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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Gerry O'Hanlon
Mapping a Way Forward

Gerald O'Collins
Treasuring Karl Rahner

Donal Dorr
Discerning for the Synod

David Cowan
Ladislav Örsy

Billy Swan
A New Irish Catholicism

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On the Duty of
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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.

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Mapping a Way Forward for the Catholic Church in Ireland¹

Gerry O’Hanlon

The future, as we all know, is ‘*terra incognita*’, unknown. There is, then, no map, strictly speaking, for the future. However, as the Irish Bishops have noted in their decision to embark on a ‘synodal pathway’ for the Catholic Church in Ireland, the ‘walking together on the way’ that characterises a synodal approach ‘is a time honoured way of working out together the “navigation map” for the Church at particular times’ (<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/synod/faqs/>). It is an exercise in *communal* discernment with a focus on the question: what is the Holy Spirit saying to the Church at this time? There are signposts on the way – Scripture and Tradition of course, but also other people (especially the poor) and our planet earth (in particular its peripheries), our country and the world with their ‘signs of the times’. Our navigational tool, our compass is the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

The biblical prototype of this approach is embodied in the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24, 13-35): the disillusionment and desolation, the encounter with the Stranger and the re-reading of the signs of the times, the invitation to join them, the recognition in the breaking of bread, the conversion and resurgence of consolation as, with ears burning, they rush back in a mission to the rest of the group in Jerusalem. Our belief is, our hope is, as Cardinal Grech, General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, put it to the Irish Bishops, that ‘... the moment we embark on a synodal process, we will open the way for Jesus to visit us’ (<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2021/03/04/address-of-cardinal-mario-grech-to-the-bishops-of-ireland-on-synodality-2/>). At a time of crisis for the Church in Ireland this bold episcopal initiative is a sign of hope.

In what follows I will focus on what the Irish Bishops are inviting us to do, modified now by the papal re-set in recent weeks; and

1 Based on webinar address to Maynooth Union, June 14, 2021

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on issues and questions that arise, especially around governance, teaching and discernment. I will approach all these topics with a particular eye to the situation of priests in Ireland today.

THE SYNODAL INITIATIVE OF THE IRISH BISHOPS

In a Statement after their March 2021 Spring meeting the Irish Catholic Bishops formally announced that they had ‘decided to embark on a synodal pathway for the Catholic Church in Ireland leading to the holding of a National Synodal Assembly within the next five years’ (<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/synod/>). The Bishops did well to place their synodal initiative in a missionary rather than self-referential framework, acknowledging the challenging context within which the Church in Ireland is embedded. This context includes the rapid secularisation of Irish society, with a major decline in religious practice and a sharp reduction in the number of vocations to priesthood and religious life; the shocking revelations around clerical and institutional abuse which have severely damaged the moral credibility of the Church; the need to promote peace-making and a culture of welcome (given the unfinished peace process in Northern Ireland and the influx of immigrants to the island of Ireland); the cries for transparency, greater participation and accountability in the Church; the discovery, due to the Covid pandemic, of the family as the ‘domestic Church’; the need to connect with young people (who have exited the Church in their droves), with the ‘many people who have left Church behind and in some cases feel ignored, excluded or forgotten’, and to honour the contribution of women, not least by listening to ‘their deep concerns’. All this, following Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*, is seen within the call to solidarity with the poor, the earth, the excluded and those ‘on the peripheries’, including ‘initiatives of social friendship in favour of our sisters and brothers in other continents’.

The Bishops proposed to proceed by means of a two-year ‘national conversation’ or consultation process, structured around the leading and open question of ‘*what does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?*’ This is envisaged as a period of prayer, listening and discernment, allowing groups and individuals to share their insights, with related information sessions and educational programmes on the meaning and processes of syondality, all under the direction and supervision of a ‘task group made up of lay women and men, including young people, religious, priests and bishops’ to be established this June (2021). This two year consultation process was intended also to serve as

the Irish contribution to the 2022 Synod on Synodality in Rome, and afterwards the exact shape of the National Synod/Assembly will become clear.

Since the Bishops' Statement Pope Francis himself (May 21, 2020) has announced that the Synod of Bishops planned for Rome in October 2022 is *postponed* until October 2023 to allow for prior consultation in every Catholic diocese world-wide (guided by a questionnaire and to be completed by April 2022), then by a 'continental' discernment by Bishops (till March 2023) and then the Synod itself in Rome (<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-05/synod-of-bishops-will-begin-in-the-local-churches.html>). The Irish plan can easily be adjusted to, and merge with, this papal initiative. It is to be hoped that in so doing the idea of a national, and not just diocesan, conversation will be preserved. In their Statement after their Summer meeting in June the Bishops simply reiterate their original plan, with two modifications – *first*, the synodal pathway will lead '... to the holding of a national synodal assembly, *or assemblies* (my emphasis), within the next five years', and *secondly* they note that '... by a happy coincidence, these first two years of our Synodal Pathway in Ireland will complement the Catholic Church's worldwide journey towards the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops in Rome ... in October 2023' (<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2021/06/16/statement-of-the-summer-2021-general-meeting-of-the-irish-bishops-conference/>)

The papal 're-set' serves to further emphasise the key significance of synodality in the thought of Pope Francis, and, in particular, that listening to and dialogue with *all* the baptised. This is brought out very clearly in the recent book '*Let Us Dream*' by Pope Francis in collaboration with Austen Ivereigh.² Within the 'see/choose/act' framework of that book we can see the contextual and missionary emphases of the Irish Bishops as being faithful to the injunction of Francis to 'see' what is going on around us and to engage with the 'signs of the times', while it is clear that the 'choose/judge' part is grounded in a synodality which refuses to rest with the harsh and merciless 'isolated conscience' and obsessions of small groups, but which seeks to resolve conflict in processes of synodality that avoid polarization. This resolution is sought through a communal discernment aimed at a *new* synthesis whose God-given origin is evident in how a harmony is achieved 'that holds on to the sharp notes of its differences' (83). This is the kind of unity that can facilitate diversity and does not impose uniformity, a unity grounded in the Trinity and expressed in the outpouring of the Spirit

2 Pope Francis, in conversation with Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020

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at Pentecost when, unlike at Babel, different languages bring not fragmentation and division but richness and mutual understanding.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS THAT ARISE

In an interview (<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-05/cardinal-grech-interview-synod-secretariat-changes.html>) to explain the papal ‘re-set’ of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Grech outlines what is involved in a way that highlights our challenge here in Ireland. The re-set is because ‘the time was ripe for a wider participation of the People of God in a decision-making process that affects the whole Church and everyone in the Church’. As noted in the Pope’s own 50th anniversary address, Francis is convinced that ‘... the Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church’s life’. The governing principle of this consultation of the People of God is contained in the ancient principle ‘that which touches upon all must be approved by all’ (*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbari debet*). This in turn finds its root in the extension of episcopal collegiality to the involvement, in synodality, of all the baptised, based upon their share in the priestly, prophetic (teaching) and kingly (governance) of Jesus Christ. And Francis in this context lays particular stress on the *sensus fidei*, that which makes the People of God infallible *in credendo* (in believing), ‘one of the strongest themes of the current pontificate’.

GOVERNANCE

Let me suggest, first, what this theological framework implies around the issue of governance, in particular for priests on the ground here in Ireland at this historical juncture. In general it points to the end of a clericalism of entitlement and government by decree and simple *fiat*. We have to learn to shift to a mode of service in which dialogue and listening, no matter how wearisome, are essential. We have to show ourselves to be trustworthy, to be competent, to be accountable. The document *Light from the Southern Cross* emanating from the Catholic Church in Australia is an example of what is involved.³ At the same time, serious work needs to be done on defining the moral and legal issues around responsibility that arise. Priests can feel that parish councils, for example, often function as kind of Suggestion Boxes which simply add yet another layer of work to already over-burdened lives: one of the fruits of the synodal process may well be a growing realisation

3 Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Light from the Southern Cross*, *The Furrow*, 71, October 2020, 519-526

by laity that they too must undergo conversion, conversion to the owning of the kind of responsibility that goes with being a committed disciple and not just an interested observer.

In particular we are challenged as priests to *empower* the People of God in our parishes by organizing the kind of consultation best suited to the local culture which we understand.⁴ Anecdotally one hears of a lot of inertia and even cynicism among us priests: we've tried all this before, I'm tired, I'm old, it just means more work ... This is not us at our best. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus had every reason for despair and disillusionment, but look what happened. The prayer of the father whose son needed healing can be ours: Lord I believe, help my unbelief (Mk. 9: 24). Let us be bold about this, let us take risks: for example, what about an evening with invited young people to tell us why they are no longer interested in the church, with women who feel excluded, with those who have left to tell us why they left and why they still remain outside? And if we genuinely don't have the energy to organize such gatherings ourselves, why not allow/empower others to do so? For those of us who are old, in particular, this is a real opportunity to sow seeds which will eventually, we can hope, yield a rich legacy compatible with the dreams and idealism with which we first embarked on our vocations. Ours is a faith of redemption and forgiveness, of new beginnings. The Pope, the Bishops have offered us a concrete way to embark on this road: let's start walking, and allow ourselves to be carried when necessary!

TEACHING

There is, secondly, the so-called 'neuralgic' issue that many people in the Irish Catholic Church – and indeed world-wide – have not 'received' much of Church teaching on sexuality and gender. We think of issues like contraception, same-sex relations, and the ordination of women. This was evidenced in the ACP commissioned survey of Catholic views in 2012 – 75% believed that Catholic teaching on sexuality was not relevant to themselves or their families; three out of five Catholics disagreed with the teaching that any sexual expression of love between gay couples is immoral; 87% believed priests should be allowed to marry while 77% believed that women should be ordained to the priesthood (*Irish Examiner*, 13 April, 2012). It was also evidenced in the results of the Bishops' own questionnaire to the faithful as part of the consultation for the Synod on the Family – the Bishops acknowledged that many found church teaching in this area to be

4 For an analysis of some of the challenges and resistances involved, see Kevin Egan, The Upcoming Synod: Are we Ready?, *The Furrow*, 72, June 2021, 323-330

‘disconnected from real-life experience’, noting that ‘... many ... expressed particular difficulties with the teachings on extra-marital sex and cohabitation by unmarried couples, divorce and remarriage, family planning, assisted reproduction, homosexuality. The church’s teaching in these sensitive areas is often not experienced as realistic, compassionate or life-enhancing’ (Statement of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 13 March, 2014).

While in the end the crisis of faith in an age of secularisation and the shift to a ‘poor church for the poor’ may indeed be the most important challenges we face – also for ourselves as priests, since our own faith is not unaffected by the spirit of the age, however critically discerned- still the non-reception of teaching on sexuality and gender are also ‘signs of the times’. They ought *not* to be simply dismissed as polemical symptoms of a culture war between ‘progressives’ and ‘traditionalists’ that we are wiser to ignore. They affect, rather, the most intimate areas of people’s lives, they involve issues of basic human dignity and rights, and rejection of teaching in these areas cannot but diminish the overall credibility of the Church.

While it is clear that public or majority opinion, much less opinion polls, are not simply equivalent to the ‘sense of the faith’, nonetheless, as the International Theological Commission’s (ITC) document on *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church (2014) acknowledges, public opinion is the prime and normal means of gauging what the ‘sense of the faith’ is (n 125). However – and this is our current situation – there are also institutional means such as councils and synods by which the faithful may be more formally heard and consulted (n 125). It is this formal moment of discernment which the Irish Bishops are now proposing.

The ITC document is clear that there is a problem when the Catholic faithful are indifferent to or simply reject Church teaching on specific issues, be they doctrinal or moral. This non- reception should lead us to a reconsideration of these teachings (nn 80, 113-125). This situation is unlikely to have improved in Ireland since 2012 or indeed 2014: if anything it will have deteriorated as church teaching (for example on contraception) is widely ignored or (on same-sex unions or women priests) simply rejected. In this case, as the ITC document states, this may ‘indicate that certain decisions have been taken by those in authority without due consideration of the experience and the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, or without due consultation of the faithful by the magisterium’ (n 123).

By not facing up to this matter honestly and openly the church comes across as inauthentic. These are ‘signs of the times’ in our culture and Church and cannot be ignored or dismissed simply as failures in effective communication. We note in particular, in sexual

teaching, the dominance of a particular natural law approach which privileges notions like ‘intrinsic evil’ and ‘intrinsically disordered’ in ways that are contested by other theological approaches. And in teaching about gender, we note an approach to complementarity that has difficulty in affording women leadership roles.

Underlying these issues there is a need to re-examine the Catholic teaching on the ‘development of doctrine’ – the operative notion of development relies excessively on an historically unjustifiable model of linear continuity with previous teaching. It does not allow for a more organic notion of development which can admit correction and pruning, as would be proper in a hermeneutic of reform, beyond simple continuity or discontinuity. It would seem that the Church position on issues like contraception and women priests is overly influenced by a *restrictive* notion of doctrinal development.

There is a view, attributed to Pope Francis, that synods are not instruments to change church teaching but rather to apply it more pastorally. However Pope Francis has also stated in his recent *Motu Proprio Spiritus Domini* (15 January, 2021) that the change in Canon Law permitting women to be lectors and acolytes represents a ‘doctrinal development ... arrived at in these last years that has brought to light how certain ministries instituted by the Church have as their basis the common condition of being baptized and the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism’. In an accompanying letter he notes that this *development* occurred due to a number of Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops and cites in particular the Final Document of the Amazon Synod. Historically many similar instances could be cited – doctrine develops, teaching changes, and often due to synodal assemblies and councils – ‘Tradition is not a museum, true religion is not a freezer, and doctrine is not static but grows and develops’ (Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, 57). It is of course understood that where teaching affects the whole Church, the Irish contribution cannot decide such matters on its own, but it may have a vital role in submitting its discernment for consideration by the universal Church.

DISCERNMENT

Thirdly, the Bishops, with Francis, are right to be wary of division, of an exclusively ‘parliamentary procedure’ which does not rise to the level of discernment, of the ‘isolated conscience’ and single-issue reform mentality which can easily sow a partisan and sectarian spirit. But it’s also true that discernment can be ‘noisy’⁵,

5 Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*, 2018/9, Dublin, Messenger Publications, chs 6 and 5

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can integrate and purify vigorous debate and conflict, lobbying and gossip – we are human beings, not angels! Interestingly Francis himself noted of the Amazon Synod that while it could not in the end rise to the level of discernment on the contested issues of married priests and female deacons (a sign of which was that, unlike in the Synod on the Family, the different sides remained as fixed in their views at the end of the process as they had been at the beginning), nonetheless what occurred was a ‘rich, productive and even necessary parliament’.⁶ And so, he seems to be saying, let the debate continue, let us ask God’s grace to raise it to the level of true communal discernment, so that the urgent questions it addresses may soon be resolved.

