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*Harry Bohan*

Family, Faith  
and Culture

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# Family, Faith and Culture

## – *Hopeful Signs*

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Family life is experiencing a great revolution. Increasingly community is becoming a forgotten concept as ‘individualism’, ‘competitiveness’, ‘market-values’ and ‘self-absorption’ tend to dominate. The Church is experiencing very significant rates of disengagement especially among families. While parents still present their children for the sacraments of baptism, first communion and confirmation, increasingly this is against a background of non-practice and disengagement from the local Christian community. This of course raises questions about our sacramental practice but also about our willingness and ability to engage parents and families, to reach out to them in the complexity of their lives and in their ambiguity about connection with us. There is no instant solution to the question of how best to do this. But there is a great need for the Church to engage with parents and families. It is only through attempts to respond to their needs and hopes that we have any possibility of building a connection and relationship with the next generation. Without this there is no future.

### CHANGING PATTERNS OF FAMILY LIFE

Changes in the patterns of family life go hand in hand with societal and economic change. This has a profound impact on the way people understand and relate to church and faith.

The changes in family patterns in Ireland reflect three distinct phases from the 20th to the early 21st centuries. These are well documented. In summary the traditional family model dominated by the values of an agricultural society has been replaced. The two-parent, separate-gendered nuclear family is now just one configuration amongst many others. The reality of modern industrialised, technology-driven society is not conducive to togetherness in the home. Technology impacts on the quality of

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family interaction especially for young people, with time at home spent increasingly alone on social media.

This era has been an extraordinarily difficult time for faith. In a globalised world we cannot escape the impact of secularisation. Mainland Europe has experienced this long before us but now secularisation is having a huge impact in Ireland. Faith is pushed to the margins. The hallmark of our increasingly secular society is individualism and self-sufficiency. It tells us we don't need others or God. Religion no longer dominates the culture, consumerism does. Young people bring with them into the school what they see and hear in the world around them.

## THE GROW IN LOVE PROGRAMME

This is the context in which the new religious education programme *Grow in Love* (replacing *Alive O*) for Junior and Senior Infants was launched in our schools last year. This year the programme for 1st and 2nd classes was launched. Over a three year period, the new programme will move through all the classes in our primary schools. This new programme will bring about significant change in the way the Christian story is told in the schools. An important aspect of the new programme is that it tries to link to home and engage parents in talking about what the children are learning at school. In this paper we set out our attempts to 'dip our toe in the water' in an effort to engage with parents of children participating in the *Grow in Love* programme and also those preparing for sacraments in Kilmurry/Sixmilebridge Parish. We go on to reflect on our learning from these efforts and what has been thrown up by this engagement.

## THE PARISH

After Ennis and Shannon, Sixmilebridge is the third-largest population settlement in Co. Clare and is regarded as one of Clare's fastest-growing villages. Between 2006 and 2011 it experienced a population increase of 51%. The parish has twenty-three housing estates, mostly occupied by young families. The enrolment at Sixmilebridge Primary School has almost doubled in the last decade. Kilmurry is a vibrant community a few miles from the 'Bridge which has seen a huge influx of new people in the last two decades who have built houses and become part of the community. Our parish is one with a mixture of urban and rural populations. A rural hinterland with a strong farming tradition makes up the third constituency in this busy parish. There are 700 children attending the primary schools in the parish which indicate that approximately 2,000 parents and grandparents may be reached even in some small way by outreach to this group.

OUR THINKING

Over the years the parish has worked on engaging with different groups of people in the community. Through Area Gatherings held in different geographic areas of the parish and in locations as varied as a lakeside, the top of a hill, the local mart, a housing estate, a large farmer's shed and a railway station, we have made many efforts to engage the different groups and areas in the parish. Connecting with the parents of the sacramental preparation classes has been more difficult.

Our sense is that the traditional First Communion parents' talk has run its course. It is no longer enough. A good presentation on the night may hold a group's attention in the moment but the experience for the most part is that the parents remain passive spectators at such gatherings.

