond measure; he was poor and he

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chose to live simply as a travelling teacher; he was obedient to the Father in everything, whatever the cost. He was certainly *counter-cultural*, by first-century Middle Eastern standards and, even more strikingly, by twenty-first century standards.

TO BE/ TO BECOME THE EXEGESIS!

To do exegesis is one thing. To *be*, or to *become*, the exegesis is quite another! There's the rub! The vowed life, in the words of *Verbum Domini*, is 'born of the Word of God'. It presumes the gospel as first 'rule of life', as life's primary project. But the message from *Verbum Domini* goes beyond this: It announces that daily living of the vowed life is, by its very nature, an exegesis of the Word of God. In other words, a life of consecrated celibacy, evangelical poverty, and prophetic obedience is a proclaimed and visible interpretation of the Word. It says to the world: 'This is a demo!'. Celibacy 'speaks' and announces the life and love of Jesus. So does evangelical poverty! So does evangelical obedience! If understood correctly, this means that lived religious profession is *one* powerful way of explicating, or clearly bringing out the meaning of Sacred Scripture, particularly of the New Testament, since we are New Testament people. It is one current way of saying who Jesus is today! It is one answer, but only one, to the universal cry, "We want to see Jesus" (Jn 12:21). This may seem a rather ambitious and novel way of considering vowed life, perhaps (a critic may argue) informed by a blindness to the failures and flaws of human nature in historical settings. It most surely offers a sky-high challenge to those within religious communities and to enquirers. But it corresponds with the biblical roots of consecrated life and with official Church teaching.

EXEGESIS AND INCARNATION

It may have been usual in the past to think of exegesis as the business and the preserve of academics in theological institutions. But there are various kinds of exegesis – various ways of interpreting a sacred text so that its meaning becomes apparent. The work of biblical scholars (exegetes in the traditional sense) is a vital service to Church and society. It is simply irreplaceable. It is more needed today than ever before. But that academic service of interpreting can and ought to be *supplemented* by other forms, notably by those which 'translate' the sacred message into readable forms in stone, like the Irish High Crosses, on canvas, in stained glass and mosaic and tapestry. More importantly, the Word, once become Flesh in Mary's womb, calls out for flesh and blood exemplars,

in all cultures and in all walks of life. This is one reason why our Church needs saints. We want to catch a glimpse of dimensions of the Gospel that may escape our most exhaustive studies. Exegesis and Incarnation go hand in hand.

THE FOUNDING CHARISM

Each founder of a Religious Congregation or Institute, in his/her time, caught a particular glimpse of the Gospel and was gifted with ways and means of incarnating that vision in the existing culture. In that sense, each Congregation represents ‘a specific interpretation of the Gospel’- a particular refraction of the light of Christ beamed on a current reality. Discovering and re-incarnating that original vision is a vital and ongoing task for members of religious communities. There is no limit to the number of ‘specific interpretations of the Gospel’ that may emerge, but they will be new, while in harmony with the original vision. Likewise, there is no limit to the number of interpretations that may evolve within and beyond existing interpretations, because the Spirit’s creativity is inexhaustible. This is another way of saying that Consecrated Life invites to endless Spirit-led incarnations, each of which will proclaim, and make ‘readable’, a specific version of the Good News of Jesus. To say that Consecrated Life has ‘had its day’ is to put limits on the power of God’s Spirit at work in human history, inspiring ongoing exegesis and incarnation.

Transparency. At the present time, we are in a state of crisis and shame. We have seriously clouded the grace of the Christ-mission. Is it possible for us to move from fear of scandal to truth? How do we remove the masks that hide our sinful neglect? What policies, programmes and procedures will bring us to a new, revitalised starting point characterised by a transparency that lights up the world with God’s hope for us in building the reign of God?

- SR. VERONICA OPENIBO SHCJ, ‘Openness to the World’ in *Meeting on the Protection of Minors in the Church*. Dublin: Veritas. 2019. p. 110.

Redeemably Awful: The Christian Altar

Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

In last month's article, I started this series on the current state of the Liturgy of the Eucharist as celebrated in many of our parishes. My title for the series is "Redeemably Awful" and I am proposing an uncomfortable examination of conscience as we mark the fiftieth anniversary of the Roman Missal as promulgated by Pope Paul VI.

This month I continue the reflection by looking at the place of the altar in the church building.¹ Everybody knows that the altar is important, but it often doesn't receive the importance it needs. At the start I must admit that things today are better than they were once upon a time. In the late sixth century, St Columbanus, had a problem with a certain lack of respect in the manner that his monks treated the altar of his monastic church and had to provide a specific penance in his *Communal Rule* to deal with those monks who spat at the altar.²

But today the problem we face is one of neglect more than disrespect. Many of our churches were built before Vatican II and after the Council these needed to be reordered for the new liturgy. However Mark Searle's reflections on the issues facing a typical parish in the United States from the early 1980's still ring true for many Irish churches:

"It is extraordinarily difficult to bring the tumultuous history of liturgical renewal in the American parish over the last twenty years into any kind of satisfactory focus. Perhaps the best way

- 1 As this is a popular article, I will only give footnotes for the exact quotations that I use. For a more academic treatment, I refer readers to two earlier publications, "Plenty Good Room: The Liturgical Need for Altars of Adequate Size." *San Vitores Theological Review* 1 (2014): 42-51 and *Liturgical Orientation: The Position of the President at the Eucharist*. Joint Liturgical Studies 83 (Norwich: Alcuin Club, 2017).
- 2 "If any spits and touches the altar, [let him pray as penance] twenty-four psalms" *Regula Coenobialis* 13 in in G. S. M. Walker, *Sancti Columbani Opera*. *Scriptores Latini Hiberniae* Vol. 2 (Dublin: School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1957), 163.

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of grasping what happened would be to go into almost any parish church in the land, built before the middle or late sixties, sit about halfway back and allow the environment to tell its own story. Chances are that the structure itself remains essentially what it was. The old altar against the back wall is probably still in place, but stripped of its mass cards, its candles, and maybe its tabernacle ... The altar rails may still be in place, but the gates have been removed and the starched linens which used to adorn them have long since been folded up and abandoned to some inaccessible sacristy cupboard ... The sanctuary, in particular, has suffered. The once intimidating sweep of steps up to the high altar is now broken with a second portable counterpart, invariably looking makeshift and out of place. The pulpit, if it remains, goes largely unused: a spindly lectern, with a colored cloth and a microphone attached, has replaced it. Chairs of undetermined vintage, rescued from the monsignor's hallway, take up the remaining space. One has the sense that in half an hour all that has come about in the space of twenty years could be cleared away and the old order restored. It has not died, it has not even faded away. It merely sleeps".³

We don't know too much about the table that Jesus used for the last supper. Later Christian stories mention St. Luke painting different icons of the Virgin Mary on the wood of that table. For the first three centuries of her existence, the Christian Church wasn't in a position to build church buildings and we know very little about the altar during this time. It is probable that the Eucharist was celebrated on portable tables that could be moved away when they weren't needed. But in the Patristic era, when the first purpose built Christian churches had been built, the altar was considered to be the primary symbol of the presence of Christ. St Ambrose is of the opinion that "Christ's altar [is] the image of Christ's body"⁴ The altar was considered to be the place where Christians went to pray. In a sense it was almost like what the Tabernacle would become in later centuries, the place they considered closest to God. We can see this in St Monica's dying instruction to her sons, "this only thing I ask of you: that you should remember me at the altar of the Lord wherever you may be."⁵ This was before St Augustine had any thought of being ordained, she is simply asking them to pray for her when they are near the altar.

