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Building Christian Community in Contemporary Culture

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The circumstances in which we now find ourselves as Church in contemporary culture are very different from say even twenty years ago, which is raising a whole series of new questions for us about personal identity, ecclesial identity, pastoral ministry, parish structures, and so on.¹ One of the most immediate tasks on hand is a certain reordering of parish life so as to ensure that *the possibility of Christian life will remain a reality in our local communities into the near future*. This will mean putting structures in place that have the specific objective of maintaining Christian life in the absence of a resident priest, which, to date, is that to which we have become accustomed.

The form of parish that is centred on a parish priest (and, perhaps, even a curate) is not the only form of structuring Christian community. It is not even the only legitimate one. I have grave reservations about the dynamic of so-called clustering, as it is in many instances little more than a priest-centred strategy for dealing with change that merely procrastinates addressing underlying issues at the level of Christian community life. It is most often an administrative response that still operates from an idea of social ordering that is fundamentally hierarchical – the power-over form – in its conception. Certainly, it solves some immediate problems in the short term; but, long-term, I would suggest, that it might have devastating consequences for local Christian communities. As opposed to a response that is limited to the administrative level, what is needed is a response that draws on a more integral and deeper reflection that mirrors the psychological, sociological, theological, and pastoral complexity of the challenge that is now at hand.²

1 Material from this paper was presented to the Dromore Diocesan Gathering, The Manor House Hotel, Enniskillen, 30 January 2018; and, more recently, to the Bradóg Cluster (Cabra, Cabra West, Phibsborough), on 24 June 2019 at Parish/School Hall, Navan Road, Dublin.

2 Ultimately, the administrative response does not empower and enable adult Christians to take responsibility for communal life; and, additionally, more than anything else, it is rooted in the dynamics of power and control.

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The key principle, right now, seems to me to be that of introducing a kind of synodal structure into our parish communities, whereby a group of lay people will, in time, be able to take responsibility for Christian life in a local community. It is worth remarking that this is not to do something that is outside of our present norms; And in principle, this can be done immediately, in the sense that there are no formal problems. Canon 516 § 2 recognizes that ‘when a parish cannot be set up in the usual fashion ‘the diocesan bishop is to provide for their pastoral care in another way’; And canon 517, § 2 permits that a ‘community of persons’ (who are not priests) can be entrusted with the ‘pastoral care of a parish.’ So even within our present regulations, without drawing on any radical theology, so to speak, we can in principle begin to take steps to ensure a future for local Christian communities. Of course, the fact that there are no formal problems does not mean that there are not significant difficulties to be faced at ground level. Enabling people to take responsibility, to form community, to act in a leadership role, to celebrate appropriate liturgies, and so on, are now enormous and even exciting challenges. But to carry on doing as we have been doing, and not to begin this process, is to sacrifice something of Christian life in the future for the sake of staying in our own comfort zone in the present.

OPEN COMMUNAL IDENTITY

There is here a further complexity when it comes to Christian community life. At a local level, the geographical boundaries of parish identity are still very important; but Church life and parish community can no longer be identified with the totality of a local population as was generally the case in the past. Apart from those who belong to other religions and none, there is a huge variation in the character of belonging from within every Christian community itself. Many now might characterize their belonging as a sort of *μεταξύ* (*metaxy*), an ‘in between’ or a ‘meanwhile’ that, on the one hand, may entail little explicit commitment to Christian liturgical or sacramental life, but, which, on the other, may value the Christian vision of life and, in that sense, may wish to be associated with the Christian community in different ways and to different degrees in order to honour this. We need to develop an understanding of community life that can accommodate a diversity of belonging as something that is intrinsic to parish life and ministry. This has to do with the importance of being able to meet the ‘pilgrim’ – the person who is on a journey – in our pastoral practice. It might be developed along the lines of an open community identity, whereby degrees of belonging are validated explicitly from within the community.

