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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Michael A. Conway

## The Transmission of Faith

May 2018

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I'd like to explore some dimensions of the transmission of faith in our culture that have an impact on ministry and its future.<sup>1</sup> The processes of transmission are in flux at present, and this has led to new dynamics that need to be critically assessed. This paper is an initial attempt to name and reflect on just some of what is taking place.

## A CHANGE IN TRANSMISSION

Traditionally faith passed from one generation to the next in a fairly 'natural' process of transmission. If parents were Catholic, for example, then it followed automatically that children were 'brought up in the faith.' There was an inbuilt dynamic of faith life that ensured that children were socialized from within the Church community via the triad of family, school, and parish. It caused great discomfort and anxiety for parents if at some point their adult children rejected this transmission of faith. This was sometimes the case, for example, when, in opposing a parental worldview, adolescents would reject religious practice (as could have been expected). It was a stressful issue in families, when, for example, teenagers refused to go to mass or partake in family prayer, and so on. I worked in a city parish over twenty years ago, and, at that time, it was common, for example, for boys to stop going to Church when they were between 14 and 15 years; curiously, at the time, it did not impact girls in quite the same way. This rupture, however, almost always presupposed a stable parental religious world-view and a definite desire to transmit faith. Very often, after a few turbulent years, young adults would, indeed, appropriate faith and practice for themselves, and a degree of stability would be restored.

1 Material from this article was presented at the Tuam Diocesan In-service, *Seeds for a New Harvest: Resources for and from Contemporary Culture*, Hotel Westport, Westport, Co. Mayo, 18 October 2017; and at the Raphoe Diocesan Clergy Gathering, *Rediscovering Ourselves in God*, Manor House Country Hotel, Killadeas, Enniskillen, 24 October 2017.

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## THE FURROW

These dynamics are now changing. Many parents are less and less comfortable with socializing their children from within the exclusive framework of the Church as was done in the past. The main reasoning behind this emerging attitude is a new appreciation of religious freedom and the choice that expresses and realizes this freedom. Increasingly, parents wish that their children would enjoy complete freedom either from religion or in choosing the expression of religion that is best for them, when they eventually come to choose.<sup>2</sup> It reflects an important good in contemporary culture, when it is a matter of religion and faith.

Part of the reason behind this significant change in perspective is a serious reservation around the latent violence that religion might harbour, express, and, even, utilize. Church and religion are no longer the innocent place that they were perceived to be by earlier generations. A certain naivety has been left behind. We are in a situation, where, increasingly, would be transmitters of the faith are themselves having grave reservations about what it is that they might transmit. I suspect that the greater the gap is between the Church and the ambient culture, the more disquiet that parents have in transmitting faith. It marks out a deep concern at many levels: relational, emotional, psychological, sexual, and even spiritual.

It means, now, of course, that the great anxiety that you find in an older generation of parents about passing on the faith to their children is no longer there for younger parents; it simply is not an issue for them. Religion is something that is firmly based on freedom; it is something you choose; and it is this element of personal freedom that now comes to be of supreme importance in matters to do with religion. It can no longer be neglected, even for adolescents and children. Clearly any religion that cannot acknowledge, respect, and, indeed, promote such freedom has little hope of being a real engaging presence in our culture. It means that each person has to discover his or her own link to the Christian tradition and find an appropriate way of expressing it, which in the future will be more diverse. Charles Taylor speaks of the 'nova effect' to capture this idea of spiralling variation in the expression of religiosity in our culture.<sup>3</sup>

### FIGURES OF FAITH

The usual way that we explore and think about religion and religious practice in our culture is to consider them according to a model of

2 One difficulty with this position is that learning and discovering our religious identity is a little like living in and learning a language; there is a real sense in which one does not choose one's native tongue. It is a first expression; after which one can go on, indeed, to learn other languages. But the first is vital in terms of the existential connection to communicating at all.

3 See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University, 2007), 297-419.

concentric circles: the innermost circle is made up of those who have been socialized in the Church environment, who regularly attend mass, and who are the backbone of the parish life; then in the next band, so to speak, there are those who attend Church occasionally, who desire that their children would be catechised and educated in the Church (and who are still, probably, in the majority in Ireland); then there are those who go to Church only for funerals or when invited to weddings so that the institutional Church does not really have any great role to play in their lives; and the outermost circle is made up of those who know very little about the workings of the Church, and who may even be hostile towards it.