3 Mark Searle, "Reflections on Liturgical Reform," in *Worship* 56 (1982), 411-412.

4 *On the Sacraments*. Catechesis Five 2.7 in Lawrence J. Johnson, ed. and trans., *Worship in the Early Church: An Anthology of Historical Sources* (Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, A Pueblo Book, 2009), 2.60.

5 *Confessions* 9.11 in F. J. Sheed, trans., *Augustine: Confessions*. 2nd ed. (Hackett, Indianapolis, IN, 2006), 180.

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Through the centuries the *holiness* of the altar was emphasized more and more. As this appreciation grew, the altar began to become more distant from the people. It was protected by baldacchinos and curtains, altar rails and rood screens. Yet throughout the centuries the altar remained at the heart of Christian devotion. People always desired to be close to the altar and throughout the Middle Ages devotion was often centred on it and this desire to see the liturgical action at the altar remained. The side altars often providing an access that was denied to the laity who found themselves further and further from the high altar. During the Counter Reformation, the Jesuits introduced a new form of church layout that gave a visual prominence to the altar, doing away with the medieval choir that distanced the altar from the people. There was a radical change to the manner Mass was celebrated during the Baroque period which promoted a new church layout where everybody could *see* the action at the altar.

THE SIZE OF THE ALTAR

Today we need to ask an uncomfortable question about our own altars; are they fit for purpose? All churches now have free-standing altars that allow for *versus populum* (facing the people). But on a basic level we need to see if all of our altars are made of worthy materials, well decorated and not cluttered. It can be interesting to compare the quality of the old high altar to the newer current altar in our older churches. But perhaps more importantly the basic question is whether the altar is big enough to properly carry out its principal function of holding enough bread and wine for the Eucharistic celebration.

One of the tragedies of Christian spirituality was that, for centuries, most Catholics only received Communion very rarely. Indeed from the fourth century till Pope St. Pius X in the early twentieth, many Catholics felt unworthy to receive Communion. The Fourth Lateran Council (1205) had to mandate that Catholics had to receive Communion at least once a year (the so-called “Easter duty”). But for centuries in most Masses only the priest received Communion. So the altar didn’t have to be very big. At the same time the custom also developed of administering Communion to the “people” at a different time from when the priest received, thus *separating* the Communion of the faithful from the actual celebration of the Eucharist. Even though people received Communion very rarely, those rare occasions often took place on major feasts or on pilgrimages. So, for logistical reasons, Communion was usually administered from the tabernacle and *not* the altar. Yet this is a liturgical abuse, that has been condemned

by the Church for centuries. Pope Benedict XIV's 1742 *Certiores effecti* was dedicated to fighting this abuse.⁶ This condemnation is repeated in Pope Pius XII *Mediator Dei* (1947) and Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium* as well as the current edition of the *General Instruction on the Roman Missal*. Yet in most parishes it is still the regular practice to administer Communion from the tabernacle (while the tabernacle should only be used for the *Viaticum*, Communion of the sick and adoration).

In our days Communion is frequent. In Ireland Communion from the Eucharistic Cup is not that common, but every Church should be able to accommodate it (and hopefully the practice will become more widespread). Where this is the practice, it is normal to have a ratio of two ministers of the cup for every minister distributing the Eucharistic Bread. This means that the altar needs to be capable of elegantly holding a presidential cup and plate, as well as less prominent ministerial cups and plates so that the entire capacity of the church can receive Communion under both kinds, with everything consecrated at the Mass they are attending. Additionally the altar must hold the candles and the missal, as well as the functional necessities such as a microphone.

In the prayer of Dedication of a new altar, the *Rite of Dedication of a Church and Altar* has a beautiful prayer of dedication of an altar. It would do us no harm to ask if the altars in our churches do justice to it:

Make this altar a sign of Christ
from whose pierced side flowed blood and water,
which ushered in the sacraments of the Church.

Make it a table of joy,
where the friends of Christ may hasten
to cast upon you their burdens and cares
and take up their journey restored.

Make it a place of communion and peace,
so that those who share the body and blood of your Son
may be filled with his Spirit and grow in your life of love.

Make it a source of unity and friendship,
where your people may gather as one
to share your spirit of mutual love.

6 I have translated the encyclical and commented on it in "Partakers of the Same Sacrifice." *Antiphon* 16:2 (2012): 130-143.

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Make it the center of our praise and thanksgiving
until we arrive at the eternal tabernacle,
where, together with Christ, high priest and living altar,
we will offer you an everlasting sacrifice of praise.

In next month's issue I will reflect on the term 'active participation' and its implications for Christian worship in our parishes.

Future Challenges. Over the course of the last century, global average life expectancy has more than doubled, and is now nearing seventy years. Over many parts of the developed world, a child born today can expect to live for over eighty years. But the paradox is that this radical improvement in the human condition has occurred as global environmental degradation has plumbed new depths. A spectrum of environmental drivers, headed by climate change, but including air and water pollution, freshwater scarcity, land and ocean degradation and major losses of biodiversity, now threatens the very existence of humankind in anything like contemporary numbers in the long, and possibly medium, term. The realisation that our present well-being is achieved by mortgaging the options for future generations is now a stark reality, part of the defining characteristics of what has now become known as the Anthropocene Epoch.

– JOHN SWEENEY, in *Modern Culture and Well-Being*, ed. Catherine Conlon (Dublin: Veritas) p. 96

The Atheist, the Archbishop and the Saint

Billy Swan

On 5 September 2019, I was present in New Ross for the opening address by Archbishop Eamonn Martin at the annual Kennedy Summer School. His talk was entitled ‘*What is the role of faith in our politics?*’ (Later published in *The Furrow*, October 2019) and was responded to by Senator Ivana Bacik and Michael Kelly, editor of the *Irish Catholic*. In her response to the Archbishop’s talk, Ms. Bacik, who described herself as an atheist, objected to Dr. Martin’s insistence that Catholic politicians bring their faith convictions into their work of public representation of the people who elected them. In a later column in the *Irish Times*, Ms. Bacik described this position as ‘deeply problematic’ as it would amount to a theocracy, given that the majority of Irish voters and politicians continue to be Catholic.¹

The issue of whether Catholic politicians can act or vote contrary to Catholic teaching is one of fundamental importance but was obscured by media commentary after the talk that focused on the issues of allegiance and authority. The Archbishop’s talk was interpreted as a warning to Catholic politicians that their primary allegiance ought to be to their faith and Church. He said that ‘the life of the Christian demands that believers give a coherent witness to the Gospel in every facet of their lives. People of faith must always be attentive to the danger of living parallel lives whereby they compartmentalise their existence into spiritual and secular spheres’. In response, Ms. Bacik insisted that the allegiance of elected politicians should be to the State and to the pluralistic plebiscite that elected them. She reduced the issue to authority and lauded the freedom that Catholic voters displayed in voting for same-sex marriage in 2015 and abortion in 2018. Context here is important. The outcome of the abortion referendum in particular, was fresh in the minds of the audience at the talk and the fact that

1 Ivana Bacik, ‘The Catholic Church Hasn’t Gone Away You Know’, *Irish Times*, 11 Sept. 2019.

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many Catholic politicians stated their support for repeal of the Eighth Amendment prior to the referendum. Here I explore how the thought of St John Henry Newman can shed some light on this clash of vision and clarify that the real issues at stake here are *not* allegiance or authority but truth, conscience and the idea of notional and real assent.

TRUTH

According to Ivana Bacik, truth appears to be the preserve of the secular realm. Truth is decided by consensus and majority decision. Religious claims to truth cannot be allowed to influence public representatives for each religious tradition claims its own truth and politicians must represent people of all faiths and none. Ms. Bacik makes a sharp distinction between the truth claims of the secular and religious worlds. She said: 'The simple Swedish phrase sums it up: 'In school, you teach; in church, you preach. The two should not be confused'.²

From both a philosophical and Catholic perspective, this understanding of truth is deeply problematic because it assumes that all religious claims to truth are inferior to better truth claims that arrive by consensus. It also assumes that all truth claims by religions are equally valid and subjective, without any appeal to the validity of the truth they claim and how it can be verified.

