

NOVATE  
VOBIS  
NOVALE

# The FURROW

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Hugh MacMahon

Freedom from and  
Freedom for:  
*The heritage of the  
Celtic monks and  
Today's Ireland*

May 2019

# Freedom from and Freedom for: *The heritage of the Celtic monks and Today's Ireland*

---

Hugh MacMahon

When a person feels that the world they knew and valued was being forcibly dismantled within their lifetime, how might they react?

It is likely to be with some form of anger, anger being the common way of dealing with fear, hurt and sadness.

For many who grew up in the pre-1990s Church, there is fear for the future of the country. Individual freedom and prosperity are signs of progress but there is a dark side to modern society that is reflected in daily reports of horrifying human tragedies.

They also fear for themselves. They are disorientated by the changes. What is genuine? Who can be trusted anymore?

Hurt is part of the experience because they see the world they knew, and they themselves, as treated unfairly. The media consistently reinforce a negative picture of the past, the Church and the people they respect. Efforts to show a positive side to traditional Ireland are dismissed as proof of inflexibility and being stuck in the past. They, and all they stood for, appear indefensible.

They are also sad because the Church they held in such respect has been shown to have had its dark side too. There will always be cruelty in people and society but that it should have existed in the Church, without comment and correction, went against all they believed Christianity stood for.

Because they still feel part of the Church, they experience guilt by association. Could they have done something to counteract what was happening out of sight?

## STARTING POINT

Such breakdowns in confidence, hope and energy are not new in human, or Christian, experience but before giving up or turning to

---

Hugh MacMahon is a priest of the Society of St. Columban. Address: St. Columban's, 67 Castle Dawson, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.

psychology for help, it is worth taking a look at what the Desert Fathers, those experts in religious experiences, had to say. They had a name for it (*akedia*), and a solution.

They themselves had taken time off during periods of social upheaval to find meaning in their existence. In the quiet of the desert, closely following the gospel narrative, they hoped to discover peace and clarity of mind through prayer and fasting. However they soon came up against their own weaknesses. With no one near them on whom they could project, and mock, feelings they were unwilling to accept within themselves, they had to confront their inner flaws. Distracting thoughts and emotions stalled their efforts. Frustration and disappointments set in, dampening their enthusiasm and prayer. Finally they were driven to examine what they discovered within themselves and they recorded in detail the conflicting desires, emotions and idle speculations before proposing ways of dealing with them.

Their accumulated experience was assembled in guide books for those seeking to understand themselves and their place in the world. The desert masters were unanimous that *humility* was both the starting point and on-going challenge for anyone seeking a closer relationship with others, be they God or neighbour. For them, humility was an acceptance of human limitations and the consequent need for support from God and others. Without humility and gratitude a personal approach to God, or others, is unthinkable.

The simple message of the Desert Fathers soon spread across the known Western world and seeped down into the lives of people. In Ireland it radiated from centres such as Glendalough and the Skelligs, instilling a humility toward God and others that can still be found in the Irish countryside.

The Irish disciples of the Desert Fathers sought out their own remote 'deserts' to which they regularly retired to confront their human demons in the presence of God. Today the word 'Dysart' (or '*Disert*') survives in place names to testify to, and remind us of, this practice.

The word 'Cil' or 'Kil' in so many Irish names likewise comes from the Latin word '*cella*', the small enclosed cells of monks.

Thanks to the holy men and women who followed the example of the Desert Fathers, Ireland became known as the 'Isle of Saints and Scholars.' Perhaps not everyone was a saint or a scholar but the early trailblazers laid a spiritual and cultural under-current deep enough to survive the changes brought about by invasions, plagues and personal differences. It taught families what was important, how to respect others as equals and that blessings are to be given and received. Their humility when encountering nature, others and the sacred was something the monks had nourished.

## THE FURROW

### FREEDOM FROM

Times change, and today few are inclined to turn to the lessons of Glendalough or Skelligs for inspiration in their daily activities. In a rapidly changing Ireland, it is said that Christians might as well be trying to stop the tide as seeking to influence social trends.

