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# FURROW

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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

*Gerard Condon*  
Religious Literacy

*Nihal Abeyasingha*  
*Amoris Laetitia* and  
Pastoral Discernment

*Gareth Byrne*  
*Bernadette Sweetman*  
Responses of Clergy and  
Lay People to Covid-19

*Robert Egan*  
Voting and Conscience

*Aloysius Gonzaga Lumala*  
African Reconciliatory  
Theology

*Michael G. Lawler*  
*Todd A. Salzman*  
The Jesus we Believe in  
was Right Brained

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# VOLUNTEER PRIESTS NEEDED

My name is Brian Kavanagh and I was ordained in 1992 (*Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin*). I work part-time in the **Parish of Allen** and in the **Marriage Appeal Tribunal** in Maynooth, Co. Kildare. I am also an accredited counsellor with **NAPCP** and work with **ACCORD** marriage counselling services.

I am in the third year of a Masters in Psychotherapy in Dublin City University. ***This year I am required to conduct research and complete a thesis.*** My research '*aims to explore the experiences of priests in their counselling role in light of their seminary formation*'. **I NEED VOLUNTEERS!**

***I would like to invite Priests ordained since the year 2016 to participate.***

Your engagement will involve an interview and your anonymity and confidentiality will be guaranteed. Your participation will be greatly appreciated.

**Please contact me on 087 6162675  
if you are willing to assist me in my research project.**

**Many thanks.**

***Brian***

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# The Furrow

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A pastoral monthly founded 1950.

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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# Religious Literacy: Lessons from the Pandemic

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Gerard Condon

Why do so many Irish Catholics know so little about their faith? While literacy in most spheres of life has blossomed, thanks to the information revolution, knowledge about religion has evidently declined in recent decades. That's despite the fourteen years of Religious Education (RE) provided by schools, and the many opportunities for adult faith-formation offered by the Church, even if few these are taken up. It is poignant for Church leaders to notice the enthusiasm (from, "*en Theos*", literally, "within God") of the *confirmandi* on Confirmation Day, only to see that attitude, and the accompanying knowledge, whittled away over the following years. Like forgetting how to calculate long-division, the religious knowledge and skills acquired at school are easily forgotten in the absence of a living contact with the Church. The trend is likely to have accelerated over the past year, as the Covid-19 restrictions have diminished the visibility of the Church, to all but her most committed members.

## A WORLD DEVOID OF MYSTERY

The effects of religious illiteracy are arguably as detrimental for society as they are for the Church. In the absence of religion, human experience loses its transcendental dimension. The wonder and awe of a life consciously lived in God's presence is replaced by the lesser deities of shopping, fitness and entertainment. A world without God gradually loses its reverence and sense of the sacred in all of creation. It might, one day, become indifferent towards the weak and the vulnerable.

Religious literacy promotes accurate information about the Church's beliefs and practices. In its absence, society's religious knowledge is reduced to outmoded and mildly offensive

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Gerard Condon, is a priest of the Diocese of Cloyne and a Diocesan Adviser for Religious Education. Address: Teach Paróiste, Ballygriffin, Killavullen, Co. Cork. This article is based on a contribution to a colloquium on religious literacy at the Loyola Institute, Dublin.

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stereotypes. For many Irish people today, the image of the Catholic Church is derived from media reports of its abuse scandals and its caricatures in TV programmes like *Fr Ted* and *Mrs Brown's Boys*.

### PHARISAICAL CONCERNS

For the parish priest, the signs of reduced religious knowledge are more mundane. They are disguised by decades of socio-religious muscle memory. Baptisms, marriages and funerals, alongside other family milestones like First Communion and Confirmation, continue to be observed with pride. Our churches look well and the structures of Catholicism are intact, even in those parishes without a resident priest. Our patronage of schools, too, is regarded as a benign influence. But there is a hollowing out of this infrastructure by the secular *zeitgeist*. For many, if not most Irish Catholics, the role of the Church has been reduced to that of a service provider.

In parish ministry, I no longer assume prior knowledge of the liturgical rites when parishioners are planning a baptism, a wedding or a funeral. That lack of knowledge is more profound than say, knowing the name of the oils which the Church uses at a christening, or the river where Jesus was baptised. There is seldom a shared understanding that the infant is being welcomed into a community of faith. Rarely is the invitation accepted, let alone volunteered, to have a baptism included with Sunday Mass. Yet this was the vision (and the provision) of the Second Vatican Council. Instead, the sacrament of welcome is a stand-alone ceremony, essentially a family celebration.

At funerals, the role of the eulogy has grown in importance, especially among those Catholics who do not regularly attend church. This reflects the legitimate need to thank God for the deceased's life and their achievements. But the *Order of Christian Funerals* emphasises the role of Christ in securing our eternal destiny. For fear of causing offence, I find myself avoiding those prayer options which acknowledge human shortcomings and our need for a divine saviour.

The practice of making an offering to the priest for a Mass has also evolved to reflect the reality that most Catholics only attend Church for personally relevant occasions. The Mass stipend used to be a private arrangement between the priest and the donor. Nowadays, the family that "reserves a Mass", expects it be the publicly stated intention for the entire congregation. This misses the point that the Eucharist is offered on behalf of all the faithful, for the wider Church and for the world.

Am I being pharisaical for associating religious literacy with liturgical concepts and norms? Irish society has risen to

## RELIGIOUS LITERACY: LESSONS FROM THE PANDEMIC

the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic with extraordinary generosity and love of neighbour. If charity takes precedence over theology, then we have nothing to worry about. To use a distinction attributed to Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), while many Catholics are not acquainted with the *form of the Church*, they still witness to the *form of the Gospel*. On the other hand, it was ecclesial structures which helped create a society based on Gospel values. That cultural reservoir needs fresh sources if it is to be sustained.

### RESPONSES

In the 1990s, the late Fr Enda Lyons predicted that the Irish Church would respond to its institutional decline in any of four ways: *ignore* the trend; *deplore* it; attempt the *restoration* of an earlier Church, or *explore* new ways of vitalising the Christian faith in Ireland. All four reactions have transpired, even if the first three are often dismissed.

A. Ignore: This response might be described as “masterly inactivity”, the phrase used to describe British administrative policy in Afghanistan during the Nineteenth Century. It successfully upheld British rule in that country for many years. The Vatican, too, prefers not to react to the vicissitudes of a particular era, in order not to be compromised by its transitory values. In a world with few certainties, the Church provides a bedrock through its customs and teachings. Advocates of this approach are naturally cautious. They show a trust in divine providence. It is, after all, the Lord who builds the house (Ps 127).

Confronting the Church’s apparent immutability is the overwhelming secularisation of Irish culture, as well as internal factors, including a precipitous decline in vocations. Like a patient confronted with bad news, the Church can deny the extent of its crisis. Denial, as a psychological mechanism, provides emotional comfort to the patient but does little to address their condition in a rational and responsible manner. Sometimes it takes a shock to grasp that new reality. Has its enforced sabbatical, over the past year, been that reality check for the Church? Perhaps, even unconsciously, it will emerge from the pandemic with a more constructive response to its situation than “keep calm and carry on”.

B. *Deplore*: “We’re no longer co-extensive with society,” Pope Benedict has said, “We live in a positivistic and agnostic culture, which shows itself more and more intolerant toward Christianity.”<sup>1</sup> The separation between Church and State in Ireland today,

1 Benedict XVI with Peter Seewald, *Last Testament: In his own words*. (Bloomsbury Continuum: 2016), 231.

permits Catholics to adopt a more critical stance. In doing so, we are donning the mantle of the Old Testament prophets who were fearless, though unpopular, critics in their society. Catholicism's worldwide organisation gives it unique insight, beyond national self-interest, on issues like climate change. The Church is one of the few voices to uphold the dignity of human life all its stages from conception to natural end.

However, the clerical sexual abuse scandals have damaged the Church's credibility as a moral guardian, as has the recent *Mother and Baby Homes Commission Report*. A humbled Church can no longer cast the first stone. In the court of public opinion, the Church's authority comes from the witness of its members, not its Magisterium. In any case, indignation or condemnation should never be perceived as the Christian's default position. More than ever, the world needs a Church that proclaims Good News, not constant criticism.

*C. Restore:* The socio-religious history of Judeo-Christianity has been characterised by patterns of decline followed a rebirth. Even before the long-predicted demise of Judah in 587BC, the Hebrew prophets began to speak of the renewal of the divine covenant. St Francis of Assisi led a reformation that imagined the Church as an institution of service rather than authority. Most recently, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) advocated a *ressourcement* (return to origins) inspired by the first Christians. A stripping away of the Church's medieval accretions occurred. The biblical model of faith, characterised by the personal encounter with God (*fides qua creditur*), became the priority for catechists. The requirement to memorise the content of faith (*fides quae creditur*) receded.

Sixty years later, the concept of restoration has a new meaning. The spirit of dialogue with the modern world, evident in Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*, has been replaced by retrenchment and a defensive mentality. The desire of some Catholics is to restore a religious literacy that begins with the content of the faith, as expressed by the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. They prefer the formal liturgical style that preceded the Council. This type of restoration risks isolating the Church from society, making it seem self-referential, its liturgies esoteric and uninviting.

*D. Explore:* The 2010 National Directory for Catechesis, *Share the Good News*, broadened the context of religious literacy in Ireland by proposing new structures for faith development. It offered a vision for religious formation throughout life's journey, extending well beyond school walls. It envisaged families, parishes and dioceses, working together towards the common aim of becoming communities of faith. The implementation of the National Directory could have been a point of departure, but it has

been largely ignored. Instead, a piecemeal evolution of the existing structures is taking place.

In primary schools, the recently completed Religious Education program, *Grow in Love* pays more deliberate attention to the terminology of the Catholic faith than its predecessor. The authors were conscious that religious literacy is diminishing and the school is the only place where children might, for example, hear the Word of God. Yet, the programme is child-centred. It reflects the spirit of the child, their zest for life and instinct for justice. *Grow in Love* integrates the school-based study and celebration of faith, with the promotion of that faith at home and a gentle encouragement to take part in parish life. However, of the three partners in faith formation, the school is still *de facto* the principal agent. And while all classroom teachers are expected to deliver RE, not all teachers see themselves as participant Catholics. All too easily, the daily time allocated to RE is set aside for more pressing concerns in the curriculum.

At *second level* schools, the effort to improve religious literacy prompted the introduction of RE as a State exam in the Republic of Ireland. Religious Education had been perceived as a marginalised or “doss” subject. The examinations have raised the status of the subject, in terms of time allocation, teaching and learning, but only in the minority of Catholic schools that include RE in its examination program.

The State’s revised *Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education* (2018) notably provides for all five world religions as well as a non-religious interpretation of life. It is suited to the new pluralist Ireland and the desire of schools to be inclusive of all faiths and none. It is argued that, the skills and attitudes acquired from the student’s exploration of religion in general, stimulates reflection on their own faith commitment. However, the Junior Cycle specification does not encourage the celebration of the Catholic faith in the classroom. Even in Catholic schools, the class thinks in terms of “this is what Catholics believe” rather than “this is what we believe.” A religious syncretism may be implied, especially for those pupils and teachers not rooted in their own faith.

The Catholic schools not teaching the course to State examination, have adopted the State’s non-confessional specification, without the focus and structure provided by the State exam. I wonder if those schools would benefit from an expressly Catholic RE syllabus, accredited by the school’s trustees, a second level equivalent of the *Grow in Love* programme? This would foster a sense of the Church’s own responsibility in efforts to promote religious literacy in schools.

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As the opportunities for catechesis within the school system diminish, the Church must look for other avenues to promote religious literacy. Sacramental preparation, too, should have a broader context than an immediate preparation leading up to a particular ceremony. Diocesan offices for evangelisation have had relatively little impact on the promotion of religious literacy. Are there untried avenues of faith formation?

## BELONGING AND BELIEVING

The original setting for religious formation was not schools, nor a central teaching authority, but closely knit Christian communities. That was the model of the early Church, especially in its “Jerusalem Spring”, as described in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47). The catechetical maxim “belonging leads to believing” was clearly operational at that time. It was because of their *koinonia* with each other, that the first Christians were “looked up to by everyone” and the Lord “added to their numbers” (Acts 2:47). Their belief in a saving God, their routine of communal and domestic prayer, their equitable and generous lifestyle, were clearly Good News in a world of cold Roman justice and religious legalism.

Those first communities were small and rooted in a particular area. According to one interpretation of the miracle of the loaves and fishes (Luke 9:12-17), the first parishes may have been grouped “in parties of about fifty”, with the reported attendance of 5,000 people “near Bethsaida” that day, being a symbolic number for the entire Church.<sup>2</sup> The importance of place is conveyed in the gospels (especially Luke-Acts) by naming the location of each event.

An appreciation for the physical presence of others in one’s immediate neighbourhood was discovered again during the Covid-19 pandemic. Being confined to a local district, with fewer social contacts, ironically proved to be a liberating experience. Neighbours that had rarely met, got to speak with one another and they “shared what they had” (Acts 2:44-46). Families discovered again the relevance of prayer in the home. All that was missing was the opportunity for the local community to gather for the Breaking of Bread. While the live-streaming of Masses has proven a lifeline to ecclesial life, its limitations have been equally obvious. What people missed most was the physical presence of their neighbours and friends at Mass.

When normal church-based services resume, will we take advantage of the renewed goodwill among Catholics motivated by their faith? Won’t they feel disappointed if all they get is a real-

2 Eugene LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God. The Origins of the Eucharist in the Gospel of Luke* (Liturgical Training Press, 1994), 66-67.

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life version of what they have been watching online: the priest, assisted by one or two others, leading Mass before a watchful congregation? Even if it numbers no more than fifty, the local Christian community has the potential to be deeply meaningful to its intentional members and a sign to society as a whole.

### WELLBEING AND MYSTICISM

There is no denying the trauma caused by the Coronavirus. The loss of life and employment, the months spent deprived of regular social interactions, have all taken their toll. For many of us, the pandemic has occasioned moments of doubt and fear as well as a sobering return to life's priorities. Thankfully, the public health authorities successfully mobilised the country's resources against the virus. However, one year after Covid-19 first reached Irish shores, "pandemic fatigue" has taken root. All of the advice about staying safe and well, while effectively delivered, has become tiresome. Little, if any, reference was made to the role that religion plays in a person's wellbeing. I wonder if people are looking for something more?

In *Why We Drive. Toward a Philosophy of the Open Road* (2020), Matthew Crawford argues that our culture of "safetyism" frustrates human autonomy. Before the advent of satellite navigation, there was a sense of adventure in not knowing how to reach a destination. Crawford thinks that always being directed by good advice, makes of the human being a passenger in life's journey, and a grumpy passenger at that. We prefer the freely chosen road, because the human spirit is made for something more than the obvious. The knowledge that we are children of God bestows that sense of identity and agency in abundance.

Karl Rahner famously wrote that the Christian of the future, must be a "mystic", one who has experienced "something", or they "will cease to be anything at all."<sup>3</sup> Authentic religious literacy requires a personal experience of God if it is to sustain an individual's faith in a world grow weary of religion. Prior to Vatican II such literacy was confined to the professionals of the Church. The laity were tasked with saying their prayers and keeping the Commandments. But, with *Lumen Gentium*, the Council conceived the call to holiness as addressed to all persons, equally, though each in their own way.<sup>4</sup>

Dermot Farrell, the new archbishop of Dublin, has said that the underlying crisis facing the Catholic Church in Ireland is that of faith. In an interview with *The Irish Times* (2.1.2021) to mark

3 Karl Rahner, "Christian living formerly and today" in *Theological Investigations VII* (Herder and Herder, 1971), 15.

4 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), Chapter 5, "The Universal Call to Holiness".

