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Ireland and the Quiet Revolution in the Catholic Church

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Pope Francis completed the fourth anniversary of his pontificate last March, 2017. Media commentary in Ireland tends to focus on particular areas of interest surrounding his papacy – his pastoral style, opposition to his recent teaching on the admission of divorced and remarried Catholics to Communion, his attempts to tackle clerical sexual abuse of children (mediated in particular through the experience of Marie Collins), the dissatisfaction in many quarters around the method of appointing bishops, and the shortage of priests. Referring to this latter point, the outgoing Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Charles Brown, was recently reported as saying: ‘We’re at the edge of an actuarial cliff here, and we’re going to start into a free fall’.¹ All these – and many other – particular issues are of great importance, but arguably they do not identify the underlying core of what Francis is attempting to do with the Catholic Church. Many theological and media commentators abroad have spoken of a revolution. I want to explore here how and why we in Ireland have been slow to appreciate what this core revolutionary strategy is, a strategy which is crucial in influencing almost all the particular issues mentioned above.

FRANCIS AND CHURCH SYNODALITY IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

Francis himself described the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG*, The Joy of the Gospel, 2013) as ‘programmatically’ (*EG*, 25). Throughout this document his focus is very much on ‘initiating processes rather than possessing spaces’ (*EG*, 223 – ‘time is greater than space’ – 222-225). What Francis means by this somewhat cryptic phrase is that ‘we need to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events’ (*EG*, 223). In other words, Francis is convinced that radical change is not the same as

¹ *The Irish Times*, Saturday, March 18, 2017

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‘obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains’ (EG, 224) but is more likely to emerge from a more patient and genuinely inclusive process.

When one translates this conviction into the ecclesial sphere Francis spells out very clearly² that what is required for the third millennium is a ‘synodal church’, in which there is free and open debate and consultation. In this new context the Pope acts as head of, but also member of, the college of bishops, and a reformed Roman Curia sees itself at the service of the whole Church (in particular of the Pope together with the bishops). Again, in this new paradigm, collegiality is to be present at all levels of the Church. This will mean that more effective authority is given to National and Regional Episcopal Conferences. It will also mean that the ‘voice of the faithful’, and the role of the baptised as sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly offices of Jesus Christ, are clearly brought to bear at local, intermediate and universal levels. This implies some lay involvement both in governance and in the formation and reception of teaching at all levels of the Church.

The terminology used to describe this ‘inverted pyramid’ way of looking at the Church centres around two words in particular – synodality and collegiality. In a helpful conceptual clarification Ladislav Orsy notes that

collegiality is a Latin legal term and in Western ecclesiology it refers to the external constitutional structures and operations of a corporate body. Eastern Christians prefer to speak of ‘synodality’, which is a Greek theological term and signifies an invisible unity created in ‘those on the road together’ ... by the indwelling Spirit’.

Orsy goes on to suggest that ‘it would be a wholesome theological position – both in the East and the West – to hold that the synodality ‘being on the road together’, generates collegiality, ‘getting together’. The ‘invisible communion is incarnated in visible operation’, and he recalls that all this is true to the advances made in synodality/collegiality in Vatican II where ‘...the conciliar discourses, debates, and battles were part and parcel in a process of ‘development of doctrine.’³

And this is what Francis has been doing since the start of the pontificate. He has located himself primarily as Bishop of Rome, within the College of Bishops, and has attempted to give institutional form to this ecclesial and papal reform by working together with a Council of Cardinals, by renewing the dynamic

2 See in particular his address commemorating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Synod of Bishops, October 17, 2015

3 Ladislav Orsy, ‘Where is Our Church Going? - searching for a response’, *The Furrow*, 63, December 2012, 591-5 at 593

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authority of the Synod of Bishops, and by urging local and regional Episcopal Conferences and individual bishops to assume their responsibilities to govern their own dioceses, always in consultation with the faithful.

