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Edmond Cullinan

Looking for Light: the Lessons of the Exile

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THE PRESENT SITUATION

Matthew Arnold in his poem *Dover Beach* uses the image of the sea of faith going out to evoke the gradual decline of Christian faith in England in the nineteenth century. Something similar has happened in Ireland in the past few decades. The tide has ebbed much more quickly in Ireland, leaving believers stranded and disorientated. Inevitably, we look around for answers as to how the present situation came about. There is much talk about a crisis. The term *crisis* implies a traumatic event which demands an immediate response. It is often used in medicine in this way. For instance, a patient's temperature rises to a dangerous level. This is a crisis and calls for intervention. The present situation of the Church in Ireland is more ongoing, so I think that it is better to see it as part of a process.

To continue with the medical analogy, the symptoms of the present situation are the falling off in Mass attendance, the drop in vocations to the priesthood and religious life and the general lack of interest in anything to do with religion. Priests, in particular, will also have noticed that the sacraments are celebrated in a superficial way by many. There is a "going through the motions" approach to baptism, First Communion and other occasions. What is behind this lack of real interest or engagement with the faith and with the Church? I suggest that what is behind this ebbing of faith is a cultural shift that has been taking place gradually in Europe over the past three centuries, but has only had an impact in Ireland in the past fifty years and more noticeably in the past three decades. The various scandals that have beset the Church in recent times are important and must be dealt with, but they are not the cause of the apparent collapse of faith and practice. They have merely served to push the shift in culture forward.

The non-religious culture in which we now find ourselves is characterised by a world of things. As human beings, we are

Edmond Cullinan is a priest of the Diocese of Waterford and Lismore and is Administrator of the Cathedral of the Most Holy Trinity, Waterford.

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naturally interested in the world around us. We want to understand it, measure it, analyse it, catalogue it and control it. All this is good as far as it goes, but it can lead to people living their lives focused on externals. This gives us the shopping culture, advertising and the emphasis on having things. Everything is a commodity. However, there is also an interior life that this culture does not cater for. Having things does not make people happy. So we find that there is a great loneliness at the heart of modern life. Man or woman surrounded by things is lonely. Even surrounded by animals, man or woman is lonely. This is surely the meaning of the picturesque story in Genesis 2: 18-25 where the man names the animals, but does not find a companion.

HOW DID WE GET TO WHERE WE ARE?

The cultural shift, referred to above, has its roots in the Rationalism of the eighteenth century and in the development of science. Science deals with phenomena, with what can be measured and observed. It is very useful and has been very successful in the development of technology. It has been so successful that other approaches to reality have been pushed aside. The result is a cultural shift of seismic proportions. The mentality which is typical of this new culture is that only what can be observed, measured and proven is regarded as real. This is the "modern" outlook. Religion deals with the meaning of life and realities such as God, life after death, the life of grace and angels. None of these can be subjected to the scientific method and so are regarded as not being real. Religion also deals with right behaviour and spiritual experience, but these can also be examined by ethics, psychology and sociology. So religion is deemed to be redundant.

In cultural terms we seem to be in a kind of middle age. We have left behind what was essentially a religious culture, where religion really permeated all aspects of life. It provided a framework of meaning within which people lived their lives. A new culture where religion will be rediscovered and integrated into a view of life has yet to emerge. A new, more balanced philosophy, which integrates science and religion will develop and will bring about another shift in culture. This will happen because the present prevailing world view is essentially inadequate. It cannot answer the big questions, such as: "What is the purpose of human life?" "Why does the physical universe exist?" "Why do we experience beauty?" "Why do human beings have an innate sense of right and wrong?" "Why do we search for truth?" These are the questions that religion addresses. These are questions that will not go away. It is simply not good enough to say that the law of gravity explains everything.

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WHERE ARE WE IN THIS PROCESS?

I suggest that the process of getting from the previous religious culture to a new integrated culture has the following stages: Adherence, Disillusionment, Rejection, Indifference and Re-discovery.

Adherence describes the situation where the religious view of reality is the generally held view. It does not necessarily mean that everyone is particularly diligent at practicing religion or very well informed, but it does mean that certain basics are taken for granted by almost everyone. These basics would include the existence of God, an afterlife, that moral failure is sinful and that religion is a good thing. It would also include an acceptance and respect for the Church, the clergy and for religious symbols and practices. Ireland was still an example of adherence well into the 1980's, although the beginnings of disillusionment had already set in by the 1960's.

Disillusionment begins with questioning the truth or importance of the religious attitudes that characterise the stage of adherence. It is a gradual process and may go on for a long time. It usually does not begin with questioning the existence of God. It begins with something more tangible, like calling into question aspects of Church teaching or practices like attending Mass. The scandals have added to the disillusionment, but only after it had already set in.

Disillusionment leads to *rejection*. This appears to be where we are at in Ireland at present. Rejection is an angry stage. It can be seen in the relentless negativity towards the Church coming from a number of sectors of Irish life at the moment. In France it was evident in the French Revolution. The Church had been closely identified with the *ancien régime* and suffered rejection along with it. Then there was a partial revival in the nineteenth century, followed by more rejection in the early twentieth century when religious orders were expelled from the country and Church property nationalised. This was followed by *indifference*. In the latter half of the twentieth century most French people were not hostile towards the Church; they were just not interested. However, from the seventies onwards a new generation have been *rediscovering* the faith and so the Church has begun to grow again. This will happen in Ireland too.

IS THERE A SCRIPTURAL PRECEDENT?

It is always a good idea to see what the Word of God has to say to us in any situation in life. It seems to me that our present experience has many similarities to the Exile of the Jews in the sixth century before Christ. A text that comes to mind is the Chronicler's conclusion to the account of the Exile.

