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+ *Brendan Leahy*

Where are We
with ‘Share the
Good News’?

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Where are We with *Share the Good News*?

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The National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland, *Share the Good News*, was launched in Dublin in early January 2011. Five years on, it is timely to ask: where are we with it? This is a question for all of us, not just specialists. Commenting at the launch, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin said,

The National Directory is directed to and must involve the entire Church in Ireland. It is not a document entrusted to the catechetical establishment ... It is an invitation to break away from our current situation which is overly school-oriented and bring back into the picture in a more focused way the central role of the parish and the family.

Immediately after the launch, a series of seven leaflets was made available designed to introduce people to the Directory. The Bishops' Conference established a National Faith Development Team that meets four times a year to review collaboration and inter-action between the various elements of the mission of the Church as represented at national level by various bodies at the Columba Bishops' Conference Centre in Maynooth. In 2015 Ms. Kate Liffey was appointed the new National Director of Catechetics and since then has also become the Co-ordinator of the National Faith Development Team. She has brought great energy and enthusiasm to her new role shaped within the *Share the Good News* framework.

A very significant event that marks the implementation of *Share the Good News* has been Pope Francis' remarkable Apostolic Exhortation on the joy of the Gospel, *Evangelii Gaudium*.

On the basis of *Share the Good News* and *Evangelii Gaudium*, the regular meetings of the Faith Development Team have helped

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raise awareness of the missionary dimension of all aspects of the Irish Bishops' Conference work. The Columba Centre has organised in-service familiarisation with the Directory for staff present in the Centre. Some dioceses have done likewise for their clergy and laity involved in ministry. The *Share the Good News* Directory has provided various agencies (for instance, Trócaire, the Finance office, the Communications Office, the Pastoral Renewal and Development council) with a solid framework for promoting their work. Initiatives such as the monthly '*Sharing the Good News*' e-newsletter have come to life.

The Council for the Family and the Council for Catechetics have worked more closely together and this has prepared the way for greater collaboration in preparation for the 2018 World Gathering of Families. The Pastoral Renewal and Development Council organised a National Pastoral Conference, 'Growing in Faith Together as Local Church Community', with a view to promoting living faith communities with the awareness that all pastoral ministry is catechetical.

The Council for Family prepared a family prayer book that has already sold some 4000 copies. Some months ago, a gathering of ecclesial movements and communities was organised by the Council for Pastoral Renewal and Development. It saw hundreds from movements across the country come together in a lively missionary spirit to give witness to the good news of mercy. Representatives of those involved in youth ministry have also met to see how best to proceed with *Share the Good News*.

In short, good work has been done. A fine start. But it is true that many of the indicators of achievement have yet to be realised.

FOCUS ON THE LOCAL

The real focus, however, of the implementation of *Share the Good News* has always to be LOCAL. Each bishop and diocese is best placed to promote and review the Directory in the local diocese. It's a question of 'mainstreaming' it, not as an extra but rather as an invitation to join the dots of much of what we are already doing in our dioceses. It is a summons to recognise we all need to engage in creative, *collaborative* catechesis at all levels of Church life.

Each diocese has to discern its priorities. Each diocese has its own journey of *Share the Good News*. Many dioceses set up committees to review how to proceed, but found it wasn't easy to understand where to begin! Nevertheless, action has been taken. Dublin Archdiocese, for instance, introduced a new Baptismal Pastoral Programme. Some dioceses have appointed faith development co-ordinators, some are actively engaging in the formation of catechists or sacramental co-ordinators, some

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have appointed new youth officers or communications officers. Several dioceses worked on diocese-wide projects. The dioceses of Armagh, Killaloe and Kerry engaged in a listening process that resulted in new pastoral plans for those dioceses. The dioceses of Kilmore and Down and Connor also held diocesan assemblies. The 'Living Church' initiative in Down and Connor saw 1,800 people from the diocese come together at the Waterfront Hall in Belfast to launch a pastoral plan. The diocese of Limerick held a three-day Synod of four hundred delegates with the theme of faith formation one of the major topics for review.

It is clear that what is coming across in engagement with *Share the Good News* is the need for formation and training. It can be hoped that the establishment of a new Irish Institute for Pastoral Studies in Mary Immaculate College (Thurles and Limerick) and the new Mater Dei Centre for Catholic Education (Dublin) will bring new energy in response to this need.

ADULTS AND FAMILIES, SCHOOLS AND PARISHES GROWING IN LOVE!

Since the launch of *Share the Good News*, a number of important resources have been produced. The publication in 2014 by Veritas of the *Irish Catholic Catechism for Adults* saw a positive response. Some 5000 copies sold. Veritas and the IEC Communications Office prepared material such as a study guide, internet clips and offered seminar days on the Adult Catechism. Indeed Veritas offered to 'train the trainers' for any diocese/church council or agency that proposed to get together a team of people to promote the Catechism. This is something that could be explored further.

