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The FURROW

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Pat Courtney

There is another Road

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In my twilight years, I am wont to reflect on my past years and wonder with concern the direction in which the Church is moving. I was trained as a missionary priest and sent to Nigeria. This was in the late sixties when that country faced ethnic problems which eventually led to the Biafran civil war. They were difficult times; they were dangerous times. Through decades of evangelisation, the Church in Nigeria was very westernised. Newly ordained Nigerian priests followed the Magisterium of the Church. As a teacher, I was often asked to give retreats in schools. Even then, I often wondered what the pupils made of rosary and benediction.

I was acutely aware of the poverty and hardship of the ordinary people. It was a shock to my system, but it was a learning curve. I inwardly questioned the practice of payment for the sacrament of confession. In a nation based on a tribal system, their ancient customs and way of life had to give way to this western missionary zeal as if their identity to tribal values mattered little.

I came to a crossroad in my life. After fourteen years as a missionary, I made the difficult decision to leave and marry. For over thirty years I worked in London and the home counties as a science teacher. In 2007, I retired and decided to move back to Ireland. Nestled in the foothills of Mount Leinster, I found my patch in an idyllic rural area. Gradually, I became aware that the rural Church did not change very much since the 1960's.

I kept up-to-date theologically and wanted very much to become involved in the parish. I met a brick wall. It came from the clergy and the laity. 'We do things our way as our parents and grandparents before us.'

The Christian Media Trust, under the umbrella of South East Radio were looking for volunteers. This was based in Wexford town. My wife and I agreed to make some programmes. This was the outlet we needed. Our programmes were based on the gospel stories. We did a lot of research for the scripts and the music. There was no imprimatur as to what we broadcast as the media was ecumenical. We raised the bar as to content and innovation. This

Pat Courtney is a former missionary priest. Address: 8 Na Crosaire, Kilmysall, Bunclody, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, Y21 NC83.

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rattled some feathers and we were advised to ‘remain within the Magisterium re content’. My wife and I were not ‘yes’ people. We made over fifty broadcasts and the final series was on the humanity of Jesus. We sailed too close to the wind. Many could not come to terms with the letter to the Hebrews quotation: ‘he was like us in all things except sin’. They accepted the divine nature with ease but found his humanity less spiritual. Not once was there any feedback from the clergy.

We both read a lot of theology books and Christian periodicals. One of them is *The Furrow*. In a recent edition, one article caught my attention, viz. *St. Joseph and the Future of the Irish Church* by Seamus O’Connell.¹ He explores the dilemma of Joseph in a new light. He portrayed a Joseph that, painful though it was, allowed God to impinge on his life. As O’Connell says, Joseph’s sensitivity to God inevitably led to inner conflict and loss of status in his life. He compares Joseph’s dilemma to the present state of the Irish Church. He makes one key statement on p. 164. *If the Catholic Church in Ireland is to come to new life, then we need to find ways of permitting the God who makes all things new bring us home by another road.* This is a powerful and thought-provoking statement.

How long has the Irish Church been on the ‘wrong road’? How many within the Irish Church still believe, barring hiccups, that they are still on the right road? It is safe to say that a major change in direction came with Vatican II. Documents, including ‘Lumen Gentium’ brought the laity under the umbrella of Priesthood. There was then great optimism that the Church was moving into the modern world, driven by the Spirit of God. Individual bishops returned to their respective countries, imbued with the message of the Council. Alas, not all. It is alleged that John Charles McQuaid, the most powerful prelate in the land had a message for the Irish Church. There would be no change.

Side paths were formed by many post Vatican II enthusiasts. There was little enthusiasm from Irish bishops. There were physical changes, like the removal of altar rails, the priest facing the people and the liturgy in the vernacular. The real vision of the Council did not materialise. The pre-Vatican road was resurfaced and the laity kept within its parameters. An educated and enlightened laity, combined with the sex scandals and falling vocations led many to abandon this road. With few exceptions, we have an Irish hierarchy that prays for this road to be full of traffic again, as in the old days. They ceaselessly pray for an increase in vocations to priesthood and religious life and if prayers were answered, then all their concerns for the future of the Church in Ireland would evaporate. In the

1 *The Furrow* 68:158-165 (March 2017)

meantime, they bury themselves beneath the raging sandstorm above, hoping it will pass by. Like Duncan in Macbeth, they do not hear the knell which heralds in the demise of the Irish Church as they know it. I fear the silence of the shepherds more than the silencing of the sheep.

There are many lay people in Ireland who are scripturally and theologically up-to-date. Some of these are even more qualified than those who have a licence to preach and teach God's Word. To this day only licenced members are allowed to preach and they are the clergy. Canon Law forbids the laity from preaching. This becomes much more forceful and permanent if these theologians are women.

