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The FURROW

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Kieran Waldron

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Gerry McGarry

*Founder-Editor of
The Furrow in 1950
and Parish Priest of
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We sometimes hear of members of the *Gárdaí* and Army dying ‘in the line of duty’ but seldom hear of priests dying in such a way. However, in 1977 - forty years ago - Canon Gerry McGarry, Parish Priest of Annagh, Ballyhaunis, died in a sad traffic accident while coming on to the main road. He was returning from his First Friday calls at Scregg, Ballyhaunis. It was 4 August, 1977 – incidentally the Feast of St John Vianney, Patron Saint of all priests.

JG McGarry, as he was officially known, was born in Claremorris on 28 January 1905. He was ordained for Tuam Archdiocese, in Maynooth in 1930. Thereafter he completed his Doctorate in Theology (DD) in 1932 and spent just one year as a curate at Ballintubber Abbey before he moved to St Jarlath’s College, Tuam for six years. He is remembered as an inspirational teacher of English. He was appointed ‘Professor of Pastoral Theology and Sacred Eloquence’ in Maynooth College in 1939 where he served for thirty years before being appointed PP Ballyhaunis in 1969. In the National Seminary he had the task of training generations of future Irish priests on how to preach – necessitating his listening to up to nine attempted sermons from would-be preachers per week for all those thirty years, as well as lecturing on pastoral techniques. He had a national apostolate.

Canon McGarry was a national figure throughout Ireland because of his followers in *The Furrow* pastoral monthly magazine which he began in 1950 and continued to edit for twenty years in Maynooth and subsequently while in Ballyhaunis. The magazine is still in vigorous health! The chosen title, as heralded in its Mission Statement, was indicative of his approach to the rather settled and over-complacent Irish Church of the 1950s. It is still printed every month: ‘Yours to drive a new furrow, nor sow any longer among the briers’ (Jeremiah 4:3). It was a prophetic statement in the decade before the Second Vatican Council which began many Church reforms in the 1960s. Because he anticipated that he might run into difficulties in securing the necessary monthly approval from the then Archbishop of Dublin, he astutely had the magazine printed in Naas, in another diocese, where the more benign Bishop Tom Keogh ruled and where the journal continues to be printed.

One of his comments on the Irish Church of the 1950s was: ‘reform here is a gradualism, conceived along managerial lines – we lead and you follow. The pace is too slow’. The English Catholic

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magazine, *The Tablet* said of him; ‘his death has deprived the Irish Church of the most powerful influence for good it has known in the past thirty years. He prepared the ground for open communication of ideas. He set the clergy to think – he grew into a prophet of the age’. Archbishop Cunnane of Tuam said of him: ‘much that was happening in the Catholic world would have remained unknown or unnoticed in Ireland only for *The Furrow*’. Bishop Cahal Daly, later Cardinal Daly, rightly commented that he knew ‘of no periodical which needed so little re-orientation in editorial policy as a result of the Second Vatican Council, fifteen years after its inception’. No wonder then that no less than thirteen Irish bishops were among the huge congregation from all parts of the country who attended his funeral in Ballyhaunis in August 1977. The following day *The Irish Press* had as its lead story on Page One: ‘Canon McGarry – Priest Who Never Grew Old’.

When he arrived very happily in Ballyhaunis in 1969 he was conscious that he had spent only a short time in parish work, more than thirty years earlier. This was not to daunt him however as he began to engage with all forms of parish life in Ballyhaunis. In a perceptive obituary after his death, the local correspondent of *The Western People*, had this to say of him: ‘Canon McGarry had a deep commitment to the word “caring” and all it meant Despite his very high level of intellectual ability he never flaunted it or adopted a superior attitude. He was a humble man in every sense of the word. He encouraged the Youth Club, the Junior St Vincent de Paul Society, the parish schools and was extremely interested in the welfare of the aged, the sick and the under-privileged’. One of his early achievements was his production of an MJ Molloy play, *The Old Road*, in 1971 by the recently revived St Patrick’s Dramatic Society.

Being skilled in the art of communication, soon after his arrival he began a modest ‘Parish Newsletter’ – a rather unheard of venture in those times in Ireland. It was merely a stencilled A4 production of six to ten pages, printed by a school Gestetner machine, but he enlisted several parishioners to write short articles as well as recording local events and pieces from various Station areas. In his first editorial for 1970 he wrote: ‘Christmas is a feast which touches the heart and brings thoughts of home to the minds of us all. It seems a good time to launch this modest Newsletter for its aim is to make us more aware of each other, to share the news, tell of our good fortunes, convey our hopes and concerns for each other. We must be talking to our friends. For that is what we are. A parish is – or ought to be - an extension of the family’. The modest newsletter sowed the seed for the very successful Annagh Magazine, begun in 1978 and now in its fortieth year.

