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*The* FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

*David Harold-Barry*

Nineteen Sixteen  
– a Terrible  
Beauty

May 2016

# Nineteen Sixteen – a Terrible Beauty

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David Harold-Barry

As I take out my passport for a journey my eye pauses on the harp. That symbol of music, poetry and history glows briefly before I move on. Approaching the events of 1916 also stirs emotions – this time complex and even unresolved. Was our family Fenian or Redmondite or part of what Elizabeth Bowen called the Anglo-Irish tribe? Or perhaps a mixture of all three? I had a grandmother who advised Dan Breen, ‘Whatever else you do, Dan, don’t forget to say your rosary!’ And I had uncles who died in the trenches of France. Was the Easter Rising a terrible mistake or ‘a terrible beauty’? And where are we today?

Billy Swan<sup>1</sup> calls on the Church to play a role in the centenary celebrations. He dwells on the spiritual roots of the nation and reminds us of how inextricably blended religion and nationhood have been. I live in a part of the world where national days are all about freedom from colonial rule which, in most cases, only lasted for decades. But I come from a country occupied by the people next door for 700 years which, on gaining independence on a day no school boy or girl can remember, chose 17 March as the defining celebration of the year. Billy Swan reminds us how Patrick Pearse saw the coming struggle as akin to Jesus’ passion and death: ‘we must not flinch when we are passing through that uproar; we must not faint at the sight of blood.’

Despite her ambiguous reaction to the events as they unfurled, the Church finally embraced the new Ireland and asserted her influence with confidence for three generations. That hegemony has now unravelled with the result, Fr Swan says, that ‘the deeper human aspirations, values and thirst for meaning that reside at the centre of every human being are largely absent from the public debate.’<sup>2</sup> The thrust of his article is that this must be reversed; ‘Christians cannot remain silent’<sup>3</sup> but must ‘participate and

1 *The Furrow*, January 2016

2 Swan, loc cit p 17

3 *Ibid*, p 18

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David Harold-Barry is a Jesuit priest. Address: Xavier House, Airport Road, PO Box 310085, Lusaka, Zambia.

contribute to the cultural, economic, political and social life<sup>4</sup> of the country. But how is this to be done? I share with Fr Billy his desire that the Church finds her way of contributing to this new Ireland of 2016 but it seems far from clear how this is to happen. Broad exhortations on preserving our Christian heritage won't be enough to stir the blood of young people today. Appeal to the aspirations of the 'Fathers of the State' who 'did not wish to usurp the place of God' will have little appeal in a country where many feel that God has often been used to squash inner convictions.

Perhaps, to mangle WB Yeats<sup>5</sup>, Catholic Ireland's dead and gone; it's with McQuaid in the grave! A recent front page article in the *Guardian Weekly*<sup>6</sup>, 'Ireland Challenges the Church,' opens with the horror of a biochemistry lecturer at Trinity College, Dublin, hearing his granddaughter say, on discovering a tiny slippery creature in the garden, 'God made this worm.' She was just beginning school and was already being 'indoctrinated.' The writer, Harriet Sherwood, describes the mounting challenge to the Church's control of schools amidst the falling number of those who identify themselves as Catholic, an increasing number of whom question 'or simply ignore' the Church's teaching on marriage and related issues.

In this context Billy Swan's call to 're-propose the theological framework already enshrined in the Constitution as a force of unity and harmony'<sup>7</sup> is a hard sell. I may live in Africa far from the scene but in our community we have a former professor of botany at UCD and we take a lively interest in what is happening at home. His first reaction to Sherwood's article was horror of another sort. What is so strange in a little girl, taking her first steps in learning her faith, saying: 'God made this worm'? Has the good lecturer in bio-chemistry not heard of evolution? We now know, thanks to science, that God creates in a different way to what our grandparents thought. There may be many 'gaps' between what 'the plain people of Ireland' think and what the Church says, but a divide between faith and reason is no longer one of them.

Perhaps the Catholic Church in Ireland has to sit down with people to discover together the way forward. If faith and reason are not opposed to each other there must be some grounds for understanding. The Second Vatican Council has set the tone for our generation: 'Nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in the hearts of the followers of Christ' (*The Church in the Modern World #1*). Authentic human experience, whatever it is, is matter for the

4 Ibid, p 21 and quoting *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

5 'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone, it's with O'Leary in the grave', *September 1913*

6 *26 February 2016*

7 Swan, loc. cit. p 19

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Church to understand and see in it the seeds of the kingdom of God – or their absence. In calling for openness to what is ‘genuinely human’ a few lines from TS Eliot<sup>8</sup> could help:

In order to arrive at what you do not know  
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.  
In order to possess what you do not possess  
You must go by the way of dispossession.

And what you do not know is the only thing you know.

We live in amazing times where people of different faiths – perhaps for the first time – are learning from each. We never understood dialogue until recently. We thought it meant being respectful, tolerant and listening to one another. We did not understand that we have to ‘dispossess’ ourselves of our opinions and hidden agendas. Secretly we hoped to win the other person to our point of view. But, as Michael Barnes, who has made a lifetime study of other religions in order to build bridges, points out, our task is to learn. He calls one of his books *Interreligious Learning*<sup>9</sup> and he sets out to understand Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism and other faiths. He has no hidden agenda to compare these religions, far less to compete with them or try to convert any of their members. His desire is to learn from them. We have a common humanity and it is intoxicating to discover how others have proceeded in their search for ‘the God who lies hidden.’ For centuries we thought we had all the answers. Now we know that we are part of a greater whole. All humanity is searching for answers and each describes their goal differently.