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They burned down the Temple of God, demolished the walls of Jerusalem, set fire to all its palaces, and destroyed everything of value in it. The survivors were deported by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon; they were to serve him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. This is how the word of the Lord was fulfilled that he spoke through Jeremiah, "Until this land has enjoyed its sabbath rest, until seventy years have gone by, it will keep Sabbath throughout the days of its desolation" (2 Chron. 36:19-21.).

Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed and the population was transported to Babylon. Before this cataclysmic event, the people and their leaders denied that it would happen. Even after the deportation, many of them said it would not last. The Prophet Jeremiah, always a realist, had warned the people about the impending disaster. Once it had happened, he said it was going to last and he encouraged them to adjust to the new situation.

In the Exile the Jewish people lost the land of Israel which had given them their identity and they lost their native government. The most serious loss was the Temple which had been the focus of their religious observance. The question now was would they survive at all. Would they simply be absorbed by the Babylonians and disappear as a distinct people? Without the supports they had enjoyed at home would their religion die out? This was what happened to the tribes of the northern kingdom which were transported to Assyria two centuries earlier. The Jews survived and actually strengthened their identity. They returned to the Holy Land and rebuilt Jerusalem and the Temple fifty years later.

Having lost the land and the Temple, the Jews fell back on what they still had. They still had prayer in the home. They still had observances which reminded them of God and of his covenant with them. Above all they still had the Word of God. The priests, who could no longer perform their duties in the Temple, concentrated on conserving the Scriptures. It was during the Exile that much of what had been in oral form was put in writing. This work was done by the priests. The Jews gathered every Sabbath to hear the Word, to be instructed and to pray. The synagogue was devised during the Exile as a pastoral and liturgical response to the new situation. This brought forth new ministries, such as the rabbi and the cantor.

THE LESSONS OF THE EXILE

The first lesson of the Exile is that God does not abandon his people. There is always a remnant that survives and grows again in time. Jeremiah's idea of keeping Sabbath does not mean doing nothing. It means waiting on the Lord and being patient. Jeremiah's seventy

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years are three generations. We are already into the third generation of rejection for some, indifference for others. So we may not have long to wait for a new springtime.

The other lessons of the Exile are, on the one hand, that we have to hold on to what we have and, on the other, that we have to devise new strategies and ministries. Judaism survived because of the *home*, the community gathered around the Word of God and because of a sense of identity. In the home, parents were the principal transmitters of the faith to their children. "Let these words I urge on you today be written on your heart. You shall repeat them to your children and say them over to them whether at rest in your house or walking abroad, at your lying down and at your rising" (Deuteronomy 6:7.). Schools can help parents in handing on the faith, but they cannot replace them. The emphasis must be shifted back to the home and the parents.

During the Exile the Jewish community gathered on the Sabbath to hear the *Word of God*, to be reminded of the story of God's involvement with them and to be given hope and encouragement. For similar reasons the celebration of Sunday Mass is central to the Christian life. The gathering of the community for liturgy, even if it is only a small remnant, is a priority. Even if no priest is available, as may happen in some places in the coming decades, the community should still gather for some form of liturgy. New ways need to be developed to provide for the pastoral and liturgical needs of communities with a reduced number of clergy.

The third thing that enabled the Jewish people to survive during the difficult period of the Exile (and also during subsequent dispersions) was their sense of *identity*. This was reinforced by customs of diet, dress and other observances. For Christians this would mean upholding values which are at variance with the general culture.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

The stage of *rediscovery* of the Christian faith and of the Church has already begun in small ways here and there in Ireland. There are young people who are interested and who are not held back by the hang-ups of their elders. It is important that they be encouraged. They need to be given a sound theological formation and good experiences of liturgy. Without these, good will and interest can end up in fundamentalism. This is particularly the case in a society where to be interested in religion is counter-cultural.

For the Jews, one of the positive things to come out of the Exile was the synagogue. The liturgy in the synagogue consists in readings from the Bible, a sermon and prayers. This liturgy can be conducted by lay people. When the Jewish people returned to

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Jerusalem and built the Second Temple, they were able to resume the offering of sacrifices and the priests were able to perform their specific duties again. Nevertheless, they retained the synagogue, because it was not just a substitute for the Temple, but had value in itself. We are in a situation analogous to the Exile. There is an opportunity to develop *new ways* of keeping the faith alive or to rediscover ones that have been forgotten. Two examples that come to mind are *Lectio Divina* groups and the Liturgy of the Hours. Both of these can be led by lay people. They are not substitutes for the Mass, but help deepen our appreciation of it. Maybe they will be among the positive things to come out of this difficult period.

In the future, the Church in Ireland, as in the rest of Europe, will probably be in a minority situation. This has certain advantages, such as a strong sense of identity and a greater sense of community. The danger is that it could become closed in on itself. Catholics could come to see themselves as a kind of spiritual *élite*. In effect we could become a sect. This would be completely contrary to the vision of a missionary Church put forward by Vatican II, promoted by all the recent popes and emphasised again by Pope Francis.

On the other hand we could see ourselves as at the service of the wider society. We could see ourselves as a leaven. We have a vocation as Christians to pray for the world, to be witnesses for Christ and the Gospel and to be a positive influence on the wider society. In this way we would be fulfilling our role as the Church which is the sacrament of salvation for the human race.

Prophetic Witness. The range of his concerns was limitless, because he saw our world as God's world. He had a prophetic gift to offer in response to the tragedies of humankind, and he shaped the lives of many, both Jesuit and other, with an optimism and vision that was in no way naïve but based on the belief that the Lord still cares for his people and welcomes generous hearts to help them in their deepest needs. He accepted the risk of intimacy with God.

— BRIAN GROGAN, SJ, *Pedro Arrupe, SJ* (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.4.