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+ Brendan Leahy

Making the Risen Jesus Visible: The Church of Kenosis

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When we are facing difficulties in life, be they financial, health, or relationship- related, it is a wise counsel to try and name the issues. Diagnosis, prognosis and treatment go together. Pope Francis often helps us name what the Church is living through at this time. For instance, speaking to the Roman Curia in December 2019, his straight talking certainly hit home: “Brothers and sisters, *Christendom no longer exists!* Today we are no longer the only ones who create culture, nor are we in the forefront or those most listened to. We need a change in our pastoral mindset ...”.

The Pope’s point was clear: Christian faith is no longer the presupposition of social life. We can no longer claim, as we might once have done, that Christian practices and norms are the way things are done around here. Today faith is often rejected, derided and marginalized.

So what are we, the Church-People of God in Ireland, to do? I’m not going to claim there are easy answers to that question. Nevertheless, in a talk to Bishops during the 2019 World Youth Meeting in Panama, Pope Francis spoke of the need for the Church to be a “Church of Kenosis”. Perhaps we can find here a direction of travel.

The word “kenosis” is the Greek word for “emptying” and we read of it in St. Paul’s letter to the Philippians in reference to Jesus Christ “emptying himself”, taking the form of a servant, humbling himself and becoming obedient, even unto death” (Phil 2:7). Quoting a homily given by Oscar Romero, Pope Francis reminded his listeners in Panama that Christ’s kenosis is not a thing of the past. God in Christ is still at work in the Church in his self-emptying compassionate outreach. It is important to recall this theme of Christ’s kenosis precisely when circumstances speak of darkness and woundedness, impoverishment and restrictions.

As the Catholic Church in Ireland sets out on Synodal pathway,

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the theme of “kenosis” provides us with our GPS. We will, of course, need to marshal actively all our own personal experiences, intellectual reflection and resourceful ideas, but it will be salutary to realise that it is not by being “full of ourselves” that we hear God’s call, but rather by entering into this dynamic of Christ-like “emptying ourselves” that we find ourselves. Let’s explore this a little more.

JESUS’ KENOSIS

We know that the proclamation of the Kingdom was central in Jesus’ public life and ministry. He actively promoted and progressed it as intimately linked with himself. With his strong sense of self-identity, Jesus gave his all, heart, mind and strength, to proclaiming his missionary programme (cf Lk 4:16-20). But we also know that throughout his ministry Jesus lived “kenotically”. He knew, in other words, how to put himself “off-centre” in relating to the One he called “Abbà”, in listening to the Spirit guiding him, and in drawing close to others. In Heb 10: 5-7 we read: ‘when Christ came into the world, he said ... “I have come to do your will, O God”.’ Throughout his life he lived this self-emptying as the base note of his existence in love of God and neighbour: “no one has a greater love that to lay down one’s life ...”, “not my will but yours be done ...”, “those who lose life find it ...”.

Jesus’ kenotic lifestyle culminates in Calvary with its cry of abandonment: “why have you abandoned me?”. The devotional listing of that cry as one of the “seven last words” of the Crucified Christ can risk sheltering us from the shocking fact that the words of this question “why” are the only words of Jesus’ dying hour that both Mark and Matthew’s Gospels present us.¹

Let’s notice *two* dynamics at play in this culminating moment of apparent darkness and failure. On the one hand, the way of the Cross, which in reality had started well before Passover week, is a crescendo-ing procession of external circumstances emptying Jesus of so much that had been significant for him – the vast numbers of contacts he had made, his reputation as a wonder worker, the disciples he had called one by one, the community he had formed day by day, the simple structures he had established (a fund held in common by “The Twelve”, patterns of prayer and rest, missionary initiatives), his mother and those few supporters left. The Temple guards came and took him, Pilate condemned him, soldiers mocked him, ultimately, even the God with whom he had a unique relationship seemed gone.

1 See Gerard Rossé, *The Cry of Jesus on the Cross: A Biblical and Theological Study* (New York: Paulist, 1987).

MAKING THE RISEN JESUS VISIBLE

Faced with these adversities, Jesus remained true to the mission and the message he was sent to communicate. He stands before Pilate as Truth incarnate. And yet he expressed this in a disposition of humble self-giving, the expression of his self-emptying. He didn't cling desperately to possess what he was being dispossessed of. He didn't engage in an aggressive defence by attacking (Luke's Gospel takes this up in another way by depicting Jesus saying "Father, forgive them ..."). Faithful "to the end", Jesus made of the external circumstances that were "emptying" him of so much the culminating moment of his internal faithfulness to his mission. In freedom and love he "empties himself" in service of God and humanity.

Others may have seen themselves as taking his life, but he had already clarified, that "I lay it down of my own accord" (Jn 10:18). He had been sent by the Father to identify with the human condition and now is drinking the cup of our human condition to the dregs; by the power of the Spirit (Heb 9:14) he still goes forth in love for the Father and for us.

