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Billy Swan

A New Irish Catholicism

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As we navigated the recent lockdown and the prohibition of public worship during the pandemic, most of us wondered what kind of Church there will be after the crisis ends. It already seems clear that the Church we anticipated would emerge in about five years' time, is already at our door and is rapidly becoming a reality in the majority of our parishes and dioceses. The impact of COVID-19 on our faith communities has found few of us prepared as we struggle to adapt to how quickly change is happening. So, what is happening in our Church and what are the implications of these changes? What are the elements of newness that are emerging that give us hope? The purpose of this article is to sketch *ten* foundations of a new Irish Catholicism that will define the Church of the future in Ireland. These are offered not as an exhaustive list but rather to begin a conversation about the signs we discern how the Lord is renewing his Church. Tomorrow's Church in Ireland will be a different Church and a smaller Church than before; but how will it be a new Church? What are the hallmarks of a new Irish Catholicism?

NEWLY PRAYERFUL

The first place to begin is to identify the unique gift the Church has received and is called to share. We are a people who have come to see our own need for salvation and who recognize that need in a broken world in need of healing. We are a people who have come to know the saving love of God made visible in Jesus Christ – a gift that is accessible to all by the power of the Holy Spirit. We have been touched and changed by that love and truth to such an extent that we want to introduce others to its life-giving power. As the angel instructed the Apostles, so the word of God says to us today: 'Go and tell the people all about this new life' (Acts 5:20). Our confidence is in the gift we possess. In the words of Pope Francis: 'We have a treasure of life and love which cannot deceive, and a message which cannot mislead or disappoint. It penetrates to

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the depths of our hearts, sustaining and ennobling us. It is a truth which is never out of date because it reaches that part of us which nothing else can reach' (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 265).

This is our mission – to share this treasure of life and love that flows from communion with God and fellowship in the family of the Church. Now is the time to re-discover the pearl of great price, the one thing necessary that animates all that the Church teaches and stands for. Now is the time to finally reject residual notions that God's love can be earned; to know that 'God loved us first' (1 John 4:19) and to build our faith on the primacy of grace. To nurture this gift, we need to be people who love the holiness that leads to personal integrity and comes about through a living union with Christ. To progress along this road means engaging in 'the art of prayer' (John Paul II, *Novo Millenio Inuente*, 32) so that our parishes and communities might be marked by 'an all-pervading climate of prayer' (*Novo Millenio Inuente*, 34). This means a willingness to teach our people how to pray by tapping into their deepest spiritual hungers. Irish Catholicism will be renewed in the measure that it successfully connects her people to our ancient tradition of mystical prayer that nurtures a living relationship with God. This powerful union with God is mediated in a unique way through the Church community with the Word of God, the sacraments, the liturgy of the hours and the witness of the saints. When parishes become schools of prayer then liturgies become animated beyond stiff rituals that many find deadening and unattractive. They become celebrations of living faith that worship God as the source of everything that is good, true and beautiful – all that the human heart is drawn to and loves.

Prayer is the key to a renewal of our Church. This is crucially important to keep in mind as we cope with many challenges that require a response. As Pope Francis guides us: 'Changes in the Church without prayer are not changes made by the Church. They are changes made by groups ... Everything in the Church originates in prayer and everything grows, thanks to prayer ... This is the Church's essential task: to pray and to teach how to pray.... Without faith, everything collapses; and without prayer faith is extinguished' (*General Audience*, 14th April 2021).

When the early Church began to grow and its administration became more time consuming for the Apostles, the community ordained deacons so that the Apostles could be free to preach, teach and to pray (Acts 6:1ff). Preaching, teaching and prayer were prioritised before administration and maintenance. They still ought to be. If the Church can teach her members to pray, train people to be teachers of prayer and provide opportunities for spiritual direction to more Catholic Christians, then the whole of peoples'

lives will be renewed. Reconnecting spirituality and religion is one of the most pressing tasks of our time. It should be one of the Church's main priorities – to help people to know God, fall in love with Him and sustain her members in a life-giving relationship with the God who created us and loves us.

