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New Beginnings  
and Painful  
Endings

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# New Beginnings and Painful Endings<sup>1</sup>

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The Christian Church is always embedded in the ambient culture, and it cannot be understood or even appreciated without taking into account this hybrid existence. There is no ontological operation that might separate absolutely ‘Church’ from ‘culture’ or, indeed, in our European context, culture from Church. For better or for worse they are together entwined. It must, of course, equally be acknowledged that they cannot be identified with one another as if forming together a seamless totality. The complex relationship between culture and Church – as neither distinct nor unified – should not, however, be interpreted as a problem to be definitively resolved (an impossibility), but rather as a richness that permits dynamic exchange and effective growth on both sides of a complex equation. In this short paper, I’d like to explore a number of aspects of this entwinement that has an immediate impact on ministry and on forming community in our contemporary context.

## LEARNING FROM CULTURE

It is a fairly obvious point, but usually not recognised, and rarely explicitly acknowledged, or appreciated: the Church and Church life is always deeply affected by, nourished by, and, indeed, indebted to the ambient culture. This means that the culture within which we find ourselves as Church shapes Church; and, perhaps, most often in unknown and in unexpected ways.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, beginning, in particular, with the Council documents, there is a growing appreciation of the importance of culture from the side of the

1 A version of this paper was presented at a meeting of the Council of Priests, Dublin Diocese, at Clonliffe College, 8 February 2017.

2 Obvious examples might include the assimilation of Greek and Latin culture in the Middle Ages, which was even given a name, *translatio studii*; the slow adoption of Enlightenment ideas and values towards the end of the nineteenth century (despite vociferous official rejection), leading eventually to the many ideas that informed the Second Vatican Council; more recently, the integration of strategies of good practice in terms of working with children and vulnerable adults, etc.

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Church. In *Evangelii gaudium*, for example, there are 99 references to culture and its cognates! The umbrella idea that has emerged since the Council is that of *inculturation*, which has become a kind of shorthand for the dynamic of the Gospel moving into a culture, taking root there, blossoming, growing, and nourishing new life in that culture.<sup>3</sup> What is less readily acknowledged, explicitly at least, is that in the course of its history the Church has always learned and has been nourished by the wider culture (and sometimes this happens in a dynamic of direct opposition). Ideas, concerns, values, patterns of thought and action have often emerged first in the wider culture, have often been trenchantly resisted and rejected by the Church, only then to be integrated (often quietly) into the fabric of its own *Weltanschauung* in a later period. Psychoanalysis has helped us, in this last century, to understand better the dynamics of repression, which are active not only in one's personal life, but also in communal and ecclesial life. Something may be rejected, only to grow underground, and re-emerge later in more propitious circumstances.<sup>4</sup> The Gospel has very deep roots in European culture and many of its new shoots spring up first outside of the framework of the visible Church to nourish life and culture. Gospel truth is not limited to the expressions and mechanisms of manifest Church life.

There is still, it seems to me, a great journey to be made in terms of the Church acknowledging explicitly this dimension of *learning from and being nourished by the wider culture*. Although, it can be said, there are the rudiments of a foundation for this recognition to be had in some of the major documents of the Second Vatican Council. Habituated to being in the position of the *great teacher* throughout its long history, many in the Church now find it very difficult to become great learners! This is especially so when those from whom one might learn are outside of the visible domain of the Church. And, perhaps, this is explicitly the case for those of us in priesthood, who have been so intimately linked for so long with the power structures in both Church and society.

- 3 This term *inculturation* would appear to have been used for the first time in 1978 by Fr. Pedro Arrupe, the General of the Society of Jesus: 'Inculturation is the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs, and unifies the culture, transforming and remaking it so as to bring about a "new creation."' See Pedro Arrupe, 'Letter to the Shole Society on Inculturation,' *Studies in the International Apostolate of Jesuits* (Washington: Jesuit Missions, 1978), 2.
- 4 If you take, for example, the *Syllabus of Errors* from 1864 (Pius IX), you could say that it was in many instances reversed by *Gaudium et spes*. It condemned, for example, that 'Every man is free to embrace and profess that religion which, guided by the light of reason, he shall consider true' (No. 15) and that 'The Church ought to be separated from the State, and the State from the Church' (No. 55).

