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Aidan Ryan

At the end of
an era

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One possible way of understanding the history of the Christian faith in Ireland since the time of St. Patrick is to envisage it as divided into eras – the brief Patrician period, the Celtic monastic era, the Anglo-Norman reformed church, the Penal times, and the post-Emancipation church. Each era had its strengths and weaknesses, and each era eventually ended. The latter era is sometimes called the Cullen Church, because of the dominance of Cardinal Paul Cullen in fashioning it. It could also be called the John Charles McQuaid Church, after its most representative figure. This is the era that is now obviously coming to a close. The purpose of this article is to reflect on how the church in Ireland, and especially its ordained membership, is coping with this end-of-an-era time, on some of the questions this ending raises, and on what the future might hold.

When something ends, – a human life, a community, or a particular form of church life, there is a grieving process. People who study the grieving process – Elizabeth Kubler Ross is probably the best known – note that there are a number of stages or strands in this process – denial, bargaining, anger, depression and finally acceptance. If one listens carefully to informal conversations in church circles today, one can discern each one of these strands in the conversation of different individuals.

There are very few in denial, since the reality of something ending is so obvious for all to see. The bargaining is mostly retrospective and comes mainly in two forms, which could be described as from the right and from the left. From the right, it mainly takes the form of - If only we had held on to the mystery of the Latin Mass and the clarity of the Maynooth catechism, and not compromised so much with the spirit of the age, then the era now ending could have lasted longer. From the left it mainly takes the form of – If only we had made clerical celibacy optional, opened all levels of Holy Orders to women, given lay people a much greater say in doctrine and discipline – then we would have been able to negotiate our way much better through the recent and contemporary time of rapid

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social and cultural change. There is also what could be called a devotional form of bargaining – if only we had kept the family rosary going, if only we listened to what Our Lady has been saying in her various apparitions then things would not have gone the way they have.

There is also an amount of free-floating anger around. It tends to focus mainly on two ‘lightening rods’ – the media and the bishops. It is undeniable that there is a clearly discernible hostility to religion in general and to Catholicism in particular in at least some sections of the Irish media. The anger directed at the bishops is mostly expressed through cynical comment, and is related to the retrospective bargaining outlined above and to the perceived failure of the bishops as a body to have taken whatever line is favoured by the individual who is in the ‘anger’ stage of the bereavement process. There are other objects of anger also – the priests and religious who did so much damage both to children and young people, and to the church, by abuse, and the laity who succumbed so easily to the blandishments of the consumer culture

A further stage or strand in the grieving process is depression. Among the clergy, this can take the form of a pervasive mood of sadness and disappointment, and a certain withdrawal from the world as it is – a looking forward to (and planning for) early retirement, a certain sense of helplessness and an attitude of, ‘it will do for my time, it will see me out’, and after that, God alone knows what will happen

Finally there is an attitude of serene acceptance of the present Irish ecclesial reality as it is – a sense that this is our time, a time in which God asks us to be present as positively as we can, a sense that we are entering a new era in Ireland, an era that can truly be described as missionary. A difficulty about this is that we have no training or expertise on how to be missionary in mentality, lifestyle or methodology. The challenge is to develop these – not easy for anyone, especially for those of us in the evening time of life. We have been good at maintenance, which is about providing the sacraments and rituals and devotions of the Church for those who ask for them, as well as the buildings that are needed for this purpose. Mission is something very different and it is unfamiliar and uncharted territory for us

One of the questions that often arises in the context of this grieving process is the question of why the Cullen/McQuaid (or post-emancipation) era is now dying. Where did we go wrong? There are, no doubt, a multitude of reasons – massive, rapid cultural and social change, increased prosperity, the huge influence of media both mainstream and social, immigration, travel ... However, I would like to focus on what I see as a few major internal

THE FURROW

weaknesses in the form of church life that is now fading. One is the excessive identification of church people and church life with the middle class in Irish society. The majority of clergy and religious come from that class, and the values we espoused were more those of Victorian respectability than of the Gospel. Our lifestyles are largely middle-class – the houses we live in, the cars we drive, the holidays we take, the restaurants we eat in, the pastimes we engage in and even the political parties we tend to support. We have little passion for the travails that convulse the majority of our fellow human beings on this planet that is our common home. We have little anger about the gross injustice that condemns millions of our brothers and sisters to a life that fails to respect their human dignity. We have little of the hunger and thirst for what is right of which the Beatitudes speak. Many of us are personally generous, but not at any real cost to our comfortable lives. We are caught up in a merciless system and it does not bother us as it should. Our church is too much like the society that surrounds it, and this society (to quote Pope John Paul II) is taken up with the idolatry of money, ideology, power and technology.

At our clergy conferences (and even, perhaps, episcopal conferences) the topic that generates most interest, energy and passion is finance – far more than, say, evangelization, or social justice or the sacredness of human life or the poisoning of the planet. We give the impression of being mainly in the business of maintenance and self-preservation. We are ‘keeping the show on the road’ without much reflection, it seems, on what the purpose of the ‘show’ is. We are largely a self-referential church.