NEWLY HUMAN

In the very first chapter of *'The Joy of the Gospel'*, Pope Francis outlines that 'those who accept his [Jesus'] offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness'. With these words, Francis captures the truth of what we have held since the time of St Patrick who described faith as 'that great and life-giving gift' (*Confessio*, 36). He proclaimed this truth in continuity with the Gospels, St Irenaeus ('the glory of God is the human person fully alive'), St Augustine ('to know God and know myself') and after him with figures from the great Tradition including Thomas Aquinas ('grace builds on nature'), Catherine of Siena ('Their humanity will be conformed to the humanity of the Word and they will delight in it'), Teresa of Avila ('We must enter by this gate...on this road you walk safely ... through the sacred humanity of Christ'), the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* ('For by his incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every human being'), St John Paul II (*Redemptor Hominis*), Pope Benedict XVI and now with Pope Francis – that Christianity *enhances* our humanity rather than diminishing it. This is true also at the social level where Christian values lend themselves to a peaceful civilization and harmony. Our challenge today is to show unbelievers and skeptics a path to holiness that cherishes all that it means to be human.

We acknowledge that this task is not easy with the historical baggage that Irish Catholicism carries as an institution. With more than a hint of Jansenism and puritanism, many experienced the Church as oppressive, anti-human and even abusive. But while we lament the past, atone for past mistakes and work for healing with those who have been alienated, the present is an opportunity to model an authentic spirituality of what it means to be human at a time when it is sorely needed. At all times, we keep before us the dignity of the human person and who God revealed ourselves to be in Christ – our divine origin and destiny, our filial identity, our need for love, work, food, family, our gifts and potential, our sin and brokenness. These are all the human categories that unite under the aegis of the 'I' that finds its fulfillment in relationship with God and others. Our dialogue with post-modernity can only be successful if it is founded on a solid anthropology and a clarity of what it means to be human. This clarity will be critically important

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as we engage with contemporary issues such as medical ethics, gender issues, human sexuality, marriage, family, new economic models and Catholic education. The renewed humanism called for by recent popes will be critical in convincing people that our faith is the friend and not the foe of the humanity we share in common.¹

NEWLY FORMATIVE

In the words of St John Henry Newman: ‘To live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often’.² In the Gospels, Jesus pointed to the essential organic quality of the Christian life. To illustrate this, perhaps the best-known metaphor he used was of the vine and the branches (cf. John 15). There he teaches how the lives of Christians are ultimately fruitful because of our communion with him and his grace. This relationship is not static but growing. For there to be fruit there must be change; there must be pruning. To be Christian is to embrace growth and engage in a lifelong process of formation. In the words of St Paul, the Christian adventure is to grow in our knowledge of God, becoming ‘fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself’ (Eph. 4:13).

This organic quality ought to excite us and influence our witness to Catholic Christianity as something dynamic and alive – an enterprise of growth in holiness, virtue, maturity, the art of social interaction, communication, wisdom and joyful love. We are moving away from an overly static concept of Irish Catholicism towards an understanding of Christianity as a way of life that is sustained by the transformative power of the Spirit as a life-long process. The crucial understanding of Christianity as a way of life, to be trained for and initiated into, highlights the role of families, parishes and school communities that facilitate and cultivate good habits and human virtue. Formation is a concept that doesn’t belong exclusively to priestly training but properly belongs to Christianity itself. It concerns every aspect of our humanity being formed and conformed to the likeness of Christ. Change is part of life. Catholic Christianity offers light and hope by offering a narrative that makes sense of change and that celebrates those moments with the Church’s rich life of rites, prayers, sacramentals and sacraments.

NEWLY ECCLESIAL

Traditionally, the Catholic parish in Ireland has been understood geographically. It was a defined territory associated with a school, graveyard, Church and village. Belonging to a parish depended on

1 See Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 78; Pope Francis, *Meeting with Participants of the Fifth Convention of the Italian Church*, 10th Nov. 2015.

