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Gerard Condon

Religious Literacy: Lessons from the Pandemic

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Religious Literacy: Lessons from the Pandemic

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Why do so many Irish Catholics know so little about their faith? While literacy in most spheres of life has blossomed, thanks to the information revolution, knowledge about religion has evidently declined in recent decades. That's despite the fourteen years of Religious Education (RE) provided by schools, and the many opportunities for adult faith-formation offered by the Church, even if few these are taken up. It is poignant for Church leaders to notice the enthusiasm (from, "*en Theos*", literally, "within God") of the *confirmandi* on Confirmation Day, only to see that attitude, and the accompanying knowledge, whittled away over the following years. Like forgetting how to calculate long-division, the religious knowledge and skills acquired at school are easily forgotten in the absence of a living contact with the Church. The trend is likely to have accelerated over the past year, as the Covid-19 restrictions have diminished the visibility of the Church, to all but her most committed members.

A WORLD DEVOID OF MYSTERY

The effects of religious illiteracy are arguably as detrimental for society as they are for the Church. In the absence of religion, human experience loses its transcendental dimension. The wonder and awe of a life consciously lived in God's presence is replaced by the lesser deities of shopping, fitness and entertainment. A world without God gradually loses its reverence and sense of the sacred in all of creation. It might, one day, become indifferent towards the weak and the vulnerable.

Religious literacy promotes accurate information about the Church's beliefs and practices. In its absence, society's religious knowledge is reduced to outmoded and mildly offensive

Gerard Condon, is a priest of the Diocese of Cloyne and a Diocesan Adviser for Religious Education. Address: Teach Paróiste, Ballygriffin, Killavullen, Co. Cork. This article is based on a contribution to a colloquium on religious literacy at the Loyola Institute, Dublin.

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stereotypes. For many Irish people today, the image of the Catholic Church is derived from media reports of its abuse scandals and its caricatures in TV programmes like *Fr Ted* and *Mrs Brown's Boys*.

PHARISAICAL CONCERNS

For the parish priest, the signs of reduced religious knowledge are more mundane. They are disguised by decades of socio-religious muscle memory. Baptisms, marriages and funerals, alongside other family milestones like First Communion and Confirmation, continue to be observed with pride. Our churches look well and the structures of Catholicism are intact, even in those parishes without a resident priest. Our patronage of schools, too, is regarded as a benign influence. But there is a hollowing out of this infrastructure by the secular *zeitgeist*. For many, if not most Irish Catholics, the role of the Church has been reduced to that of a service provider.

In parish ministry, I no longer assume prior knowledge of the liturgical rites when parishioners are planning a baptism, a wedding or a funeral. That lack of knowledge is more profound than say, knowing the name of the oils which the Church uses at a christening, or the river where Jesus was baptised. There is seldom a shared understanding that the infant is being welcomed into a community of faith. Rarely is the invitation accepted, let alone volunteered, to have a baptism included with Sunday Mass. Yet this was the vision (and the provision) of the Second Vatican Council. Instead, the sacrament of welcome is a stand-alone ceremony, essentially a family celebration.

At funerals, the role of the eulogy has grown in importance, especially among those Catholics who do not regularly attend church. This reflects the legitimate need to thank God for the deceased's life and their achievements. But the *Order of Christian Funerals* emphasises the role of Christ in securing our eternal destiny. For fear of causing offence, I find myself avoiding those prayer options which acknowledge human shortcomings and our need for a divine saviour.

The practice of making an offering to the priest for a Mass has also evolved to reflect the reality that most Catholics only attend Church for personally relevant occasions. The Mass stipend used to be a private arrangement between the priest and the donor. Nowadays, the family that "reserves a Mass", expects it be the publicly stated intention for the entire congregation. This misses the point that the Eucharist is offered on behalf of all the faithful, for the wider Church and for the world.

