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Gerry O’Hanlon

I happened, by chance, to listen to *The Leap of Faith*, presented by Michael Comyn, on RTE Radio 1 on Friday 26th November, 2021. The topic was the state of the Catholic Church in Ireland and the synodal pathway. There were three contributors. Bishop Brendan Leahy outlined the synodal process; journalist Ursula Halligan expressed hope but also stressed the urgency required to address issues concerning the exclusion of women and the side-lining of the LGBT community (particularly evidenced at the World Meeting of Families in Ireland in 2018); and journalist Derek Scally noted the resistance in Ireland to owning collective responsibility for the abuse issue, ‘hot button’ issues like ‘artificial contraception’, and the feeling of some in Germany, as the synodal process unrolled there, that the repeated insistence that the German Church on its own could not change Church teaching came across to some as a cynical exercise in passing the buck to Rome.

The overall conversation was courteous, frank and informative. Particularly riveting was the dialogue between Bishop Leahy and Ursula Halligan. Addressing one another as ‘Bishop Brendan’ and ‘Ursula’ respectively, one got the sense of real engagement, a moving beyond the notion of dialogue in the Platonic sense of the search for truth to the Martin Buber I-Thou sense of ‘encounter’, involving the whole person, as envisaged by Pope Francis. There was that fearless speech (*parrhesia*) and humility in listening (not immediately getting defensive) which the Pope has time and again characterized as core to the synodal process. This is the kind of speaking and listening which changes hearts and minds – of the participants themselves, but also of those who listen in.

Underlying this positive reality was the unspoken ‘elephant in the room’ – can church teaching change? Every bishop in Ireland will be familiar with this question by now, as more and more

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they engage in synodal like conversations. This engagement is hugely welcome – there were four or so bishops participating (not presenting) at a recent ACP webinar on synodality, six similarly at an ACI presentation on LGBTQI+ issues and many more are likely. Typically on occasions like this much common ground is discovered and relationships are built: this can only help the process of Church renewal and reform. But equally, as the engagement deepens, the question will have to be faced – by each bishop, by the bishops as a collective, and by all of us- how free is the Church to *change* its teaching, and what role in particulars do *bishops* have in this respect? I want to offer some perspectives on this.

POPE FRANCIS AND DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT

One reflex response by bishops has been to claim quite simply that the Pope himself has stated that synods are not instruments to change church teaching but rather to apply it more pastorally- ‘It’s important not to confuse Catholic doctrine and tradition with the Church’s norms and practices. What are under discussion at synodal gatherings are not traditional truths of Christian doctrine. The Synod is concerned mainly with how teaching can be lived and applied in the changing contexts of our time’¹. However, note the careful use of language here, even in this non-academic text: ‘traditional truths of Christian doctrine’ are referenced – do these extend to the so-called ‘hot button’ issues of contemporary times concerning sexuality and gender? And note too the phrase: ‘... the Synod is concerned *mainly* (my emphasis) with how teaching can be lived...’ mainly, but not necessarily exclusively?

These hints of a less absolute interpretation are reinforced by what Francis has done elsewhere. For example, he has stated in a *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.’²

1 Pope Francis, in conversation with Austen Ivereigh, *Let Us Dream*, London, Simon & Shuster, 2020, 84-5

2 *Ibid.*, 57

DOCTRINAL DEVELOPMENT

Bishops may well find themselves able to agree that church teaching changes if the discourse is couched under the rubric of doctrinal *development*, as hallowed by Newman. And so, for example, it may seem a fairly straightforward linear-like development to see Catholic Social Teaching now, in *Laudato Si*, taking on board the ecological agenda. However the shift in reinterpreting the biblical ‘dominion’ to something more like ‘stewardship’ may alert us to the reality, also in Newman, that development is rarely simply linear, but has a more organic feel to it that admits also of correction and pruning. Let me give some examples.

European Jesuit theologian the late Philippe Bacq succinctly outlines a now uncontroversial, highly instructive, case of recent change in the Catholic Church.³ For close on two thousand years the Church, in line with secular society, taught there was a natural hierarchy within the family, according to which the husband ruled over the wife, whose duty it was to obey. To support this teaching appeal was made to natural reason, to Scriptural texts in Genesis (2 and 3) and Paul (1 Cor 11: 3; Ephesians 5: 22-24), and to authoritative Patristic (Ambrose and Augustine) and Scholastic (Aquinas) sources. The teaching was stated forcefully as late as 1941 by Pius XII, echoing sentiments by Pius XI to the effect that this natural hierarchy could never be changed.

