

NOVATE
VOBIS
NOVALE

FURROW

The

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Maria Moran

Empty Pews

July/August 2016

Empty Pews

– *A Personal Story of One Vacant Space*

Maria Moran

I made it official on 24 April, 2016.

Census of the population of Ireland 2016: Question 12: What is your religion?

I did not respond by marking 'Roman Catholic' as I have done all my life up to now; instead I marked 'Other' and wrote 'Christian'. A sense of freedom and joy mixed with feelings of sadness and fear moved through me. I want the fact that I came to a decision to vacate my seat at parish level be known by the generations to come. This decision was not a response fuelled by anger but by a deep sense of sadness and loss and a need to acknowledge the reality of where I find myself vis-à-vis the institutional Church. I know I do not stand alone in how I feel but somehow that knowledge does not give me much consolation. I will give a short account of how I came to this decision in the hope that, through telling my story, I will be free to move on.

My decision was not a knee-jerk reaction but a long process of discernment over many years. My wish to speak openly is to record what I believe to be the reality for so many good people who are spiritually tired of feeling compromised and find themselves pushed over the edge of tolerance. To remain compliant any longer for me would be to seriously question my integrity as a Christian. I have no concept of where I will be led from here. I do not know what will be asked of me as I attempt to forge a new path as a follower of Christ.

MY STORY AS A ROMAN CATHOLIC

As was normal in the 1950s, I was baptised into the Roman Catholic Church a couple of days after my birth. I was whisked from the nursing home in which I was born by my godparents and brought to the nearby University Church in St. Stephen's Green, Dublin to be baptised before being returned to my mother in the nursing home. My religious up-bringing was standard with regular Sunday

Maria Moran, psychotherapist, lives at Cooleycall Lodge, Baldwinstown, Bridgetown, Co. Wexford.

Mass attended by all members of my family, a convent education where religious instruction, including preparation for the reception of the sacraments, was provided. As a teenager I attended parish sodality for my age group each month and was a member of the parish youth team. I was in my final years of secondary school when the fruits of the Second Vatican Council filtered down into the schools. I remember so well the thrill of being handed my first bible with a word of caution from the reverend sister, 'Girls, it might be wise not to read the Old Testament or St John's Gospel as you might get confused'! Naturally, being a curious teenager, I immediately leafed through my new treasure until I found St John's Gospel. It still confuses me today as it did back then but how I love it! My husband and I married in my parish church and as the years went by our four children were baptised within the first few months of their lives. They in turn attended Catholic schools. And so the cycle continues Or does it?

IGNORANCE IS BLISS?

Things changed for me at the turn of the century; our children now young adults were more independent and so I decided to engage in some serious study and began my search for a suitable focus. The fruits of this search led me to undertaking a programme leading to an honours degree in Theology and Anthropology. I followed that up with a Masters by Research in Theology focused on the process of ancestral healing from a Christian perspective. I enjoyed these years of study and felt nurtured and challenged as I began to understand my faith at a deeper level. I remember one lecturer, in the first few weeks of my first semester, explaining how theology is a subject that cannot be studied but must be lived. In hindsight, perhaps ignorance was bliss but there was no going back as my faith matured and my eyes were opened to the responsibility that brought to bear. This, in a way, was my downfall!

Reading the texts of Vatican II for the first time was a revelation to me and as the seeds of new ways started to germinate, I began to appreciate the potential of what was contained within these pages. I felt compelled to take up my own baptismal calling in a more active way in my local church. During these years we moved house twice for various reasons necessitating a move from one parish to another. The lay people involved were, by and large, people of deep faith, very fine people who committed themselves to the work at hand in a spirit of good humour and Christian love. These people will always be my friends (despite my leaving their ranks) and my life is richer for meeting them. Subtle resistance to new ideas by the priests involved was a constant background noise. Change was seen as being disruptive to 'the way we have always done

THE FURROW

things here'! Discussions involving planning for a future Church with very few priests was met with agreement on a surface level but, in general, no desire or energy to bring the ideas to fruition was evident. Projects that were planned and engaged with, more often than not, turned out to be a diluted version of the original group idea, destroying, or at best limiting, the potential to bring life or hope to a failing community. So year after year we sat and planned and planned and sat! The penny began to drop for me as I recognised the different versions of the same apathy emerging over the years, emanating from the priests under whose guidance we were expected to work.