I simply note the apparent *tension* between the assumption of the Irish Bishops that the process in Ireland, involving laity and clergy, would be one of communal discernment, and the clear indication in the ‘re-set’ of Francis that while the consultation of the local church/dioceses is intrinsic to the process, nonetheless the ‘discernment’, properly speaking, is restricted to the Bishops themselves at national/continental and universal levels. This would seem to conflict with the notion of the share in governance by laity due to their baptism, and with recommendations from ARCIC III which advised a more mandatory, normative role for them in the governance of the Catholic Church.⁷ It does, of course, harmonize well with the traditional understanding of the role of the ordained hierarchy in having the final authoritative voice in teaching and governance. What matters, it seems to me, is that the concerns of all the baptised are truly listened to and acted on – it may be that the means of so doing (by consultation or through a more deliberative role) can be teased out further at this forthcoming Synod on synodality and at future synods.

A FINAL WORD

It is too early to anticipate the fruits of the synodal pathway in Ireland – will it, for example, adopt a mode of ‘blue sky’ imagining only, or will it yield multi-stranded pathways which focus also with more depth on specific issues?

It will be important to bear in mind throughout that Francis always locates reform in the context of our faith encounter with Jesus Christ and the mission which flows from this. As the late Nicholas Lash once put it: ‘... questions concerning how the Gospel of the crucified and risen one is effectively to be

6 Antonio Spadaro, ‘Francis’ Government: What is the driving force of his pontificate?’, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 5 September, 2020, 4

7 O’Hanlon, Church Reform: Taking Stock, *The Furrow*, 71, June 2020, 323-332

proclaimed, in solidarity with and from the standpoint of the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged, are vastly more important than church structures. *Nevertheless, inappropriate structures frustrate appropriate evangelisation* (my emphasis).⁸ It is clear that priests have a key role in facilitating this renewal and reform in function of mission. I repeat, then – the Pope and our Bishops have offered us a concrete way to embark on our own road to Emmaus: let's start walking, and allow ourselves to be carried when necessary!

8 Nicholas Lash, 'Vatican II: Of Happy Memory – and Hope?' in Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008 (originally 2003), 239

The Importance of Education. It has been observed by historian Dr. Helga Hammerstein that 'the English Government's neglect of education and the Catholic Clergy's awareness of its importance, appear in retrospect to have been the vital factor determining the unique course of Irish history. Ireland was to be the only country where the Counter-Reformation succeeded against the will of the head of state'. A significant role in that process was played by the colleges and seminaries founded in several European countries for the instruction of young Irish people and the education of Irish priests. The lives and dedication of those who commenced this work and carried it on have often been forgotten.

– THOMAS J. MORRISSEY, SJ, *Mission to a Suffering People*, 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 22.

Treasuring Karl Rahner 1904–84

Gerald O'Collins

A few years after Karl Rahner died in 1984, I heard a speaker in Rome pompously declaring that 'he was *just* a philosopher'. He should have said that, like St Thomas Aquinas, Rahner was *also* a philosopher. In both cases, philosophy lent clarity and strength to their theological teaching.

At the end of the last century, it became a popular, self-promoting tactic for upwardly mobile clergy to assert loudly that Hans Urs von Balthasar had supplanted Rahner as *the* papal theologian. Ah, the politics of theology! In fact, examining closely many documents published by Pope St John Paul II, a doctoral student of the Gregorian, now a bishop in Ireland, discovered no evidence for any such special influence coming from von Balthasar.

The late Juan Alfaro, a close friend and collaborator of Rahner, admitted to me his role in drafting John Paul II's first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis* (The Redeemer of the Human Being of 1979). Rahnerian emphases showed through the text – not least (a) by using John's Gospel to express the inseparable connection between the revelation (light) and salvation (life) brought by Jesus Christ, and (b) in the teaching on God's free call to eternal life that affects the depths of all human beings. Rahner spoke of the 'supernatural existential', which the Pope expressed in more intelligible terms. Rahner could be dauntingly difficult to grasp.

Shortly after John Paul II published an encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (Lord and Giver of Life), along with several other theologians he invited me to lunch. I seized the occasion to thank him for applying (over ten times) to the Spirit the language of divine 'self-communication'. 'But I didn't take the term from Rahner,' he retorted. His reaction showed that the Pope knew Rahner's theology. He hinted that he was aware of the term's long history, which took it back through modern philosophers and Thomas Aquinas to an earlier stage of European thought.

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The theme of the personal self-communication of God holds together the divine revealing and redeeming activity. Revelation is not primarily the disclosure of hitherto unknown truths *about* God but the self-manifestation *of* the Holy Trinity. God becomes present through the gift of revelation and the inseparable offer of salvation. Secondly, to be sure, revelation involves knowing new truths about God. But, *primarily*, it means knowing or experiencing God rather than knowing about God.

When the Second Vatican Council began in 1962, an influential paper written by Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger proposed this personal view of revelation as theologically primary and supported by biblical and pastoral considerations. Rahner's ideas on revelation, tradition, and the inspiration of Scriptures shone brightly as the Council opened and developed.

When a conclusive elaboration of the constitution on divine revelation threatened to be out of reach, in March 1964 a special sub-commission was formed which included nineteen theological specialists or *periti*. They included Yves Congar, Alois Grillmeier, Rahner, Ratzinger, and a much overlooked but widely influential expert, Pieter Smulders. The sub-commission was arguably the most brilliant group ever gathered to shape a Vatican II document. It did its work well. The final text, developed by them in the light of proposals coming from the bishops, was approved 2,344 votes to 6 in the final voting on 18 November 1965.

From the close of Council and into the following decades, the ideas of Rahner shone brighter than ever. In the late seventies René Latourelle, who spent twelve years as dean of theology at the Gregorian University (Rome), enlisted me in preparing a landmark volume that appeared in half a dozen languages, including English: *Problems and Perspectives in Fundamental Theology* (Paulist Press, 1982). 'Could you visit Rahner in Munich?', Latourelle asked. 'Once he accepts our invitation', Latourelle explained. 'anyone else we invite will jump at the chance of appearing alongside him'.

When I headed north to Germany and called on Rahner, he agreed at once to be part of our team. I rose to leave. But he insisted on our taking a walk around Munich and finishing with an Irish coffee in a skyscraper overlooking the city. I relished the idea of discussing theology with someone who had a constructive theological mind of his own. But Rahner diverted attention to friends teaching at the Gregorian University and elsewhere in Rome. He wanted to hear all the latest news from the eternal city.

Before I began full time teaching at the Gregorian in 1974, Rahner had lectured there. Among the other Germans, both Catholic and Protestant, who unflinchingly accepted invitations to

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come as visiting professors, was Jürgen Moltmann. Famous for his theology of hope and theology of the cross, Moltmann had no hesitation in telling me one day: 'Rahner has been the leading theologian of our century'.

FOUR THEMES

Rahner's thinking consistently carried a wealth of meaning and exercised wide influence. Four themes sum up *some* major areas of his reflection.

First, right to the end he continued to think on a world scale. In a lecture delivered in Cambridge, Massachusetts, shortly before he died, he described Vatican II as 'the coming of the global church'. What has happened with the election of a Polish, a German and an Argentinian pope symbolized the coming of a world church. So too has the growth of the Church in Africa and Asia.

Rahner's global church conveys a vision of eternal life for 'all people of good will in whose hearts grace is active invisibly' (Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Joy and Hope, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 22). It is a church that understands St Paul's dictum's 'Christ died for all' (Romans 8:32) to mean: 'the Holy Spirit offers to all the possibility of sharing in the Easter mystery' (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

Leo O'Donovan, who had been closely associated with Rahner in Germany and in the USA, chose *A World of Grace* (Georgetown University Press, 1995) for the title of a book he edited on Rahner's theology. The title caught Rahner's vision of the world. O'Donovan, incidentally, was the clergyman who millions saw providing a prayer at the inauguration of President Joe Biden.

What Rahner called the 'supernatural existential' meant that the world is truly a world of grace. The Holy Spirit, with questions and inspirations, is constantly active in the hearts of all people. For a time Rahner wrote of 'anonymous Christians', but abandoned that terminology when he glimpsed its disadvantages. Rahner's vision of a world of grace does not stand or fall with a terminology he used for a time and then dropped.

Second, Rahner led theologians in his knowledge of sacramental reconciliation. He was convinced that a healthy practice of the sacrament called for collective reconciliation. But, sadly, the form of penance called 'the third rite' remains blocked, and the sacrament has been widely abandoned.

Third, Rahner's study of mysticism led him to recognize how widespread mystical experiences are. The data of the Oxford-based Religious Research Institute, founded in 1969 by Sir Alistair Hardy, bore out the view of Rahner. Very many 'ordinary' people

reported what have to be called ‘mystical experiences’.

Fourth, Rahner spoke of the coming church as being also a ‘diaspora’ or dispersed community. As far as I know, he has not been invoked to illuminate the Covid-19 church or anticipate the post-Covid-19 church. But that is our loss.

Rahner is no longer a living voice in our world, But his ideas remain on glittering display in the 23 volumes of *Theological Investigations*, his 1976 masterpiece, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, and numerous other writings.

Water and Liberation. Fear can hold you back from so much, even from things that are good for you. Submerging yourself in water involves letting go of fear, even overcoming irrational fear so that you can enjoy the refreshing and uplifting sensation. It is no wonder that the image of water is used so often in the spiritual journey. Even Baptism, the first of the sacraments on a religious journey, is symbolised by water. This rich spiritual symbol speaks of dying to an old way of life and taking on a new refreshing way of being in the world.

- ALAN HILLIARD, *Dipping Into Life, 2021* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 64.

Discerning for the Synod

Donal Dorr

Pope Francis has made it clear that he is committed to ensuring that the forthcoming Synod will be one in which all the members of ‘the faithful’ are actively involved – and that the process used will be a model for what is involved in community discernment. Since it is Francis himself who is primarily responsible this new emphasis on synodality and discernment in the Church, this is a good time to explore what the pope sees as the nature and purpose of discernment. In this article I shall focus mainly on the distinctive features of the kind of discernment that Francis sees as appropriate for Church gatherings. Then towards the end I shall offer some brief suggestions about how this style of community discernment might be put into practice ‘on the ground’ in local, national and international meetings.

THE NATURE OF DISCERNMENT

Francis has given us some very important accounts of the nature of discernment in various documents, particularly in *Amoris Laetitia* (AE) paragraphs 164 to 312, and *Gaudete et Exultate* (GE) paragraphs 132 to 139 and 166 to 177. Much of this material concerns personal discernment. But Francis spelled out his understanding, not only of *personal* discernment but also of *communal* discernment in an important dialogue with his friend Antonio Spadaro SJ, who wrote it up in an article called ‘The Government of Francis: Is the driving force of the pontificate still active?’ in *La Civiltà Cattolica* on 5 September 2020 – an article which includes several direct statements of Francis. Another important source is the book *Let us Dream Together* which Francis wrote with the collaboration of Austin Ivereigh.

A key point that emerges, especially from the Spadaro article, is that communal discernment is something very different from working for consensus by finding the common denominator of the contributions and viewpoints of the different participants. That kind of consensus involves making many compromises and a certain

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watering down of proposals that seem in any way unusual. On the other hand, Francis insists that when we engage in the process of discernment, though we are of course using our reasoning powers and being prudent, we are going beyond them, seeking ‘a glimpse of that unique and mysterious plan that God has for each of us’ (GE 170). For him, discernment ‘calls for more than common sense; it is in fact a gift of the Spirit’ (GE 166). And, therefore, we must allow the *Spirit* to surprise us.

Furthermore, discernment as proposed by Pope Francis, as by Ignatius Loyola before him, relies primarily not on a purely rational calculation of the pros and cons of a proposed policy, but on a ‘discerning of the spirits’. In practice, this means *sensing* the rightness of a particular action or policy through the ‘consolation’ that it evokes in us. Another way of putting this is that the Holy Spirit gives one a *sense* that this proposed policy or this action is fully in conformity with what Jesus would want us to do.

In *Let Us Dream Together* Francis speaks of ‘sensing the prompting of the Spirit’. He also notes that ‘sometimes the Spirit acts to show us that we are looking in the wrong direction’, that the real issue is not what we thought it was. And he maintains that in a synodal process a sense of disappointment ‘is likely to reveal an agenda; you came wanting to achieve something, and when you didn’t get it, you feel disappointed’. He also says that ‘the bad spirit’ encourages ‘debilitating conflicts’.

In the Spadaro article Francis spoke of the dialogue that took place during the Synod for the Amazon, regarding the priestly ordination of *virii probati*. He said: ‘There was a discussion ... a rich discussion ... a well-founded discussion, but no discernment, which is something other than arriving to a good and justified consent or relative majorities.’ He went on to say: ‘We must understand that the Synod is more than a Parliament ... on this subject it was a rich, productive and even necessary Parliament; but no more than that.’

One of the more interesting statements made by Pope Francis in his dialogue with Fr Spadaro is the following:

‘Above all, there is no discernment on ideas, even among the ideas of reform, but on the real, on the stories, on the concrete history of the Church, because reality is always superior to the idea. For this reason the starting point is always historical.’

When Francis says that ‘the starting point is always historical’, this does not at all mean that we have to be wedded to doing whatever was done in the past. On the contrary, he is encouraging us to recall how the Church was led in the past to take Spirit-inspired *new* initiatives, in order to open ourselves to hear the voice of the Spirit

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in the present and for the future and be ready to take whatever initiatives to which we are *now* being called.

Reflection on the history of the Church indicates that the *Spirit* has inspired quite a wide range of ways in which different Christians can live out their call to follow Jesus. There has always been room for a variety of responses which are not in competition with each other.

THE OVERFLOW

Francis says: ‘What characterizes a synodal path is the role of the Holy Spirit. We listen, we discuss in groups, but above all we pay attention to what the Spirit has to say to us’ (*Let Us Dream*, p.85.) Francis is so insistent on this that it is clear that he is calling us to a kind of radical conversion of our usual rather vague faith in the work of the Holy Spirit. He is inviting us to *trust* that the Spirit wants to be actively engaged in shaping our insights and our decisions – and in leading us in new directions far beyond anything we might have previously hoped for or expected.

This is spelled out in some detail by Francis in his account of the nature of community discernment. He frequently refers to what he calls ‘the Overflow’. As he explains it, ‘overflow’ is ‘the solution to an intractable problem [which] comes in ways that are unexpected and unforeseen.’

‘Such overflows happen at the crossroads of life, at moments of openness, fragility, and humility when the ocean of [God’s] love bursts the dams of our self-sufficiency and so allows for a new imagination of the possible. (*Let Us Dream*, pp.80-81.)’

The *key* point here is that when we come together to engage in a community discernment, each of us must be willing to let go of our previous agendas and be fully open to the voice of the Spirit. Then there can be a real breakthrough – the emergence of some new option or energy which comes as pure gift from ‘the Beyond’. This new reality can, if we allow it, replace our own ideas and expectations and offer a new way of going forward *together*. Francis goes on to say that ‘what matters most is that harmony which enables us to move forward together on the same path, even with all our shades of difference.’ For him the very essence of a synod is summed up in the literal meaning of the two Greek words ‘*syn*’ which means ‘together’ and ‘*odos*’ which means ‘path’; so the word ‘synod’ means walking together.

