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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Kevin Egan
The Upcoming Synod

Kathleen Coyle
The Magnificat

Michael A. Conway
The Place of Theology

Patrick Hannon
'Negative' (2)

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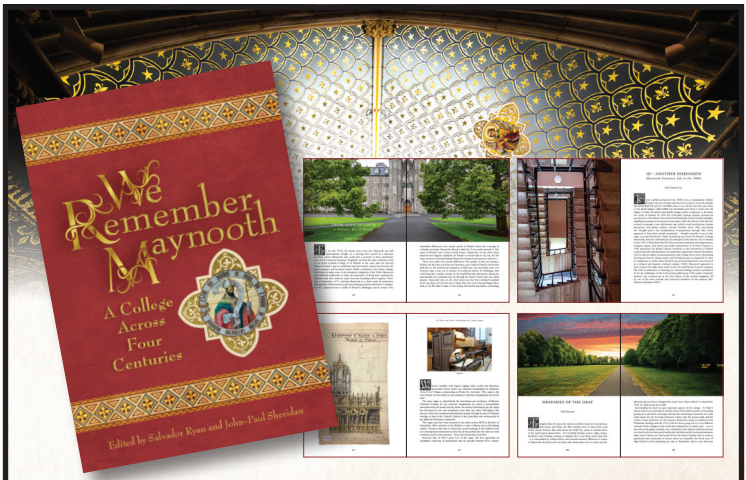

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Volume 72
Number 6
June 2021

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ISSN 0016-3120

The Furrow

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.

Editor: Pádraig Corkery, St Patrick's College, Maynooth. E-mail: editor.furrow@spcm.ie (for editorial enquiries, typescripts etc).
Rates: Single copy €4.50 (including VAT) and postage: Rep. of Ireland €2/Elsewhere €2.90). Annual Subscription: Republic of Ireland €75.00. Northern Ireland and Great Britian Stg£70.00/€75.00. Foreign: €90.00/$106/Stg£84.00. Student rate €50.00/$56.00/Stg£46.00. If you wish to avail of our *online* subscription please follow this link: **https://thefurrow.ie/register/** Subscriptions are payable in advance to the Secretary, The Furrow, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Telephone (01) 7083741; Fax (01) 7083908 (Codes: National 01; International +353-1). E-mail: furrow.office@spcm.ie Website: www.thefurrow.ie. Subscriptions can be paid by cheque or online through The Furrow website.

Single articles can be purchased and downloaded from our website: www.thefurrow.ie.

Back numbers and advertising rates available from the Secretary.

The Furrow's bank is the Allied Irish Bank, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Bank Giro Code No. 93–32–01.

Back issues of The Furrow are available on microfilm from: ProQuest Information & Learning Co., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, U.S.A., and JSTOR.

The Furrow is published by The Furrow Trust and edited at St Patrick's College, Maynooth. The views expressed in its pages are in no way attributable to the College authorities. The Furrow is printed in the Republic of Ireland at Naas Printing Ltd., Naas, Co. Kildare.

The Upcoming Synod: Are we Ready?

Kevin Egan

Along with many Catholics I welcomed the announcement by the Irish Bishops that we are to embark on a "Synodal Pathway" leading to a National Synod within five years. I had been waiting impatiently for such an announcement telling myself that it was not before its time. As I reflected on what this might involve I found myself asking the question: Are we ready for it? It is not a question that leads to a quick answer but rather to long and deep reflection. In this frame of mind I downloaded Cardinal Mario Grech's address to the Irish Bishops Conference to see what he had to say. He is the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops. Towards the end of his address, he expressed his own doubts:

> The fact that the people of God (and here I am referring to all the baptized, bishops and clergy included) are still not spiritually and theologically equipped to engage in a synodal process should not dishearten you. Antoine de Saint-Exupery says that "if you want to build a ship, don't drum up people to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea."[1]

Do I agree with him? He is right to stress the desirability of the goal but that should not blind us to the important questions that still remain to be answered. My thoughts turn to the tragic events of the drowning migrants who set out from Libya in the hope of landing safely on the shores of Europe, a desirable goal. Sadly, their means of getting there along with the vagaries of the weather dashed that dream.

1 www.catholicbishops.ie 2021/02/03/address-of-cardinal-mario-grech-to-the-bishops-of-ireland-on-synodality

Kevin Egan has lectured in All Hallows College, Dublin City University for many years. He now works as a psychotherapist and pastoral supervisor. He lives in Boyle, Co Roscommon and can be contacted at: kevinegan99@gmail.com

Setting out on a Synodal Pathway is not going to be easy. In an effort to be realistic about the synod here follows a list of some of the *hard questions* I found myself asking:

Will the Church in Ireland be willing to face its shadow?

Will it stop being defensive about the past and be open to understanding how we got into that mess?

Will it find the energy to imagine a different future where laity and clergy become partners in mission?

Will the Church begin to embrace real change?

Will the synodal process become hijacked by a group with their own agenda?

Will there be space for diverse voices to be heard?

Will participants have an experience of being listened to and treated as adults?

Will the clergy use their power to try and control the dialogue?

Will the laity find their voice and abandon the habit of "deferance addiction"?[2]

At this point, I think it would be helpful to group these questions using the time continuum of *past, present* and *future*.

OPENNESS TO LEARNING FROM THE PAST

It is to be expected that imagining the future will be a central theme in the synodal deliberations but the urgency of the future should not become an excuse for ignoring the painful and traumatic experience of the past. In my contacts with clergy over the past five years I have noticed a marked reluctance to engage with issues related to the past. They will willingly engage with issues related to self-care, stress and priestly identity. The Murphy Report, the Ferns Report, the Cloyne Report, the Ryan Report all seemed to be taboo subjects. I wonder is this to be attributed to a sense of collective guilt and shame. The assumption is that these issues have been dealt with and we can now move on. It would be a tragedy if this reluctance were allowed to block discussion at the synod.

Recently I have just completed reading Derek Scally's book *The Best Catholics in the World.* In short, the book is an attempt to answer this central question: *How did we lose our wits to allows this to happen?*[3] He is not interested in blaming, rather his standpoint is one of trying to understand. He embarks on this exploration because in his judgment the Irish Church has up to

2 Marie Collins quoted in *The Best Catholics in the World,* Derek Scally, London: Penguin Random House 2021, 147.

3 Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World,* (London: Penguin Random House 2021, 150.

this time failed to engage in a meaningful reflection on its past. The book contains interviews with some of the key players in the recent scandals. Judge Sean Ryan, the author of the Ryan report on industrial schools, is disappointed that his Report did not give rise to serious debate and reflection.[4] Serious questions still remain to be answered. "The shared question for everyone is: how did we take for granted something that now seems obvious to have been brutal and monstrous?"[5] I found myself asking a similar question following the publication of the recent Report on Mother and Baby Homes. Along with many Irish Catholics I find myself left with nowhere to go as I stand alone with my troubling questions and conflicted feelings. I will be disappointed and disillusioned if the forthcoming Synod does not provide me with the *opportunity* to be part of a collective search for understanding. The debate up to now has been characterized by defensive withdrawal rather than deep reflection.

I think it is fair to say that the Irish Church's capacity for reflection has been blocked due to traumatic nature of our history. We are a traumatized Church. Just as trauma blocks the individual's capacity to remember and reflect, which is essential for dealing with trauma, it also blocks us as a society and as a community. I consider the forthcoming Synod to have a *therapeutic potential* that might free up blocked energy for the Irish Church. It has the potential to be a *Kairos* or "graced" moment. This realization should embolden us to embrace it, despite our hesitancy.

OPENNESS TO THE FUTURE

Otto Scharmer, the author of *Theory U* identifies two sources of learning: (1) learning by reflection on the past and (2) learning by sensing and actualizing emerging future possibilities[6] I would add to this insight by pointing out that they are *interrelated*. Reflecting on the past frees us up to explore and imagine the future. I have noticed a growing willingness among clergy and laity to explore the future arising out of the crisis situation in which we find ourselves with regard to diminishing numbers of priests, few seminarians and an increasing number of laity distancing from the Church. There is a growing sense of urgency that, if we don't do something, the Church many of us were born into will be greatly diminished. The situation was strikingly put by Mark Patrick Hederman in an article in *The Furrow* with the title: *The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck.*

4 Ibid., p. 160
5 Derek Scally Ibid,. p. 166.
6 C. Otto Schirmer, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Application,* Oakland, CA:, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018, 9.

"The Catholic Church in Ireland has probably five, or, at most, ten years before being reduced to a tiny irrelevant minority."[7] One may disagree with the accuracy of his predication but one can't deny the sense of urgency that it evokes. I wonder to what extent do you the reader share this sense of urgency and also to what extent will this sense of urgency motivate our engagement in preparations for the Synod? I wonder has this sense of urgency taken root more in the laity than the clergy. I was heartened to listen to the recent zoom lecture by Fr Gerry O'Hanlon sponsored by the ACP and the sense of shared urgency in the discussion that followed. The contribution of three bishops to that discussion was warmly welcomed. Bridges need to be crossed and festering wounds healed in order for a common ground to take hold in preparation for the Synod.

I have been invited by several diocese to lead a pastoral conversation about *change*. My practice is to begin by posing a series of questions: What *response* does the word change evoke in you? To what extent do you have a sense of *urgency* about the need for change? As you look to the *future* what concerns have you? The range of responses to these questions varied greatly. Some were enthusiastic, others cautious, others questioned the need for change and a significant group said they were too old and tired to embrace change at this time of their lives. I was reminded of the observation by the pastoral theologian Peter Steinke: "Change, like someone saying the word *cancer,* makes a direct hit at the amygdala."[8] One shouldn't be surprised that a conversation about the future will elicit strong and varied emotions especially when the subject matter is our own church family. I ask myself, what is it like for a church family to have such a conversation? My initial response is to have realistic expectations. Don't expect everyone to feel that same way about change. As we know, grace builds on nature. Some clergy with the best will in the world struggle with change because of age, health and previous life experiences. This was brought home to me recently as I read Brendan Hoban's latest book: *A Priest's Diary.* In his own forthright manner he sums up his life as follows: "My life is governed by the static, the given, the habitual, the dullness that sheer repetition brings. To live is not to change at all and to live well is not to change at all, at all. Everything, it seems to me just is."[9] I wonder if Brendan is speaking tongue in cheek. At the same time, I sense a warning to any bishop not to approach bearing good news of change.

7 Mark Patrick Hederman, 'The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck', *The Furrow,* April 2017, 206.

8 Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope,* Lanham, MD.: Rowan & Littlefield Pub., 2014, 39.

9 Brendan Hoban, *A Priest's Diary,* Dublin: Banley House, 2020, 152.

Bishops and other church leaders have for many years now been inviting Catholics to think about the future by posing questions like: "What will the parish of the future look like if it is to realize (its) task?"[10] It is the role of a leader to pose such questions. The question invites the listener to imagine an, as yet, unrealized future. I have great faith in the power of such questions while at the same time conscious that people vary greatly in their ability to engage with them. I find myself imagining an elderly, frail priest responding to the question as follows: "Don't ask me to imagine a future, the way things are will see me out." Are we to interpret his words as a form of resistance or an honest reflection of his cognitive capacities at this point in time? Maybe something of both.

A recurrent theme running through the literature on change is to expect *resistance*. I have explored this topic with several diocesan groups preparing them not only to expect resistance but to recognize it when it occurs. When someone objects to a proposal, it makes a difference if you can name it as resistance rather than accusing them of being difficult. It is helpful to normalize resistance and recall the words of Isaac Newton: "It is a natural and expected part of change – for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction". I like to think of resistance as the individual's mental immune system or the organization's immune system, similar to our bodies' immune system – a term we have become more than familiar with in these Covid days. The success of the forthcoming Synod will to a large extent depend on our ability to recognize resistance when it occurs and to respond appropriately. It will take many and varied forms at different stages of the process. Just imagine the range of excuses people are likely to make for not attending preparatory meetings. Experts on the subject warn us that the most difficult form of resistance to recognize is *organizational resistance* because of the collusive factor.

I have been posing questions in regard to our readiness to explore the past and our openness to imagine a different future that is beckoning us. One of the crucial issues facing the Synod will be the delicate task of striking a *balance* between the two time-perspectives. To quote Philip Zimbardo: "Depending on the demands of a particular situation one time- perspective must take precedence while the others may temporarily recede."[11] I expect at different stages of the process a particular time-perspective will take precedence. Our sense of urgency will propel us to engage

10 Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, *The Church in Dublin: Where will it be in ten years' time.* Press release November 16 2017.

11 Philip Zimbardo, *The Time Paradox: Using the new Psychology of Time to your Advantage*, London: Rider Pub.. 2010.

with the present and with the future. However, as I have pointed out our engagement with the past has been so fragmented and minimal it needs to be "ring-fenced" to use a budgetary term.

MY FEARS FOR THE SYNOD

I expect that between now and the end of the Synod there will be several attempts to "*hijack*" the process. There are plenty of vested interests hiding in the long grass with the potential and motivation to do so. I presume that many of my readers can recall the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin during a march to protest against the atrocity of Bloody Sunday in Derry. The march was organized by the Dublin Trades Union Council. A friend of mine was one of the chief organizers and I recall his anger, rage and sense of helplessness at what happened. It was to be a peaceful march but it got hijacked when a militant group armed with petrol bombs infiltrated the march. Not many years later as a member of a religious Order I attended a Provincial Chapter and on the final day of proceedings witnessed the event being hijacked. I mention these examples to encourage you the reader to recall your own experience of events being hijacked. It may have been a family gathering, a political event, annual general meeting or even a prayer meeting! In the Catholic tradition we have a template for interpreting such events by looking on them as the work of the *evil spirit* seeking to derail proceedings. What I label as "hijacking" can be looked on as a form of the resistance I alluded to earlier. Pope Francis would seem to have had plenty experience of hijacking at the recent Synods in Rome. During the *Synod on the Family* it took the form of one issue being allowed to dominate all others, namely permitting divorced and remarried Catholics to receive the Eucharist. Something similar happened at the *Synod on the Amazon* where permitting the ordination of married men became the issue. It caused sufficient disruption for Pope Francis to conclude that the conditions were not present to conduct a proper discernment.

