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Eamonn Fitzgibbon

A Theological
Reflection on
Pastoral Practice
in this Time
– *From
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A Theological Reflection on Pastoral Practice in this Time

– *From Maintenance to Mission*

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I have been very struck in these times by the phrase that we often use in Pastoral Renewal – ‘from *maintenance* to *mission*’. Donal Harrington says that “this implies a shift on focusing effort on maintaining what is there already to focusing effort on striking out in order to put something different in place”¹; essentially it recognises that maintaining the *status quo* is no longer sufficient to meet the needs of a rapidly changing cultural context. A strategy primarily built on maintenance was perhaps appropriate fifty years ago when church practice, vocations etc were all in such high numbers. Now we need to think mission and respond to the plea by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* to operate in a ‘missionary key’. Mission implies new strategies and creative responses to go out and engage with people, to be a Church which evangelises and strives to connect with people who may not be connected in the traditional sense.

I have felt for some time that the idea that we could simply move from maintenance to mission mode is unrealistic. The reality is that maintenance is needed to continue alongside any attempts at mission – without some maintenance our Church would fall in to disarray. However, I would argue that a disproportionate amount of resources, time and energy is spent on maintenance rather than mission. The Mass schedule still had to be fulfilled, babies baptised, the dead buried, schools still expect that the priest would visit and that schools themselves would prepare children for sacraments. Any time or energy for mission is somewhat depleted. In the current context of the Coronavirus crisis, we have moved completely in to the territory of mission and the need for maintenance of most

1 Donal Harrington, *Parish Renewal: Reflecting on the Experience*, (Dublin: Columba, 1997), 74.

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of the previous schedules and practices has fallen away. We can't speak about people coming to Mass and instead we have to find ways of reaching people with on-line liturgies, radio Masses etc. We are now in entirely missionary territory - we must find ways of reaching out to connect with people who are unable to come to where we are, we need to be creative and imaginative.

ORDAINED MINISTRY AND PRIESTHOOD OF THE FAITHFUL

Immediately after the more extreme restrictions were announced by the Government, Bishop Brendan Leahy rang me first thing on that Saturday morning and asked me to identify those *clergy* in the diocese of Limerick who are under seventy years of age, and of those, who might have underlying conditions that require them to cocoon. The next task was to clarify the geographical spread of those priests who are available. In many ways it is as if we are now projected forward ten years or so. We have approximately forty to forty-five priests covering essential services across sixty parishes, including funerals, sick calls and on-line liturgies. We were also asked to identify *lay people* who could lead prayers at the graveside if required. I have been making simple resources available to families so that they can pray with family members gathered around deceased loved ones at home for the wake as we are precluded from going in and out of houses. So, families are now praying at home, leading liturgies themselves, joining in for the on-line Masses. In all of this there is an opportunity - an opportunity to let go of so much of the maintenance that was holding us back from truly operating in a missionary key.

There is no going back – even when things return to ‘normal’. There is an opportunity to look again at the volume of Masses celebrated throughout our parishes, to look again at the dependence on schools for sacramental preparation, to look again at the way in which a Church that was so clergy dependent may have denied the parish community the opportunity of being a truly ministering parish. We need to take seriously the opportunities provided in the modern culture for evangelisation – such as technology in our churches, social media etc. Never again can we argue that it would be impossible not to have Mass in this or that church every weekend, neither can we insist that the priest has to be present for every aspect of funeral liturgies.

THE DOMESTIC CHURCH

I am very struck these days by the way in which the domestic Church has been mobilised. It is interesting that the Passover

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celebrated in the Jewish tradition – the Seder meal – takes place in each household, in the home, with the family. We too speak of a basic and principal unit of the Church as being the domestic Church – the family in the home. Alongside the other units – the parish, the diocese, the universal Church – this unit is hugely important. This is the message behind each of the World Meetings of Families – the most recent having been held in Dublin.

Sadly, it seems that the significance of the domestic Church has somehow diminished over the generations. However, current circumstances dictate that this unit is now the one through which the Church finds expression. Families gather in their homes to attend Mass on the television, the internet or the radio and families find new and creative ways to pray together. Recently, when preparing a family for the funeral of their loved one they explained that the remains would be brought home for a wake – a wake that was private and confined to family. They asked me for some resources that would help them in praying that night with their deceased and I was very happy to oblige. However, it did strike me that somehow families have lost the confidence and experience around these basic ways of living and expressing their faith. These times of Covid have created a climate of necessity whereby ‘staying at home’ challenges us to ensure the domestic Church is the essential unit of Church. We cannot presume that just because families are staying at home means there is a vibrant domestic Church in place; anecdotally, it is certainly true that some families are gathered together in prayer in a new way but this may need to be accompanied with formation and encouragement.

POST-COVID ?