The harmony and togetherness which Francis is calling for is not the kind of consensus we might work for by having a succession of votes and making compromises. It comes rather as a gift from the Spirit. In a very interesting statement he notes the importance of

mediators when politicians come together to agree on a common law and says that ‘mediation is a science, but also an exercise in human wisdom’. He suggests that in a synod the Holy Spirit plays a role that is analogous to that of the mediator in the political field.

SCRIPTURAL BASIS

We can turn to chapter 15 of ‘The Acts of the Apostles’ to see a striking example of the kind of discernment that was used by the young Christian community. A significant number of the Jewish converts were deeply upset by the pioneering work of Paul and Barnabas among the gentiles. It was not that they did not want gentiles to become Christians, but that they were convinced that in order to be true Christians they would have to take on all the obligations of Jews, including being circumcised and adopting the strict Jewish rules about what kind of food one could eat.

When this issue came to a head and had to be addressed by the leaders of the young Christian community, there was no question of having a parliamentary-style debate or counting numbers on one side or the other. The process adopted was rather one of *discerning* where the Spirit had been at work. So, Peter reminded the community of how God had challenged him so powerfully in his vision of the cloth containing all kinds of animals, and the message ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made clean’ (Acts 10:15). Peter pointed out that this was followed immediately by the conversion of the gentile Cornelius and his group and ‘ratified’ by the outpouring of the Spirit on them: ‘God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. God did not discriminate between us and them’ (Acts 10:8-9).

Peter’s account of this work of the Spirit must have touched the whole group deeply and left them open to listening. ‘The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them’ (Acts 12-13). It is clear that, once again, the whole group recognized that this was truly a work of the Spirit. Those who had been raising objections were now willing to go along with the proposal of James, which was in fact a full acceptance of the validity of the approach of Paul and Barnabas, with just a minor conciliatory gesture towards those who had opposed it.

The participants at that gathering probably saw their main work as ensuring that the small Christian community of the time wouldn’t split into two – those who remained Jewish Christians and the new people brought in by Paul and Barnabas. But the result of the discernment and decision taken at that first council of the

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Church had an ‘overflow’ effect that greatly surpassed anything that the group could have expected. It led to the Church becoming a worldwide religion, a universal community in which the Jewish Christians were just a tiny minority. It opened up the possibility of the Christian faith being embodied in a myriad of different cultures – something that only now, since Vatican II, and especially since Francis became pope, is beginning to be taken seriously.

INSPIRATION OF INDIVIDUALS AND SMALL GROUPS

A reflection on the past history of our Church shows that Spirit-inspired new initiatives rarely come out of parliamentary-style debates and compromises. Inspiration generally first comes through individuals or small groups. As the story of the Council of Jerusalem in the Acts of the Apostles illustrates, it was the *new* approach of Paul and Barnabas which led to the Church becoming truly worldwide. A similar pattern can be seen down through the history of the Church. For instance, the personal inspiration of Francis of Assisi led, over a period of years, to the development in the Church of a new rich spirituality which emphasised simple living and love for the Earth.

Much more recently, we find that the major changes in theology, spirituality, and the life of the Church brought about by Vatican II, came first from the personal inspiration of Pope John XXIII. And his initiative in calling the Council was brought to fruition by the unexpected recognition of the value of the theology espoused by a relatively small number of theologians such as Yves Congar, Karl Rahner, Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac and John Courtney Murray. These were people whose views had previously been seen as maverick, even quasi-heretical. The ‘overflow’, which came when the main body of bishops ‘bought into’ the inspiration of John XXIII and the theological insights of these few scholars, was far greater than anybody might have expected beforehand. The Council brought about a quite radical transformation of Church teaching on a whole range of subjects that would have been almost unthinkable for most Catholics – and most bishops – even a few years earlier.

The coming of Pope Francis is another striking example of an ‘overflow’. When the cardinals gathered to elect a successor to Pope Benedict they wanted to elect somebody who would solve the financial problems of the Vatican and, hopefully, put some limit to the excessive power of the Roman Curia. What we have got with the papacy of Francis is a far greater emphasis on compassion rather than on law and the quite radical commitment of Francis to the practice of synodality at every level of Church life.

In order to illustrate the reality of the ‘overflow’, Francis himself cited what happened in October 2015 at the Synod on the Family. He recalled how the bishops got deadlocked:

‘Each side, entrenched in ‘their’ truth, ended up being imprisoned in their own positions. Yet the Spirit saved us in the end, in a breakthrough at the close of the second (October 2015) meeting of the Synod on the Family. The overflow, in this case, came above all through those with a deep knowledge of Saint Thomas Aquinas, among them the Archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn. They recovered the true moral doctrine of the authentic scholastic tradition of Saint Thomas, rescuing it from the decadent scholasticism that had led to a casuistic morality. (*Let Us Dream* p. 88.)’

All of these examples indicate that when Church leaders are engaged in community discernment it is important for them to be *open* to listening for – and listening to – the Spirit-inspired calls of individual members or small groups – inspirations which have arisen from their own personal discernment.

IT CAN TAKE TIME

An important lesson that we learn from the history of the Church is that there are times when there was almost immediate acceptance by the Christian community as whole, and by Church leaders, that key new initiatives were fully in line with the call to be followers of Jesus. But more commonly it has taken some time for this general recognition to come; and in the meantime the ‘pioneers’ were often left feeling rather isolated and unsupported. We might recall the great difficulties with Church authorities experienced by Mary Ward, foundress of the IBVM Sisters (now CJ and Loreto Sisters), and of St. Mary MacKillop, foundress of the Josephite Sisters. The time required for general acceptance depends partly on the degree of willingness of the members of the group to let go of their own agendas. But it also depends on the degree to which it is evident that those who are calling for the new initiative are *not* simply pushing some personal opinion but are truly inspired by the Holy Spirit.

These lessons from history throw light on the frequent insistence by Pope Francis that, ‘time is more important than space’. And it helps us to understand why Francis recently took the unusual step of postponing the date of the upcoming synod from 2022 to 2023. Of course, a main reason for this postponement was the insistence by Francis that there be adequate time for a deep and extensive

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involvement of Church members and others in the early stages of what has now become a three-year synodal process.

But we can surmise that Francis was also thinking of how, over the four years of Vatican II, there was a very significant ‘education’ of the bishops – a deepening of their understanding of what the Spirit was calling them to do, and a growing willingness to follow the Spirit. No doubt he was adverting to the fact that the more radical and controversial decisions were taken only in the final session of the Council. In the gaps of several months in between the four sessions of the Council the bishops had returned to their own dioceses and could get a sense of the response of ‘the faithful’ on the ground to the new approaches that were being suggested. And the Holy Spirit had time to work on the bishops themselves, leading these men who had been brought up on an older theology and spirituality to open themselves up to what they would have previously considered to be very ‘far out’ ideas.

DISCERNMENT ‘ON THE GROUND’

All this suggests that the gatherings ‘on the ground’ in each diocese and each region need to have a very different tone and style from the usual kind of consultations and meetings which Church leaders have practised in the past. It will be essential that the gatherings be facilitated by people who are familiar with the process of group discernment. The skills involved will, in some respects, be more similar to those of spiritual directors than to those of business consultants.

It will be essential to establish from the very beginning a *prayerful* atmosphere that will evoke in the participants an openness to listening to each other. This will be a situation where people feel safe in sharing the deep feelings and longings which well up in them in response to what others have shared, rather than giving speeches which they have prepared beforehand. All this will, hopefully, create an ambiance where people are listening for the voice of the Spirit.

It will be important to ensure that the questions which the participants are invited to address are appropriate for this kind of discernment. The main question should not be: ‘What do we have to say to the world?’ It could instead be: ‘What is God saying to me, to us, at this time? Where is the Spirit touching *me* at this moment, and what is the Spirit nudging *us* to hear and to do?’ The participants could be invited to remember that the Incarnation means that Jesus is fully embodied in this world and that therefore the Spirit of Jesus is speaking to us through all that is happening in the world. So a key question might be: ‘What is the Spirit telling us

about how Jesus is responding lovingly to the present situation in the world and the Church – and how is he inviting *us* to respond?’

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

At this point I venture to recall an experience which may give an indication of what I would like to see happening in these meetings. About fifteen years ago I was privileged to take part as a visitor-participant in a gathering where about two hundred members of a spiritual community were exploring their deepest purposes and the structures which would best enable them to fulfil these purposes. A great variety of strong opinions were expressed by different members of the group.

At one key moment a woman spoke briefly but with great feeling on some particular issue in a way that touched everybody there. At that point, one of the facilitators immediately put her ‘on the spot’ by saying: ‘Share your vision with us—what you stand for and what you believe our organization should stand for.’ The woman responded by outlining her vision, speaking spontaneously from the depths of her heart. When she had finished there was a deep silence. It was becoming evident to the participants that she had become a kind of instrument or medium who had been given the gift of putting words on what the whole group had been groping and struggling to articulate.

At one level what she had said was new. But her words had struck a cord in the hearts of the group, so that they could now recognize that she had given conscious expression to the deep unconscious desires of the group as a whole. So her words had brought harmony and a sense of togetherness which was far deeper than a consensus at a purely intellectual level. Furthermore, it had evoked a new energy in the group to live out what they now saw as *their* vision and purpose which she had articulated so powerfully. The facilitators then invited the group to take a long break to give people time to reflect on what had been said and to see whether it had been an adequate expression of the vision and purpose of the group.

As I reflect now on this event, I am inclined to interpret what happened in Christian terms. I would suggest that the woman was inspired by the Holy Spirit to speak ‘heart to heart’ to the group so respectfully and so authentically that her words provided a channel through which the light and the wisdom of the Spirit could move the hearts of her colleagues, bring enlightenment to their minds, give them a deep sense of their unity in their diversity, and infuse them with new energy for the path they were being called to travel together.

Ladislav Örsy: A Reflection and Dialogue

David Cowan

Reaching a century is always a milestone, one that few of us reach and fewer still with the same energy and vibrancy as Father Ladislav Örsy, the American-based Hungarian Jesuit and canonist who turned 100 on 30th July. His decades of work are well worthy of a tribute. This essay is both a reflection on some of his key ideas and a dialogue from two virtual discussions; one I had with Fr Örsy¹ and the other with Professor Rik Torfs, Dean of the Faculty of Canon Law at Leuven University, where Fr Örsy was a theology student.² Our starting point was the controversies currently faced by the church. Fr Örsy notes, “there are many crises, which may at times seem insurmountable, surrounding the church today.” Discussing Pope Francis, Fr Örsy observes “There is a lot of talk about his pontificate and substantial issues,” but he believes there are deeper questions in search of answers, “How far do we respect the permanent tradition? What belongs to the core? Ought that not to be sorted out? The foundational issues have not changed. We need to examine every issue separately.”

Current controversies and the tradition, or the core, are questions of *horizons*, a significant metaphor explored by Fr Örsy in his book *Theology and Canon Law: New Horizons for Legislation and Interpretation*. The controversies are well-documented and publicized and dominate media coverage and dinner party talk about the church. However, the focus on such controversies is one horizon, and currently obscures the tradition or core of the church. Seeing these as different horizons can help the church through the examination of current and historical events dominating the headlines and discern the best ways forward. This is not to ignore or trivialize some of these events, largely in the area of sexual and child abuse and of shocking proportions, because they do need to be sorted out. There are other events that have given much attention to

1 Monday, 8th February, 2021

2 Friday, 26th March, 2021. Being a young man in his 60s, I should note that Professor Torfs was not at Leuven during Fr Örsy's time.

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canon law. Such as the marriage of British of Prime Minister Boris Johnson to Carrie Symonds, the debate over whether President Joe Biden should be given communion, and the rumbling controversy over baptism stoked by former Irish president Mary McAleese since she became a doctor of canon law.³ As a result, it seems one is never far away from a barrack-room canon lawyer. Yet, the times when canon law rises to the level of public debate are also times when the *connection* between canon law and theology can become most clear, and it is at the intersection of the two that Fr Örsy has been a pioneer.

ACADEMIC CAREER

Fr Örsy says he got into canon law because he was asked. He was already undertaking legal studies in Hungary, and the Jesuits needed to train lawyers and people to teach so they asked him if he would take on the job. He was born in Egres but raised in Szekesfehervar, Hungary's original capital. He entered the Society of Jesus in 1943 and was ordained in Leuven, Belgium, in 1951. He earned his doctorate in canon law at the Gregorian University, a degree in civil law at Oxford University and did his graduate theological studies at Leuven University. He taught at the Greg, before arriving in the United States in 1966 to teach at Fordham University, the Catholic University of America and – since 1994 – Georgetown University, where he remains a visiting professor of law. Fr Örsy went on to build a body of work that comprises nine books and hundreds of articles on theology and canon law. Aside from the *Theology and Canon Law*, other titles include *The Church: Learning and Teaching, Marriage in Canon Law*⁴ and most recently *Discernment: Theology and Practice, Communal and Personal*. Fr Örsy has also written for *The Furrow*, including an extensive review of McAleese's book *Quo Vadis? Collegiality in the Code of Canon Law*.⁵

HUMAN FRAILITY

Fr Örsy reminds us that the church has had crisis and scandal from the beginning, “the cock crowed three times as Peter denied his Lord, who was also sold for profit by Judas. Human problems are

3 Dr McAleese was awarded the Alfons Auer Ethics Award 2019 for her doctoral thesis on *Children's Rights and Obligations in Canon Law*, which she completed at the Gregorian University Rome in 2018.

4 Ladislav Örsy *Marriage In Canon Law: Texts and Comments Reflections and Questions* (Delaware: Michael Glazier 1986).

5 Ladislav Örsy, ‘Where Is Our Church Going? – Searching for a Response,’ *The Furrow* 63 (2012): 591–595; Ladislav Örsy, ‘Preventing Future Crises: Collegiality in Action,’ *The Furrow* 54 (2003): 396–398.

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what they are. The history of the church, you will find, is about ordinary people. There is no point where we did not have scandals, they were there in the beginning.” Which explains why Fr Örsy remains *optimistic*, because “behind all the declines and scandals, there is always something that is alive.” Explaining this pattern, “we have this dialectic all the time, we should never have a perfect church. I believe human imperfection will always be present in the church. We are the church of sinners. The church is very human. Structural change is helpful to a point, but only up to a point. We should, listen to the Gospel and remember we are also a church of saints.” Citing Mother Theresa, he highlights the “many sacrifices made by simple, Christian people.” Visiting Africa, Fr Örsy recalls “watching the Sisters helping the sick, it seems we have quite a few Mother Therasas.” We can select many points of history and see the same pattern, for instance “in the 13th century, Christians were totally given to greed, accumulating wealth, and suddenly there is Francis of Assisi.”

