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Faith in the Future

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# Faith in the Future

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It is commonplace now to say that the Catholic Church in Ireland is in crisis. It is equally common to refer to the fact that the Chinese character for 'crisis' indicates both danger and opportunity. There is a clearly downward graph in many areas e.g. Mass attendance, finances, vocations to the priesthood and religious life, missionary enthusiasm, influence in the public square. Many of those who reflect on this reality would say that the basic issue underlying the crisis manifest in the various difficulties we are experiencing at present is the issue of faith. So it is important to reflect on this issue and on how it might be addressed.

## FAITH

Firstly it is obviously important to be clear on what exactly we mean by the word 'faith'. We use that word in a variety of ways, each of which emphasises one aspect of the reality of faith. For instance, those of us old enough to have learned the Maynooth catechism at school may remember the definition of faith as a 'divine virtue by which we believe and firmly accept the truths that God has revealed. We learned an 'Act of Faith' which went 'O my God, I believe in you and in all that you teach through your holy church, because you have said it and your word is true'. The impression we got from all of this was that faith was something one did with the mind or intellect. It was an act by which one accepted as true certain propositions or doctrines far too deep and mysterious for the very limited human mind to understand – the Unity and Trinity of God, the Incarnation of Jesus as true God and true man, the Resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection of the body, transubstantiation, the infallibility of the Pope, to name a few. We accepted all of this on the authority of the Church, which we understood to be backed up by the ultimate and supreme authority of God. All of this was valid, and continues to be valid, as far as it went. But it needs to be supplemented by other understandings of the word faith.

For example, if it is said of someone 'she approached her death

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in a spirit of great faith' this is not a statement about her acceptance of the truths revealed by God or about her capacity to say the Creed and mean it. It indicates, rather, a very strong sense of the presence with her of the personal and loving mystery at the heart of all reality that Christians name as God. It suggests a deep trust in the loving nearness of God and an ability to abandon herself completely into God's hands. This is faith as spirituality and as trust.

Another shade of meaning for the word faith is suggested by a sentence such as 'the Irish people are losing the faith'. What this is really describing is a loosening of the bonds that once existed between Irish people and the Church, particularly the Church's rituals, and especially the Sunday Mass. Practicing ones faith mainly meant attending, from whatever motivation and with whatever level of participation, the weekly gathering of the 'Faith community' in one's local church – or indeed in any church where maybe Mass was known to be shorter or where the time best suited ones weekend schedule. What mattered was that you 'got Mass' and so could claim to be practicing your faith. So faith can be understood as adherence to the Church, a sense of belonging, or at least a willingness to participate – even somewhat reluctantly - in the Church's rituals.

Of course, each of these descriptions has it's own validity, and no doubt there are other aspects of faith that would be needed to complete the picture. However, when one begins to consider how the faith might be shared, it is surely helpful to be clear on what exactly we wish to share, since the emphasis we place on one or other aspect of faith will certainly influence the ways in which we try to share it.

For instance, if we understand faith mainly as assent to revealed truth, then we will wish to communicate knowledge of the content of faith. We will encourage familiarity with the 'Catechism of the Catholic Church'. We will promote adult religious education. We will encourage an interest in the study of theology as 'faith seeking understanding'. We will try to preach doctrinally substantial and orthodox homilies. If our emphasis is on faith as an awareness of the reality of God, then our main focus in sharing it will be prayer and all that facilitates prayer – retreats, spiritual guidance, prayer groups, Christian mindfulness, *Lectio Divina*, the liturgy well celebrated, recalling the adage 'good liturgy nourishes faith, bad liturgy damages it'. If our stress is on faith as belonging, then we will try to make our churches as welcoming as possible, we will emphasise outreach, we will try to use every opportunity, especially the sacramental moments of baptism, first communion, confirmation, marriage (and funerals) as opportunities to make and to strengthen connections between people and their local parish.

All of these methods, with the underlying emphasis of each, are being used in Ireland today as part of our effort to share the faith with anyone who might be open to it.