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Canon McGarry was a well-known figure to Irish radio listeners and later to RTE television viewers, especially through its Outlook programme. For this he was awarded a national award by the Religious Press Association of Ireland. In an RTE radio broadcast of 3rd August 1978 for the first anniversary of his death two RTE presenters, Seán MacReamoinn and Áine McEvoy, two good friends of his, recorded tributes from all over the country. People vied to be included in the programme with their tributes. Áine McEvoy's summary of the programme was included in the first edition of ANNAGH magazine of 1978. She had been helped in her life's journey by him and this becomes clear in her sincere tribute. She especially admired his goodness to the sick. Sickness had been part of his own lifetime and his visits to the sick formed a huge element in his work in the parish. The radio programme included many touching tributes from his parishioners like the following: 'His austere appearance was terribly false... anyone who knew him and saw him saw a much different person. He'd always be first to start a sing-song after the Stations in the houses'. On his First Friday calls one parishioner recounted: 'one time he went to visit an old lady who was in bed and had nobody to do anything for her, and he went out into the kitchen and made her tea and boiled an egg for her'. Another said: 'he'd make you cry, sitting on the bed after Holy Communion, saying beautiful prayers that he'd make up himself ... the consolation I have is that he died doing the work he loved, and he didn't suffer'.

Áine McEvoy told how she first came into contact with him. For years she had been writing about the sick when she came across a letter from a missionary priest who complained about the infrequency of Holy Communion in a Dublin hospital. With some trepidation, understandable in those times, she wrote to *The Furrow* but asked to remain anonymous. The Editor, Fr McGarry, welcomed the letter for publication but said he had 'waged a war of attrition against anonymity all his life' and would she please re-consider on that point. So began a long friendship with him. She admired especially his work for the sick at Knock and his long hours in the Confessional Chapel there.

All his life he was an encourager. A letter from Dublin Alcoholics Anonymous thanked him for 'his part in assisting the AA through *The Furrow* in becoming accepted by the Church which he adorned'. This talent was especially needed in his calm treatment of the generations of student priests he helped on the way to become preachers. It also inspired him in encouraging and cajoling writers to contribute to *The Furrow* –perhaps his greatest achievement.

Canon Gerry McGarry certainly deserves to be remembered.

Commemorating the Reformation

– *Five Ecumenical Imperatives*

+Brendan Leahy

I had the good fortune to be in Lund, Sweden, on 31 October 2016 for the remarkable occasion of Pope Francis joining with Lutherans as they began commemorating through common prayer the beginning of the Reformation. Anyone with an ounce of history will appreciate the significance of such a gesture on Pope Francis' part. Catholics and Lutherans have certainly travelled a long way since the polemical days of Martin Luther's 95 Theses and his excommunication. While in Lund the Pope signed a joint declaration with Bishop Munib Yunan, President of the World Lutheran Federation stating that 'what unites us is greater than what divides us'.

This year, on or around 31 October 2017, it would be appropriate to mark in some way the 500th anniversary of beginning of the Reformation. We now know that the era Martin Luther lived in was enormously complex – socially, politically and religiously. We need to recognise he wanted to renew the Church not divide her. 500 years of history since then have seen many tragic consequences. But, as Pope Francis reminded us some months ago, while the past cannot be changed, it is possible to engage in a 'purification of memory', and so 'tell that history differently'.

Pope Francis has invited us to re-read our history, acknowledging that 'our division distanced us from the primordial intuition of God's people, who naturally yearn to be one'. We now realize that too often in the past 'we closed in on ourselves out of fear or bias with regard to the faith which others profess with a different accent and language.'

During the prayer service last year in Lund, one of the texts put it bluntly, In the sixteenth century, Catholics and Lutherans frequently not only misunderstood but also exaggerated and caricatured their opponents in order to make them look ridiculous They accepted that the Gospel was mixed with the political

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and economic interests of those in power. Their failures resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people.

In his homily in Lund, the Pope commented on positive aspects of the Reformation that we need to name and be thankful for:

With gratitude we acknowledge that the Reformation helped give greater centrality to sacred Scripture in the Church's life.' He also referred to the value of Martin Luther's spiritual experience 'that challenges us to remember that apart from God we can do nothing'. With Luther's concept of 'by grace alone', he reminds us 'that God always takes the initiative, prior to any human response, even as he seeks to awaken that response.