Another fear I harbour for the Synod is that a certain mindset might serve to block the contemplative listening process. Jennifer Garvey Berger refers to it as a *mindtrap,* which she describes as a "part cognitive bias, part neurological quirk, part adaptive response to a simple world that doesn't exist anymore."[12] She proceeds to give examples of these: We are trapped by simple stories; We are trapped brightness; We are trapped by control. The mindtrap that particularly concerns me is the *victim mindtrap.* For example, during the Covid lockdown I hear clergy making

12 Jennifer Garvey Berger, *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps: How to Thrive in Complexity*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019,9.

statements like: *We are not needed anymore* and *The government is against us.* I don't dispute that there may be grounds for these statements but what I want to warn against is getting trapped into the victim mindset. It locks one into the past and blocks any creative engagement with the future. For those in ministry it blocks altruism, the urge to reach out and minister to others. Catholics in Ireland have an historical pull going back to Penal Times where the roots of victimhood find fertile ground. Derek Scally opened my eyes to this possibility. "In the Penal Laws we have the foundation for a framing of our history as a narrative of victimhood."[13] It is only right that we should remember the stories of our past, they are constitutive of our identity but they come with a "government warning." Therapists are familiar with how the victim stance can block clients re-engaging with their lives. One can only imagine how this mindtrap might block us hearing the call to be agents of change. As we struggle with this mindtrap we can do no better than look to the example of Jesus. In the words of Richard Rohr: "Jesus did the victim thing right He neither played the victim for his own self-aggrandizement nor did he make victims of other people. He became a liberating and forgiving victim."[14]

As I describe the victim mindtrap I am conscious that in many cases it is a version of the mindtrap of *clericalism.* On the part of the clergy, it gives rise to certain expectations that their status entitles them to special consideration and on the part of the laity it creates the mindset that they should defer to this expectation. I am describing it this way to highlight the *collusive* nature of clericalism; we buy into it so to speak. Marie Collins who has extensive experience of clericalism coined the term "deference addiction."[15] It would be unrealistic and naïve to expect that it will not be operative during the Synodal Process. I don't consider it unrealistic to expect that the process itself might contribute to some diminishment in its influence. While the process is described as at core a discernment process, one could regard it as a process designed to contain the influence of clericalism. If this is to happen it is important that the clerical viewpoint is not allowed to dominate. For this it is vital to have a wide diversity of voices and viewpoints. "Diverse groups make smarter decisions." [16] An all-male elderly group is incapable of mapping the way forward to a Church in a complex world. For several reasons one could say that at this point in time the *Synodal Process* is the only show in town.

13 Derek Scally op.cit., 2021, 69.

14 Richard Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern: Order/Disorder/Reorder,* Cincinnati, OH.: Franciscan Media, 2020, 28.

15 Derek Scally, op.cit., 2021, 147.

16 Steven Johnson, *Farsighted: How to Make Decisions that Matter the Most,* New York: Riverhead Books, 2018, 153.

CONCLUSION

One might get the impression from the title I've chosen that my intention in writing this article was to cast doubt on the wisdom of planning for a National Synod. On the contrary, I welcome and applaud the proposal. To return to my metaphor of migrants preparing to cross the Mediterranean; I have attempted to describe the challenges that we are likely to encounter on such a journey, not in the hope that it will dissuade us from attempting the crossing but to *equip* us with the mindset we need for the journey ahead. There is wind in our sails because of our shared sense of urgency. We set out not just because the goal of becoming a vibrant and welcoming church appeals to us but because we also believe that the journey itself has the potential of changing us and making that goal more a reality.

Gift or Threat. Religious difference is usually regarded as a theological and political *problem*. But the guarding of difference, that specificity of faith which confers a particular identity, is not in itself a problem. The problem arises when religion goes toxic, as it were, when the naturally inward-looking and conservative mindset of any traditional creed is turned outward, demonising some threatening 'other'. The root of all conflicts, as René Girard points out, is not difference as such but *competition*, what he understands in terms of a mimetic rivalry between persons, countries, cultures. If that is correct, then attention needs to be paid to the conditions which create that mood of 'competition' and form – or *mal*form- the public space.

– Michael Barnes, SJ, *Ignatian Spirituality & lnterreligious Dialogue,* 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.178.

The Magnificat: The Church's Most Sung Canticle of Praise (Luke 1:46-55)

Kathleen Coyle

MARY SETS OUT ON A PROPHETIC JOURNEY

Luke portrays Mary as going "with haste" on a prophetic journey "into the hill country" to visit her cousin Elizabeth (Lk 1:39). Her hurried journey evoked for St. Ambrose the glad tidings depicted by Isaiah's words, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation" (Is 52:7).[1] Luke tells us about the meeting of two women who share the grace of being pregnant with children who will have special missions in God's plan of salvation. It is the only scene in the entire gospel where two women meet and hold center stage.[2] Zechariah's silence contrasts with the glorious spirit-inspired speech of both women.[3] Mary's haste and Elizabeth's loud cry of praise show the exuberant joy of these two expectant mothers. The tradition of Luke's community recalled the meeting of these two women who had heard the word of God and continued to ponder and live it. Inspired by the Spirit, Elizabeth prophetically announces that "the mother of my Lord" (Lk 1:43) has come to visit her. She blesses Mary:

> "Blessed are you among women" (v.42), words that echo the praise addressed to other women famous in Israelite history who have helped to deliver God's people from peril. When Jael dispatches an enemy of the people the prophet Deborah prays, "Most blessed be Jael among women," and Uzziah praises Judith after her spectacular defeat of the enemy general, "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High above all other women on the earth" (Jdt 13:18).[4]

1 Elizabeth Johnson: *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 259.
2 Donald Senior, "Gospel Portrait of Mary," in *Mary, Woman of Nazareth*, *Biblical and Theological Perspectives,* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 104.
3 Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1995), p. 55.
4 Johnson, p. 105.

Kathleen Coyle is a Columban Sister and lives in Crumlin, Dublin 12. She taught Systematic Theology at the East Asian Pastoral Institute and at Maryhill School of Theology, Manila.

Both Mary and Elizabeth must have been conscious of the part they were playing in the history of salvation: Mary preparing to give birth to the Messiah, Elizabeth preparing to give birth to the prophet who would prepare the way for the same Messiah. They carry in their bodies the compassion of God which they prophetically proclaim and in doing so highlight women's ability to interpret God's word for other women.

THE PROPHETIC MESSAGE OF THE MAGNIFICAT

As Mary and Elizabeth grew together in intimacy with their God and in inexhaustible compassion for their people, they praised God for the awesome accomplishments that enabled them to mother the next generation of prophets: John the precursor and Jesus the savior of the world. They can hardly contain their joy, their voices resounding, one praising the other and both praising God.[5] Luke found it fitting to attribute the *Magnificat* to Mary because she provided a compelling model of discipleship for his community. In this canticle of praise he offers us the good news that escaped Mary's lips in poetry and prophecy. It is the longest passage put on the lips of any female speaker in the New Testament. This canticle which "joyfully proclaims God's gracious, effective compassion at the advent of the messianic age" also reads like a protest against "the scriptural silencing of 'the lowly,' and the suppression of women's voices."[6] Her praise of God's victorious deeds for the oppressed community is modelled on Old Testament songs of divine praise and describes the inversion of earthly circumstances in which one recognizes God's action and bursts forth in song like her earlier sister prophets: Miriam (Ex 15; 20-21), Deborah (Jgs 5:1-31), Hannah (1Sm 2:1-10), and Judith (Jdt 16:1-17).

When Luke wants to offer the poor, the sick, the widows and the oppressed of his community a message of hope, he chooses the song of Hannah in 1 Sm 2:1-10. Hannah, whose natural distress at being childless is intensified by the provocation of Peninah, Elkanah's other wife who has had several sons and daughters and who ridiculed Hannah for being childless. At the birth of Samuel Hannah celebrates the occasion and at a heightened moment of prayer Mary would have made her own the sentiments and concerns of Hannah and sang of these in grateful song.

In their radical, subversive conversation and prayer both Mary and Elizabeth were politically astute and socially sensitive, expressing their hopes of changing the unjust structures of their society. The poor/humble/lowly "is a clear reference to the people

5 Ibid. pp. 258-259..
6 Ibid., pp. 263-264.

of Israel, usually in conditions of domination, oppression, and affliction."[7] Speaking her *Magnificat* offers a definite agenda of what has to change: the world must be turned upside down. This could only be achieved by putting down the powerful, raising up the lowly, the poor and the marginalized of the world, and filling the hungry with good things (Lk 1:52-53). While the *Magnificat* is profoundly religious it is also political. Mary's visit to Elizabeth culminates in the manifesto for social change. Both women are concerned about the future of their nation and their Galilean villagers who often had to borrow money to pay the triple tax, many falling into increasing indebtedness to the powerful and rich. During the Roman occupation Galileans had to pay the traditional tithe for the Temple in Jerusalem, a second tax as a tribute to the Roman emperor and a third to the local Jewish client-king by whom Rome ruled by proxy.[8] Dietrich Bonheoffer places the *Magnificat* among the revolutionary songs of the women prophets of the Old Testament:

> It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings; this is the passionate, surrendered, proud, enthusiastic Mary who speaks out here. This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of the Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about collapsing thrones and humbled lords of this world, even the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind. These are the tones of the women prophets of the Old Testament that now come to life in Mary's mouth.[9]

Luke anticipates in the *Magnificat* with what will later be spelt out by Jesus when he goes to the synagogue in Nazareth, unrolls the scroll, and reads a passage from the prophet Isaiah as he announces his mission to liberate the poor and marginalized (Lk 4:18-19). He later spells out this same prophetic message as he proclaims the Beatitudes: Like Mary, the poor understand differently, the meek experience another sort of power and the hungry thirst for justice. Herman Hendricks[10] suggests that Luke was most likely referring

7 Herman Hendrickx, *A Key to the Gospel of Luke* (Quezon City: MST/Claretian Publications, 1992), p. 35.

8 Johnson, p. 334.

9 Sermon preached by Bonheoffer on the Third Sunday of Advent, 1933; in Dietrich Bonheoffer, *The Mystery of Holy Night*, ed., Manfred Weber (New York: Crossroad, 1996), 6. Cited in Johnson, *Truly Our Sister*, p. 267.

10 Hendricks, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Manila: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1979), p. 35.

to the urban poor of the city where his community was situated. They are blessed and become the recipients of Jesus' good news. Raymond Brown adds:

> Luke's peculiar and emphatic castigation of wealth (6:24-26; 12:19-20; 16:25; 21:1-4) points to the existence of many poor in the communities to be served … the Magnificat would resonate among such groups; for them the Christian good news meant that the ultimately blessed were not the mighty or the rich who tyrannized them.[11]

Unfortunately, centuries of rote recitation have obscured the boldness of the *Magnificat* as well as its social implications for us today. "The kingdom is about living justly in a world of injustice; and justice is always about bodies and lives."[12] The World Bank estimates that the present economic system with its throw away culture, fails the needs of over 1.2 billion people who suffer from malnutrition, disease and illiteracy and live in squalid surroundings.[13] Their problem is compounded by the negative impact on their environment by ozone-depleting and poisonous chemicals which deplete fertile soils. In recent decades the destruction of the tropical rainforests has led to the rapid acceleration of species extinction which has led E. O. Wilson to remark "(R)uling out nuclear war," the worst thing now taking place in the world is the loss of genetic diversity."[14] And the poor become more and more impoverished. We are therefore invited to ponder anew Mary's Magnificat:

> … coming from the young Mary's voice, from the wombs and the bodies of this meeting of women, it remains in the air, forever shouting out God's actions among men and women and proclaiming down the centuries that the powerful will be overthrown, that the rich will be empty. And that the little/humble people will be rewarded in the dynamic of the reign of God, which is made flesh in the community of believers.[15]

11 Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (New York: Image Books, 1979), p. 351.
12 John Dominic Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering what Happened in the Years Immediately after the Execution of Jesus* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), p. xxx.
13 Sean McDonagh, *Passion for the Earth: The Christin Vocation to Promote Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), p. 8.
14 Cited in Sean McDonogh, p. 111.
15 Carmina Navia, "Mary of Nazareth revisited," The Many Faces of Mary, *Concilium,* Diego Irarrazaval, Susan Ross and Miriam Therese Winter (London: SCM Press, 2008/4), p. 25.

THE MAGNIFICAT: A TEXT THAT LINGERS, A WORD THAT EXPLODES

Walter Brueggemann,[16] the Old Testament scholar explains that when a scriptural text is spoken or read and received by the listener in different times and communities, the text lingers on through time; it is "recharged" with fresh meanings by successive readings. When the text is reflected upon and spoken again it becomes a moment of revelation, "the present is freshly illuminated and reality is irreversibly transformed." In the intimate relationship between the text and the reader the timeless word appears, bearing with it revelation for the day. Its meaning is explored from the perspective of new situations and it discloses, Bruggemann writes, "something about that moment that would, without this utterance, not be known, seen, heard, or made available." The *Magnificat* is an excellent illustration of the lingering of a treasured tradition which is reflected upon and "recharged" with fresh meanings, and explodes into new usage in different cultural and historical contexts.

The song of praise that was sung by Hannah erupted with new usage and remarkable imagination as it was spoken again to the poor and afflicted of Luke's community. It erupts again, lingers on and explodes again with new meaning amid the efforts of communities and movements to redefine themselves in the face of globalization amid the horrors of the constantly reopened wounds in such places as Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Southern Sudan. It explodes amid the uprootedness of more than a 20 million political refugees – a churning of peoples and cultures unprecedented in world history. With the growing multiculturalism of our cities and towns, where the faceless poor are often pushed to the margins, migrants are a threat and refugees are an embarrassment, we see a world-wide split between a more or less small upper class profiting from the world market, a middle class, most of whom are losing out more and more, and a vast majority of impoverished and excluded nations. Pictures of the gaunt and emaciated bodies of starving Yemeni children across our TV screens are a reminder of an appalling daily tragedy that is allowed to continue. The high death rate from the Covid 19 pandemic in countries like India and Brazil where the poor do not have access to vaccines or medical supplies, is a scandal and a blight on our Christian conscience.

In the midst of these depressing realities the Spirit groans with the cries of the oppressed and the pollution of our planet, Mary's prophetic voice needs to be heard again in our world. Her message, intended for all the lowly and the miserable explodes

16 Walter Brueggemann, "Texts the Linger: Words, that Explode," *Theology Today,* Vol. 54. No 2, July 1977, p. 180- 199.

with even greater urgency today as we try to form communities that contemplatively reflect the mystical interrelatedness of all reality and that pour themselves out in compassionate living, and reverence for all God's people and for the cosmos. In the words of Bishop Pedro Casildaliga of Brazil, Mary is "so full of God, yet so much ours."[17]

'AND THE ANGEL LEFT HER' (LK 1:38)

The angel has departed and she is on her own now, ready to assume responsibility for carrying out God's mission and together with Joseph, bringing up her son and nourishing his faith. Like the wise scribe, she is silent and ponders (see Sir 39:1-3) in her heart, interiorizing the mystery in the core of her being (Lk 2:19). While she "did not grasp immediately all that she had heard but listened willingly, letting events sink into her memory and seeking to work out their meaning,"[18] she preserved, remembered, and treasured these events as she tried to interpret her life. Mary's was a life in the process of becoming as she actively contemplated the word of God.[19] Although she did not always understand Jesus' mission, she remained faithful to the end, pondering all these things in her heart (Lk 2:51). There is a moment in our lives when our angels leave us too and we are left on our own to ponder, to treasure, and to interiorize the divine mystery in the core of our being. Like Mary we may not always understand the happenings in our lives but we seek to interpret their meaning and strive to remain faithful. We continue pondering in our heart (Lk 2:51).

