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Kevin Egan

The Upcoming Synod: Are we Ready?

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Kevin Egan

Along with many Catholics I welcomed the announcement by the Irish Bishops that we are to embark on a “Synodal Pathway” leading to a National Synod within five years. I had been waiting impatiently for such an announcement telling myself that it was not before its time. As I reflected on what this might involve I found myself asking the question: Are we ready for it? It is not a question that leads to a quick answer but rather to long and deep reflection. In this frame of mind I downloaded Cardinal Mario Grech’s address to the Irish Bishops Conference to see what he had to say. He is the General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops. Towards the end of his address, he expressed his own doubts:

The fact that the people of God (and here I am referring to all the baptized, bishops and clergy included) are still not spiritually and theologically equipped to engage in a synodal process should not dishearten you. Antoine de Saint-Exupery says that “if you want to build a ship, don’t drum up people to collect wood and don’t assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them and don’t long for the endless immensity of the sea.”¹

Do I agree with him? He is right to stress the desirability of the goal but that should not blind us to the important questions that still remain to be answered. My thoughts turn to the tragic events of the drowning migrants who set out from Libya in the hope of landing safely on the shores of Europe, a desirable goal. Sadly, their means of getting there along with the vagaries of the weather dashed that dream.

1 www.catholicbishops.ie/2021/02/03/address-of-cardinal-mario-grech-to-the-bishops-of-ireland-on-synodality

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Setting out on a Synodal Pathway is not going to be easy. In an effort to be realistic about the synod here follows a list of some of the *hard questions* I found myself asking:

Will the Church in Ireland be willing to face its shadow?

Will it stop being defensive about the past and be open to understanding how we got into that mess?

Will it find the energy to imagine a different future where laity and clergy become partners in mission?

Will the Church begin to embrace real change?

Will the synodal process become hijacked by a group with their own agenda?

Will there be space for diverse voices to be heard?

Will participants have an experience of being listened to and treated as adults?

Will the clergy use their power to try and control the dialogue?

Will the laity find their voice and abandon the habit of “deference addiction”?²

At this point, I think it would be helpful to group these questions using the time continuum of *past, present* and *future*.

OPENNESS TO LEARNING FROM THE PAST

It is to be expected that imagining the future will be a central theme in the synodal deliberations but the urgency of the future should not become an excuse for ignoring the painful and traumatic experience of the past. In my contacts with clergy over the past five years I have noticed a marked reluctance to engage with issues related to the past. They will willingly engage with issues related to self-care, stress and priestly identity. The Murphy Report, the Ferns Report, the Cloyne Report, the Ryan Report all seemed to be taboo subjects. I wonder is this to be attributed to a sense of collective guilt and shame. The assumption is that these issues have been dealt with and we can now move on. It would be a tragedy if this reluctance were allowed to block discussion at the synod.

Recently I have just completed reading Derek Scally’s book *The Best Catholics in the World*. In short, the book is an attempt to answer this central question: *How did we lose our wits to allows this to happen?*³ He is not interested in blaming, rather his standpoint is one of trying to understand. He embarks on this exploration because in his judgment the Irish Church has up to

2 Marie Collins quoted in *The Best Catholics in the World*, Derek Scally, London: Penguin Random House 2021, 147.

3 Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World*, (London: Penguin Random House 2021, 150.

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this time failed to engage in a meaningful reflection on its past. The book contains interviews with some of the key players in the recent scandals. Judge Sean Ryan, the author of the Ryan report on industrial schools, is disappointed that his Report did not give rise to serious debate and reflection.⁴ Serious questions still remain to be answered. “The shared question for everyone is: how did we take for granted something that now seems obvious to have been brutal and monstrous?”⁵ I found myself asking a similar question following the publication of the recent Report on Mother and Baby Homes. Along with many Irish Catholics I find myself left with nowhere to go as I stand alone with my troubling questions and conflicted feelings. I will be disappointed and disillusioned if the forthcoming Synod does not provide me with the *opportunity* to be part of a collective search for understanding. The debate up to now has been characterized by defensive withdrawal rather than deep reflection.

