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been Baptised
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On more than one occasion Pope Francis has caught those he is talking to by surprise when he asks: ‘hands up those of you who know the date you were baptised!’. He then goes on to share his conviction that the day of our baptism is the most important day of our lives. We should celebrate it. I can’t say the date has figured in a big way in my yearly calendar but I have noticed that often Confirmation children preparing their Confirmation booklets will have the date. Pope Francis would be happy. He really wants to draw our attention to the fundamental baptismal vocation that binds all Christians. Recently, in a significant letter written to Cardinal Ouellet, President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, the Pope returned to this theme in words that certainly provide both ordained ministers – bishops and priests – and laity with much room for thought! He comments succinctly: ‘Our first and fundamental consecration is rooted in our Baptism. No one has been baptised a priest or a bishop. They baptised us as lay people and it is the indelible sign that no one can ever erase.’ He is clear: we all enter the Church as lay people.

The Pope from Argentina didn’t come to this conclusion just recently. As a Jesuit and bishop in South America, he followed what is called a ‘People’s Theology’, an approach formalised by Lucio Gera. What characterises this theology is sharing the life of those around you, then perceiving what is already being done and so understanding with wisdom what is already working and a sign of God’s will. It is no surprise, therefore, that in the recent letter to Cardinal Ouellet, Pope Francis comments: ‘It does us good to remember that the Church is not an élite of priests, of consecrated men, of bishops, but that everyone forms the faithful Holy People of God.’

THE HOUR OF THE LAITY

The implications for this emphasis on the fundamental baptismal

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calling of the whole People of God lie in two directions. Firstly, in terms of the laity and secondly in terms of the life and ministry of priests and bishops today.

Recalling the slogan, ‘the hour of the laity has come’, popular in the mid twentieth century around the time of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Francis doesn’t pull his punches when he comments ‘it seems the clock has stopped.’ He offers his own diagnosis as to why this is so: ‘without realizing it, we have generated a lay élite, believing that committed lay people are only those who work in the matters “of priests”, and we have forgotten, overlooked, the believers who very often burn out their hope in the daily struggle to live the faith.’

To think that committed lay people are those dedicated to the works of the Church and/or the matters of the parish or the diocese is reductive of the life of the Church. The Pope’s letter is an urgent invitation to reflect on ‘how to accompany baptised people in their public and daily life; on how in their daily activities, with the responsibilities they have, they are committed as Christians in public life.’

This outside-the-sacristy vision of Church was the great focus of the Second Vatican Council as it aimed to re-position the Church in the modern world. We find the Council’s document on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, is quoted a striking number of times in Pope Francis’s Apostolic Exhortation on love in the family, *Amoris Laetitia*.

It is true that at times the broad horizon of the Church’s outreach has become eclipsed in our focus – certainly necessary in its own way – on issues of ministry, governance and models of ecclesial leadership. The sacramental, institutional means of the Church are indeed important. But they are just ‘means’. The goal of the Church is to Christify the world, to renew relationships of mutual love at every level of society, to build up pockets of fraternity and reconciliation, to create a just society bonded in solidarity, peace and unity, to care for the environment at all levels.

Reading Pope Francis’s recent comments, an Irish reader might recall Saint Pope John Paul II’s words in Limerick in 1979, on the specific vocation and mission of lay people. It is, he said,

to express the Gospel in their lives and thereby to insert the Gospel as a leaven into the reality of the world in which they live and work. The great forces which shape the world – politics, the mass media, science, technology, culture, education, industry and work – are precisely the areas where lay people are especially competent to exercise their mission. If these forces are guided by people who are true disciples of Christ, and who are, at the

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same time, fully competent in the relevant secular knowledge and skill, then indeed will the world be transformed from within by Christ’s redeeming power.

CLERICALISM

What about the place of pastors within the Church? Emphasising the role of the laity does not mean demeaning the importance of ordained ministry of bishops and priests. Pope Francis is clear on the vital role of pastors: ‘The pastor is pastor of a people, and he serves this people from within. Many times he goes ahead to lead the way, at other times he retraces his steps lest anyone be left behind, and, not infrequently, he stands in the middle to know the pulse of the people.’ Pastors are continually called ‘to look, protect, accompany, support and serve’.

What comes across loud and clear in Pope Francis’s letter, however, is a terror of clericalism. For him, clericalism occurs when priests or bishops ‘diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people’. Rather than encouraging and facilitating, it ends up controlling and ‘gradually extinguishes the prophetic flame to which the entire Church is called to bear witness in the heart of her peoples.’

