



A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

# *The* FURROW

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## Eucharist: Silence and Healing for the whole Body

February 2018

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*“If one part suffers, every part suffers with it;  
if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.  
Now you are the body of Christ,  
and each one of you is a part of it.”<sup>1</sup>*

Last Spring, as a commission of inquiry looked into the Mother and Baby Home in Tuam<sup>2</sup>, I found myself avoiding the media reports. I was torn between being horrified and heartbroken and I was sure that I could not take any more details. It seemed sensible to avoid reading every article, to evade Joe Duffy’s guests on the radio as they spoke of their pain, and to simply not discuss that which I wasn’t personally involved in or able to change. I was exhausted, and I stepped back.

One evening however, I found myself in a conversation with some women who had given birth as single mothers in the 70s and 80s. None were involved in Tuam specifically, but all were very upset around the topic. Through the intense media coverage, each had found themselves brought back into difficult moments that they had believed they had come to terms with. That ‘bringing back’ was no gentle invitation – one was in a car when a story on the radio brought on panic; another was reduced to tears in a shopping centre; a third hurt by generalised comments at a dinner party. Women who had consciously dealt with their stories, were dragged back into painful places, unable to shut out the triggering voices or insistent debate. They did not wish to bury their stories – they were not looking for pretence or cover up. However, the memories buried deep in their bodies were being fished out

1 1 Corinthians 12:26-27

2 [www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/tuam-mother-and-baby-home-names-of-the-796-children-who-died-1.3008263](http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/tuam-mother-and-baby-home-names-of-the-796-children-who-died-1.3008263)

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suddenly and unskilfully with sharp hooks and they felt wounded and shocked in a noisy competing world. I began to notice the privilege of my ability to shut out the conversation. I began to wonder about my ability to shut out this pain. What was the cost of this careful reticence? What was I saying with my careful, offence-avoiding silence?

In the following few days, after a weekend of newspaper debate about the Tuam revelations, I was a participant at three public celebrations of the Eucharist in different parts of the island. Despite strikingly relevant Gospels, about temptations<sup>3</sup> and about our obligation to treat ‘the least’ as Christ, not one prayer of the faithful or homily referred directly to the Mother and Children’s Homes scandal that was engulfing our national news cycle.

At the third Mass, surrounded by believers from across the island, I found myself hurt, upset and tearful; I wondered if I would break into the respectable silence, asking why we could speak and pray for migrants as ‘the least of these’ but not mention any of those affected by the ‘Mothers and Children’s Homes stories? It could not surely be true that a small rural parish, a diverse international group and a leadership gathering, all simultaneously forgot to include this great wound, from any angle at all, in the celebration of the Eucharist?

What was being embodied in this silence in three very different spaces? Was it really so impossible to name the pain that was on every radio and newspaper? Were we so jaded by the tears of women and children, that it was just not important enough anymore to name it at Eucharist? Were we simply separate individuals in private prayer in the same room that did not need to name our prayers aloud? Where was the reliance on Christ present in Eucharist for transformation, healing and renewal?

Where was the challenge of incarnation: that all God-created is sacred, dignified and in our stewardship? All life, all experiences, all memories – sacred and in our care.

Who do we trust so little with this real and aching running wound of broken women and children in this country – one another or God? Someone afterwards assured me that it was probably only forgetfulness; but surely the privilege of being able to forget or ignore was itself telling? Many a victim of sexual abuse, re-traumatised by the visceral accounts rushing at them from every form of media that week would have dearly appreciated such skills of shutting out or forgetting at times.

The skill of not weeping in public, the ability to deal with it at a more appropriate moment: we who could compartmentalise needed to look hard at why these seemed like ‘good gifts’.

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3 Matthew 4:1-11

## EUCHARIST: SILENCE AND HEALING FOR THE WHOLE BODY

I don't think it was forgetfulness, of course; I think it was so awful that no one wanted to be the person to name the 'elephant in the room', so we settled for respectable martyrdom. We offered it up. We said nothing for fear of saying the wrong thing. Yet, silence has been our ruination in Ireland: Respectable reasonable silence. How can we heal that which we can't, or won't, bring to prayer as a community? How can we transform as the Body of Christ if we don't trust one another, and God, with the prayer of our real lives when we gather for Eucharist?

