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Bringing it all
Back Home –
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The Vatican II image of the Church as the ‘People of God’ can be traced to the *Ressourcement* theology of Chenu, Congar, de Lubac, Philips and others, and the vision of the Church as *communio*. The Western Church has, however, remained essentially hierarchical, and not truly reflective of the universal Church, especially in Africa and other missionary territories. In such locations the establishment and development of Christian Churches was entirely dependent on engagement with the local people. In retrospect this engagement may have reflected the Church as the whole people of God, long before the *Ressourcement* theology developed or the Second Vatican Council gathered in Rome. This article will propose that the learning and experience of returned missionaries can offer a positive, even vital contribution to the development, within the Irish Church, of a *communio* which honours the rights and abilities of lay people.

THE WHOLE PEOPLE OF GOD

The Church in Africa has depended on engagement with Africans since the continuous presence of missionaries dating back to the early parts of the 19th century. In the decades since, priests, religious, brothers and lay people have lived out their missionary vocation by working with Africans, equipping them to become parish leaders, Catechists, Ministers of the Word and Eucharist and in various development and educational programmes. Knowing that ownership by Africans of the indigenous churches was essential, missionaries, including SMA priests and brothers and OLA sisters first addressed the greatest needs of the people, and consequently built solid relationships and faith communities. While missionaries were not consciously applying *Communio* ecclesiology, nonetheless parish councils and lay leaders were the norm. Where primary evangelisation was the focus, people were trained and engaged as catechists, liturgical leaders and assistants; where the needs existed in social justice or developing of the local

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infrastructure, lay people naturally assumed a share in the work and in shaping its direction. Building and construction, healthcare and education, farming and community development were the work of the missionary and the people – together; no other approach would have been realistic or practical.

LOCAL RESPONSES TO LOCAL NEEDS

The educational role of the missionary Church in Nigeria is a good example of the importance of recognising, understanding and responding to the concerns of the local people. Education had been an effective means to escape poverty and oppression in Ireland and Irish missionaries, principally SMA and Holy Ghost (CSSp,) shared its value in Africa. The Igbo people, traditionally located in the East of Nigeria had a deep desire for education. This was both because of their religious aspirations and for the advantage it would give them in pursuing the numerous employment opportunities within the colonial administration.

Missionary-run schools continued to emerge as a result, becoming, under Bishop Joseph Shanahan CSSp, a structured and organised schools network. These schools satisfied the Igbo thirst for knowledge, equipped them for employment, and enabled their spread right across Nigeria. Their basic education and fluency in English allowed the Igbo people to become teachers and Church leaders; their energy and initiative made them a real asset to the colonial establishment as well as the Catholic and Anglican missionaries, all of whom came to depend on them. The later development of Catholic Teacher Training Colleges was followed by an expansion of secondary schools. All built on the potential of education as a tool for evangelisation, particularly through the employment of graduates as teachers, often indentured for the first two years of employment as repayment for the cost of their training.

It was precisely because the Igbos desired and responded so rapidly to the provision of education that it was an effective tool of evangelisation, but the recognition of the needs and appetite of the local people and an appropriate response came from an understanding of and connection with those people by the missionaries.

COMMUNIO IN PRACTICE

The rapid expansion of such educational systems placed a substantial managerial and administrative burden on missionaries, limiting time for much pastoral work. In this context the role of lay people as catechists and parish leaders/assistants was not only beneficial, but actually critical. Although arising from necessity

rather than ideology, the existence of such working relationships and pastoral partnerships generated an inclusive Church community, a spreading of the Gospel by living its values; in short, *Communio* ecclesiology in practice. The authenticity and integrity of meeting peoples' needs – spiritual, physical and intellectual – enabled the missionaries to help to build an African Church which today is thriving. The merits of transferring missionary experience from Africa to a beleaguered Irish Church could be diminished by the clericalism and authoritarianism witnessed in Africa in recent years. Nonetheless the learning of missionaries retains an inherent value and that clerical mindset, increasingly a hallmark of the African Church, may yet be challenged by the deep sense of ownership and responsibility of ordinary Africans for their Church. Whatever the shortcomings, its genesis in small faith communities and effective relationships has produced an African Church which is still vibrant and growing, and in stark contrast to the Church many have found on their return to Ireland.