COLLAPSE OF COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Since about the 1970's, or even earlier, we have been moving toward a person-centred understanding of our world.³ We are in a situation of changing profiles, when it comes to personal identity: identity is self-discovered, self-organised, self-directed, and for the most part self-realizing. There is no longer any fixed structure of regulation, which could in any serious way control the overall dynamics of our social reality.⁴ This is just one facet of a greater complex of cultural change, whereby an existent framework that structured social reality has collapsed and is being replaced by what I would term a kaleidoscope of structuring fragments that bounce off one another. There is no longer a common macro-order. In the past such an order came before identity, so that one simply stepped into it to find meaning, to prepare for life, to know exactly where one stood, and so on. It gave the impression of a world that was largely unchanging, and in that sense was stable, secure, and safe. And many still remember that sense. In the last fifty years or so this stable macro-order has all but disappeared. And this has impacted not just on religious identities, but on a whole range of identities that had been prescribed for families, for schools, for institutions, and for professional identities (doctors, teachers, policemen, etc.). There were entire institutional domains in society that were formed along the same principles as being part of the one ecclesio-social order: Diocesan boarding schools, Teacher Training colleges, and Nursing colleges, for example, were all, to some degree, quasi seminaries!⁵ It meant that all of these instances of social order maintained a certain commonality of understanding, of practice, and of language in the culture, so that, even in an area that was newly secularized, everyone could still draw spontaneously on a common understanding, from within which identities could still be formed, relationships could be structured, and common projects carried out. This, of course, explains why similar problems and concerns are now arising in disparate areas in our culture. They have a common origin.

At present, this horizon of commonality – a commonality of culture – is dissolving here in Ireland (as it already has for our European neighbours) and will simply no longer be available to us

3 Although the movement to a person-centred world is associated particularly with the achievement of Carl Rogers and the client-centred approach to psychology, the dynamic of centring the subject in our understanding and approach to the world has its proximate roots in the Enlightenment (originally, at least, with Descartes) and significant remote roots in St. Augustine, and, even further back, in St. Paul.

4 We find these same dynamics in Islam and Judaism.

5 It is interesting that all of these structures have been completely abandoned in that 'traditional' form; except in the case of the seminary, which really is now in crisis as a place, structure, and mode of formation.

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in terms of social ordering and establishing identities. The language and understandings, the interconnections and cross-overs, the co-operations and collusions, are all being dissolved or left behind; not in any deliberate, conspiratorial way, but naturally, so to speak, as our culture itself changes and takes on new forms. The worlds of education, health, social order, politics, etc. are all being modified. This now opens up new challenges in terms of achieving identity, social cohesion, and communal agreement, which are drawing less and less on this older common horizon. In other words, it is not only individual identity that is changing; but *collective identity too is changing*.

In terms of Church, there is, if you like, increasingly, a double alienation from the classical institutional model of Church; first, there is that differentiation, whereby various areas of life (such as social services, health, and education) are being disengaged from the direct connection to the Church; and secondly, there is the collapse of a common order, language, and understanding that were all so closely related and linked (directly or indirectly) to the institutional Church.⁶ The significant factor is that the past is not being restored, repeated, or replicated. And with this a whole new vista is opening up from within which the Christian Churches with their gospel message will need to find their place and voice. In terms of religion and spirituality, this situation is not necessarily negative; but it does mean that until we accept this fundamental change, we cannot begin to be part of the common conversation that will shape the future.

IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

This emerging situation does not, however, mean that each person is left paddling his or her own boat, when it comes to finding and establishing identity. The connection to others is extremely important, where, ideally for each person, there is a significant circle of people that might include family, friends, colleagues, who acknowledge, ratify, and validate each person's life. I'd like to explore briefly the change in these dynamics of validation and recognition in more recent years.

Looking at the turn to the personal and the subjective that is so distinctive about our culture, it would be a mistake to think that they are expressions of a modern *individualism* that has no place for the communal, the social, or even the assembly as in *ecclesia* (Church community). On the contrary, the reality of community in all kinds of forms continues to be very important in culture at large. The Irish sociologist Michele Dillon – who is Professor for

⁶ The alienation in language has enormous implications in terms of the possibilities of nurturing Christian life in a community.

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Sociology at the University of New Hampshire and who specializes in religion and culture – argues persuasively that ‘the increased tendencies toward religious and spiritual autonomy do not subtract from communal commitments.’⁷ It is, however, the form of these commitments that has changed.