ACCEPTING THE REALITY

As time went on and my initial anger subsided, I began to see these weary priests as men who were burnt out and tired in spirit; perhaps even unconscious of the effect their dysfunctional behaviour was having on those they claimed to serve. Any offer of support to these fatigued men was treated as an affront to their authority. Thomas Merton puts it succinctly when he says:

He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom, integrity, and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centered ambitions, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas. There is nothing more tragic in the modern world than the misuse of power and action.¹

It seems to me that there is simply very little awareness of, or interest in the importance of proper self-care and self-development for many priests in our Church today. These men speak of being overworked (while often holding the reins of authority and control far too tightly) but seem blind to the need to nurture their own spirits on an on-going basis. Proper self-care is not an optional extra for professional carers but an essential element of a 'duty of care' to those we serve. As time went on I began to feel the impact on my own spirit of meeting this brick wall of an outdated hierarchical system that no longer worked. A bishop whom I contacted seemed to be as burnt out as those in his care. In no way was my contact with this man pastoral. I would like to make the point here that while this seems to be a prevalent attitude, it is not in line with the teaching of the same institution.

1 Thomas Merton, ed. Lawrence Cunningham, *Thomas Merton: Spiritual Master: Essential Writings* (Paulist Press: 1992), 375.

Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (*Evangelii Gaudium*) when addressing bishops, says:

The bishop must always foster this missionary communion in his diocesan Church, following the ideal of the first Christian communities, in which the believers were of one heart and one soul (Acts 4:32). To do so, he will sometimes go before the people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and – above all – allowing the flock to strike out on new paths. In his 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. Yet the principal aim of these participatory processes should not be ecclesiastical organisation but rather the missionary aspiration of reaching everyone.²

I admire Pope Francis and how he has broken ranks in many ways, not just in words but through his actions. Perhaps I have become cynical but I fear that the rigid system that has been the driving power of hierarchy will not be shaken in Pope Francis's reign. I imagine it will be business as usual after his demise. I hope I am wrong.

THE BEGINNING OF THE END FOR ME

About three years ago I decided to 'give up' going to Mass for Lent and to return only on Palm Sunday that year. (Where this idea came from I have no idea....it seemed bizarre even to me at the time!). However, I found, during these weeks of absence, that I felt lighter in spirit and recovered some of the energy that had been sucked out of me. On my return to the fold I became even more aware of the spiritual and emotional drain of energy. Month by month I noticed the Sunday congregation dwindling in numbers. I often observed the lack of 'presence' of the presider at Mass and the consequential weakening of meaningful connection between pastor and community. Let me explain what I mean by 'presence' in this context as I believe it is a key factor in the decline of the Irish Catholic Church at parish level.

2 Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World (*Evangelii Gaudium*) Ch 1, II, 31.

THE FURROW

A WORD ABOUT 'PRESENCE'

Understanding the concept of the Trinity in terms of a movement of energy can be useful. To enter into the mystery of the Trinity is to explore the flow of divine energy in and through our experience of being human. This idea has implications in how we relate to ourselves, to one another and to God. The ancient term for this flow of energy is *perichoresis*. The literal translation of this word is 'making room for another around oneself'. Understanding the Trinity in this way we may describe God as a 'loving community of equals reaching out not only to one another but to the world.'³ The significance of the doctrine of the Trinity and the *perichoretic* movement therein, is towards deeper understanding of our humanity being made in the image and likeness of God and our relatedness to all of creation. If we fully enter into this mystery there is no contradiction between the one and the many as we are drawn into communion where there is no separation. This is the place from which we can enter into our 'personhood', not as a way of doing but as a way of being. The significance of understanding our faith in this way is important in understanding the role of the priest and people at the celebration of the Eucharist. As president the priest must reside within his personhood to enable him to engage at this level of ministry. When I hear the priest addressing the congregation with the words, 'thank you for coming' (as if we come to see him celebrate Mass and are passive observers rather than people of faith coming together as a worshipping community to celebrate too) or reassuring us that he won't keep us too long (because the weather is too wet or too sunny) I find myself reacting and really wonder what message he is trying to impart. If, at a concert the audience was reassured that 'you won't be kept too long this evening because I'm sure you would like to get back out into the sunshine', or at a match if an announcement was made that 'because of the rain only one half of the match will be played', there would be uproar and rightly so! Why does a priest think this is acceptable behaviour? Is he not undermining the sacredness of the celebration and if so why? To my way of thinking this is not the attitude of a priest who is about to lead the congregation into a place of intimate union with God but a man who is going to 'say' Mass. In celebrating the Eucharist, the presider is not an actor in a drama nor is the congregation an audience in attendance. It is essential that we all, priest and people alike, give ourselves the chance to enter into our personhood as a way of being present to the mystery rather than going through the familiar motions in a distracted way

