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Séamus Lillis

“Who is not
at the Table?”

– *The Exceptional
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Séamus Lillis

The inauguration of Parish Pastoral Councils (PPCs) was radical. Among organisations of charitable status, PPCs are uniquely different, though that distinction is not yet fully appreciated. On first sight, these councils potentially represented a new, additional and organised resource in parishes throughout Ireland. PPCs were sometimes mistakenly viewed as being an appendage, focused on consultation instead of being interpreted as a leading, driving-force in realising Vatican II’s vision of the Church. At present PPCs are largely unremarked upon by secular society and their potential awaits further development.

A NEW INCOMPARABLE MOVEMENT?

Viewed as a countrywide movement, which has yet to organise itself nationally, there is potentially an Ireland-wide organisation of PPCs in the making, committed to living the Gospel and to caring for all, and particularly the poor. In this context, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) – also a parish-based organisation - comes to mind as a prototype that reliably indicates the future organisational potential of PPCs, albeit from a secular perspective. Do our PPCs – also intrinsically parish-based – in the future expect to be both a major stimulus and an effective process for transformation? These competencies – if they are to be realised – are dependent on the active and committed support of contemporary Church leadership. I have worked for over two decades in civic community development and with non-government organisations (NGOs), i.e. the voluntary sector. More recently, I engaged with PPCs in urban and rural dioceses. I did so because I initially thought that my experience with the voluntary sector would be demonstrably relevant to and would complement the work of PPCs. In this I was mistaken; this article addresses and outlines the reasons why.

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CORE APPROACH TO CIVIC NGOS AND TO COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

A dependable method I rely upon with civic communities and NGOs is to deploy challenging questions that consistently deliver – through purposeful conversations – shared values, goals and reliable means of implementation for would-be participants. The following examples from a series of interdependent questions capture the essence of my approach:

1. What is our concern? / Why are we meeting?
2. Why is it our concern?
3. What is the range of initiatives we might take to address our concern?
4. Which initiative will we implement first?
5. Having intervened, can we improve on and learn from this, our first intervention?
6. How will we know we are doing the right thing? / What are our criteria for achieving our goals?
7. Who supports us in this undertaking?

These seven sample questions deliver reliable involvement for the voluntary sector with inbuilt learning ‘on the job’ (see questions 5 and 6). The ensuing conversation dependably achieves the goal of helping participants focus and act upon their jointly expressed concerns and values. However, there is always a danger of ‘group think’ where indisputably like-minded, enthusiastic and dedicated participants in their decision-making become less sensitive to non-participants’ reservations and concerns. To guard against this risk, I usually pose the following additional question: 8. Who is not at the table?

The contrasting answers to this question, when posed to PPCs and to secular NGOs and communities, are a focus of this paper.

Responding to question 8 grounds participants’ plans in the reality of their experienced contexts. In the voluntary sector, apart from disengaged / uninterested citizens, the answers commonly reveal three significant – though absent – influences from the meeting table:

- (1) people opposed to their plans;
- (2) the views of potential funders;
- (3) the obligations and constraints inherent in accepting financial aid from the State and / or its agencies.

Usually, participants – in the light of the answers to question 8 – will radically modify the original draft answers to questions 1-7 above to accommodate the perceived views and requirements of those absent from the table. In these amendments, original plans and principles are subject to negotiation and re-negotiation. In

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reaching a compromise, the voluntary sector may often experience the conflict between their original principles and values and their subsequent negotiated and modified practice on the other. This significant adjustment, directly attributable to the three absent interests above, often has a serious and arguably calamitous effect on the rightful independence of affected participants. Participants commonly pursue a subservient relationship with these absent entities when requesting financial assistance from the public purse or from the equivalent of a foundation, to further their commitment to bring about desirable improvements. This process continues to be overlooked and neglected as a focus of research and critical reflection.

WHO IS NOT AT THE PPC TABLE?

What is the reaction of PPCs to question 8, “Who is not at the Table?” I think it fair to say that none of the usual suspects (dissenters, financial funders and State agencies) that can so adversely affect the voluntary sector, has a major impact on PPCs. Indeed, because of this non-involvement, PPCs enjoy far more liberty and autonomy, when compared to the experiences of the voluntary sector that are so often in thrall to objectors and to the dictates of funding sources intent on overseeing outcomes. This independence of PPCs is a core, unique and prized characteristic.

