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Gerry O'Hanlon

Mapping a Way Forward for the Catholic Church in Ireland

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The future, as we all know, is ‘*terra incognita*’, unknown. There is, then, no map, strictly speaking, for the future. However, as the Irish Bishops have noted in their decision to embark on a ‘synodal pathway’ for the Catholic Church in Ireland, the ‘walking together on the way’ that characterises a synodal approach ‘is a time honoured way of working out together the “navigation map” for the Church at particular times’ (<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/synod/faqs/>). It is an exercise in *communal* discernment with a focus on the question: what is the Holy Spirit saying to the Church at this time? There are signposts on the way – Scripture and Tradition of course, but also other people (especially the poor) and our planet earth (in particular its peripheries), our country and the world with their ‘signs of the times’. Our navigational tool, our compass is the Holy Spirit of Jesus.

The biblical prototype of this approach is embodied in the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24, 13-35): the disillusionment and desolation, the encounter with the Stranger and the re-reading of the signs of the times, the invitation to join them, the recognition in the breaking of bread, the conversion and resurgence of consolation as, with ears burning, they rush back in a mission to the rest of the group in Jerusalem. Our belief is, our hope is, as Cardinal Grech, General Secretary of the Synod of Bishops, put it to the Irish Bishops, that ‘... the moment we embark on a synodal process, we will open the way for Jesus to visit us’ (<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2021/03/04/address-of-cardinal-mario-grech-to-the-bishops-of-ireland-on-synodality-2/>). At a time of crisis for the Church in Ireland this bold episcopal initiative is a sign of hope.

In what follows I will focus on what the Irish Bishops are inviting us to do, modified now by the papal re-set in recent weeks; and

1 Based on webinar address to Maynooth Union, June 14, 2021

Gerry O’Hanlon, SJ is author of *The Quiet revolution of Pope Francis: A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland?*, published by Messenger Publications, Dublin.

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on issues and questions that arise, especially around governance, teaching and discernment. I will approach all these topics with a particular eye to the situation of priests in Ireland today.

THE SYNODAL INITIATIVE OF THE IRISH BISHOPS

In a Statement after their March 2021 Spring meeting the Irish Catholic Bishops formally announced that they had ‘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’ (<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/synod/>). The Bishops did well to place their synodal initiative in a missionary rather than self-referential framework, acknowledging the challenging context within which the Church in Ireland is embedded. This context includes the rapid secularisation of Irish society, with a major decline in religious practice and a sharp reduction in the number of vocations to priesthood and religious life; the shocking revelations around clerical and institutional abuse which have severely damaged the moral credibility of the Church; the need to promote peace-making and a culture of welcome (given the unfinished peace process in Northern Ireland and the influx of immigrants to the island of Ireland); the cries for transparency, greater participation and accountability in the Church; the discovery, due to the Covid pandemic, of the family as the ‘domestic Church’; the need to connect with young people (who have exited the Church in their droves), with the ‘many people who have left Church behind and in some cases feel ignored, excluded or forgotten’, and to honour the contribution of women, not least by listening to ‘their deep concerns’. All this, following Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*, is seen within the call to solidarity with the poor, the earth, the excluded and those ‘on the peripheries’, including ‘initiatives of social friendship in favour of our sisters and brothers in other continents’.

The Bishops proposed to proceed by means of a two-year ‘national conversation’ or consultation process, structured around the leading and open question of ‘*what does God want from the Church in Ireland at this time?*’ This is envisaged as a period of prayer, listening and discernment, allowing groups and individuals to share their insights, with related information sessions and educational programmes on the meaning and processes of syondality, all under the direction and supervision of a ‘task group made up of lay women and men, including young people, religious, priests and bishops’ to be established this June (2021). This two year consultation process was intended also to serve as

the Irish contribution to the 2022 Synod on Synodality in Rome, and afterwards the exact shape of the National Synod/Assembly will become clear.