There is a growing sense that we need committed lay people who will take on a period of formation to be voluntary catechists/sacramental co-ordinators/adult faith teachers in dioceses. It is also clear that we need to stitch adult catechesis (which, let's remember, is considered by the Catholic Church to be the principal form of catechesis!) into what is already going on in parish activities and in the programmes of sacramental preparation for children.

It should also be noted that there are already groups throughout the country that study the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* following a guided reading prepared by the Maryvale Institute. Other study projects of the Catechism are in the pipeline. The 'You Cat' version of the Catechism, written in collaboration with, and more suitable for, young people is available and has been distributed, for instance, to Transition Year students. Very recently, the 'Do Cat' has come on stage. Again, this is a text written more for young people; its focus is on the social teaching of the Church.

While adult catechesis may be the principal form in theory, in practice when we think of catechesis, our minds turn spontaneously

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to schools. It is true that religious education in Catholic schools has a strongly catechetical dimension. A very significant development in this area has been the publication by the Irish Episcopal Conference of *The Catholic Preschool and Primary Religious Education Curriculum for Ireland*, something recommended by *Share the Good News*. It is the first formal religious education curriculum for Catholic preschools and primary schools in the whole island of Ireland. On the basis of the Curriculum, Veritas has produced a primary school religious education series, *Grow in Love*. Significantly, this new programme, *Grow in Love*, has taken great care to emphasise the role of the family and parish.

One of the features of the new programme is a simple and attractive book to be brought home so that the family can continue what has been done in school. The book offers opportunities for parents to review the themes that have been covered in school and chat with their children about. This development is very positive. Stories are told of children coming home enthusiastically to their young parents wanting to talk about what has been done in religious education that day, asking, for example, if they could look in the Bible for the psalms!

This new focus on involvement of parents is crucial. It is one of the key goals indicated by *Share the Good News*. It has been said that we need a further resource for parents to help parents have a deeper grasp of the themes being covered in school. Veritas is now working on that. But, truth be told, this cannot be reduced to a few publications from Veritas. It is going to require all involved in ministry to see how we can help.

The school is important. The family is important. But so too the parish community as a whole. The introduction of the new *Grow in Love* programme offers a new opportunity for priests, parish councils and liturgy groups to reflect on how the parish community can really be more centre-stage in the catechetical formation of children.

This year the new programme is rolling out its teacher manual and textbooks for children of first and second classes (P3 and P4 in Northern Ireland). These are the years when children are prepared for reception of the sacraments of Reconciliation and Eucharist for the first time. Children and parents inter-relate most with the wider parish community at this time. Now is a golden opportunity for parish communities to renew the way they interact with the children, their parents and the school.

Reflecting the vision of *Share the Good News*, the Irish Episcopal Conference has offered a valuable guidelines and discussion document entitled, *Preparing and Celebrating the Sacraments of Reconciliation and Holy Communion for the First Time*. This

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document is primarily for parishes. As the introduction says, ‘it is hoped that it will assist parishes to engage further with parents/guardians and schools’. The material is proposed in a way that can be adapted by dioceses and parishes seeking to develop their own guidelines and resources in this area.

The document puts it clearly, when it reminds us:

The role of the Catholic school and its teachers is to support families and their parishes in the Christian initiation of children, not the other way around. There is broad agreement that greater balance is needed, one that encourages and empowers home and parish communities to take on a greater degree of responsibility. For many years, parishes across the country have made great efforts, through programmes like *Do This in Memory*, to ensure this greater balance is achieved. These guidelines are an attempt to encourage further collaboration between school and parents/guardians and families in the area of sacramental preparation and celebration.

We need imagination and creativity. It requires a new approach to young people by our Sunday congregations. I believe we have to move towards some form of Sunday school or its equivalent. Perhaps only a few will come. But so be it. At least it’s a start. It’s important that young people have a *living* relationship with the parish.

In terms of interaction between school and parish, Veritas has just published another short text entitled *Grow in Love: A Guide for Priests and Parish Workers when visiting Classrooms*. The Guide covers the ‘junior-infants-to-second-class’ age group. Priests and parish workers contribute much if they make regular visits to classrooms in Catholic primary schools. This book offers an insight into the language children are taught. The introduction notes that

the priest or parish worker comes, not in the role of teacher, but as a person of faith who is recognised by the children as having a particular role in the local Church. He or she comes, therefore, as a friend, as someone who is interested in the children, and who wants to share the responsibility of handing on to them the faith of the community, whom they represent.

As we move in these years to engage more with the parish side of catechesis, we will be challenged to think through what this means for young people at second-level education. The primary school level of catechesis has links with the parish through the preparation

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for the sacraments. At the second level the parish connection is not so evident for young people. This needs urgently to be explored both nationally and locally. It was partly with this issue in mind that I raised the question of the possible raising of the age for Confirmation.