How could it be different, we wondered. How could we engage with this group in a way that was meaningful to them? We are fortunate in our parish to have what we call the 'Meaning to Life' Group, a sub-group of the Parish Pastoral Council, whose concern is linking faith and life. Over the years this group has been the catalyst for developing events which reached out to the different groups in the parish. This group has also been instrumental in developing community responses to issues of local concern. We asked the Meaning to Life Group to help us to think about how best to connect with the parents.

OUR FIRST EFFORTS: YEAR 1

In our discussion with the Meaning to Life Group some things became clear:

- We wanted the *whole parish* to be aware of the *Grow In Love* programme and to see the parents as a vital part of our community. We therefore decided to speak about it at the Sunday Masses, to write about it in the parish newsletter and to continue to pray for the success of the programme at all parish Masses.
- We felt that our efforts needed to begin with the reality of parents' lives, with attention to the busyness of their lives and where 'people are at' at this point in their lives. Our parish is very diverse, coming from many different backgrounds and experiences. We needed to be sensitive to this.
- Parents needed information on the new programme and how they can be involved. But we wondered if they also needed faith nourishment for themselves. Would they be interested in this?
- Our aim was to support and encourage parents, not to place another burden. The tone of what was offered needed to be

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affirming of parents and realistic in understanding the pressures and many challenges parents feel. The right atmosphere needed to be created.

We invited Dr Dan O'Connell, who teaches religious education in Mary Immaculate College, Limerick to facilitate and present the intent behind the *Grow in Love* programme to the parents. Over a number of conversations with Dan, three sessions were agreed which we called *Parents on a Journey*. A big effort was made to encourage parents to attend by working with the schools, notes home in school bags, speaking about and praying for the new *Grow in Love* programme at our Sunday Gatherings over several weeks and inputs into the parish newsletter. On average over eighty parents turned up each night. In between the sessions, the parents were invited to gather in small groups in each other's houses, or even twos and threes over a cup of coffee, to talk about the themes of the evening and send us in their feedback.

Dan's three sessions began by talking about restlessness that is part of each of our lives. Parents were able to identify with that sense of restlessness in their own lives. This restlessness is an experience of a deep hunger which only God can give. Dan went on to speak about the vision which underlies the new *Grow in Love* programme. God *is* Love. The aim of the new programme is to help the children to grow into awareness of the God of Love.

On the second night, the session focused on the vision of Jesus as the one who came to restore us and remind us of our true dignity as daughters and sons of God. This session linked to the message of Christmas and why Jesus was born among us – to show us the dignity and value of the human person, a reaffirmation of something long forgotten, that we are made in the image and likeness of God.

In the final session, the focus was on helping people to understand that God was not just in 'holy things' but at the very heart of life. The parents were invited to notice where God is already present in their ordinary lives and most especially, in the love they experience with their children. Equally important were the conversations the parents had between meetings. There were a number of questions given out for discussion among these groups, following the theme from the talk. Not every parent chose to be part of these small gatherings around the parish but the feedback from those who did was very encouraging. For example, we were amazed by the responses to the question, 'How do you make sense of God in your life? What helps you believe?' Even though most of the parents present were not part of our regular parish life, it was clear from the feedback that they have a sense of God in their lives.

A SECOND EXPERIENCE

The second year we again focused our work to engage parents in meaningful conversation with the parents of the 1st communion classes. In all there were 80 children in the four classes in Kilmurry/Sixmilebridge in these classes. Again we invited the Meaning to Life Group to be involved. But this time we also invited some parents of school-going children who were willing to help us shape the process. Both groups were enthusiastic about the idea.

At our early meetings we talked at length about the world these parents inhabit. We spoke about the busyness of their lives and the difficulty they have in coming away from home for a night. They are easily alienated by ‘Church-speak’.

The parents in the group were keen that our engagement with other parents would not begin with ‘God-talk’. They needed to begin with ‘where the parents are at’ and what is meaningful for them. They pointed out that what is most meaningful to parents is what is happening for their children.

