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Religious Spaces
in Transition:
Challenge and
Opportunity

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Religious Spaces in Transition: Challenge and Opportunity

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As a new year and a new decade begins, reflection on the events of the previous year allows for a certain amount of analysis and evaluation. Dominated by Brexit and mass protests in France and beyond, one event in 2019 seemed to have had a profound effect. The news of the fire that devastated the Cathedral of Notre Dame de Paris on April 15th 2019, the Monday of Holy Week, resonated around the world. Many people recalled their visits to the Cathedral in the past and most felt a genuine sense of loss for what had been the symbol of Paris for hundreds of years before the erection of the Eiffel Tower in 1889. News that the damage, though extensive, was not beyond repair was met with a collective sigh of relief worldwide. It was particularly comforting to learn that the sublime twelfth-century Rose windows had been saved, and the fact that the chaplain of the Parisian firefighters, Père Jean-Marc Fournier, had saved the Blessed Sacrament and the relic of the Crown of Thorns in a heroic gesture reminiscent of his action following the Bataclan attack in 2015 was extensively reported. The dramatic imagery of the collapse of the spire on the night of the fire seemed to have inspired genuine grief, so the words of President Macron committing the French nation to restoration and rebuilding were welcomed far beyond the borders of France. The image of the damaged interior of the building with the gold cross remaining intact which was circulated throughout the world the next day was profoundly moving in its symbolism. Less widely reported was the fact that a fire also broke out, at the same time, in the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem – the third holiest site in Islam – which was kept under control. In an opinion piece in Newsweek on the day following both fires Craig Considine commented as follows:

“The building represents much more than Christian identity – it serves as a reminder of the French peoples’ will to persevere and

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their aspirations for France as well as humanity and Christendom ... A similar kind of symbolism holds true for Muslims and their connection to al-Aqsa. The mosque is much more than a place that holds the five daily prayers. Like Notre Dame, al-Aqsa has a complex history of religious tension, warfare and occupation. Originally built by Caliph Umar on the grounds of a former Byzantine building, al-Aqsa was imagined as a continuation and perfection of Judaism and Christianity”.¹

The potential destruction of these sacred buildings represents an enormous challenge for Christians and Muslims and provides an opportunity for reflection upon the importance of their places of worship as well as focusing on the extraordinary achievements of previous generations.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLACES OF WORSHIP

As the religious and cultural landscape in Ireland continues to undergo radical change how important is it to ask questions about the *future* of our many religious spaces? This question was posed at a recent symposium held in the University of Limerick.² Organised by Dr. Niamh NicGhabhann, Assistant Dean for Research, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, it interrogated how our places of worship are deeply *embedded* in our sense of identity and values. An important reminder that the future of many of these buildings is uncertain, this is a valuable and timely conversation which is worth having before the problem becomes insolvable. Each of the contributors drew from their own areas of research, focusing on an understanding of these buildings in terms of their past, present and potential future functions in society.

The keynote address, delivered by Dr. Sarah Roddy of the University of Manchester, highlighted the essential role played by voluntary funding by the Irish laity over a 70 -year period following the Great Famine. Entitled “Pray for the Donor: Money and the material in Irish Catholic Church interiors”, Dr. Roddy’s research points to the development of an increasingly cash-based economy, which led to both prominent and anonymous donations contributing enormously to the construction and decoration of hundreds of churches and religious buildings during this period in Irish history. Referring to means of funding such as pew rent,

1 Craig Considine, “Notre Dame and Al-Aqsa Fires Give Christians and Muslims a Chance to Work together to Repair Their Sacred Spaces” in *Newsweek*, 16/4/19 <https://www.newsweek.com/notre-dame-al-aqsa-mosque-fire-christians-muslims-work-together-sacred-spaces-1398119> Accessed 21/1/20.

2 Symposium - *Religious Spaces in Transition*, University of Limerick, 16th January, 2020.

collection boxes, Nativity shrines, and candles, as well as private and anonymous donations motivated by sincere religious faith, it demonstrates that Irish Catholic church interiors are complicated spaces. As well as being an indicator of the experience of ordinary people in post-Famine Ireland, it is also a record of the interaction of religious communities with their local church. Examples are so numerous and ubiquitous that there has been a tendency to take it all for granted. Dr. Roddy's research indicates that this is about to change, and indications are that extraordinary stories of devotion and self-sacrifice are hidden within the walls and furnishings of these buildings. This generosity continued up to relatively recently, when in the commemoration of the Marian year of 1954, the Church of Mount St. Alphonsus in Limerick city – famous for its annual novena to Our Lady of Perpetual Help – crowned the icon of Mary and Jesus with jewellery donated by devotees of the icon. The generous response provided gold for the crown, with enough left over to make a large gold monstrance and chalice. Included in the jewellery donated were gold wedding rings from the local community.³