I think it is fair to say that the Irish Church’s capacity for reflection has been blocked due to traumatic nature of our history. We are a traumatized Church. Just as trauma blocks the individual’s capacity to remember and reflect, which is essential for dealing with trauma, it also blocks us as a society and as a community. I consider the forthcoming Synod to have a *therapeutic potential* that might free up blocked energy for the Irish Church. It has the potential to be a *Kairos* or “graced” moment. This realization should embolden us to embrace it, despite our hesitancy.

OPENNESS TO THE FUTURE

Otto Scharmer, the author of *Theory U* identifies two sources of learning: (1) learning by reflection on the past and (2) learning by sensing and actualizing emerging future possibilities⁶ I would add to this insight by pointing out that they are *interrelated*. Reflecting on the past frees us up to explore and imagine the future. I have noticed a growing willingness among clergy and laity to explore the future arising out of the crisis situation in which we find ourselves with regard to diminishing numbers of priests, few seminarians and an increasing number of laity distancing from the Church. There is a growing sense of urgency that, if we don’t do something, the Church many of us were born into will be greatly diminished. The situation was strikingly put by Mark Patrick Hederman in an article in *The Furrow* with the title: *The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck*.

4 Ibid., p. 160

5 Derek Scally Ibid., p. 166.

6 C. Otto Schirmer, *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Application*, Oakland, CA, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018, 9.

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“The Catholic Church in Ireland has probably five, or, at most, ten years before being reduced to a tiny irrelevant minority.”⁷ One may disagree with the accuracy of his predication but one can’t deny the sense of urgency that it evokes. I wonder to what extent do you the reader share this sense of urgency and also to what extent will this sense of urgency motivate our engagement in preparations for the Synod? I wonder has this sense of urgency taken root more in the laity than the clergy. I was heartened to listen to the recent zoom lecture by Fr Gerry O’Hanlon sponsored by the ACP and the sense of shared urgency in the discussion that followed. The contribution of three bishops to that discussion was warmly welcomed. Bridges need to be crossed and festering wounds healed in order for a common ground to take hold in preparation for the Synod.

I have been invited by several diocese to lead a pastoral conversation about *change*. My practice is to begin by posing a series of questions: What *response* does the word change evoke in you? To what extent do you have a sense of *urgency* about the need for change? As you look to the *future* what concerns have you? The range of responses to these questions varied greatly. Some were enthusiastic, others cautious, others questioned the need for change and a significant group said they were too old and tired to embrace change at this time of their lives. I was reminded of the observation by the pastoral theologian Peter Steinke: “Change, like someone saying the word *cancer*, makes a direct hit at the amygdala.”⁸ One shouldn’t be surprised that a conversation about the future will elicit strong and varied emotions especially when the subject matter is our own church family. I ask myself, what is it like for a church family to have such a conversation? My initial response is to have realistic expectations. Don’t expect everyone to feel that same way about change. As we know, grace builds on nature. Some clergy with the best will in the world struggle with change because of age, health and previous life experiences. This was brought home to me recently as I read Brendan Hoban’s latest book: *A Priest’s Diary*. In his own forthright manner he sums up his life as follows: “My life is governed by the static, the given, the habitual, the dullness that sheer repetition brings. To live is not to change at all and to live well is not to change at all, at all. Everything, it seems to me just is.”⁹ I wonder if Brendan is speaking tongue in cheek. At the same time, I sense a warning to any bishop not to approach bearing good news of change.

7 Mark Patrick Hederman, ‘The Boy Stood on the Burning Deck’, *The Furrow*, April 2017, 206.

8 Peter L. Steinke, *A Door Set Open: Grounding Change in Mission and Hope*, Lanham, MD.: Rowan & Littlefield Pub., 2014, 39.