We wanted to find a way to engage these parents in reflecting on their lives and their experience. Could we find a way to awaken in them a sense of the God of Love who is so much part of the *Grow in Love* programme? This God is not distant or far away but already within their experience. Could we awaken in them a sense that in the love they had for their children, they were already experiencing something of God?

Over the course of a few weeks we developed a process which tried to take these insights on board. We also decided that the process would be more facilitative, giving space to the parents to explore things for themselves.

To begin with we involved the children in drawing a picture of a time when they felt loved at home. They were also asked to write a few sentences about that time. In the run up to the nights with the parents, the children were asked by way of homework to conduct an interview with their parents on their memories of their First Holy Communion. We asked the teachers in the school to help in this task as part of their religious education programme. The teachers grasped what we were trying to do and came on board immediately.

The children’s drawings were wonderful and very moving, connecting to all kinds of moments in family life. Moments of care when a child was ill, moments of support at a ‘scary’ time, moments of love at a birthday or holiday time were all recorded by the children. Above all, moments when parents spent time with their children watching television or doing some activity together were recorded. On the night of the Parents’ Gatherings these drawings were displayed around the room – without names – and

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the parents were invited to look at them. In small groups the parents responded hugely to the children's drawings. Though the drawings did not include names, memories were evoked and special times and moments of care and love remembered. A parent commented that it was as if the children had become their 'spiritual teachers', helping them to see what's important. This was echoed by others who pointed to the lack of material things in the drawings. What the children valued was time spent with parents, especially at special moments or at vulnerable moments in their lives.

A second part of the session invited parents to reflect on the reality of their lives through a series of images. Drawing from the earlier conversations with the parents and Meaning to Life Group a set of images depicting today's culture and typical life-style was shown. Parents identified with themes of constant busyness, being 'on the run', the pressure of consumerism, the impact of advertising, the stress on the material, etc. They were able to see themselves in the images presented.

Having explored the cultural context and the children's experience of love, we began to open up the question: 'have these experiences of love which the children describe anything to do with God?'

These quotations from Daniel O' Leary and Janet Shaeffer OP formed the backdrop to this conversation:

What is love? Watch a parent caring for a handicapped child. See a spouse coping with a partner suffering from Alzheimer's disease. Watch a family playing together in a park on a sunny afternoon, or a toddler taking its first steps and falling laughingly into outstretched parental arms. There is a beauty, 'un-showy', unselfconscious, that lives in a thousand small gestures of listening, caring, helping, giving, for no ulterior motive other than the fact that here we are "we" not "I". (Daniel O' Leary, *Already Within*, 2007)

Our most intimate experiences of God's presence with us often occur within the everyday moments, interactions and relationships of family life. The challenge is that sometimes we are so busy that we miss them. Family life is holy, is sacred. That is where God is. (Janet Shaeffer OP)

A lovely conversation followed exploring how our human experiences of love show us something of the God of Love.

At the end of the session a member of the Meaning to Life Group asked the parents to help our planning by giving feedback through a questionnaire.

LEARNING FROM THE PROCESS

Following the workshops with the parents the Meaning to Life Group held a meeting to reflect on and evaluate what had happened. The completed questionnaire had been analysed and the results available to the meeting.

- The level of participation in the parents’ workshops was surprising. Prior to the Workshops, the schools had indicated low to very low participation in events organised by the Parents’ Councils and had expected the participation at the Parents *Grow in Love* Workshops to be similar. In fact there was a very high level of participation in the Workshops with over eighty parents present each night, a surprising number of whom were men. We were struck by the positive attitude of the parents. Already in the room there was a sense that parents were engaged in the conversation. The questionnaires confirmed this.
  - 83% commented that they would attend similar type events going forward.
  - 64% are interested in opportunities to enrich their own faith.
  - 98% of people attending felt that the parish has a role in assisting in faith formation in one form or another.
  - 10 people in the group were willing to volunteer in assisting further work with the parents.
- The insight which the parents in the preparation group brought to the process was crucial. They had strongly argued that the best way to engage the parents was by connecting with something the children had done. The children’s drawings of times when they experienced love were of immediate interest to the parents.
- Insight also came from the children’s drawings. As one Dad put it ‘the children are showing us what is important.’ The children felt loved when they were given time – time when they were sick, time when Dad was off work, time when the family watched a television programme or went for a walk together, time when ‘I was tucked into bed’ or ‘when I was afraid’ ... the list went on. It was striking – and pointed out by the parents – that there was no mention of material items such as *ipads*, mobile phones, etc. It was clear that it was the quality of presence which made most of an impact on the children.
- In our engagement with the parents we saw the possibility of openness to more enduring values. Parents could identify with and critique the images of culture presented. They recognised the values of the culture around us which are presently shaping their lives as families. They were not satisfied by the values