CULTURE

It must be admitted, however, that even our best efforts seem to be bearing little enough by way of fruit. In thinking about why this is so, one area of reflection looms large. It is the area of culture. Like faith, the word ‘culture’ too can have a variety of shades of meaning, and be used in different ways in diverse contexts. For the purpose of this reflection, however, we may take it to mean something like the way people normally think and act and interact, the assumptions they hold in common, what influences daily life, ‘the way we do things around here’. It seems clear that the difficulty with sharing the faith today in Ireland is very largely rooted in cultural change. It is a truism to say that, over the last 50 years or so, we have seen rapid and massive cultural change in Ireland, on a scale unprecedented at any period in our history. We have seen increased prosperity, (albeit unevenly distributed) a huge increase in media penetration and influence (both mainstream and social media) inward migration, much more frequent foreign travel by a much greater number of people. Our attitudes have been shaped by a much greater emphasis on the rights of the individual, and the idea of personal choice as the main criterion for morality. The idea of the common good has largely faded from our awareness. A consumerist approach to life has been very successfully promoted by massive marketing strategies, subtly but powerfully persuading us to want things we don’t need. Behind all this is the influence of western style liberal capitalism, the supremacy of market forces, and the ‘throwaway culture’ and environmental damage that follows from this.

All of this is very different from the culture in which the catholic faith seemed to thrive from the end of the penal laws until the last decades of the 20th century. As a kind of shorthand, one might think of this period of Irish Church history as the ‘Cullen/McQuaid’ era, from the two towering archbishops of Dublin who were the major promoters and exemplars of the Catholic culture of that time in Ireland

ASSESSING THE PAST

While it appeared that faith ‘seemed’ to thrive in that era, one could argue that many of the elements of faith were in fact much weaker than they appeared to be. Insofar as assent to the truths revealed by God is concerned, Catholics of that era by and large believed them mostly in the sense that they did not deny them. In fact the average

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Catholic had, and has, little interest in doctrinal matters. As regards faith as a strong awareness of God, perhaps that was easier in a largely rural population, in tune with the rhythms of nature, and ways of living that were much slower than the pace of life today. If it is true that the two great enemies of awareness of God are noise and haste, these were largely absent from the culture of that time, and so a sense of spiritual reality came more easily. As regards attachment to the Church and its rituals, especially the Sunday Mass, one might wonder what motivated the extraordinarily high numbers of Sunday Mass-goers. It is undeniable that at least some of the motivation came from a strong sense of obligation and an even stronger sense of fear of mortal sin and the consequent danger of eternity in hell if ones missed Mass deliberately without good cause. It is probably not unfair to say that the handing on of faith in that era had a large element of coercion built into it – believe this, do this – or else!

## LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

So where does that leave us now as the Cullen/McQuaid church continues to decay all around us? Must we wait for it to disappear completely before it becomes possible to begin again from the ground up.? There are those who would claim that the main difficulty about beginning again is the amount of energy that has to be expended on the quite substantial set of expectations that remain as a kind of legacy of the era that is ending – the continuing provision of sacramental rituals for people for many of whom they are mostly social customs with little if any spiritual content, the ongoing involvement with an education network that in many instances is Catholic in name only, with the attendant stresses and pressures of increasing bureaucracy in this as in several other areas. All of this is simply ‘keeping the show on the road’. It is maintenance rather than mission. Most of us, at least among the clergy, have been good at maintenance, we’ve done it well and have been happy at it. But now we can see clearly that something else is needed. It makes sense to us that Ireland needs a new missionary impetus. But we don’t know how to go about it. All our training has been for maintenance and we don’t know how to go about mission in the new context in which we find ourselves, even if we had the energy and relative youth that would be needed for it

However, a few things are clear about a new attempt to share the faith in Ireland. One is that we would have to be much more *Christocentric* (and maybe less ecclesiocentric) than in the past. At its heart, Christian faith can best be described as a way of looking at life and understanding it, of responding to life and living it, that is shaped and moulded by the teaching, example, death and

Resurrection of Jesus. Other aspects of faith - doctrine, awareness of God as loving father, a wish to share in the communal life of Jesus's disciples – all of these find their origin and focus in the message and person of Christ. In Ireland, there has been a tendency to see the church as an end in itself, rather than as means to facilitate the encounter between the Risen Lord and his disciples. Perhaps we need to move the emphasis in the phrase 'People of God' from the first to the second noun in that phrase. It might also be helpful if we could re-discover the now somewhat forgotten theology of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ. We would need to place the scriptures, and especially the gospels, more clearly at the heart of our faith. The biblical apostolate could be pursued with more vigour and conviction. We would need to rediscover the beauty of Christ, especially as reflected in art and architecture. We would need to celebrate the liturgy in a way that mirrors both Christ's splendour and his simplicity.

