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# The FURROW

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Hugh MacMahon

## Finding the Way Back

– *The Christian  
Message and the  
Shape It Takes*

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# Finding the Way Back

## – *The Christian Message and the Shape It Takes*

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It is hard to know which is the most urgent challenge facing the Church today. Is it celibacy, the shortage of clergy, married priests, the fragility of marriage itself, the role of women, democratic governance, a new attitude to sexual morality, falling Mass attendance? Others might see it as a seeming inability to relate to young people among whom are high rates of depression and suicide, increasing violent crime and a disinterest in organised religion. What about the Church's role in ensuring a greater sharing of wealth among all the citizens, combatting the deterioration of the environment and addressing the causes and results of mass migrations?

Commentators usually view the present weakening influence of the Church in terms of human, scientific and economic progress. They suggest that religion does best among poorer and less educated people but fades in the face of economic prosperity and greater scientific knowledge.

However, religion survived while empires rose and fell and while its expressions can change from age to age, often influenced by economic and scientific factors, it exists on its own energy. If its influence diminishes in any one period, it is because the forms its message took failed to inspire and nourish people. Here in Ireland the Church is facing a critical moment but if the causes, and solutions, are to be found it will only be done by exploring them from a religious standpoint.

My own appreciation of the steps by which a religion inspires, or fails to inspire, a people came from my involvement with Christian communities in Korea and Ireland.

At first look the two Churches may seem to have little in common, one is new, the other old. In 1964 there were only 500,000 Catholics in Korea, today there are 5.8 million. During much the same period in Ireland the number of Sunday mass-

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goers dropped from 91% in 1973 to 30%. Despite their seemingly different fortunes, it is from their *similarities* that something can be learnt. As a companion of mine used to say about a certain type of person, 'He was an inspiration, and a warning, to us all.' How the Churches in Korea and Ireland got to where they are today can be an inspiration and a lesson for us all.

## A MODERN MIRACLE

Modesty aside, the significant contribution of foreign missionaries to the dramatic development of the Korean Church was not due to any well designed and executed missionary plan.

The Church we brought to Korea was transplanted straight from the West with little consideration for the religious and cultural heritage of the people. The liturgy was Roman, and in Latin till the late '60s. Key words used in the sacraments and catechetics were transliterated from the Latin or created from Chinese characters. Outside the Church they had no meaning. The Western theology which the words articulated was accepted on faith but with little understanding.

## WHY THEN DID THE CHURCH FLOURISH?

We did not fully understand the reasons at that time but many people, uprooted from their traditional world by war and poverty, wanted to preserve their contact with the spiritual world and found the Catholic Church met many of their needs. It was not its complex doctrines that attracted them but the symbols, stories, rituals and moral code which echoed their historic understanding of the sacred. Catholicism had what they were looking for and further explanations could wait.

The reverence and order in churches, which lasted in Korea after Vatican II, echoed the respectful formality at the heart of Confucian ritual. There they could sense a presence and a power, immerse themselves in mystery, find union with past generations, be part of a wider community, seek blessings, be refreshed and be guided in leading a moral life. What impressed them was not theological discourse but the bible stories they heard, the symbols they saw, the rituals in which they joined and a moral code they could easily grasp.

## THE SPIRITUAL MEDIA

The symbols that made this possible were those of the pre-Vatican II Church: statues and pictures of Jesus, Mary and the saints;

the crucifix, scapulars, holy oils and holy water, and a Pope as intermediary with God. For the people these images were not novelties, they were familiar religious elements steeped with sacred energy. Even the missionary priest, perhaps not fluent in the language or culture but a celibate and serving the people without hope of financial gain, mirrored in their memory of Buddhist monks. In such a sympathetic symbolic world the Korean people felt *continuity* with their ancestors' efforts to approach the invisible reality that moves the universe.

They were used to books as sources of learning. The stories that kept meaning in their lives were from the old and new testaments, and tales of ancient saints heard during Mass and catechetical sessions. They listened approvingly to how the Church had been brought to Korea by their own people, not by foreigners, and how many hundreds of their ancestors had died as martyrs.

The rituals that gave a rhythm to their activities were not just baptisms, weddings and funerals but the joy of feast days, seasonal reminders of the Christian mysteries, novenas, fasts, processions, vigils, candles, incense and blessings for everyday matters.

When it came to knowing what was right and wrong, the timeless Ten Commandments affirmed much of what they already accepted. The new directive to love God and neighbour was based on a more personal vision of the creator they had known from childhood but it appealed to their instincts.