However, the longings of the human spirit are too deeply ingrained to remain suppressed. They emerge to make themselves felt at least once in a lifetime. When people come to recognise their own inner contradictions and look for deeper significance in their lives, the wisdom of the desert experts is there to help them. It can show them how to deal with inner contradictions and then be free to engage positively with the incoming tide.

Encouragement to reflect deep within for the source of their discontent might lead them to ask, 'Why am I fearful? Have I forgotten what Jesus asked his disciples when the sea got rough, "Is your faith not strong enough?" Did I trust too much in the externals of the Church and not enough in God himself?'

Reflecting on their sense of hurt and anger they might ask, 'Am I grieving because someone else has taken over the "soft power" by which the Church previously had the ear of the politicians and the support of the media in setting moral standards? Do I still believe that the Church should be the dominant voice in society?'

The Christian message was not meant to depend on secular or social power to influence people's thinking and behaviour but, as Pope Francis said, to 'propose' a better way to them.

Those downcast from a sense of guilty might question themselves as to whether their embarrassment comes from an inability to face up to the past, put it behind them and believe that each day starts anew in God's presence.

### FREEDOM FOR

The Desert Fathers did not see themselves as cut off from the world or in any way downplaying the value of human effort in helping to create a better world. While cherishing the peace of remote hermitages they used their freedom to establish schools, take care of the sick and fugitives and reach out to others, even in distant countries. They sought to act without self-interest, to refrain from blaming others and to join in activities for the common good.

As Bonhoeffer was to say at a much later date, a socially embodied spirituality seeks expression in empowering care and service, and in a loving solidarity with the plight of the world.

## FREEDOM FROM AND FREEDOM FOR

### SPECIFICALLY CHRISTIAN

The Christian message does not have a specific economic, social or cultural agenda that can be applied to today's, or any other age's, situation but it has a specific *attitude*, based on clear beliefs and values. It was spelt out first in the Sermon on the Mount and, more recently, by Pope Francis in '*Laudato Si*'. There he draws attention to the inseparable bond between concern for nature, justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace. Of the four, the one on which the Church could be expected to speak with greatest authority and experience would be the final one: peace of mind.

Francis says, 'There needs to be a distinctive way of looking at things, a way of thinking, policies, an educational programme, a lifestyle and a spirituality which together generate resistance to the assault of the technocratic paradigm'.<sup>1</sup>

'Once we lose our humility, and become enthralled with the possibility of limitless mastery over everything, we inevitably end up harming society and the environment ... Inner peace is closely related to care for ecology and for the common good because, lived out authentically, it is reflected in a balanced lifestyle together with a capacity for wonder which takes us to a deeper understanding of life'.<sup>2</sup>

Here he is speaking the language of the Desert Fathers: Christian activity begins with inner peace and humility. He says further,

'Christian spirituality proposes an alternative understanding of the quality of life, and encourages a prophetic and contemplative lifestyle, one capable of deep enjoyment free of the obsession with consumption. Sobriety and humility were not favourably regarded in the last century'.<sup>3</sup>

Modern Western culture, to which Ireland has become attached, encourages self-assertion, accumulation rather than sharing of wealth, and campaigns for more personal freedoms. Sensitivity towards the feelings of those encountered, controlling impulses and making sacrifices for others fit uncomfortable in the new economy. At the start of the Industrial Age in Ireland, it was the slowness of the ordinary people to put material gain before human and spiritual considerations that was criticised as an obstacle to 'orderly' progress. The Catholic Church was blamed for this 'backward' reluctance to put self-interest first and efforts began to undermine its influence.

However, the 'decency' in the people, an 'ironic, mischievous, anarchistic' sense (as someone recently called it), a way of seeing

1 *Laudato Si*, #111

2 *Ibid*, #224-5

3 *Ibid*, #222

## THE FURROW

through things without stopping to dissect them, survives and is what foreigners recognise as essentially Irish. It is what motivates them to come to Ireland to experience and enjoy. The ability to see value and meaning beyond the physical was something the people learned from the basic Christian freedom of the ‘Dysart’ Fathers.