However, the cultural evolution of the 20th century around the dignity and equality of the individual had its effect, not just in civil law but also in Church teaching. By the time of the Second Vatican Council (see GS 49), the Church was stressing the equality of both partners in marriage, founded on a relationship of freedom and mutuality. No reference was made to the previous teaching nor to the Scriptural and traditional texts which undergirded it: now it was the Canticle of Canticles that was quoted, and a text in Paul (I Cor, 7: 3-6) which focused on reciprocity. Fast forward another 20 years or so and John-Paul II in *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988) reiterated the teaching of Vatican II and went on to reinterpret the traditional texts which had been used to assert the superiority of man over woman. Due to a cultural evolution, then, the Church was able to reinterpret a teaching which it had long thought to be irreformable: ‘L’Eglise peut donc changer sa doctrine meme si, a un moment de son histoire, elle la pensait irreformable’ (*The Church, then, can change a teaching even if, at a time in its history, it was taught to be unchangeable*).

3 Philippe Bacq, ‘La relation home-femme dans la societe occidentale et la tradition de l’Eglise’, *En Question*, 110, septembre, 2014, 27-29

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In a somewhat similar fashion North American theologian Edward Hahnenberg argues that the proliferation of ministries after Vatican II, in particular in the N. American church, is less a product of Vatican II's teaching on the laity and more a response to particular cultural developments and the pastoral needs they generated.⁴ In this sense lay ministry was an *anomaly*, like many other such developments in the church (he references the monoepiscopate, communal forms of monasticism, presbyteral authority, papal primacy, mendicant orders and active communities of women religious), which were more often than not experienced, not as natural evolutions, but rather as deeply contested innovations and disruption. This often led not only to theological discovery but as a major impetus to doctrinal development, which lead over time to the mainstream theological tradition not simply rejecting prior theory but finding 'ways to revise the theory in the light of the exception'.⁵

There are countless other examples of church teaching that once seemed fixed and immutable but have since changed- the acceptance of slavery and the limitation of gospel injunctions in this area to practising kindness towards slaves; the prevailing ethos of 'error has no rights' in the 19th century yielded to the Declaration on Religious Freedom of Vatican II; the insistence on monarchy and a Christian state as the preferred, god-ordained way of governance has given was to a recognition of the value of democracy and of Church-State separation.

SENSE OF FAITH OF THE FAITHFUL

A cornerstone of the synodal process of Pope Francis is that bold speaking out which allows us to determine 'the sense of faith of the faithful', to which in turn is applied '... the famous words infallible "*in credendo*" (infallible in believing). At the basis of this 'supernatural' sense given to the baptised is the Holy Spirit and so, according to the International Theological Commission, there can follow that *pastorum et fidelium conspiratio* (the breathing together of pastors and faithful) of which Newman spoke and which leads to discerning doctrinal development.⁶

I have noted here in a recent article⁷ that much Church teaching

4 Edward P. Hahnenberg, 'Learning from Experience: Attention to Anomalies in in a Theology of Ministry', in Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg, eds., *A Church with Open Doors*, 2015, Collegeville, Minnesota, Liturgical Press, 159-180

5 *Ibid.*, 172

6 International Theological Commission, '*Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*', 2014

7 Gerry O'Hanlon, Mapping a Way Forward, *The Furrow*, 72, September 2021, 455-463 at 459-46

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on sexuality and gender has demonstrably not been ‘received’ by the faithful. These play a major role in making the Church deeply unattractive to many. 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 (SF) acknowledges, public opinion is the prime and normal means of gauging what the ‘sense of the faith’ is. 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.⁸ It is this formal moment of *discernment* which the Irish Bishops are now proposing, and so they must be prepared to address the issues that arise out of honest speaking and humble listening.

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 teachings⁹. 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’¹⁰.

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. I 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, I note an approach to complementarity that has difficulty in affording women leadership roles. For a long time now the arguments against the ordination of women have, for most, ceased to be persuasive.