THE LEGACY OF VATICAN II

Vatican II was a defining event for Fr Örsy, demonstrating to him the vibrancy of the church and its capacity to listen to the Gospel. He was hugely influenced by the Council, at which he served as a bishops’ expert adviser and worked on the preparation of the new Code of Canon Law, adopted in 1983. Fr Örsy has devoted a lifetime to the examination of the integral relationship between canon law and theology without losing sight of their unique roles. He puts much emphasis in his work on the new attitude of mind that came out of Vatican II and urges canon lawyers and others to do likewise by raising new questions with “the courage to accept fresh answers.” This he sees as a balanced requirement, in that we ought to understand the dialectic between tradition and change. As he explains in *Theology and Canon Law*, the good canon lawyer “should do the same as the Council did: move beyond the familiar into a higher view point., then raise new questions and have the courage to accept fresh answers”.⁶ He concludes, those who acquire the new attitude of mind, this inquiring spirit, “can never again be mere lawyers.”⁷ Optimistically, as he wrote a decade ago, he believes we can “search for better balances without damaging vital forces.”⁸

In his 1985 published Père Marquette Lecture, *From Vision to Legislation: From the Council to a Code of Laws*, Fr Örsy

6 Ladislav Örsy, *Theology and Canon Law: New Horizons for Legislation and Interpretation* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1992), p.16.

7 *Ibid.*, p.17.

8 Ladislav Örsy *Receiving the Council* (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2009), p.12.

suggested the new code “provides a genuine bill of rights for the members of the church.”⁹ However, there is a serious omission, “The declaration of rights is not followed up by robust provisions to protect them.”¹⁰ He explained the pivotal role of Vatican II, explaining that the Council “seemingly broke new ground, where it reached down to the very bedrock of our traditions and found unused sources of energy.”¹¹ This is an energy that should infuse the church everywhere, and God’s people need “to remain faithful to the spirit of the Council. Its spirit was that of intelligent and responsible enquiry into the Christian mysteries; *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. Such enquiry must not cease.”¹² This is not a question of revolutionising structures but looking within the structures to reach all the people and allowing them to be listened to and to listen. Fr Örsy tells me “The church is very human. Structural change is helpful up to a point, but only up to a point. We all need to listen to the Gospel.”

As Fr Örsy explains, “Faith helps us to understand better, it is a gift, that is Roman Catholic, Christian teaching. You see, you are a believer, but how to act? There is a gap there. God can only help you along.” Elaborating further, he says “we are living in a puzzling age. If you believe, not much explanation is necessary. If you don’t believe, no explanation is possible. This is the turning point.” The current church controversies, as well as changes in our contemporary Western culture he explains makes this a puzzling age, yet while “there have been many puzzling periods in human history, there has always been the perception in every human being that we came from somewhere. We try to say how God should be, where God is from. In reality there are some signs, extraordinary witness, for example ending slavery or pioneering education or creating beautiful art; where does this come from?” In trying to make sense of the puzzle, he happily explains that the world is “a mixed band of God’s creatures. God created a jungle, if people today had created the world they would have created geometric squares.”

In his work Fr Örsy delights in dialectics, inviting his reader to look at the interplay of concepts and action, with contrasts such as frustration and joy, episcopate and laity, church order and people of faith. Dealing with the puzzle today we can see the legacy of Fr Örsy’s work as a reminder, and a line of enquiry, that bids us to discern the distance between vagueness and answers or, as he puts it more bluntly, between the jungle and orderliness. At one

9 Ladislav Örsy, *From Vision to Legislation: From the Council to a Code of Laws* (Wisconsin: Marquette University Press, 1985), p.16.

10 *Ibid.*, p.16.

11 *Ibid.*, p.49.

12 *Ibid.*, p.51.

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time this seemed less of a distance, as he writes in *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, the scholastics reared generations on the twin expectations of orderliness and clarity, “The apparent vagueness and slowness can be disappointing all the more now that we have become used to clarity and to speedy solutions. Scholastic philosophy and theology taught us about a well ordered universe, natural and supernatural, where all things and all beings can be defined by genus and species; it taught us order and clarity.”¹³

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

Today we live in a world where technology promises us greater clarity and order, while at the same time we are being overwhelmed with information and change, which makes following faith even more challenging. Previous ages have had more defined notions of authority, a canon of books and an education about the range of views exchanged. Professor Torfs notes, “in the past finding information was the issue, today it is about *avoiding* information, which is also an art.” In these times of changing identity, recognizing diversity and great cultural change, leavened by social media, a big part of the puzzle Fr Örsy believes is the paucity of conversation. He tells me, “Very few people are dialoguing. They are busy with everyday life, working and shopping. Dialogue in a beautiful world means conversation. They are not so interested in these questions like me or you are. There are people like you and I, but the rest are just trying to make a living. When the time comes they try to solve the puzzle; we are surrounded by the puzzle.” Scandals and declines emphasize the cultural dysfunction between persons, institutions and histories, making our culture today more puzzling. To discern our way forward we are the much richer for Fr Örsy’s rigour and creativity, and his greatest legacy could well be the agenda he has set out in his work for canon law, which is deserving of close reading in our broken age focused on new undercurrents in contemporary culture that are tapping into the perceived historical wrongs of the church.

Professor Torfs agrees, calling the problem one of “*postponed sorrow*.” He elaborates, “people are angry with the church over sexual abuse scandals or for their grandmother not being free to do as they may have wished in the church sixty or seventy years ago. This is very true in strong catholic cultures like Flanders, where I am from, and Ireland where you are, but it is difficult to engage in a true conversation about what really is important in the message of the church in these circumstances, and this comes close to what Fr

13 Ladislav Örsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching* (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1987), p.24.

Örsy is saying.” Paying tribute his legacy, Professor Torfs told me that Fr Örsy “knows what the difficult points are and understands it is not just the beauty of the canon law text but also the reality of its implementation. He shows himself to be a true canon lawyer. A true canon lawyer can live with the dark side of the church, if not you have to resign right away. If you cannot live with negative points, scandals, mistakes, errors and crimes then it is better to do something else. This is basic. There is an anthropological point as well that people can’t be perfect, and you have to assume that.”

In our increasingly digitalized world, inevitably the distance between the jungle and orderliness will only become more challenging. As our discussion turned to technology, Fr Örsy highlighted our increasing expectations of *speedy* solutions; to which we should add the expectations of novelty. He explained, “Technology is very ambivalent. Take the example of atomic energy, we can get free energy, but we can also use it in the wrong way. Technology in itself must somehow be boxed in, maybe that is the wrong word, it should be regulated by some form of morality.” He is not overly optimistic on this point, expressing a concern with technology that “We are on a very slippery slope.” This is an area that clearly concerns Örsy, and while the general horizon of technology offers room for a broad discussion, there is much scope for delving deeper into the novel problems offered by new technologies and the digital economy. One insight that Fr Örsy offers up could be of particular help in this latter respect is the notion of technological ambivalence, which takes on a new tone when one looks at a world of increasing rules, mass of data and uncharted cyberspace. Technology creates many problems, often overwhelming, and yet also appear to offer the tools to solve them or at least to manage our expectations.

CONCLUSION

Whether it is family and security, or rapid change in the digital economy, the church is always discerning the way in contingent contexts while keeping the connection with the tradition, the core. His book *Marriage in Canon Law* ends with the observation that “Many times in history the church has taken positions relying on its grace-filled instinct; the explanations arrived later, sometimes centuries later. This is a sound enough position.”¹⁴ Though, as he puts in a footnote, this should not stop us from seeking explanations. In his most recent volume *Discernment: Theology and Practice, Communal and Personal*, he explores the interplay between theology and practice, communal and personal. Fr Örsy

¹⁴ Ibid, p.294

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writes “Community discernment is a way of asking, seeking, and knowing,”¹⁵ and unfolds five specific enquiries into such discernment: theological foundations, legitimate expectations, misplaced expectations, authority and community, and finally practical guidelines, all of which produce thirty-one propositions. He states that, while this is very much an Ignatian reflection, the small work is his contribution to 21st century “wisdom literature.”¹⁶ The volume finished with a last chapter entitled ‘In Place of Conclusion.’ Looking through his work it is apparent Fr Örsy does not like conclusions and always seems to offer something other than a conclusion. I interpret this as a preference for keeping the *conversation* going rather than thinking he has the last word, and therein he invites the reader, hearer or learner to take up his work. Our conversation did finish though with Fr Örsy noting “it is God’s church, He will take care of it.”

15 Ladislav Örsy, *Discernment: Theology and Practice, Communal and Personal* (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2020), p.6.

16 Ibid, p.6.

Vanity. The sense of injury and the perception of slights come trickling out of the leaking cistern of vanity that admiration keeps topped up. The whole thing is a mirage.

– PAULINE MATARASSO, *Clothed in Language*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press) p. 104.

A New Irish Catholicism

Billy Swan

As we navigated the recent lockdown and the prohibition of public worship during the pandemic, most of us wondered what kind of Church there will be after the crisis ends. It already seems clear that the Church we anticipated would emerge in about five years' time, is already at our door and is rapidly becoming a reality in the majority of our parishes and dioceses. The impact of COVID-19 on our faith communities has found few of us prepared as we struggle to adapt to how quickly change is happening. So, what is happening in our Church and what are the implications of these changes? What are the elements of newness that are emerging that give us hope? The purpose of this article is to sketch *ten* foundations of a new Irish Catholicism that will define the Church of the future in Ireland. These are offered not as an exhaustive list but rather to begin a conversation about the signs we discern how the Lord is renewing his Church. Tomorrow's Church in Ireland will be a different Church and a smaller Church than before; but how will it be a new Church? What are the hallmarks of a new Irish Catholicism?

NEWLY PRAYERFUL

The first place to begin is to identify the unique gift the Church has received and is called to share. We are a people who have come to see our own need for salvation and who recognize that need in a broken world in need of healing. We are a people who have come to know the saving love of God made visible in Jesus Christ – a gift that is accessible to all by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have been touched and changed by that love and truth to such an extent that we want to introduce others to its life-giving power. As the angel instructed the Apostles, so the word of God says to us today: 'Go and tell the people all about this new life' (Acts 5:20). Our confidence is in the gift we possess. In the words of Pope Francis: 'We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to

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the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach' (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 265).

This is our mission – to share this treasure of life and love that flows from communion with God and fellowship in the family of the Church. Now is the time to re-discover the pearl of great price, the one thing necessary that animates all that the Church teaches and stands for. Now is the time to finally reject residual notions that God's love can be earned; to know that 'God loved us first' (1 John 4:19) and to build our faith on the primacy of grace. To nurture this gift, we need to be people who love the holiness that leads to personal integrity and comes about through a living union with Christ. To progress along this road means engaging in 'the art of prayer' (John Paul II, *Novo Millenio Inuente*, 32) so that our parishes and communities might be marked by 'an all-pervading climate of prayer' (*Novo Millenio Inuente*, 34). This means a willingness to teach our people how to pray by tapping into their deepest spiritual hungers. Irish Catholicism will be renewed in the measure that it successfully connects her people to our ancient tradition of mystical prayer that nurtures a living relationship with God. This powerful union with God is mediated in a unique way through the Church community with the Word of God, the sacraments, the liturgy of the hours and the witness of the saints. When parishes become schools of prayer then liturgies become animated beyond stiff rituals that many find deadening and unattractive. They become celebrations of living faith that worship God as the source of everything that is good, true and beautiful – all that the human heart is drawn to and loves.

Prayer is the key to a renewal of our Church. This is crucially important to keep in mind as we cope with many challenges that require a response. As Pope Francis guides us: 'Changes in the Church without prayer are not changes made by the Church. They are changes made by groups ... Everything in the Church originates in prayer and everything grows, thanks to prayer ... This is the Church's essential task: to pray and to teach how to pray.... Without faith, everything collapses; and without prayer faith is extinguished' (*General Audience*, 14th April 2021).

When the early Church began to grow and its administration became more time consuming for the Apostles, the community ordained deacons so that the Apostles could be free to preach, teach and to pray (Acts 6:1ff). Preaching, teaching and prayer were prioritised before administration and maintenance. They still ought to be. If the Church can teach her members to pray, train people to be teachers of prayer and provide opportunities for spiritual direction to more Catholic Christians, then the whole of peoples'

lives will be renewed. Reconnecting spirituality and religion is one of the most pressing tasks of our time. It should be one of the Church's main priorities – to help people to know God, fall in love with Him and sustain her members in a life-giving relationship with the God who created us and loves us.

NEWLY HUMAN

In the very first chapter of *'The Joy of the Gospel'*, Pope Francis outlines that 'those who accept his [Jesus'] offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness'. With these words, Francis captures the truth of what we have held since the time of St Patrick who described faith as 'that great and life-giving gift' (*Confessio*, 36). He proclaimed this truth in continuity with the Gospels, St Irenaeus ('the glory of God is the human person fully alive'), St Augustine ('to know God and know myself') and after him with figures from the great Tradition including Thomas Aquinas ('grace builds on nature'), Catherine of Siena ('Their humanity will be conformed to the humanity of the Word and they will delight in it'), Teresa of Avila ('We must enter by this gate...on this road you walk safely ... through the sacred humanity of Christ'), the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* ('For by his incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every human being'), St John Paul II (*Redemptor Hominis*), Pope Benedict XVI and now with Pope Francis – that Christianity *enhances* our humanity rather than diminishing it. This is true also at the social level where Christian values lend themselves to a peaceful civilization and harmony. Our challenge today is to show unbelievers and skeptics a path to holiness that cherishes all that it means to be human.

We acknowledge that this task is not easy with the historical baggage that Irish Catholicism carries as an institution. With more than a hint of Jansenism and puritanism, many experienced the Church as oppressive, anti-human and even abusive. But while we lament the past, atone for past mistakes and work for healing with those who have been alienated, the present is an opportunity to model an authentic spirituality of what it means to be human at a time when it is sorely needed. At all times, we keep before us the dignity of the human person and who God revealed ourselves to be in Christ – our divine origin and destiny, our filial identity, our need for love, work, food, family, our gifts and potential, our sin and brokenness. These are all the human categories that unite under the aegis of the 'I' that finds its fulfillment in relationship with God and others. Our dialogue with post-modernity can only be successful if it is founded on a solid anthropology and a clarity of what it means to be human. This clarity will be critically important

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as we engage with contemporary issues such as medical ethics, gender issues, human sexuality, marriage, family, new economic models and Catholic education. The renewed humanism called for by recent popes will be critical in convincing people that our faith is the friend and not the foe of the humanity we share in common.¹

NEWLY FORMATIVE

In the words of St John Henry Newman: ‘To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often’.² In the Gospels, Jesus pointed to the essential organic quality of the Christian life. To illustrate this, perhaps the best-known metaphor he used was of the vine and the branches (cf. John 15). There he teaches how the lives of Christians are ultimately fruitful because of our communion with him and his grace. This relationship is not static but growing. For there to be fruit there must be change; there must be pruning. To be Christian is to embrace growth and engage in a lifelong process of formation. In the words of St Paul, the Christian adventure is to grow in our knowledge of God, becoming ‘fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself’ (Eph. 4:13).