This way of looking at faith, spirituality, and religion in our culture is becoming more and more limited as a way of understanding what is taking place. When we use such a model, we see really only what we are looking for, and we miss out on many other dimensions that might be important and worth discovering. In fact how you look determines what you discover. The problem with this way of exploring religion is that it is based on the principle that a particular form of religious practice is the norm; and everything to do with religion is evaluated against this norm. It might well be an adequate way of approaching faith and religion for those who are, say, over-sixty; but it certainly permits very little understanding of those who are under this age. Both Charles Taylor and Danièle Hervieu-Léger propose that a good way of capturing and understanding the dynamics of faith in our culture is to attend to the figures of the 'pilgrim' and the 'convert.'<sup>4</sup>

#### THE 'PILGRIM'

There is extraordinary fluidity in the manner in which each person now achieves a sense of identity. It is no longer the case of there being an ideal form that you step into and take on; nor of there being a number of standard places, one of which you take up; nor, for that matter, a specific authority that might assign you your place, be it in culture, Church, or society. There is no solid structure that predates you and to which you are beholden. There are, of course, necessities in life, but, even here, the element of consent to these necessities is now a critical one.

In the past identity was built on established stabilities; now many of these stabilities, including the stability of ideas, are themselves subject to the movements of culture. This means that more than ever identity is constructed against a background that is

<sup>4</sup> See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 505-35, 728-72, et al; and Danièle Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti, la religion en mouvement* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999). These are, to some degree, ideal types that help in understanding; they do not apply literally to anyone.

## THE FURROW

in movement. This means that your identity, who you are, is less a noun and much more a verb: I am in the process of identifying, who I am for myself and for others. My life is a moving story; not a monumental statue! This is what 'twitter' and 'snapchat' capture so well. To put this in other language: I am a pilgrim. And it is no surprise that the idea of pilgrimage is very attractive in our culture; even to those who have no real interest in religion in a conventional form. People will undertake the Camino de Santiago or even closer to home, climb Croagh Patrick, for all kinds of reasons – some religious, some cultural, some social, and some just in order to experience the experience. The pilgrim is that figure that makes his or her way, alone, even if part of a group, on a path that he or she chooses in order to seek and discover something personal, something that can be named as authentic, and something that will help in establishing meaning in life. It is a journey with stages; to a greater degree you choose the path; you may skip some stages that are not for you; you may abandon the path for a while; you may take it up at a later stage; or you may go down a different path.

## THE 'CONVERT'

The 'convert' is the person who chooses his or her religion. We have gone from a religion of obligation to a religion of choice, and the convert is the person who has chosen freely to live his or her religion. They even choose in their choosing so as to seek out a religious path that best serves their own sense of who they are. This is now the case even if you have been brought up in a faith community and family, and you wish to continue living in that same tradition. You still must choose for yourself; that element of choosing, and choosing deliberately, is now essential. It reflects an adult appropriation of your own spiritual identity.

This choosing can be done in one of two ways; one, positive, the other, negative. The positive version is a choice for the richness of the life of faith, while at the same time respecting other options and other journeys; in particular, in respecting the other person who may choose differently. It is positive in terms of the self; and it is positive in terms of the other. This basic way of choosing in time facilitates dialogue and mutual cooperation at the level of culture, where one's faith commitment does not give one any privileged status vis-à-vis the other (either explicitly or surreptitiously).

Over against this, the negative option is a choice for the life of faith that claims exclusivity as if it were the only expression of truth. It does not really respect the choice of the other, when it really is other. It appropriates the transcendent to itself and claims to be authorized to speak in the place of God. It is obliquely oppressive of the other. Roddy Doyle, who rejects the faith of

his upbringing, captures something of this dynamic, when he observes that in Ireland you need to tell religion to back off in order 'to protect your own agnostic space.'<sup>5</sup> I would even suggest that sometimes from within the Church, you have to protect your own Christian or interior space; and you have to tell others to back off! This way of choosing – this negative version – is the form that creates a religious sect; you have 'us' and 'them.' It places the other on the outside and the self on the inside, together with whomever is perceived to be like-minded. It builds a boundary wall to both separate and protect. It has fear at its foundation: fear of the other, fear of the self at the level of identity, fear of loss, and, ultimately, fear of God.

