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*Dermot A. Lane*

## A Pastor looks Back and Forward

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It has been a privilege and an unexpected grace for me to have been able to serve as Parish Priest in Balally Parish in the Dublin diocese for the last 25 years from 1992-2017.

I recall quite vividly the first time I came to visit the Church of the Ascension in Balally. Archbishop Desmond Connell had indicated he would be appointing me as Parish Priest of Balally and that I should go out to look at the church.

It was May 1992. Fr. Willie King, CC, was mowing the lawn in front of the church. On my arrival, I asked him: 'Did you hear the news', thinking the only news was my appointment to Balally. He replied quickly 'Yes, that's really bad news for the church'! I looked at him quizzically, holding back as best I could my dismay and wondering to myself what kind of welcome is this. Willie went on to say 'Yes, it is so sad about Bishop Casey'. And suddenly I realised there was other news, more important news than mine. I was so relieved and the rest is history. During that quick visit to the church in Balally Parish I was taken by the circular design of the church and its attractiveness as a worship space in comparison to other churches in the diocese which are rectangular in shape.

13 May 1992 stands out in my mind because it was my first encounter with Balally Parish and the day that the Eamon Casey story broke.

On arrival in Balally Parish a number of things stood out for me immediately. I was moving into a young parish which had been established very efficiently from an administrative point of view by Fr. Eddie Randles, PP: key-racks, safes, Baptismal and Marriage registers, family offering collections, church stewards, ministers of the Eucharist, readers, the sacristy, parish files, a parish office, bank loans, a 500 club, bingo ...

The second thing that struck me was the existence of articulate

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Dermot A. Lane, a priest of the Dublin diocese, retired as Parish Priest in September 2017. The occasion of his retirement saw the publication of *A History of Balally Parish and the Community*, compiled and edited by Peter Sobolewski, Dublin: Linden Publishing Services, 2017. This article is an emended version of his 'Introduction' to the parish history.

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lay-men and lay-women in a variety of different ministries and groupings. The parish had been well served by the diocesan agency known as Parish Development and Renewal, by exposure to a three week parish-mission, and by a one-day parish assembly (1991).

The third item that stood out was the existence of a parish office attached to the church. Historically speaking, parish offices were a relatively new phenomenon in the diocese. I had served as a priest in St Paul's Church, Arran Quay from 1970-1972 and again in Mount Merrion Parish from 1980-1981, and neither of them at that time had parish offices.

The fourth thing that impressed me was the presence in the parish of a small community of religious sisters known as the Faithful Companions of Jesus. The sisters staffed the sacristy and the parish office. The presence of religious sisters in a parish is a blessing for the whole community.

One further point worth noting is that 1992 saw the beginning of a number of seismic shifts in the church due to different scandals: the Eamon Casey affair, the horrific abuse of children by priests, and the publication of a number of Reports on how poorly and insensitively the church had managed the abuse crises: the Ferns Report (October 2005), the Murphy Report on the Dublin diocese (November, 2009), the Ryan Report on Institutional abuse (May,2009), the Cloyne Report (July,2011). This was the context in which I was initiated as a pastoral neophyte into parish ministry away from the apparent security of academia.

## CHALLENGING TIMES

The last 25 years have been a challenging time to be a priest because of the various scandals in the church, the gradual decline in the number of priests available, and the reduction in Mass attendance and church affiliation. However, I received lots of support and empathy from the people of Balally Parish during these different church crises. In spite of the crises, I have been very happy in Balally Parish and I have been enriched in all kinds of ways by the last 25 years.

Alongside my time in Balally Parish I continued to work in Mater Dei Institute of Education. Some asked: how can you keep these two different responsibilities going together? I would reply that my teaching in Mater Dei Institute influenced my pastoral work and my pastoral experience informed my teaching in Mater Dei Institute.

I have never been comfortable with the separation of theology and pastoral *praxis*. It was a dichotomy invoked at Vatican II by those who were not happy with the way the council was developing. It was suggested that various documents were merely pastoral and

therefore need not be taken seriously from a theological point of view. This separation between theology and *praxis* at the Council was a matter of concern to the undersecretary of the Doctrinal Commission, Gerald Phillips, who had responsibility for drafting texts. Phillips wrote a critique of this tendency to separate the pastoral and the theological in which he pointed out that ‘The pastoral perspective is not something added on to the exposition of doctrine’ and that ‘a separate treatment of doctrine and practice leads to a sort of vivisection that would be the death of the message’s fruitfulness’.<sup>1</sup> The dynamic and organic unity between the pastoral and the doctrinal is highlighted in the first footnote of the *Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the modern world*.

