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David Harold-Barry

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Is the Irish Church in a 'Dark Night'?

David Harold-Barry SJ

The Furrow devotes much space to our efforts to reflect on the Church in Ireland today and where we might be going. Brendan Hoban¹ gives us a dire picture of the morale among priests as the waves of the new reality wash against their shores. And Gerry O'Hanlon² regrets that the bishops seem to be cheering Pope Francis from the touchline without getting engaged in the game.

What I have not come across, which is not to say it is not to be found somewhere, is a reflection on the spiritual texture of the present malaise. We are good at describing our empty seminaries and diminishing numbers at Mass. We know that the abuse scandals have turned many young people away. But where do our exhaustive descriptions leave us? Where is God in all this?

When you feel ill you want to know what is happening. A diagnosis relieves uncertainty. It is the same in our life in the Spirit. Ignatius of Loyola gave us some guidelines for understanding our state of consciousness. What is happening when we feel refreshed, joyful and consoled? And what is happening when we feel 'harassed by anxiety, afflicted with sadness and face all sorts of obstacles'?³ He calls the former 'consolation', the latter 'desolation.' A person can be in desolation but so can a family, a country or a Church. In the personal experience of Ignatius, and in his teaching, desolation is not necessarily a bad thing. Through it 'God wishes to give us a true knowledge and understanding of ourselves'.⁴

I would say that today the Church in Ireland is in desolation. And to know this is a step towards understanding where we are. Consolation is nice and enjoyable for a while. But it does not bring growth. It only confirms the authenticity of the struggle we have just emerged from. We will have to wait a bit before we enjoy consolation again in Ireland! There is something we have to do

1 *The Furrow*, February 2017

2 *The Furrow*, May 2017

3 *Spiritual Exercises* #315.

4 *Ibid* #322

David Harold-Barry is a Jesuit priest. Address: Xavier House, Airport Road, PO Box 310085, Lusaka, Zambia. Email: davidharoldbarry@hotmail.com

first. But we will be twice the Church – and even twice the country – once we have come through. One of the outcomes of the story that Jesus told about the lost (prodigal) son was that when he ‘came to his senses’ he was twice the man he was before. Previously, he was complacent, pleasure seeking and careless of responsibility. But after he had hit rock bottom he ‘woke up’ and found within himself the ability to say, ‘I will arise and go to my Father.’ He became a new man, a big improvement on what he had been before.

John of the Cross calls this desolation ‘night’, even ‘dark night.’ Iain Matthew explains:

The word is important today, in a world of swiftly shifting sand where foundations can be undermined suddenly. Life seems hopeful and purposeful; then circumstances conspire to break up the whole. A bout of illness coincides with humiliation at work; a friend seems not to care, or a relationship fails; my religion makes me feel more isolated, even foolish, especially after a chance conversation where principles I took for granted were questioned, even mocked. And prayer feels dead.⁵

A little later Matthew explains John’s meaning. ‘Night, that which comes and curtails control, is greeted as a ‘sheer grace’ ... Its darkness allowed a quest which responded at last to the demands of loving ... (The darkness) is the place for what is truest, deepest, most expectant, where the light is within, surer than the noonday. Most of all, night is the place for encounter.’

This may all sound a long way from Ballyporeen but I suggest it could be deeply relevant. Ireland is in a ‘dark night’ but it is a night of opportunity, of ‘encounter.’⁶ It is ‘the place for what is truest, deepest, most expectant, where the light is within.’ From the vantage point of Africa, from where I write, I can see the ‘sheer grace’ that Ireland can be in a new way for the universal Church and the world, just as it has been in the past.

But, for now, we are in our dark night. The default position for us growing up in Ireland fifty or more years ago was of packed churches, thriving foreign missions, revered priests, princely bishops and an awesome figure in white far away whose word was law. We accepted it as an established order with no room for dissent. Now it has imploded and we are as firmly captive to today’s ‘world’ as John of the Cross was to his jailers in Toledo, where he experienced his ‘night’.

5 Iain Matthew, *The Impact of God*, Hodder & Stoughton, 1995, p 51

6 Iain Matthew, p 54

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John called his imprisonment, ‘a grace of sheer delight.’⁷ From it sprung not only the mystical poetry that has gripped seekers ever since, but a fruitfulness in his ministry that placed him with Teresa of Avila as among the greatest guides ever on the journey to union with God.

Why did God allow John, already a renowned spiritual guide, to be so harshly treated? We do not know but it is a fair guess that, ‘every branch that does bear fruit my Father prunes to make it bear even more.’ Ireland has borne much fruit. Only last week I celebrated the Eucharist with the Christian Brothers here in Lusaka on the feast of Blessed Edmund Rice, I told them my father never failed to point out to us, when we climbed the hill out of Callan, the house where he was born. Among the thousands they educated were six out of the nine Taoisigh Ireland has had since independence. Is the Lord likely to forget all that – and so much more – as the Irish Church experiences its dark night? We can sometimes get trapped in gloom as we reel from the punches incessantly delivered from all sides. We forget we have lived stable moments of growth in faith, times of fierce persecution and times of generous and bountiful missionary endeavour. ‘Few nations have had such an impact on the religious development of our world as has the Irish nation,’ says Fr Tomás Surlis.⁸ This is one more moment, uncelebrated while we live it, but graced nonetheless. All this is fruit and God delights in it. He wants to make us *more* fruitful and so today we live our own incarceration in Toledo.