In terms of seeking out and establishing a meaningful life, the collective and the communal are vital. They are the essential forum of recognition and validation. An individual cannot achieve any appreciable level of meaning independently of others. Like a language, meaning emerges in interaction with others. Likewise an individual cannot live continually in the anxiety of having to re-evaluate and re-compose his or her system of meaning. Without the approbation of the other, the self cannot really emerge and experience a rootedness in life. This is true at every stage of life; but is particularly important for young adults. The large self-consistent ordering of the past proffered the horizon within which you found recognition and validation, even if, at times, this was at a cost to individual expression and identity. It validated only that which matched an accepted order; and for more and more people, this was its weakness and a significant factor in why it collapsed.⁸ The established order was simply not able to meet the multiplicity that reflected the turn to the person that came to a head mid twentieth century. It was incapable of accompanying the emergent diversity as more and more people (through education and various movements of liberation) found that it alienated them from their person and from their interior selves.

SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY

Now that that large scale ordering has collapsed, other instances of recognition and validation are being fostered. These tend to take the form of small groups and personal commitment to small groups, of which the family is still by far the most important. In this sense, human formation as a life-long undertaking no longer takes place through large-scale structures, and people increasingly seek out smaller systems of meaning. Small groups that correspond to one’s own sense of oneself are becoming extremely important in our culture in terms of socialisation, recognition, and validation. It is a

7 See Michele Dillon, ‘Multiple Belongings: The Persistence of Community amidst Societal Differentiation,’ in William A. Barbieri, Jr., ed. *At the Limits of the Secular: Reflections on Faith and Public Life*, Foreword by Charles Taylor (Cambridge: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2014), 275-304, at 276. Whereas the reflection is concerned for the most part with the US, which takes a somewhat different form than here in Europe, the reflection draws on critical discussion with Durkheim, Habermas, and Taylor.

8 The so-called ‘culture of containment’ was a reactive strategy in dealing with that heterogeneity that was judged to be negative and dangerous for the body politic within the established order.

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reaction to the large institution, to a singular dominant discourse, to a globalized economy, and to a conformist mind-set. In our culture, it is increasingly in the small group that you seek and find your meaning, your values, your recognition, your sense of what is important for you, and your understanding of the fabric of your own life. Of course, crucially, this is among equals and to a large extent the validation itself is mutual. It is the forum for the expression of convictions and the place of personal exchange and relation. The small group can generate a real sense of shared values. It is the place that engenders 'respect' and develops personal 'esteem.'

To some degree what we are witnessing is a change in the understanding of what it is to be together, to form community, and to celebrate together. *It is marked less by distance and deference and more by proximity and exchange.* In terms of the small group, it is physical presence, emotional connection, psychological parity, and the affinity of exchange that is important. The small group facilitates presence, conversation, listening, being listened to, mutual engagement, and being an active participant in terms of the social dynamic of the group. It is not a forum for sermons, or dictates, or doctrines. In the small group there is distinct interaction and presence: seeing, speaking, talking, hearing, listening, feeling, eating, sharing, and so on. The boundaries and the structures are different. Oftentimes, there is a specific feature such as gender or age or interest that marks out the character of the group in question: women's groups are not the same as men's groups (the Men's Shed Movement is a very interesting example of a contemporary men's group); but you also get young adult groups, or cycling clubs, or self-help groups, or choirs, as other typical examples.⁹ There is significant variation in the format and degree of interaction, but the element of commitment is usually very important. In the large-scale institution there is a very different ordering of persons; in the most sterile form, persons are simply there, juxtaposed in a system that may not even acknowledge them in person and in which they remain anonymous. They simply fill seats and can be counted (You know the question: Were there many at mass today?).

There has been an explosion of small groups claiming a religious form and structured around questions of meaning.¹⁰ This is already having a major impact on Church life. The proliferation of small group dynamics in the wider culture is mirrored in the emergence of what might be termed special interest groups within the Church

9 In the past there were similar structures of interaction such as the GAA, drama groups, processions, solidarities, etc.; many of which came under the umbrella of the local Church.

10 For a comprehensive exploration of the phenomenon, see Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (Oxford: Macmillan, 1994).