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Given that the Church is intrinsically embedded in culture, it cannot define itself over against ‘the world.’<sup>5</sup> And in this sense, at least, *it is not counter-cultural!* It is very important to recognize this clearly. Otherwise we risk attempting to close ourselves off into an arrogant hermetic space (like a religious sect) that is critical and, indeed, fearful of everyone and everything on the outside! It means also that, if the Church is to be true to itself, the option of withdrawing into a comfortable ecclesiastical bubble or establishing an independent ‘Church culture’ over against a ‘secular culture’ is simply not available to us!<sup>6</sup> The Church is a principle of *unity* and it is a principle of *humanism*: it strives to create and establish unity, and it promotes an integral richness of what it is to be human; and it does this in dialogue, in conversation, and, of course, in action. It strives to establish a common unity with, on the one hand, what has been inherited as tradition, and, on the other, with the full expanse of humankind in the present culture. In *Nostra aetate* we read: ‘One is the community of all peoples, one their origin, for God made the whole human race to live over the face of the earth. One also is their final goal, God’ (no. 1). Increasingly this calling to one-ness, to unity, requires acknowledging and appreciating diversity and, through diversity (and not in spite of it), working toward that unity. The Church has always learned (even if not acknowledged), and it can learn, from the wider culture. It is vital that we are capable of participating in adult, calm, responsible conversations in a spirit of co-operation, openness, respect, and peace. These conversations are, I have no doubt, already taking place, often unknown to us in our interior forums, and they are already shaping, to some degree, how Christian life is being lived in our culture. What I would like to see is greater honesty, explicit acknowledgement, and, indeed, appreciation of this very dynamic of learning from the culture.

### NEGOTIATING CHANGE

There is no doubt that we are in a period of extraordinary change at the level of our culture. This change is reflected in societal dynamics, cultural expression, belief systems, spiritual sensibilities, etc.<sup>7</sup> And in the last twenty years or so, there has been a real upheaval, a complete revolution, you might say, where for us here in Ireland

5 The following remark is interesting in this regard: ‘What is Christian [das Christliche] has never existed in a purely world-less state. Because it exists in human beings [*Menschen*], whose behaviour is “the world,” it itself only appears concretely in worldly connections’ (Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogma und Verkündigung* [München:ewel, 1973], 191).

6 The deeper theological issue here is a Christological one; namely, it reflects and realizes a practical doctetism. ‘The term ... “inculturation” ... expresses very well one factor of the great mystery of the Incarnation’ (*Catechesi Tradendae*, Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, 16 October 1979, No. 53).

7 See Michael A. Conway, ‘Ministry in Transition,’ *The Furrow* 65 (2014): 131-46.

much that was taken to be stable has been turned completely on its head. The volte-face in this cultural change was captured well for me by an old man whom I knew in County Galway, who, in his 80s during the Celtic Tiger period as he saw everything rapidly changing and being somewhat perplexed by it all, observed: (in language that was somewhat earthier than this) ‘I remember a time when people went to the bathroom outside and eat inside; now, they’re going to the bathroom inside and eating outside’!

This relatively sudden upheaval means that you cannot know automatically or instantly how to respond to this rapid cultural change: there can be, so to speak, no template for responding. And for this reason, it is quite unfair to complain about leaders or those in positions of leadership, when they do not have a response to hand that can meet the rapid changes in culture. It is simply naïve to think that this is possible. Yes, indeed, if change is taking place at a *slow* rate, it is relatively easy to adjust to the changing circumstances, but when the change is rapid at the level of culture (as it has been recently), then the process of responding is more perplexing, more stressful, more traumatic, and, eventually, will require more reflection and, indeed, imagination in terms of finding the appropriate direction in which to move forward. Of course, this does not legitimize not responding! Hoping that a *status quo* is going to return, if one sits it out, so to speak, is infantile: it is the ostrich putting its head in the sand. The attitude, for example, that ‘it’ll do me for my time,’ which you sometimes find among priests, is highly self-centred in the worst sense and deeply irresponsible vis-à-vis the wider community and future generations.

