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Martin Delaney

Postcards From
the Edge

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Postcards From the Edge

– *Looking beyond a Priest-centred Irish Church*

Martin Delaney

The recent visit of the Irish Bishops to Pope Francis was an opportunity for them to give him their unique insight into how the Irish Church is at this time in its history. Whenever any of us is asked to explain or describe to another, something which is precious to us, it sharpens our thinking and perception. The process may also have the effect of holding up a mirror allowing us to see ourselves in a new light. This article is a reflection on how I view the Church in Ireland at the moment. Let me begin by writing four postcards from the Church I experience, a place where at least some of the time I feel like I'm at the edge.

- A key figure in the diocesan administration comes to address a group of priests whose parishes form a pastoral area or cluster in a rural Irish diocese. There are priests from seven neighbouring parishes at the meeting. During the course of his address to them 'the man from the diocese' says very bluntly that of all seven of the parish priests in the room only one of them will be replaced when he retires or dies! The one who will be replaced is the Parish Priest of the local large town which presumably will become the 'hub' parish for the other six who will all eventually have no resident priest. When faced with this fairly serious prediction one of those present expresses shock as if this was dramatic news and asks the 'man from the diocese', 'Does Rome know how bad things are with us?'
- A Parish Priest has been in poor health and intends to retire a few years early and move to live elsewhere. The bishop and his advisors are aware of this at least a year before. A decision is made that the priest will not be replaced and the parish will be administered by the neighbouring Parish Priest. At no point does anyone consider it necessary to inform, let alone consult, the people of the parish. The first the people hear about the situation is when the diocesan changes are made and published.

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Nobody from the diocesan administration visits the parish. It is left to the departing Parish Priest and the new administrator from the neighbouring parish to inform the people that they will no longer have a resident Parish Priest. No effort is made by the bishop or the diocesan administration to bring the people or even a representative group of the parishioners together to explain the rationale for this fairly extreme change to their lives and the future of their parish. The consultation with the priest who must now administer the parish along with his own is fairly limited and only happens long after the decision is made.

- The Parish Priest of a fairly large parish gets suddenly and seriously ill. The bishop asks the neighbouring Parish Priest, who is almost seventy, to look after the parish while the incumbent is out of action. The neighbouring Parish Priest is now responsible for all aspects of administering the parish and the incumbent is too ill to be consulted even about some basic facts regarding the parish. There is no system in place help the ‘administrator’. He does not know who to ask about financial matters, if there are baptisms booked in, where he gets keys for such and such. In addition to looking after his own large parish he becomes quickly frustrated. Families come to complain that he did not call out the names of their loved ones whose anniversaries were supposed to be remembered at weekend Masses.
- A Irish bishop is addressing a gathering of priests from another diocese. During his address he candidly expresses his frustration about a recent meeting of his episcopal colleagues. The meeting had been dominated by discussion about strategies to ‘get more vocations’. The bishop, while acknowledging that, yes, we need more priests and we need to promote vocations, was frustrated by the underlying tone of the debate which could only see the future of the Irish Church as ‘priest centred’ as it had been in the past. He further went on to say that from the discussion he had witnessed he feared that if we had an influx of vocations, either from at home or abroad, then we as a church would head straight back to the 1950s and ignore everything that the Second Vatican Council had said about the Church as The People of God etc.

These four scenarios are true, real and current and I have tried to be accurate. I have no doubt that the first three situations can be repeated all over Ireland but these are ones I happen to be aware of. To me all four scenarios give an insight into where the Irish local Church finds itself in the second decade of the twenty-first century.

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I'm sure some of the readers of this article will recognise at least one of the scenarios I have highlighted and maybe even some of the people concerned. However, I want to stress that I'm not interested in talking about individuals whether they be bishops, priests or lay people. I certainly am not interested in 'blaming' any individuals for the scenarios outlined. As we look at these situations above I believe it is a systemic and institutional challenge we are dealing with. Yes, individuals and constituent groups play a role in sustaining and even promoting the somewhat 'dysfunctional' system and model of Church at the core of all four scenarios outlined above. Equally so, individuals and constituent groups are playing a key role in challenging the model and with some success, are leading the change. However, I am increasingly pessimistic that those who challenge the system from within and try to lead the change are seen as 'disloyal', too 'liberal', too 'extreme' or at best 'irritants' to be ignored.