The 'convert' and the 'pilgrim' are the two major figures for the contemporary European person, who seeks out religion, who searches the path of faith, and who wishes to develop a personal spirituality. On the one hand, the idea of being a pilgrim is appealing because it encapsulates movement, unfolding, dynamism, open-endedness, journey, and so on. And all this sits well in our culture, where personal autonomy, freedom, and change are so important. On the other hand, the idea of being a convert is appealing because it encapsulates stability, belonging, community, and personal challenge. These two figures do not necessarily contradict one another. Both can accommodate the other; and both can learn from the other. It is worth remarking that the element of freedom, personal identity, and singularity are central to both of them.

The dominant paradigm in our culture is that of being a pilgrim. In France, for example, there is an increase in the number of 'conversions' to Catholicism; but the new 'converts' remain 'pilgrims.'<sup>6</sup> I do not think that it is any longer possible to be a convert or a pilgrim in an uncritical way. That naivety of living simply in a pre-given religious world, the enchanted world (of Max Weber), is fading for the European mind and will only be available for a short time more and for a very small number of people. The register will be different; we can speak with Paul Ricoeur of inhabiting religion through a 'second naivety,' where everything is more critical, more deliberate, more personal, open to change, to growth, and to a more adventurous understanding of what it is to live a faith-led life.<sup>7</sup>

It would seem to me that it is vital for any Church community of the future to be able to welcome, engage with, and accompany both of these figures. And our pastoral practice and ministry would now

5 Caramine White, *Reading Roddy Doyle* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 39. The author is somewhat more colourful in his injunction.

6 See Hervieu-Léger, *Le pèlerin et le converti*.

7 See, for example, Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 352.

## THE FURROW

need to be directed at meeting them; and, of course, not excluding either of them. It will mean realizing more clearly the reality that the Christian community itself is a pilgrim community; and this not as a strategy of survival, but as a fundamental conviction that welcomes the new and moves (the pilgrimage) in company with the journey of all humanity.<sup>8</sup> To be a pilgrim is to travel, to leave, to go out, to be disturbed, to learn, to change, to accompany, to support, and so on. It is to leave behind seeing and understanding the Church as stable, superior, all-knowing, counter, and above; and seeing it, rather, as journeying, together, learning, at one with, grounded, and below. As opposed to striving to impose uniformity, it would be to value and appreciate difference and diversity of thought, of action, and of celebration as goods to be welcomed and not as problems to be overcome.

### CONFLICTED IDENTITY

In the context of these cultural dynamics, it is significant that a small, but highly visible, number of young adults are choosing forms of religion that are exceptionally intense and that would appear to be very traditional. It is no doubt reactionary. Recently, I concelebrated at a wedding, and the relatively young priest (relative to me that is!), who did a very fine job of presiding, spoke the institution narrative directly and deliberately into the chalice as in pre-Council rubrics. It is interesting to observe this phenomenon from the perspective of the culture. There are a growing number of young people, who display variants of this same phenomenon. It does not mean that people are returning to a traditional form of religion. This, in any case, would be impossible. Rather, they are creating something new; they re-appropriate the markers, language, and customs of a (perceived) traditional identity and fashion from this material a new identity.

It is a thoroughly post-modern dynamic; fully in line with contemporary culture. Ironically, in thinking that they are doing something different; they are, in fact, doing the same as everyone else. They create an identity out of carefully chosen bits and pieces of the past just like their peers in the wider culture. Of course, older priests will easily spot the components that they are quite happy to leave behind in history! These young people raid the past to borrow from it a heterogeneous range of ideas, forms of dress, priestly mores, and so on, in order to fabricate a structure of identity in the present. When you first encounter and experience this, you are liable to have a range of reactions and emotions, that might include being perplexed or, even, finding it utterly ridiculous; but,

8 It is noteworthy that the Greek word for church, *ecclesia*, is a word of motion: it refers to those on the journey who respond to the herald's proclamation.

really, they are just following the commands of the culture. Like their peers they are creating their own identity. And, we should remember, that they, too, like their contemporaries, are, for the most part, pilgrims, who have arrived at best at a temporary halting site; and, therefore, can move again, and change, and grow. That is their challenge.