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his appointment, the archbishop suggested that the crisis can be addressed through “teaching people about prayer. I don’t think we’ve been good at that in the past. We really didn’t form people in prayer. Prayers ended up being the recitation of formula ... a deeper prayer life is more important.”

The experience of the pandemic has prompted much soul-searching in Ireland’s well-educated and religiously sceptical public. Will the Church be there to facilitate that deeper interpretation of life that is at the heart of their quest? Well organised, locally based Christian communities, that encourage contemplative prayer, may hold the key.

**Discipleship Today.** Discipleship has to be worked out within the Church today: opposing clericalism, ending patriarchy, respecting gender difference, challenging the prevalent middle-class bias within the Church, welcoming refugees, and trying to be open to the marvellous richness of what is being offered by the Gardener. That task of opening up the Word needs the scholarship of theologians from our own and other Churches, the leadership of Church officials, the dedication of the millions working with the marginalised, often in work entirely hidden from the wider world; and it also needs the wisdom and experience of lay people, men and women, being included seriously in the community’s discernment about all Church issues, including the development of doctrine.

– BRIAN LENNON, SJ, *Mary Magdalene and the Gardener*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 69.

# *Amoris Laetitia* and Pastoral Discernment

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Nihal Abeyasingha

Speaking at Angelus on 27 December 2020, Pope Francis said “Today’s feast [Holy Family] reminds us of the example of evangelizing with the family, proposing to us once again the ideal of conjugal and family love, as underlined in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (*AL*), promulgated five years ago this coming 19 March. And there will be a year of reflection on *AL* and it will be an opportunity to focus more closely on the contents of the document [19 March 2021-June 2022]. These reflections will be made available to ecclesial communities and families, to accompany them on their journey.”<sup>1</sup>

Why is the Pope calling us back to *AL*? I would suggest several possible reasons. In *Let us Dream*, the Pope said that there was a discussion ... a rich discussion ... a well-founded discussion, but no discernment, which is something different than just arriving at a good and justified consensus or at a relative majority,” on the issue of addressing a priest shortage in the Amazon by ordaining so-called *virī probati*, or older, mature and married men from local communities. There was no point of discernment reached in regard to issues. On the other hand, in the two synods on the family, there was a certain discernment reached as regards the sacraments in certain situations. Secondly, I suggested in 2016 that this writing of the Pope almost said, “Here is as far as we have come with the bishops. We have offered a measure of discernment for approaching the sacraments. Are there any reflections, you, the faithful, would like to make, for you too are filled with the Spirit?”<sup>2</sup> Thirdly, marriage is not just a contract, but a covenant.

1 [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_angelus\\_20201227.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2020/documents/papa-francesco_angelus_20201227.html)

2 Nihal Abeyasingha, “*Amoris Laetitia* and *Sensus Fidelium*” in *Compass: A Review of Topical Theology* 50 (Summer 2016) 29-41

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Nihal Abeyasingha is a Catholic priest from Sri Lanka who lectured for many years at the University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka and in seminaries in India and the Philippines. Email: nabeyasingha@yahoo.com

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This dimension is spoken about, but hardly anything is done to include it in legislation covering marriage and married life. There can be much room for the development in the Spirit in these areas.

With *AL*, there has been a start in formulating concrete measures for dealing pastorally with those in “irregular” marriage situations. For example, the Synod of San Diego Archdiocese (2016) went beyond a technical debate about whether or not the divorced and civilly remarried can participate in the sacraments. They asked the diocese to develop pastoral formation programmes “in the areas of conscience formation and the internal forum, not only to implement the pathway to sacramental participation outlined in *AL*, but even more fundamentally to illuminate a core element of Christian discipleship itself.” The Bishops of the Pastoral Region of Buenos Aires formulated specific guidelines for acting in such situations and sent these to Pope Francis. He warmly approved them and said that they reflected his thinking in Chapter 8 of *AL*.<sup>3</sup> There have also been attempts drafted in Vienna<sup>4</sup> and Philadelphia.<sup>5</sup> The formulations are not of a single mould. The process needs to continue. That process is based on what Pope Francis refers to as “discernment”, which is the theme of the present article.

## DISCOVERING GOD’S PLAN IN ONE’S SITUATION

The fact is that there are persons who are in situations that do not conform to the demands of the gospel. In *Familiaris Consortio* (79-84), John Paul II considers several situations: Trial Marriages, De Facto Free Unions, Catholics in civil marriages, divorced persons who have remarried, separated spouses who have not entered into a new marriage. There is still the need for these persons not merely to recognize the irregularity of the situation, but to recognize that at the same time, by their baptism, they are still within the church and more importantly, they are within God’s plan of salvation. There is the very well known adage of Augustine:<sup>6</sup> “God does not command the impossible; but by so commanding, he exhorts you to do what you can and to seek what you cannot, so that God may assist to make it possible for you.”

3 <http://www.periodistadigital.com/religion/diocesis/2016/09/18/religion-iglesia-amoris-laetitia-el-arzobispo-de-granada-asume-los-criterios-de-los-obispos-de-baires-sobre-los-divorciados.shtml>

Cf. also <http://www.cyberteologia.it/2016/09/basic-criteria-for-the-implementation-of-chapter-viii-of-amoris-laetitia/>

4 Aufmerksamkeiten: Seelsorgliche Handreichung für den Umgang mit Geschiedenen und mit Menschen, die an eine neue Partnerschaft denken at: [http://media.wige.kategoriele-seelsorge.at.s3.amazonaws.com/Dateien/73749\\_aufmerksamkeiten.pdf](http://media.wige.kategoriele-seelsorge.at.s3.amazonaws.com/Dateien/73749_aufmerksamkeiten.pdf)

5 [http://archphila.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/AOP\\_AL-guidelines.pdf](http://archphila.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/AOP_AL-guidelines.pdf)

6 *De Natura et Gratia* 43, 50

Today's version of that adage could perhaps be what Pope Francis states in *AL* 303:

Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal. In any event, let us recall that this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized.

The *primary* responsibility in this situation of seeking what God is asking, or to discover the “do what you can”, is on the person in that situation. But there is a *secondary* responsibility or co-responsibility, that devolves on those who assist that person to come to a decision in conscience. This could be the pastor, the priest or the counselor, who assists the one who falls short of gospel ideals. The primary player and the “assistant” together engage in a process of discernment. Replying to the bishops of the pastoral region of Buenos Aires, Pope Francis said: “It [pastoral accompaniment] simply entails accepting, accompanying, discerning, reinstating. Out of these four pastoral attitudes the least refined and practised is discernment”. As he said, when meeting a group of Jesuits in Poland (2016)<sup>7</sup>:

Certain programmes of priestly formation run the danger of educating in the light of very clear and specific ideas, and indeed of acting within limits and criteria and are a priori definitively defined, while prescinding from the concrete situation. ... Seminarians should become priests, who accompany so many youth and adults in difficulty. Because many search saying “This I can or this I cannot” ... Many people leave the confessional not because the priest is bad, but because he does not have the capacity to discern the situation, to accompany [the penitent] in authentic discernment. (Translation mine).

7 Cf. Pope Francis asked Jesuits in Poland to teach discernment in seminaries as an aid to the ministry, 30 July 2016. Cf. <http://ilsismografo.blogspot.com/2016/08/vaticano-dialogo-del-papa-con-alcuni.html#more>

Pope Francis explains (AL 300):

What we are speaking of is a process of accompaniment and discernment which “guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. Conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and on what steps can foster it and make it grow. Given that gradualness is not in the law itself (cf. *Familiaris Consortio* 34), this discernment can never prescind from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church. For this discernment to happen, the following conditions must necessarily be present: humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it”. These attitudes are essential for avoiding the grave danger of misunderstandings, such as the notion that any priest can quickly grant “exceptions”, or that some people can obtain sacramental privileges in exchange for favours. When a responsible and tactful person, who does not presume to put his or her own desires ahead of the common good of the Church, meets with a pastor capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the matter before him, there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard.

The decision to marry is the fruit of discernment (Cf. AL 72). We have an obligation to discern “seeds of the word” in other cultures (Cf. AL 78). We are called to full and mature spontaneity in relationships through a process of discernment (cf. AL 151). So also, in this situation of “irregularity”, we need to discover what God is asking in the given situation. This can involve several

8 For background cf. Marc Lavalée, *Discernment, Practical Wisdom, and Christian Spirituality: A Study in Practical Theological Method* (PhD Diss., University of Boston 2013) 66-137 outlines the three traditions: Desert Fathers; Benedict of Nursia and Ignatius of Loyola at: <http://open.bu.edu>. Cf. other studies applying discernment to pastoral situations: Yeong Ju Lee Kim, *An Application of Ignatian Discernment to the Korean Presbyterian Church based on the Spiritual Exercises* (MTh Diss. Regis College of the University of Toronto. 2013) at: <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/43437>

Diane Ruth Westmoreland, (2011), *Can spiritual maturity be nurtured in Northern English Anglican congregations? An exploration of whether parishioners can grow spiritually through an experiential course on prayer using methods based in Ignatian practice* (DThM Diss. University of Durham 2011) at: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3276>

dimensions. (a) identifying elements that can foster evangelization (b) making the person feel part of the community (*AL* 243, 297). John Paul II made a similar call in 1981 in *Familiaris Consortio*, 84.

There are no pigeon holes into which these cases can be neatly fitted. (*AL* 298). Nor can one apply a cold bureaucratic morality to these cases. The approach needs to be infused with the logic of pastoral mercy (Cf. *AL* 307-311). Application of rules is not sufficient (*AL* 305). On the other hand, practical decisions reached in discernment should not be elevated to the level of a “rule” (*AL* 304). As a consequence, there are several issues that enter into the *process* of discernment.

1. *The degree of responsibility* is not the same in all cases (*AL* 300). There are mitigating factors that reduce imputability (Cf. 302).
2. *The principle of gradualness*: John Paul II said in *Familiaris Consortio* 34: “And so what is known as ‘the law of gradualness’ or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with ‘gradualness of the law’ ...” And Pope Francis repeated in *AL* 295 “This is not a “gradualness of law” but rather a gradualness in the prudential exercise of free acts on the part of subjects who are not in a position to understand, appreciate, or fully carry out the objective demands of the law.”

Thus,

It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations. At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule. That would not only lead to an intolerable casuistry, but would endanger the very values which must be preserved with special care. (*AL* 304).

3. The pastor/ counselor assists, but it is only the individual who can take *responsibility in conscience before God for the decision*. His/her conscience is the proximate law of morality for the individual – not necessarily for anyone else. It is not a question of doing something because pastor/ counselor gives permission. The individual needs to come to a decision in conscience before God – a decision for which he/she is responsible before God.

*A Suggested Outline In The Pastoral Approach*

The *spirit* in which this pastoral approach is implemented is vital to both the process and its outcome. It needs to be carried out in the spirit of the logic of *mercy*, within “a framework and a setting which help us avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues. Instead, it sets us in the context of a “pastoral discernment” (AL 312). There is no desisting from the full ideals of marriage (AL 307), but at the same time there is awareness of the mitigating circumstances in the situation being handled (AL 308), remembering that the Church is called to proclaim mercy at all times, aware that we show mercy because we have received God’s mercy (AL 309-31), and there are no conditions to God’s abundant mercy (AL 311). In addition, as mentioned above, the individual in a difficult situation should be made to feel welcome within the community of the Church. What we are proposing is an *accompaniment*. In this process, not only can priests be involved, but there can also be lay persons who assist (as John Paul II explicitly mentions in *Familiaris Consortio* 75). In the case of participating laity, one needs to make sure that they understand the teaching and ideals of marriage according to the traditional doctrine of the church.

1. The *first* and non-negotiable dimension of accompaniment is to clarify with the individual the general orientation of his/her life. Among the first questions of the catechism, all of us learnt is: Why did God make me? To know, love and serve him in this life and to be happy with him in the next. The consequence: Therefore, everything else in this life is oriented to that end. We should search for this orientation, not merely in the area of sexuality, but in the total orientation of life. This is the first area that would need to be examined.
2. Having clarified the orientation in life, the *next* is to recognize the particular situation of “irregularity” in which the individual is. If it is an issue of a second marriage entered into where a previous bond exists, then, one should seek to correct that situation in accordance with existing law. In other words, is it possible to obtain an annulment?
3. The process for annulment has been made considerably easier by Pope Francis in 2015 through *Mitis Iudex Dominus Iesus* and *Mitis et misericors Iesus*, whereby the Pope has reformed

the procedures for declaration of marriage nullity<sup>9</sup>. It would be of particular significance to note Can. 1678. Two points to be noted are, first, according to #1, in certain cases, where only the testimony of the spouse/s is available without a corroborating witness, such evidence can be admitted for the resolution of the case. Secondly, #4, where there is a “very probable doubt” as regards the consummation of the marriage, the case can be submitted for a dispensation *super rato* to the Holy See. Pope Francis remarked “Some procedures are so long and so burdensome, they don’t favor justice, and people give up”.

4. In case the existing marriage cannot be annulled for whatever reason, then, the next process is to seek what *God requires* of the person in this given situation. This is a process and depends on the situation in which the individual finds him/her-self. No one is outside the mercy of God. Even sinners find their place within that plan. (Consider the women mentioned by name in the genealogy of Matthew). Those who are, according to the promulgated law, in sin may still be called on God’s working out his plan in the pilgrim Church.

#### CONCLUSION

John Paul II in the Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae Discipline Leges* promulgating the new Code of Canon Law said “I therefore exhort all the faithful to observe the proposed legislation with a sincere spirit and good will in the hope that there may flower again in the Church a renewed discipline; and that consequently the salvation of souls may be rendered ever easier under the protection of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church.”

The literal application of laws, without regard to persons for whom the laws cater for, can kill the spirit of the law. And in regard to marriage legislation that was unfortunately the situation. But now we are coming to the realization that nothing is outside the mercy of God. Therefore, that every baptized person, even though in an objectively sinful situation, still has an offer of mercy available. What is that offer? It is up to the person to discern it, often with those trained to assist such persons.

9 Cf. John P. Beal, “*Mitis Iudex* Canons 1671-1682, 1688-1691: A Commentary” in: *The Jurist: Studies in Church Law and Ministry* 75/2 (2015) 467-538; Bernard A. Hebda, “Reflections on the Role of the Diocesan Bishop envisaged by *Mitis Iudex* Dominus Jesus” in: *The Jurist: Studies in Church Law and Ministry* 76/1 (2016) 137-157; John P. Beal, “The Ordinary Process According to *Mitis Iudex*: Challenges to Our “Comfort Zone”” in: *The Jurist: Studies in Church Law and Ministry* 76/1 (2016) 159-196.