I'm tempted to conclude this article here but I suspect I would simply be accused of being like an 'opposition' spokesperson who likes to outline the problem and offer no solutions. Therefore I will attempt to offer a few suggestions. These suggestions are not from any 'expert' stance nor are they meant to be exhaustive or even fully thought out. With those disclaimers ... here we go!

OWN THE PROBLEM!

For thirty years I have been attending meetings, listening sessions, helping to develop pastoral plans and initiatives at a local, diocesan and national level. The challenges facing the Irish Church, particularly in the light of the dramatic fall in priestly and religious vocations, have all been articulated and ventilated in different ways. Recently these challenges have become more acute. However I don't think we have any national 'owning' or even acknowledgement of the situation. I was somewhat heartened by a recent speech given by the de-facto leader of the Irish Catholic Church, Archbishop Eamon Martin. Archbishop Martin was reflecting on the changing nature of the Irish Church and what the future shape of it might be. In one passage the Archbishop is very explicit of what the future may involve:

It will of course mean a certain amount of 'letting go' by priests and even bishops as the centre of gravity of life, worship and mission in the parish shifts from the parochial house or diocesan curia to the little domestic churches and gatherings of families on the ground.

I would love the archbishop to lead us in a process of national

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acknowledgement and ownership of the vision and understanding he so eloquently outlined. It is only when we truly acknowledge and name the reality that we can nationally and collectively begin really to do something about it.

LISTEN TO THE INTERNAL VOICES THAT CHALLENGE

The Catholic Church has always had a difficulty coping with ‘internal voices that challenge.’ I suppose any organization which is hierarchical and demands obedience from its members will always find it difficult to cope with or accommodate challenging or critical voices from within. It is immediately assumed that those who question, challenge or criticize are disloyal and are not team players.

The Catholic Church in Ireland has often been compared to the GAA. Indeed some of the structures of the GAA may have been influenced by the Church. The GAA also found it difficult to give a voice to the soldiers on the ground and this led to the formation of The Gaelic Players Association. For the first years of that association’s existence it was seen as ‘the opposition’ and the ‘gods’ of the GAA hierarchy would not even recognize let alone negotiate with these upstarts. Now the two associations work together for the good of the mission and most people believe that this working together has enhanced, modernized and strengthened the GAA family. The Church has still a way to go. The Association of Catholic Priests (ACP) is the Irish Church’s version of the GPA but is very much viewed with suspicion not just by bishops but by many other priests as well. Many people view the ACP as the opposition to the hierarchy and I suppose in some ways it is. However I have no doubt that the ACP is made up of hard working, committed and loyal priests who love their God and their Church every bit as much as anyone else. I can only hope that the Irish Catholic Church can look to the GAA and the GPA as a model of how not only to accommodate different viewpoints but also work together for the good of the gospel mission.

LOOK AT PARISH STRUCTURES

Some years ago I was asked by my bishop, at very short notice, to administer a large rural parish. Having been a curate for twenty five years I had little experience of administration at parish level. Fortunately, the two previous parish priests had established and developed a very efficient parish office structure. When I arrived that first morning not knowing anything about the parish I was met by a very friendly parish secretary and an equally friendly parish Sister. Between them they filled me in on essential information and answered any questions I had. In the short year I spent in that

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parish I thanked God every day for the office, the secretary and the parish Sister! The office opened to the public and I marvelled at the footfall as parishioners came to book Masses, baptisms and weddings. I was struck by how much parish business was conducted without the priest needing to be present or involved and yet the people felt that the parish was reaching out to them. In an era of decreasing numbers of resident priests I believe we need to be developing a parish office structure, not just in urban areas but in rural parishes too. Smaller neighbouring parishes could perhaps share the services of a parish secretary at either one central location or in each parish. Many parishes are already grouped or clustered and no doubt this will be an even more common feature in the future. I believe this can be a really positive development if some genuine imagination and resources are committed to strengthening parish office structures. Essential to this is the employment and proper remuneration of good parish secretaries who also share a knowledge, vision and commitment to gospel values.

DO WE NEED A RADICALLY DIFFERENT APPROACH TO PARISH PASTORAL COUNCILS?