Since the Bishops' Statement Pope Francis himself (May 21, 2020) has announced that the Synod of Bishops planned for Rome in October 2022 is *postponed* until October 2023 to allow for prior consultation in every Catholic diocese world-wide (guided by a questionnaire and to be completed by April 2022), then by a 'continental' discernment by Bishops (till March 2023) and then the Synod itself in Rome (<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-05/synod-of-bishops-will-begin-in-the-local-churches.html>). The Irish plan can easily be adjusted to, and merge with, this papal initiative. It is to be hoped that in so doing the idea of a national, and not just diocesan, conversation will be preserved. In their Statement after their Summer meeting in June the Bishops simply reiterate their original plan, with two modifications – *first*, the synodal pathway will lead '... to the holding of a national synodal assembly, *or assemblies* (my emphasis), within the next five years', and *secondly* they note that '... by a happy coincidence, these first two years of our Synodal Pathway in Ireland will complement the Catholic Church's worldwide journey towards the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of Bishops in Rome ... in October 2023' (<https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2021/06/16/statement-of-the-summer-2021-general-meeting-of-the-irish-bishops-conference/>)

The papal 're-set' serves to further emphasise the key significance of synodality in the thought of Pope Francis, and, in particular, that listening to and dialogue with *all* the baptised. This is brought out very clearly in the recent book '*Let Us Dream*' by Pope Francis in collaboration with Austen Ivereigh.² Within the 'see/choose/act' framework of that book we can see the contextual and missionary emphases of the Irish Bishops as being faithful to the injunction of Francis to 'see' what is going on around us and to engage with the 'signs of the times', while it is clear that the 'choose/judge' part is grounded in a synodality which refuses to rest with the harsh and merciless 'isolated conscience' and obsessions of small groups, but which seeks to resolve conflict in processes of synodality that avoid polarization. This resolution is sought through a communal discernment aimed at a *new* synthesis whose God-given origin is evident in how a harmony is achieved 'that holds on to the sharp notes of its differences' (83). This is the kind of unity that can facilitate diversity and does not impose uniformity, a unity grounded in the Trinity and expressed in the outpouring of the Spirit

2 Pope Francis, in conversation with Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, London: Simon & Schuster, 2020

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at Pentecost when, unlike at Babel, different languages bring not fragmentation and division but richness and mutual understanding.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS THAT ARISE

In an interview (<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-05/cardinal-grech-interview-synod-secretariat-changes.html>) to explain the papal ‘re-set’ of the Synod of Bishops, Cardinal Grech outlines what is involved in a way that highlights our challenge here in Ireland. The re-set is because ‘the time was ripe for a wider participation of the People of God in a decision-making process that affects the whole Church and everyone in the Church’. As noted in the Pope’s own 50th anniversary address, Francis is convinced that ‘... the Synod of Bishops is the point of convergence of this listening process conducted at every level of the Church’s life’. The governing principle of this consultation of the People of God is contained in the ancient principle ‘that which touches upon all must be approved by all’ (*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbari debet*). This in turn finds its root in the extension of episcopal collegiality to the involvement, in synodality, of all the baptised, based upon their share in the priestly, prophetic (teaching) and kingly (governance) of Jesus Christ. And Francis in this context lays particular stress on the *sensus fidei*, that which makes the People of God infallible *in credendo* (in believing), ‘one of the strongest themes of the current pontificate’.

GOVERNANCE

Let me suggest, first, what this theological framework implies around the issue of governance, in particular for priests on the ground here in Ireland at this historical juncture. In general it points to the end of a clericalism of entitlement and government by decree and simple *fiat*. We have to learn to shift to a mode of service in which dialogue and listening, no matter how wearisome, are essential. We have to show ourselves to be trustworthy, to be competent, to be accountable. The document *Light from the Southern Cross* emanating from the Catholic Church in Australia is an example of what is involved.³ At the same time, serious work needs to be done on defining the moral and legal issues around responsibility that arise. Priests can feel that parish councils, for example, often function as kind of Suggestion Boxes which simply add yet another layer of work to already over-burdened lives: one of the fruits of the synodal process may well be a growing realisation

3 Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Light from the Southern Cross*, *The Furrow*, 71, October 2020, 519-526

by laity that they too must undergo conversion, conversion to the owning of the kind of responsibility that goes with being a committed disciple and not just an interested observer.

In particular we are challenged as priests to *empower* the People of God in our parishes by organizing the kind of consultation best suited to the local culture which we understand.⁴ Anecdotally one hears of a lot of inertia and even cynicism among us priests: we've tried all this before, I'm tired, I'm old, it just means more work ... This is not us at our best. The two disciples on the road to Emmaus had every reason for despair and disillusionment, but look what happened. The prayer of the father whose son needed healing can be ours: Lord I believe, help my unbelief (Mk. 9: 24). Let us be bold about this, let us take risks: for example, what about an evening with invited young people to tell us why they are no longer interested in the church, with women who feel excluded, with those who have left to tell us why they left and why they still remain outside? And if we genuinely don't have the energy to organize such gatherings ourselves, why not allow/empower others to do so? For those of us who are old, in particular, this is a real opportunity to sow seeds which will eventually, we can hope, yield a rich legacy compatible with the dreams and idealism with which we first embarked on our vocations. Ours is a faith of redemption and forgiveness, of new beginnings. The Pope, the Bishops have offered us a concrete way to embark on this road: let's start walking, and allow ourselves to be carried when necessary!

