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Shelled Peanuts

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– a Church in Search of her Soul

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A visitor to Sandycove, near Dún Laoghaire, might wonder at the Martello tower in which James Joyce lived for a few days. There were about fifty of these towers built around the coast of Ireland in the early nineteenth century to defend the country from Napoleon. The fascination with ‘the little corporal’, who inherited the French Revolution and its espousal of ‘liberty, brotherhood and equality’, soon wore off as the number of corpses from his wars mounted. But people remained intrigued and disturbed by the ‘paradigm shift’¹ of a new world order painfully coming to birth.

A fascination, if of a different kind, comes to mind as we seek to understand the ‘shift’ in feeling and thinking we experience in the Irish Church today. A Catholic visitor to Ireland from the Philippines or Zambia might wonder what has happened in a land that sent a string of missionaries to their country. And they might even have difficulty formulating their questions.

In trying to respond we would, perhaps, say two things. We would begin by explaining that there is a bedrock of faith in Ireland, formed over sixteen centuries, tempered by persecution and alienation. This faith flashes forth at critical moments, such as dying and death, when essentials are grasped and perceptions alleviated. It is not going to be fundamentally eroded by the cultural paradigm shifts of the past forty years. The fact that seminaries are emptying and religious houses are closing their doors does not mean that Ireland is losing her faith. Yes, fewer go to church, but our faith has changed, not ended.

It may not be an entirely happy parable but once you remove the shells from a bag of peanuts you end up with half a bag, yet they are

1 A phrase coined by Thomas Kuhn in *The structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago, 1970. Richard Holloway, in *Doubts and Loves, What is left of Christianity* (2001), explains Kuhn’s meaning; ‘In seeking to understand and interpret the world that lies before us, we have created habits of thought and practice that Kuhn called ‘paradigms’. These are working systems of interpretation that endure until they are succeeded by systems that do the job better. Ptolemaic astronomy was succeeded by the Copernican system, which was succeeded by Newtonian physics; and so endlessly on.’

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still peanuts. You have lost the outer crust but the essential remains. The shell which carried and supported our faith was a mixture of social convention, parental pressure and cultural influence. Today none of these has the power to persuade it once had. The shell is gone.

With the shell gone people react differently. Some remain faithful to the way they and their parents had always lived. They keep up their routine of prayer and the sacraments. Perhaps they no longer do the modern equivalent of interrupting saving the hay on a sunny Saturday in June to harness the horses to a trap so as to go to confession, as my grandmother used to do, but they have their own way of practising their faith.

Others no longer darken the door of a church but they devote their energy and resources to works that take them away from home and make serious demands on them. I am thinking, for example, of members of *Médecins Sans Frontiers* who put their life on the line in foreign places. They do the work once carried out by women and men medical missionaries.

A third category is those who have not only cut their link with 'church' but are quite hostile to any manifestation of religious influence in public life. And, while they have this attitude, they too can be devoted people like the members of MSF. Those from each of these groups often lead highly moral lives and have a heightened sense of justice at home and abroad. They will respond generously to any crisis and burn with indignation at any injustice.

But then there is a further response we can give: all these three types of people are, in varying ways, searching as their ancestors never did. They are often put off by the language used by artisans of the gospel. (I am one of these artisans and each day I have the task of speaking on the readings of the day. I have to try to avoid using 'religious' language.) We are discovering another language, a shelled language that connects with people, a language that respects Bonhoeffer's plea from his prison cell for a 'religionless Christianity'. This article, haltingly, explores this new frontier.



It is a matter of words. It is a matter of other things too - our life style, our closeness to the 'the sheep' and so on - but it is essentially about our words. How do we connect? We observe that young people are not listening. Why are they not listening? In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis calls for dialogue in all preaching. He does not mean a conversation with the people at Sunday Mass, though that might work in some cases, but he calls for an intense endeavour to connect with people in their anxieties and struggles.

When Oscar Romero, the martyred archbishop of San Salvador, was preaching in the late 1970s you could walk down the street of the city and every house would be tuned to his words on the local radio.

The Church in Ireland is also ‘trying to connect’ and in doing so is exploring this new language. Luther accused the Church of his day of reverting to ‘the law’, by which – drawing on the critique of Paul in *Romans* – he meant the use of words to preserve a system; to control by repeating worn phrases, formulas and functions. He likened the practices of the Church in 1517 to those of the Pharisees in the gospels – all function, no relationships. For Luther the word preached had to have a living connection with the experience of people and when Pope Francis praised the contribution of Luther at Lund in October he was recognising the contribution of the great reformer.

Sixty years ago Pope John chided the ‘prophets of doom’ who could see only the downside of society in his time. John saw the 1960s as a moment of opportunity when the Church could open its windows to the world and let in the fresh air. We are still breathing that air from the Vatican Council; it is an air of freedom and openness such that the Church has never before enjoyed. She has, in one way or another, been on the defensive since the time of the apostles.



To sense this moment of opportunity we can leave Ireland for a moment and go to Japan. William Johnston, an Irish Jesuit, spent his working life there and in writing the preface to the Catholic Japanese writer Shusaku Endo’s novel *Silence*, (1969), which has just been released as a film, he wrote:

If Hellenistic Christianity does not fit Japan, neither does it (in the opinion of many) suit the modern West; if the notion of God has to be rethought for Japan (as this novel constantly stresses) so has it to be rethought for the modern West; if the ear of Japan is eager to catch a new strain in the vast symphony (of Catholicism), the ear of the West is no less attentive – searching for new chords that will correspond to its awakening sensibilities.