REFERRAL TO ROME

Yet another perspective worth exploring is the suspicion that when a bishop or bishops generally claim that certain matters are beyond their competence but need referral to Rome and the Universal

⁸ International Theological Commission, *opera cit*, 125

⁹ *Ibid.*, 80, 113-125

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 123

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Church this is always to be understood as an *evasive* tactic and an instance of bad faith. What was particularly remarkable in Ursula Halligan's contribution to The Leap of Faith programme was her brave, passionate, intelligent advocacy of the rights of women and sexual minorities, as well as her appreciation of the value of church unity and a deep hope that, however miraculously, the two could and would be held together. Let me offer a brief personal experience here to support her position.

Back in the 1990s a number of us in Ireland (Jesuits and women with whom we were in dialogue) produced a text about women in the Church.¹¹ As it happened, I was appointed around that time to the 34th General Congregation of the Jesuits in Rome (1995). Along with a few others there I introduced the theme of Women in the Church for consideration at the Congregation. There was initial scepticism, especially since the topic had not been flagged in the extensive pre-Congregation preparation, and the early vote to consider whether this matter would be discussed at all just passed by about 114-111. Then, over the course of about three months or so, as the text began to develop and take on global and not just European concerns, more support was gained, so that by the time of the final vote approval was granted overwhelmingly with over 190 out of 220 or so voting for.¹² The process involved discussion, arguments, lobbying, gossip ... and discernment! This is the kind of '*noisy discernment*' that my colleague Brian Grogan refers to. Parts of the fruits of its success were its positive reception in the Vatican itself and, now in these times, its revival at Jesuit Headquarters to inform our contemporary Jesuit mission.

At an altogether more major and significant level this was also the experience of those attending the Second Vatican Council – a massive shift in hearts and minds through the process of talking, listening and praying together, and, of course, the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

And so bishops are quite within their rights – indeed their responsibilities- to explain that certain matters need to be referred more widely in the Church and to Rome. However, if they are to be authentic, and whatever their own theological and indeed faith beliefs on these issues, they must take seriously their responsibilities to represent with clarity and force, unapologetically, the 'sense of faith' of the people they lead, even when this 'sense' conflicts with current church teaching. It would be a terrible breach of trust to do anything less and be fatal to any hope of synodal renewal and missionary outreach which is its goal. In this context one recalls

11 Lennon, O'Hanlon, Toner, Sammon, *Women in the Church, An Issue of Solidarity*, Dublin: Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, 1995

12 Decree 14 of Jesuit General Congregation 34, Rome, 1995

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the advice to Bishops by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* (n 31): ‘... he will sometimes go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hope vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and – above all – *allowing the flock to strike out on new paths*’ (my emphasis).

The term ‘orthodox’ can be bandied about in these contentious contexts a lot, at times tendentiously. I would suggest that any Irish Bishop – or indeed Bishops anywhere- who wishes to be ‘orthodox’ in today’s ecclesiological context needs to *listen* carefully to the ‘sense of the faith’ of the faithful in his own diocese, and *represent* it faithfully to the rest of the Church. Otherwise the mere repetition of teaching that has not been received runs the risk of becoming ‘ideological’ in that it systematically screens out a vital source of relevant evidence. This too often creates the effect of teaching without learning, which is no kind of teaching at all.

CONCLUSION

Bishops in the ‘old church’ were accustomed to maintaining a certain distance, to avoiding contrary views within the church, and to appealing to ‘church teaching’ without feeling the need to offer reasons to support the teaching. In a synodal church bishops are much more exposed, they are engaged in dialogue and open to questioning, they cannot expect adherence to authoritative statements without accompanying explanation. Initially this may feel uncomfortable: but in the longer term it is healthier and may be experienced by the bishops themselves as liberating. As the people get to know them better as human beings of faith with their own doubts and problems, they will appreciate better too the properly conservative function of a servant episcopacy in preserving faith against the whims of contemporary fashion, while enjoying the growing freedom of the episcopacy to identify and facilitate the flourishing of lay charisms and prophetic ways, and to discern true change in governance and teaching in response to the signs of the times.

And so bishops too, in this time of crisis and opportunity, are called to *encounters*, where their faith will be tested and renewed. I have been suggesting ways in which they might consider a non-defensive response to the question ‘can church teaching change’. It is one thing – and there will be some need of this – to ‘manage expectations’ as the synodal pathway proceeds, another entirely to ‘stifle the Spirit’!