And that is where the Church really began as Jesus Christ then rises as community in the power of the Spirit.²

STARTING AFRESH FROM THE BEGINNING

Returning to our situation of the Church in Ireland, it is obvious we are in a moment of massive transformation. Words written shortly after the Second Vatican Council by the future Pope, then theologian, Joseph Ratzinger are relevant to us today. Mindful of the need to be cautious in our prognostications, he wrote that the Church of the future won't be born of slogans of the day or howls of criticism. Something deeper is needed. We'll need to start afresh:

From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge – a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, it will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision ... The Church will be a more spiritual Church, not presuming upon a political mandate, flirting as little with the Left as with the Right.

2 See Sandra Schneider, *Jesus Risen in Our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013).

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This process won't be straightforward or easy. The Church, however, is a long-haul process and new moments will open up for her. Ratzinger contended that in a context of future loneliness that will arise like a pandemic in the Western world (we think of the UK's appointment of a minister for loneliness), the Church's true nature as a community of mutual being-for-one-another will be recognised as a beacon of hope:

It will be hard going for the Church ... It will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek ... But when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. Men in a totally planned world will find themselves unspeakably lonely. If they have completely lost sight of God, they will feel the whole horror of their poverty. Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret.³

CHURCH KENOSIS IN IRELAND

That the Church finds itself starting afresh from the beginning is not something new in Ireland. The island has a long history with deep roots in Christianity and wide extension in mission. The ruins scattered across our landscape recall for us previous moments when the Church went through experiences of "emptying", "kenosis": the collapse of the monastic system, the bewilderment of Reformation, the devastation of famine. Different eras have witnessed different configurations of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

One small example. Ardpatrik in south Limerick is a tiny parish in beautiful surroundings. It's hard to believe today that in the eleventh and twelfth centuries an impressive monastery with fine buildings and a round Tower stood there as second in importance only to Armagh. Armagh had founded a league of ecclesiastical centres associated with St. Patrick and Ardpatrik became the chief centre in Munster. Archbishops of Armagh visited it and some Armagh Coarbs are buried there. *Tempora mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis*, Times change and we are changed with them.

We have mentioned above how in the case of Jesus we can speak of his "emptying" happening at two levels: external circumstances and his voluntary laying down of his life. While the comparison, of course, is not precise,⁴ nevertheless it is possible for us to affirm

3 *Faith and the Future* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), p. 117.

4 See further on this theme, Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Kenosis of the Church?" in *Explorations in Theology IV: Spirit and Institution* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), pp. 125-138.

that in the case of the Church, Christ's Spouse, there are also two inter-connected levels of "kenosis" going on. The first consists in those circumstances and events that "empty" us of the ballast that is not for our time. The second is our own missionary desire to "empty" ourselves in service. Recognising these two dynamics can provide us with a navigation map for today.

BEING EMPTIED

The external circumstances of how the Church is being made "empty" are easily named. Suffice to mention *three* headings.

The tragedy of abuse and inappropriate behaviour at various levels has scandalised many, knocking church leaders and personnel off pedestals and indeed collapsing the very pedestal of faith in many. Government reports, daily news coverage and repeated reference to a very dark chapter of our story has certainly disabused the Church in Ireland of any self-glorifying self-image. Derek Scally describes the road ahead as "clearing the car crash in our collective minds, a pile-up of pride and shame that has left many of us silent, struggling to deal with a conflicting narrative we simply cannot process".⁵

A second feature of a kenosis dynamic in the Church today is an increasing institutional poverty. One of the great desires of Pope John XXIII was of "a Church of the poor". Poverty we know can take many forms. The Church in Ireland is experiencing an institutional poverty. We lack institutional personnel, financial resources are decreasing, the volunteer network – as in all levels of society – is weakening. Once we relied on the strengths of numbers, institutions, and structures. Today, what's being asked of us is authentic relationships, a pastoral ministry that "generates" life, and the building up of communities of belonging.

Secularisation is another obvious way the Church in Ireland is experiencing a "kenosis". Already in 1974 in an article in the *Furrow*, Michael Paul Gallagher pointed to a growing atheism 'Irish-style' expressed in feelings of withdrawal and alienation from the Church by then increasingly inhabited only externally. In the years that followed Michael Paul Gallagher would note how in the wider Western world, a secular marginalisation of faith has developed with religion subtly ignored as unimportant. Ireland is certainly not immune from that. We are being asked not so much to teach who God is but to show "where" God is to be found.

5 Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World: The Irish, the Church and the End of a Special Relationship* (London: Penguin, 2021), p. 300.

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SELF-EMPTYING

While circumstances have “emptied” the Church, we also recognise that, in imitation of Jesus, we are also being called to choose to “empty” ourselves. Christ in the Church wants us to continue his kenosis of compassion. The temptation as we face adversity is to withdraw into ourselves and become self-referential, looking into the mirror and worrying. Instead, this is the time, as Pope Francis shows us so clearly, to “go out”, avoiding self-absorption and being a Church of kenosis in love of God and in service of others.