The invitation to hear the Word and live out that Word in compassionate action is as urgent in today's world of global structures of oppression as it was in first century Galilee under Roman occupation. In a world suffering from ecological devastation, global heating, militarism, starvation and poverty seem to dominate. In this present contemporary struggle, Christians can claim Mary as a critical symbol of compassionate love. Mary's *Magnificat* praising God for compassion made flesh in her womb, lingers on amid the unjust structures of our world, and explodes with new meaning amid the horrors of the constantly reopened wounds in such places as Syria, Palestine, Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq and southern Sudan. At this moment as I write, car parks in India are being converted into crematoria from which never-

17 This is an English translation of the Spanish title of a book of Marian poetry: *Llena de Dios y tan Nuestra*. by Bishop Pedro Casildaliga in Brazil:

18 Raymond E. Brown et al., *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press and Paulist, 1978) pp. 150-151.

19 Johnson, *Truly Our Sister,* p. 278.

ending plumes of ash ascend from pyres of burning bodies. These crematoria, overloaded with bodies, are clouding the skies over some of the country's biggest cities. The message of the *Magnificat* therefore needs to be heard again today, if we are to care for our sick and needy brothers and sisters. It is an urgent call and an invitation to empower the lost, the lowly, and the "bottom billion" – the "surplus people" of our world.

Holy prudence. For Ignatius, 'holy prudence' is the attitude that is taught by the Holy Spirit. Coming first among the cardinal virtues (prior to justice, fortitude and temperance), prudence consists in the capacity to pick the right criterion when deciding to act. The gift of counsel depends on it. It stands at the heart of moral reflections, both for the philosophers of old and for the scholastic tradition. It can be described as the wisdom of action. Thomas Aquinas taught that no means should be neglected to acquire the qualities of prudence: taking instruction from those known to possess it; learning how to reason well so that self-deceptions can be avoided in reaching a decision; bearing in mind all the circumstances; preventing any evil from taking over the action; knowing how to foresee. Prudence, as the capacity to choose the means to act in specific circumstances, provides itself with rules of action, with criteria. To act without any criteria would surely be to follow blind impulse or passion

– Patrick C. Goujon, SJ, *Counsels of the Holy Spirit,* 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.36.

The Place of Theology: Against the Backdrop of Light and Life

Michael A. Conway

This is the third instalment in a tryptic of articles dealing with the question of studying theology at third level as part of a humanities degree.[1] I have been considering a significant crisis that is emerging in some institutions with a view to exploring how a department, school, or faculty might respond. In the first paper I dealt with some inadequate responses that not only exacerbate the nascent crisis but reflect a diminished understanding of theology itself in the academy. In the second contribution I raised some pertinent issues that reflect on the mindset of the teacher in the classroom and the style of interaction with contemporary learners. Now, in this final article, I would like, first, to develop a number of additional points about the place and value of theology in the university and then, present what I will term a 'conjured programme' that might serve as a foundation and resource for more specific curricula. My hope is that this might help toward imagining and realizing a viable future for theology in the various, different 'places of theology' in our Irish landscape. The programme is not conceived, however, as either a comprehensive inventory of available material or as a master-template that would (or even could) be transposed simply into different institutional settings, but, rather, as a stimulus towards designing more adequate site-specific responses to the needs of contemporary adult learners.

UNIVERSITY AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

For the sake of this discussion, I am simply assuming that it is both justified and appropriate to have theology as a discipline in the contemporary university (whether secular or ecclesiastical). On

1 See Michael A. Conway, '"Break Every mirror in the house": The Place of Theology,' *Furrow* 72 (2021): 195-204; and Michael A. Conway, 'The Place of Theology: From Sphere to Polyhedron,' *Furrow* 72 (2021): 271-80.

Michael A. Conway is a priest of the Diocese of Galway. He is Professor of Faith and Culture at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

this precise question, for example, Keith Ward at Oxford makes the obvious point that "Religions are such an important and vital force in the modern world that it would be a dereliction of intellectual duty if its claims were not taken seriously, investigated carefully, and evaluated with reasoned criticism."[2] Given this as accepted, however, there is a further question of its place and its connection to other disciplines. In the classical university setting theology was grounded in the unitary dimension that was the uni-versity. As a general grounding, however, any such posited unity is less and less convincing for many so that really what we now have is more a poly- or multi-versity.[3] This does not, however, completely obliterate the desire (and, perhaps, need) to acknowledge a grounding unity. It is reflected in a newfound concern with interdisciplinarity, which is now a growing feature of contemporary third level education.

Interdisciplinarity is the recognition that there is an implicit unity that we might at the very least work towards. This acknowledgement, I believe, is vital since *specialization* builds and, simultaneously, undermines the university (if there is no counterbalancing dynamic). Indeed, as far back as 1890 Léon Bourgeois had observed that 'the spirit of speciality appeared to [him] … to be one of the most dangerous forms of ignorance.'[4] Specialists in any area who transgress the boundaries of their competence (and this is easy to do) and claim to speak for the totality or for areas that lie outside their precise region of research and expertise can readily mislead others (in being misled themselves) and do great damage in a community or in a culture.[5] Given its unique position in the academy, theology can be a powerful corrective to the disintegration of a partisan specialisation in the consort of disciplines (and not against them). It elevates the whole university enterprise to a view that permits a modicum of possible overview and integration.

However, in order to be a successful dialogue partner in the academy through interdisciplinary exploration, theology itself

2 Keith Ward, "Why Theology Should be taught in Secular Universities," *Discourse* 4 (2004-5): 22-37, at 26.

3 Clearly, there are complex discussions behind these statements that I cannot explore as part of this paper.

4 Léon Bourgeois, 'Pour la renaissance de l'Université,' in L'Université en crise : Mort ou résurrection, *Revue du Mauss* 33 (2009) : 38-46, at 39. Of course, this applies equally and, perhaps, especially to theologians, when they lack an adequate general culture in theology itself, in literature, in the humanities, and, even, to some degree, in the natural sciences.

5 It is not uncommon for a university (or equivalent third level institution) to have to disavow in public claims and statements made by staff, who stray (to put it mildly) outside their zones of competence. The internet now exacerbates this feature of contemporary academia in so easily and readily giving public voice to the most bizarre of claims and ideas.

needs to take on the responsibility of building the very bridges that facilitate communication and access for others to its domain. It must at least leave its own comfort zone, so to speak, even at undergraduate level, and open up avenues of connection with other disciplines, which, in turn, permit and facilitate others in meeting and exploring something of the richness of theology as part of a greater comprehension of human reality. Pope Francis lays great emphasis on interdisciplinarity and sees it as one of the fundamental criteria for the renewal of theology that have emerged from the Second Vatican Council's teaching and the church's experience in these past decades.[6] He observes:

> Today's recovery of an interdisciplinary approach is certainly positive and promising, even in its 'weak' form as a simple multidisciplinary approach that favours a better understanding from several points of view of an object of study. It is all the more so in its 'strong' form, as cross-disciplinary, situating and stimulating all disciplines against the backdrop of the Light and Life offered by the Wisdom streaming from God's Revelation.[7]

In a humanities programme, theology contributes substantially to countering the reductionism that you sometimes get, where education is reduced to the scientific, the technological, and the economic. It keeps open a horizon that leads the human spirit and mind to consider that Infinity that nurtures the deepest levels of human longing, searching, and knowing. In fact, it may well be a privileged interlocutor in that it is concerned with a primordial unity of both source and destiny that grounds the phenomenological order as we experience and explore it in the university.[8]

ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS

No programme of theology can be drawn up in isolation from other disciplines in the academy and, indeed, from the ambient culture. Taking a degree in the humanities, where theology is a major component, naturally lends itself to a deeper consideration of the necessary links and connections between theology and other university disciplines. Ideally, students themselves should discover this as they move to and fro between the disciplines (a valuable feature of a humanities degree). Practically, however, students need support in making the connections, in discovering

6 See *Veritatis gaudium*, No. 4 (c).
7 See *Veritatis gaudium,* No. 4 (c).
8 Whereas this may be quite clear from the perspective of theology, it is not so from the perspective of many other disciplines in the academy.

where there are crossovers, and in understanding the complex relationships involved in linking theology to other areas of human exploration. This is simply to make explicit the university as a university and theology's place in it.[9]

Apart from the more external exchange between disparate disciplines (that are, in fact, not separate), it is vital, too, that theology as a discipline itself clarifies, describes, and deals with the significant junctures between theology as a discipline and other areas of human research and study. This will enable students not only to connect initially for themselves with theology (which is almost always very different in practice to what they anticipate at the outset of their studies) but will further initiate for them the complex conversation between theology and other areas of life and study (that now include a broad spectrum of disciplines that may range from history to fashion studies!). Students need to be enabled in this way to integrate theology into the broader conversations of the university, where theology has a capacity to explore depths of the human condition that cannot be accessed through other disciplines (and this irrespective of one's personal life commitments).

DYNAMIC SYLLABUS

If you survey the teaching of theology over the last fifty years or so in Europe alone, what you soon discover is that, despite the appearance of standardization, in fact, there is no single institutional form, no standard material content, and no particular teaching model that is consistent across institutions, denominations, or, even, within countries.[10] Every 'place of theology' is significantly marked by the historical, cultural, social, and religious character of the place itself. This is no real surprise and can be read as a plea for the recognition of the importance of diversity and flexibility between and in particular institutions.

In a contemporary context, any theology programme needs to show a high degree of flexibility in terms of the material explored, modifying and renewing the programme, and assessing student performance. In particular, a syllabus cannot be fixed every ten years or so (as was perfectly adequate in the past). On such flexibility Pope Francis observes:

9 Newman's essay on the university retains its full rigour as a discourse on an ideal expression; in practice, however, as we now have it, there are very few academic institutions that even could replicate this ideal. The basic insights, however, retain their validity, something that should now be obvious after several decades during which both scientistic positivism and Marxism blinded many to the full breadth of the human intellectual endeavour as mirrored in the university.

10 And this is true even from within the confines of Roman Catholic institutions, although it is often assumed to be otherwise.

> It is essential to have light and flexible structures that express the priority given to welcoming and dialogue, to inter- and trans-disciplinary work and networking. The statutes, the internal organization, the method of teaching, the program of studies should reflect the physiognomy of the Church 'which goes forth.' The class schedules and other aspects of university life should be designed to encourage as much as possible the participation of those who wish to study theology: in addition to seminarians and religious, even lay people and women both lay and religious.[11]

It seems to me that the days of a fixed, standard syllabus are over. This does not mean, however, that, on the one hand, there are no canonical texts and discussions that might be integrated into any particular programme, or, on the other, that there is an absolute anarchy in terms of the discipline. There is a vibrant, rich theological tradition, from which one can and must make choices in terms of drawing on that tradition in response to the current circumstances (which may vary considerably across institutions even on this relatively small island). The flexibility in making these choices is what gives a particular colour to any specific programme in any individual institution. This diversity is not an impoverishment, but, rather, an enrichment that honours the specificity of person, place, and patronage. There is, clearly, a hermeneutic task here that calls for intelligence, creativity, and discernment, *whereby the learner is at the centre of perspective*. Being aware of this and responding appropriately as teachers of theology will contribute considerably to the quality of student experience, which is vital not only in terms of attracting students, but, most importantly, in their retention in any programme.

CHOICE AND ATTRACTIVENESS

A programme must, to an important degree, appeal to students in terms of their interests and needs, and to this end, the element of choice is now a significant feature of the contemporary university. The element of choice empowers students and in doing so makes for a richer classroom experience for everyone, student and teacher alike. It is essential in any future planning for theology, where it enhances the dynamic element of a programme. When students may exercise considerable freedom in what they study, not only does it give them a greater sense of being responsible for their own

11 Pope Francis, 'Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,' Naples, Friday, 21 June 2019, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/june/documents/papa-francesco_20190621_teologia-napoli.html, accessed 7 May 2021.

education, but, further, they are much more likely to be energised by their course of study. In addition, it gives students a real role in the ongoing development of a programme, whereby modules can be introduced, adjusted, or withdrawn on the basis of student uptake and feedback. This movement in itself enables the effective renewal of a programme over time and keeps it in tune with the upcoming generation of students.

A key factor for any programme of theology is the continuous recruiting of new students from the domestic culture.[12] The salient feature here is ensuring the 'attractiveness' of what one has to offer. This element of attractiveness was singled out by Pope Benedict as an essential feature of evangelization and ratified on numerous occasions by Pope Francis.

> The mystery of the Redemption is entered into and continues to work in the world through an attraction that can draw the hearts of men and women because it is and appears more alluring than the seductions which appeal to the selfishness that is a result of sin … The Church has always insisted that this is the reason why we follow Jesus and proclaim his Gospel: through the force of attraction wrought by Christ himself and by his Spirit.[13]

This is to be differentiated clearly, however, from any and every form of proselytism, which is invasive and possibly even abusive in that it does not respect the other's integrity as a free human agent. This element of attractiveness is rooted in the good news of the gospel itself. It is not to be understood in a superficial, cosmetic sense, which might be exploited by marketing strategies to dupe potential students into believing something that is other than presented. As opposed to operating on the level of rhetoric and persuasion, it draws others by resonating with the deeper levels of the human condition. It signals a possibility in terms of responding to an intellectual curiosity, or a desire of heart, or a search for authenticity, or a response to an existential dilemma, etc. In a sense a programme of theology *should* be attractive to students.

12 Given that academic theology is a service to society, culture, and church, it is vital that it is attentive and responsive to the domestic situation. It may well be easier (and highly tempting) to concentrate on recruiting students from other parts of the world, but this is always secondary to responding to the ambient context. This, indeed, could be used as an excuse or even an evasive tactic in terms of engaging with one's own world.

13 Pope Francis, 'Message of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Pontifical Mission Societies,'http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2020/ documents/papa-francesco_20200521_messaggio-pom.html, accessed 7 May 2021 (English translation corrected). See also *Christus vivit*, No. 216; *Evangelii gaudium*, nos. 34, 39, 73, 99, 100, 107, 131, 157, 159, 166, 167, 168, 210; *Christus vivit*, Nos. 39, 277; *Veritatis gaudium,* No. 4.

This is not really an 'optional extra' that can be dispensed with on the grounds of professional qualification or the requirements of ministry or some other ideological justification.

SERVING THE AMBIENT SOCIETY, CHURCH, AND CULTURE

The place of theology is a specific locus between, on the one hand, the wider culture and, on the other, the ecclesial community, while being, at the same time, centred in the intellectual world of the academy. It is answerable to a certain degree to each of these forums, and this most immediately to the university, where it cannot evade its responsibilities in terms of respecting academic freedom, acting and engaging with the other with integrity, and honouring the full rigour of intellectual inquiry. It is akin to a train station where traffic moves in all directions, arriving and leaving in complete freedom. It should never be turned into a clubhouse for an elite, or a casino for those who wish to evade life, or even a haven for those who do not wish to think for themselves and act accordingly.

This locus is clearly specific to theology. This unique positioning is not a limitation on its capacity to explore human reality (as is sometimes thought), but, rather, opens up horizons of exploration that are utterly unimaginable from within the specific parameters of most other disciplines in the university. The place of theology is a place of service to the academy, to culture, to society, to church, and to the local community that responds to social, human, familial, national, international, religious, and personal needs. It is seriously misplaced to treat the place of theology as being isolated from an outside (understood as an *ad extra*), as if it were a self-contained oasis in the landscape. As a place of service there needs to be movement not only inwards but also outwards. This outward movement involves, for example, collaboration with other civic institutions (and not just the obvious one of other academic institutions), ecclesial organisations, social and community projects, and so on. Such endeavours are not ancillary but essential to theology as an academic discipline.[14] They keep 'the place of theology' alert and alive to the dynamics of the ambient church, society, and culture. Pope Francis, speaking in Naples about theology, observes:

14 Up to the recent the past, theology was taught mainly to seminarians (usually by priests) and, as such, had more or less the horizon of pastoral ministry in view (even if the practical implications of this were not always adequately honoured). There is now, however, the real risk that in the academy theology would become an exclusive academic enterprise, deracinating the discipline not only from its living connection to the local church, but also from the surrounding culture. The danger here is that of ending up in a squirrel cage of religious ideology, which, ultimately, is neither creative nor life engendering for others (in the redemptive sense).

