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The Light from the Southern Cross – for Ireland too?

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As I noted in a recent article here,¹ the reform of the Catholic Church envisaged by Pope Francis is faced with the challenge of translating the rhetoric and theology of synodality into institutional shape and the practical nuts and bolts of parish and diocesan life. As Francis himself put it in an address marking the 50th anniversary of the Synod of Bishops (2015), synodality ‘... is an easy concept to put into words, but not so easy to put into practice’. And in the same address, when commenting on some of the means required to effect this translation of vision into local, regional, national and universal levels, he noted that ‘... these means, even when they prove *wearisome*, must be valued as an opportunity for listening and sharing’, since there is no other way that the Church can ‘keep connected to the “base” and start from the people and their daily problems’, so that ‘... a synodal Church can begin to take shape’ (my emphasis).

A recent document (May 1st 2020) from Australia entitled ‘The Light from the Southern Cross’ is the most thorough-going attempt I have seen yet in this necessary move from rhetoric to institutional reality. As such it is both interesting in itself, but also for its implications world-wide and here in Ireland too. It is not always an easy read because of its often technical nature (‘wearisome’), but its implications are, I believe, ground-breaking and exciting.

GENESIS

The document derives from the Australian Catholic Church, and, more particularly, from a group called the Governance Review Project Team (GRPT). This group had been set up by the Implementation Advisory Group (IAG), which was in turn established by the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference (ACBC) and Catholic Religious of Australia (CRA), in response

¹ O’Hanlon, Church Reform: Taking Stock, *The Furrow*, 71, June 2020, 323-332

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to a critique of Church governance by the Royal Commission. That commission was established by the Australian Government to investigate child sexual abuse in Australia.

The bishops and religious who sponsored the document have decided not to publish it formally yet, but it has been released to *La Croix International* who commissioned distinguished N. American ecclesiologist Richard Gaillardetz² to comment on it, and it is now effectively in the public domain.

The focus of the report is on church governance and on a response to the Royal Commission ‘in light of Catholic ecclesiology’ and ‘through a Gospel lens’, but also incorporating best practice and theory from the civil domain. The authors envisage that their review of governance in the Australian Catholic Church might also be of use to the Plenary Council of the Australian Church (already in preparation, with more than 250, 000 people contributing to 17,500 written submissions – 6.5.1), due to take place in 2020 and 2021 but now postponed due to Covid-19. They also hope that their review can be of help to the Catholic Church worldwide.

The GRPT consists of about a dozen members, lay and clerical, male and female, with considerable expertise in many fields, including legal (both civil and canon law), theological, political science and governance. Among its members is well-known theologian and journalist with *La Croix International* Massimo Faggioli.

CONTENT

Scripturally and theologically the document draws on themes like the Church as the Pilgrim People of God, collegial and synodal in nature, with attention to the ‘sense of the faithful’ (*sensus fidei fidelium*). It is called *as* the Body of Christ (with many parts), imbued by the Spirit to act as steward of God’s gift to the world, in service of humankind’s call to bring about God’s kingdom on this earth which, like we humans, is in its own way also made in God’s image and likeness. The approach is very much inspired by Francis himself – the church as field-hospital, a ‘poor church for the poor’, missionary in nature and constituted by synodality, resistant to the dominant clericalism - but also by Vatican II’s understanding of the Church as in service of the Kingdom, for the world, not for itself.

Within this theological framework, and drawing on Catholic Social Teaching as well, certain principles, values, practices and

2 Richard Gaillardetz, *La Croix International*, June 3 and 4, 2020, including access to the document itself, <https://international.la-croix.com/news/may-the-global-church-discover-light-from-the-southern-cross/12490>; and Joshua J. McElwee on same document, <https://www.associationofcatholicpriests.ie/2020/06/the-light-from-the-southern-cross/>

culture are highlighted which focus on the main theme at issue, that of governance (5.1). These include subsidiarity, stewardship, synodality, dialogue, reflection, co-responsibility and discernment. In addition the document notes that we must take seriously, under the rubric of a culture of leadership, ‘... the expectations of contemporary culture in terms of transparency, accountability, inclusion, participation and diversity’ (5.1.2). These expectations, the document argues cogently, are entirely compatible with gospel values. They result in considerable detail of administration and pastoral practice, two realities which again, the document argues, contrary to popular opinion, are entirely compatible (7.6.8 and *passim*) – good pastoral practice requires sound administration, as the sexual abuse crisis has so clearly demonstrated.