When it comes to PPCs, the answers to question 8 at first sight might suggest that ‘Nobody of significance’ is missing, somewhat echoing the answers of NGOs and communities. This response is erroneous, particularly for the following reason:

If we acknowledge that the pertinent and most significant answer to “Who is not at the table?” or “Who is at risk of being overlooked?” is Jesus Christ, the Giver of ‘the new commandment’ (Jn 13:34), then this answer radically modifies and amends original draft responses to the initial seven questions above, similarly as when addressed to NGOs and civic communities. Arguably the acknowledged presence of the Lord would prove to be more pivotal in determining adjustments and facilitating transformation to drafted and re-drafted answers to these questions. Responses to His Presence mean that the work and tasks of PPCs, no matter how mundane, cease to be instrumental and can become expressive. An expressive act is ‘...one that I take, not to achieve a goal outside myself but to express a conviction, a leading, a truth that is within me....’¹

The Lord is at the table and Scripture confirms this. Of the many

1 Parker J. Palmer, *The Active Life: A Spirituality of Work, Creativity and Caring*’ Jossey - Base Publishers. San Francisco, 1999, p.11.

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assurances in the Gospels probably the most pertinent for PPCs is in Matthew 18:19-20:

“In like manner, I say to you: if on earth two of you are united in asking for anything, it will be done for them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst.”

These two verses, highlighting reliable Divine involvement, might be cited as a guiding scriptural maxim for PPCs.

A PARADOX

There is a paradox here. It arises from civic communities’, NGOs’ and PPCs’ answers to Question 8: “Who is not at the table?” In the voluntary sector objectors, funders and State agencies are normally absent from the table where decisions are made; nevertheless, their very absence determines and influences the movement of participants towards instrumental activities and to compliance. For PPCs, the Lord is present at the table and strongly influences PPCs in the direction of expressive activities.

CONSEQUENCES OF HIS PRESENCE

“The chief thing that separates us from God is the thought that we are separated from Him. If we get rid of that thought, our troubles will be greatly reduced. We fail to believe that we are always with God and that He is part of every reality.... But we hesitate to believe this until our personal experience gives us confidence to believe in it.... The interior experience of God’s presence activates our capacity to experience Him in everything else – in people, in events, in nature”.²

PPCs should constantly acknowledge, internalize and operate from the presence of Jesus Christ working alongside and in them. At the very kernel of every PPC is a transforming relationship between its members and the Lord. We must discern His wishes. How a PPC discerns that it is implementing His wishes should be a cornerstone of purposeful conversations at PPC meetings. Actively and deliberately ignoring His presence – while not unheard of – would be perverse. There is a prerequisite for appropriate and ongoing spiritual formation and especially for discernment.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, it is possible to disregard, deny, overlook, neglect or be distracted from God’s presence. Some of these practices can occur through being pressed for time at meetings,

2 Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of The Gospel* Amity House, 1986, p.44. (accessed in Rohr, Richard Centre for Action and Contemplation Meditations@cac.org accessed: 22/1/2017)

or because of a heavy agenda, or having a limited perspective on one's own role. Indeed, members who have been head-hunted because of their specific professional, secular qualifications may interpret their roles (as I interpreted my own initially) as being strictly confined to aligning with their profession and thus fail to acknowledge the leadership of Jesus. He modelled and endorsed servant leadership for us (Matt 20: 26-28). Being aware of the presence of Jesus and relating expressively in His presence is a major force for transformation, relevance and accomplishment.

CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE

Since Vatican II, (1962-1965) especially in our understanding of the liturgy, great changes in the Church have occurred in Ireland. Major challenges for the future include: (1) an understanding of the role of the laity in the Church, and (2) a recognition of the Reign of God requiring at parish level an enhanced leadership and pastoral role. These factors re-orientate the hitherto familiar work of the Irish Church from inward looking to an outward focus of welcoming, outreaching and (re)evangelizing.

The vision that Pope Francis has of the Church is one where expressive acts abound within an emergent structure and which ‘goes forth’ and:

‘is a community of missionary disciples who take the first step, who are involved and supportive, who bear fruit and rejoice. An evangelizing community knows that the Lord has taken the initiative, He has loved us first (cf. 1 Jn 4:19), and therefore we can move forward, boldly take the initiative, go out to others, seek those who have fallen away, stand at the crossroads and welcome the outcast. Such a community has an endless desire to show mercy, the fruit of its own experience of the power of the Father's infinite mercy. Let us try a little harder to take the first step and to become involved.’ (*Evangelii Gaudium*: 24)

This, for PPCs is a challenge. This article has attempted to capture my emerging experience and insights as I went from working with the voluntary sector to working with PPCs. I originally had assumed that my earlier work experience with the voluntary sector would be fully transferrable to my work with PPCs. This was action without reflection. Perhaps my most significant insight was the contrast between those absent from the voluntary sector's meetings (question 8) and the transforming presence of the Lord at PPC meetings.