When it comes to dealing with change, I do not think that the first and most important question to be asked is ‘What should we do?’ in that prescriptive sense as if there was a definite and obvious response out there somewhere that need only be discovered so as to relieve each of us of the responsibility of finding our way into the future. As I see it, an equally if not more important question is, *How are we negotiating the change that is clearly taking place?* In other words: I think that it is important to pay attention as much, if not more, to the *process* of responding as it is to whatever might be the *achievement* (which is always temporary, in any case). I would wager that we are extremely weak on effective mechanisms of change, of growth, and of development at every level in the Christian Churches.<sup>8</sup> And it means that as leaders we are, I believe, relatively incompetent at facilitating change. And by relative here, I am thinking of leaders in other domains of life, who put more energy and resources into innovation and the dynamic itself of change.

8 And this, itself, is an enormous discussion for another day.

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### CHANGE

Change at the level of culture – which is evident and which is inevitable – has an impact on religious sensibility, on ecclesial identity, on contemporary spirituality, and, importantly, on pastoral ministry. Willingly or unwillingly, ecclesial life, faith needs, religious affiliation, and personal spirituality, are all being radically modified in the cauldron of contemporary culture. Negotiating this change in terms of Church life and community living is undoubtedly complex: it requires an appropriate level of self-reflection, of seeking understanding, of consultation and listening to others, of reflection in the light of the Gospel and tradition, and, then, taking decisive action (on the basis of good faith). There are different levels to this negotiation of change: cultural, societal, ecclesial, diocesan, communal, personal, and so on.

The *personal* level is very important because there are typologies at play than can and do have an enormous impact for the good and for the not so good. These typologies include factors that are emotional, psychological, social, and even spiritual. And at least you need to be aware of your own personal dynamics and take responsibility for them, when you are part of a decision making process. If, for example, you fear change or are threatened by others as part of your own personal makeup, then you might ask: are you blocking others from taking vital decisions? Are you capable of listening to and learning from others? Or do you strive to keep things at a level that is comfortable for you alone? Or on the other side: Are you reckless? or Do you manipulate others, or try even to intimidate them? Do you subtly bully through your own position? And so on.

When it is a matter of change and taking responsibility for it, there is in fact no ‘We’ that is in control, which means that it makes little sense blaming anyone, whether it be teachers, or parents, or priests, or bishops, or whomever! There needs to be frank conversations, freedom to express different and differing views; and there needs to be structures put in place that facilitate this. Blaming, as I see it, is a fear-full response to the uncertainty that comes with all change. And the more deep-seated the change; the greater is the level of fear. That is one reason why it is extremely important that you find whatever support you might need in terms of negotiating such change for yourself. And everyone must negotiate the change; *trying not to change in the change is in fact negotiating the change!* It’s probably the least desirable way of going forward in that it’s a capitulation in terms of the dynamic of life itself.

### CENTRING THE HUMAN PERSON

A significant feature of contemporary culture is a valuing of the human person. Just as Copernicus put the sun at the centre of

thinking about the cosmos, so modern culture now places the human person in the pole position in terms of thinking about ourselves, and understanding our relationship to others, to the world, and to the wider cosmos. This is an enormous achievement of our culture that is, itself, rooted in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the person being fashioned in the image and likeness of God. And I'd like to reflect briefly on this.<sup>9</sup>