The sources of the 86 specific recommendations that arise from the review are, then, *twofold*: a gospel lens and theology, especially ecclesiology, on the one hand, but also the tenets of good civil corporate governance on the other. Civil bodies referenced in this context include the Australian Financial Complaints Authority (5.3.5), the Australian Institute of Company Directors, the Australian Financial Exchange, the Governance Institute of Australia, and Standards Australia (5.4.2).

These recommendations extend to the national, diocesan and local/parish levels, with implications for the universal church and for the Catholic Church here in Ireland. I will offer a flavour of what they involve as perhaps the best way of concretizing the significance of this important document.

RECOMMENDATIONS (2.7)

There is *first* (n 3) the overarching recommendation ‘that the ecclesial governance principles of collegiality, synodality, subsidiarity, stewardship, dialogue, discernment, participation and good leadership be reflected in the governance structures and decision-making processes of dioceses, parishes and church agencies’. This is to include ‘integrity, accountability and transparency in the administration and governance practices of all church bodies’ (n 4). Safeguarding is a concern throughout.

These general principles begin to bite when one puts them into practice at different levels. First, with regard to *ad limina* visits of bishops to Rome, there are recommendations about ‘prior consultation within the diocese, including with the diocesan pastoral council, about the content of the *ad limina* report’ (n 7.2), ‘publication of non-confidential elements of the *ad limina* report to the local community’ (n 7.3) and ‘communication of non-confidential elements of the conduct and outcomes of the *ad limina*

visit by bishops on their return' (n 7.5). One can see here how the values of transparency and accountability begin to have traction, a feature of the whole report. It notes many times that the authority of both priests but particularly bishops has been excessively personalized so that an unhealthy culture of secrecy surrounds its exercise. How much do we in Ireland know about the *ad limina* visits of bishops to Rome?

This is once again to the fore in the recommendations that follow about the appointment of diocesan bishops – the process should be apparent to all the People of God, there should be a consultation process including an analysis of the needs of the diocese and a discernment of the *terna* that includes clergy and a large number of lay people (nn 8 and 9).

It has often been argued that Canon 129 of the New Code of Canon Law precludes lay people from exercising serious decision making powers. The document, rather than calling for a revision of the Code, calls instead for an interpretation of its meaning in a more liberal direction (n 13).

In many of the recommendation there are calls for lay people, and in particular women, to be included in diocesan and parochial leadership and governance. And so, there is the recommendation that 'the appointment of lay women and men to senior decision-making bodies be accelerated' (n 15.1); 'that women take a critical role in relation to the selection and formation of seminarians and participate in the evaluations team deciding suitability for ordination' (n 18) and- again, note how this one bites! - 'that lay persons with appropriate expertise be involved in decisions regarding the placement of priests in parishes' (n 19).

As I noted, running through the review is a critique of clericalism, and in particular the lack of transparency and accountability around the authority of bishops and priests. This is addressed again in the context of the formation of candidates for the priesthood, where a more collaborative model of priesthood is proposed, and it is recommended that 'all Church leaders take steps, whenever the opportunity presents itself, to educate about the dangers of clericalism and to make changes to practices that foster an unhealthy culture. These opportunities include, but are not limited to, seminary curricula and ongoing professional development for clergy and lay people' (n 34).

With regard to the Conference of Bishops in Australia (ACBC) it is recommended that its operations be more accountable, inclusive and transparent through an expansion of its advisory membership and public communication of non-confidential agendas, internal reports and major decisions (n 42); that canon 391 be changed to include mandatory consultation with the diocesan pastoral council

and the council of priests before making particular law (n 45); that ‘lay advisors, female and male attend council of priests’ and college of consultors’ meeting with the right to participate fully in all discussion and not as mere auditors’ (n 46); and that each diocese be obliged to ‘have a diocesan pastoral council or close equivalent’ (n 50).