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of the consumerist/materialist culture around them. They seemed satiated by it. They recognised the driven-ness and competitiveness of the culture we live in. They spoke about the isolation being experienced by families at a time when we have highly developed communications media. They spoke about the importance of community and wanting their children to feel part of a community with roots.

The openness of the parents confirmed our experience of the previous year. We mentioned earlier our surprise at the feedback to the question that presenter, Dan O'Connell, had posed for discussion at the parents' group meetings: 'How do you understand or make sense of God in your life? What helps you to believe in God?' The feedback indicated that most parents had a sense of God in their lives, whether through contact with nature, feeling blessed for the gifts of life, the witness of people they knew, especially parents, a felt sense of God in coming through hard times or in moments of vulnerability. This did not, in most cases, translate into engagement with the Christian Community but it did indicate an openness which surprised us. (Our surprise stemmed from the fact that many of the parents we are trying to engage with are the second generation of their family to live at a remove from Church and faith culture.)

- A shift from a modernist to a post-modernist culture has been well articulated by writers such as the late Michael Paul Gallagher and others. In our engagement with the parents we felt as if we were seeing something of this shift. From a Christian point of view most were out of touch with the language of faith and forgetful of Christ yet there was a sense of openness, even of search, which was not hostile to a faith story or a faith perspective.

Could this be indicating that this is a more friendly time for a creative embodiment of the Christian vision? There are new hungers and so potentials for a new language of faith. But this must involve connecting and starting with real life.

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

#### *Engaging with the culture of our times*

The crisis we face as a Church is not simply one of faith but also one of culture. We need to find ways of engaging with people on questions of meaning and values at a deep level.

We tend to think of culture in terms of art, aesthetics and beauty and of course culture includes all these. But culture is also about the meanings and values underlying our way of life. Whereas sociology is visible, culture is underlying; we are immersed in it like a fish in

sea water. Though we may be unaware of it, culture is constantly shaping how we image ourselves and the world around us. Today, culture is transmitted electronically through technology tied to narratives that feed us a version of reality we tend to ‘swallow’, even when we do not consciously intend to do so. Our identity and meaning world is shaped by the world of media and advertising by commercial interests whose primary interest is profit. In this world people become consumers rather than shapers of culture. But is this all there is? Have we any possibility of choice? Can we resist or, even more, transform this culture which reduces us to isolated consumers?

Our workshops with parents have demonstrated that there is an urgent need to facilitate parents to understand the culture we live in and its impact on them. Our experiment in the ‘Bridge was about helping the parents to bring to awareness the culture in which we are immersed so as to question the values of that culture. Only with awareness can parents make informed choices about the meaning and values they wish for themselves and for their children. Our efforts aimed to help the parents to see that faith offers a different set of values based on our dignity as sons and daughters of a loving God who calls us into community as brothers and sisters.

Beginning with the children had a deep impact on the parents. In a very real way the children became the teachers through their drawings which called into question the meanings and values promoted by commercial interests. The parents themselves identified that they had been over-swallowing these meanings and that they had not recognised sufficiently that these do not satisfy the meaning to life values of the children.

*‘... coming back to Mystery through the gateway of Spirituality  
...’*

The poet, Séamus Heaney, said: ‘Like many of my generation I felt I had to secularise my life in the 70s, which was a mistake. Now I am coming back to mystery but through the gateway of spirituality.’ Our experience in the ‘Bridge has taught us that if we are to engage parents it will be through ‘the gateway of spirituality.’