Am I being pharisaical for associating religious literacy with liturgical concepts and norms? Irish society has risen to

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the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic with extraordinary generosity and love of neighbour. If charity takes precedence over theology, then we have nothing to worry about. To use a distinction attributed to Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), while many Catholics are not acquainted with the *form of the Church*, they still witness to the *form of the Gospel*. On the other hand, it was ecclesial structures which helped create a society based on Gospel values. That cultural reservoir needs fresh sources if it is to be sustained.

RESPONSES

In the 1990s, the late Fr Enda Lyons predicted that the Irish Church would respond to its institutional decline in any of four ways: *ignore* the trend; *deplore* it; attempt the *restoration* of an earlier Church, or *explore* new ways of vitalising the Christian faith in Ireland. All four reactions have transpired, even if the first three are often dismissed.

A. Ignore: This response might be described as “masterly inactivity”, the phrase used to describe British administrative policy in Afghanistan during the Nineteenth Century. It successfully upheld British rule in that country for many years. The Vatican, too, prefers not to react to the vicissitudes of a particular era, in order not to be compromised by its transitory values. In a world with few certainties, the Church provides a bedrock through its customs and teachings. Advocates of this approach are naturally cautious. They show a trust in divine providence. It is, after all, the Lord who builds the house (Ps 127).

Confronting the Church’s apparent immutability is the overwhelming secularisation of Irish culture, as well as internal factors, including a precipitous decline in vocations. Like a patient confronted with bad news, the Church can deny the extent of its crisis. Denial, as a psychological mechanism, provides emotional comfort to the patient but does little to address their condition in a rational and responsible manner. Sometimes it takes a shock to grasp that new reality. Has its enforced sabbatical, over the past year, been that reality check for the Church? Perhaps, even unconsciously, it will emerge from the pandemic with a more constructive response to its situation than “keep calm and carry on”.

B. *Deplore*: “We’re no longer co-extensive with society,” Pope Benedict has said, “We live in a positivistic and agnostic culture, which shows itself more and more intolerant toward Christianity.”¹ The separation between Church and State in Ireland today,

1 Benedict XVI with Peter Seewald, *Last Testament: In his own words*. (Bloomsbury Continuum: 2016), 231.

permits Catholics to adopt a more critical stance. In doing so, we are donning the mantle of the Old Testament prophets who were fearless, though unpopular, critics in their society. Catholicism's worldwide organisation gives it unique insight, beyond national self-interest, on issues like climate change. The Church is one of the few voices to uphold the dignity of human life all its stages from conception to natural end.

However, the clerical sexual abuse scandals have damaged the Church's credibility as a moral guardian, as has the recent *Mother and Baby Homes Commission Report*. A humbled Church can no longer cast the first stone. In the court of public opinion, the Church's authority comes from the witness of its members, not its Magisterium. In any case, indignation or condemnation should never be perceived as the Christian's default position. More than ever, the world needs a Church that proclaims Good News, not constant criticism.

C. Restore: The socio-religious history of Judeo-Christianity has been characterised by patterns of decline followed a rebirth. Even before the long-predicted demise of Judah in 587BC, the Hebrew prophets began to speak of the renewal of the divine covenant. St Francis of Assisi led a reformation that imagined the Church as an institution of service rather than authority. Most recently, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) advocated a *ressourcement* (return to origins) inspired by the first Christians. A stripping away of the Church's medieval accretions occurred. The biblical model of faith, characterised by the personal encounter with God (*fides qua creditur*), became the priority for catechists. The requirement to memorise the content of faith (*fides quae creditur*) receded.

Sixty years later, the concept of restoration has a new meaning. The spirit of dialogue with the modern world, evident in Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes*, has been replaced by retrenchment and a defensive mentality. The desire of some Catholics is to restore a religious literacy that begins with the content of the faith, as expressed by the 1994 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. They prefer the formal liturgical style that preceded the Council. This type of restoration risks isolating the Church from society, making it seem self-referential, its liturgies esoteric and uninviting.