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itself. You find groups such as Youth 2000, Charismatic groups, Medjugorie groups, Taizé groups, even advocacy groups with a general outreach within the Church. Not only that, but small groups and personal networks are now a significant feature of parish life. Indeed, the vibrancy of parish life can easily be recognized in the manner in which such groups are actively encouraged and nurtured in a parish setting. There are bible groups, prayer groups, baptismal teams, bereavement groups, youth groups, Eucharist minister groups, choirs, and so on. It is important to see the link between, on the one hand, the collapse of the large-scale institution and the proliferation of what I would term *small group activity*, on the other.

The small group enables a validation of faith-life, where the key dynamic is that of *the exchange of experience*. It is far less about theory, or teaching, or doctrine as the operative reason for being there; and much more about experience, exchange, and personal encounter. The theory is secondary to the experience, if you like; and this reflects a major shift in our culture that has taken place in the twentieth century. The empirical, the relational, and the pragmatic take priority over the intellectual, the theoretical, and the doctrinal. These, of course, are not exclusive of each other; but the interaction has changed. You could say that one's beliefs' system now grows and emerges from one's experience. This is a matter of living out what one has genuinely appropriated and can own for oneself, in other words, of being authentic.

WEAK VALIDATION & CLOSED GROUP DYNAMICS

The dynamic of small groups and the mutual validation that they foster is not, however, available to everyone. It works best, of course, for those who already have considerable personal resources, be they linguistic, economic, psychological, relational, or even just having time. It also requires a significant commitment to the group in question if it is to facilitate a journey of identity. This means that many now turn elsewhere to find the validation that they need in order to chart a meaningful path in life. In its weakest form this is achieved through public space, via, for example, the media, or the Internet, or simply a group of casual friends. Here there is low quality inter-personal interaction and very few demands made on the person. There is no real proximity and little affirmation, and, therefore, a minimal possibility for human growth. As a forum of validation it is relatively weak; it does not really facilitate the emergence of a solid identity. This is part of the shadow of these dynamics and a matter of real concern, when it comes to our young people.

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There is, in addition, a particular form of the small group that needs to be remarked. These are groups that are sectarian and that demand total participation. They are social enclaves that define themselves over against others in society. Their identity as a group is defined, controlled, and perpetuated by a closed group dynamic. They promise security, validation, support, etc., on condition that one commits totally and exclusively to the group. They can take religious, political, or even economic form. They offer clear answers to life's questions, simple solutions to life's problems, and certainty in the face of post-modern flux. They are inward looking and ideologically charged at a cost to being outward looking and connected to the wider culture. They are very attractive to the young; especially when one feels oneself under threat or overwhelmed by the demands of living in the wider culture. They are presented as an oasis in a desert of indifference and neglect. The simplistic worldviews and structures of meaning that they present are quickly and easily mastered so that they are especially attractive to the vulnerable. Being part of such a group gives one a strong sense of 'being somebody,' even if it is on the margins of the culture. These dynamics go a considerable way in explaining why highly educated young Europeans join Islamist groups with which they have very little in common outside of the contours of the group itself. This is evident, however, in all the major religions, and not just Islam. In a society where large-scale institutional recognition is collapsing these groups have profited as alternate (and dangerous) systems of validation.

CHURCH AND SMALL GROUP ACTIVITY

If the Church does not continue to integrate these vital dynamics into its structuring principles, then it is greatly weakened as a way of bringing and holding people together in our culture. I suspect that ministry now and in the near future will need to pay much more attention to this; it will need to be concerned with enabling such *small group activity* that will become more and more important in community life. In a way, we can look back at the earliest forms of Christianity, when small Christian communities gathered to share the life of faith.¹¹ When asked about Christianity in the future, Charles Taylor opines: 'Well, it's not going to be that different from the way it started; we started in the Roman Empire as a small group, not established, nothing to do with the established religion, just spreading the word. It's a kind of return to ... a more authentic

¹¹ Institutional structures will increasingly depend on such activity if they are to have any purchase in the Christian communities of the future.

predicament ... we are back home in a certain sense.¹² Ministry can no longer survive as a service that is built on the celebration of the sacraments without a whole structure of community life that is built to some degree on such small group activity.