Heaney’s description might be applied to our culture. Secular Ireland turned away from institutionalised religion and is forgetful of Christ. Among some there is a kind of aversion to language about God, and especially pious language. But for others there is a new search for something deeper, for stillness, for mystery, for inwardness, a hunger to connect, to belong. But this search needs community. We cannot do it on our own. ‘Our search needs connecting with others’ (Elizabeth Johnson).

How many times have we heard the phrase of Karl Rahner

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quoted: ‘The Christian of the future will be a mystic or not exist at all’? Rahner’s future has arrived. It is happening now, today.

Less often quoted, from the same paper by Rahner, are the characteristics of a meaningful Christian spirituality for the future, which he named. He said spirituality must begin with human experience because experience is the primary place of encounter with God. It must be an engaged spirituality since the world is where God is revealed. It must be related to everyday life since human life is the meeting place between God and humanity. People must be helped to find God in their ordinary human experiences.

If we are to connect with parents this is the language we must speak, one that engages their experience and helps them to articulate their own hungers.

### A TIME OF OPPORTUNITY BUT ALSO OF SERIOUS CHALLENGE

Our experiment has shown that a real opportunity presents itself to the Church at this time but also serious challenges. This must begin with responding to reality, including the reality of the culture, as people experience it in their lives. In other words we must read the signs of the times, not in a negative or embattled way but with openness and receptivity to the hungers that present themselves. It is not enough to critique the culture; we must understand it and see how we can participate in shaping it and transforming it.

Secondly, we must recognise that schooling alone is not the answer to the question of faith formation. In Ireland we largely devolved faith formation to the schools, most of which operated under Catholic ethos. This was perhaps always an unrealistic expectation and an impossible task but even more so today when Catholic schools face so many issues including the demand for reduction in the time allocated to faith development. Certainly the school has a role to play but faith development is not the outcome of teaching alone but of witness, modelled practice and insight. How can faith develop in children unless they experience it as an important part of the lives of their parents?

However, many parents see faith development as the responsibility of someone else – school or parish. Our exercise has underlined that parents can be helped to discern questions of values and meaning and to realise the crucial responsibility they have in shaping the values, including faith values, that they wish their children to live by. However, parents must be facilitated in this task.

Thirdly, the school and what we do there can’t be isolated from the parish. We are challenged especially in the quality of the liturgy we celebrate each weekend – the Sunday Gathering. We are preoccupied with quantity and numbers which is understandable.

But the reality is there's a spiritual vacuum out there. People will not be attracted by religious routines that no longer speak to them. We have entered the season of the soul where the quality of our ministry is what's important. Only prayerful, soulful personal experiences are capable of touching the soul. Old and shallow ways of doing things have to die through a slow surrender of habits of doing things just for the sake of doing them.

For many years we have given lip service to the idea of a partnership between home, school and parish in the task of faith formation. In reality however, much more resources are ploughed into faith development in schools than into adult faith development work with parents. The present *Grow In Love* programme is a case in point. Huge effort has gone into devising and producing a curriculum and a programme that is well thought out, pedagogically appropriate and attractively presented. It is good that the programme makes a link with home through regular invitations to the parents to help with homework or get involved in simple activities with their children. But no resources have been expended in devising or developing an approach to help the parents, many of whom feel very ill-equipped for this involvement.

We are fortunate to have a Meaning to Life Group in the 'Bridge' which plays a crucial role in outreach to parents. This group plays a vital role in developing approaches which begin with the real lives of the people of the parish. But every parish needs a group like this who are in tune with the reality of the world around them but also with the possibilities for reaching out to meet people in that world. Skills in developing approaches are required but also skilled facilitation in working with groups of parents.

There is an urgent need for the Church through the support of the Parish and resourced by the Diocese to train lay people with the skills required for this work with parents. This is all the more urgent given the decline in numbers of priests. Wishful thinking and high sounding noises are no longer enough. Faith development in Ireland now requires a serious investment in skilled and resourced personnel to work on the ground with parents. This could be an important and hopeful initiative for the Church at a difficult time for faith formation.