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St. Ignatius of Loyola has proposed a process of discernment. But for preliminary discernment basically the human being has to apply reason and emotions. With careful observation, God's will in one's situation can be discerned. Guy Consolmagno, an American astronomer and Director of the Vatican Observatory, has said "By Jesuit rules, no one can put himself or anyone else forward as a candidate. Instead, we spent a week in prayer and quiet conversations before electing Fr Arturo Sosa Abascal as our new leader. While our method does not require complex equipment, I am struck by how similar it is to our scientific searches. Both require careful observations, looking for sometimes subtle shifts ... movements this time not of planets, but of our interior dispositions. We have faith that in this way we have discovered the one whom the Holy Spirit, whom we cannot see, has nudged into our orbit". Is the call to the discernment of what God wants in particular situations similar – prayer, silence, conversation and above all, careful observation?

**Our Father.** The Our Father is itself, of course, a Scriptural text (Matthew 6:9-13), but perhaps we have become too familiar with it to appreciate its depth and all its resonances. The pure light, so to speak, is refracted into many colours as the different themes underlying the prayer emerge; their inter-weaving produces the beautiful tapestry which is our faith. For indeed, a great part of Christian doctrine is implied in the Lord's Prayer, as well as direction for Christian living and a piercing examination of conscience

– SR. CLAIRE WADDELOVE, OSB, *Our Father: A Biblical Meditation on the Lord's Prayer*. (Herefordshire: Gracewing) p.3.

# Responses of Clergy and Lay People to the Covid-19 crisis

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Gareth Byrne and Bernadette Sweetman

## INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has obviously had a profound effect on the Church. Restrictions on church-going amongst other activities have differed in the two jurisdictions of the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. In both jurisdictions, however, the lockdowns have severely curtailed regular ministry in areas such as pastoral care, parish group engagement, and serving the community. On the other hand, for those with online access, worship has taken on new and creative forms. Many clergy and ministry teams have risen to the challenge of operating in a virtual environment. In recent times, there has been a great deal of research and reflection in many fields of study in the academic world on the learning gained from the experience of living in a global pandemic, and how it can inform future practice. This is also an opportunity to *assess* how churchgoers have responded to the experience, and what they think the future might hold. How well have people coped with the pandemic? Has it strengthened or weakened their faith? How has it been for clergy and lay people trying to work in this new environment? Will virtual ministry become part of the post-pandemic landscape, and will this be positive for the Church?

## THE CORONAVIRUS, CHURCH & YOU SURVEY

In May / June 2020, the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education (MDCCE) conducted an all-island survey to measure the impact

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Dr. Gareth Byrne is the Director of the Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education [MDCCE] at Dublin City University and a priest of the Archdiocese of Dublin.

Dr. Bernadette Sweetman is the post-doctoral researcher in Adult Religious Education and Faith Development at MDCCE. The MDCCE is one of two denominational centres in Dublin City University. It is engaged in research, teaching and learning in Catholic Education.

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of COVID-19 restrictions on adult churchgoers. This was the time of the first lockdown when restrictions were at their most severe. The online survey was part of an empirical study initiated at York St. John University investigating the impact for churchgoers in England, Scotland and Wales. The Irish study, led by Dr. Gareth Byrne, Director of the MDCCE and Dr. Bernadette Sweetman, post-doctoral researcher at the Centre, ran over a period of six weeks at the height of the initial lockdown when churches were closed to the public.

The survey gathered information pertaining to the impact of the pandemic on the lives of respondents across a number of themes. Demographic data such as age, gender, religious affiliation, work description, education level and general location were obtained. Pre-COVID practices were identified including average level of church attendance and the types of ministry in which the respondents were involved. Respondents were invited to comment on their engagement with online Church services as well as the forms of pastoral support they administered and/or received during the pandemic. Attitudes to the handling of the pandemic by government, Church and other bodies were also elicited and participants were given the opportunity to comment on how they anticipate the pandemic to impact upon the Church in the long-term. Finally, the emotional impact of Covid-19 also featured in the survey.

In this article, some general insights into the findings of the survey are provided. Variations between answers given by *lay* respondents and *ordained* respondents are highlighted and explored. Members of the research team were interested in seeing if there was a difference in any way between how lay respondents and ordained respondents reacted to the pandemic, and if so, what might this tell us as we move into a potentially new phase of 'being Church'.

### AGE PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

1,428 people responded to the *Coronavirus, Church & You* survey. 95% identified as Roman Catholic with the majority (84%) living in the Republic of Ireland. Respondents were geographically widespread with 39% living in a suburban location, 29% in an urban setting and 28% in a rural setting. The majority of all respondents (1,241) were laypeople while 124 were ordained priests.

While adults of all ages took part, just over half (53%) were in the age group 50–69. A little more than half of the laypeople (52%) were aged in their fifties or sixties, with 16% aged over 70. It is noteworthy that while less than half (47%) of lay respondents

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attended Church services on a weekly basis pre-COVID-19, 91% indicated that they accessed Church services online during the period in which the survey was conducted.

The ordained cohort was older with two-thirds (66%) aged in their fifties or sixties and 20% aged over 70. The higher proportion of older ordained respondents is important because Government regulations during the period in which the survey was conducted required priests over 70 to cocoon. As a result, these priests would have been prevented from carrying out their usual ministerial duties, including presiding at liturgies.

### IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

#### *Response of the Church to the pandemic*

As already mentioned, the survey took place during the time period of the first lockdown with the strictest measures in place. A greater proportion of participants viewed the Government as responding *more* effectively to the pandemic than they did the Church at national level. 72% of ordained and 67% of lay respondents agreed that the Government responded well when the virus threat emerged and that the Government had led the nation well during the lockdown. Less than half (49%) of ordained and 54% of lay respondents agreed with the statement ‘My denomination at the national level has responded well to the crisis’. Even fewer (36%) of ordained and 53% of lay respondents agreed that ‘My denomination at the national level has done a good job of leading us in prayer’. It was clear, however, that respondents had a more favourable perception of the Church’s response at *local* level. Almost two-thirds (65%) of ordained and 59% of lay respondents indicated that the churches in their area have responded well to the crisis.

#### *The church building*

The closure of church buildings is something that none of us probably ever imagined could happen in our lifetime. The effect of the inability to gather in the church was likely amplified because the lockdown occurred during a time of year in which particular Church celebrations would normally take place. Lent, Holy Week and Easter liturgies all took place behind closed doors, with online or other media sources being the only alternative to physical participation. The months of Spring and early Summer would usually see many First Holy Communion and Confirmation services as well as weddings taking place across the country. With little or no warning, Irish churchgoers had to reassess what it actually meant ‘to go to Church’.

Roughly half (52%) of lay respondents to the survey agreed that

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closing churches was the right thing to do even though almost four-fifths (79%) felt that church buildings are central to their witness in the community. While just over half (53%) agreed that the local church building was crucial for their identity as Christians, only just over one quarter (26%) felt that many people will lose faith without church buildings in which to gather for worship. The majority of lay respondents to the survey (83%) agreed that they were ‘celebrating communion spiritually from home’ during the online services. Clearly, the provision of online services was beneficial to people during this difficult period. When churches would reopen, however, just over one-third (34%) indicated that they would still only avail of online Church services, with almost two-thirds (63%) stating that they would return to normal Church services in the church building itself. In his pastoral letter, entitled *Missing each other, missing the Lord*<sup>1</sup>, written in May 2020 at the time of the first lockdown, Bishop Dermot Farrell stated:

‘People have come to the realisation that “watching Mass” is very different from being physically present and participating in the celebration with other members of their family and the community. For all its advantages and immediacy, the virtual is no substitute for physical presence with the assembled community’.

### ATTITUDES TO THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH

#### *Financial implications of lockdown*

Questions regarding the financial implications of the pandemic on the Church also featured in the survey and elicited *different* responses from lay and ordained participants. Over half (55%) of lay respondents indicated that their financial giving to the Church had decreased during lockdown. Just 9% of lay respondents said that their financial giving would decline after the pandemic. 18% of lay respondents stated that the church building would not be financially viable in the future. On the latter point, greater concern was expressed about financing church buildings into the future amongst ordained participants where the corresponding figure was 30%.

#### *What will Church be like?*

There was a stark contrast between lay and ordained respondents’ confidence in Church returning to normal. Just over a quarter of lay respondents (26%) agreed with the statement ‘Church life

1 *Missing each other, missing the Lord: Pastoral letter by Bishop Dermot Farrell.* Available at: <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2020/05/24/missing-each-other-missing-the-lord-pastoral-letter-by-bishop-dermot-farrell/>

will soon return to normal’ whereas a very low 2% of ordained respondents agreed. A higher proportion of ordained participants (46%) in comparison to lay participants (35%) agreed with the statement ‘We will finally learn how to be Church appropriately in the digital age’. The anticipated increase in online Church activity was indicated by both groups with 46% of ordained and 49% of lay respondents agreeing with the statement: ‘More pastoral work will be done online’. It seems the pandemic may have encouraged greater reflection on what has been normal Church life and how we might think creatively about being Church in the future. As sociologist Hazel O’Brien of Waterford Institute of Technology has put it:

‘A significant question might be to ask if online religious engagement throughout Covid-19 will have been enough to sustain individual and collective belonging to religion? Or, will our time in isolation have irrevocably weakened the tradition that religion rests upon?’<sup>2</sup>

#### PERSONAL RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

The survey also contained a substantial section about the impact of the pandemic at a *personal* level, for example, on one’s energy levels, sense of happiness or security, and attitudes to others. For each question, there were three options: more, less or no change. It is interesting to see *where* respondents clearly indicated an impact, be it positive or negative, as opposed to no change. Furthermore, insight can be gained in noting the differences in the responses between the lay and ordained participants.

Finding new ways to deal with things was clearly a consequence for many, with 43% of lay respondents feeling ‘more creative’. The figure was even higher for ordained respondents, whereby 58% felt ‘more creative’, likely due to having to discover innovative modes of ministry. The majority of respondents said they were ‘more prayerful’ with 56% of lay people and 65% of ordained respondents indicating this. Similar proportions felt ‘closer to God’: 33% of lay respondents and 35% of ordained respondents. The figures dropped somewhat when respondents indicated they felt ‘closer to Church’. 33% of lay respondents stated this in comparison to 44% of ordained respondents.

An examination of the findings highlights a difference in the *optimism* levels between lay and ordained respondents as shown in the table overleaf.

2 Hazel O’Brien, ‘What does the rise of digital religion during Covid-19 tell us about religion’s capacity to adapt?’, *Irish Journal of Sociology* 28 (2): 242-246, 2020

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<b>Statement</b>	<b>% Lay respondents</b>	<b>%Ordained respondents</b>
More Unhappy	20	10
More Stressed	33	20
More Bored	15	27
More Hopeful	41	52
More Trusting	28	47

Though the percentages are sometimes low, it is the *difference* between the lay and ordained respondents that warrants attention. The figures clearly indicate that the same pandemic impacted differently upon lay and ordained respondents at a personal level. The lay respondents tended towards being more unhappy and more stressed, while the ordained respondents, though indicating that they more bored, were also more hopeful and more trusting. In her RTE Brainstorm article, Dr. Amalee Meehan commented that:

‘Covid-19 holds a mirror to the spirit. If we are willing to look in that mirror and not run from what we see, we have a chance to gain self-knowledge and knowing ourselves is crucial in times of complexity and challenge.’<sup>3</sup>

Discussions prompted by studying such findings could contribute to identifying the possible mental health and wellbeing needs of the members of the Church community, laity and clergy, and assisting in potentially addressing their needs moving forward.

### FINAL COMMENTS

During the timeframe of this survey, authorities in the Republic of Ireland imposed different restrictions than were adopted in Northern Ireland. Further research could investigate the diversity of the impact on the faith lives of citizens of the two jurisdictions living under different restrictions.

In a similar vein, as 2020 progressed, it is likely that attitudes of the pandemic and its impact changed. A replication of the survey may discover a longitudinal perspective on how living with COVID-19 has impacted people’s faith and their relationship with the Church community through various lockdowns and restrictive measures.

3 Amalee Meehan, ‘Is there a spiritual side to dealing with the pandemic?’, 3 November 2020. Available at <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/1103/1175707-is-there-a-spiritual-side-to-dealing-with-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

## RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

This research has highlighted notable differences in the responses to certain issues amongst lay and ordained respondents. It is an opportune time therefore to have meaningful discourse on what are the needs of clergy and lay people in the present moment. As people in general reassess their priorities, their working conditions and how they connect with others, it may also be a good time to reflect on new ways to nurture our faith lives, to consider practical ways of building up communities of faith, and to discuss locally how we might work together as Church.<sup>4</sup>

- 4 At the time of going to print, the research team at MDCCE launched COVID-19 & Church-21. This is a follow-up survey to that featured in this article and is currently available at <https://www.dcu.ie/materdei-centre-catholic-education/news/2021/jan/covid-19-church-21-new-survey>. It is an anonymous survey that aims to collect valuable insights on how adult churchgoers in Ireland have been affected by the varying restrictions over the last several months. It is also a means to assess the impact of different online and socially-distanced church services. Please consider completing the survey and sharing the link with your friends / colleagues.

**Pilgrimage.** Going on pilgrimage is an ancient tradition. In medieval Europe, pilgrims would leave the safety of their own homes to travel to Rome, Jerusalem, or Santiago de Compostela in repentance, for an intention, or to fulfill a promise. This meant putting themselves at the mercy of the elements, possibly risking life and limb, and depending on the hospitality of others. The renewed popularity since the 1980s of making a pilgrimage along northern Spain's Camino de Santiago – or the Way of St. James – as well as society's contemporary fascination with pilgrimage in all its forms is perhaps an attempt to recover ancient values, basic humanity, and a hint of the divine. Either way, it is a step into the mystery of the unknown and opening oneself to providence.

- BRENDAN MCMANUS, SJ, *Way to Manresa* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. x.

# Voting and Conscience

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Robert Egan

I recently taught a class in moral theology on the apparent paradox contained in the Church's teaching on the primacy of conscience. The idea is that one's conscience, even when in error, is morally binding: 'Every conscience, whether right or wrong ... obliges us in such a way that whoever acts against conscience sins.'<sup>1</sup> The problem arises when we consider another aspect of Church doctrine, namely, its specific and definitive moral teaching, such as its instruction on abortion or euthanasia. The question naturally arises: What is the Catholic expected to do? Is he or she expected to obey the dictates of conscience or that of Church authority? The answer is that the Catholic is expected to inform his or her conscience. He or she is expected to understand clearly what the Church teaches on a particular issue, and to take this teaching seriously when making moral decisions.

To illustrate a judgement of conscience made without an informed conscience, I referred to the recent referendum on abortion. I suggested that the choice to vote Yes to the repeal of the Eighth Amendment was, in many cases at least, based on little more than an uncritical acceptance of a slogan such as 'A woman's body, a woman's choice.' In response, one of my students asked whether voting Yes in this referendum was a sin. I answered that if this was a judgment made with an informed conscience, then it should not be regarded as a sin, as there is a moral obligation to obey the dictates of such a conscience. However, I added, in the case of someone voting this way on the evidence of little more than a slogan, it would be difficult to see how such a judgement would be morally legitimate.

When the class ended, *my* conscience was activated. Something about what I had taught did not sit comfortably with me. I realized that many of my class had probably voted Yes in this referendum, and that, as this was their first year studying theology, at least some

1 Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlib.* 3, 27.