Clericalism, he writes, ‘is more concerned with dominating spaces than with generating initiatives. It forgets that the visibility and sacramentality of the Church belong to all the People of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 9-14), not only to the few chosen and enlightened.’ And this ‘leads to homologization of the laity; limiting initiatives and blocking the boldness to enable the Good News of the Gospel to be brought to all areas of the social and above all political sphere.’

HOW THEN ARE PASTORS TO ACT?

- A basic step that Pope Francis proposes pastors will also need is that of constantly adjusting the gaze with which they look upon the world around them. Quoting *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 71, he writes that we need to look at all areas of people’s life ‘with a contemplative gaze, a gaze of faith which sees God dwelling in their homes, in their streets and squares.... He dwells among them, fostering solidarity, fraternity, and the desire for goodness, truth and justice. This presence must not be contrived but found, uncovered. God does not hide himself from those who seek him with a sincere heart.’
- Secondly, as pastors go about reflecting, evaluating and discerning, they must be mindful of the ‘anointing’ that the whole People of God have received. It is in discerning contact

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with people's lives that we avoid falling into reflections that, in themselves, may be very good but which end up theorizing to the point that considerations result in prohibiting action. It is by looking continually at the reality of the lives of the whole People of God that we are saved from empty slogans, 'fine phrases but ... unable to sustain the life our communities.'

- Thirdly, it is not the role of the pastor to tell lay people what they must do and say regarding their lay vocation in today's world; 'they know this better than we do'. It is not up to the pastor to establish what the faithful must say in various settings. Pastors are tasked today with finding a way 'to be able to encourage, accompany and inspire all attempts and efforts that are being made today in order to keep hope and faith alive in a world full of contradictions, especially for the poor, especially with the poorest.' It is a question of being among people and, with people, supporting their faith and hope. And this means 'opening doors, working with them, dreaming with them, reflecting and above all praying with them.' As pastors, united with their people, it does us good to ask: 'how we are encouraging and promoting charity and fraternity, the desire for good, for truth and for justice; how we can ensure that corruption does not settle in our hearts.'
- Fourthly, with the pace of cultural change, even over the past thirty years, it is clear that we 'need new forms of organization and of celebration of the faith.' Quoting *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis writes that this need challenges pastors 'to imagine innovative spaces and possibilities for prayer and communion which are more attractive and meaningful for city dwellers'. He knows that 'it is illogical and therefore impossible to think that we as pastors should have the monopoly on solutions for the multitude of challenges that contemporary life presents us.' What is important is to accompany people in their search and encourage their imagination capable of responding to the current set of problems. 'We must do this by discerning with our people and never for our people or without our people'. The Jesuit pope quotes St Ignatius about the need for discernment, 'in line with the necessities of place, time and person'. In other words, not uniformly. 'We cannot give general directives in order to organize the People of God within its public life.'

CONCLUSION

Pope Francis's letter to Cardinal Ouellet is well worth reading in its entirety. It is a clear reminder to us that the whole Church needs to work together to 'inculturate' the whole Gospel in today's

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world. We have to encourage one another to live our faith where we are and with those around us. Formation in our Christian faith can never be seen simply as ‘a production-line dedicated to “manufacturing Christian worlds or spaces”.’ We need to keep the missionary horizons broad.

The mercy of fathers. Knowing that his father will ‘put down’ the family dog that has killed a sheep, the little boy stays out all night with the dog. He returns at dawn to meet his father:

Down at last into the yard we came, the dog skulking on the rope just the same as the day he had arrived to us, and my father came out from the house in his big clothes. All brown with clothes and hair. It was as if I had never seen him before, never looked in his entirety, from head to toe, and I knew then that the dog and me were for slaughter. My feet carried me on to where he stood, immortal you would say in the door. And he pulled me to him so that my cheek rested against the buckle of his belt. And he raised his own face to the brightening sky and praised someone, in a crushed voice, God maybe, for my safety and stroked my hair. And the dog’s crime was never spoken of, but that he lived ’till he died. And I would call that the mercy of fathers, when the love that lies in them deeply like the glittering face of a well is betrayed by an emergency, and the child sees at last that he is loved, loved and needed and not to be lived without, and greatly (Sebastian Barry: *The Steward of Christendom*).

- AMALEE MEEHAN, *The Message of Mercy* (Dublin: Veritas) p.155.