During the Lund celebrations, particular reference was made to Five Ecumenical Imperatives outlined in the excellent text (available on-line), produced in 2013 by the Catholic-Lutheran Dialogue, *From Conflict to Communion: Lutheran-Catholic Common Commemoration of the Reformation in 2017*.

As we celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, it is worth spending time reflecting on ecumenical imperatives. They are deceptively simple but are challenging if we let them impact on us. They aren't just for Catholics and Lutherans. Indeed, they apply not just to relations between churches but to all Christians who desire to work for peace and reconciliation. In presenting the imperatives, I'll offer a brief comment on each.

The first imperative: We should always begin from the perspective of unity and not from the point of view of division in order to strengthen what is held in common even though the differences are more easily seen and experienced.

It is always tempting to define ourselves against one another. We end up with one-sided views of one another. But we can only solve our problems together, starting from a common commitment to letting unity be the lens through which we view life. We need each other's experience, encouragement, and critique. In a homily last year at an evening Vespers ceremony for Anglicans and Catholics who had gathered together in the Church of St. Gregory, Rome, Pope Francis commented on the Christian calling to be builders of communion: 'It would be always good, before embarking on any activity, for you to put these questions to yourselves: why ought not we do this together with our Anglican brothers and sisters? Can we bear witness to Jesus by acting together with our Catholic brothers and sisters?'

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The second imperative: We must let ourselves continuously be transformed by the encounter with the other and by the mutual witness of faith.

Dialogue is a royal road in our relationships with one another. It's not just a tactic. It has to do with the way we encounter truth. Pope Francis often underlines the value of 'walking together'. It is walking together that we discover one another and discover the way forward. The 'Receptive Ecumenism' project launched by Dr. Paul Murray of Durham University reminds us that we need to move into an attitude of asking: what can we learn from one another? It is by encounter with one another, recognising the gifts we each have that we can shape each other.

The third imperative: We should again commit ourselves to seek visible unity, to elaborate together what this means in concrete steps, and to strive repeatedly toward this goal.

We won't reach the goal of full communion among Christians overnight. Reconciliation after any conflict takes time. The pace can't be forced. The proper steps are needed. We've had 500 years living apart, a time when various traditions have built up in each of our churches. We need to explore and re-read our traditions together but in an atmosphere of mercy so that we don't fall back into easy stereo-types and oppositions. That's the value of common projects, pilgrimages together and joint initiatives. An example of this was the very successful joint pilgrimage last year of young people across the churches joining Archbishop Eamon Martin and Archbishop Richard Clarke on a visit to the Battle of the Somme sites.

The fourth imperative: We should jointly rediscover the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ for our time.

Jesus prayed 'that all may be one' so that 'the world may believe'. All Christians are faced with similar challenges – how to present God in today's world. The more pluralistic our society is becoming with respect to religion, the more evident our common mission is becoming. The Gospel unites us in mission. This year's Inter-Church meeting has as its theme: *Proclaiming Christ to Families Today*. It will provide an opportunity for representatives of different Christian churches to reflect together on how we engage with families as partners in the life and mission of the Church, how we welcome the different generations of the family in our local church congregations, and how we as a Church community reach those families who are facing particular challenges in our society today and in need of care and support.

It would be wonderful if in our preparations for the World

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Meeting of Families we could in some way see how we can best involve our sisters and brothers of other churches in our journey towards August 2018.

The fifth imperative: We should witness together to the mercy of God in proclamation and service to the world.

In recent years the Catholic Church has emphasised the theme of mercy. The Church is not a custom's house, as Pope Francis repeats. It wants its doors to be open in merciful outreach to all. A major turning point in Martin Luther's life was his spiritual experience of the gospel of the righteousness of God. God is mercy, faithfully merciful towards us. In the preface to his Latin works (1545), he noted that it was 'by the mercy of God, meditating day and night,' that he gained new understanding of Romans 1:17: 'here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. Thereupon a totally other face of the entire Scripture showed itself to me...'

As we grapple with issues to do with wounds of the past, both North and South of the Border, commemorating Martin Luther and the beginning of the Reformation, we are prompted to rediscover the calling to be ambassadors of mercy as we strive to help one another heal memories, moving forward step by step, always beginning again, from conflict to communion.

Luther's call. Vatican II went a long way to satisfying Luther's call for a council as a representative body; there were lay and also Protestant 'observers' there and it turned out that the latter had significant influence . . . Today, instead of offering more and more indulgences to mitigate the punishment due to sin, Pope Francis speaks of God's mercy, echoing, it has to be said, Pope John's discourse at the opening of Vatican II.

– P.F. LYONS OSB, *Martin Luther. His Challenge Then and Now* (Dublin: Columba Press 2017) p. 205.