TEACHING

There is, secondly, the so-called 'neuralgic' issue that many people in the Irish Catholic Church – and indeed world-wide – have not 'received' much of Church teaching on sexuality and gender. We think of issues like contraception, same-sex relations, and the ordination of women. This was evidenced in the ACP commissioned survey of Catholic views in 2012 – 75% believed that Catholic teaching on sexuality was not relevant to themselves or their families; three out of five Catholics disagreed with the teaching that any sexual expression of love between gay couples is immoral; 87% believed priests should be allowed to marry while 77% believed that women should be ordained to the priesthood (*Irish Examiner*, 13 April, 2012). It was also evidenced in the results of the Bishops' own questionnaire to the faithful as part of the consultation for the Synod on the Family – the Bishops acknowledged that many found church teaching in this area to be

4 For an analysis of some of the challenges and resistances involved, see Kevin Egan, The Upcoming Synod: Are we Ready?, *The Furrow*, 72, June 2021, 323-330

‘disconnected from real-life experience’, noting that ‘... many ... expressed particular difficulties with the teachings on extra-marital sex and cohabitation by unmarried couples, divorce and remarriage, family planning, assisted reproduction, homosexuality. The church’s teaching in these sensitive areas is often not experienced as realistic, compassionate or life-enhancing’ (Statement of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference, 13 March, 2014).

While in the end the crisis of faith in an age of secularisation and the shift to a ‘poor church for the poor’ may indeed be the most important challenges we face – also for ourselves as priests, since our own faith is not unaffected by the spirit of the age, however critically discerned- still the non-reception of teaching on sexuality and gender are also ‘signs of the times’. They ought *not* to be simply dismissed as polemical symptoms of a culture war between ‘progressives’ and ‘traditionalists’ that we are wiser to ignore. They affect, rather, the most intimate areas of people’s lives, they involve issues of basic human dignity and rights, and rejection of teaching in these areas cannot but diminish the overall credibility of the Church.

While it is clear that public or majority opinion, much less opinion polls, are not simply equivalent to the ‘sense of the faith’, nonetheless, as the International Theological Commission’s (ITC) document on *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church (2014) acknowledges, public opinion is the prime and normal means of gauging what the ‘sense of the faith’ is (n 125). However – and this is our current situation – there are also institutional means such as councils and synods by which the faithful may be more formally heard and consulted (n 125). It is this formal moment of discernment which the Irish Bishops are now proposing.

The ITC document is clear that there is a problem when the Catholic faithful are indifferent to or simply reject Church teaching on specific issues, be they doctrinal or moral. This non-reception should lead us to a reconsideration of these teachings (nn 80, 113-125). This situation is unlikely to have improved in Ireland since 2012 or indeed 2014: if anything it will have deteriorated as church teaching (for example on contraception) is widely ignored or (on same-sex unions or women priests) simply rejected. In this case, as the ITC document states, this may ‘indicate that certain decisions have been taken by those in authority without due consideration of the experience and the *sensus fidei* of the faithful, or without due consultation of the faithful by the magisterium’ (n 123).

By not facing up to this matter honestly and openly the church comes across as inauthentic. These are ‘signs of the times’ in our culture and Church and cannot be ignored or dismissed simply as failures in effective communication. We note in particular, in sexual

teaching, the dominance of a particular natural law approach which privileges notions like ‘intrinsic evil’ and ‘intrinsically disordered’ in ways that are contested by other theological approaches. And in teaching about gender, we note an approach to complementarity that has difficulty in affording women leadership roles.

Underlying these issues there is a need to re-examine the Catholic teaching on the ‘development of doctrine’ – the operative notion of development relies excessively on an historically unjustifiable model of linear continuity with previous teaching. It does not allow for a more organic notion of development which can admit correction and pruning, as would be proper in a hermeneutic of reform, beyond simple continuity or discontinuity. It would seem that the Church position on issues like contraception and women priests is overly influenced by a *restrictive* notion of doctrinal development.