D. Explore: The 2010 National Directory for Catechesis, *Share the Good News*, broadened the context of religious literacy in Ireland by proposing new structures for faith development. It offered a vision for religious formation throughout life's journey, extending well beyond school walls. It envisaged families, parishes and dioceses, working together towards the common aim of becoming communities of faith. The implementation of the National Directory could have been a point of departure, but it has

been largely ignored. Instead, a piecemeal evolution of the existing structures is taking place.

In primary schools, the recently completed Religious Education program, *Grow in Love* pays more deliberate attention to the terminology of the Catholic faith than its predecessor. The authors were conscious that religious literacy is diminishing and the school is the only place where children might, for example, hear the Word of God. Yet, the programme is child-centred. It reflects the spirit of the child, their zest for life and instinct for justice. *Grow in Love* integrates the school-based study and celebration of faith, with the promotion of that faith at home and a gentle encouragement to take part in parish life. However, of the three partners in faith formation, the school is still *de facto* the principal agent. And while all classroom teachers are expected to deliver RE, not all teachers see themselves as participant Catholics. All too easily, the daily time allocated to RE is set aside for more pressing concerns in the curriculum.

At *second level* schools, the effort to improve religious literacy prompted the introduction of RE as a State exam in the Republic of Ireland. Religious Education had been perceived as a marginalised or “doss” subject. The examinations have raised the status of the subject, in terms of time allocation, teaching and learning, but only in the minority of Catholic schools that include RE in its examination program.

The State’s revised *Specification for Junior Cycle Religious Education* (2018) notably provides for all five world religions as well as a non-religious interpretation of life. It is suited to the new pluralist Ireland and the desire of schools to be inclusive of all faiths and none. It is argued that, the skills and attitudes acquired from the student’s exploration of religion in general, stimulates reflection on their own faith commitment. However, the Junior Cycle specification does not encourage the celebration of the Catholic faith in the classroom. Even in Catholic schools, the class thinks in terms of “this is what Catholics believe” rather than “this is what we believe.” A religious syncretism may be implied, especially for those pupils and teachers not rooted in their own faith.

The Catholic schools not teaching the course to State examination, have adopted the State’s non-confessional specification, without the focus and structure provided by the State exam. I wonder if those schools would benefit from an expressly Catholic RE syllabus, accredited by the school’s trustees, a second level equivalent of the *Grow in Love* programme? This would foster a sense of the Church’s own responsibility in efforts to promote religious literacy in schools.

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As the opportunities for catechesis within the school system diminish, the Church must look for other avenues to promote religious literacy. Sacramental preparation, too, should have a broader context than an immediate preparation leading up to a particular ceremony. Diocesan offices for evangelisation have had relatively little impact on the promotion of religious literacy. Are there untried avenues of faith formation?

BELONGING AND BELIEVING

The original setting for religious formation was not schools, nor a central teaching authority, but closely knit Christian communities. That was the model of the early Church, especially in its “Jerusalem Spring”, as described in the Acts of the Apostles (2:42-47). The catechetical maxim “belonging leads to believing” was clearly operational at that time. It was because of their *koinonia* with each other, that the first Christians were “looked up to by everyone” and the Lord “added to their numbers” (Acts 2:47). Their belief in a saving God, their routine of communal and domestic prayer, their equitable and generous lifestyle, were clearly Good News in a world of cold Roman justice and religious legalism.

Those first communities were small and rooted in a particular area. According to one interpretation of the miracle of the loaves and fishes (Luke 9:12-17), the first parishes may have been grouped “in parties of about fifty”, with the reported attendance of 5,000 people “near Bethsaida” that day, being a symbolic number for the entire Church.² The importance of place is conveyed in the gospels (especially Luke-Acts) by naming the location of each event.

An appreciation for the physical presence of others in one’s immediate neighbourhood was discovered again during the Covid-19 pandemic. Being confined to a local district, with fewer social contacts, ironically proved to be a liberating experience. Neighbours that had rarely met, got to speak with one another and they “shared what they had” (Acts 2:44-46). Families discovered again the relevance of prayer in the home. All that was missing was the opportunity for the local community to gather for the Breaking of Bread. While the live-streaming of Masses has proven a lifeline to ecclesial life, its limitations have been equally obvious. What people missed most was the physical presence of their neighbours and friends at Mass.