This idea is not new. At the end of the nineteenth century, John Henry Newman (1801-1890) famously averted to the problem in his '*Biglietto*' speech as he reacted to being named a cardinal by Pope Leo XIII in 1879. He said:

'For thirty, forty, fifty years, I have resisted to the best of my powers the spirit of liberalism in religion. Never did Holy Church need champions against it more sorely than now, when, alas, it is an error overspreading, as a snare, the whole earth'.

At the time, Newman was speaking about the assent to religious propositions. Yet the propositions assented to might well be propositions about almost any subject matter and not just religious ones for Newman was concerned with the epistemology of belief and the assent to what is true. In his defence of doctrine, he identifies a problem that bedevilled religion in his time and continues to do so in ours. He added in his *Biglietto* speech:

'Liberalism in religion is the doctrine that there is no positive truth in religion, but that one creed is as good as another, and this is the teaching which is gaining substance and force daily. It is inconsistent with any recognition of any religion, as true. It teaches that all are to be tolerated, for all are matters of opinion. Revealed

2 Ibid.

religion is not a truth, but a sentiment and a taste; not an objective fact, not miraculous; and it is the right of each individual to make it say just what strikes his fancy’.

The problem of relativism in religious truth described here by Newman is also one that infects the understanding of truth in the popular culture today. It reduces truth to consensus, without any need for truth claims to be evaluated and tested by objective criteria. The issue here is about the integrity of truth itself for we need some standard to judge the claims that a truth makes. We need to say about some truth claim – ‘this is wicked and here’s why’ or ‘this is good, it is a requirement of justice and here’s why’. C.S. Lewis wrote something similar when he said: ‘A dogmatic belief in objective value is necessary to the very idea of a rule which is not tyranny or an obedience which is not slavery’.³

In order to be taken seriously, a truth claim needs to be *tested* and must not contradict itself. This brings us back to the philosophical principle of Non-contradiction that goes back to the time of Plato and was formally stated by Aristotle. It states that something cannot be true and not true at the same time. So for example, the Catholic Church teaches that an unborn child of twelve weeks or less is human, unique and has been created in the image and likeness of God. It therefore has innate rights that must be acknowledged and defended. This truth claim is also backed up by science that reveals that the unborn child of twelve weeks or less has a full human genome that is unique to their actuality and existence. The Catholic Church asks its members to assent to this truth, not because of its own authority but because of the inherent truth of what it claims. This is consistent with the thought of both St Thomas Aquinas and Aristotle who describe truth as the conformity of the intellect with the thing before it. Resisting a relativistic understanding of truth as one opinion as good as another, C.S. Lewis likewise defines truth as the correspondence with reality. He said that ‘truth is always about something’ and ‘reality is that about which truth is’.⁴

The principle of non-contradiction therefore insists that if Catholic politicians and indeed all Catholics assent to this truth claim then they will carry that conviction into political debates and into the ballot box. Not to do so would violate the principle of non-contradiction that states it is not possible to hold to the dignity of unborn life in the private sphere and vote for the removal of their rights in public. We either believe the truth claim about the unborn child of twelve weeks or less or we don’t believe that truth for both options cannot be true at the same time. In the words of the Eamonn Martin in his speech: ‘the truth is one and valid for all....

3 C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, Macmillan, New York, 1965, p. 81.

4 ‘*Myth Become Fact*’ in *God in the Dock*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970, p. 66.

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the truth of the dignity of the human person and the fundamental right to life is discoverable by all people of goodwill’.

Catholic politicians who campaigned for a ‘Yes’ vote in the abortion referendum respond to this by claiming that while they privately oppose abortion, they do not wish to impose that value on the people who elected them including those who think differently. Such reasoning is understandable but still violates the principle of non-contradiction which undermines truth itself and ultimately civilization. For as Aristotle pointed out centuries ago, if contradictory claims are just as valid as non-contradictory claims, then all words and all claims are meaningless.⁵ This is not to judge Catholic politicians who campaigned for repeal but it does point to a very big circle that is only squared by violating the principle of non-contradiction. We turn now to another reason why many Catholic politicians explained why they campaigned to repeal the Eighth Amendment, namely on the grounds of conscience.

CONSCIENCE

The fallout from Eamonn Martin’s comments made its way to the Dáil. In response to the leader of the Labour party Brendan Howlin, who said it was time to leave behind an era when ‘clerics instructed politicians’, the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar paraphrased the familiar quote from St John Henry Newman about toasting the Pope but conscience first and added that the saint was encapsulating ‘the idea in the Catholic faith that allows people to act in accordance with their conscience, even Catholic politicians’.⁶ It was immediately clear from the Taoiseach’s remarks that what he intended was to use Newman’s insight on conscience to justify how Catholic politicians, including himself, could campaign for something contrary to basic Gospel and Church teaching.

Two points need to be made here. The first is that while it is true that Newman upheld the primacy of conscience, he did so in a manner that did not drive a wedge between conscience and the moral teaching of the Church. For Newman, the workings of conscience and the education of conscience must be understood in relation to other fundamental moral realities. He insisted that the first of these moral realities that conscience is subjected to is the presence and rule of Christ. For this reason, Newman famously referred to conscience as the ‘aboriginal Vicar of Christ in the soul’.⁷ Rather than conscience being a centre of personal subjectivism and isolated from moral demands, acts of conscience

5 Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, bk.4, chap.3, 1006a30-1008a10.

6 Varadkar invokes St. John Henry Newman in Conscience Debate, *The Irish Times*, 15 October 2019.

7 Letter to the Duke of Norfolk

can only be realised with intimate union with the Spirit of Christ. Newman's description of conscience as 'vicar of Christ in the soul' was a deliberate choice by connecting the moral imperative led by Christ in the soul with the moral authority of the vicar of Christ on earth who was the Pope. Therefore, far from setting Papal and Church teaching aside, Newman was attempting to forge a closer connection between moral imperatives that come from basic beliefs and the lively conscience of the believer as a free and responsible Christian and citizen.

The second point in relation to conscience is that while Newman argued for its primacy, he also warned that, even in his lifetime, a subjective interpretation of conscience was beginning to justify anything. In the same '*Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*' in 1875, Newman observed:

'Conscience has rights because it has duties; but in this age, with a large portion of the public, it is the very right and freedom of conscience to dispense with conscience, to ignore a Lawgiver and Judge, to be independent of unseen obligations. ... Conscience is a stern monitor, but in this century it has been superseded by a counterfeit, which the eighteen centuries prior to it never heard of, and could not have mistaken for it, if they had. It is the right of self-will'.

It is this right of self-will and subjectivism that certainly asserted itself among Catholic politicians and voters who said 'yes' to repealing the eight amendment on the grounds of conscience. Yet this was a decision that they did not make lightly. So what then was the good that appealed to their conscience in order to vote this way? How did their conscience come to justify the removal of the right to life of the unborn who are twelve weeks and younger? Perhaps the answer lies in Newman's distinction between notional and real assent.

NOTIONAL AND REAL ASSENT

In the run up to the abortion referendum, health Minister Simon Harris asked the electorate to vote 'Yes' if they thought it was wrong that about 3,500 Irish women had to travel abroad for abortions each year. We need to care for these citizens at home rather than force them to travel for abortions that they have decided will happen anyway. So the argument went.

Many Catholic voters accepted this. While personally opposing abortion they were prepared to support the provision of abortion in Irish hospitals as part of health care for women in crisis who otherwise travel abroad. Their decision was based on this *perceived good* that would arise if the eighth amendment was repealed, namely that Irish women would receive better care.

