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for Ireland:
*A Returning
Missionary’s View*

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The Challenges for Ireland: *A Returning Missionary's View*

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I continue to see myself as a 'returning missionary' although I am back in Ireland for five years. The reason is that I am still trying to come to grips with the immensity of the changes that have occurred in the intervening thirty or so years.

Just as I was never fully accepted as an Asian despite spending over half a lifetime there, on returning to Ireland people tell me, 'You don't understand,' because I was not here when the events occurred that marked the depth of the change.

However, just as I had to rise to the challenge of trying to appreciate the culture and mind-set of Asia, and be enriched by them, I felt a need to understand how the New Ireland had developed and how I should respond.

The result of my efforts may be seen as those of an outsider but that is a missionary's fate. Whatever value these views have comes from the fact that they are an 'outsider's', those of an on-looker with a difference and hopefully, fresh, perspective.

Being relocated to Ireland, rather than just coming home occasionally on vacation, made me more aware of the impact those changes had made.

While the growing prosperity and speed of secularisation caught my eye, it was the state of the Church that interested me most. A religious powerhouse that for long had huge credibility and respect had become, almost overnight, defensive and fragile. Its vocabulary no longer had meaning for the young, its activities no longer attracted large crowds and you had to be careful with whom you talked about religion.

I was reminded of the shock I experienced in Korea when the forms of Christianity we had so confidently brought out from Ireland were challenged by the time-honoured beliefs, morality and devotional practices of Asia. We found ourselves in a world

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where our certainties were questioned. If we did not engage with that reality, and be changed in the process, we might as well have gone back home.

In Korea it led me to studying Confucianism and the complexity of popular religion. It helped me see truth in what had previously appeared inscrutable and even backward. Eventually I found my feet in the new situation and lived to enjoy the interaction over the following decades.

Here in Ireland I felt a similar effort was necessary to appreciate what was happening around me. Three key areas in which the Church was facing difficulty became apparent. They were its relationship with the younger generation, with religiously-minded but not church-attending believers and with the media.

ENGAGING WITH THE YOUTH

The new catechetical program for primary schools has received much praise, and most children are well prepared for their First Communion, but at about the age of sixteen they encounter an 'adult world' in which religion is viewed as unscientific, irrelevant and outdated. Few have the support to resist the pressure of peers and media to be 'modern,' free and reject the old.

Yet the idealism and energy of youth continues to seek outlets.

In recent years it has found expression in a way that should not really be a surprise. It has taken up the cause of those who find themselves on the wrong side of social expectations and of regulations that seem unnecessarily strict. Examples are the support they have given to same sex marriages and women seeking abortion.

Not so long ago the majority of the people of Ireland would have regarded the sacredness of life and the traditional form of marriage as unquestionable. Now greater consideration is given to individuals who suffer from the harsh effects of implementing such principles impersonally. Unbending standards are seen as causing unnecessary misery for a significant number of people and demand grows for a more sympathetic and personalised approach.

I was helped in understanding how this change took place so quickly and definitively by the writings of Amartya Sen, the Noble Prize-winning economist whose Capability Approach has had widespread influence.

In his own words, 'Development consists in the removal of various types of unfreedoms that leave people with little choice and little opportunity of exercising their reasoned agency. The removal of substantial unfreedoms is constitutive of development.' By 'agency' he means, being able to stand up and act or speak for themselves.

Rather than accepting the national economic plan and GNP as the deciding factors in society Sen would put individuals first, 'namely, advancing richness of human life rather than the richness of the economy in which humans beings live.' He believes that priority should be given to identifying, and then modifying, the hidden obstacles that hold people back from enjoying a full life whether they be poverty-bound, disabled, women or unjustly criminalised.

The tension between individual rights and communal expectations will always be there and balancing the claims of both will always challenge lawyers and politicians. Which personal freedom deserves preference over the 'common good' in this day and age? Usually the lawmakers looked back to tradition, religious and cultural, for precedents but now present and local circumstances set the agenda. In the new approach, each issue is discussed democratically in public debate and then put to the government for legislation.

Religious and historic values are now regarded as private opinions that have to fight for acceptance in the marketplace of public opinion. Established institutions, whether secular or religious, are treated with suspicion as likely favouring a certain social class or ideology. Even cultural nationalism can be seen negatively as binding people together on 'unreasonable' grounds. Some would insist that it too needs to be phased out.

Sen's focus on individual choice and 'the outcast' (social minorities) is not something new or radical, it is rooted in Christian values. Most Liberals since Adam Smith were Christians and drew their ideas of liberty, reason and free speech from that tradition.

The Christian desire that everyone 'have life and have it to the full' has long found expression in a wide range of educational, medical and social services, at home and abroad, and reflects the priorities which Pope Francis stresses and exemplifies today.

