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Aidan Mathews

Three Trimesters
Later
– *Reflections on a
Referendum*

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1. On the evening of Friday, May 25th, I crossed the church-grounds of the Dublin parish where I'd received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, plus a ten-shilling note from my roguish grandfather, at my Confirmation fifty years before, and I stepped into the community centre that's often used as a kindergarten but was kitted out, instead, while the Angelus rang from the tannoy in the bell-tower, with booths for a national ballot on abortion.

The centre didn't exist when I was little. The village of Ranelagh itself was an overcrowded undergraduate bedsit, short on traffic lights and black with the Brompton bicycles of the Earlsfort Terrace students who crammed the pre-63 cubbyholes in houses that were built between the last of the Victorian stables and the first of the Edwardian garages.

Nowadays we call them garidges or granny flats. Ranelagh's on trend again, full of bourgeois sorts pretending, like myself, to be bohemians. In a way, we're the children of the two Marys who were presidents, Robinson and McAleese, rather than the three woebegone women who feature in the old Good Friday lamentation; the lot of us passionately promulgating light and leniency across our benighted culture, except, of course, when it comes to the redistribution of wealth.

Now I know we were quite right about same-sex marriage, although, to my shame, I did think at the time it might be silly to put new wine in such old wine-skins; and I'm certain we were heartily sorry – by a majority of 86%, be it said – back in 2004 to have to bar black women in search of citizenship from going into labour once they cleared customs. But the Jesuits used to teach me that the answer to any important question is always Yes *and* No; and, because I am so afraid of crowds, I had in my heart a criminal misgiving about plebiscites, like the lethal self-harming of the Brexit business, as a polite form of mob-rule.

A neighbour in the booth beside me had no doubt whatsoever.

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Indeed, he had a firm purpose of amendment. In fact, he was so moved by his own magnanimity as a Guardian reader and a guardian angel of the future perfect, that he welled up in front of me. I, on the other hand, felt awful, a bigot and a beast, as I made my miniature X with a graphite pencil in the broken shape of a Brigid's cross.

2. The oldest Christian image of virgin and child in the whole of Western art is found in the long hall of Trinity College in the Book of Kells; and, even today, in our globalized era, the ancient Chinese ideogram for goodness still traces its origin to the simple brush-stroke sign of a mother and baby.

But that isn't why I voted as I did in the referendum on the repeal of the Eighth amendment. And it wasn't to do, either, with the housekeeper who raised me. Ann had arrived in the world without an escort in the 1930s, and she was refused entry anywhere by the two complicit families and their church-going society. Indeed, she was still being stonewalled in her sixties. If it weren't for the Charity nuns and for Sr. Augustine, a mother-figure whom she visited each second Sunday for the rest of her life, she might never have made it into my own prosperous household as a nineteen year-old nanny from the orphanage who showed seven children in turn that motherhood has more to do with the breast than with the uterus.

I'm not even sure whether my wife was the reason, although the gift of her left kidney is now settling down in my right-hand side to keep me alive for longer. Because *her* unmarried mam spent much of the third trimester jumping off haystacks in the West of Ireland, and I'm sure she was seen by the local folk, who went to Mass religiously, in much the same way that the neighbours in Nazareth once derided Mary, the mother of Jesus, as a teenage slut who had hoodwinked a stupid cuckold called Joseph, but deserved instead to be stoned, so she did.

The Aristotelian campaign arguments over person-versus-potential left me cold, I admit – at 62, I can't decide which, if either, I may be – and the soul itself, after all, is only a figure of speech. It's our materiality that makes us mystical. But I do love early life in its stubborn minuteness. It may be the moss on the rubber-seal of my driver's mirror, surviving each strenuous car-wash, or lichen silvering the north bark of a fir-tree; it may be the prehistoric fossils of blossom in the blond sand-stone of my small back yard; or it may be the starfish blastocyst like a distant supernova.

For, just as *silent* is an anagram of *listen*, so the startling word *begin* is an anagram of *being*.

3. One of the more arresting images on the afternoon of the Referendum count, late in the month of May, was the spectacle of all the young women cavorting jubilantly in the yard of Dublin Castle. As it happens, I'm a dad of two grown-up girls, one on either side of thirty, and their socio-cultural formation in the *Zeitgeist* of middle-class, millennial Ireland was accompanied by a celebratory honour guard in the Arts and Media whose battle-cry – "Testosterone bad, oestrogen good!" – made me feel sad at times, in the nineties and noughties, for a sibling of mine, God help him, who only had sons to speak of.

Now don't get me wrong or, worse, think me righteous. I am every bit as reprobate as the next man, boy, or male foetus. Besides which, I fully realise you can't force a person in a free society to persevere in a pregnancy she abominates; and, if, by contrast, one of my loved ones had a difficulty achieving that hopeful state in the first place, I'd pour my savings into what hospitals call so prettily their Human Artificial Reproduction Centre, regardless of the refrigerated embryos that perish in the process.

No, it's more that the O My God generation of those eager and emancipated women clapping in the cobble-stoned courtyard, put me in mind of something I'd read from the Babylonian Talmud about another Exodus, where the rabbis remind us that the God of Israel was greatly grieved when his angels and archangels cheered madly at the sight of the drowning Egyptians in the Red Sea, and the Lord rebuked them, saying: "Stop it at once. These too are my children."