This organic quality ought to excite us and influence our witness to Catholic Christianity as something dynamic and alive – an enterprise of growth in holiness, virtue, maturity, the art of social interaction, communication, wisdom and joyful love. We are moving away from an overly static concept of Irish Catholicism towards an understanding of Christianity as a way of life that is sustained by the transformative power of the Spirit as a life-long process. The crucial understanding of Christianity as a way of life, to be trained for and initiated into, highlights the role of families, parishes and school communities that facilitate and cultivate good habits and human virtue. Formation is a concept that doesn’t belong exclusively to priestly training but properly belongs to Christianity itself. It concerns every aspect of our humanity being formed and conformed to the likeness of Christ. Change is part of life. Catholic Christianity offers light and hope by offering a narrative that makes sense of change and that celebrates those moments with the Church’s rich life of rites, prayers, sacramentals and sacraments.

NEWLY ECCLESIAL

Traditionally, the Catholic parish in Ireland has been understood geographically. It was a defined territory associated with a school, graveyard, Church and village. Belonging to a parish depended on

1 See Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 78; Pope Francis, *Meeting with Participants of the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church*, 10th Nov. 2015.

2 *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Part I, sec. I.

where you grew up. The rapid social changes in recent years have seen a shift away from the parish as a spatial area and towards a faith community to which one belongs and identifies with. St John XXIII beautifully described the parish as ‘the village fountain to which all can come and slake their thirst’. This metaphor takes us back to the spiritual roots of a faith community where people witness to Christ, worship and gather around the Word of God and for the sacraments. It seems inevitable that parishes of the future will be spaces where people know each other, form friendships to counteract isolation, welcome newcomers into the faith and sustain each other in that faith commitment. Going forward, parish communities will need to take greater responsibility for the faith formation of their members and to nurture a mature adult faith that endures a life-time. This will mean a necessary reform of our sacramental system where the sacraments of initiation in particular – Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist – are grounded in the life of the faith community itself. While the ongoing contribution by parish personnel to Catholic education is vital, the loss of meaning of sacramental celebrations as mere occasions to be facilitated, needs to be addressed. Being ‘sacramentalised but not evangelised’ is a problem that can be ignored no longer. In the words of Bishop Michael Duignan: ‘We need to avoid the temptation to turn our churches into mere sacramental dispensing stations – where people come to pick a religious product rather than be nourished to live the Christian life’ (*Pastoral Reflection on the Future of the Church in the Diocese of Clonfert*, 28th April 2021). The system that has been in place for decades is no longer fit for purpose for a prophetic Church that needs to put a greater value on what she stands for and what she has to offer. Many think that if we ask less of people, they will be more attracted to the faith. The opposite is true. The more they are invited to give nothing less than everything, the more compelling and alluring the Catholic faith becomes.

NEWLY PROPHETIC

The Irish Catholic Church has shifted from the center to the margins of public life in recent decades. Some lament this change as a loss of power and influence. Yet there is an opportunity today for the Church to reclaim her prophetic edge and voice. Instead of relying on a platform or status she no longer enjoys, the Church will be renewed in the measure that her members live their faith authentically, in a way that makes that faith credible and so gives rise to hope. In the words of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin: ‘Personal integrity and holiness bear within them a striking strength that can be stronger than physical power’ (14th Nov. 2020). History has

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shown this to be true. When all other props have been stripped away and all that remained was the faith of Christians, the Church was at her best and her light shone brightest. For this reason, Irish Catholicism is being renewed by people who understand our collective vocation as a resistance movement that offers the world, not a combative faith but a revolutionary faith. Based on the Gospel, it is our conviction that the Church offers a broader, richer and more coherent vision of life than the many alternative narratives on offer today that are confusing, spiritually poor and morally bankrupt. Regarding specific issues of social justice, life issues, marriage, family, sexuality, care for the environment and others, this is not a time for the Church to be timid or retreat into private and hidden spheres. It is not a time for the Church to lose its identity by dissolving itself in the surrounding culture. She knows that *accommodation* is simply a quicker route to *obliteration*. In the words of Pope Francis, she needs to ‘go forth’ and to ‘put out into the deep’, engaging courageously with modern culture in the market square. The Church does this knowing that she is the ‘*ekklesia*’ – the people called out of the world to be a sign and instrument of God’s saving work. As a prophetic community we are called, not to fit in but to stand out.

NEWLY COURAGEOUS AND CONFIDENT

The scandals of the past few decades have shaken our confidence to the core. Certainly, they need to be faced with humility and repentance but in such a way that holds our nerve, does not dumb down the faith or question the integrity and core teachings of the Gospel. Renewal and reform doesn’t mean the faith becoming culturally accommodating, hand-wringing and unsure of itself. We must not become a Church that had allowed its distinctive colours to be muted and its sharp edges to be dulled.

While avoiding fundamentalism, we need to get clear about the content of faith as taught by the Church and to boldly proclaim that faith in our dialogue with modern culture. Clarity breeds confidence. The clearer we are about the content of faith, the more confident we will be of its truth and value. And it is this confidence that will inspire us to proclaim it boldly. This is the boldness that Pope Francis summons us to in ‘*Rejoice and Be Glad*’. He prays that we be imbued with the same spirit as the early Christians who preached the Gospel on their terms, despite the consequences. In doing so we are not afraid, for the Lord and his wisdom are with us as he promised. Homilies, lectures, catechetical programmes, articles, podcasts and videos will become more compelling when the believers behind them become more courageous, clear and

confident in what they believe. With this spirit we face the multiple challenges with intense faith, drawing from the well of all that is good, true and beautiful in our faith Tradition.

NEWLY INFORMED

I heard it said recently that while we are trying to hug people into the Church, atheists are arguing people out of it. And the atheists are winning. There has been much talk recently of respectful listening and dialogue in the Church and of course this is important. But we mustn't lose sight of our fundamental calling to proclaim the Gospel and to 'always be ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you have' (1 Peter 3:15). Therefore, the importance of sharing our faith will need to be matched by the importance of knowing and understanding what we believe. If hot button topics are obstacles to people coming to faith, then we need to do a far better job at making the argument for why we teach what we do. This need highlights the importance of adult faith formation and creative apologetics to help us lead others to Christ who is 'forever young and a constant source of newness' (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 11). We need to offer young people far more reasons to believe. The split between the theological and the pastoral in the life of the Irish Church since the Council has been a disaster.³ We need to show how faith is a reasonable choice and the best fit in a world that does not explain itself. In doing so, we simply cannot afford to ignore the vast reservoir of wisdom left to us by intellectual giants of the past such as Augustine, Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Edith Stein, John Paul II, Benedict XVI to name a few. These great figures inspire us to engage truthfully with the great questions of our day as they did in their time.

NEWLY PARTICIPATIVE

At the Spring Meeting of the Episcopal Conference this year, the Irish bishops decided to embark on a synodal pathway for the Catholic Church in Ireland leading to the holding of a National Synodal Assembly within the next five years. Prior to this synod, there will be much reflection on the life of the Irish Church through the lens of a synodality model that seeks to consolidate the bonds of communion between all members of the Church and to foster a sense of co-responsibility for the mission of the Church. This shift from a passive to participative model of Church began in earnest at

3 'Theology needs to be rehabilitated in the service of the Catholic Church and in Irish society. Without some such rehabilitation of theology, we will end up having a Church that is un-theological and a theology that is un-churched'. D. Lane, 'Vatican II: The Irish Experience', *The Furrow*, Feb. 2004, Vol. 55, 67-81, 80

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the Second Vatican Council and has been promoted ever since. In the ‘*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*’ published in 2004, ‘Participation’ is included among eight principals of the Church’s social teaching. In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI said: ‘it is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted ... This demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as “collaborators” of the clergy but truly recognized as “co-responsible”, for the Church’s being and action’.⁴ Here is a call for all the baptised to actively participate in the life of the community. Unlike a democratic model, participation in the life of the Church is predicated on our participation through grace in the life of the Trinity and is celebrated by actively participating in the liturgy, especially the Eucharist.⁵ The forthcoming synod and preparatory work will be an opportunity to engage with the gifts of all the baptised and open up new possibilities for leadership, liturgical renewal and shared pastoral responsibility. Whatever the future of the Church in Ireland, it already seems clear that the Irish Church will be newly participative or will not be here at all.

NEWLY MISSIONARY

The Irish Church has been a missionary Church from the very beginning. It is in our DNA to go forth, reach out, to travel, adapt and find creative ways to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. A private faith just won’t do. We want others to know God and we desire to lead others to faith in him. We want his kingdom of peace and justice to flourish and so pray for it and work for it. In this spirit, Pope Francis urges us to ‘go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ’ (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 49). For those dedicated to evangelization, the haunting words of Jesus are never far from our hearts: ‘When the Son of Man returns, will he find any faith on earth?’ (Luke 18:8). Therefore, mission is not an end in itself or can’t be reduced to a noble desire to make the world a better place. Mission is about leading others to faith in Christ and growing in faith as we do so. Gathering people into the community of the Church is not an optional extra because the Church remains the sign and sacrament of salvation. On a hopeful note, Rodney Stark in his book ‘*The Rise of Christianity*’ notes in history how times of

4 *Opening Address to a Pastoral Convention*, Rome, 26th May 2009.

5 ‘Through the Holy Spirit we are all called participators of God...we enter to form part of divine nature through participation in the Spirit’ St Athanasius, *Letter to Serapion*, I, 14; ‘This is our vocation. To become divine, to become God through participation’. St John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 22, 3.

famines and pandemics were followed by a revival in Christianity.⁶ We saw this revival in Ireland after the Great Famine in the 19th century. According to Stark, this was because the Church remained true to her identity and mission as she stood close to the people at a time of crisis. In these challenging times, may she also remain faithful to the Master, true to her identity, mission and become a community of ‘Spirit filled evangelisers’ (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Chap. 5).

NEWLY HISTORICAL

When we look back on the history of the Irish Catholic Church, there are aspects to be immensely proud of – women and men whose witness inspires and developments that have produced so much good. There are also moments that make us deeply shameful. As we go forward, we do so acutely conscious of both the lights and the shadows of our story and with a sharp historical consciousness. We can neither airbrush out the darker side of our history or forget the wonderful heritage left to us by our Christian ancestors. A synodal model of Church will see us walking together with brothers and sisters who have been wounded from past experiences and who are still scarred. It will be necessary going forward to be sensitive to people who have been wounded and care for those who have been hurt. Walking with the wounded keeps us grounded, humble and yet strong in our resolve to work for healing and reconciliation. It spurs us on to show the true face of Christ to those who long to see it. Walking with and listening to the wounded helps the Church to renew itself and start over. Our mission today continues to be the work of re-building trust. While acknowledging past wrongs and probing their causes, we believe that we still can treasure all that is good, true and beautiful about the Christian faith and help people explore its healing power and potential.

CONCLUSION

In 1970, a young professor named Joseph Ratzinger made this prophesy: ‘From today’s crisis will emerge a Church that has lost a great deal ... it will become small and will have to start pretty much all over again. It will be a more spiritual church ... it will be poor and will become the Church of the destitute’.⁷ There is an increasing sense among Irish Catholics that in a post-scandal, post-COVID landscape, the present is very much like starting over again

6 R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton University Press, 1996, 73-94.

7 Joseph Ratzinger, ‘What will the Church look like?’ in *Faith and the Future*, Ignatius Press, 2009, 116.

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for a Church that has lost a great deal – loss of numbers, status, property and credibility to name just a few. But in a paradoxical way, she will be richer in the measure that she will be newly prayerful, newly human, newly formative, newly ecclesial, newly prophetic, newly courageous, newly informed, newly participative, newly missionary and newly historical. ‘Behold, I make all things new’ says the Lord (Is. 43:18; Rev. 21:5). May we all embrace a new Irish Catholicism with hope and joy.

Bringing to Birth. All art is a bringing to birth. It is not a matter of creating out of nothing but of liberating what is already there, in the strict sense a labor. The sculptor frees the form concealed in the stone. The analogy is plain since the stone, the material, is already visible, gravid with a weight it is destined to lose, yielding it reluctantly into the hands of the artist. The poem is no less brought to birth, eased out of chaos where all meanings pre-exist-incipient, mingled. Words are the tools that give these meanings their shape and ease them into being, and in so doing the words become the poem, the form in which the meaning is embodied. The poet is at once midwife and maker.

– PAULINE MATARASSO, *Clothed in Language*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press) p. 60.

On the Duty of Ecclesiastical Office Holders to listen to the Faithful

Richard Shields

In 2016 the Canadian Government created a regulatory framework legalizing medical assistance in dying (MAID) for persons with a “grievous and irremediable medical condition” and “unbearable physical or mental suffering from illness, disease, disability or state of decline that cannot be relieved under conditions that [one] consider acceptable.”¹ In 2021 access to MAID was extended to persons whose death is not immediately foreseeable, including those who fear losing mental capacity to direct their caregivers through advanced directives to permit MAID.

The Catholic Bishops of Canada opposed MAID from the start. Although their position raised important arguments “informed by reason, ethical dialogue, religious conviction and profound respect for the dignity of the human person,”² in the end it proved ineffective.

How does one explain the gap between what Catholic Church leaders view as compelling moral arguments, on the one hand, and the general public acceptance of the opposite positions? In this article I will argue that in a secular culture the voice of the Church lacks the moral force it once held. This is further weakened when bishops speak in their own voice, without the participation of lay Catholics. In order to communicate effectively in civil society, ecclesiastical office holders need to learn how to communicate with members of their own Church.

THE CHALLENGE OF FORMING A MORAL CONSENSUS IN A PLURALIST SOCIETY

The Gospel dynamism animating the Church’s involvement with the world does not guarantee a smooth relationship between

1 Government of Canada, “Medical Assistance in Dying,” <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/medical-assistance-dying.html#grievous>

2 Canadian Catholic Conference of Bishops, ongoing. “Faith and Moral Issues,” <https://www.cccb.ca/faith-moral-issues/suffering-and-end-of-life/euthanasia-and-assisted-suicide/>

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the Church and culture. When public policy runs in the face of values deemed essential for integrity of life, the Church has a right to speak out. Indeed, to intervene in defense of the common good is a fundamental dimension of its mission.³ In a culture of individualism, however, autonomy often trumps all other values.

The impetus to broaden eligibility for MAID followed on a Quebec Superior Court ruling that “the statutory provision requiring natural death be reasonably foreseeable infringes life, liberty and security of the person guaranteed by the Charter of Rights ... in a manner inconsistent with the principles of fundamental justice.”⁴ While the initial intent of the legislation was de-criminalization – protecting the assisting physician and medical workers from prosecution – in the public debate MAID was treated as a medical procedure aimed at ending suffering.

Polls indicate that a majority of Canadians accept the choice to end one’s own life as a human right, the act of assisting as compassion and restrictive provisions as discriminatory. Only one-fifth of the population opposes legal access to MAID. The rest find themselves somewhere in the middle, echoing the position taken by the Alzheimer Society Canada that everyone, including people living with dementia have “the right to participate in decisions about their life and care and advocating for access to MAID through advance requests.”⁵

Like their fellow citizens, Canadian Catholics consider MAID from across a spectrum of views, informed both by religious values, as well as beliefs about governmental responsibilities in a democratic, morally pluralistic society. Arguments based on natural law are no longer accepted by “all reasonable” persons. Concepts such as the dignity of life and the nature of the person have proven to be as divisive as they are unifying. Authoritative teachings of the Church, from same-sex marriage to abortion no longer gain full compliance within the Church.