Even after that week, I could not find a way to sensibly articulate my hurt among my Mass-going brothers and sisters. I wanted to ask why this was reduced to a historical 'women's issue', or a 'Tuam story' – when in fact it was impacting on current generations, and indicted the whole system of family life and community on this island. Pregnant girls didn't arrive or leave in a vacuum to the many such Mother and Children's Homes in Ireland, and women in their 50s, 60s and 70s were still today finding themselves weeping in shopping centre parking lots. Yet, every attempt in the days that followed was met with well intentioned 'whataboutery' and neat logic; so I stopped trying and became silent myself.

Respectable reasonable silence. Nothing healed, just the appearance of order restored.

Which of course it wasn't. The hurt had fish-hooked deep into my bones, there to remain,

### IN-TURNING

I once read an old definition of sin - that of *turning in on ourselves*. When we turn in on ourselves we become self-absorbed and lose our connections with God and with one another. Whether in words or in passivity, this self-absorption carries a sense of being a victim, alone and in despair. The self-absorbed are clear that this is about them, not others, and so they sometimes are more offended by others shouting than by the blood on the floor. Turning in on ourselves removes the risk of engagement to the point of removing vitality itself from our bones.

I found myself, at these celebrations, wondering if we were turning in on ourselves. With respect and with love, I wondered if the impact of the Eucharistic celebration was being reduced by this not-naming of the real hurts among us, by this ability to not mention the unmentionable – here, at our most transformational and united moment as the Body of Christ.

Eucharist is not about safety or going back. It is a moment of recognition that Christ who was present at Creation, at the Last Supper, Calvary and in the garden with Mary of Magdalene – this Christ is fully present here. This means that we are not separate

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from the world's challenges when we meet; we mediate the world in and through Eucharist; we understand who we are, and who we are called to be: Christ's hands and feet in this time and place.

If we can block out the pain, we can block out the possibility too. We can stay in the shallow end, treading water instead of diving in.

### TURNING OUT

Tuam, of course, is not just about one place or one moment. It's now a symbol of so many more places and so much more buried hurts. Many of those now wounded were never in Tuam, but the discussion of that particular place has triggered many and varied memories, perhaps long buried but now raw, aching and visible. That pain is not going away.

There is a temptation to deal with such historical pain as simply a matter of factual evidence. For instance a friend explained with great kindness to me that the images we had of girls with shaven heads were, of course, not real, as the Homes had record sheets showing the purchase of hairbrushes. True; though they also had factual reports of girls choosing to enter those Homes voluntarily and apparently freely signing off on adoptions, though these facts are now known to often be untrue.

What I know it this: there is a howl from the belly of Ireland that seems to be triggered again and again. Ignoring or relativizing it is not working, so while it's tempting to turn-in; this would be a mistake. This howl is not about some dry facts about what did or did not happen. It is about how we – as a people – own our excruciating pain. For, as Richard Rohr reminds us 'if we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it.'<sup>4</sup>

Turning out to others is frightening – the discussions of Tuam have not always been fair to everyone, and some feel we cannot risk ourselves anymore. Like I wanted the privilege of withdrawing from the hard conversations, many feel that it isn't fair to ask us, as a church, to give any more of ourselves.

Maybe that's why it's time to ask ourselves a question about fairness: So what? So what if we, like the weeping women, are not able to ignore what is happening – what then? So what if history is not fair on us all, what will we do anyway? So what will we do now, as the Body of Christ in our land? So what does all this mean for how we celebrate Eucharist now?

4 Richard Rohr, "Transforming our Pain", <https://cac.org/transforming-our-pain-2016-02-26/> "Healthy religion, almost without realizing it, shows us what to do with our pain, with the absurd, the tragic, the nonsensical, the unjust. If we do not transform our pain, we will most assuredly transmit it. If we cannot find a way to make our wounds into sacred wounds, we invariably give up on life and humanity"

## EUCCHARIST: SILENCE AND HEALING FOR THE WHOLE BODY

Pope Francis's metaphor of a field hospital springs to mind when we think of turning out:

"The thing the church needs most today is the ability to heal wounds and to warm the hearts of the faithful; it needs nearness, proximity. I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugars! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. Heal the wounds, heal the wounds ... And you have to start from the ground up."<sup>5</sup>

In the last decades we have worked hard to clarify facts honestly and to bring justice to our unjust history. We have offered good field hospitals to those suffering and in need. It has been important work, and it must always continue.