3 Declan Marmion, 'The revival of Trinitarian Theology', in Declan Marmion and Gesa Thiessen eds. *Trinity and Salvation – Theological, Spiritual and Aesthetic Perspectives* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2009), 9.

in order to ‘do’ our duty! It is the responsibility of the presider to be truly present in this way and to lead the congregation into this place of mystery. Personhood gives us all the ability to enter into a place of transcendence and to be present in the transparent way necessary for Christ to work through us at the depth of our being.

In saying this, it brings me back to my observation of many priests (but not all) to be men who are burnt out and tired in body and in spirit. They seem to be literally only able to go through the motions. I have heard some priests complain that they have too many Masses to say and if this is so, why treat it as an excuse for poor liturgy but as a realisation that things need to change? Why not let the people support them in finding obvious solutions as a way of meeting the reality of where Church is at the present time? These are very practical issues that good pastoral teams, if given the opportunity, could support change in a wholesome and life-giving way for all. The time has gone when the priest may have been one of the very few educated people in the area. Trust needs to be established afresh and on an equal basis between the ordained and the faith community. We are all equal and this does not exclude the place of holding different roles within church.

BACK TO MY OWN STORY

Still we journeyed on ... but I knew that there was something seriously wrong when, instead of feeling renewed after Sunday Mass I needed to take time when I reached home to recover my spirit. At one pastoral team meeting I named what was happening for me and discovered that I was not alone in my feelings. We soldiered on for another couple of years trying to support each other as best we could. About three months ago I made my decision to leave. I felt I was colluding with a dysfunctional system that was doing more harm than good. As a last ditch attempt to address the problem, I spoke once again of my distress and of my sense of spiritual fatigue. A month later I left, not only the pastoral team but also the institutional Church.

CONCLUSION

One last point I would like to make and it is about the likely response that is often heard from within Church circles when people just like me vacate their pew. We are spoken of as those who have ‘voted with their feet’. Secularisation is often blamed and a loss of faith is mooted as the cause. Wrong on all counts for many, many people, including me. My faith, thank God, is strong, so strong that I have forfeited the comfort of being with my worshipping community. The description of secularisation (and indeed the term laity) when used in the context of people’s decision to leave the institutional

THE FURROW

Church is, for me, offensive. Both terms are negative descriptions of what people are: secular is defined as that which is not sacred and laity are those who are not ordained! To label the majority of baptised Catholics with a negative tag is not to see those people in reality. My guess is that by pointing to secularisation of the laity, the blame can be put outside the walls of the church, thus avoiding the need for self-reflection within those walls. Over the years I have asked many people who have left the institution why they had done so and the reason they give is that they have done so because of a sense of feeling diminished over time and unheard in any attempt made by them to articulate their hurt. It is a deep pain that is hard to express. But it is a deep pain that needs to be heard.

I know that my journey ahead is going to be tough. I am still grieving a loss of great depth but have faith in the God who leads me forward on a path, as yet unknown. It is a lonely place and I do not recognise the shape or colour of the manna that will sustain me on my pilgrim way. But of one thing I am certain, that manna will eventually be visible to me when the time is right. In the meantime I will travel lightly, I will celebrate the sacraments when I happen on a place where this is possible and where a welcome awaits the wandering pilgrims.

Celibate love. While deeply appreciative of the messages of goodwill from many other people and their supportive prayers, I believe that at such a time one also needs the loving and more immediate support of one's closest friends. We men and, maybe more, we celibate clergy are often slow about expressing or even mentioning our love for each other. We still have much to learn in this regard, especially from our female friends. Hopefully, even at this late stage of life, I can learn to be less reticent about my appreciation of such loving support.

– Willie Walsh, *No Crusader* (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 138