This was the spiritual world in which Korean Catholics developed their understanding of Christianity and nourished their faith. Its influence continued even in the decades after Vatican II when the Korean Church enjoyed its greatest expansion.

Later, as life improved in the 1970s and '80s, people's confidence in their heritage revived and they might have begun to question the Church's dependence on Western concepts to express its deepest insights and its slowness to respond to the questions raised by the new sciences.

A crisis was delayed by the emergence of some outstanding figures in the Church: Cardinal Stephen Kim of Seoul, Archbishop Victorinus Youn of Kwangju and Bishop Danial Ji of Wonju. Their stand for democracy and human rights made them national figures at a time when others were intimidated into silence. Catholic prestige soared and young people flocked into the churches. This rapid growth continued until early in the new millennium when social stability returned and the Church's slowness to respond to newly-felt spiritual needs became more apparent. Today, Sunday Mass attendance has dropped to 18%. The questions already troubling the Church in Ireland and elsewhere are now being faced.

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### WHERE THE CRACKS BEGAN

Vatican II was welcomed in both Ireland and Korea for the new possibilities it opened but it also had unanticipated consequences. The theological relaxation it ushered in was an essential part of the search for relevance but it led to questioning some of the basic assumptions on which many people had based their lives.

The question of *salvation* was thrown wide open. If the Church, with its sacraments and moral teaching, was no longer essential for salvation, why be subject to its severe discipline? Ireland responded with an enthusiastic openness to ecumenism but missionary vocations nosedived. Why go abroad if the people in non-Christian countries have their own paths to salvation? The thrust of the Church's overseas activity turned more in the direction of justice, peace and poverty issues.

The '*non-directive*' counselling approach of Carl Rogers became popular in Catholic circles at that time and had long-lasting effects on the formation of clergy and laity. People were urged to find answers within themselves rather than in the wisdom and instruction of others. In the background, TV was showcasing attractive alternative lifestyles that seemed quite acceptable in other countries.

In the face of these challenges, the symbols, stories and ritual of previous years no longer offered the same support or direction. It was not that such underpinnings had become obsolete but they needed to be readjusted to express a renewed understanding of what Christianity stood for. As Pope Francis stated in his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 'The biggest problem is when the message we preach seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ's message.' (34).

The typical parishioner was caught between the appeal of new freedoms and concern that the Church was throwing out the baby with the bathwater. They waited for a fresh demonstration of the uniqueness and relevance of the Christian message and for new stories, symbols and rituals that would stir their interest and imagination. But no one seemed able to provide what they were looking for.

If a solution is to be found, where should the search begin?

### DISCOVERING THE CORE

Pope Francis states in *The Joy of the Gospel*, 'The message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and

thus become all the more forceful and convincing.’ (35) He goes on to say, ‘In this basic core, what shines forth is the beauty of the saving love of God made manifest in Jesus Christ who died and rose from the dead.’ (36)

The concept of ‘love’ has long intrigued humans and is still a key theme for novels, movies, TV dramas, songs and art. Yet not everyone is thinking of the same thing when they sing, ‘All you need is love.’ Love can be romantic, erotic, affection, platonic, generosity, self-love or unconditional.

It is the latter, unconditional love, that which expects nothing in return, that Christian tradition sees as closest to that of God the Father. The Greek term *agape* was used to describe it. It was the love of parents for their children, of teachers for their disciples, of benevolent rulers for their subjects, of friends who helped with no expectation of repayment.

In a culture which promotes self-love, the idea of putting other’s interests before one’s own will be regarded with suspicion. Such altruism is explained away as either a covert form of seeking self-satisfaction or a world-denying stance peculiar to Christianity.

Yet, the concept of *agape* was highly regarded long before Christianity came into being and in civilizations far beyond those of Europe. In China, Confucius called it *Ren*, the ‘Love due to people’. The ability to go beyond self-interest for the sake of others was seen as the highest human achievement. It is the glue that still holds society together in the Confucian world of China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam and elsewhere.

In describing *Ren* as the essence of humanity, Confucius stated, ‘I treat the aged in my family properly and extend this to the aged in other people’s families, treat the young in my own family properly and extend this to the young in other people’s families.’ The values associated with it were respect, responsibility, genuineness and knowledge of self. To help people practice *Ren* on a daily basis it was embedded in the stories, symbols and rites that are still at the heart of life in East Asia.