PREACH THE GOSPEL – USE WORDS IF NECESSARY

Missionaries have walked the path of challenging cultural practices and unconventional approaches, accepting those realities, and facilitating, against that background, an encounter with God's love which has spread across the African continent. The SMA have done so by honouring the vision of their founder, Bishop de Brésillac to reach out to the most abandoned and respond to the signs of the times. De Brésillac's vision for the establishment of an African Church was not radical in its structure; the SMA was a clerical Society from the outset. But he did recognise the need for an indigenous Church and clergy, respect for local culture and customs and the empowerment of the African believers. The SMA have pursued these values by working with people according to their needs and equipping them to be responsible for their own faith, rather than depend on the only priest for miles around. In that way they have, like other missionaries, lived the Gospel as well as taught it.

In Ireland today, some African realities, such as a shortage of priests, are more evident than anyone could have ever have imagined, and although the culture, social practices, language and history may be very different, perhaps the response needed is not. Much has been written since the election of Pope Francis on the burgeoning 'age of the laity' within the Church, as if to indicate it is something new. Reflection on the missionary experience might suggest a recognition of the role of the laity long ago, allowing missionaries to make a meaningful contribution in the current climate.

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KEEPING THE HOME FIRES BURNING

Ireland is not Africa; it has been a Christian country for centuries but in recent years that Christian identity has become less obvious; the participation in and commitment of people to the Church is in decline. Society has changed dramatically and many feel the Church has failed to respond in a compassionate and non-judgemental way to the reality of their lives. Factors such as abuse scandals and safeguarding issues have only deepened the disillusionment. There is much work to be done, but there is still hope. The Gospel needs to be heard in Ireland more than ever, but new ways of communicating it are needed. Creativity and innovation are essential. Tried and tested methods of catechesis remain but it is time to explore other avenues. The potential still exists to reach people through conversations which are equal and respectful; through encouraging and supporting people to play their role in music and liturgy; by enabling and empowering people to express their faith through social justice and helping those most in need; and through inviting them to own the ongoing mission both here and in Africa. Such an invitation can come from those with the authenticity and integrity needed to issue it, those who have witnessed it for more than a century and a half in Africa and other places – the missionaries themselves.

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Despite reduced numbers present in churches, many people, especially the young, care deeply about justice and rights, about protecting the weak and those with no voice, and about caring for the earth. This passion for justice is a language which is universal and intergenerational. It is reinforced by Pope Francis' invitation in *Laudato Si'* to hear 'the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' (LS49) in caring for 'our common home.' With a strong tradition of interaction with and empowerment of lay people, missionaries are ideally positioned to tap into that shared wisdom and, drawing on their African experience, to offer people new ways to express their faith by living out the Gospel values.

The last eighteen months have seen an international focus on two huge issues: climate change and displacement of peoples. Pope Francis has provided leadership on both issues both in word and deed, advocating compassion for the marginalised and the poor and care for the earth, who 'herself burdened and laid waste is among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor' (LS2). Bodies such as the Global Catholic Climate Movement, Eco-Congregation Ireland, CAFOD, Trocáire, Christian Aid, Goal, and Concern are all providing practical ways for people of faith to express their care and concern, to move from charity to justice in their response to

the needs of the earth and the poorest of her peoples. Demanding climate justice and adequate support for refugees are perhaps unlikely and unconventional ways by which to promote the Gospel and mission. Yet these are the issues with which more and more people are engaging, instinctively recognising that the future of families, communities, eco-systems and the whole of creation depend on their response. The Irish Church must read the signs of these times and recognise within itself an untapped resource. It must encourage and support missionaries, with all their experience and wisdom, to do what they have always done: to initiate real dialogue with lay people as their partners, to facilitate them to feel the 'cry of the earth and the cry of the poor' and to respond together in new and creative ways.

Diminishing psychic gap. In Ireland, in previous decades, there was an emotional, psychic gap between parents and children, men and women, teachers and pupils, lecturers and students, bosses and workers, doctors and patients, priests and laity, and so forth. These relationships were more formal, with greater limitations and constraints in the way they addressed each other and about what could be said and done between them. The diminishing psychic gap between people was reflected in the places where they met, in the nature of their talk, in their gestures and their touches. These cultural transformations were linked to an increased demand and expectation to be open and frank and to express feelings and emotions. This involved learning new skills in relation to what can be said to whom, when, and where. It involved new forms of communication and trust.

– TOM INGLIS, *Meaning of Life in Contemporary Ireland* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan) p.187.