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Robert Egan holds a PhD in Theology and teaches courses in Moral Theology at the Pontifical University, Maynooth.

of them had probably done so with an uninformed conscience.<sup>2</sup> So, what exactly was I saying to these students, or, perhaps more importantly, what was I not saying? In this article, I will draw out and critically assess some of the implications of the Church's teaching on abortion and sin.

#### IMPLICATIONS

If we examine the Church's teaching on sin and conscience in terms of the fate of the person, it becomes more than an interesting paradox to be pondered. Anybody at all familiar with traditional Catholic moral teaching knows that unrepented mortal sin leads to the sinner being consigned to Hell. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that 'mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is love itself. ... If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from Christ's kingdom and the eternal death of hell, for our freedom has the power to make choices forever, with no turning back.'<sup>3</sup> The question I shall address here is this: Was voting Yes a mortal sin?

The Church's teaching on direct abortion is clear: 'A person who procures a completed abortion incurs a *latae sententiae* (automatic) excommunication.'<sup>4</sup> With regard to voting Yes, this could be considered formal cooperation in future abortions, and formal cooperation in evil, according to the *Catechism*, 'constitutes a grave offence.'<sup>5</sup> So, there is no doubt that we are dealing here with a serious transgression of the moral law, whether one directly obtains an abortion or supports someone to do so. So, *inadvertently*, and I cannot stress the word enough, I had implied that the souls of some of my students may be in danger because of the way they had voted in the referendum. It was never my intention to suggest such a thing. It was only when I began to reflect on what I had taught that I realised its full significance. I concluded that while most Catholic theologians would not openly suggest such a thing, and many indeed would not even support this view, the idea that Yes voters are guilty of mortal sin could be inferred from official Church doctrine.

But are we necessarily dealing here with mortal sin? In Catholic moral theology, the criteria for sin to be considered mortal are serious matter, full knowledge, and deliberate consent.<sup>6</sup>

2 These students were, in fact, third year students so most of them would have been old enough to vote in the referendum. This, however, was their first year studying theology.

3 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1861

4 *The Code of Canon Law*, 1398.

5 *Catechism*, 2272.

6 *Ibid.*, 1857.

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Now certainly in the case of voting on abortion, it could hardly be argued that this is not a serious matter. The question whether certain people made this choice with full knowledge, we shall presently consider.<sup>7</sup>

### FULL KNOWLEDGE

Let us first consider what is meant by full knowledge. Is this full knowledge that a particular action is wrong, or is it full knowledge that an action is *considered* wrong? The distinction is one that I believe to be critical in terms of examining the degree of sinfulness of an action. According to the *Catechism*, full knowledge ‘presupposes *knowledge of the sinful character of the act*.’<sup>8</sup> In terms of the referendum, the Church’s position on abortion was clear: abortion and voting for abortion was wrong. So, we can safely say that everyone that voted Yes, did so knowing that this was *considered* wrong by the Catholic Church. This means that they were aware of the Church’s view on this issue, that the act of voting Yes to this proposal would be condemned by the Church. However – and this is important – they disagreed. They did not share these views. They did not think that what they were doing was sinful. On the contrary, they believed that what they were doing was right. Nobody set out on May 25th, 2018 to do the wrong thing. The truth is that most Irish voters got it wrong, in the sense that they voted for something that is objectively harmful to society. However, they did not see it this way. My question, then, is this: How can it be suggested that Yes voters had ‘knowledge of the sinful character of the act’ (of voting Yes), if they did not see the act as sinful or immoral? The only possible way to argue that such a vote was cast with knowledge of this kind is to suggest that people knew that what they were doing was wrong but did it anyway. I cannot see this. While people did indeed know that the Church considers abortion wrong, they voted Yes because they disagreed, or they believed there was something greater at stake, namely, a woman’s right to choose to have an abortion in sometimes extremely difficult circumstances. This was a justice issue for both No and Yes voters. For the latter, the situation in Ireland in relation to abortion was wrong. Changing this situation was regarded as a moral issue and voting Yes was considered the right thing to do.

7 The question whether a sin is committed with deliberate consent is directly related to the question of full knowledge. Where it is demonstrated that a person acts without full knowledge, the question of deliberate consent becomes a somewhat moot point.

8 *Catechism*, 1859, emphasis added.

It might be suggested that people who voted Yes in fact knew that what they were doing was wrong, because ‘no one is deemed to be ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man.’<sup>9</sup> The *Catechism* states that feigned ignorance or hardness of heart do not diminish but in fact increase a person’s culpability. The notion of feigned ignorance would seem to suggest that people may sometimes pretend to be ignorant of the sinfulness of an action. If this is true, it would make sense to say that their culpability is increased. This would be sin upon sin, deceit added to the already sinful action. However, I cannot see how this might apply to Yes voters. It could be argued that people pretend or rationalise when it comes to sinful acts so that they may enjoy whatever pleasure they derive from the particular sin. In the case of voting for repeal, however, this does not make sense, as those who voted for repeal had nothing to gain personally. This is not to say that Yes voters did not enjoy some pleasure in their victory in this referendum, but this was the same kind of pleasure that No voters would have enjoyed had we won. It was a pleasure derived from a feeling (misguided as it was) that justice had been done, not the selfish pleasure of the sinner. Of course, Yes voters may also have derived a somewhat less innocent pleasure from their victory, namely, that of intentionally flouting the laws of the Church, which many regard as oppressive and backward. However, I do not think that anyone deliberately disobeyed the dictates of conscience in such a serious matter, simply to undermine the Church. Such an action would be malicious, and I do not believe Yes voters to be guilty of such malice. While it could perhaps be argued that some people, due to their contempt for the Church, may have convinced themselves that what they really knew to be wrong was in fact right, such rationalisation is never fully conscious,<sup>10</sup> and so there would be a real problem with applying both the criterion of full knowledge, and that of deliberate consent.

Again, one may wish to argue that the hearts of Yes voters were hardened to the harm that would be done to unborn babies, as well as to society in general, if they were victorious in this referendum. Of course, they would probably respond by suggesting that it is our hearts that are hardened to the plight of pregnant women in difficult situations. The question that concerns us here, however, is: Does a Yes vote necessarily imply a hard heart? If one truly

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 1860.

<sup>10</sup> The moment that one becomes aware that one is rationalising is the moment when such rationalisation loses its power. If a person begins to become aware that he or she is rationalising, one of two things may happen: Either the person decides against the action, realising that he or she is rationalising and therefore truly believes that the action is wrong, or the person decides to go ahead with the action, reasoning that his or her reflections are not in fact rationalisations, but the truth. Rationalisation can only operate in darkness.

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believes that we are dealing here, not with an unborn person, but with a ‘cluster of cells,’ then a Yes vote does not suggest hardness of heart. It simply suggests that not all of us see things in the same way. People have very different horizons from which they view the world. Many think more in terms of science than religion, but this does not mean that they are ‘hard of heart’? And even if a Yes voter believes that the human embryo is more than a mere cluster of cells, but voted Yes because he or she also believed that it was important for women to be able to make this judgement for themselves, this does not necessarily imply hardness of heart.

The attitude of those who wish to undermine the Church could be described as hardness of heart. However, I would have some difficulty believing that there would be a direct correlation between this attitude and a deliberate decision to knowingly do what one genuinely believed to be wrong. There are those who hate the Church. While such enmity is based on a misunderstanding of what the Church is, it is also, ironically, based on a sense of morality. Those who hate the Church may not fully understand, but they have also witnessed the great harm that the Church in this country has done to so many of its citizens. The result is moral indignation, which stems, not from a hardened heart, but from a sense of justice.

## CHURCH AND SOCIETY

Even if you are convinced by my argument, the question remains: Should one be held morally accountable for going against the teaching of the Church, for going against what he or she knows the Church *considers* wrong? As we have seen, if this is a legitimate, informed judgement of conscience, then a person is obliged to follow it, as ‘a human being must always obey the certain judgement of his conscience.’<sup>11</sup> A person may then be vindicated for doing something wrong if, after informing and struggling with his or her conscience, he or she decides that the action is the right thing to do. This makes sense if you think of the alternative: a person truly believes that an action would be the right thing to do but fails to do it because he or she knows that the Church considers it wrong. In such a case a person may end up doing what is objectively the right thing to do, while believing that it is the wrong thing to do. One would have to question the moral character of such a person, even while he or she is doing the right thing. Yes voters, then, if they genuinely struggled with their conscience, even if they came up with the wrong answer, can be vindicated because they truly believed that what they did was right.

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism*, 1800.

But what of those who did not struggle with their conscience, those who took little or no time to listen to both sides of the argument so that they might make an informed judgement? Are such people to be held morally accountable for their lack of critical reflection on this issue? Thinking about this question in relation to my students, I realized that the idea that one should inform one's conscience before making a major moral decision, while quite reasonable, was one that they had probably never encountered before I suggested it. Most young people in Ireland today do not read theology books, or the Bible, or even attend Mass. Yet, despite this lack of commitment to the Church, many of them still believe in God, and they still have a strong sense of right and wrong. Should these people be held accountable for their lack of knowledge and information, and for their inability to reflect critically on such important issues in a society in which, for understandable reasons, faith has declined and confidence in the Church has waned? Perhaps, instead of condemning people for their lack of faith and commitment to the Church, we might try to understand why the situation is as it is, and take appropriate action to change it.

While Bishop Doran suggested that Catholics who voted Yes might consider going to confession,<sup>12</sup> it is of course not only Catholics who are capable of sin. Many of those who voted Yes have rejected the Catholic Church and any other form of what is popularly called 'organised religion.' This may be closely related to their decision to vote Yes. The idea that abortion is wrong is unfortunately so connected with the Catholic Church that the rejection of the former would seem to follow naturally from a rejection of the latter. Yet, abortion is wrong because the life taken is that of one endowed with personhood from the moment of conception. While I believe this, I must admit that it is a somewhat religious view. Even if this view is not directly connected to Catholicism, it is a religious view, nonetheless. There is a sense of something greater than biology at play when life is created, something transcending the purely natural. However, this is a religious mentality, and many people have lost this capacity to think in terms of the transcendent. But we should not judge those who are not religious. Our attitude should be one of hope, not condemnation. We can hope and work towards a day when people will return to God. This will only happen through repentance for our own sins, through personal healing, through making the body of Christ stronger by making its individual members stronger. Only then will people return to the Church, and the sense of the transcendent be restored.

12 *Today with Sean O'Rourke*, R.T.É. Radio 1, May 28th, 2018.

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### CONCLUDING REMARKS

It occurs to me that this article may seem to be a vindication of those who voted Yes in the abortion referendum. I have indeed suggested as much. However, while I do believe that those who voted Yes may, unless they acted maliciously, be vindicated, I also believe that abortion is evil. I can hardly think of anything more appalling than the deliberate destruction of a human life at its most vulnerable. It is, therefore, my firm view that the people of Ireland made a grave mistake when they voted to repeal the Eight Amendment. However, while I strongly believe that abortion is seriously wrong, I do *not* consider those who voted Yes to be evil people. I certainly do *not* suppose that they deserve eternal damnation.

It also occurs to me that there are wider implications to my argument that a judgement of mortal sin should not be applied to those who voted Yes. This article could also seem to be an attempt to undermine the whole notion of mortal sin. One might ask: If Yes voters did not commit mortal sin because they did not believe that what they were doing was wrong, does anybody commit mortal sin? Anybody can give reasons for doing what they do. People can rationalise to subdue an uneasy conscience. We might conclude then that no one ever commits sin in *full* knowledge, that there is always something obscuring this knowledge, making it incomplete or distorted. It is not my intention to dismiss or deny the doctrine of mortal sin. I believe that people can so ‘miss the mark’ of virtue that their relationship with God can be damaged to a degree that one could call spiritual death or Hell. So, I do not deny mortal sin. The idea of ‘sin unto death’ (1 John 5:16-17) is biblical and part of our Catholic heritage. I do, however, challenge the notion that a person’s relationship with God can be reduced to a simple equation, where one meets a set of criteria to qualify as a mortal sinner. Life and people are more complicated than this. I believe this view is reflected in the *Catechism*, when its authors state that ‘*although we can judge that an act is in itself a grave offence, we must entrust judgement of persons to the justice and mercy of God.*’

# How African Reconciliatory Theology can Enrich the Sacrament of Penance

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Aloysius Gonzaga Lumala

Looking at the African situation as well as humanity in general, there seems to be a secularist revolution that is seeping into postmodern society with the result that Christianity has been marginalised and its practice weakened. The celebration of the sacraments, especially penance, has been affected. For example, the need for repentance so as to attain God's forgiveness has been replaced with a self-serving do-it-yourself morality. However, using its key characteristics of truth-telling, reconciliation, forgiveness and reparation, African theology of *ubuntu* can enrich the understanding and appreciation of sacramental penance.<sup>1</sup>

## AN AFRICAN CONTRIBUTION

No doubt, African reconciliatory paradigm encourages building comradeship after a period of separation. It must be noted that acceptance and incorporation are necessary for reconciliation between formerly alienated people. This is central not only on a personal, physical, psychological level, but also on a social, political and even environmental level. African traditional spirituality regards reconciliation as being highly significant for the entire universe and provides conditions that facilitate a process of social reconciliation. Theo Sundermeier suggests that traditional African religion is the clearest example of what may be called a "religion of reconciliation." He bases this assessment on the understanding that:

1 Ubuntu is a Zulu word meaning human being. It is used as a concept that affirms the organic wholeness of humanity, i.e., a wholeness realised in and through other people. This is a practice well-known in Africa, of trying to reconcile people who have done wrong with the rest of the community. See Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 1997), 39.

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Aloysius Gonzaga Lumala is a priest of the Archdiocese of Kampala, Uganda but currently ministering in the Diocese of Down and Connor in All Saints Parish, Ballymena. He recently graduated from the Pontifical University, Maynooth with a Doctorate in Theology. [agslumala@gmail.com]

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‘Religions of reconciliation are oriented toward the community; their prime focus is on nurturing relationships and restoring breaches in society. They are committed to the world in which they live, and do not seek to escape from it. Rather, their ethos is one of participation and involvement’.<sup>2</sup>

Generally, the desire and commitment towards reconciliation and elimination of unpleasant situations is dominant in the African community. For example, among the Bantu peoples<sup>3</sup>, social order and peace are essential and sacred. This order is conceived primarily in terms of kinship relationship. And since everybody is related to everybody else, a person is not an individual but a corporate entity. The occurrence of sin or manifestation of evil produces tension and simultaneously deepens the sense of damage in the community. So, reparation and reconciliation are handled through offering sacrifices and by ritual purifications. A person conscious of his/her sin and under fear of punishment ritually transfers the guilt to an animal which is sacrificed (killed). By so doing, the sinner asks the Supreme Being or the spirits to accept that offering as a substitute in his/her place. More often than not these rites include a communal meal at which all present partake. Through these rituals, Africans feel there is something outside themselves that is reborn, forces are reanimated, and life reawakens. The renewal is no way imaginary, and the individuals themselves benefit from it, since the particle of social being that each individual bears within him/herself necessarily participates in this collective celebration.<sup>4</sup> This is because African religiosity and spirituality is about the totality of life and how to enhance it. It seeks to address elements of social disruption and hostility. Thus, the focus is always on keeping reconciliation practices down to earth and pragmatic in order to avoid settling for pretence with regard to societal harmony.