On the other hand, if they have ‘converted’ to an extreme stance in this regard; then, the matter is much more serious; and it is an issue for everyone in a presbyterate or a community. This is equally the case if such candidates present for seminary formation.

The first thing that needs to be said is that this form of religiosity has little to do with faith and religion per se; it is a cultural phenomenon that at its core is reactionary; in particular, it is reacting to the secularising tendencies in the culture. It asserts a form of public religiosity in the face of a culture that is judged no longer to give room to religion, or, perhaps better, to a particular expression of religion, especially in the public square. That this is the case is clear, when you realize that the identical dynamics can be found in Islam, in the various other Christian churches, and in Jewish communities. It is not specific to any faith. In addition, it is a phenomenon that has emerged in a specific cultural context: namely, liberal Western democracy. In terms of the Catholic Church in Ireland the phenomenon has emerged in about the last fifteen years or so and is reactionary not just from within the wider culture, but also from within the Church itself, where it is presented as saving the reality of religion from what are perceived to be destructive developments in the post-Council era. It has not yet taken the most extreme form of the ‘integrist’ that you find, say, in France, connected originally with Bishop Marcel Lefebvre, although there are indicators that we might well be on the way to having to deal with such a position in terms of mind-set and ministry.

Now in the context of this reflection, I cannot go into any great detail around these dynamics; and there is, indeed, much that needs to be said. I will, rather, limit myself to some basic observations.

The first thing that you notice for those who adopt this position is that there is very little real engagement with the complexity of the Christian tradition or any real sense of the historical or cultural character of the Church’s journey in and through time. The position invents its own version of ‘tradition’ that draws heavily on the ecclesial world of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> It is not a return to the Tradition of the Church in any rich sense of that term as understood, say, in *Dei Verbum*, which, itself, reflects the great movement of *ressourcement* that we had prior, during,

9 Now, increasingly, fed by websites (themselves, ideologically construed).

and subsequent to the Council.<sup>10</sup> Neither is it nostalgia in a living sense for the pre-conciliar Church for the obvious reason that for the most part there is no real, living connection to that reality. Rather, what we have is a staging of elements of our religious past, a fabrication that is made up of features drawn from earlier models of priesthood and Church life that are now put on display in the present as a feature of identity. It is this that we need to understand.

What you find in a nutshell is a kind of exhibitionism, whereby religious markers are used to assert an identity as belonging to a certain group over against the 'other' (and there are variants on this 'other'). These markers are signs of separation, of purity, of privilege, and even of power. The idea of display, of being seen, of being visually assertive is very important to this mind-set. You are meant to look and see: the difference, the superior, and, even, the sublime.

To my mind, it is akin to a spectacle that you might have at the Galway Arts Festival. I was in France last summer and I attended a medieval pageant in the grounds of a splendid castle in Normandy, with knights, horses, falconry, jousting, hunting, and medieval -music, -cooking, and -pottery. It was magnificent; all of it was artificial, of course. After a while you realized that the chainmail that the knights were wearing was made of a modern polyamide that looked like metal; the wonderful background noise of the medieval world was coming from loudspeakers that were hidden discretely in the trees; and it was clear that the majestic Irish Wolfhounds never did a day's hunting in their lives – the only thing that they seemed to react to was ice cream! It is make-believe, or, better, wanting to make others believe or, maybe even, a desperate wanting-to-believe.

