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# FURROW

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Bridie Stringer

For such a time  
as this

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The title of this reflection comes from the Book of Esther 4:14 and speaks of a time when the displaced Jewish people are in danger of persecution and Queen Esther is faced with the challenge of trying to save them whilst risking putting her own favour with the king in jeopardy. Her uncle Mordecai says: 'Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for such a time as this'. These poignant words are perhaps a fitting preface to any consideration by the lay faithful as to what type of Church we are called upon to build and sustain at a time of turbulence and uncertainty.

Commentators on Catholic issues have had a fevered summer analysing the impact of the latest wave of scandals to engulf the Church – the abuse of children by priests in Pennsylvania, the role of religious orders in the enslavement of unmarried mothers in Tuam, the trafficking of their babies through covert adoption arrangements and the cruel and disrespectful disposal of mortal remains in sewage systems rather than in holy ground. The term 'historic' abuse is a term which I have always found problematic and the emotional response to the scandals during the summer of 2018 indicated that there was nothing 'historic' about entire lives blighted by trauma experienced in childhood. For many such victims, not only was their physical wellbeing and peace of mind destroyed but their faith life suffered catastrophically too. God was, in effect, killed for them.

In 2002, I was present at a meeting which was held as a compassionate pastoral debrief for a parish community whose priest had been convicted of possessing pornographic images of children. I was struck by the testimony of those who felt that their family's sacramental milestones had been tainted by the ministry of a priest who could commit such offences. Some had been driven to remove the priest's image from wedding and baptism photographs as he was no longer perceived to be the holy man who had officiated authentic religious rituals for his people, but instead harboured a sordid and criminal secret. So, in addition to those

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who rightfully seek their day in court as direct victims, there are many others whose faith life has been shaken because their parish leader was not what he appeared to be, nor indeed, was called to be. Whilst many senior clerics in the Church are currently voicing their grief and distress that such abuses could take place, there seems, as yet, few proposals to set in place structures of governance which hold the institutional Church to account. In his homily at the Mass for the Feast of Our Lady of Sorrows (15 September) during the Council of the Bishops' Conferences of Europe (CCEE) in Poznan in Poland, Cardinal Vincent Nichols recalled the reception which Pope Francis had received during his visit to Ireland the previous month:

‘Slowly one important truth became clear to me: I was wrong to hope that the voice of joy and welcome would overcome the voices of anger and condemnation. Both voices have to be heard. Both voices must find an echo in our hearts.’<sup>1</sup>

Alluding to the second voice, the cardinal spoke of:

‘... those who have suffered abuse and mistreatment within the community of the Church, the voice of those whom we, the pastors, have let down for we have failed to protect them from the wolves in our midst’.

Pope Francis has, on many occasions, cited clericalism as a major factor in the crisis - the received wisdom that priests are not accountable to their people and that the hierarchical structure will ensure that justice will be served. Sadly, as we have learned, this is not the case. Pope Francis in his letter to the People of God in August stated that:

‘Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say ‘no’ to abuse is to say an emphatic ‘no’ to all forms of clericalism.’<sup>2</sup>

There are of course many facets to this particular toxic diamond and some commentators have pointed to the benign acceptance by lay people that, in matters of faith and holiness, ‘Father knows best’. This narrative suggests that the lay faithful have somehow brought

1 Cardinal Vincent Nichol's Homily at CCEE Conference in Poznan: <https://rcdow.org.uk/cardinal/homilies/ccee-conference-in-poznan/> accessed 23/09/2018

2 Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God <https://rcdow.org.uk/news/letter-of-his-holiness-pope-francis-to-the-people-of-god/> accessed 23/09/2018

the present catastrophe upon themselves by their unquestioning reverence for clergy. Certainly, my memories of Catholic Ireland in the 1950s and 60s show layers of deference which went far beyond the boundaries of the church grounds. The advice of priests was routinely sought on all manner of social and political issues and the education in Catholic schools lived out the principle of '*lex orandi, lex credendi*', (as we pray, so we believe) and the '*lex*' was sometimes unreasoned and unreasonable. I remember the obligation to seek the bishop's permission if Catholic students wished to study at Trinity College Dublin. This establishment had clearly been educationally sound enough for William Congreve, Jonathan Swift, John Millington Synge and Edmund Burke, but it was not until the 1970's that the obligation on Roman Catholics to seek permission to study there was lifted. As a school pupil with an interest in English literature, I was also intrigued by the concept of the Catholic Index, a list of forbidden books which good Catholics should not read and was given to understand that the books in question were grossly salacious and immoral and inevitably to do with sex! I wondered who at the Vatican was given the task of reading all those 'dodgy' books in order to determine if good Catholics should not read them. Galileo and Copernicus too had had their run-ins with the gatekeepers of orthodoxy and Galileo was freed from censure only in 1979, but by then, he had been dead for 337 years. As a university student (sadly not of Trinity College, Dublin), I was aware that some classical literature novels like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* were on the course reading list and also on the Church's "not for reading list", although, strictly speaking the Index had been discontinued in 1966 and I was at university in the late 60s and early 70s.