Based on its approach, African reconciliatory paradigm is a philosophy that is inclined towards action and the practical affairs of life. It is reconciliatory and accommodating, rather than exclusive and alienating. It does not create theories about things that are not related or significant to people’s lives. In other words, it supports a holistic and well-balanced view of reality, promotes a perception of inter-dependence and mutuality of all the forces of the universe.

2 Theo Sundermeier, “Erlösung oder Versöhnung? – Religionsgeschichtliche AnstoBe,” *Evangelische Theologie* 53 (1993), 124ff.

3 Bantu is the largest the African ethnic group and it is used as a general label for the 300–600 tribes who speak Bantu languages.

4 Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 353.

## AFRICAN RECONCILIATORY THEOLOGY

This means that it provides a practical approach to social problems. Therefore, such a process is certainly relevant in the quest for social reconciliation.

### COMMUNITY EMPHASIS

Basically, African reconciliatory paradigm is community oriented and strives for the well-being of everyone. Its aim is to reveal and foster human aspects that inherently link human beings to one another and the universe. It attempts to lead people towards an understanding and appreciation of their traditional heritage, which in itself can create a reconciliatory atmosphere. Given its pluralistic concept, it is a philosophy that essentially embraces diversity. It also attempts to harmonise and accommodate what seems to be different instead of eliminating or belittling it. Claudia Nolte-Schamm argues that such an inclusivism and openness must be an advantage to any reconciliation process.<sup>5</sup> She goes on to say: ‘African Philosophy dictates that the “other” – be it an “other” ethnic group, an “other” worldview or religious system, an “other” way of communicating or whatever – is incorporated rather than expelled’.<sup>6</sup>

Desmond Tutu claims that the African heritage, traditions, culture, customs and beliefs as reflected in the Bantu ethos can help Africans realise the reality and necessity of reconciliation for all of humanity.<sup>7</sup> The concept of *ubuntu* can make this a significant contribution simply because its tradition focusses on social relationships, promoting the values of interdependence and togetherness as well as the healing of broken relationships. Nolte-Schamm comments:

‘This ‘human-centred approach to life’ may help to overcome feelings of disappointment and frustration about people; it may counteract feelings of resentment, antipathy or anger; but also feelings of inadequacy, guilt and shame. It may even foster a

5 Claudia M. Nolte-Schamm, “A Comparison Between Christian and African Paradigms of Reconciliation and How They Could Dialogue for the Benefit of South African Society,” (Doctorate Thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, 2006), 99.

6 Ibid.

7 See Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, 127. Also see. Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 35, 57, 64. Many African theologians agree: “We are convinced that the Bantu principle of vital participation can become the basis of a specifically African theological structure of reconciliation.... Communion as participation in the same life and the same means of life will be, we believe, the centre of this ecclesiological theology.” See Vincent Mulago, “Vital Participation,” in *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*, ed. Kwesi A. Dickson and Paul Ellingworth (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), 157.

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willingness to forgive and to give someone a ‘second chance.’ Essentially, it has the potential to restore lost hope in humanity and [the latter’s] ability to do and be good.’<sup>8</sup>

This optimistic worldview is one of the treasures which Africans use as an appropriate way of restoring confidence in our human ability to confront and overcome social problems.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SACRAMENT

In the African reconciliatory paradigm hurtful sentiments are settled between persons or parties who have offended each other – as is often the case in everyday life – by rituals like hand shaking, patting the back, embracing each other and then having a reunion meal or drink. I propose that adopting some of these practical sociological embodiments of contrition, reconciliation and forgiveness could enrich the celebration of *sacramental penance*. As a way of showing our turning away from sin and reconciling with God and the Church, penitents may shake hands with the confessor soon after confession and perhaps also embrace or shake hands with one another particularly after the Lord’s prayer during the penitential service. And where possible after the penitential service the Christian community may share together refreshments as a sign of thanksgiving for God’s love and mercy. This tangible embodiment of reconciliation and forgiveness between God and humanity serves not only to express the gesture of humility and forgiveness in a human way, but also has the purpose of promoting that inner attitude of conversion of life and purification of heart. And even from the purely human point of view, independently of the Church’s teaching on sacramental activity, such an expression of a human attitude rooted in our bodily nature not only expresses inner attitude, but reciprocally it strengthens and deepens it. This is the remarkable thing in human beings that the body shapes the soul and the soul shapes the body.

African reconciliatory paradigm is a worldview which does not exist in an individual sense but always within the context of the community. There is agreement among researchers that *ubuntu* theology perceives reconciliation as a reunion of the community. If humans mistreat one another, it displeases God. When they reconcile, they are by the same token also reconciled with God. Tutu ultimately sees *ubuntu* theology as promoting communal reconciliation between God and neighbour.<sup>9</sup> Besides emphasizing

8 Claudia Nolte-Schamm, “African Anthropology as a Resource for Reconciliation: Ubuntu/Botho as a Reconciliatory Paradigm in South Africa,” *Scriptura* 93 (2006): 379-80.

9 Michael Battle, *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu*, 9.

human beings' likeness to God, the fullness of humanity only becomes manifest in community. He claims that God has made us so that we will need each other. We are made for a delicate network of interdependence.<sup>10</sup> *Ubuntu* theology can restore humanity and dignity to both perpetrators and victims of violence and create a sense of mutuality among humans who are alienated from one another.<sup>11</sup> This theological vision is able to bridge the terrible rifts created by the injustices and inhumanities of the past. It has the capacity, Tutu stresses, to 'overthrow apartheid' through humanising the oppressor and establishing a sense of South Africans belonging to one another.<sup>12</sup> I believe that this paradigm of reconciliation based on appreciating the sense of *community* might enrich the Catholic spirituality of reconciliation not only for Africans but for all humanity.

The African paradigm of peace-building and communal reconciliation helps human beings realise that they share a common history and future. They are dependent on each other for their collective well-being. So, it is possible that the sacrament of penance can be more appreciated and enthusiastically embraced if celebrated communally. However, the communal dimension of reconciliation has not been fully adopted by the Africans themselves, and less so by other peoples. Where it has been effectively applied, it has transformed antagonistic people, families, clans, communities and tribes into healed, reconciled and vibrant communities.<sup>13</sup> It has encouraged its enthusiasts to hope for the best and to try to bring out the best in others. This is because it does not give up on people, and it does not despair at their failures and inadequacies. Its *five* key pillars are dialogue, truth-telling, reconciliation, forgiveness and reparation. It is upon these vibrant characteristics that I consider the African theology and reconciliatory paradigm a vital resource for revitalising sacramental confession in Africa and elsewhere.

There is actually a broad consensus among theologians that traditional Western Christianity may benefit from the African focus on the community.<sup>14</sup> Setiloane states that Christianity could be enriched immensely if it were to learn from African tradition about community, that is, of the very sense of being.<sup>15</sup> I believe that the African emphasis on community is quite refreshing and exciting especially if the communal dimension does not prevent the

10 Ibid., 35.

11 Ibid., 5.

12 Ibid., 45.

13 Ibid.

14 See M. L. Daneel, *Fambidzano: Ecumenical Movement of Zimbabwean Independent Churches* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1989), 272; D Crafford, "The Church in Africa and the Struggle for an African Identity," *Skrif en Kerk* 14 (1993): 163-75.

15 Gabriel M. Setiloane, *African Theology* (Cape Town: Lux Verbi, 2000), 57.

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individual from taking personal responsibility and accountability. Just as Western individualistic tendency can be *both* destructive and creative, the all-embracing emphasis of the communal reconciliatory approach can also become harmful if Christians ignore their personal responsibility of making an effort to celebrate the sacrament of penance. Hence, the rite for reconciliation of several penitents with *individual* confession and absolution seems to be the most appropriate in revitalising the sacrament of penance. This is because it fosters the spirit of penance within the Christian community whereby the faithful can have the possibility of individual confession and yet communal penitential celebrations help to sensitise about the social impact of sin and reconciliation. Last but not least, the faithful especially children are helped to gradually form their conscience about sin in human life as well as enhancing that freedom of making a personal choice to attain God's grace through the sacrament of penance.

As well as reconciliation with God, the sacrament of penance is vital in making friends again of people who have been estranged. It helps make peace between people who have perhaps quarrelled, have had a disagreement or fallen out with one another and no longer walk together or talk together. Quarrels in the same family, between brothers or sisters, between parents and children can be saddest of all and also the bitterest and the hardest to make up. If you have ever tried to reconcile people who have fallen out, you know what a terrible struggle it often takes for people to shake hands and make up again. So, the grace of God through the sacrament of penance enables us to renew our friendships with God and one another. God is kind, our truest Friend and ever-loving Father. He never turns away from us, but it is we who turn away from Him. God is always wanting to make it up again between us and Him. But it takes two to make a friendship. Actually, you cannot force another to be your friend or reconcile with you. Even God cannot force us to be friends with Him. What is key is the slightest sign of our sorrow, the least indication that we are ready to let go of our past mistakes or sinfulness. Like the story of the prodigal son, which is perfectly fulfilled in the sacrament of penance, the great sacrament of penance reconciles us with God our Father and gives us joy that our human friendships are restored.

## CONCLUSION

Therefore, the African notion of *ubuntu* of trying to reconcile people who have done wrong with the rest of the community is a profound practice that can *revitalise* the understanding and celebration of sacramental penance for all Christians. Karl Rahner, an influential

theologian before and after the Second Vatican Council of 1962, articulates that everyone has an opportunity for salvation and that we should not give up on our neighbour, everyone can be saved. He stresses that it is important to appreciate the Christian belief that wrongdoing is not only an offense against God, but also against the Church or community.<sup>16</sup> So, after acknowledging your mistake and the need to say sorry, the community then helps you, welcomes you back and supports you through the journey of reconciliation and attaining new life. This way of thinking is certainly very helpful when teaching about the sacrament of reconciliation, placing great emphasis on the role of the whole community along with the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

16 Karl Rahner, "Forgotten Truths Concerning Penance," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 2 (London: Longman & Todd, 1963), 136. See also Rahner, "Penance as an additional Act of Reconciliation with the Church," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10 (London: Longman & Todd, 1972), 128-130.

**The Need for Holistic Education.** I do not see the future of education as being robot-based. Education in the context of the Gospel of Jesus favours holistic education and not merely skills-based training programmes. All school must attempt to create a learning environment where children are accepted as they are, and are encouraged to attain their full and unique potential as human beings, made in the image and likeness of God. Holistic education engages all aspects of the student's life. It is not focused merely on learning about ideas, but also encourages education in the arts, culture, science, languages, sport, ecology and religion. Schools that opt for holistic learning strive to encourage pupils to be unselfish and to use their gifts, not just to benefit themselves, but for the common good of other humans and the planet.

– SEÁN McDONAGH, *Robots, Ethics and the Future of Jobs* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.73.

# The Jesus we Believe in was Right-Brained: “Go and Do Likewise”

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Michael G. Lawler and Todd A. Salzman

## NEUROSCIENCE

There are four universally-recognized sources of Catholic theology: Scripture, Tradition, Science, and Experience. Pope John Paul II consistently called for an intense dialogue between theology and science in which each discipline would both retain its own integrity and be open to the insights and discoveries of the other. In this essay we focus on a relatively new science, neuroscience, examine its connections to Catholic ethics, and ask what light it might shed on the psychology and character of Jesus.

It is now common knowledge that the human brain is divided into two interconnected hemispheres. In the 1980s, data derived from functional electroencephalogram (fEEG) studies showed that both hemispheres were involved in every brain process, and neuroscientists interpreted this data to mean that there were no functional differences between the two hemispheres. Contemporary research has demonstrated this conclusion is an error. The *right* hemisphere, it has been shown, thinks intuitively and globally in images and metaphors, is comfortable facing new reality that is contrary to what it already knows, and includes in its decision-making empathy, the ability spontaneously to understand what another is feeling. The *left* hemisphere, in contrast, thinks rationally and fragmentedly in concepts that are partial representations of reality, has a tendency to deny knowledge contrary to what it already knows, even to accept absurdities, and is largely unconcerned about others and their feelings.

Notwithstanding the overlap that exists between emotional and cognitional brain functions, neuropsychology has demonstrated that emotional understanding occurs predominantly in the right hemisphere and that the left hemisphere is stubbornly rational and

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Michael G. Lawler is the inaugural holder of the Amelia and Emil Graff Chair in Catholic Theology at Creighton University. Todd Salzman is his successor in the Graff Chair. Their recent publications include *Virtue and Theological Ethics* and *Introduction to Catholic Theological Ethics: Foundations and Applications*, both published by Orbis Press in 2019.

uninterested in emotions. Persons with lesions in the right frontal lobe undergo a personality change which includes an incapacity for the empathy Pope Francis insists leads to compassion and mercy (*Amoris Laetitia*, 308-311). Despite these functional differences, however, both hemispheres are active in every brain activity and both are always engaged. When we say, therefore, the right hemisphere does this and the left hemisphere does that, we are to be understood as saying that the hemisphere in question is *predominantly*, not exclusively, active in the function in question.

The issue of attention is important in both science and theology. Selection and prioritization of input are necessary, for the human brain is a limited system and a multitude of inputs compete for its limited resources. Attention resolves that competition in favour of the data most relevant to the task at hand. The one brain, attending to reality in two different hemispheric ways, orients knowledge of two different “worlds.” The right hemisphere’s world is the whole world of reality with which humans are necessarily and intimately connected. The left hemisphere’s world is a fragmented and partial *re-presentation* of that whole world. This left-hemispheric world enables us to partially understand both scientific and theological reality.

We raise here a question that is centrally important in both neuroscience and theology, namely, the question of the connection of emotional and cognitive brain activity. It has been fashionable to dismiss *human emotions* as unreliable guides for ethical judgments; only reason and especially will, it has been argued, is of importance for ethics. Modern Catholic ethicists judge that to be a mistake. They accept emotions as forms of unconscious judgments that assign to certain persons and things importance for our well-being and flourishing, and argue that there is a twofold process in any judgment of ethical truth. There is *first* a right-hemisphere, emotional apprehension about the importance of some value for my personal well-being and flourishing and, *second*, a left-hemisphere, rational judgment that indeed this value is *truly* important for my well-being and flourishing. We shall expand on this double process as we go along.

In the early days of emotion research, it was assumed that emotion and knowledge resulted from separate brain processes, an assumption that is now judged to be in error. There is mounting neuroscientific evidence that emotion is not separate from the reasoning that people do about their own values and the values of others. Emotion serves to guide and even on occasion inhibit all-important attention. The right hemisphere places functional restrictions on all thought processes, and hence on how we attend to both theology and science.

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Early neuropsychology distinguished two types of attention, the broad, global attention of the right hemisphere and the narrow, fragmented attention of the left hemisphere. We have *two* ways of attending to reality. Whatever is *new* to experience and knowledge is first present in the global, emotional attention of the right hemisphere, which then transmits its intuitions of the new to the narrow, rational attention of the left hemisphere to be organized. The rational left hemisphere dissects the right-hemisphere intuited whole, abstracts parts of it, and *re-presents* them as concepts for the understanding and manipulation of the original whole. The rational concepts and language through which we deal with reality, though true and valid, are never the whole of reality, but only parts of the whole. In the search for an understanding of the whole, concepts and words should, therefore, be treated as tentative, not because they are false but because they are never the big picture. Neuropsychology demonstrates that in this dual process the activity of the right hemisphere is cognitively *prior* to that of the left. The right hemisphere is concerned with the intuited whole and guides the left's narrow attention of the fragmented whole. The left hemisphere is concerned with only the parts it knows and understands. If not approached critically, this narrow and restricted concern leads easily to a fundamentalism that rejects everything new and adheres uncritically to an established tradition in both science and ethics.