*Agape*, though a Greek word, expresses a universal human experience which even today few fail to admire. Among the various varieties of love, it is a natural or God-given gift to all of humanity, reflecting the very nature of God himself. The message of Jesus brought this insight to a new level.

#### THE CHRISTIAN CONTRIBUTION

Even his compatriots had difficulty understanding what Jesus said and did. His *counter-cultural* parables and actions challenged their understanding of God, themselves and society.

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Matthew Chapter 5 spells it out in stark terms: love your enemies, if someone strikes you on the right cheek, offer him the other cheek; if someone sues you in court for your shirt, let him take your coat as well; if someone forces you to go one mile, go two miles with him.

God's treats those who come to him late in life just the same as those who followed him for many years at great cost. (Mt 20:1)

He rates people, not by how much they own, but on how much love they showed for others. (Mt 25:31)

His love is offered equally to those who appreciate it and those who will reject it. (Mk 4:1)

He gives so generously that there will be always be more than enough. (Mk 6:42)

He tells people that if they want to be great they must be servants. (Mk 9:35)

The most important rule and law is to love God and others. (Mk 12:33)

John's gospel summed it up with the account of the last supper and Jesus washing his disciples' feet.

The Acts of the Apostles trace the efforts of the early Christians to live out this vision. In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, Ch. 13, we have his memorable description of what it means in practice. The image of Jesus sacrificing himself on the cross became the symbol of Christian identity and mission.

## THE SPIRIT/BODY TENSION

For the early Christians, the persecution and contempt they had to endure seemed inevitable because of their counter-cultural beliefs and lifestyle. But when the Church became politically acceptable, and even privileged, pressure to conform to society's expectations of immediate gratification increased.

It led to a significant number of Christians leaving the cities for the emptiness of the desert in order to explore the Christian way without distraction. There they asked themselves, 'Who am I, and who is God?'

In line with the thinking of that time, they viewed themselves as being part spirit, seeking what was authentic and lasting, and part body, attending to the more immediate and earthly demands of a nervous system. Between the two stood free will with the task of deciding which would get priority. They decided that if they were to make any progress in nourishing their spiritual side they would have to be able to limit the demands of their emotions and bodily appetites.

To develop their spiritual capability the desert seekers

developed a program of scripture studies, meditation and prayer. They restrained their bodily appetites through fasts and vigils, minimising personal possessions and avoiding sensual distractions. Some spent their whole life in the wilderness engrossed in this task while others returned to city life believing they would now have something to offer as teachers or leaders.

A number of contemplatives described their experience of God's love in mystical and emotional terms, drawing on the imagery of the 'Song of Songs'. Despite the time devoted to scriptural study and reflection, life in the desert was not meant to be an austere mental exercise. Its goal was to raise the emotions to the highest possible level and turn people into genuine 'men and women, fully alive and for others'.

As one of the Desert Fathers stated, 'While the desire of the spirit does not allow the mind to be dragged into unbridled license, neither does the weakness of the flesh allow the spirit to be drawn on to unreasonable aspirations for holiness.'

These heroic efforts of the 'Desert Fathers and Mothers' were widely reported, admired and imitated. Eventually their example took root even in faraway places like Ireland. Soon hospitality and giving without expectation had added meaning in Irish life on all levels, often accompanied with the aspiration of 'offering up' the effort spent in helping others.

#### PRACTICAL CHRISTIANITY

Undeniably, the high level of self-awareness and self-giving achieved by the desert scholars was seldom realised by the majority of Christians, either then or in later centuries. Even monks experienced how difficult it is to avoid seeking the consolation of some personal possession, looking for praise or bending the rules to assert individuality. Good deeds inspire gratitude in some form or another and few can resist the glow of being appreciated. However, at such times monks were expected to consider whether they were acting just to get such affirmation or whether they would have been so self-giving anyhow.

The majority of people lived in villages and cities where daily life provided more distractions and temptations than in the desert. What the monks, from their deserts or Skellig rocks, contributed to society was a reminder that there was more to life than what immediately attracts attention. For centuries in Ireland and elsewhere, amid cattle raids and territorial wars, the monks were a silent but visible reproof. They kept alive the hope that as long as a person retained in their hearts the desire to follow Christ, sooner or later, despite temporary lapses or distraction, they would be able to return to what was lasting.



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*Today* the challenge to stir consciences is as great as ever. The consumer society in which we live is based on belief that the only important needs are those that come from bodily appetites and they can be instantly gratified if one has the money. Acquiring wealth, or the appearance of it, has become the priority. In such circumstances, practising self-denial to enable one's spiritual ability to grow is likely to be viewed as time-wasting, repressive, unnecessarily demanding and out of touch with innate needs.