Dr. Richard Butler of the University of Leicester gave an interesting perspective on the “difficult” heritage of some ecclesiastical buildings focusing on the building of Galway Cathedral on the site of the former Galway jail. The links to the Maamtrasna murders and the execution of Myles Joyce, widely believed to have been innocent of the crime provided the background to this complicated history.⁴ Dr. Gillian O'Brien from Liverpool John Moores University developed this theme referring to difficult heritage and dark tourism, pointing out that in 1796 there were 51 jails in Ireland one of which, Kilmainham gaol, has become a sanctified space because of its association with the leaders of 1916.

Jessie Castle's talk on Irish *convent buildings* of the 19th century centred on the enormous growth in the building of convents in 19th century Ireland, indicating that in 1801 there were 11 convents in the country, and by 1901, this had increased to 368. This was of course attributable to the growth of religious orders following Catholic emancipation in 1829, as well as the remarkable resourcefulness of the sisters involved. Dr. Danielle O'Donovan, Programme Manager for Nano Nagle Place in Cork built on this legacy, documenting the transformation of South Presentation Convent from a formal to an informal learning environment. Closed in the late 1990s it was re-opened as a public space four years ago,

3 See *Church of Mount St. Alphonsus, 150th year Anniversary Guide*, (2015), 49

4 See Lorna Siggins, “A Wrongful Hanging in Connemara, 1881” in *The Irish Times*, May 20th 2016.

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with the historical buildings regenerated and blending with the new buildings such as the café and Heritage Centre. Continuing the social justice ethos of its foundress, the building is used by the Cork Migrant Centre and the Lantern Community Project as well as by groups of creative writers, poets and musicians. This project is a very impressive example of what can be achieved with the vision and will to overcome the challenges posed by buildings that have outlived their original purpose.

The symposium resumed following lunch with key insights by Ankie Petersen and Sander Ummelen on the situation in Holland, pointing out the challenges faced by the many churches and their administrations.⁵ Speaking engagingly of the transition processes and change management necessary in an environment where churches are losing 287 people per day, they asked the very pertinent question – Who Cares? It would appear from the following session, which included input from all the participants and attendees, that there is a considerable amount of concern from academics, archivists, historians, museum curators, environmental groups, and educators. The talking points focused on sources, archives and texts which should form part of the exploration of the histories of these buildings, identifying the stakeholders, and what questions need to be asked about understanding these buildings and their past, present and future functions in our societies. The answers to these questions will be crucial in setting out a path for the future of our churches and religious spaces.

The next stage of the symposium involved a visit to the John Henry Newman campus in Mary Immaculate College in Limerick. This former convent and female orphanage, built in the nineteenth century, has been successfully adapted to the needs of a modern third-level institution, housing the Graduate School. The tour of the campus was facilitated by one of the architects of the refurbished building, Cathal Quinn, who pointed out the challenges of adapting the building to a contemporary setting.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

Following the tour of the building, there followed a response to the day from Dr. Joseph MacMahon, OFM, and Professor John McCafferty of UCD. Dr. MacMahon reflected that the Church has always been in a state of transition, and that it is now going through a radical period of change, becoming more *faith centred*. Observing that religious spaces point to a deeper reality and mystery that

5 According to Peter Doorackers, an editor at the *Katholiek Nieuwsblad* Dutch society has not yet reached “peak secularisation”, and the “biggest wave of church closures” was still to come. See “More Dutch churches set to close, Catholic newspaper warns” in *The Irish Catholic*, January 23rd 2020, 26.

have profound associations with collective memory and meaning for religious communities, he referred to three reactions to the fire in Notre Dame. The *first* reaction was at the popular level of genuine grief for the loss of a building that represented a world that was precious to them. The *second* reaction was an elitist sense of cultural and aesthetic loss, and the *third* was the reaction expressed by the Archbishop of Paris, Michel Aupetit, who drew attention to the *raison d'être* of the building and to what happens inside it. This leads to the question of what its mission is *now*, in the wake of the catastrophe, and indeed, to what form the rebuilding will take. In a letter sent in Autumn 2019 to the 47,000 donors worldwide who contributed to the rebuilding, the Archbishop pointed out that the Cathedral fund continues to receive over 140 donations per week, assuring those donors that the Notre Dame foundation, of which he is President, continues in dialogue with the French authorities regarding the restoration programme.⁶ Interestingly, on the 16th July 2019, the French Parliament passed a law requiring that the building be rebuilt exactly as it appeared before the fire, indicating sensitivity to the feelings of those who contributed.