The first thing that needs to be said is that contrary to what is often claimed, this does not *necessarily* lead to self-centredness, selfishness, and individualism. To see this, we need to distinguish two forms of this centring of the human person. I'd like to call these the 'immured self' and the 'embedded self'; and they need not be confused.<sup>10</sup> In one form, that of the immured self, the subject takes the centre position absolutely and despotically, so to speak. Here the self is understood to be radically independent of other persons and is treated in isolation from the embracing created order. It is, first of all, a pretty obvious illusion (even if widely adopted); and secondly, when one assumes such a position, it is always at a cost to others, to community life, and to the environment. It is not a position that can hold for very long. It engenders all kinds of problems: personally (it accentuates and promotes the isolation of the individual), socially (not only does it make it very difficult to acknowledge any substantial bonds of connection to others with whom you are in relationship, but it also fuels the law of competition, which is highly destructive of the bonds of communal life), and environmentally (it treats the environment merely as a resource that is to be plundered for individual gain).<sup>11</sup> Various critiques have shown this understanding of the self to be untenable: philosophically, psychologically, socially, and environmentally.<sup>12</sup>

9 Movements and developments in the twentieth century that have contributed to this major recognition would include: the *personalism* of Emmanuel Mounier and Gabriel Marcel, the *existentialism* of Karl Jaspers (and, separately, Jean-Paul Sartre), the concern with a *philosophy of the other* in Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas. And a more remote background is to be had in Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel, which could be characterised as the valuing of singularity over system.

10 You could say that the 'immured self' is a more trenchant ideological expression of what Charles Taylor calls the 'buffered self' (see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* [Harvard: Harvard University, 2007]).

11 See Michael A. Conway, 'The Underdeveloped Heart,' *The Furrow* 67 (2016): 259-65; and *ibid.*, 'The Developing Heart,' *The Furrow* 67 (2016): 583-94.

12 'But it is this atomistic, relationless agent ... who has been the target of some of the most sustained and persuasive philosophical critiques in our century. Wittgenstein showed him to be epistemologically threadbare, Charles Taylor and Alison Jagger show him to be morally and politically bankrupt – and sexist to boot – Foucault showed him to be a social-scientific non-sense, and Lacan and Irigaray present him as psychologically pathological. As a model for human beings this "disengaged man" is a nonstarter, for human knowing and human being not only are not but could not be self-constituted' (Janet Martin Soskice, 'Trinity and the "the Feminine Other,'" *New Blackfriars* 75 [1994]: 2-18 at 14).

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The centring of the human person can, however, take another form, which I am calling the embedded self. Over against that self-centred form of the immured self, this alternate form puts the singular human person at the centre as a priority over all 'systems': be they thought patterns (including religious ones), communal practices, or social structures. Here the human person is appreciated in its *singularity* and given a primary value over competing concerns, wherever and whenever this is possible. *It is the dignity of each person that is underlined and valued.* This is done, however, in a way that is not exclusive of our connections to others, to the environment, and to the wider universe. The self is recognized to be embedded in a world and not to be an isolated, atomistic entity. What it really underlines is the supreme dignity of each and every human being. And it is this that is new!

Concretely it means, for example, that as a culture we have come to recognize that each person is capable of discerning his or her own moral path in life in terms of what is understood to be good, to be evil, to be true, to be meaningful, etc. We can and do discuss all of these things among ourselves (and we disagree); but in the end, in so far as possible, each person has the right and freedom to decide for himself or herself. It is part of each person's dignity to discover, to affirm, and to live by the values that he or she freely chooses in order to live and structure life.

Not only that, but each citizen in our culture has the fundamental right to be a participant in the structures that we establish among ourselves in terms of our social ordering: be that in terms of law, political institutions, community decisions, etc. *This is what serves and engenders social cohesion.* It is no longer credible to strive to create community if we are not prepared to recognize that each person has a voice that needs to be listened to and taken on board in terms of whatever decisions are made that affect our common life. If voices are excluded, or silenced, or alienated, then social cohesion is put in jeopardy.