The human mind, then, operates on *two* different cognitive systems, one fast, emotional, and unconscious, the other slow, reasoned, and conscious. The function of the rational system is twofold, to guide rational ethical judgments and to provide justifications for judgments already made emotionally. This dual-process of knowing, we believe, can offer us all help in understanding the project of ethical judgment.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ETHICS

The foregoing suggests several important conclusions for Catholic ethics. What is *new* is present first to the broad, global attention of the right hemisphere before it can be present to and dealt with by the narrow, fragmented attention of the left hemisphere. New experience, new information, new conclusions engage the attention of the right hemisphere more than that of the left, even if the new information is verbal in which the left hemisphere is massively predominant. There is no neuroscientific doubt that the apprehension of anything new occurs in the right hemisphere, and that the right hemisphere alone can bring us something that we do not already know. The left hemisphere prefers and deals with what

## THE JESUS WE BELIEVE IN WAS RIGHT-BRAINED

it knows, which makes it more efficient than the right in situations when knowledge is routine but less efficient when knowledge might have to be revised, as happens regularly in both theology and science. The right hemisphere brings us not only new knowledge but also emotion that can control and even inhibit our fragmented left-hemisphere attention to the new knowledge. Twenty years ago, neurologist Vilayanur Ramachandran demonstrated the left-hemisphere tendency to deny anything it does not already know, even to accept absurdities; the right hemisphere, in contrast, is actively alert for what is new. The left-hemisphere, in science, theology, and everything else, holds tenaciously to what it knows, even in the face of contrary evidence. It is of great interest that this left-brain behaviour is truer of men than of women.

### JESUS' RIGHT-BRAIN PERSPECTIVE

In this section, enlightened by the foregoing neuroscientific data, we seek to understand *three* parables told by Jesus. Without data from functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), we can never know with certainty what was going on in Jesus' or anyone else's brain in any interaction but, on the basis of neuroscientific insights, we can interpret from his actions what was going on in his brain prior to his rational judgment to act this way. We *begin* with an interaction reported in Mark's gospel (7:1-30). Jesus had been preaching something entirely new in his Jewish tradition: "all foods [are] clean" (v. 19). The Pharisees with whom he was in dialogue were adhering narrowly and rigidly in their left hemispheres to the long-established Jewish tradition of washing their hands before eating and asked Jesus why he and his disciples did not do so. Jesus replied, from the intuition of his right hemisphere where everything new originates, with an entirely new teaching which "declared all foods clean" (v. 19). What goes into a person from outside, Jesus teaches, "cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and so passes on." What comes out of a man or woman "is what defiles a man [or a woman]. For from within, out of the heart of man or woman, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery" and other "evil things" (vv. 18-23). Reflecting on contemporary experience in contemporary society we could expand that list: refusal to help the poor, the vulnerable, the homeless, discrimination against those whose ideas or life-styles differ from our own.

After this interaction with the Pharisees, Jesus goes into a house where he is joined by a Syrophenician woman "whose little daughter was possessed by an unclean spirit" (v. 25). The woman bowed down at his feet, and "begged him to cast the demon out of

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her daughter” (v. 26). Jesus’ immediate reply we might understand from our own experience. Allowing his rational left hemisphere to focus narrowly on what he and we all intuitively know, the separation between “us” and “them,” he notes that she is not one of “us” and replies that “it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (v. 27). Undeterred, and empowered by her right-hemisphere empathy, love, and compassion for her daughter, the woman responds that “even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs” (v. 28). *Emotionally* moved in his right hemisphere by the woman’s reply to see the bigger global picture, perhaps intuiting empathetically that the child was not separated from him as one of “them,” that she was a child of God equal to any Jew, Jesus was moved to empathy and compassion for both the woman and her little daughter and banished the demon from her child. The woman “went home and found the child lying in bed, and the demon gone” (v. 30). We are convinced that the neuroscientific data on brain activity, when carefully attended to, helps us to understand better the actions of the actors in this gospel event and points us to the broader messages of all gospel stories. This story of the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees helps us to understand the difference between the left-hemisphere inspired and narrowly focused actions of religious hierarchs and bigots and the broader right-hemisphere inspired intuitive insight of Jesus, which all his followers are called to imitate. The interaction between the empathetic, compassionate, and merciful Jesus and the Syrophenician woman should lead us to an equal empathy, compassion, and mercy for all those who are afflicted, vulnerable, poor, and cast aside in our own society.

## SECOND PARABLE

Our *second* story is taken from Matthew’s gospel (18:23-35). It is the story of a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants. One servant “was brought to him who owed him ten thousand talents [about fifteen years’ wages for a laborer at the time]; and as he could not pay his Lord ordered him to be sold, with his wife and children and all that he had, and payment to be made” (vv. 24-25). The servant pleaded with his king “for patience with me and I will pay you everything” and “out of pity for him the Lord of that servant released him and forgave him the debt” (vv. 20-21). The servant went out and met a fellow servant who “owed him a hundred denarii [about one hundred days wages, far less than what the first servant owed the king]; and seizing him by the throat he said, ‘Pay what you owe’” (v. 28). The second servant pleaded exactly like the first, “Have patience with me and I will pay you”

(v. 29), but the first servant refused and put his fellow servant “in prison till he should pay the debt” (v. 30). This story reveals all kinds of left-hemisphere reason and right-hemisphere emotions.

At first, the king acts out of the narrow, fragmented reason of his left hemisphere, narrowly attending to what he knows: the servant owes him a lot of money, he cannot pay, there is a law about the payment of debts, he must go to jail. Then, in response to his servant’s piteous pleading, the king experiences the right-hemisphere emotions of empathy, compassion, and mercy, and forgives the servant’s debt. The servant immediately meets a fellow servant who owes him a small amount of money, and he immediately follows the fragmented rational judgment of his left hemisphere, there is a law about the payment of debts, he must be sent to jail; and so he is. The wicked servant pays no attention to the bigger, global picture perceived by his right hemisphere, which includes the fact that he has just been forgiven a much larger debt. When the king hears of his servant’s behavior, how he ignored his king’s example in a much smaller matter, he experiences the holy and wholly-justified emotion of anger and “delivered him to the jailers till he should pay all his debt” (v. 31).

From this story we learn of the initial narrow, fragmented, left-hemisphere reaction on the part of both the king and the servant who was forgiven his debt: the law is the law and the debtor must go to prison. There is, then, on the part of the king after the pleading of the servant, right-hemisphere global attention to the bigger picture, perhaps including cruel repercussions to his servant and his servant’s family, and the emergence of the emotions of empathy, compassion, and mercy. Not so with the servant who stays stubbornly with his left-hemisphere knowledge; there is a law about debt payment, the law is the inviolable law, and his fellow servant must go to jail. There is, finally, the emotion of the king’s righteous anger, initiated in his right hemisphere by the intuition that his servant should have followed his example and forgiven his fellow servant’s small debt as he had been forgiven a much larger debt. The king, of course, in this parable is a stand-in for Jesus and the wicked servant is a stand-in for the rest of us, frequently and self-righteously lacking in empathy, compassion, and mercy toward those around us who have offended us, really or imaginarily, in some small thing. And still we unthinkingly pray in the Lord’s Prayer “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us,” forgetting that frequently we follow left hemisphere, rational, fragmented knowledge that we have been somehow offended and that the offender must be somehow punished, perhaps even sent to jail.

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### THIRD PARABLE

Our *third* parable is the parable featuring the man whom Luke simply calls “a Samaritan” (Luke 10:33) but who has been interpreted in Catholic history as “the Good Samaritan,” because his actions are deemed good. “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead” (Luke 10:30). Along came a priest who, seeing the half-dead man lying on the road, felt he would compromise his priestly purity required for his temple functions if he tended to him, crossed over to the other side of the road, and self-righteously hurried by. Along came a Levite, a man of the same tribe of Levi as the priest but not a priest, and he too worried about his Levitical purity, crossed over to the other side of the road, and also self-righteously hurried by. Then along came a Samaritan, deeply despised by Jews of the time, who when he saw the beaten man lying bloody and wounded on the road “had compassion and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him” (vv. 33-34). He even gave the innkeeper “two denarii [about 1.25 euros],” telling him to take care of the man and “whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back” (v. 10:35). Wishing to emphasize the point of the parable, Jesus asked the lawyer who had challenged him “Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” The left-brained lawyer, probably much like the rest of us, had no doubt: “the one who showed mercy on him” (10:36-37). Jesus’ final command is what all Christians are to learn, not only from this parable but from his whole ministry: “Go and do likewise” (v. 37).

In our days, when the poor and vulnerable, refugees and immigrants, are being globally demonized, we find Jesus’ refusal to acknowledge any human distinction between “us” and “them,” between Jews, Samaritans, and Syrophenicians, and his preference for right-brained empathy, compassion, and mercy over left-brained legal and religious justice in the parables of the wicked servant and the Good Samaritan enlightening. We also find his command at the conclusion of the parable of the Good Samaritan, “*Go and do likewise*” (Luke 10:37), which we insist flows not only from his parable but from his entire life, a sound prescription for human and Christian well-being and flourishing. We will never see a wounded man on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, but we might see one on the road from Dublin to Dundalk. We will certainly see homeless men, women, and their children sleeping rough all across our country, poor, hungry, cold, emotionally deeply

## THE JESUS WE BELIEVE IN WAS RIGHT-BRAINED

wounded, and avoided. Jesus' command "Go and do likewise," we must understand, applies to those people and situations.

### CONCLUSION

Our understanding of Jesus' parables and life, and of their instructions for our ethical lives, has been wonderfully enhanced by our understanding of both the neuroscience we briefly explained and Pope Francis' theological insistence that right-hemisphere mercy and compassion toward our fellow humans, especially those who are in any way beaten and wounded, are at the very heart of the Gospel. Unlike the priest and Levite, we cannot hurry by wounded men, women, and children; we are called to stop and do good to the wounded, even if it means that in the process, as Francis poetically states, our "shoes get soiled by the mud of the streets." Jesus expects us, he continues, "to stop looking for those communal or personal niches which shelter us from the maelstrom of human misfortune, and instead enter into the reality of other people's lives and to know the power of [right-brained] tenderness" (*Amoris Laetitia*, 308). Our warm right-brained attention to the global world of reality in which all humans are necessarily involved is a *better* prescription for Christian and human living than a cold left-brained attention to a fragmented and partial *re-presentation* of that whole world. It is time and past time for all Christians and their too often embarrassingly sinful leaders to heed Jesus' gospel command: "Go and do likewise."

**Catholic Social Teaching.** One of the key elements of Catholic Social Teaching is that work is an important activity for human beings. In most economic and political systems, work is seen as a commodity, something one does in exchange for something else, such as an income. However, in Catholic Social Teaching, work is seen, not as a commodity, but as crucial and central to an individual's self-worth. It also contributes to the development of one's self, family, community and the larger society.

– SEÁN McDONAGH, *Robots, Ethics and the Future of Jobs* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 167.

# Homilies for April (B)

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Liam Kelly

## **Easter Sunday**

*April 4*

Acts 10:34, 37-43. Ps 117:1-2, 16-17, 22-23. Col 3:1-4/1  
Cor 5:6-8. Jn 20:1-9

*When Christ is revealed – and he is your life –  
you too will be revealed in all your glory with him.*

What is the resurrection? Is it just another fact of history? The undecided will ask ‘did it really happen?’ The believer answers, ‘it happened, and it’s still happening!’ Most people agree that ‘something’ happened. But the ‘something’ isn’t, and can never be, merely a simple historical fact; the resurrection has never passed into history. It’s been said that history is what happened to other people and *memory* is what happened to *me*. Memory involves me personally. As long as what ‘happened’ continues to live in me and change me, it is never really in the past. This is uniquely true of an encounter with the risen Jesus.

The early preaching of the resurrection, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles is the stuff of witness and memory. Eye witness accounts are offered, not to explain the extraordinary event of Easter, but to make possible for others a full and free participation in it. Jesus is risen, and his disciples have encountered him. We can through grace and faith encounter the risen Jesus in and through our daily circumstances. These encounters are typically one with our moving out to others in generosity and patience, in understanding and truth. The Church has never stopped gathering to open the scriptures and break the bread, privileged places of encounter.

Like a meteor which has left a great crater, the resurrection of Jesus has left an extraordinary impact on human history. A great deal of our history these past two thousand years has been happening in or around the cavity of this event. But the resurrection of Jesus requires that we find ourselves in the story, that we learn to inhabit the greater story of God’s love in Jesus, which, the apostles are convinced, is the only story worth telling. St. Paul tells the Colossians, ‘when Christ is revealed – and he is your life – you too will be revealed in all your glory with him’. The resurrection

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Liam Kelly, OFM, Franciscan Friary, Athlone, Co. Westmeath

means that there is no story which is not *his* story, no lasting memory which is not *his* memory. This revelation isn't a tyranny, a divine takeover, it is a graced letting go into who we are, when death is finally taken out of the equation.

The Easter narratives, the empty tomb, the linen cloths on the ground, the frantic, disrupted grieving, followed by 'appearances' which are no longer determined by the inflexible limits of time and space; these narratives bring us beyond our normal terrain, into faith. They help us not only to grit our teeth and get through this life, but to hope in a new life that has already broken into and changed the story of human history. The attempt to explain and understand must wait. Our first step is surely to inhabit this new story. To listen to a story that is all about what God has done in Christ, and continues to do, in us.

### **Second Sunday of Easter**

*April 11*

Acts 4:32-35. Ps 117:2-4, 15-18, 22-24. Jn 5:1-6.

Jn 20:19-31

Easter Sunday, through to Ascension and Pentecost was considered one great Sunday in the early Church. Understandably, we try to map out the mystery into discreet encounters, but we also try to hold it together, for it is a single mystery of faith. It is the definitive, saving revelation of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

To enter into this saving mystery, we are helped by the apostles and the accounts of their coming to believe. By no means was all the work complete on Easter Sunday; we have the impression of an extended, baffling, exhilarating and magnificent coming to faith. The disciples encounter the risen Jesus in ways that reassure them and redirect them, into Easter faith. The familiar titles of 'master' and 'rabbi' become redundant in the face of this mystery. Thomas, in today's Gospel utters the extraordinary words, 'My Lord and my God', indicating something of the distance the disciples had to travel in this Easter time. The period during which the reality of the resurrection took shape for the disciples is telescoped in the Gospel accounts. However long; days, months, years, it involved an extraordinary journey of the mind and the heart. But they travelled that distance in good company.

In today's Gospel there is a sense of that gentle pedagogy, as Jesus instructs Thomas: 'put your finger here', 'look, here are my hands', 'give me your hand; put it into my side...doubt no longer, but believe'. Jesus leads Thomas, step by step into the mystery of His risen life. As for Thomas, so for us. We are called into a radically new way of seeing and living. And this new Easter faith

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in whatever familiar forms it is expressed after twenty centuries is still unsettling, perplexing and beyond our limited perspectives. On Easter morning the terrified women who went to the tomb were asked by the men dressed in brilliant clothes, ‘why look among the dead for someone who is alive?’ As disciples, and as a Church, are we following the gentle pedagogy of the risen Jesus, or do we look for Living One among the dead?