WORLD MEETING OF FAMILIES 2018

The news that Pope Francis had selected Dublin as the venue for the 9th World Meeting of Families broke on the evening before the official launch of the Curriculum and Veritas programme, *Grow in Love*. It was a happy coincidence, reminding us again not to leave religious education only to schools but to promote a family and parish commitment to it.

If we look again at *Share the Good News*, we discover it refers often to the theme of family. In section B, chapter three (especially n. 56) it focuses on Christian marriage. In section C, chapter four we find references to marriage preparation and support, parenthood and family ministry (ns 80-84). Paragraphs 89 and 90 look at the importance of intergenerational learning within parishes and families. Paragraphs 91 and following in Chapter 5 help us consider sharing our faith with the young. Section D, chapter seven offers resources for implementation.

In n.134 we are told that the catechetical and religious education needs of young people should to be given high priority in the life of the parish. It suggests establishing a support system for family catechesis, helping parents/guardians, grandparents and young people to speak and pray together in the light of their everyday experience. It refers to a Family Mass ministry in the parish. And it focuses on the link between the parish and schools in terms of preparation for the sacraments of initiation. The recently published document mentioned above builds on this.

The two years of preparation for the 2018 Meeting offer a window of opportunity to focus together on the theme of family and catechesis. Each diocese has been asked to have a representative or establish some form of family representative forum in preparation for the event. It has been said on many occasions that the catechetical element has to have a priority in our preparation over the coming two years.

It can be hoped that the theme of family ministry/family catechesis will be on the agenda for all diocesan and parish meetings over the next two years. *Share the Good News* reminds us that the family itself is a main agent of evangelisation.

The Council for Marriage and the Family is organising a one-day conference entitled 'The Joy of Love, *Amoris Laetitia* and the World Meeting of Families in Ireland', on Saturday, 22 October 2016, at

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St Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin. It will be the official launching of the preparations for the 2018 Meeting of Families in Ireland. It will be an opportunity for dioceses and parishes to send representatives who can take the day as a formation/training day.

CONCLUSION

The National Directory for Catechetics, *Share the Good News*, can be considered an ambitious template for catechetics in Ireland. Does it expect to achieve too much? Perhaps. But we need to aim high. Despite what at times might seem difficulties, we have so much going for us in Ireland!

By European standards we still have a relatively high practice rate. There is great work going on in Catholic schools. Grandparents are active in wanting to hand on their faith to listening grandchildren. Youth ministry up and down the country is in contact with many young adults. It was wonderful to witness the almost 2000 Irish at the World Youth Day in Krakow. The work of the Diocesan Advisors, primary and post-primary, is exemplary. They meet regularly and their enthusiasm for their task is encouraging. There are very many teachers doing their best both in primary and second level schools.

Third-level chaplaincies are in contact with young people. Members of religious orders and congregations, though ageing, are still very much present. A clear message coming across at diocesan assemblies from lay people is that they want to do their part. They want to be involved in expressing the parish's mission to communicate the Gospel. There are many ecclesial movements and communities, both old and new, in Ireland.

What is needed most now is creative, *collaborative* catechesis, vital at this point in Ireland. We need to work at joining up the dots, seeing how best to utilise the resources we have. As Pope Francis reminds us, what matters is to generate new processes that will have their own impact in time. One thing is clear: we can't continue business as usual.

Chapter seven, the final chapter of *Share the Good News*, presents policies and objectives to be pursued at all levels of Church governance and membership. Alongside each objective, we find indicators of achievement, suggestions on how to achieve the objectives. Five years after the launch, it would do us all good to re-read this chapter and see where we are – each of us, as parents, as bishops, as members of parish councils, as priests, as school principals, as deacons, as members of diocesan teams, as parish workers, as members of liturgy committees, as teachers, as grandparents....

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The words of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin at the launch in 2011 continue to be relevant: ‘If the new Directory is to be successful, we have to understand that it aims at much more than tweaking at the current system. The current system has been very comfortable for parishes. What is being proposed here in the Directory is revolutionary for our parishes.

The new religion. While both sport and politics dominate the media – with religion being increasingly confined to the personal and private sphere – for many of the participants it was the webs of meaning woven around sport that had more significance than either religion or politics. Sport can be seen as the new religion in terms of providing a sense of identity, bonding and belonging, of collective effervescence, and, in some respects, of models that interpret life in terms of effort, performance, and chance, of winning and losing and, generally, models for how people should live healthy and fit lives. However, there was a strong divide among the interviewees. For some sport was an integral part not just of their leisure lives, but of family and community life. It was a central element in their cultural repertoire. This was often the case even if they did not play or had never played. However, for many others, sport meant little or nothing. They neither followed, believed in, nor played but, as with atheists in religious culture, they have to live in cultural world increasingly dominated by sport.

– TOM INGLIS, *Meaning of Life in Contemporary Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) p.190.