This decentralisation of governance is to be in communion with the rest of the Church of course, but requires bishops to be particularly attentive to the signs of the times in their own spheres of authority, so that, as bishops, they will sometimes be ahead of their flocks, sometime walking alongside, and sometimes following along behind, and all the time consulting and listening, not least to those who tell them things they may not want to hear (*EG*, 31).

The world-wide consultation of the faithful, prior to and during the Synod on the Family, no matter how clumsily and unevenly carried out, was an important earnest of this transition to a more participative and inclusive Church, based on sound theological principles, the practice of the first millennium, and the demands of contemporary culture. It has led already to a more open culture of debate within the Church and to that modest, if controverted, development of doctrine contained in the Papal Exhortation '*Amoris Laetitia*' (*AL*, The Joy of Love, 2016), fruit of the synodal process.

Vatican commentator, Joshua J. McElwee notes the change in Church culture that the Pope is bringing about, 'playing a very long game, trying to shift the Church's vision of its mission and its stance towards the world'.⁴ He quotes eminent moral theologian, Lisa Sowle Cahill to the effect that 'the pope used the synod process as a way to consider possible developments in Church teaching without causing open divisions in the Church', and describing Francis as a 'wonderful ecclesial politician'.

I would add simply at this point that for Francis it is clear that ecclesial reform is always in function of mission, of our encounter with Jesus Christ and his proclamation of the Kingdom of justice and peace already beginning in this world, Jesus who is the personification of God's mercy and love. At the heart of this reform lies a personal and communal discernment of what it is God wants of our Church now, a discernment that takes account in its formation of doctrine of the 'sense of the faithful' (not least popular piety and the voice of the poor), the voice of the theologians, and the authoritative role of pope and bishops. It also allows for lay participation in Church governance. The potential for change in this more inclusive ecclesial way of proceeding is enormous. And it includes the dream of Francis of 'a poor Church for the poor'.

4 Joshua J. McElwee, Since 2013, Pope Francis has endeavoured to shift church culture, *NCR*, March 9, 2017

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OPPOSITION

Another experienced Vatican commentator, Marco Politi, has written a forensic account of the opposition to Francis, the English translation of which takes the story up to 2015.⁵ Tellingly, the title of Politi's book is *Pope Francis Among the Wolves*, with a sub-title of 'The Inside Story of a Revolution'. Politi states that 'Francis's revolution has a name: the missionary transformation of the Church' (127) and he identifies 'collegiality' as a principal pillar of this revolution (127). He notes that the opposition to the attempted shift from an imperial, monarchical Church to one that is more synodal and collegial comes from many sources.

Among them are many (though not all) in the Roman Curia who find change difficult and are accustomed to a clericalism which supports ambitious self-seeking, many bishops and local hierarchies used to a more un-thinking and less responsible role, some people of power and even criminality (Mafiosi in Italy and elsewhere) who are more at ease with a 'gospel of prosperity' and find the social gospel of Francis (articulated in *EG* and *Laudato Si'* in particular) hard to stomach, and those who suspect that the move to synodality is a cover for changes in Church teaching re gender and sexuality. Politi notes in particular the concerted opposition to Francis in Italy (where his changes are felt most keenly) and the United States, where, as Massimo Faggioli has noted, 'there exists a robust network of Catholic universities, colleges, and lobbies that, in parallel to conservative American Protestantism, consider a traditionalist outlook on faith essential to the moral health of the United States' (165).

Since the book was published in 2015 we have seen this opposition harden and become more visible, with a campaign of street posters in Rome and the kind of bureaucratic obfuscation resistant to change highlighted by Marie Collins in her dealings with Roman Congregations (in particular the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith). Most significantly of all, there has been the open opposition to the Exhortation, *The Joy of Love*, spearheaded by the four Cardinals in their articulation of the '*dubia*', with the demand for 'yes or no' answers and a threat of 'fraternal correction' if the answers proved unsatisfactory.