### **Third Sunday of Easter**

*April 18*

Acts 3:13-15, 17-19. Ps 4:2,4,7,9. Jn 2:1-5. Lk 24:35-48

*You killed the Prince of Life. God,  
however, raised him from the dead.*

The preaching of the Gospel, in the first instance, wasn’t a matter of reporting the facts of Jesus’ death and resurrection to an interested but uninvolved group of people. The news of the resurrection was preached to those who had participated in the death of Jesus, either baying for his blood, or simply by taking cover. From the beginning it was assumed that everyone was involved in the events leading up to the death of Jesus and, significantly, that nobody, even those most directly involved knew what they were doing.

This is the message of today’s first reading. In his manner of preaching, Peter must have managed to communicate to his listeners that he too was implicated. Early Christian preaching, which may sound today like an embittered rebuke or an exercise in blaming, is in fact the beginnings of a new narrative; a story that doesn’t require us to exclude or expel the guilty. The core of apostolic preaching may be described as an invitation to recognize your victim as your hope. Jesus is unanimously expelled, taken outside the city limits and executed. Whatever justification people may have felt for this violence, God has vindicated Jesus, by raising him up, acquitting him of every charge.

The attempt to frame the story in terms of Jesus’ guilt or in terms of political and religious necessity collapses entirely when the Gospel is preached. For once the story isn’t told from the ‘winners’ point of view, rather, the ‘looser’, the innocent victim frames the story. And in doing so, we are helped to recognize our habitual patterns of blaming, casting out, and banishing the victim. Jesus, the innocent victim, returns vindicated, not to settle the score. Rather, Jesus comes unarmed to show us how our moves to exclude, to silence and to kill says everything about our fascination with violence, and very little, if anything about the guilt of our victims.

In today’s Gospel Jesus is keen to be touched and to show his

wounds. The disciples discover that in touching Jesus' wounds they are not made to feel ashamed nor are they condemned. Somehow the wounds represent a new source of mercy and reconciliation. The wounds of Christ are an inexhaustible sign of healing love. In showing us that wounds can heal, Jesus helps us to think the unthinkable; that we can return to our victims, not to justify ourselves by insisting on their guilt, but to recognize in them, in their wounds, our hope.

#### **Fourth Sunday of Easter**

*April 25*

Acts 4:8-12. Ps 117:1, 8-9, 21-23, 26, 28-29. 1 Jn 3:1-2.

Jn 10:11-18

The fourth Sunday of Easter is associated with the theme of vocation and the pastoral imagery of the Good Shepherd. The notion of shepherding sheep is problematic in today's world. Frequently, it brings to mind not so much the steadfastness and love of the shepherd, but the passivity of the sheep. We inhabit a world which values individuality, authenticity, and spontaneity, not the qualities we associate with sheep! In our striving to be individual, authentic and spontaneous, we are, however, inveterate imitators. We tend to borrow from each other all the time; ideas, fashions, opinions, mannerisms, loves and hates, while affecting a calm, disinterested spontaneity. It's a full-time job, being an original!

The Gospels propose a model for our imitation; Jesus the Nazarene. Our imitation is not meant to be furtive and disguised. Like Peter, we are required to acknowledge that the good we do is done in *his* Name. We are assured in the second reading that we are 'already the children of God', therefore, our identity is secure and established. What we are to be in the future has not been revealed, but our future selves (our true selves) will be like God, since we will see God as God really is. St. John implies that when we see God as God is, we will imitate what we see, we will become like God in goodness. Finally, our well-honed skills of imitation will be trained onto a model whose goodness, beauty and truth will make us true originals, not anxious copies of each other.

Nevertheless, this imitation, this 'sheepish' following, is rightly perceived as a risky business in our world today. There have been plenty of 'hired hands' posing as good shepherds in the Church and in society. This has engendered a not unjustified scepticism among the flock. It is a miracle that the voice of the Good Shepherd can still be heard, against the background of so many competing voices, and our own bleating! It is indeed the work of the Lord, a marvel in our eyes!

## News and Views

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**The Sign of the Cross.** *Vincent McBrierty, 49 St. Fintan's Crescent, Sutton, Dublin 13 writes;*  
*In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*

The enduring and seamless nature of the Christian message is at the heart of our beliefs. In a rapidly changing world, our spiritual participation can, on occasion, be relegated through complacency and distraction in the routine of daily prayer, and by the formidable and unsettling challenges facing the church in these times of ever-increasing secularization, social upheaval and economic chaos. The current pandemic has imposed a further impediment to the traditional format of daily Christian practice with the closure of the churches for the first time in their history, or, at most, restricted access to them, little or no access to the sacraments, and constraints on travel, in an effort to curb the spread of the Covid 19 virus. There is, nevertheless, the bonus of time for reflection, and the creation of periods of 'sacred silence' to ponder on faith issues, one of which is The Sign of the Cross, which is the simplest and most used prayer of all, mostly taken for granted as a preliminary to more important prayers to follow. It is, nonetheless one of the most profound prayers in its own right. When one blesses or sanctifies one's self with the sign of the cross what does it signify?

*First* and foremost, it is a visible manifestation of our Christian faith which places the Holy Trinity of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit at the core of our Christian belief. *Second*, it implies that what we do and how we behave thereafter is in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and is affirmed by 'Amen' or 'So be it'. That is a personal commitment and affirmation to follow the Christian way of life. *Third*, the cross itself is an enduring reminder of the key corner stone of our faith, namely our redemption through Christ's death on the cross, the profound significance of which is revealed in the last supper; not alone did Christ redeem us through His death on the cross, He left each of us, past, present and future, a lasting and timeless gift of His body and blood in the Eucharist. Thus, we are in communion with Christ crucified both physically and spiritually each time we reverently receive the Eucharist. We are truly at one with Christ in a deeply personal and intimate way.

But there is a *further* dimension to Christ's crucifixion which addresses the most excruciating level of His pain and suffering, shared, in turn by His attendant Blessed mother. It begs the question: 'Why does God the Father permit such indiscriminate pain and suffering which is difficult to reconcile from the purely human perspective?' There is, however, a value in suffering which can be understood in a spiritual way. Jesus throughout his life and death paid the price for our sins, which aptly has defined human suffering as a form of 'Divine Currency'. And it is through this spiritual dimension to human life that we identify with the suffering of Jesus in his passion. For the sinner suffering may be viewed as correction rather than punishment per se; For the devout, it is in communion with Christ's suffering on the cross in expiating the many abhorrent and sinful activities throughout humanity that fly in the face of Christian practice and beliefs. Recall the human Christ's words on the cross, 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' It was the sheer gravity of sin, the atonement of which required such a sacrifice.

This was the clearest indication of the role of suffering in assuaging wilful and deeply sinful affronts to the Lord above. Indeed, the Virgin Mary in her apparitions, referred to the pain and hardship that even the committed Christian would experience throughout their lives. The lives of the saints bear ample testimony to this fact.

It is in this way that the simplest of prayers, the Sign of the Cross, embodies the fundamental message of our faith, a faith that is uniquely personal to each one of us in our intimate relationship with our crucified Lord.

Amen.

**Covid-19, Immunity and Religion.** (*The Furrow, January 2021*)  
*Christopher Garrett, Sligo writes:*

*"The Trouble with a Great Many of Us Is We Know So Many  
 Things That Ain't So."*

Josh Billings, humourist

The Book of Ecclesiastes tells us there is nothing new under the sun. And so it is with infectious pandemics. Over 50 million people (and 60% of Europe's population) died in the Black Death that occurred in the 14th century, resulting from a bacteria carried by small mammals and their fleas. Over one million people died due to various bacterial and viral illnesses (typhoid, measles, dysentery,

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smallpox, etc.) in Ireland in the 19th century in a population severely weakened by malnutrition. In 1916 9,323 people died in Ireland from tuberculosis. The current SARS-CoV-2 global pandemic is in no way unique.

The human response to the pandemic has been different from those in the past. The highly effective cooperation between government and public health officials has led to dramatic interventions that have saved millions of lives. The cause and treatment of this infectious agent have been arrived at with astonishing speed. The international public-private partnership that achieved a remedy for this illness was the product of intense global cooperation and effective application of science, not seen since the Apollo moon landings. It is a feat of human achievement that surpasses the moon landings and is unparalleled in human history.

Sadly, our advanced technology has also provided a platform for the rapid spread of disinformation regarding this illness. With little knowledge about its origin (at the time of writing, World Health Organisation (WHO) officials are in Wuhan investigating), there has been an opportunity for people to exploit the knowledge gap to promote their agendas. Anti-communists see a Chinese “invented” conspiracy as part of a strategy of global hegemony. Anti-secularists murmur about government-led plots to eradicate organised religion. Environmentalists point to human destruction of the environment as the cause. I’m presuming that the human impact on the environment must have been very severe in the 14th century leading to the Black Death. Some pro-life activists say the SARCS-CoV-2 vaccines (without discriminating) are made using aborted fetuses. The truth is, two of the SARS-CoV-2 vaccines (Pfizer and Moderna/NIH) use no cells at all in their production. Anti-technology folks say 5G networks are to blame. Those who oppose the use of vaccines see this all as the work of the nefarious “Medical-Industrial complex.” Advocates of naturopathy claim we need enhanced immunity, ignoring the fact that the majority of those struck with the illness had normal immune systems. In reality, the host immune response is the cause of much of the pulmonary morbidity. We treat it with an *immune-suppressing drug* (steroids). The homeopathic advocacy groups made the same claims in the 1980s/1990s, claiming diet and exercise could cure HIV-AIDS. The list of agendas being served by the current pandemic is apparently endless.

The problem is that disinformation actually hurts people. People are putting themselves at risk of death and illness by not taking a vaccine. They claim it is unsafe while the study data and health care experts say otherwise. In the 1980s, when government public health officials tried to close bathhouses in San Francisco, they

were rebuffed by the gay community. Despite clear epidemiological evidence that bathhouses were a nidus of the spread of the disease (before we even knew the disease was a result of an infectious agent), the gay community believed that the recommendation was a conspiracy by the government and medical community to take away their hard-earned new rights and freedoms. By the time bathhouses were closed over a year later, hundreds of thousands had died of the disease. I cared for teenage haemophiliacs in St James' Hospital who died of complications of HIV/AIDS acquired through contaminated blood products in the 1990s. Due to that experience, I find it truly shameful that people exploit the deaths and illnesses of millions to promote their own agendas, no matter how noble their cause may be.

There is a condition called confirmation bias, where your mind is made up, and you only accept information that supports your hypothesis and reject all other data. An example is a detective who decides a person is guilty, and looks only at evidence of guilt, and ignores all other exculpatory evidence. This bias leads to looking at data only partially and is a significant cause of human error, in all walks of life. Conspiracy theorists employ this approach to prove as true “things that ain't so.”

It is up to all of us to be responsible and not to disseminate false or unproven information dressed up convincingly and authoritatively as facts. If you aren't an expert in health care, don't act as an authority, or share false medical information through social media. That is true of absolutely everybody up to and including presidents of large countries. We all have this responsibility; lives are at stake. Disinformation can lead to illness and death.

You are morally responsible for your own health care. It is a moral imperative. To do this optimally you need access to the latest medical data. I would strongly recommend developing a relationship with a health care provider who is up-to-date with state-of-the-science information and practices evidence-based medicine. Do not get your medical advice from non-medical sources, be they social media, print journalism or television.

### **Letter to the Editor**

I'm a man in his late 70s. “I'm trying to think of what I'll do with you”. Those were the opening words of a phone call from a DLP [Designated Liaison Person] the very first time they spoke to me. I remember being somewhat shocked at the time. I had sought help from one of the Orders this DLP represents.

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I am amongst those sexually abused as a child by a priest from an Order. I was grievously hurt again by another priest from a different Order as I began my adult life. I asked this second Order for help in the Autumn of 2018, just after the Pope's visit. This second hurt ruined my life and spoiled any chance I have had of happiness. The pattern in recent years has been that whenever the Church is in the news I am beset by an ulceration of the hurts I had experienced in my childhood and early manhood. What the DLP actually did was to text me later that day with the details of how to contact *Towards Peace*. The DLP then rode off into the sunset, apparently not really concerned as to whether *Towards Peace* had been of any help. One call and one text was the extent of the help offered!

As it happened *Towards Peace* wasn't of any help to me and, thinking the feedback might be helpful, I informed both the Order and *Towards Peace* of that fact. As I was feeling somewhat OK at that point, I got on with my life. However, this feeling of OKness didn't last long.

Towards the end of May 2019 the memory of the hurts in my early life began to surface again in a very negative way. I needed help badly. I approached the same Order again. I must have forgotten the attitude of the DLP. And what happened to me thereafter was so wrong in every way imaginable that I am still struggling to make sense of it.

Some *weeks* after my second request for help I got a call from the same DLP, whose empathetic capacity resembles that of frozen cement. The delay would suggest there was no urgency to help and should have been a warning sign to me. I reminded the DLP of their very first comment to me, "I'm trying to think of what I'll do with you", to which their reply was "if you ever say that I said that I'll deny I ever said it".

Thereafter, the DLP was quite inattentive towards me. I got an odd call, almost always in the evening, but these calls were rare. I was obviously an afterthought. I got a call one evening as I sat down to dinner. The DLP was driving to a hospital to visit a sick aunt. I pointed out that the call was coming at an inconvenient time but the DLP kept talking even though they had nothing of consequence to say.

In the meantime, I phoned and emailed the Provincial several times but got no response. Every effort on my part was ignored. Towards the end of August, *three months* after I had sought help and with no response whatever from the Provincial, I was feeling very stressed. I emailed the Provincial pointing out that it had been 32 days since I had heard anything from the DLP. Some days later I got a call from the DLP berating me for contacting the Order.

How could any right thinking DLP feel they had a right to rebuke someone seeking help because that person had gone directly to the Order when the DLP was doing absolutely nothing? It says something about the [un]suitability of such a person to do the sensitive work of a DLP. The DLP also made a big issue of the fact that it had been 31 days since they had made contact with me and not 32! I decided then to withdraw from the whole process as it was making me ill.

It was the behaviour of the Provincial, however, that was most disappointing. The Provincial had written a letter to me almost *12 weeks* after I had asked for help and thereafter ignored me completely until mid December 2020. As to why he would write a second letter, more than 15 months after I had withdrawn from the process, is somewhat of a mystery. This letter was most confusing and very bizarre in that it was the most disingenuous letter I have ever received.

It claimed that the Provincial, following much reflection and prayer, had made “the difficult decision” not to return my phone calls. He has never answered any of my calls. The letter referred to information I had sent in my parting email in mid September as the reason he had not responded. I ask why no response throughout June, July, August and early September?