All of which probably puts me on the wrong side of history, pace President Obama, but the wrong side of history is, for better and worse, where you find the bodies of the condemned. Not that I'm certain of this or of anything at all, thank God. I can neither predict the historical past, which, in this country at least, changes beyond recognition every forty years; and I can't predict the future, post-Repeal, unlike the lovely anorectic girl, as innocent as the unborn child, with the light lanugo on her cheeks and forehead, who said to me long ago: "It can only be a gift to future generations."

4. Those who voted against the Repeal of the Eighth earlier this year are often caricatured, sometimes correctly, as dyed-in-the-wool, old-style R.C.'s, mutton dressed as Lamb of God; but they're not always sheepish or even domesticated, and there are times they can resemble scapegoats more than sheepdogs.

To those for whom Catholicism and catholicity are in perpetual pillow-talk, it's not even clear that the Papal lark in the Phoenix Park some months ago, let alone in '79 with the sainted John Paul second, was a valid Eucharist, since the Mass is, by definition,

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the opposite of the mob. Of course feeding the multitudes always remains the gospel mandate, but a Last Supper service of any sort is a mnemonic intimacy, a consolation and a challenge, for those who find the messenger as interesting as the message, and whose Passover get-togethers therefore start with a double confession, both of faith and of fault, each of them grievous.

But the centrality of Holy Communion doesn't stop us from sporting the conformist anti-clerical views, though we should never be as vicious or as vile as Jesus was about the poor Pharisees. It's just that all élites, whether they belong to the Archbishop or to Aodána or to the top-tier of the Irish Times ABC's, are deeply dubious. A dominant culture will always be domineering, and our present polity, which Diderot already described three hundred years ago as "an invisible church" with Pope Voltaire as its Peter, is secular and sectarian. It mimics Maynooth in many ways, not least in its many May Nots.

A Christian, on the other hand, is a custodian of lost causes, who has come through the difficult gift of their own disgrace to understand that he or she is complicit in the cruelty of the human ordeal. Their task henceforth is not the pursuit of happiness, but the unhappiness of the pursued. As the ancient rabbis say in a riff on Deuteronomy that was written in the eternal city of Babylon: 'When *everyone* is agreed upon the guilt of the accused, let him go at once. You may be sure he is innocent.'

5. On the day of the Referendum count, I drove through all the posters of people that had been strung up on the street-lights and were hanging from them like the morning after a pogrom. The great RTE mast where I work loomed larger and larger, and it made me think of the family rabbit my uncle Brian buried beneath it as an obelisk for Felix in the days of our Donnybrook childhood, and of how my mother fretted that suicidal sorts might be tempted to scale the aerial and jump from the satellite disc at the summit.

At my own computer keyboard, mindfulness wasn't working, although Special Forces snipers in Iraq and Afghanistan are adamant that the skills of stillness help them focus on the hardest headshots. So I was glad when my family called me for a stroll in sunlight on the busy pier in Dún Laoghaire (I don't know East from West), where we walked with a Teddy's ice-cream running down my wrist like bird-white on a public statue, past the bandstand where the Temperance Ensemble used to perform with such spirit, some of it 14%, in the 1960s.

There was this little girl who was standing on a bollard in her Holy Communion dress and a crown of freesia that I wanted to handsel, if anyone recalls that quaint expression out of the Dublin

tenements, and my wife said: “You can give her money, but don’t touch her, for Christ’s sake”. My daughter had said the very same thing in Herbert Park when I stopped there once to look at children shrieking on the swings: “Dad, if you don’t come on, the *au pairs* will be ringing the police”.

And on we went, indeed, through the barefoot and the shod as far as the fort, same as our great-grandparents in the sepia studies of Kingstown harbour in the National Library of Ireland’s Alexander Collection. We moved through the fair among Panama hats and baseball caps, the scent of Factor Fifty and fake-tan, Nike trainers and Zimmer frames, and seven pairs of the double-prams and older couples that hard-hearted twenty-something females have nicknamed IVF buggies; and all of this in the key of seagull soaring over the whole blessed lot, us, the upright evolutionary in-laws of both the short-nosed fruit bat and the bow-head whale, with our shared placental destinies.

The need for discernment of Spirits. There is no doubt that discernment of spirits is essential in the ministry of deliverance in order to distinguish problems which are psychological in origin from those that are spiritual. Pope Francis has a very interesting chapter in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Rejoice and be Glad*, entitled, “Spiritual Combat, Vigilance and Discernment”. In par. 166, he wrote, “How can we know if something comes from the Holy Spirit or if it stems from the spirit of the world or the spirit of the devil? The only way is through discernment, which calls for something more than intelligence or common sense. It is a gift which we must implore. If we ask with confidence that the Holy Spirit grant us this gift, and then seek to develop it through prayer, reflection, reading and good counsel, then surely we will grow in this spiritual endowment”.

– PAT COLLINS, CM, *Freedom from Evil Spirits*, (Dublin: Columba Press) p. 152.