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The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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From Human to Spiritual – *Making the Connections*

October 2017

From Human to Spiritual

– *Making the Connections*

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A reputable study on ‘Values and Social Change in Ireland’ (1994) predicted that the Catholic Church was facing a decline, especially among young, urban and educated adults. The respondents cited the low level of spirituality as experienced in churches, the lack of inspiration from the rules and symbols and the lack of opportunity to discuss their spiritual needs and doubts. In the practice of religion they found a seeming lack of concern about society and its social problems. In particular, many claimed that they are not being helped by the Church to think for themselves with the support of Church teaching (CT Whelan, ESRI, 1994). These signs of the changing times merit attention:

- The level of spirituality as experienced in churches by the 15-65 cohorts and their lack of inspiration from religious symbols and rules,
- The opportunity to discuss spiritual needs and doubts and to think for themselves with the support of Church teaching,
- And the concern about society and its social problems.

There is considerable evidence from the age profile of church attendance (and otherwise) that this decline in confidence has deepened greatly in the intervening years. There is a lesser sense of need for church services and less of a felt benefit from them. The crisis around sexual abuse has weakened the authority of church leaders and this links into the global loss of deference to institutions and tradition. Faith – believing beyond human evidence – is more difficult in the era of science and technology where all of reality is assumed to be measurable. It is also more challenging in an age where the urgency is on the search for life and personal fulfilment here and now.

It is tempting for Church leaders to set the priority in safeguarding the heritage of faith (creed, sacraments, commandments, prayers and devotions) in face of a seemingly hostile world (2 Timothy

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1:14). Moreover, human controls may seem stronger than the inspiration of the Gospel. There is a marked discouragement of theological discussion and pastoral planning leading to a sense of powerlessness and avoidance of analysis. Furthermore, the withdrawal of church voices from public discourse entails a serious loss of wisdom and courage in dealing with the social challenges of our time, e.g. housing, property, income distribution, environment, migrants. A vision of 'the common good' is essentially absent. This contrasts with the genuine appreciation of the pioneering action-research of Seán Healy, Peter McVerry, Stanislaus Kennedy, Consilio Fitzgerald, Pat Cogan, Seán McDonagh, and Donal Dorr among others.

In this scenario, various journals report how priests are ministering with remarkable commitment and ingenuity; but with declining energy, numbers, morale and vision into the future. Many are creative in learning and leadership strategies in the pastoral councils and other influential groups. They are busier and under pressure in dealing with services to the current church-goers. There seems, however, to be 'a culture of un-entitlement' to express alarm and to propose contributions to the solutions. Yet the urge remains to fan into a flame the Spirit we are given – 'not a spirit of timidity but the spirit of power and love and self-control'. 'Love is without servility as it is without arrogance' (2 Timothy 1:7)

Each of us experiences the family and the world in our own way and hence personal life stories attract much attention. Persons come before systems in the post-modern culture. Current experiences challenge the wisdom of tradition. Seamus Heaney expressed the personal journey from Station Island (1984) ever more clearly: 'Your obligation is not discharged by any common rite. What you do you must do on your own. You've listened long enough. Now strike your note'. Today, greater value is invested in personal freedoms and life as a discovery.

The particular challenges for the Church are to engage with younger and more educated people in the changed social culture of today:

- To mobilise members as stakeholders in the Church.
- To recognise the connections from human experiences to spiritual levels.
- To enrich the channels of spirituality from within social interaction.

MEMBERS AS STAKEHOLDERS

One response to the declining number of priests who are active is the clustering of parishes to be served by a mobile priest. This strategy on its own tends to give priority attention to sacramental

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services and the maintenance of church buildings. Thus prayer and church-going are further emphasised as the (only) ways of being followers of Christ. This widens the gulf between religious practice and the social culture of today. God is (almost) confined to church sacraments! Yet, the social culture of our time wants the Church to be inclusive in connecting with people of goodwill and with those who are vulnerable for reasons of social convention or colour or sexual orientation. Indeed, Christ himself want his followers to be especially recognised for their love and care for one another and, particularly, for the well-being of people who feel marginalised (John 13:35, Matthew 35:40).

A weakening of the relationships and informal contacts, especially in the bonding of community is likely to happen. The buzz of social media brings life to community interaction. Formal interactions alone re-enforce the clerical model in which the church is properly 'led' and 'represented' only by the priest who is under the control of the Diocese. Lay ministers are not usually mandated or qualified for official pastoral ministries in regard to the sacraments, faith development, social care. Parish councils tend to have little or no responsibility for, or scope in, pastoral planning in the priest/bishop centred church. This contrasts with the parishioners experience in various clubs and organisations where they take responsibility and initiative.

