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Dominic Meehan

A Letter to
Brendan Hoban

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Dominic Meehan

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Dear Brendan,

Thank you for your thought-provoking article, your insight and experience ('*A Lost Tribe*'. Brendan Hoban, *The Furrow* February 2017). I'd like to thank you also for your 40 plus years of service, not so much to the church in Ireland, but to the people of God. I'm sure there are many who are thankful but just haven't expressed it.

Let me introduce myself; I am a 48 year old single man living in Templemore, Co. Tipperary. I was ordained a priest for the diocese four years ago this coming November. (I constantly have to remind people that I'm not the youngest but the newest ... or at least I was, till the ordination of Vincent Stapleton in June 2015). I've had the good fortune of living life both outside the 'confines' of priesthood and now 'within'. I think, since I was a teenager, the idea of priesthood had 'gnawed' at me and twelve years ago a friend sent me off to seminary with my new mantra, 'It might be something or nothing'. I'm delighted to say that (so far) it has been something.

Prior to my being accepted to study for the diocese I had undergone a psychological assessment; the results, given in synopsis form, stated that I was '*not sick ... but there are weaknesses!*' The parting words to me from the psychologist, Fr Des O'Donnell, OMI were that '*If you ever get a chance to grow and don't take it, that's a sin*' – words which have stayed with me since and that, I would like to think, I live by.

I entered Maynooth in August 2005; the previous night I along with my brother had cleared out the rented third floor premises in Nenagh where I had operated a Dental Laboratory for the previous five years – a career and life which I loved and which was going very well. The prospect of a 'spiritual' month in 'lockdown' with

THE FURROW

no one calling to my door, no deadlines, no phone calls, no TV or newspaper sounded like heaven.

I know there has been a lot of criticism of the national seminary, St Patrick's College, through the years and, yes, I'd say they can get things wrong and right, but speaking from my own experience it was 99% positive. It is a place that allows many opportunities for growth, spiritual, emotional, pastoral and academic and in the words of Fr O'Donnell, if we are presented with the opportunity to grow and don't take it ... that's a sin. Maynooth offers the opportunity, but like a horse brought to water! I mentioned 99% positive. The one percent negative experience was the last year and a half. I had taken a step back from diaconate and now found myself in a type of limbo not knowing if I'd be ordained or 'cut loose' as they say. It was a tough time but with my spiritual director, I came to realise that priesthood was not an entitlement but a 'gift'; a gift we are always being called to, called by God, our Ordinary, our peers and formation staff, but above all we are being called by the people. I used this time to become, or try to become, the person God had intended me to be, whether it was an ordained minister or a 'lay' man. I was not ordained in Maynooth but walked out with my head high knowing that I had given it my all with openness and honesty. I have a great respect (which I believe to be mutual) for those involved in my formation. I was very fortunate to have the support of my archbishop. It is important to me that his understanding and support be acknowledged. The failures and weaknesses of bishops are often emphasised by clergy, who in turn often receive undeserved similar treatment. We, above all, ought to see the importance of acknowledging the good when it is there.

When my colleagues and I entered Maynooth, the horrific Ferns Report was breaking, so unlike those earlier ordained, we were entering a church which was very badly wounded. That's not to disparage those who were very seriously hurt, betrayed and permanently scarred by that very same church. We were entering a church where numbers both in the pews and in the seminaries were at an all-time low, where there were no longer live-in house keepers, where the language of confident and unquestioned infallibility was long gone and where to take for granted people's admired respect was at best naïve and at worst terrible arrogance. Saying this I am bowled over and often confused by the support and regard that people have for us and the appreciation they show for the little we do for them. There will, of course always be those not prepared to listen, the ignorant and misinformed who will refer to some of us as, in your own great phrase, '*mad at everything*'.

There is much to be sad and angry about in equal measure. There must be something done around the whole issue of reporting

anonymous allegations. Why are we treated so differently? Guilty till proven innocent? Presumption of innocence, I thought, was a basic human right? If that is still the case, then the basic human rights of many priests around Ireland are being denied! No doubt Joe Duffy, our print press and media would have a field day with this if it didn't involve priests. I firmly believe that where allegations prove to be false, those making the allegations need to be answerable.

Your description of those most affected by loneliness and isolation is heart wrenching. Surely something can (and is) being done about this? Thankfully work being carried out on behalf of the Irish Church by the 'Integrity in Ministry'¹ team and the work of Fr Paddy Sweeney are bringing to the forefront the immediate need and vital importance of care for the priest. However, this care starts from within. I think Mahatma Gandhi said 'be the change you wish to see in the world', I can see from my limited experience there are priests very involved in the life of their diocese, parishes and colleagues and then there are priests involved in nothing. This takes in both young and old. You speak about the obsessions which distract. Might I suggest they are the same obsessions that distract those who live 'normal' lives. Loneliness and isolation are not reserved for the chaste celibate; sadly there are nursing homes up and down the country filled with mothers and fathers who receive only very sporadic visits from children whom they gave their all for, who are now too busy or too selfish to give a little back. I don't say this in an attempt to reduce the isolation and loneliness felt by priests, but sometimes we fall into a trap whereby we believe that if my life were 'normal', if I were married, had a family, a companion all would be well. To quote a wise Maynooth man 'we must compare like with like' i.e. if I experience loneliness and isolation as an ordained man there's a chance that I will experience the same, living a 'normal' life. I think we have a duty of care for each other; it is our responsibility, young and old, to make sure initiatives like Fr Paddy Sweeney's are followed up and implemented throughout the country and that we encourage colleagues to benefit from the services available. I don't think I could ever say to a colleague 'Get rid of that jumper' or 'Buy a new suit, for God's sake', but I can see the need and importance for that to be said. The issue of priests being denied the right to retire is serious and requires immediate address. For someone contemplating diocesan priesthood, the