ON BECOMING A CHURCH THAT GIVES WITNESS IN A PLURALIST CULTURE

The questions that Catholics face are daunting. They concern how to respond to significant shifts in public values and “be a sign and

3 Synod of Bishops, “Justice in the World,” 1971. <https://www.cctwincities.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Justicia-in-Mundo.pdf>.

4 Government of Canada, “Legislative Background: Bill C-7: Government of Canada’s Legislative Response to the Superior Court of Québec *Truchon* Decision,” <https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/csj-sjc/pl/ad-am/c7/p1.html>

5 Alzheimer’s Society of Canada, “Statement on Medical Assistance in Dying,” 2019. <https://alzheimer.ca/en/help-support/im-caring-person-living-dementia/end-life-care/medical-assistance-dying>

safeguard of the transcendent character of the human person.”⁶ How does the Catholic community dialogue with a culture that appears unable to accept the same starting points? What has to happen to make assisted dying, abortion, or any other “big” moral issue unthinkable, even if they remains legal? The Church has a place in the public forum. While a moral consensus appears to be out of reach, the bishops must avoid dividing the world epistemologically into opposing realities – the religious and the secular.

Formal statements, natural law arguments, and dogmatic imperatives fail to address the factors at play in culture and society today. The Church does not need to change its beliefs in order for it to learn new ways to communicate with others about what it believes human dignity involves and requires. But this requires paying attention to the experience of lay Catholics. The witness of the Catholic Church will only be compelling when it reflects not only what the Church teaches, but who the Church is – all of the baptized who are seeking a spiritual home in Catholicism. Pope Francis clearly sees this as integral to the credible witness of the church. “In [the bishop’s] mission of fostering a dynamic, open and missionary communion, he will have to encourage and develop the means of participation proposed in the Code of Canon Law, and other forms of pastoral dialogue, out of a desire to listen to everyone and *not simply to those who would tell him what he would like to hear.*”⁷

All members of the Church have a right to be consulted when bishops make decisions that impact on the lives, from closing parishes or schools to public statements of what the Church stands for. When Bishops speak on divisive public policy issues, they need to make room for the laity to speak. Instead, in an effort to control the message, they act unilaterally, as was evident from the sex abuse scandal, engaging in a kind of clericalism which is both transactional (situating the status of the clergy above that of the laity) and institutional (putting the needs of the institution above those of community of believers). Clericalism is a form of controlling the rules of belonging and the parameters of questioning/ thinking. Clericalism limits the space for critical thinking and allows virtually no structures or processes for hearing what is on the minds and in the hearts of the laity.

Without *practical structures* it becomes meaningless to say that lay women and men play a critical role in the choices that lie before

6 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes* (Rome, 1965), n. 76 https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html

7 Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel* (Rome, 2013) n. 31, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.emphais mine).

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the Church. Choices give contour and substance to the Church's presence vis-à-vis cultural shifts and social values. The voice of the Church in public affairs requires the capacity "to decipher authentic signs of God's presence and purpose in the happenings, needs and desires in which the People [of God] has a part along with other men of our age" and to find "solutions which are fully human."⁸

Church authorities, though gifted with the grace of office, have a limited perspective. Consequently, they must listen to and learn from the laity. Facing the reality of pro-life and pro-choice parishioners, feeling the yearning of divorced and remarried and same-sex couples who want to share in the spiritual strength of the Church should not be a threat to their status. The hierarchy needs to hear the stories of Catholics and to understand not just what they are saying, but the people who are saying it. The Catholic clergy, from bishops to curates, need to show enthusiasm for being with their people, attending to the questions, and searching for the truth.

THE LAITY AND THE WAY FORWARD

The actual path forward remains uncharted. Finding practical ways to listen to and learn from the laity often founders on clashes over authority and position in the Church.⁹ Nevertheless, there is a sound theological argument for not only permitting, but requiring lay participation in decision making in the Church. In the following section I will highlight the views of John Henry Newman and Karl Rahner. In the process I will show that Church practice still lags far behind practical theological development.

John Henry Newman is perhaps best known for his essay "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine,"¹⁰ where he argued that the Holy Spirit works in hierarchy and laity together. The faithful experience of the laity (*sensus fidei fidelium*) counts, because they are "a substantive factor in the Church" and their sense of the faith works as a barometer of the Church's vital

8 Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 11.

9 The U.S. Catholic bishops continue to act unilaterally on a range of practical issues that they claim are actually matters of Church doctrine, most recently on the Biden's right to receive communion. See: *National Catholic Reporter* <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/pelosis-archbishop-calls-denying-eucharist-public-figures-who-support-abortion>; Michelle Boorstein, "Biden's Stance on Abortion Rights triggers coming debate among Catholic Bishops on Communion," *Washington Post*, April 29, 2021.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/04/28/biden-catholic-president-bishops-abortion-communion/>

10 John Henry Newman, "On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine," *Rambler*, July 1859, <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/rambler/consulting.html>.

ON THE DUTY OF ECCLESIASTICAL OFFICE HOLDERS

connection to its origins”¹¹ This claim brings together doctrine and practice, not in a derivative way (where practice is determined and governed by doctrine), but in a mode of complementarity.¹²

While Newman’s essay has been the source of numerous studies on the theology of the laity, it is important to remember the context that led to its publication. Newman, the newly appointed editor of the *Rambler*, was intent on settling a dispute between the magazine and the English bishops over the question of the state’s right to inspect publically funded Catholic schools. The *Rambler* had argued that the bishops’ decision would hurt the Church by risking the loss of government funding and that their decision was a mistake that could have been avoided had the bishops consulted competent laymen on the topic. The Bishops countered that the school question was an ecclesiastical matter, in which the laity had no say, arguing that they were the sole authority for making practical decisions affecting the Church.¹³

In a conciliatory approach to the bishops’ argument Newman wrote: “Acknowledging then most fully the prerogatives of the episcopate, we do unfeignedly believe ... that their Lordships really desire to know the opinion of the laity on subjects on which the laity are especially concerned.”¹⁴ Newman had in mind “practical questions” not what we call matters of faith and morals; but to underscore his position, he continued, “[i]f even in the preparation of a dogmatic definition the faithful are consulted, as lately in the instance of the Immaculate Conception, it is at least as natural to anticipate such an act of kind feeling and sympathy in great practical questions, out of the condescension which belongs to

11 Richard Penaskovic, *Open to the Spirit: The Notion of the laity on the Writings of J. H. Newman* (Augsburg, Germany: Veralg Werner Blasaditsch, 1972), p. 189.

12 John Burkhard would expand *sensus fidelium* beyond practicing Catholics to include “all who are struggling to live their lives in pursuit of and in accord with Christian truth as they inhabit it. This is especially the case when they are struggling with the vast array of issues that promote or restrict human dignity.” See: “*The Sensus Fidelium – Old Questions, New Challenges*,” in *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings*, 2015, 27-43, at 29. <https://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/article/view/8751/7969>

13 One finds this attitude institutionally solidified by Pius X. “The Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories of persons, the Pastors and the flock, those who occupy a rank in the different degrees of the hierarchy and the multitude of the faithful. So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society [Church] and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors.” http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-x/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-x_enc_11021906_vehementer-nos.htm

14 “Judgment of the English Bishops on the Royal commission,” *Rambler*, May 1859 <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/rambler/contemporary5-59.html>

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those who are *forma facti gregis ex animo* [called to be an example for the whole flock, 1 Peter 5:4].”¹⁵

For Newman “ecclesiastical matters” cannot be reduced to magisterial teachings. His position on the Catholic schools question exposed the ecclesiastical over-reach of the bishops into matters that clearly impacted and thus required dialogue with the laity.¹⁶ Just as no dimension of lived faith should be overlooked in clarifying doctrine; neither should the experience of the laity be ignored in determining Church practices. For Newman, the sentiments and ideas of the laity, not over against but in conjunction with the clergy, were an integral dimension not only in doctrinal matters, but in its governing and teaching offices, as well. This insight remains foundational for understanding the role of the laity in ecclesiastical decisions and the obligation of bishops to engage in dialogue. or what in Germany has become known as the “synodal way.”¹⁷

But Newman was short on proposals for how this might look in practical decision making in matters affecting the Church at the local level. He placed little stock in public opinion and insisted that for their voices to hold weight in the Church, the laity should be theologically orthodox and well formed catechetically. Nor were the rank and file of Catholics receptive to his ideas--not surprising considering the precarious position of Catholics in 19th century England.¹⁸

NO LONGER NEWMAN’S WORLD

By the mid twentieth century it was clear that a defensive position was no longer tenable. Pope Pius XII recognized that the voice of the hierarchy was often too weak to prevent the destructive abuse of power by Europe’s totalitarian regimes. In his 1944 Christmas address *Benignitas*¹⁹ Pius underscored the importance of a dynamic public opinion in opposing the “brutality, iniquity, destruction, and annihilation” rationalized through propagandizing media. Public

15 Ibid.

16 See Fainche Ryan, “On Consulting the Faithful in Matters of Doctrine: The Twenty-First Century,” in *The Church in Pluralist Society: Social and Political Roles*, Cornelius J. Casey and Fainche Ryan, ed. (Notre Dame, IN. University of Notre Dame Press, 2019), pp. 101-122.

17 “Germany’s synodal assembly a step to rebuilding Church’s credibility,” *Crux*, January 20, 2020. <https://cruxnow.com/church-in-europe/2020/01/germanysynodal-assembly-a-step-to-rebuilding-churchs-credibility/>; Der Synodaler Weg (The Synodal Way) https://www.synodalerweg.de/fileadmin/Synodalerweg/Dokumente_Redden_Beitraege/2020_FAQ-Synodal-Path-englisch.pdf

18 J. H. Newman, “Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England,” 1851, <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/england/index.htm>

19 Pius XII, “Benignitas,” December 24, 1944. http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/it/speeches/1944/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19441224_natale.html

opinion was a necessary condition for restoring just relationships in society. Six years later the Pope called for freedom of speech in the Church itself. In his words, “only those who do not know the Church or those who know it poorly will be surprised by this. For the Church, after all, is a living body and would be deficient in her life if public opinion were lacking; and that lack would devalue both the shepherds and the faithful.”²⁰ Pius was cautious. He neither abandoned the idea of a hierarchically ordered Church structure nor equated public opinion with the “will of the masses.” Without referring to *sensus fidelium*, he did envision responsible informed and sustained dialogue in matters of Church governance.

THE *SENSUS FIDELIUM* AND CHURCH GOVERNANCE

Public opinion is not identical with the *sensus fidei fidelium*. Nor can the *sensus* be measured simply against theological propositions or declarations of the Magisterium, as if it were some form of “theological correctness.” The question for advancing the role of the layman in the Church concerns how *sensus fidelium* is practiced in the life of the Church. Critical thinking Catholics want to go beyond affirming that the Holy Spirit is present in the Church; they want to have a *framework* for discussing how this unfolds in the decision making and commitments of the Church in the life of their parish, their diocese, and in their country.

The laity have a rightful say in more mundane decisions, not because these decisions may be viewed as “practical” (not requiring sophisticated theological training), but because dogma is embodied in and made accessible through practices. Karl Rahner explains that the Church either achieves or falls short of what it is called to be through its practices. Rahner sees Church “practice” as inclusive both of structures and policies, as well as sacraments and devotions. A theology of *participation* can affirm the role of the laity in the “essential” structure of the Church; but such a theology is deficient, if it does not demand to know how this role is realized in fact. According to Rahner, public positions taken by the Church cannot be derived simply from doctrine or scripture, but need to be discerned in the particular situation in which the Church wishes to speak. These iterations of the life of the Church as a visible community are not the sole prerogative of the ecclesiastical office holders – bishops and priests – but are a responsibility shared with all the members of the Church.²¹

20 Pius XII, “Aux journalistes catholiques réunis à Rome pour leur IVe Congrès international,” February 17, 1950. http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/fr/speeches/1950/documents/hf_p-xii_spe_19500217_la-presse.html

21 Karl Rahner, “Practical Theology Within the Totality of Theological Disciplines,” in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, Volume IX, Graham Harrison, tr. (London: Darton, Longmans, and Todd, 1972), pp. 104-105.

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The place of the layperson in the Church is of special concern to Pope Francis.²² His vision of a “synodal Church” underscores his teaching that “every one of the baptized should feel involved in the ecclesial and social change that we so greatly need. This change calls for a personal and communal conversion that makes us see things as the Lord does.”²³ He calls for pathways from polarizing positions toward a “culture of encounter.”²⁴ Shared discernment does not diminish the truth of moral beliefs or the authority of the Church’s office holders. It expands our access to truth. Before Catholic bishops take positions on burning issues in the public sphere, they have a duty to listen to what the faithful have to say.

22 Christopher Wells, “Synod of Bishops to Take Up Theme of Synodality in 2022,” *Vatican News*, 7 March 2020. <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-03/synod-of-bishops-to-take-up-theme-of-synodality-in-2022.html>;

23 Pope Francis, “Letter to the People of God,” Vatican City, 20 August, 2018. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180820_lettera-popolo-didio.html

24 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, Vatican City, 3 October 2020, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html

False Security. Many areas of life are now extremely polarised and opting for one side only can give a false sense of security and certainty. In political life, this can and does give rise to a culture where security is sought to an extent that billions are approved by governments and peoples for spending on arms and processes to keep the presumed enemy at bay. Fundamentalism in religion is equally wasteful, distorts the quest for the truth and forfeits it to unattainable certitudes and compliance.

— JIM MALONE AND JOHN McEVOY, *Mystery and the Culture of Science*, (Cambridge Scholars Publishing) p. 16.

Homilies for October [B]

Jessie Rogers

Twenty-Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
(Day for Life)

3 October

Genesis 2:18-24; Psalm 127 R/v5; Hebrews 2:9-11;
Mark 10:2-16

(This homily is based on the longer Gospel option.)

In today's Gospel, several different groups of people come to Jesus. First, the Pharisees come with their question about divorce. We are told that they were *testing* Jesus. There were different camps within the Pharisees regarding what were legitimate grounds for divorce, some more lenient and some much stricter. They are not asking the question because they want to learn and discover more. They are asking because they want to pigeon-hole Jesus by his answer. Their minds are already made up; now they want to know which box to put Jesus in. Jesus graciously engages with them by inviting them to think again, to broaden and deepen their understanding of the issue. When they are back inside, the disciples also come to him with their questions about the same topic. Their questioning is genuine. They want to know more, to understand better. And so Jesus tells them some very difficult truths.

In the next vignette, another group comes to Jesus: people with little children. These people have intuited something about Jesus' kindness and they want him to connect with their little ones. Their instinct for encounter is a beautiful testimony to the attractiveness of Jesus. This is where the disciples come in. If their minds were open to learning more in the last scene, here their hearts are closed. Some people are worthy of Jesus' time, it seems, while others are not. They probably think that they are doing their teacher a favour by ensuring he is not distracted from his important work or from the more worthy recipients of his attention.