Every appeal to him to talk to me was to no avail. Every appeal was ignored. I had asked that he and I might meet and try for reconciliation: ignored. I had asked, on good grounds, whether the seal of confession might have been broken by a priest of his Order. How he could have ignored this question was most baffling but ignore it he did. And even with regard to this ‘15 months later’ letter the Provincial got one of the office staff to phone me asking for my address and whether I would accept the letter! Thinking it would surely be a reconciliation between us I enthusiastically agreed. I have never spoken to the Provincial. I would gladly talk to him at any time. I have prayed for both him and the DLP and forgive them both for the hurt they re-inflicted on me in my twilight years.

Before I withdrew from the sorry process, which I thought would have been a spontaneous effort to help and not the arm wrestle it turned out to be, I also suggested to the Provincial that his Order might consider:

- (a) a quicker response to those seeking help than I got.
- (b) More follow up during the process.
- (c) Less conflict, actually no conflict.
- (d) Less self-justification and
- (e) Far more empathy.

## THE FURROW

I also now believe that DLPs might need to be screened as to their *suitability* for the work involved in dealing with hurt people and that DLPs should *not* represent more than one Order.

My story always reminds me of the “certain man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell in with robbers”. [Luke,10;30]

(The author can be contacted through the Editor)

**The Challenge Ahead.** I believe that preparing for and responding to the social impacts of AI and automation will be the defining challenge of the next decade and that the Catholic Church and all religions will need to take this issue on board, as a central pastoral focus of their work at local, national and global level. Groups focused on this topic should be formed in every parish and diocese to address this issue. Obviously, those who are working at a national level should be in touch with research groups in universities and the trade unions. In this area, the Catholic Church could work closely with other Christian Churches and all religions, because the reality of automation will affect everyone.

– SEÁN McDONAGH, *Robots, Ethics and the Future of Jobs* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 178.

# New Books

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**Women's Ordination in the Catholic Church.** John O'Brien. (Cascade Books: Eugene, Oregon, 2020), ISBN 9781725268043.

In 1994 John O'Brien's *Seeds of a New Church* (Columba Press) memorably identified the gap between the traditional model of Catholic faith in Ireland and the vision and ideas that ordinary Catholics would need to sustain their faith commitment. Currently, an associate professor of theology at the Centre for Catholic Studies in Durham University, and still no shrinking violet in terms of the theological tasks he sets himself, this Irish Spiritan priest turns his attentions in this volume to a consideration of the Catholic Church's prohibition on the ordination of women. Readers of this journal need no reminder that this is an issue which receives much critical media, popular and academic attention throughout the West. As one who taught at second and third levels for many years, I was regularly confronted, when attempting to outline the Magisterium's position on this matter, by the hostility it typically stirred from many otherwise generally sympathetic students, male and female.

O'Brien is a wholehearted advocate of women's ordination and strongly disagrees with the view that the Church's official teaching and practice on the matter arises from the will of Christ. Indeed, one of the key elements of the book is its sustained argument that women in the early church clearly exercised important leadership roles in ministries which were the forerunners of the offices of deacon, presbyter and bishop. He points to the mention in the letters of St Paul of women as travelling missionaries and leaders of house churches. Already in the Pastoral Epistles he recognises a hardening of attitude towards women, but points to literary and epigraphic (i.e. inscriptions or epigraphs) sources which he believes infer, for example, a female presbyteral ministry in the south of Italy in the fifth century and that women deacons did not disappear in the West until the ninth century. Intriguingly, he argues that the Carthusian women's religious order founded in the eleventh century preserved a memory of women's diaconal ordination when, for example, a nun at her consecration as a virgin received the stole, maniple and cross from the presiding bishop. This and some of his other assertions here are fascinating in their detail and implications, and will no doubt invite further scrutiny by scholars and others anxious to test their veracity. Such is his conviction that women were and should again be ordained that at times he seems, when pointing to evidence to support his arguments, to stretch language, using terms like we can 'infer' and 'assume' this or that conclusion on

## THE FURROW

several occasions. He does, however, modestly acknowledge that, 'It is difficult to find evidence explicitly and unquestionably attesting to women bishops'.

Whatever the herculean task that O'Brien (and others) has set himself in trying to persuade the Roman authorities to look again at the question of women's ordination, and the pushback he is likely to receive for visiting the question, this book represents the labours of a fine theologian. In a country like Ireland where debate about women's ministry is normally conducted on either a dismissive, even rancorous social science level (which simply rejects traditional Catholic theological concerns as evidence of misogyny) or utter pragmatism (women priests would go some way to replenishing the diminished ranks of clergy to serve in parishes) this book's attention to historical and theological argument is to be welcomed. The three most enjoyable elements of the volume for me are: its well-informed theology of Church and sacrament which grow out of a clear recognition of the significance of Christ's resurrection; its reflection on the relationship between the ministerial priesthood and the priesthood that belongs to the baptised, which orientates the former to service in ministry rather than power; finally, its clear and concise exposition of the 'distinct though organically united' relationship between theology and canon law and the significance of this debate for theological discussion in the Church today. This is a book which will both elucidate and provoke.

*Ballintra, Co Donegal*

NIALL COLL

**A Calvary Covenant: The Stations of the Cross.** John Cullen. Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2020. ISBN 9781788123105

**Hearers of the Word: Lent and Holy Week Year B.** Kieran O'Mahony OSA. Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2020. ISBN 9781788123518

Resources to help one enter fruitfully into the season Lent and to celebrate Easter with renewed joy and hope are always welcome. Even more so in these challenging and uncertain times for individuals, families and faith communities. These latest publications from Messenger Publication tick all the boxes! Written by two well established authors and beautifully produced they should grace the book shelves of people of faith and, especially, those in ministerial roles.

John Cullen's reflections on each Station of the Cross are fresh and provide much food for thought. He follows a set structure of Remember, Meditation, Reflect, Pray and Sing. I found his suggestions for a verse or two of a hymn at the end of each station very helpful. The text also contains a brief introduction to the origins and history of the Stations that might well be shared with parishioners.

Biblical scholar Kieran O'Mahony and his *Hearers of the Word* series will be familiar to readers of the *Furrow*. This is the fifth volume of the

series and provides reflections on the five weeks of Lent as well as Holy Week, including the Easter Vigil. His commentary includes a verse by verse commentary on the readings but also a very rich Pointers to Prayer for each reading. There is nothing one dimensional about his commentary – rather he provides the reader with a rich insight into the background, context, history and genre of each text of the Word. The book concludes with a short, but important, essay on the challenges encountered by those who want to ‘talk about salvation today’. He briefly indicates the difficulties inherent in the understanding of salvation inherited from St Anselm and sets out to ‘reimagine and rethink salvation’ in a way that is meaningful for today.

Cork

P.J. McAULIFFE

**The Eagle, the Tiger and Covid – Imaging God re-calling Ireland.**  
Carl Bradley and Neal Carlin. 2020. [[www.columbacomunity.com](http://www.columbacomunity.com)]

In May 31st 2018 Salman Rushdie wrote an article in the New Yorker Newspaper entitled “Truth, Lies, and Literature”. The article finishes with the following paragraph. “*We stand once again, though for different reasons, in the midst of the rubble of the truth. And it is for us – writers, thinkers, journalists, philosophers – to undertake the task of rebuilding our readers’ belief in reality, their faith in the truth. And to do it with new language, from the ground up.*”

There is a real sense that the authors Carl Bradley and Neal Carlin are not just sensitive to this reality, but they have embarked on answering its invitation. Their approach is novel, and their method is creative. Through the art of story and imagination the reader is enabled, and at times forced to engage such themes as ecology, community, wealth, marriage, mediation, religion, life questions and spirituality. As the reader journeys with the main character of this creative prose, they are enabled to explore what it means to live a credible life informed by faith.

This book finds itself in a long tradition of fiction inspired writing which informs and speaks to the realities of faith and life. From C.S. Lewis’ *Cornicles of Narnia* to William P. Young’s more contemporary novel *The Shack*, Bradley and Carlin’s book *The Eagle the Tiger and Covid* endeavours to explore through imagination well known topics of modern life. This results in moving the reader from head to heart knowledge and bringing them to that place where faith, wisdom and everyday life meet. This offers the reader a novel prisms through which to view, reflect and discover life’s deeper meaning. One of the chapters concludes with a line that could be read as a central thesis of the book. “*Everything belongs and leads to how much we all have in common*”.

The latter part of the book departs from its central and creative story to gift the reader an eclectic collection of writings including an interview with the authors; a tribute to John Hume; a reflection on the Church of the

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future; Neal Carlin's response to Gerry O Hanlon's article in this journal (*The Furrow*) in September 2019 and Neal Carlin's reflection on prison ministry.

In *The Eagle the Tiger and Covid* Carl Bradley and Neal Carlin enable the reader to reimagine how and where God may be operative in their lives. They enable the reader to hear anew where God is calling us as individuals, as a society and as faith communities. Their creative approach may initially throw the reader until one realises that fiction enables the reader to lower their defences so that, even for the briefest moment, truth can find a way into their heart where their experience of reality, faith, community and truth is rebuilt anew.

*St. Patrick's College, Maynooth.*

MICHAEL COLLINS

**Paradise. Reflections on Chiara Lubich's Mystical Journey.** Edited by Donald W. Mitchell. New York: New City Press, 2020. ISBN 978-1-56548-401-6.

It is generally appreciated that the new ecclesial movements in the Catholic Church have garnered a more rapid recognition in some parts of the world than in others. That is not to say they have been necessarily absent or rebuffed in parts but that some local churches and individuals have remained less sure as to the movements' purpose and have kept them at arm's length. *Paradise. Reflections on Chiara Lubich's Mystical Journey* is a substantial and serious undertaking to drill into the foundations of one such movement – Focolare. It is not a book for one wanting a basic introduction to the movement, but rather a significant exploration of the motives and inspirations of its founder Chiara Lubich (1920-2008) as described by her in a mystical experience in the summer of 1949 and lasting for several months, perhaps even into 1951. This experience, known as *Paradise '49*, was an "entrance into the bosom of the Father" (p. 61) in as much as that is possible in earthly human terms.

The book is a collection of articles originally published between 2012 and 2019 in the academic journal *Claritas: Journal of Dialogue and Culture* – an English language journal dedicated to exploring and analyzing the mystical writings of Chiara Lubich. The book contains two of Chiara Lubich's own presentations on her mystical experiences, with a biblical commentary by Gérard Rossé. Following some further contextualization which aims to locate Lubich within the history of Christian mysticism, the book subdivides into sections exploring the implications of *Paradise '49* for theology, biblical studies, humanity and the Church, society and culture, and finally interreligious dialogue. The reader will find here a series of scholarly articles which will provoke and stretch the engaged and erudite mind.

Two notable Irish contributions are those of the Bishop of Limerick, Brendan Leahy, and Diocese of Ossory priest, Thomas Norris. Fr. Norris

explores a Trinitarian ontology centered upon relationship – how that, in fact, there is a “nothingness” in God which is eternal self-gift to the other. Norris explores Gospel truths that emerge from “living the Trinity” (p. 200) under the inspiration that “God is Love and God is Trinity” (p. 198). The Gospel truths are: Jesus dwelling in each person we meet; mutual love between people to the point of that unity which Jesus suffered and prayed; and Jesus crucified and forsaken as the measure and the method of the love required (cf. p. 199).

Bishop Leahy coauthored his article with Fr. Hubertus Blaumeiser (Diocese of Augsburg). It analyses how Lubich’s mystical experience, as expressed in a text entitled “Look upon All the Flowers,” dovetails with the Second Vatican Council’s vision of the Church. Taking up the themes of Jesus’ forsakenness and self-emptying, the authors describe Christ as the seed whose “decomposition” is the blossoming of humanity. It is the ‘trinitising’ of humanity.

This book will test a newcomer to the Focolare movement but with some background research (online), it will prove fruitful for those who persevere with the text. Its thematic structure will lend itself to the reader exploring themes of immediate interest while also navigating otherwise less familiar topics. There is a freshness to this presentation of Christian mysticism which will provoke reflection on living the profession of faith in the Triune God of Love.

*St Patrick’s College, Maynooth*

SÉAN CORKERY

**No Complaints:** *A Memoir of Life in Rural Ireland and in the Irish Public Service.* Maurice O’Connell (ed. J. Anthony Gaughan) Dublin: Kingdom Books. ISBN 9781916476431.

This is a gem of a book, beautifully written, full of rural wisdom, and an insight into the working of the Irish public service.

I have to declare an interest at the outset. I worked with the late Maurice O’Connell in the Irish Department of Finance, prior to his becoming Governor of the Central Bank, and I admired him greatly.

Let me start with the cover, a joy and a sadness. The joy to see the real Maurice there as I knew him. The sadness that he is now gone from us.

The book is quite short. It is a memoir that Maurice wrote in 2010. The first half recounts his life as a youth in Moyvane, near Listowel, his period in Maynooth, and his brief teaching career. The second half deals with his years in the Irish Public Service, mostly in the Department of Finance and then in the Central Bank.

It might not be the thing to say nowadays, but in my day Maurice could have been called a “spoiled priest” because he left Maynooth while still a seminarian. That could have been a cause of shame for the family in the day, but Maurice recounts the reaction of his Parish Priest when he returned home from Maynooth. He feared the worst. However, much to

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his surprise, Father Dan complimented him on his courage and suggested that Maurice might now be mature enough to share a drink with him. I mention this in particular as I have encountered many former seminarians in the Civil Service, and my view has always been to admire them for their original decision to give the priesthood a go.

The book is a great read throughout. The Civil Service teaches you to boil a text down to its core but Maurice brings that extra element, imbibed from the Listowel air no doubt, that of the storyteller. He has the gift of conjuring up a picture in just a few well chosen words, the legacy of his education in the classics.

The book is a wonderful, but at the end of the day, a frustrating read. You end up wanting more.

*Dublin 5*

PÓL Ó DUIBHIR

**Forgiveness.** There is a condition, however, as laid down in the second half of this petition of the Lord's Prayer: "*Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.*" Our Lord emphasizes its importance by repeating and expanding it at the end of the prayer. "For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you; but if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). Our eternal salvation depends upon our forgiveness of others. We cannot have our own sins forgiven while deliberately refusing mercy to our neighbour. We cannot enter heaven with an unforgiving heart or with private enmities.

– SR. CLAIRE WADDELOVE, OSB, *Our Father: A Biblical Meditation on the Lord's Prayer*. (Herefordshire: Gracewing) p.106.

# Trócaire

'Hold fast to  
love  
and justice.'

(Hos 12:6)



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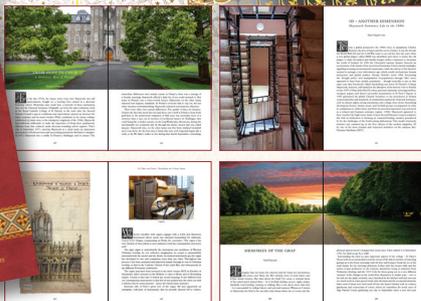
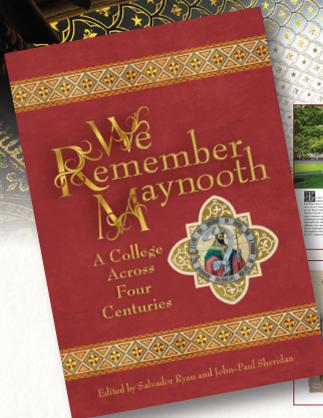
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**For more information on the resources and Lent parish webinars during February and March please contact: [colm.hogan@trocaire.org](mailto:colm.hogan@trocaire.org)**



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