It is revealing that the same separation between theology and pastoral practice is invoked today by those who do not like the direction that the teaching of Pope Francis is taking, especially in relation to *The Joy of Love (Amoris Laetitia, 2016)*. It needs to be emphasised that Christianity is a pastoral religion, concerned not only about knowing the truth but also about doing the truth in love. Good theology is always pastoral and pastoral practice is empowered by theology.

#### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

As we look back at developments of the last 25 it is important also to look to the future. It is difficult to predict what that future will bring. However, it will be at least a future of working more closely with our neighbouring parish in Sandyford. There are significant synergies between Balally Parish and Sandyford that need to be developed and there are differences that are complementary which should be respected.

Up to now, the clustering of neighbouring parishes is seen as the answer to the declining number of priests. However, not all is well with the clustering model. Some see it as a clerical response to a larger question about the nature of parish and ecclesial viability. It is often said that ‘priests come and go, but parishioners remain on’. There may be more wisdom in this saying than appears at first hearing.

Is it accurate to suggest that the future of a parish depends on the temporary availability and passing presence of a priest? What model of church is operative here? To be sure, Eucharist is the source and summit of church life, but is there not a prior question about the primacy of the Word and evangelisation as essential to the celebration of the Eucharist? Without an encounter with the living Word of God, there is a danger that the celebration of the Eucharist

1 G Philips ‘Deux tendances dans la theologie contemporaine’, *Nouvelle Revue Theologique*, 85,1963: 225-238 at 237

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could become an empty ritual. Is there a possibility that clustering may, unwittingly, side-line the importance of the priesthood of the baptised? Is anyone looking out for the impact of clustering on the work-life balance, the unintended erosion of social supports, and the well-being of an ageing clergy?

In March 2017, Cardinal Reinhard Marx, Archbishop of Munich, one of the G9 advising Pope Francis, proposed to his Diocesan Pastoral Council an alternative model to clustering. According to Marx, the way forward is to empower lay people through training to lead parishes when there is no priest. Cardinal Marx seeks to safeguard the importance of the local parish as a way of guaranteeing the presence of the church locally: 'remaining visible locally' is important and 'the local church is most significant'.

It is noteworthy that in the course of his talk to his Diocesan Pastoral Council, Cardinal Marx refers to the teaching of Vatican II on the priesthood of all the faithful while acknowledging the complexity of this particular teaching in terms of the relationship that exists between the priesthood of the baptised and the ministerial priesthood. There is a need, at this time, in the Irish church to promote pilot projects on the future of parishes that are different to the clustering model. Given the diversity of parishes in dioceses, it is clear that a 'one size fits all' approach to the future of parishes is unlikely to do justice to the variety of gifts, charisms, and resources that exist in parishes.

### THE VISION OF VATICAN II (1962-1965)

There is a vision within the Second Vatican Council still awaiting full implementation. Some progress has been made in the last 52 years, but more needs to be done. Two particular areas cry out for implementation: a recognition of the equality of all 'in Christ' and the primacy of the priesthood of the baptised.

On the equality of all the Council stressed:

*Since all possess a rational soul and are created in God's likeness, since they have the same nature and origin, have been redeemed by Christ and enjoy the same divine calling and destiny, the basic equality of all must receive increasingly greater recognition<sup>2</sup>.*

This vision of the equality of all 'in Christ' who have the same nature and origin, the same divine calling and destiny awaits full implementation. The Council also called for an end to discrimination on the basis of sex, race, colour, language and religion<sup>3</sup>. It saw discrimination as incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

2 *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern world (GS)*, a.29, 1965.

3 *GS*, 29

## A PASTOR LOOKS BACK AND FORWARD

Women are the backbone of parish life and yet their contribution continues to be taken for granted, unheard and unrecognised. The advances in secular society concerning equality, gender, and justice stand out in contrast to the current *praxis* of the church. If this disparity of *praxis* between secular society and the church is allowed to continue, it will be difficult to be hopeful about the future.

The ever-increasing participation of women in public, political, and commercial life serves to highlight how much the Catholic Church is out of sync with these developments. An institution that does not heed the experience and *praxis* of over half its members is not realising its full potential. At the Council Cardinal Suenens memorably asked: 'Why are we discussing the reality of the church when half the church is not represented here'? (1964). This question is as valid today as it was 53 years ago. At present the church is seeing only with one eye, hearing with one ear, and limping along on one leg. The church of tomorrow, if there is to be a church, needs to see with two eyes, to hear with two ears, and to walk tall with two legs, especially if it is to address the questions arising out of clustering and the urgent need for trained lay-led- parishes.