For centuries, the Church in Ireland was all powerful. Their presence moved into every aspect of human life. The mores of sexual behaviour dominated their thinking. It was the only sin. As the haloed glow of the 1932 Eucharistic Congress wafted through the future decades of Catholicism, there lurked beneath the shifting sands two seismic forces which lay dormant. Eventually, they surfaced- clerical sex abuse and the treatment of unmarried mothers and their offspring.

Women make up half the world's population. Made in the image of God and equal to the male in every aspect, they have in history been given a hard time. The theology of original sin has done enormous damage to the Church. From the time of Eden, women were regarded as the cause of evil in the world. They were treated as second class, as they are now in many parts of the world. When they 'fell from grace' in becoming pregnant out of wedlock, no questions were asked about the father. There was only one source of action. Denigration and the separation of mother and child. She had to be punished for her sins.

In spite of the sexual scandals, the shadow of clericalism, tainted with misogyny, still hovers. In an all male Church, it would be inconceivable and totally against tradition even to contemplate that the Holy Spirit could flow through the female species. In my opinion, the Church is at a crossroad and it must decide which road to take. To remain as they are will only lead to a cul-de-sac of spiritual barrenness. God is put in a box and many are irked that their God does not answer their prayers for vocations. Like Joseph, to allow God to impinge on their lives means change and change means pain and loss of status. They must allow God to find another road.

The statistics are there for all to see. There is an ageing clerical population; clustering of parishes is not an answer. To keep on the same road with a wing and a prayer, hoping against hope that the tide will turn, is tantamount to saying that the Holy Spirit has

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no say in changing direction and going down another road. There exists a pool of resources among the laity who are willing to inject new life in the Church. But they have no status. They need to be recognised by the Church through their Priesthood. Married men could be ordained to diaconate and priesthood. Married priests, if they wanted to, could be allowed to minister. Women could at least be ordained as deaconesses. The latter, ignored and despised for centuries may be the saving grace for a dying Church.

It is easy to suggest solutions for a new road, but there are enormous barriers. Surprisingly, one of the barriers is the laity itself. As O'Connell says, for many God is *'just an idea'*. Allowing God to enter their lives, as with Joseph, is foreign to them. Being Catholic is retaining and maintaining the church building for Mass, baptisms, confirmation, weddings and above all, funerals. Theological input is minimal. Having been instructed for generations by those who seem to know better, it is no wonder that so many have archaic ideas about God, Jesus and iconic Mariology. When more than once we hear that Jesus was a Catholic or that baby Jesus knew that he was God, or that Mariology is central to Christianity, then there is a need to enlighten the laity and allow them to think for themselves. It is not their fault. At times, I squirm at Sunday Mass while trying to imbibe incoherent waffle from some mainstream clergy who have never read a theological book since ordination. Happily, there are many devoted clergy who keep up-to-date and are in tune with their congregation. The worst scenario are those who rely on the Internet for their homilies. There is no connectivity. Even the Prayer of the Faithful is merely a repetition of generalities with little recognition of the needs affecting the daily lives of their congregation. Most of the laity live in a comfortable zone. There is no grey area. To question archaic dogmas is not heresy. To be able to perceive Jesus as one of us and act on that truth is more important than adhering to doctrines that have passed their sell-by date.

The other impenetrable barrier is clericalism – that ontological separated group, who, by virtue of ordination see themselves as the true 'Alter Christus'. It never entered their theology that the Holy Spirit is not confined to flow through ecclesiastical veins only. For me this Spirit is fighting against the odds. The Church is very reluctant to change. It will have to change to survive. The laity need to be educated in a greater understanding of the Incarnation. It would be a break-through if the clergy took a back seat at the Readings and allowed those informed laity, male and female to inject some life into a dying Church. We desperately need to hear the Good News as the early Christians did. That may be wishful thinking as the wagons have been circled. Time will answer this

question in a few decades. If there are fewer clergy, that is the end of clericalism and we have found another road. It could be the most exciting and exhilarating time for a reborn Church. Like Dorothy, we will have found the Yellow Brick Road. The Spirit is waiting in the wings. Let it fly and hover at will.

Sensus Fidei. Vatican II was a new Pentecost, equipping the Church for the new evangelisation that popes since the council have called for. The council gave a renewed emphasis to the traditional idea that all of the baptised have a *sensus fidei*, and the *sensus fidei* constitutes a most important resource for the new evangelisation. By means of the *sensus fidei*, the faithful are able not only to recognise what is in accordance with the Gospel and to reject what is contrary to it, but also to sense what Pope Francis has called ‘new ways for the journey’ in faith of the whole pilgrim people. One of the reasons why bishops and priests need to be close to their people on the journey and to walk with them is precisely so as to recognise ‘new ways’ as they are sensed by the people. The discernment of such new ways, opened up and illumined by the Holy Spirit, will be vital for the new evangelisation.

– INTERNATIONAL THEOLOGICAL COMMISSION, *Sensu Fidei in the life of the Church*, 2014, #127.