Interestingly, the Irish Roman Catholic hierarchy voiced their own disapproval of certain works, mostly on the grounds of what they felt was immorality i.e. sex, so Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* was publicly burned in her hometown, under the supervision of the parish priest. Significantly, the arrival of the Douai-Rheims Bible in rural Ireland had been received with a certain distrust too, since it would have encouraged Catholic laity to read and interpret it for themselves and this was felt to be dangerous, as only clergy studied the 'sacred sciences'.

Although the Index no longer exists there is still an understanding that thinking in a certain way and expressing it openly will bring about severe opprobrium, especially so in the contemporary Church for members of the clergy or those in consecrated life. "Harsh criticism" or "public disgrace" are two of the recognised meanings of 'opprobrium' and, as someone who likes to respect words and their use, I have used the word deliberately. Having now acquired

copies of Sean Fagan's *Does Morality Change?*<sup>3</sup> and Lavinia Byrne's *Woman at the Altar*;<sup>4</sup> I think it is unjust to refuse to engage in critical inquiry but instead to engage in inquisition. In the end of course, unlike the late Fr Fagan or the then Sr Lavinia Byrne, lay faithful were possibly so far down the hierarchy of credibility as not to matter, rather like guests in their own house. Incidentally, the nun who wrote a book with that title was dismissed from her post as a theologian in an Indiana Seminary in 1995 for having signed a letter to Pope St John Paul II asking that the ordination of women should be discussed. This letter had been a response to the Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* issued in 1994 in which discussion about women's ordination was forbidden, since this particular papal teaching was to be 'definitively held' i.e. to be received as part of the deposit of faith. The papal teaching concluded:

'Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.'<sup>5</sup>

Whilst for the 'Baby Boomer' generation this teaching, and prior to it, the Church's prohibition of 'artificial' forms of contraception, might have been cause for concern and the subject of lively debate and discussion, some of the Millennial generation (those born in the 1980s) do not appear to find the Church's teaching of much significance. Many have simply lost respect for an institution which they perceive as hypocritical, misogynistic, and lacking the skill, or the will, to explore gender inclusivity and sexuality. In the 12 August 2017 edition of the *The Tablet*, it was suggested that there was a 'lost generation' of young Irish Catholics who simply 'don't do religion'. This article implied that their lack of engagement could be addressed by some type of hierarchical management system for youth and vocations ministry. My own view then, and now, is that some initiatives may affirm those involved in setting them up, but may not actually address the fundamental issue that the institutional Church has lost its relevance and moral authority.

3 Sean Fagan. *Does Morality Change?* Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1997.

4 Lavinia Byrne. *Woman at the Altar*. New York: Continuum, 1999.

5 Pope St John Paul II's apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost\\_letters/1994/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_apl\\_19940522\\_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html) accessed 24/09/2018

## WHAT MUST WE DO?

‘What must we do?’ was the question posed to John the Baptist in Luke 3:10 and it is a question which the entire Church, as one People of God rather than two separate constituencies must ask of itself. Setting canon law over against civil laws and rights will simply lead to circumlocution and seem like smoke and mirrors.

The synodal model of the early Church as described in the Acts of the Apostles 15:1-29 shows a fledgling community of believers wrestling with the terms and conditions by which Gentile believers might be admitted. The solution was reached through respectful explication of arguments articulated by Saul, Barnabas and Peter in the presence of the elders, followed by prayerful discernment by the leader, James. His decision was endorsed by the entire community of believers and a letter sent to the Gentiles confirming only four conditions for admittance to the Christian community. They did not need to be circumcised, but should ‘abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication’ (Acts 15:29).