### ON THE MARGINS

Another significant feature of this *centring of the person* that I wish to highlight is what the French Jesuit, Michel de Certeau, calls 'the rejection of insignificance.'<sup>13</sup> It is no longer acceptable to treat a person as being marginal. In earlier forms of community structures (including those of religious communities), a whole swath of persons was treated as being insignificant. They were often, literally, hidden from view. They were not seen and they were not heard; and, crucially, they were not understood to be real players in the decision-making processes of community life. They

13 Michel de Certeau, *La culture au pluriel* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1993), 24-6.



were invisible. And this invisibility often depended on façades: self-censoring-façades, family façades, village façades, Church façades, society façades; covers that kept people hidden, out of view, and, so often, non-participative, or only partially manifest in community life. There was a sort of silent collusion that insured this invisibility. In the twentieth century, particularly in the post-war period, a whole series of persons has stepped from or have been enabled to step from (to whatever degree this is feasible) invisibility into visibility. In this way, they have taken their due place in terms of their integral presence in the wider community. This began most spectacularly post-war with women stepping from relative social and cultural invisibility and taking their rightful place in the public forum. More recently we have witnessed this same dynamic in regard to people with disability, people from the LGBTI community, people with mental health issues, and, even more recently children.<sup>14</sup> The voice-less are gradually finding and claiming their voices; and this is now a very distinctive mark of our European culture. Persons are increasingly stepping from spaces of invisibility and darkness into the visibility and light of public space. This has an enormous impact on how we form community.

Another feature of this same ‘refusal of insignificance’ is the tragic phenomenon of absenting oneself from a social group or community. When for a period of time it becomes clear that one is not considered to be important or that one is being alienated in a particular social setting, then a step that may be taken as a response is simply to leave. It is a refusal to remain present in a situation of disregard or neglect. De Certeau observes that ‘Abstention, the result of a marginalization ... manifests ... a refusal of insignificance.’<sup>15</sup> This is often a process, whereby gradually one leaves a system, an organisation, an institution, or a workplace. The subjacent dynamics that lead to someone leaving, often play out behind the scenes, so to speak, where voices have been subtly silenced or listened to only cynically in order to effect the alienation that leads to marginalization and eventual departure. These dynamics are the direct result of an abuse of power and are ubiquitous in Church structures. This may go a considerable way in explaining why so many abandon in anger or frustration their ecclesial belonging. There are traces of this ‘disappearing’ of the ‘other’ everywhere.

#### ADULT COMMUNITY

The temptation to leave what is taken to be a relatively *inflexible*

14 The growing visibility of the issue of homelessness at present could even be read in this register.

15 Certeau, *La culture au pluriel*, 25.

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institutional Church in our highly *dynamic* culture in many ways makes great sense; but in the end, I see it, for the most part, as a retrograde or even adolescent step. The often deep dissatisfaction with the institutional form of Church (however understandable) is read in the register of all or nothing, in or out, my way or no way, the baby and the bathwater! This, to my mind, is far too simplistic a way of reacting to the issues that are at stake, when it comes to religion, faith, and spirituality in our culture. It is facile to dismiss out of hand the rich heritage of two thousand years of Christian life, thought, and wisdom; and it is offensive to reject it simply as the *naïvety* of parents, grandparents, and all those figures, towering and otherwise, who have gone before us. No doubt, some of them may have been foolish in their beliefs; but, surely, not all of them! To leave – whatever that might mean – in our present culture may indeed be an easy step to take, but the loss might well, in time, outweigh whatever might be gained from being on the outside (so to speak). And you cannot know the possibilities that you might have disowned in terms of the quality and integrity of your future life! Where the adolescent abandons and walks away, the adult critiques, adapts, maintains appropriate boundaries, and transforms. No doubt, this is a much more challenging path to take for oneself (and, indeed, for others).

I would suggest that ‘staying’ in a Christian community in a time of great transition and change is very much an adult affair.<sup>16</sup> And I mean that in two ways. Firstly, the decision itself must be made in an adult way: at its deepest, it is a real commitment to Christian life and community in all its complexity. One can no longer be a member of a such a community naïvely as if it were some kind of ideal place, where one might escape the responsibility of dealing with the full complexity of one’s own existence and the fundamental questions of the human condition. Indeed, Charles Taylor speaks of a ‘breach of *naïveté*’ that is characteristic of our times.<sup>17</sup> A Christian community is, no doubt, a place to strive to be child-like; it is not a place in which to be childish.