Again, the relentless focus on inclusivity, accountability and transparency is emphasised by the recommendation on diocesan synods: ‘that within five years following the closing session of the Plenary Council 2020-21 each diocese conduct a diocesan synod and every ten years thereafter’ (n 56).

At a *parish level* the same principles pertain and specific recommendations are made to operationalize them. And so it is recommended ‘that each parish articulate and enact clearly structured and transparent, prayerful, synodal processes in which the faithful of the parish have the opportunity to bring forth their ideas, and contribution towards the vision and activities of the parish. These may include, but are not limited to, an annual parish meeting to which all parishioners are invited’ (n 68). With regard to the issue of parish ‘clusters’ and the like – also a matter of concern in Australia with the reduction of numbers and the ageing of clergy- it is recommended that ‘in developing proposals to reconfigure parishes, the people in each parish or group of parishes affected by a proposal be consulted and provided with opportunities to meet together to discuss options’ (n 70). Parish councils should be mandatory – ‘that each diocesan bishop mandate parish councils in the parishes of his diocese’ (n 74), and clergy appointments, as noted, should be made by the bishop in a consultation that should include ‘lay women and men’ (n 83).

ANALYSIS

It is of course true that this document does not yet have high authoritative status, coming as it does from what is, in the final analysis, merely a committee, and subject to discernment by the Bishops and Religious who sponsored it. However, it is commissioned by an authoritative body and, at the very least, is a good indicator of how the wind is blowing.

This is so in particular because its approach is relatively conservative. What I mean by this is that for the most part (with the exception of some suggested tweaking of canon law), it accepts the current doctrinal *status quo*, and simply draws out the implications of current doctrine for governance when viewed through a synodal lens. This relatively conservative stance is arguably more likely, then, to gain the acceptance of the bishops and, ultimately, of the

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Vatican itself, in its sober and careful presentation of the case for what are quite radical moves towards more inclusive governance.

These moves do not for the most part, as my June article proposed, move from advocating a more deliberative as opposed to consultative role for laity, but they do advocate for more *mandatory* (as opposed to discretionary) consultation – a step along the way?

Where there is a decided move towards a more mandatory role for laity – and, interestingly, a call for church law (canon 129) to be changed or at least be interpreted more liberally- is in the encouragement to appoint laity (women as well as men) to positions where jurisdictional authority may be exercised.

I simply note here that over the longer haul it will *not* be possible to separate church governance and teaching in the way this review does owing to its specific terms of reference: the *sensus fidei* and the role of laity as both prophet and king applies to both teaching and governance. This will be vital when, for example, further solutions are sought to the problematic issue of the under-representation of women in positions of authority, a reality pointed out many times by the document. Inevitably this will lead to further consideration of the issue of ordination, as is happening with respect to diaconate and in all likelihood may also happen with regard to priesthood. Some of these matters have already been considered by the Amazon Synod and all of them are likely to be treated by the ‘binding synodal process’ at present in train in the German church.

It remains true, finally, that this focus on institutional governance only makes sense if founded on, and is a function of, our encounter with Jesus Christ and our search to deepen it, not least in our care for one another and our planet earth. Given our contemporary culture, it is only through a more inclusive, participatory and transparent institution that we can hope to create the kind of assemblies and spaces where God may be sought and shared in the dialogical, conversational exchange of stories and experience which faith requires in an environment which is more and more spontaneously secular in outlook. Without this foundational concern all our institutional re-building will be in vain: with it we can hope to fashion a new language with which to express and communicate the good news of the gospel to one another and to our contemporaries.

CONCLUSION

There are clear implications for the Catholic Church in Ireland arising from this document.

It has become somewhat of a self-fulfilling truism that many

of us *priests* are, unsurprisingly, somewhat demoralised and, as an ageing cohort, we are unlikely to have the energy for what might seem like the more onerous administration and form-filling, box-ticking bureaucracy required to implement the best practices entailed in a more transparent, accountable shape of Church. Besides, many of us – and not only those more elderly- have been imbued with a ‘Lone Ranger’ model of authority which really does find it ‘wearisome’ to share power with others.