Why is the element of display so important? Simply, because we live in a culture of display, image, and spectacle! Self-presentation is the life-blood of contemporary identity. The basic rule is that if you do not see it, if it is not displayed in public, or if you do not display it in person; then, it does not exist! Now, every moment must be captured, communicated, tweeted, re-tweeted, forwarded, put up on facebook and instagram, liked by as many people as possible, and shared with friends in order to be experienced. And that is the key. What's the point in standing at the Cliffs of Moher if you can't let everyone know that you are there, while you're there! What's the point in being, say, a priest, if everyone cannot see this state (or maybe even status) that you enjoy! And for this, of course, you have to have signifiers that communicate this reality:

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10 See Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

costumes, logos, signs, particular ways of doing things, specific stances, etc. Experience itself is shaped and experienced through the being-made-visible: *exhibeo ergo sum!* (I display, therefore, I am). To be is to display! To display or not to display is not yet the question! This is all part of the one dynamic: the book is judged by the cover; and the clothes do make the man (or woman)!

This need to display is also connected to another contemporary value; namely, the command to be true to oneself. If I am to be authentic, then, of course, I must display my identity in public. Everyone must know and recognise who I am. It is, literally, vital that I am vocal and expressive of my identity, particularly, in those places, where it is different from others. This is what I stand for and, therefore, assert. It doesn't really matter what it is that I think or have to say: it is enough for me to believe it! This is how it is, full stop. There is little sense of growth, progress, and learning. There is no real recognition that others may have travelled the road before you, and it would be wise to listen to them. There is no sense of engagement, struggle, discernment, discovery, loss, and gain. There is no sense of belonging to a community of mind that would require reflecting together in order to arrive at an expression of the truth that might be appropriate for our times. The most that is accepted in this regard would be engaging with a group of those who are like-minded! And such groups now exist.

And there's an important clue: life is controlled, directed, and lived through an ideology (the like-mindedness); this is an addiction that captures the human spirit in just as ferocious a fashion as might gambling, alcohol, or an opiate. It is frightening to observe this dynamic of religious ideology colonising the human spirit. The addiction itself completely enslaves the mind. The difficult task of (theological) thinking, and searching, and understanding is simply dismissed and ignored! The critical intellectual moment is completely suppressed; or, better, repressed, if it does not match the fixed ideas of the ideological stance. The fundamental ground on which one stands is, needs be, a defensive one, as if one were literally standing for God in a Godless world. It is as close as you can get to idolatry in practice (and, in saying that, I am abstracting from it the question of culpability). Thomas Merton, for example, speaks of 'a form of unconscious idolatry, centred upon the illusion of a fixed idea, in which we place our trust,' and he explains: 'This idea may be true in itself, but the violence of our own will gives it a disproportionate place in our own interior life. So it becomes an idol, drawing to itself the worship and attention and trust that we owe to God Alone.'<sup>11</sup>

The most worrying factor is that it creates a pseudo or even false

11 See Thomas Merton, *No man is an Island* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 224.

## THE FURROW

identity. This, in time, may not be able to withstand the vicissitudes of life, particularly when one realizes that it fabricates a sort of parallel order that gradually is disconnected from the ambient world. It is alienated from, and it alienates, other Christians (even colleagues, family, and friends); it is alienated from, and it alienates, peers (who at best find it amusing, at worst deranged); when it is operative among young priests it is alienated from, and it alienates, older priests (who are often quite perplexed by what they are witnessing); and, most seriously of all, it is alienated from, and it alienates, the person's own interiority. Because you have already arrived, there is no room for growth, for discernment, for formation, for change, and, indeed, for adventure.

Henry David Thoreau astutely observes that 'Not till we are lost ... do we begin to find ourselves.'<sup>12</sup> There is no sense that redemption itself is a process, whereby we are transformed gradually and in a thoroughly human way by a living and loving relationship with our God.<sup>13</sup> In its place you find a terrible inflexibility that is balanced on a knife-edge between 'all' or 'nothing.' This dualism is dangerous; and many implode eventually under its tutelage. It masks the complexity and the ontological depths of the human person. In its extremism, it turns life itself into a very cold place, with little real connection, or compassion, or care. It is death masquerading as life.