The second issue concerns the teaching of Vatican II on the priesthood of the baptised. It is important to remember that the Council went out of its way to affirm the primacy of Baptism. There was a deliberate recovery of a theology of baptismal priesthood as that which confers our most basic Christian identity in relation to witness and being a part of the Body of Christ in the world with a mission. An explicit expression of this can be found in the *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* of the Council. On the one hand that document points out:

*The baptised, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood<sup>4</sup>*

On the other hand the same document goes on to say:

*Though they differ essentially and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial... priesthood are none the less interrelated; each in its own way shares in the one priesthood of Christ<sup>5</sup>*

There are a number of points to be noted in this multi-layered teaching of the Council. The priesthood of the baptised and the ministerial priesthood are interrelated. Both participate in different

4 *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*( LG), a.10

5 LG, a.10

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ways in the one priesthood of Christ. The priesthood of the baptised is the basis of the ministerial priesthood. And an important part of the role of the ministerial priesthood is to activate the priesthood of the faithful. In recent times, especially in the light of a number of ecumenical dialogues, there has been an emerging emphasis on the primacy of the priesthood of the faithful as the basis of Christian existence. For example, some theologians in the Orthodox tradition point out that there is no such thing as a non-ordained Christian: all Christians are ordained into the one priesthood of Christ in virtue of their baptism. On the other hand, ordained ministry is not simply an extension of the common priesthood. Instead, as the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission pointed out in 1973, the ordained ministry is different because it ‘belongs to another realm of the gifts of the Spirit’<sup>6</sup> requiring a process of calling, discernment and formation. This recovery of the link between baptism and the one priesthood of Christ is surely of significance in discussions about the future of parishes in the service of ministry, mission, and liturgy.

### POPE FRANCIS

As Pope Francis seeks to implement this vision of Vatican II and to reform the church, three images stand out in his teaching.

There is first of all the image of a church called to go out of herself *to the peripheries*, not only geographically but also to the existential peripheries in people’s lives: the mystery of sin, of pain, of justice, and indifference to religion, of intellectual currents and human misery. In his address to the Cardinals before the last conclave (2013), the then Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio pointed out that:

*When the church does not come out of herself to evangelise, she becomes self-reverential and then gets sick. The evils that, over time, happen in ecclesial institutions have their roots in self reverentiality and a kind of theological narcissism.*

It will be necessary for the church to reach out to the peripheries of life to rediscover once again the mission and ministry of Christ as pertinent to the needs of the 21st century. The second image employed by Pope Francis is that the church should become *a field hospital*:

*The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful ... I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously*

6 ARCIC, ‘Ministry and Ordination’, a.13, 1973.

*injured person if he has high cholesterol ... You have to begin to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else ... And you have to start from the ground up' (September 2013).*

Working 'from the ground up' is exactly the right methodology for our time, not 'from the top down' as has been the case.

The third image is that the church of the future according to Francis must be *a church that builds bridges*, not walls: bridges to other churches and other religions, bridges to the alienated and those who have been hurt by institutional abuse, bridges to unbelievers and critics.

By far the most significant challenge facing the Catholic Church in Ireland is learning how to move from being a church of collaboration to becoming a church that believes in and practises co-responsibility. Co-responsibility is about establishing a new ownership, a new partnership and a shared responsibility in *praxis* among the priestly people of God for the well-being and actions of the church. The church must learn to value and harness the existence of different charisms, gifts and vocations within the Christian community in the service of the coming reign of God.

Pope Francis is advancing the challenge of co-responsibility by calling for the establishment of a Synodal church at all levels within the life of the Christian community: in the universal church, national conferences of bishops, diocesan structures, and parishes. A Synodal church is a church that knows how to listen and learn, that reads the signs of the times and discerns, after prayer and reflection, what the action of the Spirit is saying to the church today. A Synodal church takes seriously the 'sense of the faithful' among all of the disciples of Christ and recognises that all of the baptised participate in the one priesthood of Christ and are endowed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit. A significant step towards a Synodal church has been the decision of Pope Francis on 9 September 2017 to devolve responsibility for the translation of liturgical texts from the Vatican to the local Conference of Bishops.

Pope Francis is leading the church forward in these and other areas. He is seeking by word and example to implement the pastoral vision of Vatican II and to bring the church into the 21st century. The question that remains is: will the Catholic Church in Ireland follow the pastoral way of the Bishop of Rome?