In more recent times (1854) this *sensus fidei*, the graced wisdom of the entire People of God, was sought before determining the dogma on the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. Likewise, in 1950, in the pontificate of Pope Pius XII, the dogma of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary was solemnly given in *Munificentissimus Deus*. Among the citations given for its authenticity was, not only the scholarly wisdom of theologians and pastors but also the belief ‘which is thoroughly rooted in the minds of the faithful’.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this wisdom can be garnered in our own time to set the trajectory for the way forward for a Church in which many feel betrayed and tainted.

At local parish level, pastoral councils and robust safeguarding standards which are overseen by expert members of the community should militate against any tendency to privilege offenders over their victims. Diocesan pastoral councils should be one of the sources of wisdom for serving bishops and the default reporting mechanism for allegations of abuse should be to the police rather than the schools or care establishments in which the alleged offences have taken place. The openness and transparency inherent in this approach should not frustrate the vindication of the accused, if found to be innocent, and will reassure parents and others that the needs of the victim will always be paramount.

In terms of pastoral leadership, again, using a model from the early Church, the selection of Seven Hellenist Leaders to minister

6 Pope Pius XII’s Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost\\_constitutions/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_apc\\_19501101\\_munificentissimus-deus.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_p-xii_apc_19501101_munificentissimus-deus.html) accessed 24/09/2018

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to the widows in Acts 6:1-7 was undertaken by the community. The candidates were to be ‘men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom’. This synodal model could be readily adapted for our time too with various constituencies canvassed in the selection of the diocesan bishop. The views of parishes, via their pastoral councils and the councils of priests could be invited to share their wisdom and to conduct interviews with the possible episcopal candidates. The chosen candidate (or a shortlist of candidates) would then be notified to the Roman Curia and the choice ratified. This process would signal that subsidiarity, as envisaged at Vatican II, could be realised and that all significant decision making did not reside in the Roman Curia. It might also be fruitful to consider a limited tenure for episcopal appointments. Rather than an ecclesiastical promotion which lasts until the age of 75, episcopal appointments could be time-limited tenures of perhaps 5 years, with an option to extend. The bishop would then return to presbyteral duties after his period of episcopal oversight. His episcopate would be a period of ‘first among equals’, a model of local collegiality which would be shared among peers.

The appraisal and supervision systems which are common in the caring professions could also be adapted to the episcopal role. The report which each bishop compiles before his *Ad Limina* visit to the Roman Curia could be recast to include a 360° perspective on the bishop’s oversight of his people. Input could be invited from priests, laity, fellow-bishops, and parish and diocesan pastoral councils. In this way, the bishop would be able to reflect meaningfully on those areas in which he excels and those for which some further support and development might be given. It should also be common practice for the *Ad Limina* report to be shared with the entire diocese before the visit takes place. Ready access to online media platforms should make such pastoral engagement easily achievable.

These simple initiatives would perhaps inject some vigour into bishops’ conferences which at present appear to be jaded and averse to the risk of innovation or indeed, renovation. One recent example of such torpor was the response to the Holy Father’s Apostolic Letter *Magnum Principium*<sup>7</sup> confirming that the conferences could authorise the Mass translations to be used within their territories. Many lay faithful rejoiced at this news and looked forward to the retrieval of the very beautiful 1998 Mass translation which had been rejected by the Roman Curia in favour of the Latinate, convoluted version we currently have for worship. Instead, the

7 Pope Francis I. Apostolic Letter *Magnum Principium* re Canon 838. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2017/09/09/170909a.html> accessed 7/10/2018

response from the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales was tepid and the view expressed that it would simply be too costly to replace the current missals. As the Australian theologian Fr Gerry O'Collins put it in *Lost in Translation – The English Language and the Catholic Mass*: 'Before I die, I would be delighted to celebrate once again the Eucharist in my native language'.<sup>8</sup> Many would echo 'Amen' to that.

The relatively simple first steps which I have outlined would perhaps signal a change of body language for the local Church. They would suggest that this is a Church which is happy to engage in meaningful conversation about its troubled present and seek to be inclusive and respectful of all its stakeholders in planning the way ahead. As the Oxford scholar and social commentator Theodore Zelden expressed it:

A true conversation starts with the listener willing to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose results are never guaranteed. It involves risk. It is an adventure in which we agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps this conversation is for such a time as this.

8 Gerald O'Collins, *Lost in Translation*. Collegeville. Minnesota: Liturgical Press Academic. 2017, p.viii.

9 Theodore Zelden *Conversation*. London: Harville Press. (1998, p.3).

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