But, you know, this is far from the whole truth. There are many instances all over Ireland of priests and parishes moving in the direction outlined by this review, and we need to find ways of learning from one another, both from successful practice and from obstacles and failures that have arisen. Perhaps most of all we need to pray for the *personal conversion* in our own relationship with God, with Jesus Christ, admitting our weakness, our lack of knowledge and even energy at times, and allow our imaginations to be fired by a different model of church more suited to our age and more likely to embody the ideals which inspired us to become priests in the first place so many years ago in a different cultural context. That personal conversion is what leads to the cultural change that can more easily facilitate institutional re-shaping of the kind the document outlines. And we will quickly find that there are so many competent and professional lay people who are more than ready and able to help with institutional renewal.

And this will be the challenge for *laity*: to overcome that co-dependency which can characterize their relationship with clericalism, and, with the aid of suitable formation when required, take up their rightful role in exercising their own charisms within church governance.³

The crucial challenge just now, however, is for our *bishops*, that they would provide the leadership that is required. After the 2020 summer meeting of the Irish Episcopal Conference a statement was issued in which it was stated, *inter alia*, that the ‘... Bishops welcome the announcement by Pope Francis in March that the theme (of the October 2022 Synod of Bishops) will be: *For a synodal Church: communion, participation, and mission*’. They went on to reflect on the timeliness of this synod and ‘... how in recent years in Ireland many bishops have organised assemblies, gatherings and deep-listening processes in their dioceses to help encourage a more synodal, missionary Church throughout the island – a Church which fosters greater “communion, participation and mission” for the benefit of all’.

3 Neal Carlin, *Imaging Church and State in a Changing Environment*, *The Furrow*, 71, July/August 2020, 442-445

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I think, *first*, one must welcome this statement by the Conference and its unambiguous affirmation of the synodal thrust characteristic of the pontificate of Francis and its adoption as policy in Ireland. The bishops are right, *secondly*, to draw attention to the enormous amount of good work already done along these lines in individual dioceses, usually with great professionalism and a high degree of participation. There is, then, much to build on. However, *thirdly*, it remains the case that most Irish Catholics would be quite unaware of the enormous paradigm shift in the rhetoric of the bishops embracing as a body this synodal model of church. This is surely because, in contrast with the Plenary Council in Australia and this review document in particular, the binding synodal process in Germany, the Amazon synod and the insistent teaching of Pope Francis, the response of our bishops as a collective is still rather bland and timid.

The document 'The Light from the Southern Cross' illustrates what it takes to translate rhetoric into institutional reality. It would need, of course, to be adapted to the specific local reality pertaining in Ireland, north and south, and especially to our respective civil and criminal legal codes, and the particularities of the cultural world that we inhabit. This, and the sharing of best practice and experiences of obstacles already referred to, can surely best be undertaken in the kind of exercise that the Australian Church is now involved in, with such enormous consultative buy-in by the faithful and with appropriate expert help, in convoking, preparing for and going through the process of their Plenary Council. Some such national assembly or council of the Irish Church, building on the good work done at diocesan level identified by the Bishops, would surely galvanize latent energies and provide momentum for the renewal and reform of the Irish Church which the Bishops, like all of us, desire?

The light of the Southern Cross refers to a stellar constellation in the skies that has particular resonance in the cultural traditions of Indigenous Australians, and indeed has liberationist symbolic meaning for all Australians. Indeed, at the core of all Christian paschal experience is the reality of God's glory, resplendent in the seeming hopeless tragedy of the cross. It is fitting, then, that out of the crisis of child sexual abuse and the terrible suffering involved for victims/survivors and families, something good, some resurrectional radiance, might emanate. Our situation in Ireland is, in many ways, similar to that of Australia. Can we, laity, priests, religious and bishops take up the hopes and challenges offered by this document in re-shaping the Irish Catholic Church?