I recently heard a priest of my own generation, in a discussion of the present state of the church in Ireland, say ‘This is not what we signed up for’. This provoked in my mind the uncomfortable question ‘What did we sign up for?’, What did I sign up for in the year of the first moon landing? No doubt we sincerely believed in the noble motives we professed – following Christ, bringing the Eucharist to the people, serving God. But is it possible that there were other less altruistic elements mixed into our motivation? Was there, perhaps, an element of signing up for a position of assured status in society, with housing and income, albeit modest, guaranteed for life with little enough accountability for how we spent our time? Is it possible that some of the anger floating around is based on a sense of being robbed or cheated of that position of privilege and influence that went with the priesthood in the church in which we were ordained all those decades ago? There is a further uncomfortable question that bothers me, by way of personal examination of conscience. Because of the material comfort of our lives and the relative absence of accountability, did

we tend to become mediocre, even flabby, in our ministry? Did we tend, more and more, to 'do our own thing', to do only what we felt like doing, or even to do very little of anything? Given that we are more at home with maintenance than mission, is it possible that an undue amount of our declining energy has been devoted to the maintenance of our own comfort and convenience?

There are other internal features of the post-Emancipation church that sowed the seeds of its own demise. One of the best speeches at Vatican Two was made by Bishop Emil de Smedt of Bruges. He claimed that the three great sins of the church were triumphalism, legalism and clericalism. There were plenty of all three in the post-emancipation church in Ireland. Most of the triumphalism has gone the way of the cappa magna and the ring-kissing. There is a greater awareness that laws (like the Sabbath) are made for human beings, not vice versa. Clericalism is probably the slowest of the three to go, perhaps mainly because there are fewer clerics to maintain it, rather than any conviction about the need to move away from it. But before the fading of these elements in the church in Ireland, much of the damage was already done, as the 'sensus fidelium' began to see more clearly how far they were from the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth.

So what will come next? What kind of church will the next era see, after the now fading era has come to a complete end? It is never wise, or even possible, to predict the future, but some things at least can be said with some degree of confidence, and other things can be dreamed of with some degree of hope. It is clear that the church of the future will be smaller and composed of intentional Catholics who have made a conscious option for Christ, for the values of the gospel and for the community that proclaims and tries to live by these values. Its leadership will be quite different – it will be led, not by organizers, or sacramentalizers but by evangelizers, missionary disciples who have deeply assimilated the Gospel into their lives, who are passionate about it and have an ability to communicate it with enthusiasm. This leadership will be a mixture of male and female and the question of who is ordained to preside at the Eucharist will be seen as of secondary importance. The primary question will be who can best proclaim the gospel, firstly in his/her personality and lifestyle and then in the more verbal and visual forms of communication. This may be, in a strange way, a return to the first era, the Celtic church. It is not clear if any or all of the major figures of that era – Finian, Enda, Ciaran, Kevin, Colmcille, even Brigid – were ordained or not, or ever presided at the Eucharist. What is important is that they were clearly seen to be people of the Gospel, with the ability to attract others to the following of Christ. Perhaps it is 21st century equivalents of these

THE FURROW

who will lead the next era of the Christian pilgrimage in Ireland. Any renewal, at any time in the church, always needs saints who will provide focus and inspiration and energy which will renew the presence of Christ among his people.

A further feature of the church of the next era will be a much greater involvement with people on the margins of society. It is significant that the face of the church which seems most acceptable and respected in Irish society now is that embodied by people like Peter McVerry, Sr. Consilio and Sr Stanislaus Kennedy – all people who work with and for the broken and the wounded, and who seem to operate out of the ‘field hospital’ model of what the church ought to be. Of course the post-emancipation church also cared for the poor and downtrodden – one has only to think of people like Edmund Rice and Catherine McCauley. But somehow what started out as a wish to respond to the poor in the spirit of the Gospel seemed to drift towards simply making the poor more respectable through an education that made them conforming and even successful subjects of a society that remained inherently unjust – fodder for the great consumerist culture that dominates our lives. So where does all this leave us, the ageing last generation of Cullen/McQuaid Catholics and clergy? How can we live happily and constructively in this end-of-an-era time? What can sustain us in the in-between time as we await the coming of another era, whose contours we may vaguely discern, but whose flowering we probably will not live to see? A colleague recently said ‘I hope to spend whatever time is left to me doing as much good as I can, for as many as I can, for as long as I can’ - not a bad ideal to set before one. We can continue to search for, and celebrate, those moments that invite people into something deeper than the soporific superficiality of the culture we inhale every day – moments like the wonder of new life in a family, moments of discovery of genuine love, even moments of darkness, death and bereavement. We can continue to invite people away from the tyranny of noise and haste that marks our times, and into the silence and stillness which is the language in which God speaks the message of abiding love to the human heart.

Perhaps we can learn lessons for our times from the saints of Ireland down through the centuries – John Sullivan, Catherine McCauley, Oliver Plunkett, Malachy the reformer, the great monastic saints, even Patrick himself. They would no doubt lead us even further back, to the earliest Christian communities and ultimately to the shores of the sea of Galilee and to the upper room in Jerusalem, and the road to Emmaus. In these places we have the best chance of glimpsing what God may have in store for the disciples of his Son in Ireland in the time to come.