> I would say that theology … is called to be a theology of hospitality and to develop a sincere dialogue with social and civil institutions, with universities and research centres, religious *leaders* and all women and men of good will, for the construction in peace of an inclusive and fraternal society, and also for the care of creation.[15]

And students need to realize this in their engagement with theology, and, where possible, encouraged in connecting to the wider community through projects, placements, invitations, exhibitions, public events, etc.

A PROGRAMME FOR THEOLOGY (HUMANITIES DEGREE)

In the light of the above remarks and my earlier discussions, I would like, now, to propose a 'conjured programme' (see Appendix) that might function as a starting point for reflection on the programming of theology in a contemporary academic setting.[16] Theology is understood here as a half-degree subject in a humanities degree programme, which is termed (not without reflection): *BA(Hons) in Theology, Religion and Culture*. This conjured programme is conceived as a 'study document,' which might serve as a stimulus for a faculty or a school that wishes to renew and reinvigorate how theology is being taught. Clearly, there is considerable further work to be done in terms of the actual design of modules (complete with aims, objectives, and modes of assessment) and, importantly, in terms of assuring a classroom engagement that delivers a genuine student-centred experience.

My thought is theological, not sociological or economic, and so it is not drawn up with a view to increasing the numbers of students taking theology (although I would wager that it might, indeed, lead to such an increase).[17] It is composed with a view to contributing to the communal life of society, in general, and, in particular, to the life of the church. My idea is that this would be an initial

15 See Pope Francis, 'Address of His Holiness Pope Francis,' Naples, 21 June 2019, emphasis in English original, translation slightly modified.

16 I have consulted, worked with, and received critique and feedback from a range of persons in drawing up this programme, all of whom are connected in various ways with theology, both inside and outside of the academy. In this, I have been able to draw on a vast expanse of experience, and I would like to express my sincere gratitude to all those who made contributions in various ways and in different capacities. Responsibility for this final version, however, rests on my own desk!

17 Although working on a relatively small scale, since 2015, *Carlow College, St. Patrick's,* has changed how theology is being taught to bring it in line with many of the principles outlined in these articles. It is remarkable that there has been a steady increase in the number of students taking theology, with the numbers keeping it on as a subject, at times, doubling from year to year.

presentation, but that in the actual running of the programme, there would emerge in time an inner momentum, which would, then, bring about change as required, guided, critically, by learner interest, uptake, and feedback. This is really a call for theology to take seriously its own integrity as a university discipline and act accordingly in its engagement with a new generation. If it does this, the discipline, it seems to me, will have a future.

APPENDIX

BA (Hons) in Theology, Religion and Culture

The conjured programme is based on a three-year schedule full-time, whereby the theology component of the degree is to be structured on four pillars (as opposed to the classical 'subjects' in theology), which should, then, be accentuated in the various modules. Not only do these pillars ensure a certain cohesion to the programme, but they resonate better with contemporary university structuring in general, which is less about taking 'subjects' in the traditional sense and more about exploring particular areas from different perspectives. This corresponds, further, to the desire for greater interdisciplinarity from within theology itself. These pillars are:

A) World, Society, and Religion
- which will speak more to the *global* dimension of world, religion(s), and society.

B) Community and Belonging
- which will speak more to the *local* perspective of society, community, and Church.

C) Scripture, Literature, and Sacred Texts
- which will speak more to *scripture*, bible, literature, and sacred texts

D) Person, Self, and Identity
- which will speak more to the *singular* aspect of life, religion, and faith

Preliminary Remarks

The programme is to advance in three steps, corresponding to each of the years. Each step should be emphasized in the respective modules, with a clear development in the various steps in terms of the quality and level of engagement and, concomitantly, the aims

and objectives of each module. They ought to be appropriately and adequately challenging so as to accentuate the element of progress in the programme. The steps are as follows: year one, 'Beginnings,' which is concerned with origins, starting points, access, engagement, attractiveness, etc.; year two, 'Opening up a conversation,' which attends to communication, dialogue, boundaries, exchange, meeting and respecting otherness, complementarity, etc.; and, finally, year three, 'Looking to the Future,' which looks to the future, freedom, responsibility, creativity, spirit, eschatology, etc.

Student voice and choice are critical to the programme, so that the classroom experience is to be an interactive one, with mechanisms of student-led change built into the programme (whereby students become real players in the élan of change). There is only *one* compulsory module, namely, Th 100 (an initial *methodology* module)

Students should choose four/five from ten (approx.) modules over two semesters (the statistics here to be adjusted to correspond with credit ratings and requirements, etc.). Students may move between modules for the first two weeks of each semester (at which point they must make their final selection). The minimum number of required enrolments to ensure that a module might run should be fixed at six enrolments from the cohort of students taking this particular programme.

Students must take at least one module from each pillar over the course of each year. If a module does not run (because of inadequate numbers), students are free, in respect of the corresponding pillar, to choose from the full listing of modules available, thereby maintaining the vital element of choice.

Module Assessment should reflect an interactive classroom experience, draw on an innovative spectrum of assessment methods, and, correspondingly, adjudicate a broad range of student skills. Assessment should move away from giving large percentage marks to summative assessment so as to include and value diverse forms of formative assessment.

SELECTION OF MODULES

The programme is drawn up in line with the requirements of the Teaching Council of Ireland. There are eight set modules and two open modules assigned to each year (or two semesters). The two open modules not only allow for a degree of variability on a yearly basis, but also provide an additional mechanism for introducing modules into the programme, whereby a new offering would be run over a trial period.

Year One: Beginnings

Th 100: *Doing Theology at the University* (Methodology, attending classes, taking notes, writing skills, essays, reading, library use, personal statement, education plan, etc.). This is the *only* compulsory module

Th 101 (A): *Religion as a Global Reality* (major world religions: their origins, histories, and basic beliefs and practices, philosophy of religion)

Th 102 (A): *The Beginnings of Christianity in the Mediterranean World* (culture, texts, early tradition[s], and the dynamic of global expansion)

Th 103 (B): *Integral Human Development* (person, community, and place, secular belief systems, Christian anthropology, systematic theology)

Th 104 (B): *Society and Christian Community* (the structuring of society, politics, church, institution)

Th 105 (C): *Sacred Books, Scripture, and World Literature* (this module might involve, where possible, visiting centres such as the Chester Beatty Library, Trinity College Library, the Irish Writers Centre, or equivalent establishments in proximity to the place of theology)

Th 106 (C): *The Ancient World: People, Religions, Languages, and Writings*

Th 107 (D): *Mind, Body, Spirit: Identity and Meaning in Contemporary Culture* (spirituality, psychology, prayer, mindfulness, secular belief[s], Christian mysticism)

Th 108 (D): *Ethics and Moral Reasoning in Late Modernity*

Th 109 (X): *Open Module* (an elective such as *Religious Artefacts and Material Culture*, or a guest lecturer, or a once-off treatment of a relevant subject, or, importantly, a trial module, to be assigned to a particular pillar for later inclusion in the main programme)

Th 110 (X): *Open Module*

Year Two: Opening up a Conversation

Th 201 (A): The *Abrahamic Faiths: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (philosophy of religion, Orthodoxy, Pentecostalism, interfaith action and dialogue)

Th 202 (A): *Christian Faith and Contemporary Culture* (inculturation, secularization, secular belief systems, the arts and religion, film, etc.) This module is ideal for assessment through project work.

Th 203 (B): *Mapping Religion and Communal Identity* (material religion, architecture, heritage, biculturalism, community structures, parish, tradition, and Christian identity). This module might involve visiting diverse places of worship, monastic sites, parish centres, heritage centres, support services, graveyards, etc.

Th 204 (B): *Communal Gathering and Celebration* (religious practice, ritual, and liturgy)

Th 205 (C): *Secular and Sacred Texts* (scripture and literature)

Th 206 (C): The *Living Word* (the scriptures as foundational to religion, faith, and Church life)

Th 207 (D): *Engaging with Otherness* (Church, culture, citizenship, discrimination, the LGBTQ+ community, race relations, feminism, and equality)

Th 208 (D): *A Theology of Care* (faith life, care ethics, wellbeing, mental health, support structures, social sciences)

Th 209 (X): *Open Module*

Th 210 (X): *Open Module*

Year Three: Looking to the Future

Th 301 (A): *Global Religion, International Cooperation, and Migration* (NGOs, refugees, world aid, *Fratelli tutti*, inter-religious dialogue and its challenges for the future, etc.). This module might involve a contribution/interaction with an organisation like *Trócaire* or an equivalent centre of research on-campus.

Th 302 (A): *God, Creatures, and Creation* (the God question in contemporary culture, creation theology, systematic theology)

Th 303 (B): *Ecology, Environment, and Habitat* (environmental theology, systematic theology, religion and the natural sciences, social location, climate action, resources, housing, *Laudato sì*, etc.)

Th 304 (B): *Faith and Religion in the Digital Age* (digital theology, religion, media, communication, technology, religion on-line, on-line religion, public discourse, netizens, truth decay, etc.). This module might connect up with a communications organisation such as *Kairos Communications*. It might, further, be assessed by means of a video essay, podcasts, or an equivalent exercise.

Th 305 (C): *Reading and Learning from the Scriptures* (a study, say, of the synoptic gospels or St. Paul)

Th 306 (C): *The Scriptures and Social Change* (a study in the Hebrew scriptures, say specifically, a study of one of the major prophets such as Jeremiah)

Th 307 (D): *Human Rights: Religion, Gender, and Race*
Th 308 (D): *Christian Community and Leadership Skills* (collaboration, communication, critical thinking, confidence building, pastoral leadership, etc.). This module might have a short placement opportunity within a church related organization. It could be assessed, for example, by means of a 'Learning Journal.'
Th 309 (X): *Open Module*
Th 310 (X): *Open Module*

Summer holidays. The best holiday breaks allow some time for reflection and exercise in gratitude. St. Matthew tells us that where our treasure is we will find our heart.

So, I give myself a little challenge for this summer:

Make some time to sit with my thoughts.
Pay attention to where my mind goes when it is unoccupied.
Discover what my personal treasure is by following my thoughts.
How long does it take before God enters my mind?
Where is faith among my list of values?
The uncluttered mind can tell me a lot if I really do pay attention.

– Martin Donnelly, *Lakeland Lockdown Reflections,* 2021 (Belfast: Shanway Press) p.20.

‘Negative’ (2)

Patrick Hannon

One reaction to last month’s piece on the response of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a question about the blessing of gay unions was that it went around the houses, as the saying goes, instead of coming directly to the point; the point on this view being that the *Responsum* and Explanatory Note were singularly ill-judged, as was clear from the comments of Cardinal Schönborn among other senior churchmen. What more is there to say? But there is more to say, for we also saw that the Cardinal’s critique was matched by a defence of the document by two of his brother cardinals, and there have been many contributions to mainstream and social media in favour of what their authors saw as no more than a statement of standard Catholic teaching. And in any case, and more fundamentally, what’s in question is the considered view of the body which is charged with the promotion and defence of Catholic doctrine, the publication of which was approved by Pope Francis. For that reason alone it cannot be ignored, and it requires to be engaged with in terms of Catholic theology.

Of course the disappointment of people who expected more of a pope whose words and actions seemed to reflect a more positive view is understandable, as is the anger of folk hurt by the terms in which the Congregation explained its reply. And there are men and women, straight as well as LGBT+, for whom this set the seal on their disillusionment with the Catholic Church. But there are also people who are disappointed and angry and hurt who do not want to leave, whose faith in the God of Jesus Christ holds them still. They are torn, though, because they want also to believe that the Church into which they were baptised has a place for them, and the *Responsum* and Note have put that in doubt again. What last month’s article tried to do was to signal that Catholic teaching allows a more *nuanced* view than does the blunt response of the Congregation. Or, put another way, that when the CDF’s verdict is read in the light of Catholic teaching in the round, it need not be taken as the last word on the question it addresses. What follows will expand on this.

Patrick Hannon is a priest of the Diocese of Cloyne. He is Emeritus Professor of Moral Theology at St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Part 1 of this article appeared in the May issue of *The Furrow.*

WHO SAID NO?

But first, what is the status of the *Responsum*? The standing account is found in another CDF document entitled *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*: 'The Roman Pontiff fulfils his universal mission with the help of the various bodies of the Roman Curia, and in particular with that of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in matters of doctrine and morals. Consequently, the documents issued by this Congregation expressly approved by the Pope participate in the ordinary magisterium of the successor of Peter.'[1] The phrase 'expressly approved' is important, its force best seen by reference to two technical expressions that are used to characterise a pope's approval of documents issued by the CDF: *approbatio in forma specifica* and *approbatio in forma communi*. The first refers to an approval in which the pope endorses a document so as to make it his own, and this – which must be explicitly stated – naturally augments its authority. The second is understood as authorising publication, without necessarily approving everything the document contains, and it is *not* assimilated to the ordinary magisterium of the pope.[2] This doesn't mean that such a document can be disregarded; obviously the CDF has what one might call an authority of its own. But it is plain at any rate that the *Responsum* and Note were not approved by Pope Francis *in forma specifica*, for this would have had to have been made explicitly clear.[3] And its authority is the authority of its reasoning, and doesn't preclude an analysis of that reasoning, and a respectful questioning of the conclusion that 'the Church does not have, and cannot have, the power to bless unions of persons of the same sex'.

WHY?

For this conclusion the Note offers a number of interconnected reasons, and the first is based on the nature of a blessing. Blessings belong to the category of sacramentals, the Note says, and

1 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_ doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html

2 'This is an assurance that the proper formalities have been observed, but does not mean that the pope has studied the matter in depth and approved all aspects of it. Once approved by the pope, the decision remains that of the dicastery and does not become papal legislation.' JH Provost, 'Approval of Curial Documents in Forma Specifica', *Shorter Studies*, THE JURIST 58 (1998) 213-225

3 Some have wondered whether the expression 'gave his assent to the publication' suggests a weaker approval than is usually imported by the formula in *forma communi* but perhaps this is no more than a legal nicety. The fact is that Francis is on record as having agreed to the document's publication, even if the decision is not an exercise of the ordinary magisterium of the pope.

sacramentals have a particular importance among the liturgical actions of the Church. They are 'sacred signs that resemble the sacraments: they signify effects, particularly of a spiritual kind, which are obtained through the Church's intercession' – here is cited Vatican 2's Constitution on the Liturgy – and 'by them people are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions of life are sanctified'.[4] But even if they resemble sacraments, are even 'a kind of imitation', they are different, the Note points out, quoting The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: 'sacramentals do not confer the grace of the Holy Spirit in the way that the sacraments do, but by the Church's prayer, they prepare us to receive grace and dispose us to cooperate with it'. Blessings are 'signs above all of spiritual effects that are achieved through the Church's intercession'. 'Consequently, in order to conform with the nature of sacramentals, when a blessing is invoked on particular human relationships, in addition to the right intention of those who participate, it is necessary that what is blessed be objectively and positively ordered to receive and express grace, according to the designs of God inscribed in creation, and fully revealed by Christ the Lord. Therefore, only those realities which are in themselves ordered to serve those ends are congruent with the essence of the blessing imparted by the Church.' Here we are at the heart of the argument for the Congregation's judgment, and it calls for close attention.