This stance is often marked by a double aggression in terms of the ambient culture and the wider Church life: one external and the other internal. On the one hand, the external aggression is directed at the culture, denouncing, in an inflated fashion, anything in it that does not correspond to a very narrow understanding of religious life and faith.<sup>14</sup> You are more likely, for example, to hear yoga being condemned in public, than hearing any constructive discourse on the problems of, say, housing and homelessness, or the plight of refugees, or dealing with financial worries, all of which are real concerns for many in our society. (And, ironically, sometimes a little bit of yoga can actually help!). On the other hand, the internal aggression is directed at those from within the Church, who are considered to have betrayed the 'true meaning' of faith and are accused of watering down the transcendent (as if the incarnation were not real). There is little appreciation of the enormous work done by older priests (and, indeed, by lay people), who have given their lives to ministry. There is, remarkably, no concern with dismantling the power-over structures that have emerged in ecclesial life and that are a counter-witness to the

<sup>12</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, The Village.

<sup>13</sup> This is the fundamental meaning of the incarnation.

<sup>14</sup> This is akin to that 'view from nowhere' that would permit one to know and judge everything; it is to stand in a place that is absolute (which would be that of God).

gospel. Pope Francis's message of openness and mercy: well, it's not appreciated, and, in some cases, he is even presented as leading the Church astray!

In terms of ministry it is particularly serious in that it traps the person in a world-view that is utterly disconnected from the challenges and tasks of living in, and with, our contemporary culture. Like all addictions, it creates a parallel world of fictional proportions. When such a view of religion is taken as the substance of the life of faith, it is dangerous not only for oneself, but also for others. It is perilous for oneself in that it can completely arrest the dynamic of interior growth and connection with one's own humanity in all its breadth (physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual); and it is dangerous for others in that it proffers irresponsible and woefully simplistic religious answers to the complex questions of contemporary life. It is interesting that the French writer Marguerite Duras observes that 'every attempt to simplify human conscience (or consciousness) has something fascist in it.'<sup>15</sup> This is a severe statement, but it captures a fundamental truth.

What you get, in fact, is a kind of ex-carnation of the life of faith, where what is staged in the external forum is valued in a dysfunctional way over interior disposition, theological learning, personal growth, one's own faith journey, pastoral discretion, solitude, etc. Values such as modesty, prudence, self-effacement, and humility speak for a certain priority of the interior forum over public expression; it is to know the importance of *humilitas* (being grounded!) over arrogance; of 'being' over 'display.' What is really missing is an appreciation of that 'invisibility' that is expressed simply in discrete service and love of neighbour, which is the heart of ministry, and something that you do not put on show. Ultimately, it is, I believe, a primordial cry for certainty that has its roots in the rage against mortality.

As yet, it has no sense of the very heart of the Christian economy, where – through the greatest irony of all – death itself is the place of resurrection and new life. It is still on the outside of the life of faith; it has not yet learned to live within it.

I would like to finish with a poem that captures some dimensions of that pre-conciliar world that as a Church we have left behind us; definitively. It is by Francis Harvey (1925-2014), who was born in Enniskillen and, for most of his life, lived in the diocese of Raphoe. It is called *The Redemptorists of my Youth* (and you might just notice the attention paid to the visual and the element of display).

15 Marguerite Duras, *La passion suspendue: Entretiens avec Leopoldina Pallotta della Torre* (Paris: Du Seuil, 2013), 30.

THE FURROW

**The Redemptorists of my Youth**

By Francis Harvey

They had one-track minds and declamatory hands;  
they were superb actors in a dying or dead tradition  
not unaware of the dramatic impact of a black biretta  
flourished above a bowed head.

They strode like soldiers into embattled  
pulpits and wore crucifixes like swords  
at their waists. Their invocations were

trumpet calls to battle against the world,  
the flesh and the devil and each flickering candle  
in our hands was a faggot lit  
to burn another heretic. They flushed  
sin from the coverts of our souls with fear

and drove God's sacred plover crying  
into the upland rain  
where it remains.

**A 'Dangerous Book'**. Every revolution needs a unifying reference point. Ireland's rising had the 1916 Proclamation, Mao Zedong had his 'little red book' and the civil rights movement had Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech. Each struggle against injustice, it seems, is encapsulated in a moment that pierces a hole in the prevailing logic. In the fight against climate change and environmental destruction, Pope Francis' encyclical has rapidly become that central rallying cry – and lays out a road map for a just and sustainable society.

– LORNA GOLD, in *Laudato Si': An Irish Response*, (Sean McDonagh, Ed.), Dublin: Veritas, 2017, p. 91.