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The FURROW

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Authentic Encounters

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The tone of Pope Francis's social encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti* is one of urgency, an appeal for a profound change of heart in terms of compassion, care, and generosity in face of so many global challenges. Such is needed, the pope says, to challenge passivity and scepticism that suspends needed action. Meaningful change, the pope says, is instigated when we are present to human suffering and open to meaningful encounters with those different to us. We are reminded that fraternity is the neglected link in the triad of human rights, and he appeals to the common humanity all share beyond creedal or political allegiances.¹

In inviting us to discuss the need for greater authenticity in person and interpersonally, in our awareness of growing wealth/poverty divide, displacement of peoples and care of the environment, the Pope holds forth the parable of the Good Samaritan as a model. Entering the story more fully reminds us of the various roles we play in everyday interactions – as represented by the different characters [63]. Do we both notice and act in face of what happens around us, provide shelter or credit on trust as did the innkeeper? Or am I sometimes the passer-by in the story who is indifferent or ignores, or even exploits a situation for my own advantage?

There are possibly many avenues worth pursuing towards meaningful change, some of which may form part of *Synodal '21–23* discussions. The question of authenticity drew me to what Thomas Merton once wrote: '... the only meaning discoverable in life is that revealed by God ... received out of the transcendent darkness of His mystery and our own ... True meaning is gifted like life itself ... those who paddle through on their own steam, independent of God, taking the gift of life as a given, are prone to love of self, and lack the Christian disposition that fulfils itself by selfless love for other persons.'² Pope Francis, however, takes a more expansive, less dogmatic stance in *Fratelli Tutti*. He appeals to the innately universal human propensity for goodness – an approach embodying the style of Jesus.

1 Encyclical Letter *Fratelli Tutti* of The Holy Father Francis on Fraternity and Social Friendship. (The Holy See: Liberia Editrice Vaticana, Oct. 2020).

2 Thomas Merton, *The New Man*. London: Burns & Oates, 1985, p. 23.

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In our own time, the response to climate change and the war in Ukraine might be examples of innate goodness coming to the fore. Such spontaneous responsiveness blurs the line between everyday divisions – between, for example, secular and religious orientations. Today, suspicion of ‘cold’ scientific rationalism is giving way to an aesthetic and moral sense regarding the beauty of our world and need for more responsible lifestyles. For some this indicates the pendulum is swinging back towards traditional religion, or that Christianity might re-emerge in some altered form. In the meantime, in an age of predominant non-belief, current realities on the ground require that we tease out how best to encourage a change of heart towards needed compassion and action.

IDENTITY AND INTERIORITY

The Pope approaches the dilemma from yet another angle, adding that meaningful dialogue with others requires a sense of our own identity rooted in indigenous culture, together with the vulnerabilities and gifts we all carry ‘... I cannot truly encounter another unless I stand on firm foundations – on the basis of these I can accept the gift the other brings, and in turn offer an authentic gift of my own’ [143]. He adds that a measure of healthy self-love is also foundational to an interior disposition that helps to counter selfish individualism, suspicion and growing fundamentalism in our world.

There has been a steady increase in the emergence of nation states over the past century. Each people, race, culture rightly strive to protect what is best about their heritage. Unfortunately, in some cases, pride spills over into extreme nationalism, fascism, or tyrannical rule. *Fratelli Tutti* also observes that fraternal spirit tends to diminish beyond one’s family, parish, nation, or tribe. Others are often seen first in how they differ from us, at times arousing suspicion if not hostility and fear, triggering the latent tendency for prejudice. ‘Perhaps we were trained in this kind of mistrust’ the pope muses [152]. A hunter-gatherer tribe of old might have considered such essential for survival. As globalisation brings different peoples closer together, and as we learn more about each other, basic instinctive mechanisms might become less defensive?

Regarding *interiority*, a measure of comfort and freedom regarding one’s person and culture does seem apt given a reticence on most of our parts to give-up cherished viewpoints or opinions. Change can be uncomfortable, eliciting resistance. Acceptance of others in our encounters, humanly speaking, requires an open heart and mind, which in turn depends upon a measure of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and self-esteem. In many ways well-

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rounded human development results from risk, instinctively in the transition from childhood dependence, through adolescence, on to adult independence. Thereafter, interdependence influences choices made, as does acceptance and surrender in face of unresolvable mystery that life presents. None of this is a straight -forward linear ascent. Nevertheless, the measure of success achieved can be gauged by a certain quality of inner freedom.