The Gospel with its missionary mandate presents us with an art of loving service that pushes us outwards not in proselytising zeal but in evangelising deed and word. The Son of God didn’t wait for problems to be resolved on earth before coming among us. He cured the sick and brought compassion to the suffering. Even in the face of adversity he continued to speak words of life and offer horizon and vision to the blind. His love was universal. As he put it, God “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5:45). He made himself a neighbour to all. Right to his last breath. Luke’s Gospel presents us with an active Jesus on the Cross forgiving, and offering hope. The Fourth Gospel presents the dying Jesus still working to establish the first cell of the Church: Mary and John (cf. Jn 19: 26-27), an image suggested in iconic form to the Irish Church in the Marian apparition at Knock.

LIVING THREE COMMUNIONS

In a Vatican document published last year on the topic of parish and pastoral conversion, we read how the parish is called to be “a sign of the permanent presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of his People”.⁶ Not just the parish, of course. The whole Church is. Local faith communities – be they parish, diocese or smaller faith communities – aren’t just worshipping congregations. Rather, as members of the Church we find ourselves at all levels in “emptying” ourselves in outreach towards one another and towards others. It is the Church of kenosis lived out day by day as we journey to a new reality that lets the Risen Jesus be visible and act among and through us.

Of course, all of this is no simple task. The unique contours of our recent experience remain a challenge. To make our own St. Paul’s words “it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20), we need to let *three* communions shape us.

6 Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction “The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church”, (20 August, 2020), n. 7.

a) *Communion with the Word of God.*

We put on the mind of the self-emptying Christ through living the Word. The Word has the ability to “prune” the old self and let the “new self” emerge. The Word as our daily viaticum has been a great focus put before us by the Spirit in recent decades but yet to be fully taken on board. Faith communities come to life through the Word of God not just prayerfully meditated or studied privately but when there’s a synthesis of Word and life with experiences and fruits shared communally. This communitarian encounter with the Word is a feature of new groups such as lectio divina prayer groups, Alpha as well as small Christian communities and ecclesial movements.

b) *Communion with our neighbour.*

Focus on the neighbour is always a way to avoid self-absorption. Pope Francis speaks of the mysticism of encounter and he underlines dialogue, fraternity and social friendship as keys for today’s mission. As he puts it in *Fratelli Tutti*, “By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there” (n.8).

This is why synodality as a theme is so important. Sr. Nathalie Becquart, the new under-secretary to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops in Rome, speaks of the need of what John Henry Newman described as “con-spiratio”, that is, together, “breathing” the life of faith. In synodality all vocations become reconfigured in their relating to one another. We exercise together a communitarian discernment. We encourage one another to go out in missionary discipleship. The Acts of the Apostles teaches us so much about this.⁷

The communion with our neighbour can never be limited to just those immediately in our bubble. In church terms, communion is about living and feeling with the Church and in the Church in its universal dimension. It involves building communion with Christians of other churches, fostering dialogue with faithful of other religions, and reaching out to all people of good will. It can all be messy but, as Pope Francis repeats often, the Spirit works in this messiness.

c) *Communion with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.*

The Eucharist transforms us and makes us “other Christs”. In an era that is sick, we certainly need to “adore” as Peter Julian Eymard reminded us, but we need also to recognise how the

⁷ See Tom O’Reilly, *Acts of the Apostles: A Reading for Mission Today* (Dublin: Veritas, 2021).

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Eucharist propels us to continue Jesus' self-emptying by living eucharistically, that is, in a love that finds its measure in the Eucharist: 'love one another "as" I have loved you'.

We know that the Crucified-Risen Christ, encountered at Mass is the One who "emptied himself" by taking up residence in all places of vulnerability and exclusion, poverty and victimisation. With his self-giving, reconciling love, he has entered the cracks of differences, divisions and contradictions. In the Eucharist the very heart-beat of a world that increasingly realises that everything is connected with everything and everyone is connected with everyone. We also find the core of integral ecology, a theme young people are particularly sensitive to.

CONCLUSION

I was struck recently by a comment made to me: the Church starts when someone comes alongside you and, in imitation of Jesus says, "I am ready to give my life for you". The Church isn't lifeless structures, organisations or buildings. Of course, we need institutional elements to communicate, house and build Church but, ultimately, it is being together, united in love of one another, mindful particularly of those excluded, that we begin to be living cells of Christ's mystical body, journeying as communion in history.

Structures alone won't save the Church. Our trust is in the Lord who journeys with us: "they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them" (Mk 16:19). The dynamic of "kenosis", the "self-emptying" love, even in the midst of adversities, facilitates the visibility of the Lord's presence and action among us and through us.

One thing is clear. The Church of the future will have a considerably higher lay profile. That's not to say ordained ministry will disappear. Of course not. It will be there and essential. But the Spirit is blowing in the direction of an emergent profile of Church identity more in terms of laity, women and a new engagement of believers in the world. Here we think of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In Ireland we have such a great devotional regard for Mary. But she is also the woman of justice, social engagement, problem solving as un-tied knots, and community-generation. Ultimately, our Church-kenosis is about letting this Marian profile emerge more clearly.