2 *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Part I, sec. I.

where you grew up. The rapid social changes in recent years have seen a shift away from the parish as a spatial area and towards a faith community to which one belongs and identifies with. St John XXIII beautifully described the parish as ‘the village fountain to which all can come and slake their thirst’. This metaphor takes us back to the spiritual roots of a faith community where people witness to Christ, worship and gather around the Word of God and for the sacraments. It seems inevitable that parishes of the future will be spaces where people know each other, form friendships to counteract isolation, welcome newcomers into the faith and sustain each other in that faith commitment. Going forward, parish communities will need to take greater responsibility for the faith formation of their members and to nurture a mature adult faith that endures a life-time. This will mean a necessary reform of our sacramental system where the sacraments of initiation in particular – Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist – are grounded in the life of the faith community itself. While the ongoing contribution by parish personnel to Catholic education is vital, the loss of meaning of sacramental celebrations as mere occasions to be facilitated, needs to be addressed. Being ‘sacramentalised but not evangelised’ is a problem that can be ignored no longer. In the words of Bishop Michael Duignan: ‘We need to avoid the temptation to turn our churches into mere sacramental dispensing stations – where people come to pick a religious product rather than be nourished to live the Christian life’ (*Pastoral Reflection on the Future of the Church in the Diocese of Clonfert*, 28th April 2021). The system that has been in place for decades is no longer fit for purpose for a prophetic Church that needs to put a greater value on what she stands for and what she has to offer. Many think that if we ask less of people, they will be more attracted to the faith. The opposite is true. The more they are invited to give nothing less than everything, the more compelling and alluring the Catholic faith becomes.

NEWLY PROPHETIC

The Irish Catholic Church has shifted from the center to the margins of public life in recent decades. Some lament this change as a loss of power and influence. Yet there is an opportunity today for the Church to reclaim her prophetic edge and voice. Instead of relying on a platform or status she no longer enjoys, the Church will be renewed in the measure that her members live their faith authentically, in a way that makes that faith credible and so gives rise to hope. In the words of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin: ‘Personal integrity and holiness bear within them a striking strength that can be stronger than physical power’ (14th Nov. 2020). History has

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shown this to be true. When all other props have been stripped away and all that remained was the faith of Christians, the Church was at her best and her light shone brightest. For this reason, Irish Catholicism is being renewed by people who understand our collective vocation as a resistance movement that offers the world, not a combative faith but a revolutionary faith. Based on the Gospel, it is our conviction that the Church offers a broader, richer and more coherent vision of life than the many alternative narratives on offer today that are confusing, spiritually poor and morally bankrupt. Regarding specific issues of social justice, life issues, marriage, family, sexuality, care for the environment and others, this is not a time for the Church to be timid or retreat into private and hidden spheres. It is not a time for the Church to lose its identity by dissolving itself in the surrounding culture. She knows that *accommodation* is simply a quicker route to *obliteration*. In the words of Pope Francis, she needs to ‘go forth’ and to ‘put out into the deep’, engaging courageously with modern culture in the market square. The Church does this knowing that she is the ‘*ekklesia*’ – the people called out of the world to be a sign and instrument of God’s saving work. As a prophetic community we are called, not to fit in but to stand out.

NEWLY COURAGEOUS AND CONFIDENT

The scandals of the past few decades have shaken our confidence to the core. Certainly, they need to be faced with humility and repentance but in such a way that holds our nerve, does not dumb down the faith or question the integrity and core teachings of the Gospel. Renewal and reform doesn’t mean the faith becoming culturally accommodating, hand-wringing and unsure of itself. We must not become a Church that had allowed its distinctive colours to be muted and its sharp edges to be dulled.