When normal church-based services resume, will we take advantage of the renewed goodwill among Catholics motivated by their faith? Won’t they feel disappointed if all they get is a real-

2 Eugene LaVerdiere, *Dining in the Kingdom of God. The Origins of the Eucharist in the Gospel of Luke* (Liturgical Training Press, 1994), 66-67.

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life version of what they have been watching online: the priest, assisted by one or two others, leading Mass before a watchful congregation? Even if it numbers no more than fifty, the local Christian community has the potential to be deeply meaningful to its intentional members and a sign to society as a whole.

WELLBEING AND MYSTICISM

There is no denying the trauma caused by the Coronavirus. The loss of life and employment, the months spent deprived of regular social interactions, have all taken their toll. For many of us, the pandemic has occasioned moments of doubt and fear as well as a sobering return to life's priorities. Thankfully, the public health authorities successfully mobilised the country's resources against the virus. However, one year after Covid-19 first reached Irish shores, "pandemic fatigue" has taken root. All of the advice about staying safe and well, while effectively delivered, has become tiresome. Little, if any, reference was made to the role that religion plays in a person's wellbeing. I wonder if people are looking for something more?

In *Why We Drive. Toward a Philosophy of the Open Road* (2020), Matthew Crawford argues that our culture of "safetyism" frustrates human autonomy. Before the advent of satellite navigation, there was a sense of adventure in not knowing how to reach a destination. Crawford thinks that always being directed by good advice, makes of the human being a passenger in life's journey, and a grumpy passenger at that. We prefer the freely chosen road, because the human spirit is made for something more than the obvious. The knowledge that we are children of God bestows that sense of identity and agency in abundance.

Karl Rahner famously wrote that the Christian of the future, must be a "mystic", one who has experienced "something", or they "will cease to be anything at all."³ Authentic religious literacy requires a personal experience of God if it is to sustain an individual's faith in a world grow weary of religion. Prior to Vatican II such literacy was confined to the professionals of the Church. The laity were tasked with saying their prayers and keeping the Commandments. But, with *Lumen Gentium*, the Council conceived the call to holiness as addressed to all persons, equally, though each in their own way.⁴

Dermot Farrell, the new archbishop of Dublin, has said that the underlying crisis facing the Catholic Church in Ireland is that of faith. In an interview with *The Irish Times* (2.1.2021) to mark

3 Karl Rahner, "Christian living formerly and today" in *Theological Investigations VII* (Herder and Herder, 1971), 15.

4 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* (1964), Chapter 5, "The Universal Call to Holiness".

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his appointment, the archbishop suggested that the crisis can be addressed through “teaching people about prayer. I don’t think we’ve been good at that in the past. We really didn’t form people in prayer. Prayers ended up being the recitation of formula ... a deeper prayer life is more important.”

The experience of the pandemic has prompted much soul-searching in Ireland’s well-educated and religiously sceptical public. Will the Church be there to facilitate that deeper interpretation of life that is at the heart of their quest? Well organised, locally based Christian communities, that encourage contemplative prayer, may hold the key.

Discipleship Today. Discipleship has to be worked out within the Church today: opposing clericalism, ending patriarchy, respecting gender difference, challenging the prevalent middle-class bias within the Church, welcoming refugees, and trying to be open to the marvellous richness of what is being offered by the Gardener. That task of opening up the Word needs the scholarship of theologians from our own and other Churches, the leadership of Church officials, the dedication of the millions working with the marginalised, often in work entirely hidden from the wider world; and it also needs the wisdom and experience of lay people, men and women, being included seriously in the community’s discernment about all Church issues, including the development of doctrine.

– BRIAN LENNON, SJ, *Mary Magdalene and the Gardener*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 69.