A TROJAN HORSE

What is going on here? I think that, apart from understandable resistance to change, there is also a real fear that the acceptance of a synodal, collegial Church is a kind of Trojan horse which will inevitably, if only over time, usher in the kind of changes, the 'doctrinal development' referred to by Orsy and Cahill. These

5 Marco Politi, *Pope Francis Among the Wolves, The Inside Story of a Revolution*, New York: Columbia Press, 2015 (English translation).

changes have already been foreshadowed in the relaxing of the rules around Communion for divorced and remarried people arising out of the recent Synod and they are anathema to a conservative minority. In this context Paul Vallely may express matters a little too polemically, but he is surely correct to point out that the doctrinal opposition to Francis is both exaggerated and on weak grounds (an ‘impertinence’), given that the offending Exhortation of Francis comes at the end of an intensive and wide consultation of the Church, and can be shown to be in accordance with both Scripture and Tradition.⁶

Francis may well be quite conservative himself doctrinally, but a more synodal Church (which listens to the voices of the faithful and of theologians) is surely bound to result in change and significant doctrinal development, as well as a form of governance more in touch with the realities and challenges of our world and less restricted by an exclusively clericalist imagination.

But if that change can be done collegially, discerning together the promptings of the Holy Spirit, as opposed to monarchically (whether through Pope of the Right or the Left) and only in reaction to the protests of particular pressure groups, then there is a better chance of maintaining unity in the Church. A better chance too of moving from fear to hope, of facilitating individual and communal conversion in a way which allows conservatives and liberals to find the greater unity that is anchored in their common love of Jesus Christ. This is the crux of the revolution of Francis, and while some individual issues (one thinks of the reform of Vatican finances and the safety of children) do demand urgent and singular attention, other important issues are best settled within the emerging process of synodality.

This approach is illustrated, for example, by the new Commission to re-examine the rules for liturgical translation (thus re-opening the possibility of a less clunky English and other languages translation of the Missal), by the possibility of married priests in areas of need, and by the commission of men and women established to study the feasibility of female deacons, with enormous repercussions for the role of women in the Church.

LED BY THE LORD

Francis himself has remained serene and apparently unflappable in the teeth of the opposition. He welcomes open debate, and distinguishes between opposition which is principled and open, that which is malevolent, and that which is covert.⁷ In a revealing Q and A session with the Jesuits gathered for their recent General Congregation 36 in Rome (autumn, 2016), he made it clear that

6 Paul Vallely, ‘So much to do, so little time’, *The Tablet*, 11 March, 2017, 4-6, at 5

7 Gerard O’Connell, *America*, Dec 22, 2016

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this serenity is not due to any innate optimism: rather, he reveals, ‘I am rather pessimistic, always!’ and his serenity comes from that sense, at the end of each day, that ‘I realize that I have been led’, when ‘I realize that despite my resistance, there was a driving force there like a wave that carried me along’ and ‘this gives me consolation’. He goes on to say: ‘It is like a feeling, “He is here”’.⁸ It is in this context of being led by the Lord that he can recently list what he describes as the eighteen achievements of his pontificate to date (among them the Council of Cardinals, the promotion of lay men and women within the Roman Curia, the decrees regarding negligent bishops and the reform of Vatican finances).

Ecclesiologist Richard Gaillardetz has written helpfully about the shift under Pope Francis to the exercise of a more pastoral magisterium in the Church, characterized by service to a synodal, listening Church; by reliance on symbolic gesture more than on juridical act; by commitment to the decentralization of authority; by exhibiting an appropriate doctrinal humility; by acting through the practice of discernment and the formation of conscience; and by reluctance to pronounce prematurely on controverted issues.⁹

I would simply add that pastoral in this context should be understood to involve the relationship between faith/the Church and the world, but not as the antithesis of doctrinal. The attempt was made by some to reduce Vatican II to ‘only a pastoral Council’. This is part of a classicist mentality that wants to consider doctrine as eternally unchanging, with a concession only to application. This attempt has been cogently rejected by many theologians operating within a more historically aware consciousness, among them Bishop Johan Bonny (there should not be an antithesis between the pastoral and doctrinal), Raphael Gallagher (theology does not consist in a first act of ‘pure’ or ‘real’ theology, followed then by a concessionary pastoral theology which involves a more merciful application of first principles – rather, there is a reciprocity between the two movements) and Edward Hannenberg (the doctrinal development that can emerge from properly discerned ‘anomalies’ in pastoral practice).¹⁰