While avoiding fundamentalism, we need to get clear about the content of faith as taught by the Church and to boldly proclaim that faith in our dialogue with modern culture. Clarity breeds confidence. The clearer we are about the content of faith, the more confident we will be of its truth and value. And it is this confidence that will inspire us to proclaim it boldly. This is the boldness that Pope Francis summons us to in ‘*Rejoice and Be Glad*’. He prays that we be imbued with the same spirit as the early Christians who preached the Gospel on their terms, despite the consequences. In doing so we are not afraid, for the Lord and his wisdom are with us as he promised. Homilies, lectures, catechetical programmes, articles, podcasts and videos will become more compelling when the believers behind them become more courageous, clear and

confident in what they believe. With this spirit we face the multiple challenges with intense faith, drawing from the well of all that is good, true and beautiful in our faith Tradition.

NEWLY INFORMED

I heard it said recently that while we are trying to hug people into the Church, atheists are arguing people out of it. And the atheists are winning. There has been much talk recently of respectful listening and dialogue in the Church and of course this is important. But we mustn't lose sight of our fundamental calling to proclaim the Gospel and to 'always be ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you have' (1 Peter 3:15). Therefore, the importance of sharing our faith will need to be matched by the importance of knowing and understanding what we believe. If hot button topics are obstacles to people coming to faith, then we need to do a far better job at making the argument for why we teach what we do. This need highlights the importance of adult faith formation and creative apologetics to help us lead others to Christ who is 'forever young and a constant source of newness' (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 11). We need to offer young people far more reasons to believe. The split between the theological and the pastoral in the life of the Irish Church since the Council has been a disaster.³ We need to show how faith is a reasonable choice and the best fit in a world that does not explain itself. In doing so, we simply cannot afford to ignore the vast reservoir of wisdom left to us by intellectual giants of the past such as Augustine, Aquinas, Teresa of Avila, John of the Cross, Edith Stein, John Paul II, Benedict XVI to name a few. These great figures inspire us to engage truthfully with the great questions of our day as they did in their time.

NEWLY PARTICIPATIVE

At the Spring Meeting of the Episcopal Conference this year, the Irish bishops decided to embark on a synodal pathway for the Catholic Church in Ireland leading to the holding of a National Synodal Assembly within the next five years. Prior to this synod, there will be much reflection on the life of the Irish Church through the lens of a synodality model that seeks to consolidate the bonds of communion between all members of the Church and to foster a sense of co-responsibility for the mission of the Church. This shift from a passive to participative model of Church began in earnest at

3 'Theology needs to be rehabilitated in the service of the Catholic Church and in Irish society. Without some such rehabilitation of theology, we will end up having a Church that is un-theological and a theology that is un-churched'. D. Lane, 'Vatican II: The Irish Experience', *The Furrow*, Feb. 2004, Vol. 55, 67-81, 80

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the Second Vatican Council and has been promoted ever since. In the ‘*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*’ published in 2004, ‘Participation’ is included among eight principals of the Church’s social teaching. In 2009, Pope Benedict XVI said: ‘it is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted ... This demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as “collaborators” of the clergy but truly recognized as “co-responsible”, for the Church’s being and action’.⁴ Here is a call for all the baptised to actively participate in the life of the community. Unlike a democratic model, participation in the life of the Church is predicated on our participation through grace in the life of the Trinity and is celebrated by actively participating in the liturgy, especially the Eucharist.⁵ The forthcoming synod and preparatory work will be an opportunity to engage with the gifts of all the baptised and open up new possibilities for leadership, liturgical renewal and shared pastoral responsibility. Whatever the future of the Church in Ireland, it already seems clear that the Irish Church will be newly participative or will not be here at all.