This concern for women with crisis pregnancies was also shared by those who voted ‘No’. We all could agree that over 3,500 cases of abortion is a tragedy, the vast majority of them being unwanted pregnancies. The difference came in how to address the problem. Studies consistently show how a combination of poverty, the lack of support by a partner and the divorce of sexual practices from family, marriage and commitment are the main causes of unwanted pregnancies. But rather than tackle the root causes of the problem as we do in other areas of medical and social care, the only solution offered in the campaign to help these women, was the option of abortion. There was no serious effort to explore another way or face up to the underlying causes of the abortion tragedy. Furthermore, the moral dimension of the option for abortion was de-sensitised in the run up to campaign by placing the right to choose before the right to life. The right to choose became what was more real and what more people assented to while the reality of abortion as the deliberate ending of an unborn child’s life became less real and more notional. Therefore it could be argued that many Catholic politicians and voters gave a notional assent to abortion as the solution to a societal problem of unwanted pregnancies and combined with the right to choose trumping even the right to life, they voted ‘Yes’ and squared this decision with their conscience as an act of goodness. But did Catholic politicians and voters give *real* assent to abortion?

The distinction John Henry Newman draws between real and notional assent is outlined in his 1870 work ‘*An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*’. For Newman, we really assent to something which is thought of in a concrete manner; in notional assent, we assent to something which is thought of in an abstract manner. In the case of abortion and Catholic politicians, could it be argued that their ‘Yes’ to repeal was a notional assent to abortion rather than a real assent? The answer may be positive given that repeal was the only way presented of achieving a good - namely that Irish women would no longer have to travel abroad and would receive better care at home. As the Labour party posters put it – ‘For Compassion in a Crisis. Vote YES’. For such a simplistic argument to be convincing, the real horror of abortion procedures had to be taken out of public discourse and scrutiny.

Real assent to abortion would require an explicit exposure to what happens during an abortion and to witness at first hand the intentional killing of an unborn child. For Newman, if you apprehend a proposition in a real way, you also assent to it in a real way. That is why the 2019 film ‘Unplanned’ had a powerful impact on many who saw it including those who were pro-choice before viewing it. In a hearing of a Congressional committee in the

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US, Chuck Konzelman - the writer and director of 'Unplanned' revealed that 94 abortion clinic workers sought to leave their jobs after seeing the pro-life film.⁸

How did this happen? Why did many follow the path of Abby Johnson out of the abortion industry after watching a sonogram of a child in its mother's womb being aborted? A reasonable answer is because the people in the industry saw for themselves the reality of abortion and what it involves. While their assent to it before may have been notional, they could no longer give their real assent after the reality of what they saw. They had been exposed to the real truth of what abortion entails and so could no longer subscribe to it.

Again, Newman anticipated this with his insights into truth, conscience and the difference between notional and real assent. Criticising an overly intellectual understanding of truth divorced from love among Christians in France and Italy, Newman wrote: 'They believe merely with the intellect, not with the heart. Argument may overset a mere assent of the reason, but not a faith founded in a personal love for the object of our faith'.⁹ Here Newman insists that a real grasp of truth and its impact on conscience is not merely intellectual but something far more visceral. For Abby Johnson, it wasn't a cleverly worked out argument that convinced her to leave Planned Parenthood but an image of a living child on a screen about to die, that touched her heart and changed her life.

CONCLUSION

In response to comments made by a senior Churchman on the duties of Catholic politicians, the Taoiseach Leo Varadkar drew from St John Henry Newman. This paper has also drawn from the insights of Newman to shed light on the role of faith in politics and the integral relationship between the private and public faith convictions of Catholic politicians. Newman helps us see the need to move beyond Ivana Bacik's tired rhetoric about deference to authority to the real issue of truth - how it is not equivalent to majority opinion, nor the preserve of the secular realm and how truth cannot contradict itself. She insults the intelligence of most of the 33.6% of the electorate who voted 'No' to abortion not because they were 'fervent lobbyists ... who campaigned against a more secular society'¹⁰ but because both faith and reason testify that an unborn life of twelve weeks or less, is still of value and is worth defending. Concerning conscience, while Newman insists

8 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=55mDsrEWXCM>

9 J. H. Newman, *Selected Sermons*, ed. Ian Kerr. New York, Paulist Press, 1994, p.9.

10 Ivana Bacik, *opera cit.*

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on conscience having rights, he does so because conscience first has duties. It bears witness to a truth that is recognised rather than created. Finally, his distinction between notional and real assent challenges those who would condemn Catholic politicians and voters who voted for repeal. While it acknowledges the complexity of the issue of abortion, it also draws us closer to the reality of what happens when an unborn life is ended. For Abby Johnson and many who saw the film 'Unplanned', the issue of abortion became real instead of notional. If everyone who voted 'Yes' on 25 May 2018 had seen the film beforehand, I wonder what the result might have been. We will never know. But we might have a more accurate picture of what we said 'Yes' to and what it implied.

From Gratitude to Healing. Another practice that can bring us healing and consolation is to write down all the reasons we are grateful for our cherished loved one. Gratitude has immense healing power, and we are bound to have countless memories of them for which we are thankful. We thank God for having put them in our lives and for the hope of being reunited with them again. We again entrust them to the care and protection of His loving mercy as we continue to practice the third spiritual principal in healing from our grief.

– CHRIS ALAR, MIC and JASON LEWIS, MIC, *After Suicide* (Stockbridge, MA: Marian Press) p.153.

Homilies for May (A)

Brenda Dolphin

Fourth Sunday of Easter

May 3

Acts 2:14, 36-41. Ps22 1-6. 1Pt2:20-25. Jn 10:1-10

As you have been hearing in the readings from the Old and New Testament our celebration today focusses on relationship, our relationship with Jesus who calls himself the Good Shepherd and through that relationship we come to know God as our Father. As we know relationships are pivotal for us in life. Without relationships we would shrivel up and die.

Our first reading highlights for us that it is through our baptism that we belong to Jesus, that we are drawn into relationship with him, that we are as he calls it himself “his flock”.

Our second reading focusses on Jesus and what he was willing to do and to sacrifice so that we could belong to God.

The psalm is one of the most beautiful and most consoling prayers you could ever come across. “*Near restful waters he leads me*” (v1:5). “*He guides me along the right path*” (v2:1)

In the Gospel Jesus uses the image of a Good Shepherd to describe his relationship with us. The image of the Shepherd is not one that we are very familiar with but if you can imagine the person whom you experience as really caring for you, as having your very best interests at heart, who is willing to sacrifice herself or himself for you, who knows you and loves you, then you are very close to knowing how very much you are loved, cared for by Jesus.

“I have loved you with an everlasting love and I am constant in my affection for you” (Jer 31:3)

In this section of the gospel, Jesus who is a master story-teller is trying to help us understand that he loves us to distraction, that he calls each of us by name and that he knows each one of us in our separate individuality.

Knowing that we are loved and accepted by another is one of the best ways to enable us to grow and mature as human beings and to become the best human being we can be. This is what Jesus

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wants for us; he leads us to this *fullness of life*. He helps us to come to know God, whom he calls Father and relates to as ABBA (Dad). He shows that what God wants for us is what he the Good Shepherd wants for us, what deep down we want for ourselves and for those we love – *fullness of life*.

Our experience of being loved enables us to reach out to others, to want others to share with us in the love that is being offered, to be peace builders with others, so that we can live in unity and harmony with each other, and so that we can be people who draw others deep in to the circle of love that we ourselves have been drawn into by the loving care of our Good Shepherd.