The manner, in which persons now form collective bodies, and, therefore, community, has changed and continues to change. It is no longer top-down along hierarchical lines nor does it entail accepting a pre-given structure. It is rather bottom-up along lines of mutual exchange.¹³ Indeed, leadership in this context is much more about enabling, guiding, facilitating, directing, etc. Communal life is allowed to emerge so that each person has the space to flourish in terms of his or her identity. It is such dynamics that are satisfying to more and more people in our culture. We are in the realm of inter-subjectivity, discussion, dialogue, mutuality, exchange, and just ordinary companionship. This is what now energizes people. A ministry that is viable for the future will need to be able to appropriate something of this vision; and not as a strategy, but out of real life-giving conviction. It is in this way that a new form of institution(-ality) can emerge to support the life of faith. It is vital, to my mind, that, at the very least, we might recognize the *possibility* that is inherent in these dynamics. Old wine skins will not hold new wine! And the structures that we have inherited are continuing to collapse in our culture.

We are witnessing the death of an institutional form of Church that was pre-occupied with uniformity, control, and power over others.¹⁴ It is this structure that is collapsing. We now need real, pragmatic, realisable decisions about enabling, training, facilitating, and creating the space for lay Christians to take increasing responsibility for community Christian life. If we wish to contribute to Christian life in the future, then we need to make this a priority. New structures will emerge in time and, to some degree, we are already witnessing this. The temptation right now may still be to try and maintain a sinking ship: it is, after all, that with which we are familiar; which gives us a sense of stability; and, indeed, still furnishes a small cohort within the

12 Francisco Lombo de León and Bart van Leeuwen, 'Charles Taylor on Secularization: Introduction and Interview,' *Ethical perspectives* 10(2003): 78-86, at 84.

13 The pattern is not pre-given, but formed and knitted together as a praxis, viz., a living action. Speaking recently, Pope Francis spoke of the need for a 'theological Pentecost' and commented: 'Without the possibility of the experience of new paths, nothing new is created, and there is no more place for the newness of the Spirit of the Resurrected One' (<https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Catholicisme/Pape/A-Naples-Francois-prone-liberte-theologique-2019-06-21-1201030506>, accessed 22 June 2019).

14 The unhealthy nature of its dynamics are coming more and more to the fore, and go a significant way in explaining why so many are 'leaving' or disassociating themselves from the institutional Church.

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Christian community with a modicum of power. The image that I have is that of the Titanic sinking! The very powerful image of this huge liner sinking slowly into the water can so easily take hold of consciousness; it grabs the mind's eye and even the heart's hold. And, of course, if you've seen the film; then, it is even more likely to be the case! But the amazing thing, the remarkable, the miracle, is that all around the gigantic ship as it goes down, there are these small boats that carry life away from the place of death. Death does not have the final word. Hope is not with the huge ship; it is, rather, being carried onwards in these small boats. They become the principle of new life. And with this image, there is a certain realization that maybe we ought not to try and re-build a super-tanker that will carry everyone in the same way and on the identical path across the ocean of life to eternity! Instead, might we not encourage the use of small boats that simply remain in free and easy contact with each other? If you go down to any seaport, you will see a delightful variation in the small boats moored there: names, shapes, sizes, colours, and so on. Necessarily, the future is going to be much more diverse, more colourful, and, in that sense, brighter. We're not at an end; it is really, only, another beginning. I'd like to close these remarks with a poem by John O'Donnell.

Storm

John O'Donnell

We should have seen it coming, I suppose,
but we were dog-tired when we left, and skies
seemed clear, the sun's work done, sinking astern.
He'd flaked out down below, missing his turn
to steer – and who could blame him, wanting peace
from days of heat and dust, and everywhere
excited hordes, clamouring for a piece
of him. A shame to wake him, but we were
in real trouble, too late to shorten sail,
heaving waves swamping the decks, the boom of gale
enough to raise the dead. I slapped his face:
'We're going down! Don't you care?' He blinked, then stared
as if he'd come back from another place
to wind and water, waiting for his word.¹⁵

15 In 'Name and Nature: "Who Do You Say That I Am?"' ed. John F. Deane, *Poetry Ireland Review*, Issue 112, April 2014, 102.