It is part of a tradition in which Irish missionaries, who have taken a lead in struggles for democracy, justice and social development around the world, share.

However, the optimistic belief in progress and reason that calls for the constant updating of standards is a challenge for establishments like the Church whose role is to preserve and build on human experience. Practical wisdom accumulated over the centuries as humans strove to develop a path to happiness should not be casually dismissed.

Can the Irish Church help to find an acceptable balance between preserving traditional values for the common good and honouring individuality? Identifying, and providing advocacy for, those who are side-lined in today's society will put the Church in a more

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authentic place from which to engage with young people sensitive to cases of injustice.

RELIGIOUSLY-MINDED BUT NOT CHURCH-ATTENDING

As recent events have shown, the majority of Irish people, while accepting 'Catholic' as their national identity have drifted from the practices and beliefs of that faith. For many generations the Church had provided them with a clear sense of value, guidance and hope. However, rapid improvements in education, economics and exposure to a wider world changed the situation dramatically from 1950 on. It was no longer sufficient just to tell people what they should believe and do.

Growing up in that period, I could sense the coming storm. There was a contradiction between the personal awareness of God's compassion and presence that I found in older relatives and neighbours, and the ritualism and reluctance to update that I experienced in the Church. The unbending authority of the Church and its representatives was not to be questioned, textbook explanations were given instead of expressions of personal conviction and the involvement of the laity was carefully supervised.

When the sexual abuse cases and cover-up scandals became public they created the 'perfect storm' that brought out the pent-up anger and frustration with the Church that existed among the general population. It does not seem to have run out of energy yet.

Again I am reminded of how missionaries came to cope with a situation for which they had not been prepared.

Ask any missionary priest ordained in the 60s or early 70s to set up a traditional style parish and he would cross deserts, paddy fields or jungles to do so. Usually they were good at the task because they had a clear idea of the model of Church they wanted to establish and they got along well with people.

However they soon learnt that speaking a different language and working in an unfamiliar environment made them dependant on the local people. It was this collaboration that enabled them to set practical goals, prepare effective liturgies, meet expenses, attract newcomers and engage with the youth.

In countries like Korea, the space created for the laity after Vatican II was not only a key element in the dramatic growth of the Church there but provided the most effective way of forming Christians. Koreans, perhaps like the Irish, are more 'doers' than students and the invitation to take on responsibilities in the parish community became their 'school' for learning what it meant, in practical terms, to be a Christian and how to lead a Christian life.

Later, when society became more prosperous and the needs

of the people changed, the Church was called to be even more in tune with the local culture and spiritual heritage. At first the missionaries were at a loss. They had not been taught to look at the situation with a critical eye, to adjust their outlook beyond the traditional parish and seek to meet new needs. It took them a while to absorb that now a different type of missionary was required, one with more expertise in religious development, in cultural adaptation and in training leaders for local challenges.

In reflecting on their formation, they discovered they had been trained more as engineers than architects. They were good at following the blueprints given to them, with minor adjustments to allow for local conditions. However, when new circumstances arose that required a fresh blueprint they were perplexed.

The next generation of missionaries will not be numerous but will be better qualified with the skills needed to help young local Churches deepen their spiritualities by drawing on their national heritage, develop structures better suited to local conditions and form lay leaders prepared for the many needs of contemporary society.

It is an experience from which the Church in Ireland could benefit as it faces similar challenges. When parishes are communities of committed Christians, educated in the Scriptures and their spiritual heritage and involved in the social needs of the locality, the wider population will start taking an interest again.

The time when priests could perform all the tasks of leading a community have passed. Such responsibilities are now too complicated – safeguarding, audits, management of personnel, maintenance of buildings, preparing liturgies, reaching out to the needy in the area. Many hands and multiple skills are needed.

With an aging clergy, it is difficult for the Irish Church to move quickly from implementing a traditional pastoral approach to adapting to new demands. While it hesitates to make serious changes, a vacuum is created that is happily occupied by others, some with a social agenda unfriendly to the Church and religion.

ENGAGING THE MEDIA

In May 1980 I was in Gwangju, South Korea, when university students began demonstrating against the military dictatorship of General Chun Doo-hwan. The army was sent in to cower the demonstrators and in the ensuing clashes hundreds of citizens were killed.

The national media were ordered not to mention the incident and only the popular *Dong-A Ilbo* made an effort to get the truth out by printing items like, 'There is no truth in the rumour that yesterday soldiers in armoured vehicles entered Gwangju,' and,

'There is no truth in the rumour that 128 citizens have been killed in Gwangju by soldiers.' Finally even that newspaper was silenced.