1 The Integrity in Ministry process is a deep listening exercise offered to those in ministry in the Irish Church today. The process itself, led by a group brought together by the IBC and AMRI (Association of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland) forms part of a greater project whose aim is to identify the resources that need to be in place to guide and support the ongoing ministry of religious and priests in the Church in Ireland now and into the future.

THE FURROW

prospect of dying with his shoes on might not appeal. As regards guilt, might their guilt at retiring be lessened by allowing them reduced roles within parishes if they choose?

Yes, the world we live in is changing. I often wonder how my older colleagues cope. The truth is that it seems to be these colleagues who cope and adapt best. As pastoral workers in this ever-changing world, what gives us the right to think we can adapt to every situation? To know what to say or do? Thank God that to be human is to be vulnerable. There is an awful irony in that we live in a nervous and vulnerable church where to appear vulnerable is to seem weak. I'd suggest that it's that air of invulnerability from the past (and with some at present) that pushes people away and isolates us further. In a little book entitled *A Vision of Pastoral Ministry*, Richard R. Gaillardetz says that perhaps 'the greatest healing that Jesus offered came not from the regeneration of withered limbs or blind eyes but from Jesus' offer of unconditional acceptance extended toward each person he met'. There will always be situations beyond our training, I don't think people expect us to have all the answers (if they thought that, they wouldn't come near us!) but what they do expect and appreciate is that we are there for them, to listen and accept them and their brokenness unconditionally.

I'm glad that you acknowledge that the church will survive by adapting and I firmly believe that it's people like you who may lead us in ways of adapting if that is your choice. Your vision, voice, insight and experience will be part of that change and adaptation.

I have no doubt that we will get many things wrong, as we have in the past, but to quote a professor of scripture in Maynooth, getting it right or wrong isn't that important. What's important is that we keep the conversation going and for that I'm grateful to you. When it comes to priesthood I'm still 'wet behind the ears'. I am often asked am I happy which to be honest annoys me; it's as if it's an anomaly to have a 'happy' priest. (And anyway is it normal to be happy all the time?) I usually reply in one of two ways: I ask 'Are you happy?' or I tell people that I'm still on my honeymoon (which is how I feel!). I appreciate that I have been given a wonderful start in my priesthood, a PP who is friend and mentor and fantastic colleagues. Our current set-up here in the parish of Templemore, Killea and Clonmore is a PP and two curates (I am constantly reminded I am the junior although I am by four months the eldest) **THREE PRIESTS!** Yes I know, unbelievable – and a fourth in residence who is administering a neighbouring parish. We call our very comfortable living arrangement the '*Little Vatican*', a 'cluster' of four houses in close proximity (across a lawn), we get on well so we have the luxury and reassurance of support, companionship and

A LETTER TO BRENDAN HOBAN

‘fraternity’ when we need it, and equally important, privacy and solitude when we need that. I hope I don’t fall into the category of ‘*the usual suspects*’ who accuse you of being negative. You finish your piece by asking about truth. Truth as you rightly point out can be bleak. It can be ugly but if that’s all the truth we can see, well then I’m sorry but that is being negative. The truth is also beautiful. The beauty of the Gospel message, a message we are asked to pass on despite the growing number of people who think they don’t want, or need to hear it. I’m not asking for nostalgia but for the sake of the under 40s and in the interest of balance you might sometime write about the truth which is the beauty of your own many years’ service.

I write this letter to you, the week after Real Madrid have advanced to the semi-final stages of the Champions League, they did so with the aid of some very dodgy refereeing. I’d love to say I’m a Plymouth Argyle supporter but I’m not, I’m a Leitrim man and I know that when it comes to the GAA they face the reality of their situation but thank God it will never stop them from dreaming.

With much regard and respect,
Dominic Meehan.

Arrow prayers. There will always be a place in the Christian life for the so-called ‘arrow prayers’, those spur-of-the-moment prayers that well up in an instinctive reaction to some sudden event – perhaps the sound of an ambulance siren, hearing of the death of a friend, or seeing a news flash on television. But these can only be a minor part of any mature prayer life. Not every Christian disciple can be a contemplative (even less a mystic), but the discipline that is implied by the word ‘discipleship’ itself calls us as individuals to seek to enter into the silence of God. This is open to all, and it is required of all.

– + RICHARD CLARKE, *Shouldering the Lamb*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications) p.112.