In a *Tablet* article² not long before he died Johnston wrote: Endo saw Catholicism as

2 Google *The Tablet* Oct 12, 2010. ‘The Path from Hate to Love’. William Johnston SJ.

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dogmatic, uncompromising, patriarchal. It saw reality in terms of black-and-white. Its history was full of 'I am right and you are wrong', bringing inquisitions, intolerance, punishment of dissidents and downright lack of compassion.

Asian thought, on the other hand, was 'grey', flexible, tolerant. It stressed 'both-and' rather than 'either-or'. Above all, Asian thought was feminine, grounded in a predominantly yin culture. Endo often said that his faith came through his mother. I recall showing him a book about Julian of Norwich and 'the motherly love of Jesus'. He smiled enthusiastically. 'Father, give me that book!' he said.

Endo often wanted to slough off his Catholicism since he felt it was an ill-fitting suit. But he could not. It was too deeply part of him. Still he longed for some kind of spiritual kimono to replace the suit, something more in harmony with Japanese philosophy and aesthetics.

We can see our dilemma through this Japanese lens. Our Catholicism today is also constrained within structures and attitudes – shells and suits – that have served us in the past but are now ill-fitting. We are now called to a sustained effort to interpret our faith in a way that modern minds and hearts in the West can relate to. If we fail, people will continue to drift away. I have a young cousin who said to me not long ago, 'I love Jesus, but I can't take the Church stuff.'



How can the Christian faith be rethought? Theologians, artists and novelists have done prophetic work on this question for a century, though only the first of these would acknowledge they were trying to interpret 'the signs of the times' in terms of faith. The late Michael Paul Gallagher wrote in *Into Extra Time* that 'a passion of my life has been to make faith real for people, especially those who find themselves far from church language or what they once knew as religion.' Michael Paul, in the same book, saw signs of faith in 'intuition, relationship, narrative, poetry and religion.' In other words, he found faith traces everywhere which is another way of saying, with Ignatius of Loyola, he 'found God in all things.'

In this new paradigm, faith is cutting its moorings from its strictly religious pier and sailing out into the dreaded secular open sea. Perhaps many readers may not be familiar with the work of DH Lawrence, but allow me to pick just one image from his novel, *The Rainbow*, written in 1915, which is relevant here. He wrote:

He (the particular character at that point in the novel) had a suspicion of the pretensions of beauty and perfection, shared, he would have us believe, by the medievals who opted for the pointed Gothic arch over the 'perfect' rounded rainbow arch of the Normans. ... (the Gothic) always asserted the broken desire of mankind in its pointed arches, escaping the rolling absolute beauty of the round arch.

I find this rejection of the perfect form (the rounded arch) an echo of Endo's discomfort, referred to above, with a 'perfect' Catholicism that was 'dogmatic, uncompromising ... and saw reality in terms of black-and-white.' Lawrence's preference for the 'broken' Gothic arch is a more fitting symbol of the 'grey, flexible,' feminine, compassionate expression of the Church's faith as seen, for example, in Pope Francis' *The Joy of Love*. This letter raised eyebrows, even among cardinals and bishops, at its 'grey' approach to the pastoral care of remarried couples. They even wrote to the Pope asking for 'clarifications.' Francis seems to have shrugged his shoulders as if to say, 'Think about it!'

Western minds stumble over compassion. The Jesuits who entered China and India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries patiently and sensitively, and with the approval of Rome, developed a Christianity rooted in the culture of the people. Rome tolerated it for a century but eventually caved in to the zealots for orthodoxy and suppressed the Chinese and Malabar rites. Dogma one, compassion nil!

But there are great things happening and Ireland and the West will rediscover their faith in dialogue with their own cultures and those of the other nations of the earth. One of these 'great things' is the continued generosity of Irish people at the service of others abroad, which I have already alluded to, and the fiscal contribution of the Irish government, topping up the generous donations of 'the plain people of Ireland' to development and relief.

But what is perhaps not so well known is the openness to other cultures and ways of thinking which is becoming a global phenomenon. And here I would like to return to William Johnston's article in *The Tablet*.

After the 9/11 attack on New York, Johnston sat down over green tea with his Japanese friends to reflect. They pointed out that Hellenistic Christianity's attitude, already mentioned, of either/or, right/wrong, percolated into western culture and habits of thought. Johnston's Japanese friends were aghast at the plane flying into the Twin Towers but it reminded them of another plane at another time appearing over the city of Hiroshima and dropping an atomic bomb. 'We are right, you are wrong.'

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This Japanese reaction shocks us into asking fundamental questions; questions that young people ask today and get no answer. They face a future made fragile by the absolute judgements of the men of action – be they Islamic fundamentalists or those who sit around Trump's table.

The exciting thing is that the voices of compassion, mercy and 'greyness' are beginning to be heard.

The clericalization of power. The clericalization of power is very important in the Roman Curia and the administrations of dioceses. We must look at canon law and reflect theologically to see what roles require priests; and then *all* the other roles, in the widest sense possible, must be open for lay people, men and women, but especially women. In the administration of the Vatican, it is not necessary that clerics guide all the congregations, councils and departments. It is a pity that there are no women among the lay people in the Council for the Economy. The specialists were chosen before I started as coordinator, but I will search for women to serve in this role.

– CARDINAL REINHARD MARX, interviewed by Luke Hansen, *America*.