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Hugh MacMahon

The Synod: Assessing and Regenerating

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Preparations are underway for a national synodal assembly as Ireland faces a rapid secularisation of society with a subsequent decline in Mass attendance.

The challenge will be to discover what can be done to make the young, and not so young, feel at home again in the Church and its liturgy. For the majority of young people today the Church is not part of their world. Rather than seeking inspiration there they regard it as dated, impersonal and obstructive. Probably more than previous generations, they have difficulty in finding meaning, purpose and support in their struggles. They are open to guidance that seems reasonable and that echoes their deepest convictions. However they are also exposed to a media bombardment that consistently disparages religion with stories that put the Church in a bad light and undermine its credibility. If religion has something to offer them, they need to hear it in clear and fresh terms with which they can relate.

The primary task for the synod, then, is *not* in reforming church governance or clarifying theological issues. It is to outline a *message* and a sense of direction that give purpose and affirmation to modern life. Something worth reflecting on, testing and sharing with others.

If Christianity had not been able to do this it would never have become a world religion.

What was it that once made Christianity so capable of leading populations to reshape their beliefs, attitudes and behaviour? Finding the answer means going back to an earlier stage of Christianity when the basic message was less ambiguous and uncluttered by the accumulations of years.

For Ireland we could do worse than revisit the early days of our own Church when Christianity was seen in positive terms and the challenge taken up with enthusiasm.

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But how much do we know of those times? Our numerous monastic ruins, and catch phrases like ‘An Island of Saints and Scholars’, hint at what was there but a scarceness of records from that period has held us back from appreciating it and drawing from its store of experience.

RELIABLE WITNESSES

The first time I visited the monastic cells on *Skellig* rock I could not but be impressed by their audacity and minimalism but I wondered what sort of men would choose to live there. One explanation offered for the austerity of their lives was that they felt a need to compensate for their sins. Others, on a more positive note, saw them as attempting a purer and ‘holier’ form of Christianity. But how could they be better Christians if they cut themselves off from society, from their neighbours in whom they should discover and serve their God?

I searched for a more convincing explanation. ‘Lives’ of contemporary Irish saints, often written long after their death, focussed on recording their miracles, hardships and other proofs of sanctity. The memory of those holy people is still embedded in the names of our towns and villages, and they are invoked occasionally for cures and blessings, but they are voiceless when it comes to addressing the broader questions of people today.

If only someone had interviewed them, asked them whether they had found what they were looking for, how they dealt with their weaknesses and what kept them going despite setbacks and failings!

Fortunately there were two young men who tracked down such holy persons with these concerns and left us an account of their findings. They were not Irish nor did they ever visit Ireland but the account of their interviews spread across western Europe and within a hundred years were inspiring and shaping the lives of thousands of Irish men and women, setting the standard for the growing Irish Church. If we want to understand the monks of Skellig, and the hundreds of other monastic settlements that sprang up around the country, they provide us with the descriptions and insights we need.

The eye-witnesses of course were John Cassian and his companion Germanus who in the year 384 crossed the deserts of Egypt seeking out famous Elders among the monks to learn from their experience. Their report was quickly shared across western Europe, influencing the Churches there. Excerpts from it can be found in the writings of St Patrick and of Finnian of Clonard, teacher to the ‘Twelve Apostles of Ireland’. Two of the pioneering

‘Fathers’, Anthony the Great and Paul of Thebes, are portrayed on High Crosses in Moone, Monasterboice and elsewhere.

It was rather late in my own search that I came across Cassian’s journal and realised its unique value. It threw light on the questions that had nagged me and opened the legacy of the elusive monks of Skellig for inspection.

PURPOSE IN LIFE

The *first* question put to Cassian and Germanus on their arrival at the desert was, ‘What brought you to this desolate place?’ and over the twenty-four frank discussions or ‘conferences’ that followed they explored their purpose, discussed their doubts and learnt the methods by which the monks dealt with human vulnerability on their way to encountering life in its fullness.

The *range* of topics they raised are of enduring concern.

Why is there evil in the world? Why are some made to suffer while others, who seem to live less worthy lives, thrive? Why is so hard to become the person we would like to be? Should we be held responsible for our actions? Are bodily instincts too basic and strong to be resisted? Does our fate depend on ourselves or is it decided for us? Is a life dedicated to study and contemplation superior to that of service in society? How can relationships be improved?

These discussions took place against the backdrop of a movement which already had thousands of followers and was attracting widespread attention. They were based on the conviction that we humans are not confined by biological limitations and can enjoy a greater happiness beyond the physical.

The monks who followed this path were moderate and pragmatic. They did not ignore or downplay physical needs in order to concentrate on the non-material. For them, both body and spirit were God-given and deserving of respect. The challenge, rather, was in not allowing one to dominate the other, to the detriment of both. The Elders identified eight areas in which bodily inclinations can easily take control and need to be managed. Later this list was reduced to seven and became famous as the ‘Seven Deadly Weaknesses (or Sins)’.

It may surprise some to learn that sexual matters were not a main concern. It was food. Gluttony was the first vulnerability because too much food was seen as providing the energy for other excesses. If that appetite could be controlled, the others could be too. Sexual demands indeed featured but in an unashamed manner that led to two chapters or Conference being omitted from English translations in the more prudish Victorian era.

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The Conferences illustrate, step by step, how individuals can come to understand and transform themselves and their weaknesses, enabling them to concentrate on experiencing the sacred in life.