One of the more interesting points to emerge from Politi’s analysis of the opposition to Francis is the extent to which it is rooted in inertia or apathy, in passive resistance or sometimes a passive-aggressive mentality, rather than overt hostility. He references the satirical wit of Italian comedian Maurizio Crozza in this context – his skit features Pope Francis plodding along the Via

8 General Congregation 26, 2016, Messenger Publications, 2017, 71-85, at 81

9 Richard Gaillardetz, Doctrinal Authority in the Francis Era, Toward a Pastoral Magisterium in Today’s Church, *Commonweal*, December 19, 2016

10 See O’Hanlon, ‘The Quiet Revolution’, *The Furrow*, 66, December 2015, 637-9; and The Joy of Love, *The Furrow*, 67, June 2016, 332

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Salaria at 7 am carrying a refrigerator on his shoulder to give to a widow; Francis asks ‘what door do we deliver to?’ and one of his two splendidly dressed secretaries who don’t lift a finger to help him answers ‘Number 1321, Holiness’ ... a prostitute, groups of *ciellini* (members of *Comunione e Liberazione*), Roma football supporters, and two cardinals come along and ask him for photos and blessings. The widow refuses the present because it is the wrong colour. ‘It could have been worse’, murmurs Francis as he sets off homeward (Politi, 209-210).

At the oral presentation of his book in the Loyola Institute in TCD Politi invoked another image to describe what is happening in the Church: Francis is like a star soccer player, many spectators admire him greatly, they urge him on – but very few get on the pitch with him to ensure victory. At their recent ‘*ad limina*’ visit to Rome it was reported that Francis told the Irish bishops they had to be like goalkeepers, fielding balls from all angles. What kind of role is the Irish Catholic Church, bishops, priests and laity, playing to ensure that the Francis revolution gains ground?

THE IRISH CATHOLIC CHURCH AND THE QUIET REVOLUTION

Although, regrettably, we don’t have any formal account from the Irish Bishops concerning their recent ‘*ad limina*’ visit to Rome, Archbishop Eamon Martin is reported as saying that the Irish Bishops were very encouraged by the ‘open attitude’ and ‘listening mode’ of both the Pontiff and the Holy See Curia. The Pope did not lecture them with a prepared text but sat down with them in a relaxed and informal way, so that this was a ‘quite extraordinary meeting’ – ‘he didn’t present us with an agenda of the things he wanted us to talk about. The dominant thing was that he was asking us and challenging us about what it means to be a bishop in Ireland or anywhere today’, urging the bishops not to be ideological but ‘to meet with people the way they are’. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin added that ‘nothing was off the agenda’ in terms of topics, however controversial, and Bishop Nulty of Kildare said that the word ‘conversation’ best summed up the experience (*The Irish Times, Saturday, Jan 21, 2017*).

Francis urged the bishops to exercise ‘an apostolate of the ear’, to listen to what the faithful, and especially young people, were saying.¹¹ In summary, the Pope acted (in accordance with the revolution he is proposing) in a synodal way, like Jesus walking with his disciples, and the bishops were enthused. But why, then, don’t they themselves act in this way with us, the faithful of the Irish Catholic Church, when they can see how clearly fruitful this more inclusive mode of proceeding is from their own experience?

11 Sarah McDonald, *National Catholic Reporter*, February 13, 2017

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The picture on the ground in Ireland is not entirely black. We were promised a ‘structured dialogue’ by the bishops back in 2010. Some dioceses have had good listening exercises – I note in particular the very effective Synod in Limerick under Bishop Brendan Leahy; the listening exercise in Kilmore under Bishop Leo O’Reilly which resulted in a tabling of the issues of married priests and female deacons at the Irish Episcopal Conference; the extended listening process in Killaloe under the then-bishop Kieran O’Reilly which resulted in a diocesan pastoral plan and an empowered laity which was able to resist the proposal to introduce deacons (not in the plan) and the wisdom of the Bishop in postponing that idea for further consideration. And there are others.