Secondly, the decision to stay means *staying as an adult*; namely, as someone, who takes up his or her position in a community of equals. Only a community of equals can claim credibly to be a community of love and of service to one another. Christian communal life can only survive to the degree that it moves beyond the infantilizing structures and dynamics of pyramidal hierarchy so as to realize a space of adult exchange in community. The

16 One is forced to negotiate multiple tensions between one’s commitments to ‘Church’ (however one might understand it) and one’s belonging in a wider culture (however one might value and critique it) (see Michael A. Conway, ‘Tensions of Ministry,’ *The Furrow* 66 [2015]: 196-209).

17 Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 13.

dysfunctional drive to power-over-others is widespread in our Church and present at all levels.

The Christian community is a community of equals because God loves us equally. This insight has too often been masked because of a long history of pyramidal power that dominated Christian life and community. There is no doubt that we have a considerable journey to make before this consciousness is lived out practically in our communities at all levels. But I have no doubt that we will get there (in one way or in another). This, of course, does not undermine the need for a differentiation of roles in terms of community life (which is true for all communities, not just the Christian one), but our various roles and positions (whatever they may be) will need to be understood as subservient (in the sense of service) to a fundamental equality of human persons gathered in freedom, forming community in a fashion that respects the singularity of each and every member.

The form of Christian community that has a future in our culture will depend significantly on our ability to integrate *a vision of a community of equals* into the practical structures of Church life. In terms of community, we will need to move from an emphasis on a pyramidal institution to a common-unity of equals grounded in service of one another. This will be to realize a solidarity that is rooted in Christ and that is 'voluntary' in the sense that each person enjoys the fullness of their own personal freedom, while being supported by the wider community.

#### THE PARISH

One of the most important tasks for us now is facilitating parishes in taking independent, adult responsibility for faith life and community. It is clearly better for everyone if we would now facilitate and work towards this as opposed to leaving communities to collapse further as the number of priests in dioceses diminishes. This is not so much a matter of deconstructing parish structures and replacing them with new structures (although to some degree this is already taking place through clustering, etc.), but, rather, of now creating spaces (physical, psychological, and spiritual) for people in a community to meet and discuss faith, to read the scriptures, to share experiences of faith, and so on. *The key element is that of enabling exchange and conversation on the Gospel.* This is not as easy as it might sound; and we can no longer hide behind sacramental practice. Enabling others to voice their faith beyond clichés and pre-fabricated ideas is a real challenge and an urgent task. When, for generations, people have become accustomed to being silent in terms of expressing and talking about faith, a whole support system needs to be put in place to enable them to find

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their voices: it involves discovering and learning a language that is specific to their experience of faith, gaining a certain confidence in speaking that language, learning to read the scriptures, and explore the Church's vast tradition, etc. There is an enormous deficit of language that can resonate in our culture in terms of faith expression and a deep ignorance of the Church's complex and nuanced tradition.

The French poet and writer, Victor Hugo is credited with saying that 'nothing can resist an idea whose time has come.'<sup>18</sup> And it seems to me that in terms of the journey of Christianity and of the Church in our European culture, we have now reached that juncture where Christian life will be shaped, lived, and witnessed to, increasingly, by adult, responsible, lay persons as the significant voice and actor in society and in our culture. This means that in an adult mode lay persons will need to move beyond being passive participants, and become active, responsible, creative members of the Church that will shape Christian life for, and in, our dynamic culture. This is an enormous change, and we can now only get a glimpse of what it might mean. Let me finish with two simple insights from another great culture. The Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, who was the founder of philosophical Taoism and probably lived in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, is credited with these two sayings (one, interpretative, the other, prescriptive): 'New beginnings are often disguised as painful endings!' and 'A journey of a thousand miles begins under your feet!'

18 This would appear in fact to be a paraphrase of '*on résiste à l'invasion des armées; on ne résiste pas à l'invasion des idées* (one resists the invasion of armies; one does not resist the invasion of ideas)' (Victor Hugo, *Histoire d'un Crime*, 1877, Conclusion, X).