It might be objected, ‘it is one thing to dialogue with other faiths but quite another to do it with secularists, who, by definition, do not base their lives on faith.’ Yet, if Billy Swan’s call is to be taken up and the Church is not to ‘remain silent,’ there has to be a meeting point. The Church has her rich experience based on a long tradition. She has much to contribute. Her problem – our problem – is how to engage in a conversation with those who see things differently, even though both sides are heirs to the same culture.

I have suggested we can learn from interreligious listening. We can also learn from secular society. In Southern Africa we were utterly astonished by the relatively peaceful transition to black rule in South Africa in 1994. But the event left a lot of unfinished business and the establishment of a *Truth and Reconciliation*

<sup>8</sup> *East Coker*, line 138

<sup>9</sup> *Interreligious Learning: Dialogue, Spirituality and the Christian Imagination* (2012) Cambridge University Press.

*Commission* chaired by Archbishop Desmond Tutu made huge strides in bringing people, divided for centuries, together. The rock core of the commission's method was the uninterrupted listening given to people as they told their stories. There was no judgement and, except in certain exceptional cases, no retribution. The results were not perfect but they did much to lay the foundations of the new South Africa struggling, peacefully, to be born.

AN ALIEN FORCE

The divide in Ireland is, of course, completely different. But it is a divide. For many people in 2016 Ireland, the Church is an alien force. France, once a Catholic country like Ireland, has gone through all these challenges for two and a half centuries. Yet what do we see in France today? You do not have to research the numbers who identify themselves as Catholic to learn what a small number it would be, relative to the whole population. Yet the Church is alive and vibrant. To understand this we can go back to Helder Camara, the late Archbishop of Olinde and Recife (Brazil), who proposed forty years ago that the Church of the future would be one of 'Abrahamic minorities' by which I take him to mean small communities of Christians who give a powerful witness by their way of life. They come together as a group to address the plight of the poor or refugees or the disabled or those in broken marriages – and so forth. The group, or community, is bonded together by a desire to love and serve others, especially the weakest. They are 'faith' communities in the sense that they believe in a better world – in scriptural terms, the kingdom of God – breaking in on us, and our task is to attune our life accordingly. We may not see immediately how this will happen any more than Abraham did when he set out 'without knowing where he was going' (Heb. 11:8).

These communities exist in France today as well as in many other countries, including Ireland. They are 'inclusive' in the sense that they work together with all 'people of good will' who share their vision irrespective of Church or culture or whatever. Each one is the 'salt of the earth', but each in her or his own way. I am thinking of Taizé<sup>10</sup>, l'Arche<sup>11</sup>, Chemin Neuf<sup>12</sup> and others. The likes of these are what 'grab' young people. They show what the Church can be when it is a leaven as well as a teacher.

10 A monastic ecumenical community founded by Br Roger Schutz in 1940 to work and pray for reconciliation between France and Germany and, by extension, throughout the world. Thousands of young people go there every year.

11 A federation of communities which welcome people living with intellectual disabilities, founded by Jean Vanier in 1964. Young people of different faiths, or who say they have no faith, share their lives with the disabled for short or longer – sometimes for life – periods.

12 An ecumenical movement of communities founded by Fr Laurent Fabre in 1973 for promoting unity in families and in nations.

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It is hard for the Church to walk alongside people when she has for so long been out in front. It is not easy to slough off the garments and habits of old, but it is as clear as daylight that we are being called to change. We are blessed in this centenary year of 1916 with a pope who keeps hinting at the way forward. Billy Swan mentions his now classic metaphor, ‘the smell of the sheep.’ You have to be among the sheep to get their smell – not out in front where fresh breezes blow it away!

### CONCENTRATE ON THE CORE

Things will move when bishops, priests and religious are no longer ‘in charge’ and we ‘let the hounds off’ as a prominent layman in my home parish in Co Tipperary once put it. While caring earnestly for all, we can perhaps ignore, for a while, the dropping numbers in our Church benches and concentrate on our core business. Jesus seems to have expected many to drift away when the going got tough and turns to his disciples, ‘Surely you don’t want to go too?’ (John 6:676). The core business is witness. People listen with only one ear to words. They use both ears when the words are backed up by deeds.

The present is far from being a time of gloom for the Church. It is a beautiful moment when we can discard the baggage – the ‘spare tunic and the coppers for your purse’ (Matt 10) – of the centuries and come directly to the longings of our contemporaries. Billy Swan’s quote from James Connolly is apt: ‘the man who is bubbling over with enthusiasm for Ireland and yet can pass unmoved through our streets and witness all the wrong and suffering ... without burning to end it, is, in my opinion, a fraud and a liar in his heart.’<sup>13</sup> Much of the fire for that burning is found in secular society and we have to admit, continually and humbly, that the Church often arrives on the scene, as the saying goes, ‘breathless and a little late.’

But arrive on the scene she does and in doing so has so much to offer, not least in reminding the people of our time of ‘the wonder of our being’ (Ps 139) and of all creation.

13 Swan loc. cit. p.16