NEWLY MISSIONARY

The Irish Church has been a missionary Church from the very beginning. It is in our DNA to go forth, reach out, to travel, adapt and find creative ways to share the Good News of Jesus Christ. A private faith just won’t do. We want others to know God and we desire to lead others to faith in him. We want his kingdom of peace and justice to flourish and so pray for it and work for it. In this spirit, Pope Francis urges us to ‘go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ’ (*The Joy of the Gospel*, 49). For those dedicated to evangelization, the haunting words of Jesus are never far from our hearts: ‘When the Son of Man returns, will he find any faith on earth?’ (Luke 18:8). Therefore, mission is not an end in itself or can’t be reduced to a noble desire to make the world a better place. Mission is about leading others to faith in Christ and growing in faith as we do so. Gathering people into the community of the Church is not an optional extra because the Church remains the sign and sacrament of salvation. On a hopeful note, Rodney Stark in his book ‘*The Rise of Christianity*’ notes in history how times of

4 *Opening Address to a Pastoral Convention*, Rome, 26th May 2009.

5 ‘Through the Holy Spirit we are all called participators of God...we enter to form part of divine nature through participation in the Spirit’ St Athanasius, *Letter to Serapion*, I, 14; ‘This is our vocation. To become divine, to become God through participation’. St John of the Cross, *Spiritual Canticle*, 22, 3.

famines and pandemics were followed by a revival in Christianity.⁶ We saw this revival in Ireland after the Great Famine in the 19th century. According to Stark, this was because the Church remained true to her identity and mission as she stood close to the people at a time of crisis. In these challenging times, may she also remain faithful to the Master, true to her identity, mission and become a community of ‘Spirit filled evangelisers’ (Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Chap. 5).

NEWLY HISTORICAL

When we look back on the history of the Irish Catholic Church, there are aspects to be immensely proud of – women and men whose witness inspires and developments that have produced so much good. There are also moments that make us deeply shameful. As we go forward, we do so acutely conscious of both the lights and the shadows of our story and with a sharp historical consciousness. We can neither airbrush out the darker side of our history or forget the wonderful heritage left to us by our Christian ancestors. A synodal model of Church will see us walking together with brothers and sisters who have been wounded from past experiences and who are still scarred. It will be necessary going forward to be sensitive to people who have been wounded and care for those who have been hurt. Walking with the wounded keeps us grounded, humble and yet strong in our resolve to work for healing and reconciliation. It spurs us on to show the true face of Christ to those who long to see it. Walking with and listening to the wounded helps the Church to renew itself and start over. Our mission today continues to be the work of re-building trust. While acknowledging past wrongs and probing their causes, we believe that we still can treasure all that is good, true and beautiful about the Christian faith and help people explore its healing power and potential.

CONCLUSION

In 1970, a young professor named Joseph Ratzinger made this prophesy: ‘From today’s crisis will emerge a Church that has lost a great deal ... it will become small and will have to start pretty much all over again. It will be a more spiritual church ... it will be poor and will become the Church of the destitute’.⁷ There is an increasing sense among Irish Catholics that in a post-scandal, post-COVID landscape, the present is very much like starting over again

6 R. Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, Princeton University Press, 1996, 73-94.

7 Joseph Ratzinger, ‘What will the Church look like?’ in *Faith and the Future*, Ignatius Press, 2009, 116.

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for a Church that has lost a great deal – loss of numbers, status, property and credibility to name just a few. But in a paradoxical way, she will be richer in the measure that she will be newly prayerful, newly human, newly formative, newly ecclesial, newly prophetic, newly courageous, newly informed, newly participative, newly missionary and newly historical. ‘Behold, I make all things new’ says the Lord (Is. 43:18; Rev. 21:5). May we all embrace a new Irish Catholicism with hope and joy.

Bringing to Birth. All art is a bringing to birth. It is not a matter of creating out of nothing but of liberating what is already there, in the strict sense a labor. The sculptor frees the form concealed in the stone. The analogy is plain since the stone, the material, is already visible, gravid with a weight it is destined to lose, yielding it reluctantly into the hands of the artist. The poem is no less brought to birth, eased out of chaos where all meanings pre-exist-incipient, mingled. Words are the tools that give these meanings their shape and ease them into being, and in so doing the words become the poem, the form in which the meaning is embodied. The poet is at once midwife and maker.

– PAULINE MATARASSO, *Clothed in Language*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press) p. 60.