However, we all know the difference between treating a wounded limb and building a healthy body. Initially we need to fix the specific hurt, but if we want long term health we need to consider the whole body and its health.

So is now the time to acknowledge the 'high cholesterol', affecting not just some wounded places but the whole Body of Christ? The silences, the systemic or familial abuse did not wound just one person at a time: whole families relationships were affected, whole communities defined. This hurt has remained in our body across generations, like a virus appearing without warning in weakened limbs or tired muscles – a howl to shock, or a tut-tut to silence, just when we thought it was safe to move on. This wound affects how we talk about difficult topics together, how we value feelings or experiences, how we treat each other, how we survive or how we offer it up.

Can we acknowledge the long term hurt created by institutional and family violence, in order to honestly begin the longer journey to the healing of a people? Can we turn out, scary as that may be, and stand in the sunlight as one people, acknowledging the paleness or health of ourselves as a Body, in order to really heal? I believe that the Body of Christ can and will heal, if we are willing to acknowledge that it is not just some who are wounded, but the whole Body that is in need of justice and healing. If we bring it all to God, not just the very best and very worst bits!

One simple way of turning out is to be more open when we pray together.

5 Interview by Antonio Spadaro, S.J. with Pope Francis, 'A Big Heart Open to God'. *America Magazine*, Sept 2013. [www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis](http://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2013/09/30/big-heart-open-god-interview-pope-francis)

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- How might we bring our real stories, our pain and our needs, in prayer at Eucharist? How might we acknowledge family and community life in all its complexities, injustices and joy?
- How might we, as local faith communities, acknowledge and accompany those dealing with unresolved trauma in our midst? Not as separate individuals in need of private help, but acknowledge that as long as some of us hurt, the whole Body is wounded and in need of healing.
- How might we acknowledge our own personal and institutional pain, so that we might bring it to Christ for transformation?

### TRANSFORMATION

Remember the three experiences of Mass that broke my heart? The following week I was back in two of those places for a weekly celebration of Eucharist.

In one, the prayers of the faithful and the homily reflected a gentle concern and inclusion which was welcome.

In the second, a powerful homily was hugely healing for me personally. The celebrant acknowledged that many might prefer not to speak of Tuam, or of the many family stories that had been left unspoken. However, he felt it was important to acknowledge the damage, hurt and pain caused when we put some people out; when we made some people so unacceptable to our society that we even buried them separately for fear of contamination.

Then, even though it was Lent, he brought out the Paschal Candle and placed it between the ambo and altar, lighting it. He brought into the centre of our celebration every child and adult who were put outside; left out; abandoned; forgotten. He included every one, and asked forgiveness for the hurt that had been done.

In my bench, I noticed how this simple action helped me heal. I noted the silence of a people unused to naming such things, and I wondered what we might look like over time if we kept letting the Lord transform and heal us. Afterwards I thanked him; not just for what he said and did, but for staying with the pain for a whole week and for being willing to name it, when it might have been easier to say ‘but I missed the moment’.

It was not perfect, but it was good and honest and kind. It was a breaking of silence that created a possibility for growth, a letting go of the privilege of ignoring the pain people live with. Moments like this, together at Eucharist, can only help us as we allow God to transform and heal the whole Body of Christ. Moments like this, possible in every parish, light a way.

*Take down your lantern from its niche and go out.  
You may not dwell in firelight certainties  
Secure from drifting fog of doubt and fear.  
You may not build yourself confining wall and say:  
‘Thus far, and thus, and thus far shall I walk,  
And these things shall I do and nothing more.’  
Go out!  
For need calls loudly in the winding lanes  
And you must seek Christ there.  
Your pilgrim hear shall urge you one pace beyond  
And love shall be your lantern flame.<sup>6</sup>*

6 <http://www.presentationsisterssf.org/nanopoem.htm>

**Why Lent?** A friend of mine from the Lutheran tradition has a very interesting question about the Catholic Lent. ‘Why do you need to do these things once a year – why don’t you do all these things all year’? I must say I had no answer.

– ALAN HILLIARD, *Dipping into Lent*, Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2017, p.44.