This path calls for at least temporary withdrawal from a busy life, if possible to an isolated retreat such as Skelligs. However, it was not contempt for the world or fear of retribution that led people there. The Elders were clear that a Christian faith based on fear of punishment or hope of immediate reward is no substitute for a love based on faith. Understanding what this means in practice and sharing in it was their goal.

Cassian's chapters on prayer (Nos 9 and 10) are classics that remain essential reading for students of spirituality. There is room in them for different forms of prayer as each person's situation is considered unique. An early Christian mantra for maintaining concentration is explored and highly recommended. Cassian also advised, 'pray often but briefly'.

The monks on Skelligs, and in other monasteries scattered across Ireland, practiced the belief that human spiritual needs require as much attention as bodily needs. Beginners were inspired by Cassian's stories and went on to follow the rule he drew up at the request of a local bishop (*The Institutes*, his other volume).

WHY THE SILENCE?

Why have the writings of Cassian *not* been used more often to energise modern minds, debunk misconceptions and illustrate the positive aspects of Christianity?

One reason is that, despite his careful attempts to express how spiritual progress requires human effort as well as divine help, there were persistent accusations that he gave too much credit to free will and not enough to God. Anyone who actually reads what he said will admire his efforts to find a middle way and today his approach is widely accepted. However, rumours of heresy were enough to steer cautious scholars away and the texts were reserved for libraries and monasteries.

Another reason is that, despite their modern question-answer interview format, the discussions tend to be long-winded and crammed with biblical quotations (1,500 in *The Conferences*). Each of the twenty-four chapters or Conferences is at least twenty pages long.

Reading *The Conferences* in their entirety can be demanding but the picture they present has so much to reassure and guide Christians today that I began to condense the chapters to focus on the key topics, preserving the original wording and reasoning as much as possible. When I added some comments on each Conference, with

an introduction to the background and reflections on what they have to offer today, a book emerged that was published recently entitled, *Voices from the Desert, The Lost Legacy of Skelligs*.

RELEVANCE IN A BUSY WORLD?

What has Cassian to offer in today's world of disturbing mental, social and environmental issues?

The desert option, in its more dramatic form, did call on the individual to step back for a time from society to concentrate on developing their inner potential.

The Mary-Martha tension was a recurring debate. In the gospel story, were Mary's efforts to hear what Jesus was saying more important than her sister Martha's service in providing food for the guests?

Cassian, as a monk, can be seen as favouring Mary's attitude but his own life is also instructive. He moved on from the desert to serve the Church in a number of roles before establishing a monastery that was to have a formative influence on Western civilisation. In Ireland, many among the thousands of students at Finnian's monastery at Clonard went on to set up major centers of learning and support that changed the face of the country.

I live in Maynooth where within walking distance we have St Senan's monastery at Laraghbryan and the round tower of St Tua's monastery at Taghadoe. Tua, also known as Ultan the Silent, came from Clane, up the road, where St Ailbe of Emly had a cell that he passed on to St Senchall. Nearby, Kilcock gets its name from St Cocha (one of four of that name), a relative of Kevin of Glendalough and a strong woman not afraid of conflict. Similar associations can be found all over Ireland. For local people those 'living Christians' were the embodiment of what gave purpose to daily life, contact with the sacred and much needed support.

These celebrated men and women never succeeded in radically changing the political, economic and social world of their time -- wars, injustices, inequalities and egotism continued. However, when people compared the restraint and selflessness of monastic life to the human suffering caused by uncontrolled instincts they were reassured that meaning and goodness in life *endure*.

Today, a similar clarity and sense of urgency is needed to encourage people in their search for meaning and give them that extra incentive to move from talking about issues such as environmental neglect, social inequality and world poverty to begin making the necessary changes in their lives.

The Desert Father and Mothers were masters in the field of spiritual intelligence, witnessing to a dimension of human life

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that goes *beyond* the immediate, the physical and the selfish. They offered an invitation, not a threat. This is the heritage that needs to be revived today.

THE SYNOD AND DISCERNMENT

The Bishops, in announcing the synod, stated, ‘Pope Francis emphasises that this is not simply a matter of discussion as in a parliamentary debate. Rather it is primarily a prayerful spiritual time of communitarian discernment.’

Discernment was important for the Desert Fathers, it is discussed thoroughly in Conferences 1 and 2. When asking, ‘What should we do?’ they were taught to consider first, ‘Why are we doing this?’ After reflecting on what motivated them they should ask again, ‘Why are we *really* doing it?’ If they are satisfied that their thinking did not originate in one of the ‘Seven Deadly Weaknesses’ – pride, anger or envy, for example – then they could proceed with confidence.

With the heritage of our national ‘Desert Fathers and Mothers’ to draw on there is good reason to believe that the Church can again become a presence in Ireland that gives purpose, self-esteem and support to people in their daily life.

Homemaking. The *word*, as used in John’s Gospel, is about more than information; it carries with it an invitation. This is made clear in Jesus’ answer to the complaint made much later in the gospel that he is revealing himself to the disciples and not to the world: ‘Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them’ (14:23). The combination of ‘word’ and ‘home’ here is, in the phrase of Michael Paul Gallagher, ‘*Urworte*, language that transcends utility and the shallow clarity of appealing to the mind alone’. ‘Word’ and ‘home’ connect head and heart, resonating holistically with the hearers and appealing to them as relational beings. Jesus’ answer is his assurance that he will abide with those who hear his word(s) and keep his commandments.

– Kevin O’Gorman, SMA, *Divine Diamond: Facets of the Fourth Gospel*. 2021. (Dublin: Messenger Publications) p. 33.