This is the personal vocation to which each and every one of us is called. By personal vocation we mean that each of us has a unique and personal way of loving and being in relationship with God, which is not replicated by any other human being. Whatever pathway we chose in life it will always be underpinned by our personal vocation, our unique relationship with God.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 10

Acts 6:1-7. Ps 32:1-2, 4-5. 1Pt 2:4-9. Jn 14: 1-12

The gospel today, endorsed especially by the reading from the Acts of the Apostles, highlights *three* very important facets of our life as followers of Jesus Christ.

* Jesus in this intimate moment of sharing with his disciples reaches out to them to console and soothe their anxiety in the face of impending separation. “Don’t be worrying and fretting I will take care of you and you will be with me again”, he says. He is asking them to *trust* him one more time. This does not mean as we know, that all pain and anxiety is simply wiped out of their hearts by spoken words, this is not humanly possible but *trust in another* is the essence of a relationship, trust is what sees us through the hard times as well as the good ones. This is what Jesus is saying to his friends and to us –TRUST ME

* Thomas, the doubting disciple, always had the knack of asking the crucial question! His spontaneous question, “Lord we do not know where you are going so how can we know the way”, elicits Jesus’ startling response “*I am the way, the truth and the life*”. This response emphasises what we learned from the readings last week when we encountered Jesus as the Good Shepherd, the one who loves us and who leads us to God. He repeats the same message in this reading from the Gospel. Jesus is the one who reveals to us the human face of God, Jesus is the way to God,

HOMILIES FOR MAY (A)

Jesus is the one who reveals the truth of life, of being; Jesus is the source of real life for us *if we trust him to lead us*

* What was mentioned rather briefly in last week's reading is now emphasised by Jesus in that he repeats insistently that *to know him is to know the Father*. It is not an easy thing to do, as this kind of knowing touches into every fibre of our being and is not something in our head only. If the disciples, who had spent three years constantly in Jesus' company where he was physically present to them, had not yet picked up that message, then for you and me it is a lifetime's challenge to really know and let ourselves be known by God. This knowledge has a tendency to wax and wane as we struggle with life's demands. It is trust in Jesus that enables us to hang in there.

And yet, we all long for something or someone who helps us to find meaning in our lives, who can enable us to look beyond what is merely visible, who can point to something more, to a light at the end of the tunnel. Jesus, by the power of his Holy Spirit at work in us does just that for us. He may come to us through another person, through a situation, through a word we read or something we hear. If we are attuned to him through connection with him in his Word and in Holy Communion, then as surely as the dawn follows the dark, the answer will come to us as it did to the disciples in the opening reading today; they found a way to enable their service of the Word to grow while at the same time people in need were not neglected.

If they could find a way, then you can too. Jesus through the working of His Spirit is the same today as yesterday, as he will be tomorrow. All we have to do is trust him.

Sixth Sunday of Easter

May 17

Acts 8:5-8, 14-17. Ps 65 1-7, 16, 20. 1Pt 3: 15-18. Jn 14: 15-21

In our readings today we are drawn into the wonderful mystery of the gift of the Spirit of Jesus, the Holy Spirit. The reading from the Acts of the Apostles reveals progression in the life of faith of the Samaritans. Firstly, Phillip preached the Word which they accepted and then Peter and John went to them to lay hands on them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit.

Which brings us to the gospel, where we meet Jesus speaking with his disciples towards the end of his life on earth. As he speaks, he links love with obedience or in today's language, he links deep listening to what he teaches and then being moved to *do* as is *asked*. Jesus asks the Father to send the Spirit to strengthen and enable the

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true disciple to live courageously what God asks. There are *three* very important things that we can take from the readings today.

*Christian life is dynamic.

We grow and develop in our following of Jesus. Life is not static, human growth and development is not static, spiritual growth is not static. Just as Jesus knew that his disciples would not be automatically transformed by travelling around with him and spending time with him. He knew that to learn from the experience, they needed the power of his Spirit at work in them to give them the courage and the passion to continue to share what they knew to be true. So too for you and me being a Christian and following Jesus means that we grow and develop as Christians, we don't remain static. We need the power and the strength that comes from the Holy Spirit to live truthfully as real Christians. We learn what being a Christian means as children and understand the message then as children, but as we grow into adulthood, if we are truly following Jesus, then we must be living our discipleship as adults in our practice of Jesus' word, leading us to deeper understanding and greater commitment as life moves forward. If not, we ask ourselves what has stopped the growth and development. When I examine the way I live as a Christian, as an adult, do I come up with the same old litany that I had when I made my first confession?

*Christian life challenges us to "more"

Our following of Jesus as adults will constantly call us out and beyond of ourselves to share with others what we have learned from life's experience, what gives us deep down hope and joy in our lives. This we do always in a courteous way, as Peter in the second reading tells us, but clearly and truthfully nonetheless.

*Christian life draws us into a circle of Love

Finally, we are called again into the circle of love that surrounds us – if we truly live by what Jesus says and does, we are showing true love and that love calls out the love of the Father for us which again binds us all the more closely with Jesus who will never abandon us to our own devices. What does Love mean to you? Whom do you really love?

Ascension of the Lord – World Communications Day *May 24*
Acts 1:1-11. Ps 46: 2-3, 6-9. Eph 1: 17-23. Mt 28: 18-20

Let us start today with a story (World of Stories for Teachers and Preachers. T Bausch, 1998.)

Upon Jesus' arrival in heaven a big number of angels greeted him. After the formalities, they asked him whom he had left behind on earth to finish the work that he had begun. Jesus replied, "Just a small group of women and men who love me". "Is that all?" they asked, astonished. "What if this group should fail?"

Jesus replied, "I have no other plans".

While the story is an imaginary one, it holds the essence of what the feast of the Ascension and indeed World Communications Day can mean for us who proclaim to be followers of Jesus Christ. In the reading from the Acts of the Apostles we listen to Jesus telling us that through the power of his Spirit at work in us we will be given the power to be his witnesses wherever we are in this world, that is, if we open the door of our hearts to his Spirit. And then in the gospel of Matthew he promises that, as we try to be witnesses to what we have learned from him, he will be with us always to the very end of time.

If we have been called to be part of "that little group of women and men who love Jesus" and who follow him, we know that the only way we can respond to the love that he shows us is by loving in return. But then, we can only reach out in love if we are in close contact with Jesus himself through prayer. Loving others is costly. It can also bring great joy. We are not on our own as we try to live a good human life since Jesus has promised that he will be with us. Each of us has the mission from Jesus to bring the love we experience into our relationships, all the situations in which we find ourselves. A smile, a word of encouragement, a helping hand, - we start there with the ordinary simple things of life. As we grow in our relationship with Jesus, as we let the power of his Spirit in through the door of our hearts we find that God will continue to call us to the "more". The Spirit of Jesus does not let us bask in the complacency of what we find easy and comfortable in our relationships, in our lives. The Spirit is not a Spirit of ease and comfort but of power and energy, passion and commitment. Sometimes, the power of the Spirit frightens us and we tend to close the door of our hearts so that we won't be challenged to go beyond our comfort zones.

Jesus through his death had to leave this world physically so that his Spirit could come, so that we could be strengthened and emboldened by the power of that Spirit alive in us to be that little group that continues in our time and in our place the great work he began.

Today on World Communications Day we think about all the many ways by which we communicate and are communicated with on this planet and beyond. However, for all the technological innovations available to us it would seem that the most satisfying

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and the most effective communication takes place face to face between human beings. What do you think?

Who are the people whom I have met in my life who have influenced me for good?

Pentecost Sunday

May 31

Acts 2:1-11. Ps 103:1,24, 29-31, 34. 1Cor12:3-7, 12-13.

John 20: 19-23

This great feast of Pentecost (50 days after Easter) celebrates the moment when the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, makes a mark on the world and the world can never be the same again.