William Bridges offers us a wonderful example of Moses as a leader who successfully managed the transition needs of a community in a time of great change.² There is a danger that we will rush back to the way things were when all of this is over – a flight back in to Egypt. The greatest tragedy for the living and the greatest insult to the dead will be for us to go back to the way we were, carrying on as if nothing had happened. We are now in what could be called ‘the neutral zone’ – that time of wilderness between the old and familiar and the birth of something new. God is not teaching us a lesson through Covid but God uses every moment as a *teachable moment* and so it will be important that we reflect on this experience and draw out what it might mean for how we do things in the future.

2 William Bridges, *Getting Them Through the Wilderness: A Leader's Guide to Transition*, 2006.

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SACRAMENTAL PREPARATION AND CELEBRATION

In fact, this year will require of us a creative response to the provision of Confirmation to those children who, not having received confirmation in the Spring of 2020 will now have left primary school. Here, there is an opportunity for parishes to provide some catechesis and sacramental preparation for the sacrament. Parents could be invited to apply to their local parish for the sacrament and commit to undertake a basic programme provided at parish level. Similarly, deferred First Communion ceremonies could now take place across a number of Sundays with families again being invited to apply to receive the sacrament. This crisis could present the opportunity and impetus to move towards the parish based sacramental preparation and celebration that we have long spoken about.

INTERNET RELIGION

The immediate aftermath of Covid 19 saw a huge rise in the array of on-line Masses and liturgies provided over the internet. This development is worthy of reflection. Ilia Delio sees this internet religion as a sign of a *new* religious consciousness on the horizon and through it we can attend different liturgies around the world, exploring different religious traditions. She continues:

‘Internet religion may be God’s way of saying – I am much larger than you think; I actually enjoy different languages and rituals. I can be found in a thousand ways and I cannot be boxed into a concrete structure whether a Church, a Temple, a formula or a decree – all of these are human constructions that in the past were helpful but in our age have hindered and, at times, alienated us from our capacity to unite. Now we are in the midst of a pandemic and the internet is pushing us toward a new planetary community, sharing our fears and hopes online, joining in a common concern for our future’.³

The internet certainly provides the means to a new community and within this a new faith community. In saying that I have been very struck by the fact that people still wish to connect with their own locality, their own neighbours and clergy, even if it is through the internet.

3 *Internet Easter* by Ilia Delio April 6, 2020, Accessed at <https://omegacenter.info/internet-easter/>

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ECOLOGY

At the height of the pandemic we celebrated Earth Day – the fiftieth anniversary of this celebration which focused this year on Climate Action. In looking for the causes of coronavirus, there is a recognition that it is linked in some way to human interference with the earth's ecosystems and biodiversity. This is true whether it originated in a laboratory in Wuhan or in a wild animal market where animals are brought from their natural environment to highly stressful conditions creating a breeding ground for viruses. Even if the cause lies elsewhere again, all agree that globalisation and world travel facilitated the spread of this virus throughout the world. Many years ago, Thomas Berry reminded us that we belong to the earth; the earth does not belong to us. Some argue that because we humans have disrupted the Law of Nature:

‘there is likely a silent war that has erupted between nature and humans; for we have become the most unnatural species on the planet ... the systems of nature ... forming a federation of earthlife to consider the extent of human destruction and probably planning a global human *coup d'état* in the 21st century ... for nature is made for the flourishing of life and will do whatever it takes to achieve its purpose’.⁴

Perhaps, such an interpretation of this crisis may seem too extreme but there is no doubt we cannot be healthy unless the planet is healthy:

‘There is a clear link between the wellbeing of humans, other living beings, and the ecosystem which we can ignore only to our peril – a hard look at our consumption patterns that have been wrecking the planet. We also need to take a hard look at some of the luxuries we are addicted to, like flying around for frivolous reasons, holidaying in exotic places and travelling thousands of miles to reach there, etc., with detrimental impacts on the planet and its ecosystems’.⁵

It is encouraging that when human health is endangered there is a capacity to act, changing our behaviour and complying with the extreme measures that are required. If we can recognise the ecological crisis as being equally urgent, with devastating consequences for human health, it may not be too late to make the necessary lifestyle changes. Similarly, there has been a growing

4 *Internet Easter* by Ilia Delio April 6, 2020

5 *Seven Reflections on the Coronavirus Emergency from an Ecological Perspective*, Jostrom Isaac Kureethadam SDB, Coordinator of the Sector on Ecology, Vatican Dicastery for Promoting Integral Human Development.

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sense of the worldwide community coming together in response to Covid – it is to be hoped that this global solidarity will continue in the form of an international response to the needs of poorer nations.

A CAUTIONARY NOTE

Ministry encompasses practice which in turn can be defined as intentional action. However, it is recognised within pastoral theology that alongside what we term best practice, practice is corruptible – practices are not neutral and they are not always good. Therefore, we also need to be continually asking what is the *shadow-side*, the possible negative consequence of some of the hastily convened pastoral practices enacted as a response to Covid-19. The suddenness of the situation in which we found ourselves caused a rush to solutions which, though well-intentioned and perhaps appropriate in the circumstances, may give rise to some dangerous off-shoots. That which has been put in place is certainly not the ideal – it is a *'needs must'* response – it is also true that sometimes well-intentioned actions can have negative unforeseen side-effects.