I feel a little nervous about posing this question about Parish Pastoral Councils. I am acutely aware that pastoral councils at parish and diocesan level have been the principal vehicle for promoting the Vatican II model of Church as The People of God. I feel guilty because I know so many people who have dedicated themselves to the promotion of Parish and Diocesan Pastoral Councils and by questioning their very existence I may in some way be seen to undermine their efforts. I will try to explain my reservations by reflecting a little on where the notion of pastoral councils came from. To clarify my thinking I'm indebted to Fr. John McLoughlin from Liverpool who spoke eloquently about this subject in a homily he gave at his Silver Jubilee in July 2016.

Jesus Christ makes us all sharers in his priesthood through baptism and ordination. In Christ the common priesthood of the baptized and the priesthood of the ordained are intrinsically linked and interdependent or, as the fathers of the Second Vatican Council put it, they are 'ordered to each other; each in its own way participates in the one priesthood of Christ' (*Lumen Gentium* No 10). This is our root, our anchor: the common priesthood of the baptized and the priesthood of the ordained, in different ways, together share in the one priesthood of Christ.

In trying to give expression to this sharing in the one priesthood of Christ the post conciliar Church has spoken of the notion of collaborative ministry. Pastoral Councils are meant to be collaborative ministry in action. Some years ago, and from perhaps

an unexpected source, collaborative ministry got a major shot in the arm! Pope Benedict XVI, on three separate occasions expressed what I think is a much stronger understanding of what is really meant by ‘collaboration in the priesthood of Christ’. In a homily he gave on 7 March 2010 at the parish of San Giovanni della Croce in Colle Salario in Rome, Pope Benedict called for ‘...a change in mentality, above all with regard to the laity, “moving from considering them “collaborators” of the clergy to recognizing them as truly “co-responsible” for the being and action of the Church, promoting a mature and dedicated laity in this way’. Benedict had made essentially the same point in an address a year earlier when he spoke at the opening of the Pastoral Conference of the Diocese of Rome (26 May 2009). He again characterized the relationship of clergy and laity as one of not merely ‘collaboration’ but rather ‘co-responsibility’ when in August 2012 he sent a message to the 6th Assembly of the International Catholic Action Forum in Romania. I share with John McLoughlin a belief that

rooted in the one priesthood of Christ, the shape of the future in regard to the common and ordained priesthood, lies in accepting most fully – imaginatively and creatively the task of co-responsibility for the being and activity of the Church.

Pastoral councils, at parish and diocesan level, as I have experienced them (even the better ones) have been to a greater or lesser extent an example of collaboration. They have not been an experience of co-responsibility. The reason for this is that pastoral councils operate in a predominantly clerical and priest/bishop-centred Church. The boundaries and limitations placed on pastoral councils by Canon Law and the tradition of the Church militate against them ever being more than collaborative and the strength of that collaboration will depend on the openness of the incumbent priest. However, as PPCs, deficient as they are, are currently the ONLY formal/official way in most parishes for lay people to be involved I wouldn’t like it to be inferred that I am suggesting that they should be scrapped when there is no immediate prospect of another practical way of involving laity in decision making.

My hope is that pastoral councils can move from being an expression of collaboration to one of co-responsibility. I’m skeptical that my hope will ever become a reality unless Pope Benedict’s fine words and those of Archbishop Eamon Martin are backed up by real commitment and action.

INVEST IN PEOPLE MORE AND BUILDINGS LESS

The first time I visited Rome I was very struck by that statue of

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Francis of Assisi looking up at the façade of St. John Lateran Basilica, the mother Church of the world. The statue depicts Francis symbolically ‘propping up’ the Church. The building is only meant to be a symbol of the Church as an institution or even as a family which was in serious trouble. I’m always reminded of that scene whenever the subject of employing lay people for ministry in the Church comes up. In the Irish context there is not one diocese, not one parish which has ever shied away from the biggest building challenge, whether it be the building or renovation of churches and cathedrals, the provision of schools, parish halls or parochial houses. Priests have led and rallied parishioners into fundraising initiatives to come up with hundreds of millions of euro for buildings even in the smallest rural parishes. Parish buildings and particularly churches continue to be a source of pride for communities up and down the country. Change the conversation to finding some funds to employ a parish secretary, a parish Sister, a sacramental coordinator, choir director, catechetical advisor or a faith development leader: ‘Oh, we are only a small parish, a small diocese. We could never afford that and do we really need them anyway? Surely there is a retired Sister somewhere who would do it for a small stipend!’