But for the most part one gets the impression that the bishops are happy to surf the wave of the Pope’s popularity without really engaging seriously with the content of his message (where, for example, is the detailed Irish Episcopal analysis of *Evangelii Gaudium* or *Laudato Si’*, with some kind of programme to tackle inequality and the ecological question? Where are the guidelines for the implementation of *Amoris Laetitia*, in particular around access to Communion for divorced and remarried people, as well as a more open consultation around sexuality and gender? And, in particular, one gets a sense of a lack of engagement (apart from some notable and encouraging exceptions) with the revolutionary core of Francis’s way of proceeding, that turn to synodality, which is the key to so much else.

THE IRISH BISHOPS

Is this because, as Cardinal Cupich of Chicago has expressed, synodality, consulting with others, is ‘hard work’?¹² Is it because of what was described above as passive resistance, or inertia? Is it fear of loss of control? Why, for example, does the outgoing Papal Nuncio not see that his ‘into free fall’ statement about priestly vocations demands more than a managerial solution of parish clusters, but must involve consultation with the faithful about more radical approaches (including the possibility of married clergy, a move which Pope Francis has encouraged the Brazilian Hierarchy to consider seriously)? Why has the Irish Episcopal Conference been so slow enthusiastically to support the Pope’s central insight around synodality and to resist the calls for regular national synods? Most baffling of all, why does someone so able as Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, with immense credibility among so many of the faithful and media, not use his considerable authority and influence to campaign openly in support of the papal revolution towards a

12 Joshua J. McElwee, Cardinal Cupich: Francis is giving new life to Vatican II reforms, *National Catholic Reporter*, March 13, 2017

more synodal Church, in which the voice of laity and theologians would have a structured and institutional presence?

In a recent edition of the review *Studies* several contributors commented on the condition of Irish Catholicism in ways that are germane to our discussion here: Tom Inglis, sociologist of religion, shared his research findings that ‘Irish people no longer look to the Church of their upbringing as a place or ‘site’ where they practise religion, nor even as a source of meaning and moral guidance in their lives’; fellow sociologist Gladys Ganiel comments on the post-Catholic nature of Irish society and the growth of ‘extra-institutional religion’; while Dr Vincent Twomey notes again the anti-intellectual nature of Irish Catholicism.¹³ Pope Francis has argued that to make the Catholic Church a site of hope and meaning requires a radical reform. Can the Bishops rise to this challenge and offer us the leadership which is required? Can they do so for the World Meeting of Families in August 2018, so that it becomes less a forum for platform presentations and catechesis (valuable though these are) and more an inclusive discussion which is unafraid to broach the often controversial and contested issues around sexuality and gender in a way which is constructive and attractive, as illustrated by *The Joy of Love*, itself the fruit of a synodal process?

And can the rest of us, lay faithful, priests and religious, resist the temptation to inertia or passive resistance and find a way to get involved, at whatever level, in promoting a more inclusive Church and signal our willingness to help our bishops in their complex and daunting task? Can reform groups in particular continue to be true to their own charism and mission, but also consider the wisdom of the theorist on social movements, Sidney Tarrow when he stressed the particular significance of ‘political opportunity’ (in this case the election of Francis as a reforming pope) in the struggle for any justice cause, and the wisdom of arguing for access to input and power when such an opportunity presents itself, rather than opting for singular and concrete gains which have less lasting significance?¹⁴ We can miss the wood for the trees so easily in these matters. There is a quiet revolution going on in the Catholic Church, with enormous significance for now but more for future generations. It will not be accomplished overnight. But it has a better chance of success if we recognize what is at its core – the structural and cultural transformation of the Church along synodal, collegial lines in order to give better witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ for our times – and we in Ireland have our role to play here.

13 *Studies*, ‘The Future of Irish Catholicism’, 106, Spring 2017

14 Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement, Social Movements and Contentious Politics*, CUP, 2011, 159-167