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Jesus, we are told, is *indignant*. The disciples have got it badly wrong. Nothing is more important than welcoming the children. Jesus gives his time and attention to these little ones. No rushed blessing here so that he can get on with the more important task of teaching the adults. No, Jesus hugs them and communicates his blessing through contact, through touch.

It was good that the disciples' minds were open to learn more in the discussion about divorce. But their *hearts* needed to be open too, to recognise the dignity of children. Jesus tells the disciples that they cannot experience life in its joyful fullness – the Kingdom of God – unless they welcome the children. They are so focused on what they consider the important work of the Kingdom that they dismiss the very ones who hold the key to entering it.

On this Day for Life, we probably already know where we stand on issues like abortion and euthanasia. But how do we approach pro-life issues? Do we listen to others just enough to put them in one or another box, or are we open to having our understanding deepened? Pope Francis encourages us to recognise that life issues are more than just beginning – and end-of-life questions. He has said that “we cannot tolerate or turn a blind eye to racism or exclusion in any form and yet claim to defend the sacredness of every human life.” The death penalty, the climate crisis, war and guns, the treatment of refugees, all of these are life issues. Do we make Jesus indignant by who and what we choose to overlook or ignore?

As we meet Christ in the Eucharist, let us come like children, eager for closeness, eager for blessing. May Jesus expand our hearts and minds to embrace life in its fullness, for everyone.

Twenty-Eighth Sunday in Ordinary Time

10 October

Wisdom 7:7-11, Psalm 89:12-17 R/v14, Hebrews 4:12-13;
Mark 10:17-30

“Tell me, what is it you plan to do
With your one wild and precious life?”

Those words by Mary Oliver conclude her poem, *The Summer Day* where she reflects on the simple wonder of noticing and being fully present to a grasshopper. Her life was well spent weaving words into poems that evoke these attentive moments. King Solomon's answer to the question of what to do with a life, at least as a young person, would have been “I want to become wise.” The person who comes running up to Jesus in today's Gospel wants ‘eternal life.’ I

think he means more than an insurance policy for life after death; he wants to be really alive now.

He is making good progress as a moral person; he has kept the commandments since he was little. And goodness does seem to be a big deal for him; he calls Jesus ‘good’ too. But clearly he senses something is missing. Jesus’ first response to him is strange: “Why do you call me good?” But then Jesus nudges the man toward the real issue: “No one is good but God alone.” Jesus wants to dislodge this preoccupation with ‘being good’ to free up some space for focusing on God. If this person is to enjoy life in its fullness, then he needs to take his attention off goodness and put it onto God. He cannot do that, though, because of his possessions. He is willing to work hard at morality and to be rewarded for it as is the case in other areas of his life. He is probably even willing to be generous with his wealth, but he is prevented from embracing the fullness of life precisely because his arms are so full of ‘stuff’.

“Jesus looked steadily at him and loved him.” What a beautiful moment in the story. When Jesus gazes at the man with love, he sees his desire, his struggles, and his enormous potential. Jesus, the Word of God, cuts through the layers that hide the man from himself and pronounces the cure for his longings: “Get rid of everything that entangles you, use it to bless others in their need, and join me on my journey.” There *is* something amazing that this person can do with his life, but he is going to have to leave the clutter behind.

The man understandably balks at such a radical course of action and goes away. Perhaps he spent the rest of his life rationalising about how one can serve God by making sensible use of one’s wealth. Maybe he worked even harder at being an exceptionally good person. Still, if Jesus’ diagnosis was correct, he would never have found the life he longed for. So this story doesn’t have a happy ending.

The encounter in the Gospel did not have to end that way. The youngster who became St Francis of Assisi found himself at a similar crossroads, but he gave up everything to follow Jesus. And look what he made of his one wild and precious life!

If the challenge in this Gospel sounds too much, then we prove Jesus right: to try to enter the realm of God while clinging to wealth or status is as tricky as a heavily laden camel trying to wiggle through a tiny space. That’s not a liberating way to live! When Jesus gazes at you with love, what does he see that is holding you back from the life God wishes for you? May God grant us the grace to be willing to relinquish whatever it is that stands in the way of life in all its fullness.

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

17 October

Isaiah 53:10-11, Psalm 32:4-5, 18-20, 22 R/v22, Hebrews 4:14-16,
Mark 10:35-45

(This homily is based on the longer Gospel option.)

“If you are going to follow Jesus, you better look good on wood.” With that unnerving little statement, Daniel Berrigan, a Jesuit peacemaker and advocate for social justice, was trying to shock us into rethinking what it might mean to be faithful Christians. There is something incongruous in choosing to follow a crucified messiah as a path to honour and status. Nevertheless, people in the Church have been trying it for centuries.

In the passage immediately before today’s Gospel, we find the last of three ‘passion predictions’ in the Gospel of Mark (8:31; 9:31-32; 10:32-34). Repeatedly, Jesus warns his disciples that their journey to Jerusalem is going to end with his death at the hands of the religious and political leaders. Jesus also tells them that ‘after three days he will rise again.’ James and John must have latched onto that final piece, because they ask him whether they can have the positions of greatest honour in the ‘happily ever after’ ending. They are willing to suffer with Jesus, they think, but only if they are to be amply rewarded. They are motivated by the question: “What is in it for us?” I doubt the other disciples are indignant because they have purer motives: they just didn’t want James and John to be the special ones.

And so Jesus invites them, and us, to think differently about greatness and about leadership. In God’s upside-down kingdom, the way up is down. Those who follow Jesus need to say a conscious and determined ‘no’ to the accepted wisdom about what it means to have authority and to be a leader: ‘No!’ to wanting to be treated with fawning deference; ‘No!’ to getting your own way because you have the power to; ‘No!’ to seeing yourself as one of the important ones who can ignore insignificant people. And because that goes against the grain of everything we see modeled in the world around us, that ‘no’ has to be intentional and frequent.

We say ‘no’ most effectively by saying ‘yes’ to something else. Jesus invites leaders to say ‘yes’ to a life of service to others. A servant is someone who humbly takes care of the needs of others. This is not the antithesis of leadership, since the power of leadership should be directed toward influencing others toward achieving shared goals. Servant leadership, then, is not about personal fulfilment but about the common good.

The best way to learn what Jesus means is to watch Jesus closely and then to imitate him, even though that may mean

getting crucified! Jesus perfectly embodied servant leadership. He was not trying to get rich or grasping for honour and status. He did not jockey for position in the halls of power. But neither did Jesus serve others by being a doormat or allowing himself to be hijacked by other people's selfish or well-meaning agendas. Jesus had a clear sense of his mission and invited and empowered others to work toward their shared goal of actualising the reign of God. Jesus took time to be alone with God and to recharge, but he also set aside his own needs to minister to the needs of others. And where his followers needed to reflect and to reset their priorities, like in today's Gospel, Jesus was not afraid to challenge them and redirect their focus.

It may be tempting to look at some politicians or other leaders and point a finger at their self-serving, power-grabbing ways. But that is not Jesus' concern here. He refers to worldly leadership games only to draw the contrast. "This is not to happen among you," he says. More of us are called to exercise leadership than we realise. If we are in a position to help others achieve common goals – be it in the family, at work, in the parish, at school, on the sportsfield, among a group of friends – then we have the opportunity to exercise servant leadership.

James and John had to let go of their hunger for recognition and reward to embrace the way of Jesus. We may not think of ourselves as leaders, but we can always find ways to serve. While we pray for the conversion of those who confess Jesus with their lips and yet lord it over others, let's make sure that we ourselves are following Jesus as ones who serve.

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

24 October

Jeremiah 31:7-9, Psalm 125 R/v3, Hebrews 5:1-6,
Mark 10:46-52

One of the best ways of passing on the faith is by sharing our stories. Not the ones we carefully craft to illustrate a moral lesson, but the ones that spill out of us as laughter and that makes us want to sing with joy. Listen again to the opening words of today's psalm: When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage, it seemed like a dream. Then was our mouth filled with laughter, on our lips were songs. The heathen themselves said, 'What marvels the Lord worked for them!' What marvels the Lord worked for us! Indeed we were glad."

Imagine how Bartimaeus would have told his grandchildren about what happened to him all those years ago when he was sitting, blind and ignored, at the side of the road leading out of

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Jericho. Surely it was etched in his memory, the feel of the hot sun and the dusty air, the sounds and smells of the large crowds jostling to get close to Jesus. And the feeling within him, a rising, stubborn, hope-against-hope that his life could be different if only he could get Jesus' attention. He can only guess where Jesus is by the flow of footfall around him. If he doesn't act now, the opportunity will pass. No one else is going to help him, so all he can do is shout, increasingly desperately, to attract Jesus' attention. He can sense the growing irritation of the crush of people around him, indifference slowly hardening into hostility. But his voice is the only way he can reach out through the thronging darkness so he keeps filling his lungs with hot dry air and shouting until his throat burns. This is his moment and he'll be damned if he'll let it slip away from him. All of a sudden, the atmosphere softens around him. The scolding voices become encouraging. "Hey, he's calling you! You can stop shouting, He's over there, standing still, waiting for you." Adrenaline pumping, he jumps to his feet. Hands nudging him in the right direction, he stumbles toward Jesus. A kind voice asks him a strange question: "What do you want me to do for you?" Surely he doesn't have to ask – what else would a blind beggar want? In that moment the longing and the hope that come together inside him are so huge it feels like he could burst. The vague if insistent cry for help becomes the clear request: 'I want to see.'

In the presence of compassion that he senses with his whole being, he names his deep longing, and receives what he most desires. I doubt he could ever relate that moment without his voice trembling with gratitude and awe. And the words that Jesus spoke – "Go, your faith has saved you." Your faith ... your faith ... He had thought of himself as helpless and desperate, unable to do anything except yell and ask for Jesus to give him something, like someone throwing a few pennies at a blind beggar. But Jesus named that stubborn desperation as faith, and affirmed it as effective. He, blind Bartimaeus, had done it! And if he could do that, what couldn't he do? He could follow Jesus anywhere, and he did.

Can you imagine the effect of Bartimaeus's story on the next generations of his family? The little ones would want to hear it again and again even though they could recite it word for word themselves. The older grandkids may have shuffled a bit in embarrassment at the old man's emotion, even feigned boredom, but you can bet that they would end up telling it to their own children, entering into the wonder of the experience through the retelling of the story.

To return to the psalm: There is a shift there from a joyful remembering of the past to a plea for help in a difficult present. The

prayer is once again “deliver us, O Lord.” It is prayed in a time of struggle, but that struggle is hope-filled nevertheless. The memory of the story of a dream come true gives tired hearts and hands the stamina to keep sowing, even through tears, because harvest time *will* come.

What are your family’s stories? What memories made you smile or stand still in awe? Are you telling them to the next generations? Passing on the faith can sound abstract and feel daunting. But telling our stories, that’s different. When we share ideas, people can take them or leave them. But when we tell our stories, we share something of our very selves, something sacred and full of life. That is powerful.

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time

31 October

Deuteronomy 6:2-6, Psalm 17:2-4, 47, 51 R/v2,

Hebrew 7:23-28, Mark 12:28-34

The Gospels are so full of stories of conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities, that it comes as a pleasant surprise when the scribe who questions Jesus in today’s Gospel gives an enthusiastic, affirming response to Jesus’ reply. The point on which Jesus and the scribes, so often at loggerheads, are able to agree, is that love matters most in the practice of religion. They both link love of God with love of neighbour. As another New Testament writer points out, if we think we are loving God while at the same time hating another human being, then we are lying to ourselves (1 John 4:20). The heart that is open to God is also open to other people.

Jesus and the scribe both quote the scripture we heard in the first reading. The *Shema* (which literally means ‘listen!’) is a central declaration of the Jewish faith. Many observant Jews pray it daily. Because all human beings are created in the image of God, everyone is created with the capacity to give and to receive love. For Christians and Jews, however, that love is explicitly related to the God we worship. It is in responding faithfully to the loving God who loves us first that our capacity for love is deepened.

In that first reading, loving God is closely connected with fearing and obeying God. Generally speaking, that which we fear we do not love. Conversely, it is easy to love someone without fearing them. Why, then, bring fear into the equation? An all-consuming love - one that occupies our whole heart, soul, mind and strength - can only be for that which we take very seriously. That would be a good way to explain ‘fear’: it means to take God very seriously. To love God with our whole being is not the same as having God as one love, even the pre-eminent love, among many. It means that

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we direct our whole being toward God and love all else in the light of that.

In the juxtaposition of awe and love we have the two great impulses that connect humanity to the divine mystery. Rudolf Otto described the experience of the sacred, which he believed underlies all religions, using the Latin phrase *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. God is the mystery at the centre and circumference of our being, so God's presence evokes awe and wonder. That awe has an element of 'fear and trembling' because it brings to awareness our utter dependence upon that which we cannot control or fully understand. But the experience of the sacred mystery of God is also one that fascinates and draws us in, because it is the experience of love. Awe and wonder, fascination and love are all part of the human response to God. When we love God as God, God becomes the One to whom we surrender completely and upon whom we centre our lives.

As Christians, we believe that the God we are called upon to fear and to love comes near to us in Jesus. Jesus is the human face of God. Through him we approach God without terror but we do not do so flippantly. When we take God seriously, no other love or fear can draw us away from God. We can truly love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and the love that fills our hearts will flow over into the way we relate to others. We do not have to choose between awe and intimacy in our relationship with God. We can experience the wonder of the sacred and the comfort of God's love. Nor are we asked to choose between centering our lives on God or being kind and compassionate human beings. Love of God and love of neighbour go together. And, as was the case for Jesus and the scribe, love helps us to discover common ground.

News and Views

Personal Reflections on Consecrated Life in 2021. *Marion Morgan, OCV, 5 Temple Street, Bedminster, Bristol, UJ B53 3BF writes:*

With the ever-increasing emphasis on the importance and the value of the laity, the question inevitably arises as to whether or not there is still a place for the active religious life.

Maybe a good starting point in considering this is to think about the whole question of vocation. There is no denying that calls to the consecrated life are real. In some case, a person might indeed be mistaken in their interpretation and a true invitation needs to be ratified by the church authorities – and even then, mistakes can be made – but that in no way invalidates the point that real vocations to a life consecrated to loving and serving Christ in whatever way he chooses do happen.

It is first and foremost a call to how the person involved will relate to Christ. The outcome of the commitment may not look very different to any other person who spends their life serving others, but the interior relationship makes a difference to the person's prayer, guides their choices, leads to their growth to spiritual and human maturity. It is an intensely personal relationship which affects their whole being.

Secondly, such a calling runs together with the call for availability. If I am called to a particular ministry, it may not be possible to combine this with the more usual vocation to marriage and bringing up a family. A consecrated person is free to give their energy and talents wherever the Lord chooses, without distraction. They are wholly available. Very often this involves actually working within the institutional church, but is not necessarily the case.