The symposium concluded with a response from Dr. John McCafferty, who emphasised the importance of adapting sacred buildings with *sensitivity* to their original purpose and the cultural patrimony that they represent. His reference to the 'widow's mite'⁷ and the potential pushback from communities was a reminder of the deep connection between these buildings and the people from the original communities who sacrificed so much to bring them into being. The story of this wave of religious building in Ireland is a complicated one. The determination and energy of those involved, viewed within the context of post-Famine Ireland, was breath-taking. Certainly, abuses of power occurred, but equally certainly, there were extraordinary acts of generosity and self-sacrifice involved. The individuals involved in the building of the great Gothic cathedrals of the Middle Ages shared an ideal with those who contributed their energy and money to the building of churches, cathedrals and other religious buildings in nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland. All of them aspired towards transcendence, an aspiration that has receded considerably in our time.

NOTRE DAME REVISITED

Bearing this in mind, it is worth returning to the events of 15th April

6 A reminder that Notre Dame Cathedral has been the property of the French State since 1789, although the Archdiocese of Paris is responsible for the upkeep and care of the building.

7 Cf. Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4.

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2019, and to the actions of Père Fournier, the priest who risked his life to save the Blessed Sacrament and the relic of the Crown of Thorns from the flames. In an interview held two days after the fire he described how he and the Chief Sergeant of the Fire Department entered the building, and had to locate the keys to the sanctuary and the reliquary as pieces of burning wood dropped from the ceiling of the building. Having rescued the Blessed Sacrament he blessed the cathedral with it, an action he described as an act of faith. “I asked Jesus - whom I believe is really present in these hosts – to combat the flames and to preserve the edifice dedicated to his mother. This benediction coincided with the start of the fire in the North Tower. And, at the same time, its extinction! Without doubt, it was Providence ... the two belfries were saved.”⁸ When he had ensured the safety of the relics and the Blessed Sacrament he climbed up the South tower, which was accessible, with the Fire Chief. When they arrived at the top of the tower, they saw that the roof had been consumed by the fire, and the cathedral was in flames. Asked what feelings he had experienced at this moment, he replied as follows:-

‘We were about to enter Holy Week. We had begun Lent with the distribution of ashes, and that phrase “Remember that you are dust and that into dust you will return”. That condition of dust is closely aligned to our humanity. But also, it is necessary to view it from the perspective of the Resurrection. I had, at the same time, this great sadness at the loss of an extraordinary good, this great framework of the cathedral. And, at the same time, this indescribable joy lying in the hope of the Resurrection. I knew that the cathedral would be rebuilt, more beautiful, stronger, and more alive.’⁹

Asked to clarify what he meant by “more alive”, he responded:

‘Yes, because many of these buildings are shells that are a little dead. For these religious monuments, there is a risk that they can become whitened sepulchres. In the history of Western Christianity these buildings were burnt, collapsed, and were attacked. What happened? Everyone rolled up their sleeves and rebuilt. There is a kind of inherent life in these buildings which accompanies the daily life of Christians.’¹⁰

8 Hugues Lefèvre “Père Fournier: “Dans Notre-Dame en feu, j’ai récupéré Jésus et beni la cathédrale”, Numéro 2154, 17/4/2019, <https://www.famillechretienne.fr/boutique/magazines/2154>, Accessed 5/2/20.

9 Ibid. (Translated from the French by the author).

10 Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This identification of our religious spaces with the life of Christians, lies at the heart of how we plan for their future in an increasingly secular world. While church attendance in Ireland remains relatively high in comparison to the rest of Europe this is likely to change in the future. The symposium at the University of Limerick started a conversation that many of us might be reluctant to engage with, but it is nonetheless necessary in order to ensure that the future use of our religious spaces respects the integrity of their original purpose. The words of Père Fournier describing both his sadness and joy when watching the roof in Notre Dame in flames seem appropriate as Ireland faces this next phase of her history.

Meeting God? Every human being can meet God. This happens all the time, even though most people are unaware of it. Christians believe that experiencing deep joy has to do with experiencing God's presence. This is especially true for joy that leaves a good aftertaste following the event that caused the Joy. You can experience that joy while praying or in the church but just as well at work, in the kitchen, in a museum or walking in nature. That joy can be strong. It is often quiet and almost unnoticeable. Joy that continues to resonate says something about where and how God is present in a person's life.

- NIKOLAS SINTOBIN, SJ, *Did Jesus really exist?*. 2020. (Dublin: Messenger Publications). p. 20.