A 'LEGITIMATE CONCERN'?

First, though, we might look at what the note offers as a further reason: 'since blessings on persons are in relationship with the sacraments, the blessing of homosexual unions cannot be considered licit. This is because they would constitute a certain imitation or analogue of the nuptial blessing invoked on the man and woman united in the sacrament of Matrimony, while in fact "there are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God's plan for marriage and family"'. As remarked in the earlier article, this seems to be the kind of concern which Cardinals O'Malley and Turkson had in mind, reiterated by many who welcomed the *Responsum*, and often heard as a reason for what is a perceptible stress on particular moral norms, in this case the danger of confusion about church teaching on marriage. Cardinal Schönborn considers that to be 'a legitimate concern' even as he criticises the *Responsum*, and it certainly can't be discounted.

4 http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20210222_responsum-dubium-unioni.

However, one can ask: how likely is it that anyone to whom the question matters will mistake a blessing for a sacrament? Couples look for a blessing because they know that they cannot access the Sacrament of Marriage, and those who attend such a ceremony either know the difference or are indifferent to it. In any case, responsible planning by officiants and couples will take care to avoid giving the impression that the ritual is the equivalent of a sacramental marriage ceremony. And on the broader question of the need to reiterate norms, one is reminded of a remark made by the president of the French Episcopal Conference in another context: 'the Church cannot act as if human beings were children who must be held by the hand'.

A 'DECISIVE DISTINCTION'?

When we come to the core of the argument, more questions suggest themselves. The appended Article of Commentary says, 'The Note is centred on the fundamental and decisive distinction between persons and the union. This is so that the negative judgment on the blessing of unions of persons of the same sex does not imply a judgment on persons'.[5] There is of course a conceptual distinction, but does it work in the way the Commentary claims? The union in question is not as it were an abstraction; it is a union of *persons* who have committed themselves to each other in love, with all that a true love is and will ask of them. What is in question is a loving relationship between two people, each a child of God, each loved by God, each created in God's image. They commit to each other, to stand by each other, to be there for each other - all the things that are called for in a true love. Such a relationship has, as the *Responsum* acknowledges, 'many positive elements, which are in themselves to be valued and appreciated'. Yet it nevertheless says that these 'cannot justify these relationships and render them legitimate objects of an ecclesial blessing, since the positive elements exist within the context of a union not ordered to the Creator's plan'. So the union turns out to be envisaged in terms only of the physical expression of sexuality, as if this is the key to a moral evaluation, the ultimate basis for declaring a purported blessing illicit. 'God does not and cannot bless sin.'

But what of a couple who are willing to forego the kind of physical expression which the Note apparently has in mind, as is the case with the Church of English bishop of Grantham, to name one publicly known instance? Is it 'illicit' to ask a blessing on such a union? And if there is a distinction between objective and subjective morality, as in the last article we saw to be a staple of

5 Ibid.

Catholic moral theology, how can a same-sex union be predicated as inevitably sinful, or sinful in such a way that God's grace cannot touch it? Compare what Pope Francis has taught: 'Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin – which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such – a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church's help to this end'.[6] And what of the situation of a couple whose conscience tells them that a physical expression of their love is permissible, even if according to Catholic teaching this is a mistaken view? The Catechism teaches that 'A human being must always obey the certain judgment of conscience. If he [*sic*] were to deliberately act against it he would condemn himself'.[7] It can happen that the judgment is erroneous, but that is not always owing to a culpable ignorance; and we have seen that Catholic teaching also recognises that a mistake made in good faith can eliminate moral fault. When it's contended that the judgment is about the union, not about the persons, the fact is that the Note appears to say that the sinfulness is as it were written into a same-sex union just because it is homosexual. How then can it claim not to judge homosexual persons?

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

A deeper kind of question arises when we look at what the Note says about sacramentals and blessings and grace. The text is dense – inevitably, for it condenses a range of material from papal and conciliar documents, the Catechism, the Roman Ritual, and a document of the Congregation itself concerning the pastoral care of homosexual persons. And it may help if we pick out its essential content with the aid of simpler definitions and descriptions found elsewhere. First, a sacramental: 'any object or prayer or action that can put us in touch with God's grace in Christ'[8]. Then a blessing: the Note's description is comprehensive, perhaps masking what exactly is in question when a blessing is asked upon an individual or couple or group. That type of blessing is described in older accounts as invocative; such blessings 'do not impart any sacred character to the person or thing receiving the blessing, but are mere supplications of some favour from God'.[9] In the Hebrew

6 *Amoris laetitia* par. 305. www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.

7 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 1790. See further ## 1791-1793, and cf # 1735

8 *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship,* ed. Peter Fink SJ, Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990, art. 'Sacramentals'.

9 Roberti-Palazzini, *Dictionary of Moral Theology*, tr. H J Yannone. London: Burns and Oates, 1962. Art. 'Sacramentals', at p. 1080.

Bible, '[b]lessing is conceived as a communication of life from Yahweh [and] Yahweh himself is the only one who can bless; men bless by wishing and praying that Yahweh will bless'.[10] Among the favours asked for often is God's protection, that God may be with someone, or with His peopIe, Israel. In Christian usage, too, a blessing is God's doing, and it is sought through the intercession of the community of the People of God to which we give the name church.

And recall now the description of a sacramental above: 'any object or prayer or action that can put us in touch with God's grace in Christ'; which leads to the question, what is grace? The concept is multifaceted and the word has more than one meaning, and down the Christian centuries there have been various accounts, different aspects accentuated, often in response to erroneous ideas. But its essential nature can be expressed in terms simple enough, for it refers to God's self-communication, supremely in Jesus of Nazareth, whose word and works incarnate the truth of which the psalmist sang: 'The Lord is compassion and love'.[11] It is in Christ that God is met, and Christ is rightly called the sacrament of God, for a sacrament is a sign which makes present what it signifies; and Christ is met now in his mystical body the Church, which for that reason can be called the sacrament of Christ. The self-communication of God is called grace because it is God's free gift, undue to us and not only because we are sinners; called grace also because it graces human existence, raises us to a new level of being, makes us sharers in the life of the Trinity.

God's love is constant, never fails: 'Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you'.[12]

And God's love is disclosed in a myriad of ways, and especially in the love that we meet and show in the relationships which constitute our personal world. Adapting a phrase of Enda McDonagh's, it could be said that graced human love is God's love abroad in the world,[13] and that love reaches us and touches us whenever we are loved by another. From Ezekiel to Paul the message is that God never stops loving us, whatever our situation; and if a blessing is a 'prayer or action that can put us in touch with God's grace in Christ', how can it be wrong for anyone to ask for it, ever?

10 John L McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966. Art. 'Bless, Blessing', at p. 98.

11 Ps. 103:8.

12 Isaiah 49:15.

13 'The Primacy of Charity', in McDonagh (ed.), *Moral Theology Renewed*, at pp.131 and 136.

I have not been arguing that same-sex unions are to be blessed indiscriminately: accompaniment and discernment will help tell what a couple and their pastor need to know. And other words of Francis are instructive in this regard: '… 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'.[14]

And maybe all our thinking about questions such as those at stake here should be shaped by the thought with which Vincent McNamara ends his reflection on what it means to live a Christian life: 'We live and move and have our being within a Presence who broods over the long evolution of our race, who knows that we carry the human stain, the elemental wound of human nature, who appreciates the curve of each personal history. Who is more sensitive to the complexity of our lives than any human legislator, even those who purport to represent him/her. Who does not judge as we judge. Who has told us to trust more in God's loving-kindness than in the righteousness of our doings. Who understands failure. We can only be patient'.[15]

14 *Amoris laetitiae*, par. 303. In this and the passage quoted earlier, the 'irregular situations' with which the Pope is dealing are those involving heterosexual relationships; but there is no reason to think that his reflections can't be applied also to the relationships of persons who are LGBT+ .

15 *The Call to be Human*, Dublin: Veritas, 2010, p. 240.

Restoring her Voice (1):
The Syrophoenician Woman as an icon for enlarged thinking

Seán O' Sullivan

This year the Sunday Lectionary invites us to reflect of what Mark the evangelist describes as the 'Good News about Jesus Christ' (Mark 1:1). But the Church, for reasons known only to itself, denies us the opportunity to view this portrait in all of its power and splendor by omitting two keys passages from our Sunday worship. The healing of the Gerasene demoniac in Mark 5:1-20, and indeed the parallel texts in Matthew 8:28-34 and Luke 8:26-39, are omitted entirely from the three-year Sunday cycle. The encounter between Jesus and an unnamed Syrophoenician woman, recorded in Mark 7:24-31, is also omitted this year though the parallel, but very distinct, account of Jesus and a Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:21-28 is proclaimed on the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time in Year A.

I readily admit that both encounters present serious challenges and difficulties for both preachers and congregations, as indeed they do for biblical scholars and commentators, and yet by excluding them from our Sunday worship, we effectively silence an important and, I would suggest, an essential element of the witness that Mark's gospel has to offer us as believers. The simple fact is that if a gospel text is not proclaimed when we gather as a community to pray together then it is likely that the vast majority of believers will never have the opportunity to hear its saving word or to reflect on its significance. It is worth noting that both passages are included in the Revised Common Lectionary used by Protestant Churches and here, as elsewhere, we would be well served by following their example. One can only wonder whether those responsible for compiling our Sunday Lectionary were trying to save preachers or congregations or perhaps, the Church itself, from the awkward

Seán O'Sullivan is a priest of the diocese of Cork and Ross. Address: New Parochial House, Monkstown, Co. Cork. Next month's *Furrow* will carry the second part of this article.

and unsettling questions that these passages pose. Whatever their reasons, we are, I contend, all the poorer for not being afforded the opportunity to wrestle with the polemic of these passages in the hope of gleaning from them a saving word or a blessing, as Jacob did when he dared to wrestle with God in Genesis 32:22-32.

My focus in this article is on exploring the meaning and the significance, both for individual believers and for the Church, of the encounter between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7:24-31 and on restoring the powerful and saving word of this remarkable woman who quite correctly refuses to be silenced.

A POLEMICAL AND CONTROVERSIAL PASSAGE

Mark's account of the encounter between Jesus and an unnamed Syrophoenician woman has fascinated and frustrated believers and scholars, almost in equal measure, throughout history. We are fascinated by its jarring portrayal of Jesus' apparent reluctance to heal a young child; we are frustrated by the difficulty of reconciling such a portrait with the image of Jesus consistently presented elsewhere throughout the gospels. All too often scholars and preachers have sought to 'airbrush' out the more jarring and anomalous elements in this passage instead of allowing the text to speak its own powerful message on its own terms.

The New Revised Standard Version translates the passage as follows:

> From there he [Jesus] set out and went away to the region of Tyre. He entered a house and did not want anyone to know he was there. Yet he could not escape notice, but a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit immediately heard about him, and she came and bowed down at his feet. Now the woman was a Gentile, of Syrophoenician origin. She begged him to cast the demon out of her daughter. He said to her, "Let the children be fed first, for it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But she answered him, "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." Then he said to her, "For saying that, you may go-- the demon has left your daughter." So she went home, found the child lying on the bed, and the demon gone. Then he returned from the region of Tyre, and went by way of Sidon towards the Sea of Galilee, in the region of the Decapolis. [NRSV]

If we accept the scholarly consensus that Mark's gospel is the earliest of the four canonical gospels, then Matthew's reframing of the tradition in Matthew 15:21-29, which is a considerably

tamer account of an encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman, suggests that Mark's account posed as many questions and difficulties for the early Christian community as it does for modern readers. Matthew presents a 'softer' and more sympathetic portrayal of the tradition: the encounter takes place in a more public setting and the woman addresses Jesus as 'Son of David' – a title laden with messianic significance. In Matthew's account, Jesus explains the rationale of his refusal by stating that 'he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' and, perhaps most tellingly, Jesus explicitly acknowledges the woman's 'faith' as his inspiration for healing her daughter.

Whilst establishing the historicity of any gospel encounter is a complex and contested issue, some biblical scholars suggest that there are good reasons for believing that Mark's account reflects the powerful memory of an encounter within Jesus' own ministry. Given the tensions that we know existed concerning table-fellowship between Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians in the early Church, it is hard to imagine why the evangelist would otherwise attribute to Jesus a position that his own community had almost certainly rejected by the time the gospel came to be written. The story of the Syrophoenician woman, as it has come down to us, could have been not simply embarrassing to the early Christian community but it could have been detrimental to the unity of the evangelist's own mixed community. The very fact that he did not adjust the story accordingly but left the inherent difficulties unresolved argues strongly for the passage having some historical basis. Such a polemical encounter would have remained a powerful, if somewhat perplexing, memory in the early Jesus community. Moreover, biblical scholars highlight that several aspects of the grammar in the passage, especially the woman's response, reflect Semitic rather than Greek grammar and may therefore constitute further evidence of the antiquity of the tradition.

STRUCTURE – A GUIDE TO MEANING

The immediate context of the narrative of this passage within the wider gospel narrative is that of Jesus' ongoing controversy with the Pharisees over purity boundaries in Mark7:1-23. Coming immediately after the declaration that all foods are clean, Jesus goes to a Gentile territory and so the theme of boundaries is continued. The encounter with the Syrophoenician woman also notably stands between accounts of the feeding of a multitude in Jewish territory (Mark 6:30-44) and the subsequent feeding of a multitude in a gentile region (Mark 8:1-10).

Biblical scholars draw our attention to the fact that the passage

is carefully constructed as a concentric chiasm that can be represented as follows:

a. Jesus' arrival near Tyre and his desire to be alone (24)
b. The woman approaches (25)
(Parenthetical note on the woman's ethnicity [26a])
c. The woman's petition. (26b)
d. Jesus' response (27)
e. The woman's retort (28)
d'. Jesus' second response (29a)
c'. The woman's petition is granted (29b)
b'. The woman returns home and finds her daughter healed (30)
a'. Jesus returns from the region of Tyre (31a)

Such a structure typically serves to draw our attention to the central element of the chiasm. In this case the woman's response acts as the focal point and the hinge of the encounter. The very structure of the passage should cause us to suspect that the woman's response, the only words directly attributed to her in the passage, will be critical to any understanding of the episode: a suspicion that is strengthened by Jesus' explicitly drawing attention to her word or *'logos'*.