From the first reading today we learn that the coming of the Holy Spirit brings *unity*. The Spirit, in the account from the Acts of the Apostles, brought unity to peoples who spoke very different languages and came from very different places but who heard the apostles tell the story of Jesus in their own native language.

The work of the Holy Spirit among those who are open to the Spirit's workings creates unity and understanding. The Spirit draws people into closer communion with each other.

From the first reading also we learn that the coming of the Spirit was heralded by the sound of a strong and rushing wind. Climate change has provided us with enough experience of wind storms this year to realise that wind disturbs and uproots and can be an incredibly powerful force that can even overturn a truck travelling along an open road.

The first reading also likens the coming of the Holy Spirit to flames of fire. And again our experience of climate change alerts us to the power of fire, how it sweeps everything in its path and, while being very destructive, it also enhances, purifies and cleanses.

The images of wind and fire and what they conjure up for us from our experience also lead us to understand that when we open the door of our hearts to the Holy Spirit we must also be ready for what the Spirit will do. The Holy Spirit can jolt us to make changes in our life just as the apostles in the upper room were changed from being a small band of fearful anxious people into a fearless group that did not hesitate to tell the truth of what they knew about Jesus despite the fact that they had to face major opposition, testing persecution and. Eventually, many paid the ultimate price.

We ask the Holy Spirit to fill us with Spirit filled energy and power that we might be Christ's eyes, ears, hands and feet in the world. That we might do so fearlessly, without flinching in the face of opposition and even derision.

When we ask for the gifts of the Spirit, when we open the door of our heart to the power of the Spirit we will experience a pull in

our lives towards God in prayer just like Jesus after his baptism was impelled by the Spirit into the desert where he spent his time in prayer with God. As well as the pull towards God we experience from the Spirit a push out towards the world in which we live so that we are impelled to carry the message out to everyone we meet in ordinary everyday simple ways.

The fruit of the Spirit in our lives is love, together with a deep-seated joy that wells from deep within our heart.

Who is the Holy Spirit for me and how do I experience the Holy Spirit in my day to day life?

Eucharistic Adoration. While it was the custom from the beginning for Christians to reserve the Blessed Sacrament, so that communion could be brought to the sick and the dying, the practice of adoration outside of Mass did not emerge until the thirteenth century. Eucharistic adoration has been zealously promoted by the papacy and many of the great saints of the Church since then. Pope St Paul VI, for example, explained that ‘to visit the Blessed Sacrament is ... a proof of gratitude, an expression of love, and a duty of adoration toward Christ our Lord’ (*Mysterium Fidei*, 66), while Pope St John Paul II sought to rekindle in the Church a sense of ‘eucharistic amazement’ (*Ecclesia de Eucharista*, 6)

– TOM MULLIGAN, *Beyhold the Lamb of God* (Dublin: Veritas) p.8.

New Books

Connecting Lives – Interbelief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland. Edited by Patricia Kieran (Dublin: Veritas) 2019). ISBN 978 1 84730 761 3.

Religion and Education – The Voices of Young People in Ireland. Edited by Gareth Byrne and Leslie J. Francis (Dublin: Veritas) 2019. ISBN 978 1 84730 890 0.

What I find particularly attractive about these two recent publications is the inclusion of facts. While Gradgrind had a particular desire for facts in the beginning of Dicken's *Hard Times*, the facts contained here are not of the same type. He wanted the children to have facts to brain and to hand as part of their education. Here we have facts to brain and to hand in the *defence and support of education*. The debate around education is often marked by a lack of the real facts and a genuine understanding of what actually happens within the walls of schools, in particular Catholic Schools.

Thankfully, these two books will be of enormous assistance to all working in the area of education in Ireland; two really strong arrows in the quiver.

Patricia Kiernan has long been writing about the topic of Interbelief Dialogue and Religious Diversity and its place in the educational endeavour. This first volume is a testament to her hard work, and it is beautifully and appropriately dedicated to the late and lamented Professor Michael Hayes, former President of Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, whose untimely death deprived the debate on education of a robust and resounding voice. The book comes out of the Interbelief Dialogue in Contemporary Ireland Seminar in 2016, which was supported by the Anna Lindh Foundation, a charity established in Dublin in 2005 which works "to promote intercultural and civil society dialogue in the face of growing mistrust and polarisation" (p.257). It is named for the Swedish politician assassinated in 2003. The quotation by Rilke is apposite; we need to learn to love the questions in a world which is devoid of answers.

Kieran offers an explanation of 'interbelief', which suggests that "meaningful dialogue is pluriform and is enriched by religious and non-religious participants coming together in trust and openness in what Gert Biesta describes as 'a way of being together that seeks to do justice to all partners involved.'" The book consists of eighteen chapters and ancillary material. Each of the chapters stand in their own right but together form a superb document of the situation in Ireland today. The range and scope of the contributors is a credit to the endeavour, which seeks to accommodate

a wide range of thought and opinions on the subject – religious, agnostic, humanist and atheist. The books attends to both the global and the local. Julia Ipgrave turns to the subject of Interreligious Encounter and Dialogue in Schools and Ken McCue on Sport and Racism. Jenny Siung writes about museums as public spaces for intercultural dialogue and learning and Trisha Rainsford about the Mid-West Interfaith Network. At a time when we observe the seventy-fifth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the prophetic words of Tomi Reichental bear note, “we must remember that the Holocaust did not start with gas chambers but with whispers, taunts and abuse”, and it sits appropriately beside a piece on Islamophobia in Ireland – as the great problem with history is that it has a habit of repeating itself.

Religion and Education – The Voices of Young People in Ireland also comes from an international conference at DCU Institute of Education in 2018 and it is a testament to the editors and all the contributors that the book has appeared so quickly. This conference came off the back of the Religious Diversity and Young People survey on 2013-2015 which will be of great benefit to all scholars in this field for the next few years. I agreed with Gareth Byrne in the introduction when he suggests that the fruits of scientific research should not be limited in its dissemination to scientific journals and to fellow researchers and academics. Information and scholarship such as this should be made available to as wide an audience as possible. Firstly because it is vital data, but secondly, because it is immensely readable. Whatever about ignoring history, we ignore the voice of children and young people at our peril and indeed, at their peril. In a country which prides itself on the child-centred curriculum and the many models of school patronage which supports this, the voices of young people in terms of religion and education is essential. The book is divided into three parts and ancillary material: The Greer Legacy (1968 survey of sixth-form religion within Protestant-founded voluntary school in Northern Ireland); The Millennial Generation; Religious Education and Religious Diversity. The chapters in part one build on that Greer survey and the ones that subsequently took place every ten years. Among the topics covered in this section is the denominational differences between pupils attending Catholic and Protestant schools, the topic of gender, culture and identity among Catholics growing up in Ireland. Part two begins with research gathered in 2003 among both male and female students in Catholic schools; the so-called Millennial generation. The section finishes with the voice of their parents, with regard to the areas of parental expectation and support of Catholic schools. Part three explores the Irish Centre for Religious Education (DCU) administered survey among 13-15-year-olds. Two interesting chapters here: church attendance and the factors that influence its practice. Chapter 11 examines the personal, social and spiritual worldview of male adolescent atheists in the Republic of Ireland. The book is capped by a concluding twelfth and final chapter by Sandra Cullen, noted academic and brilliant scholar of this subject. She sums up the findings of the book with mention of the work

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of Lieven Boeve and his appellation of the interlinking features of socio-cultural developments in Europe – detraditionalization, individualisation and pluralisation. While most educators are familiar with Boeve’s work, Cullen applies the categories to the data in the various chapters. In other words, now we have Irish data to prove clearly and succinctly what was believed as mostly anecdotal in the recent past.