There are some outstanding exceptions in Ireland where a real commitment has been made to investing in people and ministry. The one I am perhaps most aware of is the Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin. For many years K&L has invested significant resources in its Faith Development Services employing people full-time in the areas of Liturgy, Catechetics, Youth Ministry and Liturgical music. I’m sure there are critics within a diocese like Kildare and Leighlin who question such a commitment of resources but under the leadership and vision of three successive bishops this commitment has been maintained and enhanced. To move from a Church characterized by patchy collaboration to one of co-responsibility will involve a significant re-setting of priorities and a commitment of financial resources to investing in people ... even at the expense of buildings!

PAY MORE ATTENTION TO PROCESS

I believe that the Irish Church could draw more on the significant expertise available in the areas of leadership training, facilitation and critical evaluation. I suspect that Religious congregations have paid more attention to this than diocesan or parish structures have. I can recall some years ago a CEO of one of Ireland’s most successful companies coming to address the priests and bishop of our diocese. As is mandatory for anyone hoping to impress a gathering of Ossory priests this speaker drew heavily on sporting

and particularly hurling metaphors and examples. He did this very successfully and in the process made some very significant points and suggestions about leadership, accountability and evaluating performance. The lads were mightily impressed and walked out of that room with a spring in their step, some even tempted to put his ideas into action. But then over the tea the naysayers poured cold water on it all and said; ‘that’s ok in the business world but this is the church and we do things differently!’

Many people reading this will hopefully have been part of some gathering or meeting which was well run or facilitated, where everyone had their say, people spoke honestly and respectfully, meetings where tasks were undertaken and delivered upon. How life giving that can be! But sadly too many of us have also been subjected to gatherings and meetings where people waffled, where difficult subjects could not be discussed, where voices were not heard respectfully and where voices were strangled completely. Ordination, for some, still brings with it a belief that accountability is for others but not for us.

I know we are not a business, we are not part of a secular organization but I believe there are many strategies in that world which could also enhance ours. Strategies which would allow all voices to be heard, strategies which would help us to listen to voices very different from our own, strategies which would make us more accountable to others, to ourselves and to our God. What could be more Christian than that?

WAITING TOGETHER FOR WE KNOW NOT WHAT

While I was working on this article a friend sent me a article with the title I have just given this final section: *Waiting Together for We Know Not What*. This could well be an alternative title for my own reflections. The shape of the Church in Ireland in ten or twenty years is certainly in ‘*We Know Not What*’ category. We are ‘*waiting together*’ to see what will emerge. Many of our Church leaders would seem to be waiting passively to see what happens. Some of them feel that because they are within sight of retirement themselves they take the view that ‘it will be alright for my time and let the next generation worry about it’. Some just don’t have the energy to contemplate the significant new thinking which may be required.

The suggestions I have made above will not fit into the category of passive waiting. Our waiting has to be active or at least pro-active and it has to be waiting *together*; lay faithful, priests, religious and bishops. Pro-active Waiting Together cannot however be just about strategies, process and structures. It must also be a waiting which is reflective and contemplative and grounded in genuine

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Christian Hope. Recently, Dr. Kevin Egan addressed a group of priests in Kilkenny and he spoke about the importance of Hope as we look to and plan for the future. Dr. Egan quoted from Richard Lennon in speaking about Hope and the Church's Mission; *'This is a moment (in the wake of the clergy sexual abuse crisis) when hope manifests itself in both a willingness to acknowledge painful truths and imagination that strives to develop different possibilities in the future'*.

At every level and at every gathering, local, diocesan and national, which seeks to plan for the future of our Church, prayerful silence, speaking, listening and yes ... hope must be at the core. Only then can the voice of God emerge, only then can we really listen to all the voices especially those different from our own. Only then can the 'we know not what', the 'something new' emerge into the sunlight.

Clannishness. During the last few years I was part of a small group of students who regularly celebrated the Eucharist together. We felt very comfortable with each other and had found "our own war." The songs we sang, the words we used, the greetings we exchanged all seemed quite natural and spontaneous. But when a few new students joined us, we discovered that we expected them to follow our way and go along with 'the way we do things here.' We had to face the fact that we had become clannish, substituting our minds for the mind of Jesus Christ. Then we found out how hard it is to give up familiar ways and create space for the strangers, to make a new common prayer possible.

– WENDELL BERRY, 'The Gift of Good Land', *A New Creation*, ed. Roger S. Gottlieb (New York: Crossroad).