9 Brendan Hoban, *A Priest’s Diary*, Dublin: Banley House, 2020, 152.

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Bishops and other church leaders have for many years now been inviting Catholics to think about the future by posing questions like: “What will the parish of the future look like if it is to realize (its) task?”¹⁰ It is the role of a leader to pose such questions. The question invites the listener to imagine an, as yet, unrealized future. I have great faith in the power of such questions while at the same time conscious that people vary greatly in their ability to engage with them. I find myself imagining an elderly, frail priest responding to the question as follows: “Don’t ask me to imagine a future, the way things are will see me out.” Are we to interpret his words as a form of resistance or an honest reflection of his cognitive capacities at this point in time? Maybe something of both.

A recurrent theme running through the literature on change is to expect *resistance*. I have explored this topic with several diocesan groups preparing them not only to expect resistance but to recognize it when it occurs. When someone objects to a proposal, it makes a difference if you can name it as resistance rather than accusing them of being difficult. It is helpful to normalize resistance and recall the words of Isaac Newton: “It is a natural and expected part of change – for every action there is an opposite and equal reaction”. I like to think of resistance as the individual’s mental immune system or the organization’s immune system, similar to our bodies’ immune system – a term we have become more than familiar with in these Covid days. The success of the forthcoming Synod will to a large extent depend on our ability to recognize resistance when it occurs and to respond appropriately. It will take many and varied forms at different stages of the process. Just imagine the range of excuses people are likely to make for not attending preparatory meetings. Experts on the subject warn us that the most difficult form of resistance to recognize is *organizational resistance* because of the collusive factor.

I have been posing questions in regard to our readiness to explore the past and our openness to imagine a different future that is beckoning us. One of the crucial issues facing the Synod will be the delicate task of striking a *balance* between the two time-perspectives. To quote Philip Zimbardo: “Depending on the demands of a particular situation one time- perspective must take precedence while the others may temporarily recede.”¹¹ I expect at different stages of the process a particular time-perspective will take precedence. Our sense of urgency will propel us to engage

10 Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, *The Church in Dublin: Where will it be in ten years’ time*. Press release November 16 2017.

11 Philip Zimbardo, *The Time Paradox: Using the new Psychology of Time to your Advantage*, London: Rider Pub.. 2010.

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with the present and with the future. However, as I have pointed out our engagement with the past has been so fragmented and minimal it needs to be “ring-fenced” to use a budgetary term.

MY FEARS FOR THE SYNOD

I expect that between now and the end of the Synod there will be several attempts to “hijack” the process. There are plenty of vested interests hiding in the long grass with the potential and motivation to do so. I presume that many of my readers can recall the burning of the British Embassy in Dublin during a march to protest against the atrocity of Bloody Sunday in Derry. The march was organized by the Dublin Trades Union Council. A friend of mine was one of the chief organizers and I recall his anger, rage and sense of helplessness at what happened. It was to be a peaceful march but it got hijacked when a militant group armed with petrol bombs infiltrated the march. Not many years later as a member of a religious Order I attended a Provincial Chapter and on the final day of proceedings witnessed the event being hijacked. I mention these examples to encourage you the reader to recall your own experience of events being hijacked. It may have been a family gathering, a political event, annual general meeting or even a prayer meeting! In the Catholic tradition we have a template for interpreting such events by looking on them as the work of the *evil spirit* seeking to derail proceedings. What I label as “hijacking” can be looked on as a form of the resistance I alluded to earlier. Pope Francis would seem to have had plenty experience of hijacking at the recent Synods in Rome. During the *Synod on the Family* it took the form of one issue being allowed to dominate all others, namely permitting divorced and remarried Catholics to receive the Eucharist. Something similar happened at the *Synod on the Amazon* where permitting the ordination of married men became the issue. It caused sufficient disruption for Pope Francis to conclude that the conditions were not present to conduct a proper discernment.

Another fear I harbour for the Synod is that a certain mindset might serve to block the contemplative listening process. Jennifer Garvey Berger refers to it as a *mindtrap*, which she describes as a “part cognitive bias, part neurological quirk, part adaptive response to a simple world that doesn’t exist anymore.”¹² She proceeds to give examples of these: We are trapped by simple stories; We are trapped brightness; We are trapped by control. The mindtrap that particularly concerns me is the *victim mindtrap*. For example, during the Covid lockdown I hear clergy making

12 Jennifer Garvey Berger, *Unlocking Leadership Mindtraps: How to Thrive in Complexity*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2019,9.