Hopefully the Catholic Church in Ireland will not have to take ingenious steps such as those adopted by the *Dong-A Ilbo* to get its message out. There is an unfriendly media in the country happy to headline negative stories about religion and reluctant to give balanced reports.

Missionaries know only too well the mistake of judging an unfamiliar situation from the viewpoint of one's own generation and culture. All too often we discovered that the 'strange' behaviour of the people around us was not as backward or 'superstitious' as we had thought. What had appeared to be an out-dated or even harmful practices turned out to have a logic that made sense in the local circumstances and moment of time.

The past too is a foreign country and anyone going there needs to speak the language and make an effort to understand the feelings and behaviour of the people there.

In Ireland a number of influential journalists and presenters on social affairs seem to lack that insight. Pre-conceptions dictate discussions and as a result a significant number of Church leaders are reluctant to face the media. They are afraid they will be misquoted or manipulated.

However, the more serious challenge facing the Church is in presenting its version of events with accuracy, clarity and courage.

It would seem that the Church has not yet recovered from the 'great wounds and grief' caused by the sexual abuse revelations and the manner in which the institution tried to protect itself with silence.

The continued silence has allowed a media narrative of 'Ireland's Dark Past' to go unchallenged and perpetuating the impression that the Church, and society at that time, was institutionally cruel and uncaring.

Growing up in mid-1900s Ireland, I did not experience it as particularly dark and while the Ireland of today has greater freedoms and prosperity I wonder if it really is a safer and brighter place.

Life was a lot rougher then because there was not much money in the country. I recall the basic diet and rugged treatment we received in the diocesan secondary school I attended. The annual fee for boarders was 50 Pounds. Most of the staff were priests, not all of them with a talent for teaching, but they provided me and many others with a low-cost education which gave us a future. Most of my fellow-students went on to live in relative comfort and initiated the national prosperity we enjoy today.

We survived and probably were all the better prepared for later

hardships. But there were many others who were treated far more harshly, and unfairly, than us and their story needs to be told too so we can know why that happened and how we can ensure it does not happen again. As long as we are not fully aware of the facts and circumstances, we do not know what we ourselves should think, much less know how to explain them to others.

A credible resource department is needed to dig out the facts and background of disputed cases so a clearer and more balanced picture can be presented to the public. Everyone, inside the Church as well as outside, wants to know the full truth.

Beside such research, the Church will have to encourage and support Catholic journalists in taking on the challenge of restoring balance in the Irish media. It has been noted that Catholic institutes in Ireland have produced few intellectuals. A comparison with the quality of religious journals in nearby countries is revealing.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

At present I am living with Chinese priests and laypeople doing religious studies in Ireland.

They came here with an idealised image of Ireland, the home of the missionaries who went out to live among them in difficult times and in doing so became their idea of what it means to be a Christian.

Not long after their arrival here the Chinese students discovered a different reality. Ireland can no longer be counted as a Catholic country. I try to explain to them what had happened and how their stay here could nevertheless be a valuable experience for them.

The faith level of a people can drop suddenly. Today it is Ireland, tomorrow it could be any other country where the traditional faith seems strong. When the economy provides a degree of prosperity, individualism increases and people will no longer be satisfied to be treated collectively. They will want to have their questions answered in a personal manner and their needs, spiritual and other, met in a way appropriate to their situation.

The Church must be prepared to help them develop a personal relationship with God, based on the way of Jesus and guided by practical example rather than pressure.

As missionaries finally learned, each culture has a spiritual heritage to build on, a way in which the Spirit led the ancestors to grasp and experience the presence of God. Today some of such customs and associated language may seem outdated but the core insights and approaches still resonate in human hearts and have much on which to reflect.

These are the lessons the Chinese, and other, future church leaders can bring home with them from Ireland because the

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countries from which they come will shortly be facing similar demands which traditional Church structures cannot meet.

Returning myself to Ireland after over thirty years abroad, I found that due to the profound changes many people are still disorientated and searching ‘to fit in and find my tribe.’ That will happen if the individual and their primary tribe are both open to the possibility of enrichment and serious change.

Economics of Violence.

War, preparations for war, trade in weapons – from handguns to extremely sophisticated delivery systems – and the sale of munitions are big business. World military expenditures in real terms for 2016 were US\$1.7 trillion. As long as wars continue, tremendous contracts for weapons to replace bombs dropped and planes, drones, and other military equipment destroyed in conflict will be awarded to munitions companies. The Middle East, Africa, Mexico, and the “Northern Triangle” of Central America are awash in weapons that continue to fuel treacherous situations; a very dangerous arms race is under way in Asia; and the United States is struggling with a breathtaking epidemic of gun violence.

– MARIE DENNIS, [ed], *Choosing Peace*, Orbis Books, 2018. p.52.