There is much evidence to suggest that faith can only flourish in the setting of real *community*. In the context of the dominant culture of the West today, this community will need to be strong enough to be counter-cultural. It seems that faith tends to be stronger where Catholics are in a minority, and where such a status seems to produce a stronger sense of identity and sense of belonging to a faith community. Especially in mainland Europe, what are called ecclesial movements provide many with this communal sense of identity that supports an alternative way of looking at life, and living it, that runs counter in many respects to the mainstream ambient culture. In the past, this sense of community was usually provided by the local parish and neighbourhood. However, in the much more individualized (even atomised) culture of today, the parish, especially in urban areas, but in rural Ireland also, finds it more and more difficult to foster a genuine sense of community, especially in matters of faith. This may be linked to the tendency to see faith as mainly a personal and private matter, which most Irish Catholics are reluctant to display or even to speak of in public. Attendance at Mass, for example, is often seen more as an exercise of individual devotion, or as doing one's religious duty than as a participation in communal liturgical worship. One task that a missionary project in Ireland might undertake would be to search for people who genuinely wish to see life, and live it, in a way that runs counter to the aggressive consumerism that constantly invades and pervades our lives. From among these it may be possible to form small communities that would try to be supportive of each other in tuning into and living by the vision and values of the gospel.

A further feature of faith in the future would be an attempt

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to find *points of contact* with those features of contemporary culture that are open to the gospel. Many of these are found in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which is an expression of a vision of human life on this planet that has much in common with the gospel. Pope Francis has much to teach us in this regard. His championing of care for the earth as our common home is very much in tune with the concerns of thinking people today. His focus on the ‘peripheries’ and on those excluded from participation in a fair share of the worlds resources is shared by the many people who work for greater justice for those who are the objects of discrimination and prejudice. His core value, which he describes with the word ‘mercy’ is surely shared by all who long for a more compassionate and inclusive society at every level. His emphasis on the family as the basic building block of society is surely echoing the concerns of many people. Communities of faith in the future would need to share all of these concerns, and a life of small communities of faith would have to include commitment to all of these priorities.

There could be difficulties in the formation and life of such small communities of faith in the Ireland of the future. One such difficulty could be finding age and gender balance. Initially, older people might be more inclined to join, and women will probably join more quickly than men. Perhaps such groups might best be formed with young families, but including grandparents and the wider circle. Another difficulty might be differing theologies or styles of being Catholic – e.g strong devotional enthusiasts and fervent social activists might find it difficult to cope with each other, while the doctrinally orthodox might have problems with the pastoral outreach of people with a more inclusive mentality. But as the history of the church from the days of the apostles teaches us, there will always be differences and tensions, but ways can still be found to move forward together.

Another major difficulty could arise from the question of who would initiate and follow through on the formation of such groups. It seems doubtful that such leaders/evangelizers will be found in families and parishes that are at present unable to foster vocations to the priesthood or religious life. It may well be that future renewal of this kind may have to come from beyond our shores, as it did in the great reform of the 12th century when new Orders like the Cistercians and the Augustinian Canons who came from France, at the invitation of people like St Malachy, to re-vitalize the weakening church of that era.

### DISCERNMENT

We know that faith, both personal and communal, is ultimately a

gift from God and so we need to open our minds and hearts to the work of the Holy Spirit to discern what God is saying to us at this time regarding our faith in him and our feeble efforts to share it. The call of Pope Francis for a more synodical ethos in the life and leadership of the Church is gradually finding a response in the life of many Irish dioceses, by means of synods and assemblies and listening processes that strive to involve as many people as possible in thinking about and planning for the future. It is important that these initiatives be movements of genuine discernment, rather than mere exercises in the strategic management of diminishing resources. This ought to involve serious, genuine and sustained prayer on the part of all the participants. We need more than just the often perfunctory recitation of prayer formulae that sometimes begins church-related meetings. We cannot deepen our faith or attempt to share it with others without an attentive listening for what God might be asking of us at this time. Discernment is not a familiar concept to many of us, or a skill at which we are proficient, but we surely need to learn it if we are to be guided by the Lord in the ways of faith, rather than simply trying to negotiate our way into an uncertain future relying solely on our own personal insights and our own very limited wisdom.

One of the great themes of the Hebrew scriptures is the theme of exile, especially arising out of the experience of those who were carried off into captivity in Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar six centuries before the birth of Christ. The voice of Isaiah, as we hear it especially in Advent, was for them a message of hope and reassurance that despite all the appearances to the contrary, God has not forgotten his people. A parallel could be made for the community of the disciples of Jesus in many parts the world today, not least in Ireland. We find ourselves living ‘on alien soil’. We have hung up our harps by the rivers of the new Babylon that is, at least in part, the world we live in today. We are finding it difficult, as the psalmist put it ‘to sing the song of the Lord in a strange land’. Yet this is our time and this is our place, and it is in this time and place that the Lord both consoles and challenges us in the living and sharing of our faith.