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statements like: *We are not needed anymore* and *The government is against us*. I don't dispute that there may be grounds for these statements but what I want to warn against is getting trapped into the victim mindset. It locks one into the past and blocks any creative engagement with the future. For those in ministry it blocks altruism, the urge to reach out and minister to others. Catholics in Ireland have an historical pull going back to Penal Times where the roots of victimhood find fertile ground. Derek Scally opened my eyes to this possibility. "In the Penal Laws we have the foundation for a framing of our history as a narrative of victimhood."¹³ It is only right that we should remember the stories of our past, they are constitutive of our identity but they come with a "government warning." Therapists are familiar with how the victim stance can block clients re-engaging with their lives. One can only imagine how this mindtrap might block us hearing the call to be agents of change. As we struggle with this mindtrap we can do no better than look to the example of Jesus. In the words of Richard Rohr: "Jesus did the victim thing right He neither played the victim for his own self-aggrandizement nor did he make victims of other people. He became a liberating and forgiving victim."¹⁴

As I describe the victim mindtrap I am conscious that in many cases it is a version of the mindtrap of *clericalism*. On the part of the clergy, it gives rise to certain expectations that their status entitles them to special consideration and on the part of the laity it creates the mindset that they should defer to this expectation. I am describing it this way to highlight the *collusive* nature of clericalism; we buy into it so to speak. Marie Collins who has extensive experience of clericalism coined the term "deference addiction."¹⁵ It would be unrealistic and naïve to expect that it will not be operative during the Synodal Process. I don't consider it unrealistic to expect that the process itself might contribute to some diminishment in its influence. While the process is described as at core a discernment process, one could regard it as a process designed to contain the influence of clericalism. If this is to happen it is important that the clerical viewpoint is not allowed to dominate. For this it is vital to have a wide diversity of voices and viewpoints. "Diverse groups make smarter decisions."¹⁶ An all-male elderly group is incapable of mapping the way forward to a Church in a complex world. For several reasons one could say that at this point in time the *Synodal Process* is the only show in town.

13 Derek Scally op.cit., 2021, 69.

14 Richard Rohr, *The Wisdom Pattern: Order/Disorder/Reorder*, Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2020, 28.

15 Derek Scally, op.cit., 2021, 147.

16 Steven Johnson, *Farsighted: How to Make Decisions that Matter the Most*, New York: Riverhead Books, 2018, 153.

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CONCLUSION

One might get the impression from the title I've chosen that my intention in writing this article was to cast doubt on the wisdom of planning for a National Synod. On the contrary, I welcome and applaud the proposal. To return to my metaphor of migrants preparing to cross the Mediterranean; I have attempted to describe the challenges that we are likely to encounter on such a journey, not in the hope that it will dissuade us from attempting the crossing but to *equip* us with the mindset we need for the journey ahead. There is wind in our sails because of our shared sense of urgency. We set out not just because the goal of becoming a vibrant and welcoming church appeals to us but because we also believe that the journey itself has the potential of changing us and making that goal more a reality.

Gift or Threat. Religious difference is usually regarded as a theological and political *problem*. But the guarding of difference, that specificity of faith which confers a particular identity, is not in itself a problem. The problem arises when religion goes toxic, as it were, when the naturally inward-looking and conservative mindset of any traditional creed is turned outward, demonising some threatening 'other'. The root of all conflicts, as René Girard points out, is not difference as such but *competition*, what he understands in terms of a mimetic rivalry between persons, countries, cultures. If that is correct, then attention needs to be paid to the conditions which create that mood of 'competition' and form – or *malform* – the public space.

– MICHAEL BARNES, SJ, *Ignatian Spirituality & Interreligious Dialogue*, 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p.178.