A final point on both books. Cullen in her chapter begins with descriptions of, on the one hand, a loud, compelling but mono-voiced megaphone and, on the other, a music producer mixing the various voices of a 48-track system. It is an eloquent metaphor for both books. The recent history of Irish society is marked firstly by a time where there was really just one voice speaking in that society. In the last few years, many more voices have been added, some louder, some softer, some vociferous, some counter-cultural. We have stood on an Orange box in the marketplace with our megaphone in our hand attempting to get our message across and seeking to be heard over the din of all the others. Perhaps, as each book so clearly demonstrates, it is time for all of us to come down from our podia, leave behind our megaphones and to head into the recording studio and learn to use the mixing desk.

St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth

JOHN-PAUL SHERIDAN

Well of Living Water: *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman*. Magdalen Lawler SND. Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2019. ISBN 978-1-78812-113-2.

In recent years it is hard to ignore the rise of the icon in Ireland. All the more reason, then, to welcome a book that is acutely accessible as well as eminently enlightening on the role and potential of icons. Magdalen Lawler’s book *Well of Living Water: Jesus and the Samaritan Woman* serves as a timely publication in response to the growing popularity of icons in the spiritual lives of Irish men and women.

Well of Living Water is a gentle book. It introduces the gospel story (see John 4:1-43) and an icon of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well with great care and a genteel patience. The book itself contains nine short chapters, each of which employs high-quality images of the icon (or a particular part of the icon), as well as parts of the gospel story for the reader to ruminate on. Lawler brings together in each chapter Scripture, iconography, Ignatian spirituality and, on occasion, quotes from the poetry of St John of the Cross. That Lawler’s book is the result of a longstanding love is patent. The particular icon depicting Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well has been used by Lawler since the 1980s and it is clear that she has done much study and prayer with the icon and the gospel text, the one dynamically nourishing the other.

Central to the gospel text and the icon is the theme of Living Water (see John 4:10). The marvel to Lawler’s book is that she facilitates the reader to

sip or to bathe, according to their desire. Lawler provides the reader with an impetus to pray by guiding them through the scene, often employing an Ignatian-style imaginative prayer process. Using phrases such as ‘we can listen...with inner senses of the heart’, ‘in your mind’s eye’, ‘with the eye of your heart’, Lawler empowers the reader to pray with their ‘interior senses’ (p. 28). This is why the book’s appeal is so wide: Lawler acts as the guide, but after this it is up to the reader to reflect and make their own this encounter with Jesus. Different questions will arise naturally from the text and the icon for each person: when and where in our lives do we meet Jesus? Where are our sources of Living Water? Who, like the Samaritan woman, is excluded in today’s society? What role is given to women in the dynamics of discipleship and ministry in the 21st century?

A highly-recommended book for anyone with a burgeoning desire to explore the features of one particular icon and to those who seek anew sources of Living Water in their lives.

St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth

RONAN M. SHEEHAN

Unfinished Business: The Case for Housing, Health and other Social Rights in the Irish Constitution. Jerome Connolly. ISBN; 978-0-9928453-0-8. Purchase at mrjromeconnolly@gmail.com.

Fresh in the minds of politicians and the electorate still is the part played by the housing crisis in the outcome of the recent election. And to walk the streets of our cities and towns is to be reminded starkly that homelessness is a feature of the crisis with horrors of its own. In a Pastoral Letter in 2018, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference said that safe and affordable housing is a human right; in December 2015, in a statement marking International Human Rights Day, they had said that a constitutional amendment recognising a right to housing ‘would make an important contribution to the legal and policy frameworks required to address the inadequacies of the current system’. And on the day this review is written, an article in *The Irish Times* by Dermot Desmond is headlined ‘Everyone has a right to a home’. All of which makes it opportune to look again at the question of socio-economic rights, the subject of Jerome Connolly’s painstaking study of the pros and cons of giving constitutional recognition to a right to housing, health, and other social rights.

Look again: for, over almost a quarter of a century this proposal has been considered by bodies such as the Constitutional Review Group (1996), the All-Party Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution (2004), and the Convention on the Constitution (2014). It featured in the 2016 Programme for Government, and in that year also in the Report of a Special Committee on Housing and Homelessness. From the outset an official reluctance is discernible, even if the members of the 2014 Convention decided by a large majority that such rights merited explicit recognition in *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. The reluctance is manifest beyond

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doubt in the Government's *Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness*, published in July 2016 and meant to set the agenda for housing up to 2021, which managed to avoid any mention at all of a right to housing. Instructive also as regards the attitude of successive Governments is the State's response to obligations under treaties such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which Ireland ratified in December 1989. In the second of its reports on Ireland's record, the monitoring UN Committee deprecated Ireland's continuing failure to incorporate or reflect the Covenant in domestic legislation, and stated: 'The Committee ... strongly recommends that [Ireland] incorporate economic, social and cultural rights in ... the Constitution, as well as in other domestic legislation'.

For Jerome Connolly, constitutional recognition of socio-economic rights is a matter of unfinished business, a logical consequence of the 1916 Proclamation's promise to guarantee equal rights and opportunities to each citizen and to cherish all the children of the nation equally; in some sense also called for by the Constitution as it now stands, and the constitutional jurisprudence which has been evolving. He lays out his stall in the Introduction: 'This study argues that here are at least three reasons why social rights should now be inserted into the Constitution: the fundamental nature of the interests they protect, their demonstrable justiciability, and the importance of strengthening protections against the excesses of market forces'.

Connolly makes the case both positively and negatively, offering arguments in favour of his thesis whilst engaging respectfully with the arguments which have been put forward against it. He is fully conversant with relevant human rights instruments, and with conventions and charters and constitutions, and his deployment of research in these areas is backed by a grasp of political theory and by his training in economics. If a question may be raised about his handling of some of the legal technicalities, this doesn't diminish the impact of a formidable case. His concern is at root a moral concern: what moves the argument is a conviction about fundamental human values: dignity, equality, social justice, and a consistent ethic of life. He indicates the congruence of his thesis with Catholic social teaching but his arguments are in wholly secular terms, for he wishes to engage with people of good will of whatever religious persuasion, as indeed that teaching has itself always tried to do.

Handsomely produced, with a striking cover design by David Caines, *Unfinished Business* is, as William Binchy writes in a Foreword, 'an invitation to open, rational dialogue which seeks to convince through the strength of the empirical evidence and the logic of its analysis'. But, though packed with carefully researched information and adhering to a rigorous standard of argument, it's not the work of a detached academic; Jerome Connolly was Executive Secretary of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference Commission for Justice and Peace for over thirty years, during which he was involved in advocacy as well as analysis and research on human rights and on peace issues. As Professor Binchy also says, 'The

book is an important contribution to contemporary constitutional debate. Its originality, wisdom and sheer fair-mindedness combine to make a compelling case’.

St. Patrick's College, Maynooth

PATRICK HANNON

Called to Freedom. Reformation 1517-2017 in an Irish Context. Edited by Gesa Thiessen (Dublin: Wordwell Ltd) 2019. ISBN 9781916492257.

Timing is important in publishing and it poses a challenge when it is of a set of conference papers. This attractive volume would have been very ‘timely’ if it had appeared by October 2017, the fifth centenary of the Reformation, rather than in 2019. That said, it is of perennial value because of the quality of its contents, some eighteen presentations made at a symposium in Dublin in the Spring of 2017.