However a reflection on human reality challenges this modern myth. In China, where people have long practiced restraint for the sake of others (*Ren*), they are able to enjoy themselves as much as anyone else. *Ren* has humanised the life of a vibrant, hardworking people, making the Asian experience an alternative and worthy challenge to the West's.

In the desert life was not inhuman or unbearable. Many of the practitioners lived contentedly to a ripe old age. Fasts and other ascetical practices were not goals in themselves, they were means to experiencing the presence and love of God at a deeper level.

That the monks appreciated the beauty of creation and rejoiced in the unique satisfaction of spiritual progress was attested by visitors. Strangers and the poor were welcomed with the generosity the monks themselves experienced from God. Tales of the monks' learning, humanity and heroic efforts were shared widely across the western world.

### MEETING THE CHALLENGES

To return to the list of demands facing the Church today, most are closely related to the Church's ability or inability to *challenge* society with its counter-culture message of selfless love, based on belief in God as loving Father Creator.

It is only in that light that the Church's attitude to celibacy, marriage, priesthood, Religious life and service in society have meaning. These commitments demand both restraint and a constant focus on expectations. The Desert Fathers' first question to newcomers was, 'Why? Why did you come here?' Today they might ask, 'Why do you wish to be a priest or Religious, get married, assist in the church, volunteer or join the public service? Is it a hope for respect, power, riches or love? If that is so, there are other paths you should think about. Just be careful they don't become your entire life.'

Such expectations are demanding but reducing the Christian message to what is culturally acceptable serves neither the Church nor the people.

In offering hope and purpose to the younger generation, the

message of *agape* will find resonance in their idealism and help them find their place in a wider world. Sharing their concern for the environment is an opportunity to explain why it is a religious issue: our relationship with God's creation should be based not just on what we can take from it but on how we can protect it even at some cost to ourselves.

As to the role of the Church in society, the prevailing values of consumerism need to be challenged by a counter message. If enough followers of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, selfless volunteers and dedicated public servants are true to their commitment, people will get the message. At present those benefitting most from the economic system are those who lend money and for them the thought of giving something with no hope of return is anathema. We have forgotten that for centuries the practice of lending for profit was considered a sin in Western civilisation. Human progress calls for a re-centred world, based on restricting self-interest.

#### MANAGING THE MEANS

Finally, what about the rites, symbols and stories that traditionally embedded the Christian message? Can those we knew so well be revived or do we need new ones?

Solving that might be the easier part. Once the message has clarity, and is being implemented in society, the rest should follow.

That is what happened in the early Church. Jesus left words and an example but no authorised religious structure. As the early Christians sought to follow him they developed the ritual, words and symbols they needed to remind them of him, refresh their faith and bolster their efforts.

The early Irish Church, in a different time and place, cultivated the monastic rather than the diocesan system, its own way of calculating the date of Easter, a distinctive monastic tonsure, a unique penitential system and the ideal of going abroad as 'an exile for Christ.'

Each practice expressed how the Church viewed its counter-cultural role at a certain time, how it prayed and who were its exemplar-heroes. The forms chosen had their origins in Judaic and Roman usages, Irish customs and the example of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. It was not a planned process, it evolved naturally.

*Today*, in a different age and culture, the challenge continues of finding ways in which we can experience and practise the unlimited love of God for his world and pass this on to others through words, ritual and symbols that will enlighten, move and nourish.

Much will depend on the celebrant of liturgical events ensuring that the Bible message of *agape* will be clearly reflected in word

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and signs. Scripture scholars, theologians and liturgists can help in taking wise choices, avoiding pitfalls and maintaining a sense of direction. Yet, keeping non-selfish love at the centre of Church life is never a rational or academic exercise but a *coalition* of heart, soul, body and mind.

The great achievements of the Church in the past – in Ireland, Korea and elsewhere – are an inspiration for all but the situation of those Churches today is a warning we cannot ignore.

**Courage.** The experience of fear in our hearts doesn't mean we cannot be courageous. Being really brave means embracing the Cross in the midst of fear, even while we are fighting against it, like Jesus in the Garden of Olives. That's the kind of courage the martyrs showed. The Lord is never closer to his own than at these moments. That kind of courage-in-the-midst-of-fear is the greatest witness to belief in God and the power of his love for our healing and our good.

– SISTER MARY DAVID, *The Joy of God* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 90.