Again to quote Pope Francis, ‘Nobody is suggesting a return to the Stone Age but we do need to slow down and look at reality in a different way, to appropriate the positive and sustainable progress which has been made, but also to recover the values and the great goals swept away by our unrestrained delusions of grandeur’.<sup>4</sup>

‘We are speaking of an attitude of the heart, one which approaches life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present to someone without thinking of what comes next, which accepts each moment as a gift from God to be lived to the full. Jesus taught us this attitude when he invited us to contemplate the lilies of the field and the birds of the air, or when seeing the rich young man and knowing his restlessness, “he looked at him with love”’.<sup>5</sup>

## SAINTS AND SCHOLARS

If the message of the Desert Fathers is relevant for all periods of history, how did its influence fade in the Ireland where once it was so strong?

The process was slow. After six hundred years of monastic leadership in Ireland, a diocesan system was gradually introduced and the focus moved from individual spiritual growth to communal ministry. The transformation began in Ireland with the Synod of Rathbreasail in 1111. Local ruling families had taken over control of many of the monasteries from ‘holy men and women’ and used the political and economic potential of those institutions to their own advantage. The reforming synod sought to free the Church from this secular management but it also had the effect of shifting the image from spiritual lighthouse to ecclesiastical administration.

Over the following centuries the shaping of the Church was hampered by wars and Penal Laws. After the Famine the Church began to find its feet again, with priority given to forming a clerical and parochial system on Roman lines. Inevitably the pastoral duties of catechetical instruction and ministering the sacraments received precedence.

However memories of the old spiritualities survived in folk memory and practices. Traces of the monastic system can be found in seminaries and Religious houses. They were usually built to monastic specifications, with a cloister and central church. Clergy

4 Ibid, #114

5 Ibid, #226

## FREEDOM FROM AND FREEDOM FOR

and Religious were encouraged to observe the rules traditionally at the heart of monastic life: reciting the psalms, communal activity, sombre clothing and the ideals of poverty, chastity and obedience.

In the Irish Church efforts to maintain a balance between forming both 'saints' and 'scholars' continued but practical demands tilted the preference towards the latter. Up to the mid-1900 new parishes were still being built to deal with the increasing population. This meant that contacts between pastors and parishioners became more formal, that is, based on providing ministerial services rather than personal spiritual guidance.

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Any call for a return to the spirit and teaching of the Desert Fathers might seem unrealistic in an era of economic prosperity and technological conveniences. However, the number of spirituality centres around the country has increased. How to make parishes communal powerhouses of spiritual renewal is a challenge for the diocesan clergy. Drawing people's attention to early Irish saints who lived in the locality (giving it a 'Kil' name) will provide opportunities to introduce the spirituality which inspired previous generations. Some of those who previously sought spiritual inspiration in Asian religions may be surprised to discover that the elements they admire in Buddhism or Hinduism can also be found close to home, in their own heritage.

The experience of the Desert Fathers, in Ireland and elsewhere, suggests that religious growth thrives in small communities of people assisting each other in their spiritual journey, praying and practicing Christian charity together. Today they may not be based in monasteries but they will have 'dysarts', private places for spiritual recovery and regeneration. It could be a room at home, a secluded spot in nature or a retreat house hermitage where nothing distracts them from encountering their own deeper needs and God's sustaining presence. For support they have the encouragement of a like-minded community and for guidance the practical lessons of their spiritual ancestors, the early monks.

Pope Francis calls for new prophetic voices to lead or join this renewal. He prays that people will continue to be inspired by the basic Christian message and actively engage in local and national issues. The message of the gospels must be kept in the public eye and the promoters of a New Ireland challenged not to stifle the human spirit. A seeker came to Anthony the Great in the desert and asked, 'What should I do?' He replied, 'Don't count on your own righteousness, and don't regret something that is past, and practice restraint of the tongue and the belly.'