St Paul points to the 'variety of gifts' in the Church through which 'all kinds of service' are to be done. The same God is working in all of them in the parish community of faith and love. (1 Corinthians 12:4). Merely being 'helpers of the priest' and customers of the services is increasingly alienating in the current cultural aspirations to personal fulfilment and active participation. Having a say and sharing in responsibility are essential dynamics for the level of commitment and investment needed by the Church. Active parishioners deserve to be recognised as stakeholders in the parish who share responsibility for the message and how it is communicated. The fruits will be harvested in the energy and generosity, talents and competence to be mobilised for the mission of the Church.

It is widely accepted that the most profound cultural and social changes in our time occur in the status of women. This is seen in terms of self-understanding and social recognition. The insights, flair, experience, leadership and special gifts of women are greatly honoured and valued today. Society is enriched. Indeed, the Church has much wisdom and inspiration to contribute within the dynamic searching for new and creative understandings between men and women and for inner self-belief in this age of opportunity and confusion. Hence, we are surely called upon to 'test the spirit'

regarding their levels of involvement and leadership in the Church! Moreover, women deserve to be at the centre of this discernment and not be further alienated by decisions from a distance.

Pastoral ministry is most effective when aligned with the resources and charisms available locally. Hence the proposal that, full-time and voluntary lay personnel will take over the running of parishes in pilot projects in the diocese of Munich, Germany. This would enable lay people to lead the Church at grassroots level and to leave priests to cover sacramental and evangelising issues (Cardinal Reinhard Marx, *The Universe*, 31 March 2017). The aim is to inspire and empower the active membership.

Such pastoral strategies would require profound changes

- a) In the management training and leadership of personnel, both clerical and lay
- b) In parish and diocesan structures and accountability, and
- c) In the commitment to pastoral planning and collaboration.

CONNECTED EXPERIENCES

It is argued that the greatest disease facing humanity right now is a profound and painful sense of disconnection – from God, from one another, from ourselves (body and spirit and also from the environment (Richard Rohr, 2016). Happily, the Church presents the liturgy as ‘the summit’ of a wider range of activity and ‘the fountain’ from which all her power flows (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, par 10). Each sacrament proclaims and makes fruitful an aspect of the Church’s wider mission of light, joy and hope in the world. It also reaches into the learning processes and life experiences of the recipients here and now.

It was so sad to have the focus of Pope Francis ‘Year of Mercy’ narrowed into sacramental confession and indulgences rather than opened up to ‘the loving-kindness of our God’ in a world struggling between condemnation and forgiveness of human failures. Seriously incriminating confessions and accusations are shared daily on radio, television etc. but with little resolution or healing for many people. The prodigal son was first moved by hunger in his belly before reflecting on ‘the loving-kindness’ of his father. Today, the sacrament of Reconciliation does not connect well with the deeper dilemmas of the individual nor of the wider social relationships. Forgiveness cannot credibly be packaged into a ritual – because its goal is the renewal of relationships with God, with oneself and with other people. Renewal has to be processed through human experiences.

Five roads to forgiveness are pointed out by St John Chrysostom: the acknowledgement of our sins, letting go of the wrong done to

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us and seeking the generosity to forgive, prayers from the heart, generosity to the poor and genuine humble behaviour (Breviary Vol III p 464-5). These human journeys are readily recognised in the parables and actions of Jesus himself (Luke 15). The sacrament would then be experienced as the fountain of recovery. It is the Church's celebration and proclamation of God's forgiveness and healing love coming through a variety of channels. It also invites us into spiritual direction and personal growth in the journey ahead.

MEANING TO LIFE

In recent times, the wider circle of care and love is more visibly connected into the sacrament of the Anointing of the sick. Family and carers are gathered to bring the 'blessing' of their practical care and faithful friendship over a period of time. The deep level of personal attention brings a comforting and inner peace that is celebrated in the sacrament. It is frequently a gathering of the sorrow and love that has deepened over a period of time and now craves for expression. 'You have come all the way from Dublin to bring the gift of your tears'. Where love is active, God is already present. No avoidance through religious rites! In this scenario of anguish and love the more formal prayers of Anointing come to be experienced as the summit and the fountain of the 'strengthening grace' of the Holy Spirit. It is the mystery of faith and hope for the journey beyond the human.

The ceremony of Confirmation is a joyful celebration for young people, parents, teachers and priest. It is 'a coming of age event' for the home and the school. Unfortunately, it also marks the termination of church attendance for the majority of the peer group! Hence a major review is required on connecting with the family and on cultivating the felt experience of the people being confirmed whatever their age.