There is a view, attributed to Pope Francis, that synods are not instruments to change church teaching but rather to apply it more pastorally. However Pope Francis has also stated in his recent *Motu Proprio Spiritus Domini* (15 January, 2021) that the change in Canon Law permitting women to be lectors and acolytes represents a ‘doctrinal development ... arrived at in these last years that has brought to light how certain ministries instituted by the Church have as their basis the common condition of being baptized and the royal priesthood received in the Sacrament of Baptism’. In an accompanying letter he notes that this *development* occurred due to a number of Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops and cites in particular the Final Document of the Amazon Synod. Historically many similar instances could be cited – doctrine develops, teaching changes, and often due to synodal assemblies and councils – ‘Tradition is not a museum, true religion is not a freezer, and doctrine is not static but grows and develops’ (Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, 57). It is of course understood that where teaching affects the whole Church, the Irish contribution cannot decide such matters on its own, but it may have a vital role in submitting its discernment for consideration by the universal Church.

DISCERNMENT

Thirdly, the Bishops, with Francis, are right to be wary of division, of an exclusively ‘parliamentary procedure’ which does not rise to the level of discernment, of the ‘isolated conscience’ and single-issue reform mentality which can easily sow a partisan and sectarian spirit. But it’s also true that discernment can be ‘noisy’⁵,

5 Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis*, 2018/9, Dublin, Messenger Publications, chs 6 and 5

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can integrate and purify vigorous debate and conflict, lobbying and gossip – we are human beings, not angels! Interestingly Francis himself noted of the Amazon Synod that while it could not in the end rise to the level of discernment on the contested issues of married priests and female deacons (a sign of which was that, unlike in the Synod on the Family, the different sides remained as fixed in their views at the end of the process as they had been at the beginning), nonetheless what occurred was a ‘rich, productive and even necessary parliament’.⁶ And so, he seems to be saying, let the debate continue, let us ask God’s grace to raise it to the level of true communal discernment, so that the urgent questions it addresses may soon be resolved.

I simply note the apparent *tension* between the assumption of the Irish Bishops that the process in Ireland, involving laity and clergy, would be one of communal discernment, and the clear indication in the ‘re-set’ of Francis that while the consultation of the local church/dioceses is intrinsic to the process, nonetheless the ‘discernment’, properly speaking, is restricted to the Bishops themselves at national/continental and universal levels. This would seem to conflict with the notion of the share in governance by laity due to their baptism, and with recommendations from ARCIC III which advised a more mandatory, normative role for them in the governance of the Catholic Church.⁷ It does, of course, harmonize well with the traditional understanding of the role of the ordained hierarchy in having the final authoritative voice in teaching and governance. What matters, it seems to me, is that the concerns of all the baptised are truly listened to and acted on – it may be that the means of so doing (by consultation or through a more deliberative role) can be teased out further at this forthcoming Synod on synodality and at future synods.

A FINAL WORD

It is too early to anticipate the fruits of the synodal pathway in Ireland – will it, for example, adopt a mode of ‘blue sky’ imagining only, or will it yield multi-stranded pathways which focus also with more depth on specific issues?

It will be important to bear in mind throughout that Francis always locates reform in the context of our faith encounter with Jesus Christ and the mission which flows from this. As the late Nicholas Lash once put it: ‘... questions concerning how the Gospel of the crucified and risen one is effectively to be

6 Antonio Spadaro, ‘Francis’ Government: What is the driving force of his pontificate?’, *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 5 September, 2020, 4

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

proclaimed, in solidarity with and from the standpoint of the poor, the weak and the disadvantaged, are vastly more important than church structures. *Nevertheless, inappropriate structures frustrate appropriate evangelisation* (my emphasis).⁸ It is clear that priests have a key role in facilitating this renewal and reform in function of mission. I repeat, then – the Pope and our Bishops have offered us a concrete way to embark on our own road to Emmaus: let's start walking, and allow ourselves to be carried when necessary!

8 Nicholas Lash, 'Vatican II: Of Happy Memory – and Hope?' in Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2008 (originally 2003), 239

The Importance of Education. It has been observed by historian Dr. Helga Hammerstein that 'the English Government's neglect of education and the Catholic Clergy's awareness of its importance, appear in retrospect to have been the vital factor determining the unique course of Irish history. Ireland was to be the only country where the Counter-Reformation succeeded against the will of the head of state'. A significant role in that process was played by the colleges and seminaries founded in several European countries for the instruction of young Irish people and the education of Irish priests. The lives and dedication of those who commenced this work and carried it on have often been forgotten.

– THOMAS J. MORRISSEY, SJ, *Mission to a Suffering People*, 2021 (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 22.