AN ENCOUNTER OVERSHADOWED BY DIFFERENCE

The passage begins with Jesus entering a house and wishing to remain unnoticed. The text gives no details as to whose house it is and the reference is best understood in terms of Mark's characteristic use of "house" as a place of teaching and revelation (1:29; 2:1; 3:20; 5:38; 7:17; 9:33) – a clue perhaps that what follows is a form of teaching. The woman is initially introduced in terms of her need: she is the mother of a child with an unclean spirit. It is this initial description that shapes our emotional response as readers to the entire episode. We immediately empathize with the desperation of any parent seeking to save the life of a sick child. The immediacy of her coming to Jesus upon hearing of his presence in the region captures both the urgency and desperation of her situation. Here, it is the woman, not Jesus, who takes the initiative.

The evangelist deliberately goes to great lengths to identify the woman in both cultural and religious terms, even though this means distorting the carefully constructed chiastic structure of the episode. She is a Gentile of Syrophoenician origin. From the perspective of the text, as "woman," as "pagan" and as "foreigner" she is in every way possible different to Jesus. Her actions in approaching Jesus exactly mirror the actions of Jairus pleading for his daughter

in Mark 5:21-43. His plea had been answered, thereby creating a heightened sense of anticipation. Both come, both bow down at the feet of Jesus and both plead for a sick daughter, traditionally one of the most vulnerable members in ancient mid-Eastern society.

THE SCANDAL OF JESUS' RESPONSE

Jesus' response is as shocking as it is unexpected. Whereas he had healed Jairus' daughter and notably instructed her parents to give her something to eat, here he not only refuses the woman's plea to heal her daughter but he argues that her daughter should not receive the 'children's food.' It is not simply the fact of his refusal that is shocking but the derogatory and uncaring manner, laden with racist undertones, in which it is expressed. Whilst in Mark's gospel Jesus does not explain the rationale of his refusal, as will occur in Matthew's account of the Canaanite woman, it is clearly based on a differentiation between the care due to 'children' and to 'dogs.' In the Hebrew Scriptures the image of "children" is frequently used as an image for or reference to the people of Israel (Exod 4:22; Deut 14:1; Hosea 11:1; etc.) while the metaphor of "dogs" occurs in several biblical texts as a term of abuse for Gentiles (1Sam 17:43; 2 Kgs 8:13). Bread is regarded as a synonym for life in many cultures and in this instance is best understood as such. While the use of the term 'first' leaves open the possibility that there may come a time when others are fed, the simple fact is that, in this instance, the woman cannot wait: her daughter needs help and she needs it now!

FACING UP TO THE SCANDAL OF JESUS' RESPONSE

Few, if any, words of Jesus in the gospels have generated such polemic which perhaps explains the Church's resistance to having it included in our Sunday Lectionary. In earlier passages Jesus is described as being 'moved with compassion' to cure a leper (Mark 1:41) and to feed a multitude (Mark 6:34). How then could this 'man of compassion' now be so cruel and uncaring as to refuse to heal a sick child? How could he be so obviously prejudiced in his world-view and how could we not have known before now? This passage after all occurs almost at the halfway point of the gospel narrative!

The history of exegesis and devotion have not been found wanting in their zeal to "soften" and diminish the scandal of Jesus' response and to absolve Jesus of wrongdoing or, at the very least, to mitigate his responsibility. Some have interpreted Jesus' refusal in biographical terms insisting that his response is a reaction to being

interrupted when he wanted to be left alone. Yet such an explanation doesn't account for other examples of Jesus' reaction to similar situations in Mark 1:37 and Mark 6:30-44. Other apologists link his harsh refusal to Jesus' earlier rejection by a Gentile community in Mark 5:1-20 and his own advice to his disciples concerning the treatment of those who did not welcome them in Mark 6:11. Yet this explanation raises the equally problematic notion that the Syrophoenician woman is being made to pay for the rejection of others. Moreover, despite the many controversies that occur in the gospel between Jesus and Jewish authorities he continues to engage with them and answers a plea for 'a little one' in Mark 5:21-43. The undeniable fact is that Jesus' response to the woman offers a "striking contrast with every other healing situation in the Gospel. Only here does the initial request meet with refusal."[1]

Other scholars maintain that Jesus was merely testing the faith of the woman. Yet there is nothing in the text to justify such an inference. Matthew will introduce the idea of faith in his account but Mark makes no such claim. Some scholars have sought to breach the impasse on linguistic grounds stressing that Mark uses the diminutive term "puppies" in place of the more generic term meaning "dogs" claiming that such a choice has the effect of softening Jesus' comment from direct insult to condescension. Our moral indignation however to a sick child being compared to a dog is in no way assuaged by the use of the term "puppy" particularly given that dogs in general, be they puppies or fully grown, were regarded as scavengers and ritually unclean within Judaism. Another attempt to defuse the scandal comes from a historical critical interpretation of the gospel and attributes the tensions portrayed in the episode as reflecting tensions regarding table fellowship in the early Christian community. While this is undoubtedly a concern for the evangelist in his gospel, it does not explain why he presents the episode in this fashion. As I have already noted, this passage, as it has come down to us, could have been detrimental to Mark's own purposes given the tensions in his own community. The very fact that he did not adjust the passage accordingly suggests that the evangelist deliberately incorporated this encounter because he believed that it had something significant to reveal to us, something that justified the controversy it might well cause within his own community.

Finally, some scholars propose that the harshness of Jesus' comments should be understood in the context of the abusive relationship between the city dwellers of Tyre and the Jewish

1 Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Second Gospel* (Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2000), 76.

peasants of the surrounding countryside.[2] Whilst such a tension may indeed have manifest itself historically in a hostility towards the people of Tyre, surely a similar hostility would have been felt towards tax collectors as agents of a foreign power and nonetheless Jesus eats with them and even calls Levi to be his disciple (Mark 2:14). It should also be noted that the gospel parables that deal with day laborers, debt, resentment towards absentee landlords and exploitative stewards, which might be regarded as reflecting such socio-economic tensions, are completely absent in Mark's Gospel. The simple fact is that the woman comes to Jesus in the poverty of her powerlessness pleading with him to save her sick daughter. Jesus' refusal has to be seen for what it is: clear evidence of a prejudice that refuses to accede to her plea because of who she is in racial and ethnic terms; she is a 'dog' and not a 'child'; an 'outsider' and not 'a child of the covenant.' Ultimately we must accept and seek to understand the harshness of Jesus' response rather than simply seeking to airbrush it away.

THE SYROPHOENICIAN WOMAN'S REFUSAL TO BE EXCLUDED

It would be perfectly natural for the woman to be devastated by Jesus' refusal and to be outraged by the manner of his response. It would be understandable if she were to respond by cursing him and walking away. Yet, incredibly, she does neither. Despite the hurt and the outrage she must feel, she refuses to accept that the conversation is over and that no more can be said on the matter. She refuses to be silenced and she refuses to give up on her hope of securing a saving word for her daughter and even retains a respectful tone addressing Jesus as 'Sir' as she seeks to continue the conversation.

Tellingly, she does not directly oppose what Jesus has said but rather responds in a way that, instead of contradicting what he has said, extends and reinterprets his response: "Sir, even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28). In other words, she takes the very same elements that Jesus has used in his stinging allegory and re-envisages them in a new way. Within her re-interpretation and reframing of the allegory, the "dogs" are now relocated inside the house. The introduction of the detail "under the table" transforms the allegory into a domestic and familial scene with all the associations of belonging implicit in such a setting. Whereas Jesus had spoken of bread being 'thrown' to the dogs, implying that the dogs were somewhere outside the house and therefore not part of the household, the woman speaks of the

2 Gerd Theissen, *The Gospels in Context*: Social and Political History in the Synoptic Tradition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 60-80.

crumbs falling from the table under which the dogs are sitting, inside the house and part of the wider household. We know from literary sources (Plutarch, *Aemiliis Paulus* 10,4; Pliny, *Letters* 4,2.3), relief sculptures and vase paintings that the Greeks and Romans kept house dogs as domestic pets, unlike the Jews who regarded dogs as scavengers and ritually unclean.[3]

THE INSPIRATION OF THE WOMAN'S RESPONSE

But where, we might ask, did the woman acquire such insight and wisdom? Whilst the biblical text does not speak directly of the well-spring or source of the woman's wisdom, it does, I believe, hint at the inspiration of her response. The power invoked by the woman is not based on any right that she can claim. It is based simply on her daughter's desperate need and the capacity of Jesus to respond. The need of one and the ability of the other to respond to that need are the very elements that Jon Sobrino has identified as being the constitutive elements of mercy. Mercy, Sobrino insists, is " a reaction to the suffering on another … whereby one reacts to eradicate that suffering for the sole reason that it exists."[4] Thus the woman's response is above all else an appeal to mercy: Her appeal is to unbiased mercy – the type of mercy implicit in the falling crumbs. She insists, as Shakespeare would centuries later, that "the quality of mercy is not strained."[5]

Her intuitive awareness, powerfully expressed in her response, is that mercy recognizes no boundaries and is of its very nature sufficiently abundant for all to enjoy its benefits. Inspired by this conviction she challenges Jesus's refusal and invites him to discover within himself that which overcomes all boundaries and barriers that may divide us: namely, our shared humanity. Humanity is the household symbolized in her reconfigured metaphor. The power of mercy invoked by the woman is not based on rights attained through birth, culture or social norms; rather it is based upon the need experienced by "one" and the capacity of the "other" to respond to that need. "Her kind of faith; faith in unbiased, undeserved mercy – the faith of the powerless, not of the powerful – did not overshadow her ethnic and gender otherness but highlighted it."[6]

3 Sharyn Dowd, *Reading Mark: A Literary and Theological Commentary* on the Second Gospel, 77.

4 Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People down from the Cross* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993), 18.

5 William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998) 197.

6 Judith Gundry-Volf, "Spirit, Mercy and the Other," *Theology Today* 51 (1995) 520.

The Syrophoenician woman offers a different perspective, a different way of seeing and understanding the same elements, precisely because her experience in life has been different. She sees and interprets the same realities in a dramatically different fashion, because in her cultural world, her lived experience, they have a very different significance and resonance. The woman finds room for her daughter, not by challenging her designation as a "dog" but rather by reinterpreting the term from her own cultural context and in the process transfigures her daughter's place in the allegory from that of an "outsider" to that of an "insider." Her response in no way denies the differences that exist between Jesus and herself. From her cultural perspective, the 'dogs' may not be scavengers and may indeed be domestic pets, but they are still not truly members of the household in the way the children are. They are brought inside, yet they are *under* the table and not *at* the table. She accepts the reality of the differences that distinguish herself and her daughter from Jesus but her reconfiguring of the allegory creates a broader sense of shared belonging even if a dog belongs to the household in a way that is qualitatively different from that of 'children.' In her reconfigured image *both* 'children' and 'dogs' now are located within the house and belong to the household. In so doing she offers a radically different way of seeing and understanding the same reality. The distinctions between 'dogs' and 'children,' between Jew and Gentile, are not denied but both are now subsumed into the superordinate group that is the household of humanity.

Drawing on her own domestic experience in which household pets benefit from the children's crumbs, the woman's response in no way seeks to deprive the children of their food: she merely wishes to be allowed to benefit from other's surplus. She makes no claim on the children's bread. Her request is far more modest; she seeks only the crumbs that fall from the table. Her appeal therefore does not threaten the children's right to their "bread" as Jesus' response seems to infer but seeks only that her daughter be allowed to feed off their crumbs. The woman instinctively and intuitively believes that grace of its very nature is extravagantly abundant. Her insistence that her daughter receive these crumbs is the expression of a firm conviction that there is more than enough to go round for all, even for little dogs. In many ways her response proclaims the very mystery that the twelve baskets of scraps of food symbolized in Mark 6:43. The crumbs the dogs receive are no longer the result of a deliberate act of the house owner whom Jesus had portrayed as intentionally throwing the bread to the dogs but rather are the crumbs that fall naturally from the table and which are a natural and intrinsic part of the very act of a family gathering for a meal at table.

In many respects the woman's response echoes the deeply rooted conviction within the Hebrew Scriptures that a commitment to kinship solidarity should not, and must not, undermine the rights and privileges of those standing outside of any kin-relationship, be they stranger or foreigner (Exod 23:11; Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19). Her response therefore echoes one of the highest and most noble aspirations of the Jewish law: namely, that mercy and goodness must be shown to all. By finding room for her daughter in the reconfigured allegory, the woman rejects both the exclusivism and the sequential priority implied in Jesus' refusal.

ENLARGED THINKING AND 'A SAVING WORD FROM THE OUTSIDE'

Jesus is now faced with a dilemma: a Gentile woman makes her appeal based on the core value of God's mercy, and in so doing, she challenges Jesus to re-examine his own vision of his mission and ministry and to rediscover within himself and his own religious heritage the primacy of mercy. This is her contrasting truth: the unwavering conviction that mercy knows no bounds and must transcend all boundaries. In many ways the Syrophoenician woman assumes the prophetic mantle of Abraham and Moses who are described as similarly debating with God for the sake of others, challenging God to move beyond the demands of justice in order to be truly merciful (Gen18:22-23; Deut 9:25-29).

Jesus is completely disarmed by the woman's reply. The one who has consistently led throughout the narrative and who has chastised his own disciples for their lack of understanding, here changes his mind and recognizes the woman's position as a saving word (*logos*). In fact the text bears witness that he explicitly attributes this change of heart to the woman's word. A more literal translation of his response reads 'Because of your word [*your logos*], you may go." The woman's response, her contrasting truth, forces Jesus to recognise the contradictions within his vision and ultimately leads to a transformed vision. The illusion of the legitimacy of exclusion is shattered and in the following chapters in the gospel narrative we find Jesus healing a deaf man in the Decapolis region (Mark 7:31-37), feeding the four thousand in a gentile area (8:1-10), and including all nations in his vision of the elect (Mark 13:27) without reference to any boundary or distinction. The Syrophoenician woman's vision, which stands at the center of the structural chiasm, stands as the defining wisdom of the story and is explicitly acknowledged as such by Jesus within the text. Here Jesus does not pronounce the miracle. He simply confirms that the little girl has been cured and explicitly attributes it to the *logos* or 'word' of the woman!

Her *logos* is recognized as the saving or saving or 'messianic' word that ultimately saves both her daughter and Jesus. Her insistence that mercy knows no bias becomes the saving word that allows Jesus to understand his life and mission in a new and more inclusive way. Her *logos* is the sacred word of the story. Jesus, the one who consistently calls others to follow him, is presented here as responding to her initiative and understanding. It is surely significant that the woman's response in verse 28 is the only part of the verbal interchange that occurs in the present tense, suggesting perhaps the ongoing and enduring significance of this *logos* beyond the limits of this particular passage. It is also worth noting how the power of her 'logos' contrasts with the inability of the disciples to cast out an unclean spirit in the only remaining instance of the healing of an unclean spirit in Mark 9:18.

The principle of mercy becomes the transforming power of the story, both for her daughter who is liberated of the unclean spirit and for Jesus who is liberated of the unclean spirit of exclusion. How far Jesus has moved from his original position is highlighted when, for the very first time, he refers to the little girl not as 'little dog' but as "daughter" at the end of the pericope in verse 30. She is now raised to equal status with the "little children" and within this new vision is the recipient of healing on an equal footing as the children of Israel. To put it in figurative terms, it is as though Jesus has allowed ethnic and religious considerations to blinker his vision and blind him to the desperate plight of the woman. Initially he sees only "a Gentile of Syrophoenician origin" (Mark 7:26). The woman's response forces Jesus to become aware of these "blinkers," to recognize how they have restricted his vision, urges him to cast them aside and ultimately begs him to recognize her for who she truly is *"a woman whose little daughter had an unclean spirit"* (Mark 7:25) which is precisely how the evangelist introduced her at the beginning of the pericope.