How this vocation is lived out does of course vary. Some find it more appropriate to join with others with a similar calling – or, rather, a calling to similar types of service, or a similar spirituality – hence the religious orders. Then there are solitaries, hermits, carers or whatever. Priests are a separate category altogether. The *Order of Consecrated Virgins* (or Widows) to which I belong is a flexible association of women who are called to consecrated life but live out their consecration in a number of different ways; caring, teaching, sometimes parish work, or any other work or profession.

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It is a way of *being*, and *praying*, rather than a commitment to a specific work. They are responsible to their local Bishop, but self-supporting.

How do these vocations differ from vocations to other ways of life?: to marriage and family; to nursing; to caring; to business. There are very many educated, prayerful women (and men) doing many great things, including lecturing in theology, being catechists, administration in many fields, contributing greatly in every honest occupation of secular life. I think we all should develop our own relationship with God, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. We should all pray to be shown how we can serve him best. Some are called to marriage; some are called to be consecrated. But, these days, the prayer life of the consecrated may not differ that much from the prayer life of the married, particularly after any children have grown up and left home. Many more people currently are going voluntarily on courses, retreats, becoming qualified in different ways, and deepening their commitment to Christ without more formal 'consecration'. The ministry of spiritual direction is increasingly being exercised by women and men regardless of whether or not they are recognised as consecrated. Some dioceses, including Anglican dioceses, have lists of available 'directors' or 'accompaniers' to assist those seeking to deepen their spiritual life in finding an appropriate guide.

Many non-consecrated lay people read the Daily Office. Many join Third Orders. Many lead equally devout and holy lives in their own way, with the Lord, as he calls and directs them, in whatever field, ecclesial or secular, that he wants. The choice of how to serve includes discerning the answer to the important questions: do I serve within the structural church or do I serve in secular life, in both, serving as a member of the living Body of Christ?

Of course we need lay people fulfilling tasks within the church structures. But we desperately also want lay people fulfilling tasks in the secular world. How else can the love of God be spread? I believe that undue pressure to 'help in the church' should be avoided, especially for young families.

In the light of this, it is *not* helpful to equate being consecrated with a sort of 'higher rank' or better position of influence in the church. This is without undervaluing in any way the sacrifice, commitment, dedication and achievements in so many diverse ways of religious and other communities. But I would see consecration primarily as a personal way of relating to the Lord, and not a special mandate for service over and above the mandate incumbent on all baptised Christians. I would like to see ALL lay people being considered for more significant responsibilities in the church. It should be a level playing field for lay people, married,

religious or single consecrated, according to the individual's gifts, availability and personality.

The move to synodal government, though rather cumbersome, does seem to be the way forward, and a way that any woman or man with gifts and talents and a devotion to Christ may become more able to contribute to the lived life of the church within church structures, regardless of whether they are religious, married or single. The cream may one day be seen to be rising to the top!

Freely choosing. We need to distinguish between secularism and secularisation. The first, like any other “ism”, is very aggressive and exclusionary. It is a battle against the sacred, the religious, and Church institutions. Secularisation, in contrast, is a process by which we need to learn to consider from a critical standpoint how religion can become an experience of God. What is termed “Christianity” in the Western world is more of a sociological phenomenon than a religious experience, i.e., you are Catholic because you were born into a Catholic family or in a Catholic country and you’re part of that world. Secularisation leads you to question that in a process which, to my way of thinking at least, is healthy for the Church since it means that the experience of God is not confused with belonging to a particular tribe, race, nation, or people. In a secular environment, being Catholic is a decision that is down to every individual.

- ARTURO SOSA, S.J., *Walking with Ignatius*, 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.85.

New Books

Resurrecting Justice: Reading Romans for the Life of the World.
Douglas Harink. Downer's Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020. ISBN
9780830852765

It is a rare enough experience to encounter a book and wish that every preacher could read it. But in *Resurrecting Justice*, Douglas Harink achieves a number of impressive feats that mean his book warrants a place on the shelf of anyone who finds themselves having to sometimes explain Paul's letter to the Romans. Harink understands the book as "an attempt to follow Paul as he thinks justice in relation to Jesus" (p. xi). This is a successful attempt.

Harink is a theologian based in Canada, working out of the evangelical Protestant tradition. His theological work has consisted of a dialogue between textual criticism and continental philosophy. That situates him as a certain lofty kind of academic, but this book – while in no way forsaking that rich vein of exploration – is engaging, accessible, and fresh.

It is structured in sections which unfold the argument alongside the chapters of Romans. This means that the preacher can consult Harink's proposals in advance of sitting down to write a sermon or homily. It is not an exegetical text which painstakingly works verse by verse through the letter. It is, rather, a theological vision for how the letter can spark conversations with our contemporary world. Segment-boxes literally pose questions for the reader (or preacher) to ponder. It is, thus, a great aid as Sunday approaches.

Yet Harink is writing as a leading figure in one of the most interesting fields within Protestant theology, often dubbed "the apocalyptic school". *Resurrecting Justice* will impart many of the richest insights and stances emerging from this conversation almost by osmosis. To say that this is an apocalyptic text doesn't mean that it deals with Hollywood fantasy, but instead refers to the way that Jesus *unveils* the purposes of God in our world (p. 153). The tensions between appearance and reality, our best intentions and our tragic consequences, and faithfulness and faithlessness run through Paul's great letter, apocalyptic readings can draw these out.

The final aspect of this book that is unusually strong is in its stance towards the reader. It may at times be a challenging read, especially for those who are not previously exposed to this way of approaching the biblical text. But it never patronises the reader and never thinks that it has to be simplistic as it pursues simplicity. It furnishes the reader – I think ideally preachers or theology students – with some essential vocabulary

(there is even a helpful glossary and suggested ‘further reading’ section) that allows them to start going a little deeper with Paul and Romans.

Through it all, Harink draws out how Romans teaches that God’s love is inextricably connected to God’s justice. That is a message people need to hear. Justice and love are not competitive. As they say in my Presbyterian tradition: “That’ll preach!”

Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Dublin

KEVIN HARGADEN

Mary Magdalene and the Gardener: Women Leaders in the Church.

Brian Lennon SJ. Dublin: Messenger Publications. 2021. ISBN 978 1 78812 314 3.

The encounter between the risen Christ and Mary Magdalene in John’s Gospel [and elsewhere] is the subject of Brian Lennon’s most recent publication. The fact that the *woman* Mary was the first to see the risen Lord and was tasked by Jesus to proclaim the good news to the disciples has been pondered by theologians and others over the centuries. Thomas Aquinas, for example, called her the ‘apostle to the apostles’. Pope John Paul II, in *Mulieris Dignitatem* [#16], wrote that the unique role of Mary Magdalene ‘crowns all that has been said previously about Christ entrusting divine truths to women as well as men.’ Recently Pope Francis changed Mary Magdalene’s memorial to a feast day reflecting her unique role in the community of faith. Brian Lennon advances this discussion by reflecting on the role of Mary Magdalene and other women in the early church and the implication of this fact for the discussion on the role of women in today’s church. This question featured in the Amazon Synod in 2019 and continues to be a key issue in local and national discussions on the future of the Church in many parts of the globe. Indeed, many would claim that how this issue is engaged with will be decisive in the shaping of the future of the Catholic Church. This discussion includes the role of women in ministry but also, and maybe more importantly, their role in decision making and governance. Lennon’s stance is presented with clarity and conviction; ‘Discrimination against women is a dark stain on our Church. It undermines our credibility in preaching the message of the Gardener, precisely because this discrimination is in direct opposition to his message.’

This is a timely and important publication. Though a slim and pocket size volume it presents one of the key issues of today, within and outside the Church, in an accessible and credible way. It is broken into four chapters and includes a Foreword by Ruth Patterson, the first woman to be ordained to the ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland. It is an ideal text for parish- based discussion groups or pastoral councils.

Cork

P. J. McAULIFFE

THE FURROW

The King of Love – Guide to a Prayerful Experience of John’s Gospel.

Albert McNally. Belfast: Shanway Press, 2021. ISBN: 9781910044322.

It has been said that what is written without effort is read without interest, so it is always a pleasure to read something crafted and drafted with enthusiasm by an author. *The King of Love – Guide to a Prayerful Experience of John’s Gospel* was a self-confessed labour of love, in the writer’s own words; ‘It is a joy getting to know John!’ and the contents of the 220 page volume is rooted in that sense of joy. It also now completes the set of Fr. McNally’s previously well received publications on the Synoptic Gospels. The work doesn’t directly comment on COVID-19 as the text was completed pre-pandemic, yet this prayerful approach to St. John’s Gospel brings a timely bearing upon all that has occurred recently by addressing spiritually the timeless experience of trauma familiar to so many generations resulting from war, poverty, plague or personal crisis. In this interpretation disaster is viewed from John’s perspective of wonder and glory shining through in the face of horror and tears that was Calvary.

As the author indicates, one reason John remains less familiar for people than the Synoptics is due to having no year of its own in the Lectionary. The many layered content of the fourth Gospel too presents challenges to a modern readership wary of mystery. The author memorably advises, *be content to live with mystery, for God must be God, the fascinating but mysterious*. What is not mysterious however is the attractive layout of the text and generous print size which is always a welcome feature for some of us! We also find within its pages a guide to all of the 21 chapters of the Gospel with 22 passages for Lectio Divina as well as a series of 10 Stations of the Cross according to John which supplement the traditional ones.

The book is aimed at a wide readership of students, clergy and religious, lay people and all who love scripture. Prayer and study groups may also find this a stimulating resource and one which will richly repay the effort to understand and pray with it. The author sums up his motivation and regard for this particular Gospel; ‘*There is no more positive, love-filled and heart-warming document in the Bible. Everyone deserves the opportunity to become familiar with it.*’ A welcome addition to any spiritual library.

Termonfeckin, Co. Louth

PAUL CLAYTON-LEA

Food, Feast & Fast. P. Fintan Lyons O.S.B. Dublin:Columba Books, 2020 ISBN:978-1-78218-371-6

400 years ago author François de la Rochefoucauld wrote; “*To eat is a necessity, but to eat intelligently is an art.*” 400 years later in *Food, Feast & Fast*, author P. Fintan Lyons O.S.B. assists us to do just that – to eat thoughtfully, reflectively and with due respect for the history and culture of food and its production in human activity. Utilizing an impressive body

of historical and theological thought and literature he takes the reader on a literary and historical journey of the story of food from Cain and Abel in the book of Genesis to the medieval monks on Skellig Michael, stopping at many points in between, and then on to our own era of environmental crisis, veganism, vegetarianism and animal welfare. Over twenty chapters and 400 pages we are treated to a fascinating global overview of the crucial part food has played in human life and activities with particular regard to the effects of religious thought and rituals, especially Christian perspectives and the role of fasting as a powerful way to achieve control of one's life. St. Ambrose of Milan we're reminded was one of many teachers, both pagan and Christian, who saw food as linked with sexual temptation which in turn led to the extreme ascetic practices of generations of monks and certain saints using fasting as an aid to spiritual purification and the development of an inner joyful and positive attitude to life. St. Benedict, to whose Order the author belongs, emphasised frugality more than fasting and realistically recognised, and to a degree, catered for the variety of needs to be found among different individuals within the walls of the monastery.

The author reaches a somewhat grim conclusion as he reflects and reports on numerous international studies which point irrevocably to the increasing dangers that the current level of human activity poses both for itself and for all life on earth. Because human eating, he asserts, is the basic preparation for all human activity, our attitude to food and its production and the whole culture which surrounds food plays a very significant part in the looming environmental crisis. He recommends that Christian believers go *beyond* adjusting their lifestyles and carbon footprints and become even more radical than simply taking to heart the teaching of Pope Francis in his landmark encyclical *Laudato Si'*. The church as a community he concludes, needs 'to become more aware of its identity as a harbinger of the end-time' and to see the environmental crisis from the perspective of the coming reign of God. There are many things to interest and engage us in this work – it's tempting to say 'much food for thought'—as well as reflections that might help us to eat more intelligently as de la Rochefoucauld advised, and with deeper appreciation.

Termonfeckin, Co.Louth

PAUL CLAYTON-LEA

Why Are You Afraid? Have You No Faith? The World Facing the Pandemic. Statio Orbis March 27, 2020. Pope Francis. Edited by the Dicastery for Communication. Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; Huntington, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 2021. Pp. 176. Price \$19.95, pbk. ISBN: 978-1681929620.

When historians write the annals of the papacy of Francis, they will undoubtedly mention March 27, 2020. During the first wave of the Coronavirus pandemic, when the world was closed down and nobody knew what the future would bring, the Bishop of Rome led the world in

THE FURROW

praying a holy hour and an extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* blessing. St. Peter's Square was completely empty, and millions around the globe tuned in to see an old man, walking with a pronounced limp, who processed through the empty Square. He prayed before an ancient crucifix and icon of Mary in the pouring rain.

Pope Francis is a pope of surprises and we do not know what the future will bring, but I would hazard a guess that this *Urbi et Orbi* will be the most iconic moment of his papacy. That evening Francis prayed and accompanied his flock. He concluded his homily saying, "I would like this evening to entrust all of you to the Lord, through the intercession of Mary, Health of the People and Star of the stormy Sea. From this colonnade that embraces Rome and the whole world, may God's blessing come down upon you as a consoling embrace. Lord, may you bless the world, give health to our bodies and comfort our hearts."

The present book is a record of that remarkable event. It is a coffee table book that is filled with photographs of different moments of the event. It contains the whole text of the liturgy and prayers from March 27, along with Pope Francis' moving homily. It also contains several excerpts of homilies and writings that the Holy Father wrote or preached in Lent and Easter 2020.

While this book has much to recommend it, it does not contain much that could be classed as new and the texts themselves are readily available on the internet. Furthermore, readers who are interested in Pope Francis' mature reflections on the pandemic might be better served by reading his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* or his book with Austen Ivereigh, *Let us Dream*. This present book could be a nice gift, although it is also worth noting that it is a paperback, which unfortunately makes it a little less suitable for gifting or leaving on a coffee table. In summary it is an attractive paperback book that can provide an hour or so of fruitful reflection for those who wish to read it.

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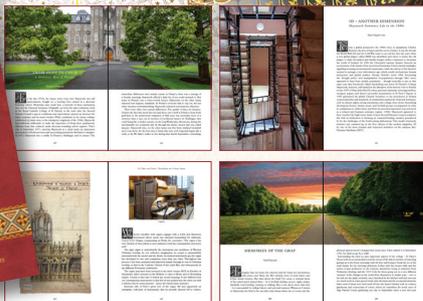
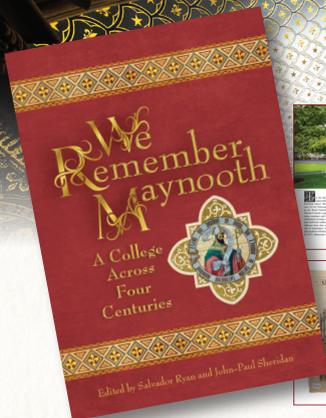
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