Indeed Pope Francis is alert to these dangers and he has reminded us that “online Masses and spiritual communion do not represent the church, this is the church in a difficult situation that the Lord is allowing, but the ideal of the church is always with the people and with the sacraments” - one’s relationship with Jesus “is intimate, it is personal, but it is in a community,”⁶ The *community dimension* of our liturgical celebrations is seriously undermined and virtual communities are a poor – albeit necessary – substitute. Online Masses, prayers and acts of spiritual communion are available but Pope Francis says this is not the church and he has even gone so far as saying it is ‘dangerous’.

Others expressed discomfort at online liturgies because far from seeing them as a forward step towards a technological future, they experience them as a backward step to the liturgy of yesteryear – clergy centred without lay presence or participation, where the congregation is very much cast in the role of spectator. Somebody even remarked to me that it is ironic that the distribution of communion is discouraged at lay led liturgies and now, when the distribution of communion is impossible our first recourse is the Mass – is it not now time for creative prayer and lay led liturgies?

The rush to fill the void created by closed churches may be keeping us from entering in to a deeper moment of prayer and reflection. Tomáš Halík, the Czech priest and theologian has remarked:

6 Pope Francis, Homily at Morning Mass in Santa Marta, April 17th 2020.

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‘Maybe we should accept the present abstinence from religious services and the operation of the church as *kairos*, as an opportunity to stop and engage in thorough reflection before God and with God. I am convinced the time has come to reflect on how to continue the path of reform, which Pope Francis says is necessary: not attempts to return to a world that no longer exists, or reliance just on external structural reforms, but instead a shift toward the heart of the Gospel, “a journey into the depths”.⁷

There is also the danger that the Eucharist becomes less of an action and more of an object – our language communicates this objectifying the Eucharist when we speak of getting, taking or receiving communion. We have seen priests and bishops, with the best of intentions, bless streets and cities with the monstrosity from open-top cars (even a diocese from a helicopter) as a protection from the virus. Thomas O’Loughlin invites us to:

‘use this experience to rediscover that we are the church (it is not a building), we must be eucharistic every day ... but the word ‘eucharist’ relates to a verb: it is something we, the whole People of God, do. It is our basic activity as Christians, not some ‘thing’ that the priest does for us or makes for us’.⁸

Technology and the internet has offered us a wonderful resource creating opportunities previously unimaginable but we need to proceed with *caution*. For example, I know that some clergy provided deferred celebrations of the Easter ceremonies by previously recording them through Facebook on YouTube – initially for those using Facebook streaming this was the only option available to them. The canon lawyer Luigi Mariano Guzzo alerts us to a very interesting dilemma created by this practice. He asks whether the internet is a communicative or a liturgical space. Traditionally the internet has been used by the Church for communication, we are now using it as a liturgical space and this is untenable with deferred celebrations.

‘If the Internet is understood as a liturgical space, then the situation has to change. Taking into consideration Matthew 18:20 (“Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am among them”), it seems that there are two essential elements of the Eucharistic celebration: 1) the actuality of the celebration, as a present moment of grace; 2) the people of God as an assembly

7 Tomáš Halík, *Christianity in a Time of Sickness*, America: The Jesuit Review, April 13, 2020, Vol. 222 / No. 8.

8 Thomas O’Loughlin, *Reimagining the Eucharist*, The Tablet, 25th March 2020.

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that gathers in “breaking” the bread. In the deferred celebration both these elements are missing ... If we don’t talk about these things in our ecclesial communities, we will continue to live in the contradiction of bishops and priests who recommend to people to follow celebrations which are formally considered ‘without people’, while asking them, at the same time, not to take them as if they were simply entertainment. But if there is no liturgical participation, in the full sense, what should distinguish these celebrations online from other broadcasts in programming, that is, from entertainment?”⁹

CONCLUSION

I am conscious that, as a friend remarked recently, ‘you are great at asking the questions but where are the answers?’ I am raising more questions than answers here but for now it is appropriate to live with the questions, to develop the capacity to ask open questions and attend to the answers with an open mind.

For now, ours is a task of discernment, praying to the Lord to “Grant that all the faithful of the Church, looking into the signs of the times by the light of faith, may constantly devote themselves to the service of the Gospel.”¹⁰

9 Luigi Mariano Guzzo, *Can Web/Internet be a liturgical Space?* Il Regno blog, 8th April 2020. (translated from the Italian)

10 *Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs (III): Jesus, the Way to the Father*, from the 3rd Edition of the Roman Missal, English Translation, 2011.

True Love. Once again, love must not be confused with like. The point is not to *like* everything and everybody – not even God could seriously issue such a command. Rather to *love* means to respect the other as other – even if I should not like him or her. Hence, love often implies hard work and intimate engagement, and, contrary to popular opinion, love ought not to be reduced to sentimental feeling of harmony or nostalgic romanticism.

– WERNER G. JEANROND, *Reasons to Hope*. 2020. (London: T. & T. Clark), p. 174.