Yet there is the danger of neatly labelling it ‘desolation’ and claiming we know what is going on. We might sit back and let the drama play itself out. If a person is sick, they may go to bed and let their immune system do its work. But if they are in desolation they have to do something. John of the Cross tried to get out of his jail! He found a tool and day by day he loosened the screws on the lock and so escaped. We too have to loosen the screws. We can, for instance, embrace good changes and not fight them. We can welcome the increasing role of lay people, particularly women, in the Church. We can welcome the increasing interest of science and medicine in what religion can teach. For example, a recent article in *The Lancet*⁹, the prestigious journal of medicine in the UK, describes a growing ‘convergence’ between faith and science:

Medicine is passing through its own profound transition, a transition in purpose, practice, and philosophy. The global medical and scientific community, although it has achieved

7 In *En una noche oscura*, Quoted by Matthew p53

8 *The Furrow*, February 2017, p118

9 Richard Horton: *When The Lancet went to the Vatican*, 15 April 2017

much, could do (and must do) more to address the emergencies and crises facing humanity. We must think and act differently. Science and medicine cannot continue in the same way. The notion of a set of universal values, while inspiring, faces difficult, perhaps insuperable, challenges. Scientific inquiry and medical practice alone are insufficient to confront humanity's problems. A rejuvenation in moral inquiry, leadership, advocacy and activism is needed. We have to understand that wisdom comes from a broad inclusive conversation, from fostering a plurality of voices.

A new compact, convergence, and complementarity between the scientific, medical, and faith communities seems like an important opportunity to be seized. The reception and response to *Laudato Si'*—Pope Francis's first full Encyclical, *On the Care for Our Common Home*, published in 2015—is one example of moral leadership by the Catholic Church. *Laudato Si'* reveals the importance of taking communication as seriously as we do substance. In many surprising ways, the relationship between science, medicine, and religion is only just beginning.

I find this heart-warming. The Church, which for many is an irrelevance, is being 'brought in from the cold' by the artisans of science and philosophy. Surely this gives us a peek into the future. We are on the threshold of a complementarity between faith and reason which will blow us out of our desolation. 'A woman in childbirth suffers because her time has come, but when she has given birth to her child she forgets her suffering ...'

'OTHER STUFF'

'Heart and Soul', the BBC's spotlight on religious matters, recently featured a programme on the Irish Church, called '*Mission in Reverse*' – a reference to the 200+ priests from Africa and India and elsewhere who serve Irish parishes and institutions today. A student at Rockwell was asked if he still believed and he replied as he fiddled with his mobile, 'Ah, no! There is so much other stuff.' The 'other stuff' competes with our proclamation of the gospel and often wins. A recent article in *The Irish Times*¹⁰ describes Stephen Fry's comments, on Gay Byrne's RTE programme *The Meaning of Life*, as 'gratuitously offensive about a God he professes not to believe in.' This too is 'other stuff' and maybe it is like the cruel Toledo jailer of John of the Cross who does not understand what he is doing.

In desolation we often do not understand what is happening. But we have to be alert for signs, 'persevering in patience' and

10 By Fr Brendan Hoban, May 30, 2017

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remembering that ‘consolation will soon return’ as we ‘diligently use the means against desolation.’¹¹

The same BBC programme touched the tip of the iceberg when the ordinary women of Cashel protested strongly – and with humour – about the Church’s influence in education, legislation and medical ethics. The Church is not listening, they said. The priest at Rockwell, Fr Augustine Bengala from Sierra Leone, pointed out that the Irish bishops were amazed, when they paid their *ad limina* visit to Rome, that Pope Francis spent the time listening to them. He had no lecture for them up his sleeve. If the people the author of *The Lancet* article wrote about are listening to the Church, the Church too should be listening to them. The contribution to the BBC programme of Patsy McGarry, *The Irish Times* religious affairs correspondent, was blunt. The bishops are finding it hard to be positive. The bishops are now into “management of decline” – an image that conjures up the memory of the officer on the *Titanic* in *A Night to Remember* who manages the evacuation of women and children only to the inadequate number of lifeboats. This feeds into our desolation, but McGarry gave an intriguing suggestion of where we are going. He holds that the powerful organised hierarchical Church we grew up in is ‘of recent origin, dating back to the end of the nineteenth century.’ Before that it was an *ad hoc* Church, meaning people had Mass where and when they could find a priest. I take him to mean it was a precarious Church – nothing solid – a bit like the early Church of Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna. And also, it was a bit like the Church in France today. Less than a decade ago I visited a friend near Albi. His local priest had 17 parishes and got round them when he could. He was totally relaxed and did not seem to suffer from the *angst* mentioned by Brendan Hoban in his *Furrow* article above.

Does all this add up? I do believe it is helpful to see our Church now as engaged in a new encounter – with itself, with society and with God. ‘I am the light of the world’, says Jesus, ‘anyone who follows me will not be walking in the dark.’ We may be experiencing the dark but all the time Jesus is there beckoning us to understand what is happening. The late Fr Joe Veale wrote a powerful appeal to his fellow Jesuits fourteen years ago¹² to stop speaking tired language about God and begin to share their actual experience of God. People now yearn for the language of experience and not the language of authority. I would suggest we need to stop wishing our experience of being Catholic today was other than it is. Instead we need to embrace it and understand what it is saying to us. Then the Lord will help us escape, pruned and renewed, from our prison.

11 *Spiritual Exercises* #321

12 *The Way*, 4 October 2003