'Meaning to Life' is a group initiative coming from a series of consultative workshops with parents and from the 'Grow in Love' programme in primary school. It seeks to create a more comfortable sharing from the interactions between parents and children as the primary place of encounter with God. It is very clear that resources for training in creative skills and confidence are essential for this level of connectedness. The learning is according to the processes of the receivers and is real to actual living (Harry Bohan, *The Furrow*, Vol 68:4). Two pointers might be noted:

- The inner journey of faith is unique for each (young) person with due respect for the choices, dilemmas, pace of commitment, clarification of core beliefs of each. 'We all want our own two shoes of life', as John McGahern puts it, as we face the rising

sun. The Holy Spirit and our own human spirit grow into a united witness (Roman 8:14-17).

- Secondly, the gifts of the Holy Spirit – in wisdom, courage, wonder and awe – become more relevant in the dilemmas of the human journey.

REAL PRESENCES

From my earlier years as Chaplain to early School Leavers and also to a Convent of Eucharistic Adoration, I came to wonder about the various 'real presences' of Christ among us and how they are connected.

The Spirit of Christ became evident in the teachers, parents, youth leaders who gave personal attention and created new programmes for hard-to-reach school leavers. New relationships had to be cultivated leading to more free-flowing activities and programmes beyond the school. Some families were dealing with the aspirations and talents of young people in the face of severe poverty and special needs. This is how Christ came near to the broken-hearted and those whose spirit was crushed. This is where we 'wrestle with God' and find 'a ladder to God' as Jacob did (Genesis 32).

A feature of our time is the emergence of networks of mutual support among people who are dealing with various illness, retirement, bereavement, parenting, misuse of substances, social offending etc. Here especially Christ has pitched his tent among us (John 1:14 Revelation 21:3). He wants us to serve with others as inspired by the washing of feet on Holy Thursday (John 13:12-16).

The symbols and adventures of human living are to be connected into the offertory gifts of bread and wine at Mass. The aim is to link the human into the spiritual. The very fruits cultivated in the earth and the products of human ingenuity (in bread and wine) become our spiritual food and drink in the Eucharist. In turn, Christ within us urges us to share with the poor (Acts of the Apostles 2:42). This mystery of faith connects the human and the spiritual in the deepest and most real presence.

CHANNELS OF SPIRITUALITY

The Word of God is not to be confined in any particular culture of religious symbols, formulae, practices. Hence the Church is called continually to examine the signs and opportunities of the present time and so present the 'living power of the Gospel in ways adopted to each generation'. The perennial questions are about the meaning of life – the present life, the fullness of life to come and the relationship of one to the other (*Gaudium et Spes*, par 4).

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‘The whole and entire mystery of Christ’ includes the great value of the human person, including freedom and physical life and family. It also encompasses civil society, labour and leisure, material goods and their fair distribution, so that people may live together as brothers and sisters (*Christus Dominus*, par 12-13, II Vatican Council).

In conclusion, personal choices and active participation are core values today in place of deference and obedience. Hence participatory strategies and shared responsibilities are required for authoritative leadership to be fruitful. Moreover, the Church’s service to society is likely to be more effective in an involvement from within society and in sharing the dilemmas of humanity.

The Church’s involvement comes for the mystery of Christ among us when his Spirit enables us to recognise the ladders to Heaven and the channels of spirituality from within every human situation. Many Christians would want the Church not to confine its ministries to explicitly religious programmes but also to serve wider channels of spirituality in a mission to involve the whole Church in welcome to Pope Francis:

- Family as bridge into society - accompanying its members and generations (Pope Francis I: *Amoris Laetitia*, Veritas, 2016)
- The work of Justice and Peace - as expression of faith in action
- Care of our shared home – in the wonders of creation (*Laudato Si’* 2015)
- Personal Development and Relationships – integrating body-mind-spirit.

Christians not Lutherans. In the first place, I ask that men make no reference to my name; let them call themselves Christians not Lutherans. What is Luther? After all, the teaching is not mine (7:16). Neither was I crucified for anyone (1 Cor 1:13). St Paul, in 1 Cor 3, would not allow the Christians to call themselves Pauline or Petrine, but Christian. How then should I – poor stinking maggot-fodder that I am – come to have men call the children of Christ by my wretched name? Not so, my dear friends, let us abolish all party names and call ourselves Christians after him whose teachings we hold. The papists deservedly have a party name.

- LW: *Luther’s Work*. (J. Pelikan and H. Lehmann, eds, Philadelphia and St Louis, 1955) quoted by P. Fintan Ryan, OSB. *Martin Luther*, (Dublin: Columba Press) p.199.