Biblical scholars continue to debate whether the historical Jesus actually pursued an active ministry to Gentiles or not. What is clear is that, subsequent to the encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, Jesus is clearly presented in Mark's Gospel as engaging in a healing ministry, a miraculous feeding and, at least implicitly, a teaching ministry to the gentile crowds. All the constitutive elements of a mission to the gentiles are present: they are not simply prefigured; they are realized although their full realization may yet lie in the future. The fact that the evangelist does not record more details of this ministry can be accounted for by the fact that having established Jesus' mission to the gentiles in paradigmatic form, the evangelist's attention shifts in Mark 9:31 and the focus switches to the journey to Jerusalem and the cross.

Despite the existence of a Justa and Berenice tradition in the early church, according to which the Syrophoenician woman and her daughter became followers of Jesus, the gospel text offers no basis for believing that the woman converted: the text simply tells us she went home. The boundaries of difference are overcome but diversity is respected. Change is neither demanded nor expected: rather a space is created where change can take place and new ways of thinking and being can emerge. As such the passage rejects the pretension of a forced homogeny. Instead, it promotes and respects the particularity of each voice and is enriched rather than threatened by such diversity. In short it respects the dignity of *difference*.

Hospitality. Hospitality, offering a seat at mealtime to strangers, had long been recognized as fundamental benefaction (Gen. 18:5; 19:3; Exod. 2:20; Ruth 2:14), into which a moral imperative was imported: "Share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house" (Isa. 58:7; Ezek. 18:7). The Epistle of James (2:1-7) upbraids those who dishonour the poor, the Epistle to the Hewbrews speaks proignantly of oppression suffered by the wretched poor who depend on *philadelphia*, "brotherly love" (13:1-2 RSV).

– C. Clifton Black, *The Lord's Prayer,* (Kentucky: Westminister John Knox Press) p.147.

Charles Nyamiti: An African Theologian

Paul Kangkai

In May 2020, Africa lost one of its finest theologians, the Tanzanian Charles Nyamiti (1931-2020). Together with prominent writers like Vincent Mulago, John S. Mbiti, Appiah-Kubi, Kwesi Dickson, Bénéze Bujo, Eboussi Bulaga, Ela J. M., Emmanuel Bolaji Idowu, he belongs to a generation of creative African theologians who pioneered Christian theological reflection from an *African perspective*. Prior to the independence of many African countries in the 1960s and 70s, the views of Africans and their religiosity were mostly articulated by European missionaries, historians, and anthropologists. While they were ground-breaking in many ways, they sometimes were oblivious to certain cultural nuances and sensibilities in which many Africans were aware.

Charles Nyamiti's interest in African Christian Theology began early in Kipalapala near Tabora in Tanzania during his philosophical and theological training in the seminary (1954-1962). After his ordination as a priest of the Archdiocese of Tabora in 1962, he continued his theological studies in the Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium where he submitted his licentiate thesis in 1966 and doctorate dissertation in 1969. Nyamiti also studied music at the Conservatorium of Leuven and subsequently Vienna, where he started to study ethnology (*Völkerkunde*) at the university and musical composition in the Vienna High School of Music. He was awarded a doctorate in Vienna in 1975. Nyamiti returned to Africa teaching first in Kipalapala seminary and then the Catholic Institute of Eastern Africa (CHIEA) in Nairobi, Kenya. This institute was given a charter in 1992 and became the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). Nyamiti focuses on the critical understanding of *African* Christian Theology understood in the strict narrow sense as the systematic and scientific presentation

Paul Kangkai is a priest from Jalingo diocese, Nigeria. He was a student of Professor Charles Nyamiti at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA). Currently, he lives and works in Multyfarnham, Co. Westmeath, Ireland. Email: kangkaipaul.pk@gmail.com

or elaboration of the Christian faith according to the worldview of the people in sub-Saharan Africa. This clarification is necessary because it can be argued that African theology existed since the beginning of Christianity in the continent although to a great extent, in a latent form, mainly orally, in an unsystematic fashion. However, the systematic and scientific presentation and elaboration of the Christian faith according to the needs and worldviews of the people of sub-Saharan Africa is only in its infancy when compared to theological expositions in the apostolic, patristic, medieval, reformation and post-reformation epochs.

Nyamiti's most important contribution is in Christology. This is hardly surprising since Christology is the subject which has been most developed in today's African theology. Already, there is a variety of African Christologies. Prominent among them are African Christologies of inculturation and African Christologies of liberation. Nyamiti's theological approach falls into the category of African Christologies of *inculturation*. His most significant contribution is the book *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective*.[1] Nyamiti based his Christological reflections on the African understanding of "ancestor," although his conclusions are different from another African author Bénézet Bujo.[2] The starting point for Nyamiti are the beliefs and practices found in many (though not in all) African traditional societies. According to these beliefs, ancestral relationship (between the living and the dead, and sometimes between the Supreme Being and humanity on earth) comprises the following elements: Kingship (consanguineous or non-consanguineous) between the dead and his/her living kin; In many cases the ancestor has also to be the source of life for his/her earthly relatives; Superhuman status (usually acquired through death) comprising nearness to God, sacred powers and other superhuman qualities; Mediation (not indispensable) between God and the earthly kin; Exemplarity of behaviour in community; Right or title to frequent sacred

1 Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor: Christology from an African Perspective* (Gweru, Zimbabwe: 1984). See "Ancestral Kinship in the Trinity: An African Theology of the Trinity," in *Inculturation: Working Papers on Living Faith and Cultures* (Effective Inculturation and Ethnic Identity), Vol. IX, Rome 1987, 29-48; "The Mass as divine and ancestral encounter between the living and the dead", in *African Christian Studies*, CHIEA, Nairobi, August 1985, 28-48; "Uganda Martyrs: Ancestors of Mankind", in *African Christian Studies*, CHIEA, July 1986, 41-66; "African Tradition and the Christian God", in *Spearhead*, no. 49 (Eldoret, Kenya: Gaba Publications, 1977).

2 Bénézet Bujo, "Pour une ethique africano-christocentrique", in *Bulletin de la theologie africaine*, vol. 3, no. 5 (January - June), Kinshasa, 1981, 41-52; "A Christo-centric ethic for black Africa", in *Theology Digest*, vol. 30, no. 2, 1982, 143-6; Afrikanische Theologie: in *ihrem gesellschafflischen Kontext* (Theologie Interkulturell, vol. 1), Dusseldorf, 1986, 79-137.

communication with the living kin through prayers and ritual offerings (obligations). This understanding of ancestral relationship leads Nyamiti to examine first the inner life of God (Trinity) and finds out that there is *analogically* speaking – an ancestral kinship among the divine persons.

Nyamiti is a creative contributor to African Christian Theology and goes beyond mere prolegomena. His method is a significant progress when compared to the contents of the symposium "*Les prêtres noirs s'interrogent*,"[3] published in 1956, and those of the book "*Chemins de la christologie afraicaine*,"[4] written thirty years after. In the first case, French speaking African theologians are speaking about the possibility of and need for African theology; in the latter case, they are building it. For the first time in the history of sub-Saharan Africa, African categories are systematically employed to express and expound the mystery of our Saviour: think of expressions as "Christ the integral healer, chief, elder-brother, master of initiation, ancestor, black messiah (liberator), plenitude of human maturity", etc.[5] It should be emphasized that in order to perceive better the *originality* of these titles as applied to Christ one should take them in their African sense, and should see them from the perspective of the African social and cultural background from which they are taken. Together with other African theologians, Nyamiti brought into focus African points of departure from which the various writers envisage Christ's mystery. This is what conduces them to accentuate, in their own specific ways, the different Christological teachings implicit in the Bible, for example, Christ as victor, or as ancestral mediator, the cross as a mystery which inspires discreet feasting and circumspect conviviality, and so forth.

Although there is a strong Thomistic influence in his writing, Nyamiti contributed significantly to building the *theological bridge* between Western and African categories. His goal was to bring traditional theological categories to Africans while promoting and making the world to understand African concepts.

3 Paulat Emile, "Des prêtres noirs s'interrogent", in *Archives de Science Sociale des Religions*, Annêe, 3, 1957, 175.

4 Françis Kabesele Lumbale, Joseph Daré, Rene Luneau, Bénézét Bujo, *Chemins de la christologie africaine* (Paris: Desclée, 1982), 143-166.

5 Aylward Shorter, *Jesus and the Witchdoctor: An Approach to Healing and Wholeness* (London: 1985); "Christian Healing and Traditional Medicine in Africa", in *Kerygma*, 20 (1986), 51-58; Harry Sawyerr, *Creative Evangelism: Toward a New Christian Encounter with Africa* (London: 1968), 72; J. S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979), 81-98; A. T. Sanon, "Jesus, Maitre d'initiation", in F. Kabasele et al. (eds), *Chemins de la christologie africaine*, 143-166; *Enraciner l'evangile: initiations Africaines et pedagogie de la foi,* Paris, 1982. P.N. Wachege, *Christ Our Elder: A Christological Study from the Kikuyu concept of elder* (mimeographed thesis), CHIEA, Nairobi, 1986.

Nyamiti's legacy is his contribution at developing a theological method and making African Christian theological reflection known to the world. He prepared the generation of students he taught for decades to continue to make African Christianity known clearly both within Africa and beyond.

Getting Our House in Order. The eighth resource provided by Christian faith is the emphasis on right order. We have all heard of the catchphrase "get your house in order first". It describes the urgent need to sort ourselves out by identifying what elements in our lives we need to change or prioritise before we can help others. The phrase also points to a more literal truth of the importance of order as a prerequisite to a clear mind and a sound mental health. A simple example is tidying my room or my desk in the office. The more I put some order or shape in it, the better I feel I can focus on my work and plan my day; or putting order in my day with the help of my diary. It helps me to organise commitments but also helps me retain control of when I exercise, rest, read, call friends and pray. From this everyday experience, I know the truth that tranquillity and harmony do flow from right order.

Billy Swan, *Faith and Mental Health* (London, Catholic Truth Society) p.57.

Homilies for July (B)

Liam M. Tracey

Fourteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time *July 4*
Ez 2: 2-5. Ps 123: 1-2, 2, 3-4. (1) 2 Cor 12: 7-10. Mark 6: 1-6

Looking and looking again might be one way of describing the task of a prophet. What is it to look at the world with honesty and to see it as God has created it and wants it to be? Really seeing, gazing with respect, looking at oneself, others and the whole of creation is not an easy thing to do. It takes practice and work just like so many other a in life. Looking is an art that needs developing and like any art, it requires a teacher.

The people in the synagogue of the hometown of Jesus are also looking and listening to their neighbour's child. They cannot believe the miracles they are seeing and the teachings they are hearing, because they cannot really see or hear. Sure, they look but they have already decided about what they are seeing, nothing extraordinary here, we know who he is? He has nothing to teach and nothing to show us. Is it not strange and yet entirely predictable that the gospel writer tells us that those present in the synagogue do not accept Jesus, because they know who he is and he has nothing to show them?

That of course is the point of the Gospel narrative, they do *not* know who Jesus is, and they do not know where he comes from and who his family are. Jesus remarks that this is the lot of the prophet, rejection at the hands of one's own kit and kin. Knowing that of course does not make the task of the prophet any easier. Maybe that is the hardest task of any prophet, speaking to one's own people and place, in the midst of one's own congregation and church. Perhaps to those we know and love, bringing a message that they may not want to hear and asking them to gaze on realities that they would prefer not to look upon. There is a loneliness in the prophet's calling, because it places the prophet outside the circle and comfort of everyday life. No wonder those called to be prophets in the scriptures often run the other way or like Jesus in the reading today are depleted with their lack of faith.

Liam Tracey, OSM, is Professor of Liturgy at the Pontifical University, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

Ultimately the role of the prophet is to speak truthfully and lovingly, that task needs to be rooted in an experience of God who is merciful to all. The question asked of every prophet is Where do you gaze and from whom do you draw your strength. For the disciple that involves looking upon Jesus and knowing who he is. This is the central issue for the Gospel of Mark. Do you know who Jesus is, even though he continually urges his disciples and followers to remain silent on the point of his identity? Of course once one recognises who Jesus is and where he truly comes from, I cannot remain the same, this knowledge impacts on how I live my life of discipleship or my response is halfhearted and grows cold. In the celebration of the Eucharist as a Christian community of disciples we affirm repeatedly what we would like the world to be like, how it might reflect the goodness and mercy of God. That requires a great deal of honest looking, a deep imagination and the help of God as we strive to change ourselves and our world.

Fifteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time July *11*

Amos 7: 12-15. Ps 85: 9-10, 11-12, 13-14 (8) Eph 1: 3-14
Mark 6: 7-13

Poor old Amos, he is not having much luck with his prophetic calling. He is clear that this is not a task he wanted but one that was entrusted to him by the Lord who called him to prophesy to the people of Israel. He may be a seer, he may even be speaking the truth to his listeners, but there is little evidence that they are keen to hear his message. His message we learn in the book named after him, is one of doom for the people of Israel, devastation is about to be unleashed down upon them and Amos has no words of comfort for them.

At least the disciples that Jesus sends out in the Gospel today have the company of a companion as they go out on mission to proclaim the good news. The gospel presents them as pilgrims, carrying little or nothing, depending on the generosity of those who welcome them and their message. They are invited to become locals with the locals, to share the life of those they are going to preach to, those who they hope will share the life they have chosen. Even as he sends them out, Jesus is aware that not everyone will welcome them with open arms. In a sense, the manner of how they are to preach the good news is a reflection of the good news itself. How Jesus is redrawing the lines of the society in which he finds himself and the message he is entrusting to his disciples. Probably that is the reason he sends them in pairs, they are going to need each other as they embark on this next stage of their following

of him. As one listens with care to this gospel, in looking at Jesus preaching repentance, casting out devils and curing people, welcoming those outside the normal parameters of society, we may note that this very authority is then given to disciples. A very different style of leadership is being presented to this community. Leaders are called to enact the good news of forgiveness, gather and foster a community of disciples into a new way of living. The knowledge of who Jesus is? The message of the crucified one who is now risen is entrusted to these followers as they lead and gather, not exclude and alienate. They are sent to speak with authority. In this community of disciples, those who lead are rulers who are not rulers.

At the heart of every Christian community and its gathering on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist is the mystery of Christ, the one who has passed from death to life. The only one with true authority in our midst. This image is contemplated with lyrical rapture in the second reading today. The author of the letter to the Ephesians using a language of mystery and wisdom to paint a picture of Jesus. He is the message; he is the one we are called to follow. He is the one who gathers us together. He is the One who holds all things together.

Sixteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time *July 18*
Jer 23: 1-6. Ps 23: 1-3, 3-4, 5, 6 (1). Eph 2: 13-18. Mark 6: 30-34

The gospel of Mark is often characterised as an urgent narrative filled with paradoxes. Jesus often commands silence on anyone who comes to know who he truly is. In other places when people come to that knowledge, Jesus withdraws. The striking thing of course about these silences and withdrawals is that they do *not* work. The truth about Jesus breaks through, his fame spreads and people will not be silent. The more he commands it, the louder he is proclaimed. He brings his followers to a lonely place so that they can be alone, and a crowd follows them and they are met not with a rebuke but with pity or as some translations put it 'a great compassion.' This will of course come to its climax in the profession of faith made by Peter. Everything in this gospel leads to that point and everything that happens after it flows from Peter's confession.

The care that Jesus shows for those who follow him and announce his message, is one that is an example for all leaders or as they are pictured in today's readings shepherds of the flock. The consoling words of the familiar psalm are set aside by the fierce words of the Prophet Jeremiah, who condemns those who

would lead their flock astray or be scattered. These Sundays of Ordinary Time has focused on the role of leaders in the Christian community and are an invitation to all followers of the Lord to reflect on how we are called to share in the leadership of Christ. That leadership is profoundly linked to the task of reconciliation which is central to the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians. In our day, which is a time that is fractured and broken, leadership must be about reconciliation between peoples and communities or it is not a leadership that is worth its name. Reconciliation between communities, between peoples, between nations is a gospel imperative for every believer and one that is essential for all our flourishing on this good earth.

The Eucharist that we celebrate is the sacrament of reconciliation. It is a sign of the closeness of God to every human heart. God in Christ Jesus has come close, has become our peace and broken down the barriers that we erect between each other because of fear. Peace is not the absence of fear or violence, it is something that is much more positive, it is the gift that communities are called to live each day and construct every time they come together. It is surely the message that Christians are called to proclaim in our world today, when the message of Jesus is that no one is excluded and his compassion is given for all, especially those most in need.

Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time *July 25*

2 Kgs 4: 42-44. Ps 145: 10-11, 15-16, 17-18. Eph 4: 1-6.
Jn 6: 1-15

Today we begin our reading of the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, commonly called the Bread of Life discourse. It comes around on these Sundays every three years. This happens partly because the gospel of Mark is so short and partly because this section of the gospel of John is seen as so important to the life of the community. Today is very familiar to us from other gospel accounts, the mysterious multiplication of the loaves and fish. Is this an account of the Eucharist in a gospel that famously does not have an institution account at the Last Supper? Is it a teaching of the relationship between Jesus and the individual believer or is it a creedal statement of faith in the incarnation of Jesus, that he truly is human and his body is not a ghost? All of these and more have been proposed as the reasons behind this chapter of the gospel, and after the setting of the scene today we will hear more on the Sundays that follow.

How often is it that people ‘come after’ Jesus because of the signs? People see what he is doing and they want it for their loved

ones. Expectations are awakened. We want the big things, a healing of a sick relative, a Lotto win, a resolution to familial conflict.

How often is it, though, that all someone needs is a simple reassurance that, indeed, Jesus the Christ is present? That presence that can calm the grandest of fears.

These narratives have so little to do with bread. They are so much more about how Jesus acted in order to show who he is. Jesus responded to the needs of the crowd and the disciples. Jesus is active through both the wondrous signs and simple presence.

Expectations. Encounters. Interpretations. Who is Jesus in this text? Who is Jesus?

The mysterious gift of food is central to our Eucharistic celebration today, from the gift that keeps giving in the first reading today to the account of the crowd eating their fill in the gospel. Images of food and its abundance abound in the readings today. The assembly gathered to celebrate the Eucharist share this abundant gift of God, but are also challenged to allow it become a reality for the whole of our world that still knows much hunger and lack of even the most basic foodstuff. If we have learnt anything over this last year, it is surely that we are profoundly interconnected on this planet of ours. Hunger is something that affects us all. It is not enough to have food to eat, but we need others to share it with, or it just remains food on the plate, it never becomes a meal. For the preacher today as well as for the congregation, the temptation is to preach and think about the Eucharist too quickly, and that would be a mistake. This chapter of John is about so *many* things; do not limit it to the most obvious one. Speak about the presence of the Risen One in this gathering, how we have searched for him over this last difficult year. How we need to continue to be with him over the fearful and unknown months ahead of us. How can we nourish his presence in our daily lives and with those we share our life with.

For Jesus to call himself the bread of life which we will hear him do over the course of the next number of Sundays is a commitment to bring hunger to an end, and where there is physical hunger and famine that must be eliminated. Without food we do not exist, hunger is the lot of the poorest in our world, it is the antithesis of everything we celebrate in the Sunday Eucharist. It always stands as a challenge to us to do more, it always reassures us of the presence of the One who is with us always.

News and Views

Towards Peace Spiritual Support Service. *Una Allen, Coordinator, Towards Peace, Columba Centre, St. Patrick's College Maynooth, Co. Kildare writes:*

Towards Peace is a service offering spiritual support for anybody who has been abused, physically emotionally, sexually, spiritually, in a religious/ church environment. It is a pathway, a safe space where people who have been hurt can connect with their own spirituality, their sense of God and the Sacred, their own journey towards peace. The service is free and is also available to the families of those who have been affected.

Research shows that abuse by members of the Church has a major impact on a person's spiritual well-being. Towards Peace is a response to a request from a number of survivors, who despite having received counselling, are still struggling at some deeper level of themselves. These men and women speak of a loss of faith and a sense of rejection by a Church who betrayed them. They speak of their feelings of darkness, of a deep mistrust and suspicion of that Church which resulted for many, in the loss of a spiritual home. In many cases they speak of a sense of abandonment by God.

In *Towards Peace*, support is provided to survivors through conversations with a spiritual director/companion, an 'anam cara' or soul friend who endeavours to help each person listen to their own conversations with God – whomever or however they perceive that to be – ever respectful that each person's individual spiritual journey is his or her own.

This is a *shared* experience. There is no sense of the spiritual companion bestowing knowledge or answers, or attempting to bring the survivor back to Church; rather it is a journeying together, unpacking the hurts and the wounds that may have lain dormant for years. There is no pre- determined road map on this journey. Each person travels at their own unique individual pace.

Towards Peace was established by the Irish Bishop's Conference and the Conference of Religious in Ireland – which later amalgamated to form AMRI (the Association of Missionary and Religious Leaders in Ireland). The spiritual companions are made up of lay people men and women, religious and clergy. Based countrywide they are fully trained, qualified and experienced.

They are committed to ongoing specialised training and regular professional supervision All Towards Peace spiritual companions are members of AISGA (All Ireland Spiritual Guide Association) and abide by the AISGA Code of Ethics.

The numbers who access the service are relatively small but for those who do engage feedback has for the most part been very positive. There is no doubt that over time survivors of abuse can and do rediscover their spirituality and transform the spiritual vacuum left in the aftermath of such hurt. The pathway of spiritual direction / accompaniment may not suit everybody, and the service is continually looking for new ways to outreach to survivors. As a result of ongoing engagement with those who utilise the resources, plans are now in train to expand the service to include possibilities such as retreat days, pilgrim walks, support/ meditation groups etc.

For further information contact: towardspeace@iecon.ie/www.towardspeace.ie

If we don't transform our hurts,
we project them onto a cycle of negativity
(Daniel O'Leary)

Share your Pastoral experience. *Brian Kavanagh, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare writes:*

I was ordained a priest for the Diocese of Kildare & Leighlin in 1992. 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 and during the next academic year I am required to conduct research and complete a thesis. My research aim is to 'explore Irish catholic priests' experiences of the counselling aspect in their pastoral care role in the light of their seminary formation'. Ethical approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

I wish to invite *priests* ordained in 2011 or subsequently who are engaged in parish ministry, and not having completed formal study in counselling, to share your experiences to date and reflect on them in the light of seminary formation. Your involvement will be greatly appreciated. If you are interested in being a participant in the research I will be glad to send you some more information.

Please email me at brian.kavanagh27@mail.dcu.ie or 087 6162675

New Books

Maynooth College Reflects on COVID-19: *New Realities in Uncertain Times.* Eds. Jeremy Corley, Neil Xavier O'Donoghue and Salvador Ryan. Dublin: Messenger Publications. 2021. ISBN 9781788123327.

Bad times, hard times-this is what people keep saying; but let us live well, and times shall be good. We are the times: Such as we are, such are the times. Saint Augustine wrote this in the face of impending disaster for the church in north Africa more than a millennia ago, but they chime well with our own uncertain times and resonate with many of the sixteen illuminating essays contained in *Maynooth College Reflects on COVID-19***.** Part of the new realities referred to in this timely publication includes the discovery of unlikely and previously unsung heroes among us, some of whom have risked their health or paid the ultimate sacrifice of their lives for the welfare of others. Cynicism about modern humanity has also been largely silenced by the clearly demonstrated strength of communal bonds and the willingness to make individual sacrifices for the common good which have revealed the innate goodness of most people. Inevitably, for believers and agnostics alike, the question of God's presence or seeming absence amidst such universal suffering arises. In their individual essays, Noel O'Sullivan, Gaven Kerr and Thomas G. Casey, SJ fruitfully contextualize and provide insightful points for reflection and discussion on God, evil and how in the words of Casey we might *'rise into prayer instead of descending into panic'*. Similarly, helpful and stimulating questions and discussion points are placed at the conclusion of each essay. Beyond philosophical and theological questions posed by the pandemic there are also thoughtful pastoral oriented articles which will resonate with priests and families as well as those who are actively involved in parish ministries. John Paul Sheridan offers a welcome and perceptive reflection on the often neglected or ignored area of the spiritual lives of children. The world of play, camaraderie and spontaneous affection, so essential to their healthy and wholistic development, has been severely attenuated as they helplessly absorbed the fears and anxieties of adults, (however loving and protective) with whom they have been unnaturally confined throughout the crisis. With over 3 million COVID-19 deaths so far a major human and pastoral issue is addressed by Michael Shortall as he explores the stages of grief and the process of grieving with particular attention to the impact on bereaved individuals and family members, the hidden toll of which is still to emerge. There are challenging essays about the future of the Irish Church from Salvador Ryan and Neil Xavier O'Donoghue and several other thought provoking or reflective chapters from Pádraig Corkery, Noirin Lynch, Aoife McGrath, Jessie Rogers, Jeremy Corley, Michael Mullaney, Kevin O'Gorman SMA, Anne Codd,

PBVM with Michael Hurley and Philip John Paul Gonzales. Also included is an interview with Pope Francis from *The Tablet* by Austen Ivereigh. This rich collection brings the all too rare religious questions emerging from the crisis to the fore and make a meaningful contribution to the inner healing and purposeful thinking that may be sorely needed in times to come.

Termonfeckin, Co. Louth PAUL CLAYTON-LEA

Beyond the Altar: Perspective for Liturgical Worship. John Ainslie. London: Benedicamus. 2020. ISBN: 978-0-9929050-5-7.

John Ainslie is a former chairman of the Society of Saint Gregory. He has written this book with a proposal for a way forward in the debate over the position of the priest when he is praying the Eucharistic Prayer. During the renewal of the liturgy following Vatican II the shift in orientation from *ad orientem* to *versus populum* was one of the clearest noticeable changes. While the overwhelming majority of Roman Catholic Masses are celebrated with the priest facing the congregation across the altar, there is a very vocal minority that proposes that all Catholic liturgies return to the pre-conciliar practice of the priest facing East, which is normally the back wall of the church.

In this book Ainslie proposes a third way, he "proposes the integration of sanctuary and nave, and the location of the altar in the midst of the congregation, so that the prayer offered and the sacrament shared at it may be more readily perceived as that of both people and priest" (xii). In the first half of the book he gives us a historical overview of the question, concentrating on the theology of Guardini and Schwarz as well as magisterial documents and the general situation of the initial renewal of the liturgy. The second half of the book is more in the line of a reimaging of how the renewal of the liturgy could have been. While respecting tradition and the impulses for renewal Ainslie proposes a reordering of the churches whereby the lectern or pulpit would be in the centre of what is now the sanctuary and where the post-conciliar altar is usually located. Then the altar would be placed towards the main door of the church so that the priest would face East and at the same time the priest would be behind much of the assembly, so that the assembly would be formed as a U with the priest in the bottom centre of the U and with everyone facing East. The (ministerial) priest would then lead the priestly people in their sacrificial prayer from the middle. This would be a radically different way of celebrating the Eucharist.

I found the proposal to be intriguing. It definitely favours a "what if" reflection of how the world might be if the liturgical renewal had taken a different direction. On the level of realism, I would wonder if this is pie in the sky. The liturgical renewal has taken place, we are more than 50 years into the pre-Conciliar phase, virtually every Catholic church in the world has been reordered and there is little chance of parishes doing a major

reordering for a second time. However, particularly after the COVID-19 crisis, many parishes will have to embark on serious renewal. If churches are to stay open, they will have to attract people. The coming years will be a challenging time during which the viability of many parishes will be called into question. In this new reality there will be room for a variety of ways of doing things. If parishes in the future are looking for new options, Ainslie could be proposing a viable option for some parishes.

I recommend the work for the consideration of all interested parties. Ainslie is not proposing some quick fix but, if we admit that we are facing serious problems with the practice of Catholicism, then maybe we have to listen and at least consider those who propose radical solutions.

St. Patrick's College, Maynooth Neil Xavier O'Donoghue

The Story of Nano Nagle: A Life Lived on the Razor's Edge. Anne Lyons. Dublin: Messenger Publications. 2021. ISBN 9781788123228.

Nano Nagle lived and worked with those on the margins of society long before Pope Francis' clarion call to engage with the vulnerable, the neglected and the downtrodden. Nano Nagle's remarkable life is well narrated in this fine publication by Messenger Press. Broken into nine compact chapters Anne Lyons gives a clear picture of the background, inspirations and key moments in the life of this remarkable Cork women. She was born in Ballygriffin in 1718 into a wealthy and privileged family and, like many from that social background, left Ireland at age ten to be educated in France. She spent almost twenty years there enjoying the privileges that came with her family status and resources. On her return to Cork she was moved by the grinding poverty she saw all around her and the dearth of opportunities for education and advancement. By 1769 she had opened and resourced seven schools in Cork City and had taken up residence among the poor and neglected. She was a women of deep faith who was 'certain that God was on the side of the poor and vulnerable: in God's eyes they were the important ones [p 50].' She was a prophetic figure who inspired others, during her lifetime, to follow her example and continues to inspire many communities across the globe. The Presentation Sisters, whom she founded towards the end of her life, continue to live out her vision of inclusion, love and respect in the changed circumstances of today. In October 2013 Pope Francis named her Venerable and her journey towards canonisation continues.

Nano Nagle was a voice for the voiceless and a source of hope for the hopeless. The Nagle family motto, *Non vox sed votum*, accurately reflects her life and legacy. Anne Lyons, a Presentation Sister, has presented the life of this prophetic women with pride and in a very accessible, thorough and credible way.

Cork P.J. McAuliffe

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14 June
16.00 – 18.00

Due to the Covid-19 restrictions
The Maynooth Union
will host an online event this year.

Speakers include:

Austen Ivereigh:
Pope Francis' vision for the Church in the post-Covid world

Gerry O'Hanlon, SJ:
Mapping a Way Forward for the Catholic Church in Ireland

More details to follow

https://maynoothcollege.ie/maynooth-union