The project itself was very timely in that the symposium was organised by the Lutheran Church in Ireland to coincide with the visit to Dublin in February 2017 of an exhibition on wheels that enabled visitors to share their stories about the Reformation and ecumenism. The truck visited sixty-seven cities in Europe, emblazoned with the text: ‘We want to change the earth; why not start with ourselves’, as one of the photographs provided in the book shows. The event was designed to correspond to the exhibition’s theme by presenting the views of speakers of Lutheran and Catholic churches, from Germany and Ireland. The published proceedings begin with reflections by local church leaders, entitled ‘Ecumenical Perspectives on Reformation 1517-2017’ and are then divided into two parts: ‘Luther, Reform and the Freedom of the Christian’ and ‘Legacies of the Reformation’.

The quality and scope of the interventions is particularly striking. In a paper by Prof. Gunda Werner from Graz, discussion of the highly complex issue of free will, the subject of debate between Luther and Erasmus, is brought into focus by analysing the Council of Trent’s subsequent reaction, a very interesting follow-up to the two protagonists’ exchanges. Luther’s legacy for Pauline studies, an important and topical subject for ecumenism today, was analysed by Prof. Martin Meiser of Saarbrücken in an extensively noted essay. It is an important contribution to the discussion of how Luther understood Paul’s distinction between Law and Gospel, whether it was as spiritual and non-political as Luther would have it in the service of his own theology of righteousness (99). The author refers to the work of several recent scholars in relation to this issue.

Irish based theologians were also well represented. Prof. Ruth Whelan took as her point of departure her expertise in Reformation France to consider the symposium’s theme, ‘For freedom Christ has set us free’, in the context of sixteenth and seventeenth century France,

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paying particular attention to claims that the Reformation had brought both freedom and democracy. She took the Huguenot movement for a case study in both France and the diaspora, including Ireland. She concluded that there was ambiguity surrounding the claims that the Reformation brought religious freedom when oppression and violence served the interests of those involved, but asserted that French Protestants have drawn lessons from history, enabling them to adopt an unambiguous ethical imperative for the present (123). An analysis of religious change in sixteenth and seventeenth century Ireland by Prof. John McCafferty of U.C.D. describes 'Ireland's break with Rome' as 'a second-hand affair achieved using borrowed clothes' (126). One of the difficulties involved in tracking the progress of Protestantism in Ireland is that because of the destruction of records not only in the Four Courts in 1922 but also in the fire which occurred in the Bermingham Tower in the eighteenth century, 'very little is known of what went on in the naves of churches and in the spiritual lives of churchgoers in Ireland from 1536/7 to the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558' (128). He records the slow process of anglicising both the clergy and the liturgy (linguistically and theologically) compared with England, but 'by the accession of Charles I in 1625 both sides boasted a full set of bishops'(136). Some of those appointed by Rome went on to spell out their claims to legitimacy by martyrdom. He concludes that the process of introducing the Reformation to Ireland was complicated by the use of religious rhetoric for political purposes and political rhetoric for religious purposes. This made it very difficult 'to hear anything at all of the interior religious thoughts and emotions of those who lived in early modern Ireland' (137).

This densely packed compact volume includes essays from theological, scriptural and historical perspectives and in international settings: Germany, France, Ireland, Switzerland and Sweden. It has several pages of coloured photographs related to the Dublin event. It is quite a valuable contribution to Reformation scholarship and so has perennial value even if it has made a somewhat tardy appearance relative to the Reformation commemorations. Given the considerable work done by the editor and publisher it is disappointing that physically it may not prove lasting, as the thermal glue binding, a type known as perfect binding, does not live up to its name – at least in the copy this reviewer received and probably making the pages liable to come loose.

Glenstal Abbey, Co. Limerick

FINTAN LYONS O.S.B.

Eating Together – Becoming One. Thomas O'Loughlin. Minnesota: Liturgical Press. 2019. ISBN-13: 978-0814684580.

In pages of clearly written text this book presents so much reflection on the Eucharist and its implications for the (dis)unity of those celebrating

the Eucharist that, in this short review, I can barely skim the surface. Tom emphasises that this is not about the Eucharist as a sacred object, but about the Eucharist as an activity of the gathered people with Jesus.

The question of inter-communion with members of other Christian churches may seem, for Catholics, well settled in the negative. In Ireland and Britain, the Test Act of 1673 made reception of communion in the Church of England a legal public renunciation of the Catholic church.

Pope Francis spoke at a gathering at the Lutheran Church in Rome on Sunday 15 November 2015 in response to a question from Anke de Bernardinis, whose husband is Catholic. She expressed sorrow at not being able to partake together in the Lord's Supper, and asked, "What more can we do to reach communion on this point?" Pope Francis pondered the words of Jesus to "Do this in memory of me." He asked himself, "Is sharing the Lord's Supper the end of the journey [the final banquet in the New Jerusalem], or is it the viaticum for walking together? I leave the question to the theologians, to those who understand ... I ask myself: Don't we have the same Baptism?"

Thomas O'Loughlin is professor of historical theology at the University of Nottingham, UK. This book is his response to those remarks. He is unambiguous in his position. Since we have the same Baptism, we should be in communion at the Eucharist. "Each of us is in need of this support for the next step in our journey. To refuse to share it with someone is a sinful arrogation to oneself of that which is part of the divine care for the church. It is the equivalent in sphere of faith to not sharing one's food with the hungry (p.96) ... Can we wish each other this gift of peace and then say to another witness to the Risen One, but you shall not eat?" (page 118).

There will be diverse positions on this; but they must address the sacramental theology put forward in this book. I can only say that I cannot recall any other book which has enriched my appreciation of the Eucharist as much. It is also vital for the mission of the church, to which our divisions are an obstacle.

Dublin

PADRAIG MCCARTHY

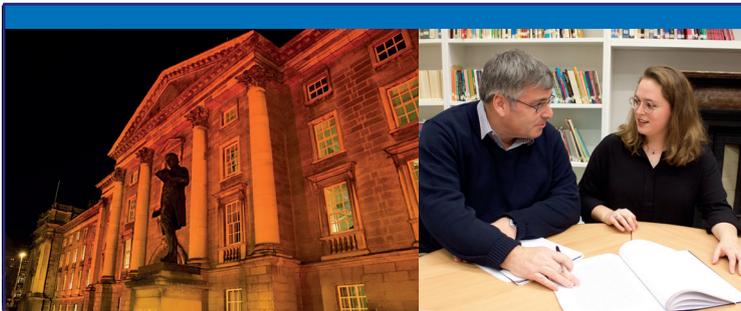
Shorter Notice

Behold the Lamb of God: Praying Before the Blessed Sacrament.
Tom Mulligan. Dublin: Veritas, 2020. ISBN 978-1-84730-956-3

This recent publication from Veritas contains twelve reflections to enable prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. The Introduction reminds readers that Eucharistic adoration has been zealously promoted in the Church since the thirteenth century. In *Ecclesia de Eucharista*, for example, Pope St John Paul II sought to rekindle in the Church a sense of ‘eucharistic amazement’. The reflections themselves draw from a rich variety of sources from theologians [ancient and modern], saints, revered spiritual writers and the Scriptures. The twelfth reflection draws from the richness of the Irish spiritual tradition and contains some short prayers in Irish as well as English. The volume has a beautiful coloured cover depicting *The Virgin Adoring the Host* and also contains a slim bibliography. A very useful aid to prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

Institutionalised Selfishness. Selfishness is the *modus operandi* in totalitarian regimes, that disregards the rights and freedoms of the individual. It is also manifest in democratic countries though – as institutionalised selfishness – where profit is more important than the attendant damage to the population in which the organisation operates. This applies to industries and companies that have the power to influence governments and modify laws and regulations to suit their own needs and maximise profit. This is evident in the large amounts of money spend on polished advertising campaigns to hide the potential harmful effects of products or activities, whatever the price to humanity or the planet.

– CATHERINE CONLON, ed. *Modern Culture and Well-Being*,
(Dublin: Veritas) p.125.



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