We each have a 'style' to become more fully our authentic self – in our nature to create and co-create according to our gifts. It is often said people are most happy when natural endowment, gift, is developed earnestly and made available to others.³ Here we might again speak of faith in our common humanity, in living good lives, encouraging one another. Authentic human striving in any form enriches and advances the nobility of creation, most tangible in the transmitted beauty of authentic art, whether that be painting, music or poetry; – less obviously tangible, but just as significant in the dedication of say, a nurse or a plumber.

CONTEMPORARY LIFE

When Westerners are asked today whether they believe in God, or not, the divide is often split *three* ways between those who believe in a non-defined 'something', believers, and atheists. The 'something' category might be found across different age groups, amongst the lapsed, incredulous, various humanist strands, those simply curious about religious phenomena, or those not brought up in any religious tradition. Church attendance in Ireland suggests that faith is practiced mainly by an older generation, replicating patterns in other developed countries, nuanced according to local factors. Such may be conjecture, or a common sense, but does indicate that religion plays an increasingly minor role in people's lives.

What is dramatic about the Irish situation is how *rapid* the turn from religious practice has been in little more than half a century. There are multiple contingent causal factors that might explain what has happened, factors both internal and external, and as such, applicable to other countries apart from our own. However, in a country once saturated in religion and self-reflection (of sorts), it must be asked how deeply the faith permeated the Irish 'soul'? The question has relevance for *future* evangelisation - how meaning making in the context of faith can be communicated anew? With the ongoing decline in practice, prayer and contemplation, a major pivot in the scaffolding of interior discernment is disappearing. A corollary effect is forgetful memory that the many freedoms

3 Vilem Flusser, *Gestures*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. 2014. p. 48-54.

enjoyed today emerged from our Judeo-Christian heritage. Instead, never ending focus on historical Church misdemeanours overshadows the social forum.

A recent RTE television documentary brought to my mind this *disconnect* – the lack of appetite today for in-depth reflectivity. The documentary in question focused on the use of expletive language in Ireland. As a nation we apparently excel in this regard - world beaters! Various explanations were offered, such as the musicality and expressive nature in both word and music of native idiom. Particular expletives have a supposed sonorous quality connected to the brain's music centre; we are told. We might be tempted to conclude that natural creativity explains our tendency for prolific swearing.

A national tendency towards resentment was referenced at the program's end, but not entered upon. What in fairness amounted to a humorous treatise was also a reminder of a notable reticence in mainstream culture for in-depth reflection. Cliché and cancel culture are common enough ways of dealing with 'serious' matters. Proliferate 'effing' & Co may be music to some ears, but indicative of an inner poverty to others, a poverty compensated for in part by 'foul' language.

On the other hand, many today seek out 'contemplative' spaces, not just to escape from the soullessness of consumerist materialism, but in search of more wholesome living – in this life. As such, belief in a transcendent reality, in a personal God or afterlife, is often absent, or considered irrelevant. Perhaps there may be a sense of immanence, of a world 'spirit' among those who believe in 'something'. It makes good sense that the Church would address more of its energies to this category of people. Otherwise, the march towards populist atheism may be unstoppable. One wonders what untapped potential there might be were Christian imagination to make even bolder moves than it already does in helping to make heart-changing (religious) moments more of a reality for those sometimes swamped within the vacuous moral environment of today.

Living authentically summons up association with virtues such as truthfulness, trustworthiness, reliability, sincerity – and how these align with our actions. In part - in the root sense, authenticity implies we are authors of ourselves for good or bad. If that were all, then self-autonomy might be considered the supreme virtue. This is what Merton argues is insufficient where values such as selflessness and sacrifice are required in the interests of the common good – that infectious quality of presence provided by the Good Samaritan.

The present Pope's use of more contemporary language to explore ways in which we shape or fail to shape authentic encounters is prophetic for our age. There are signs that imaginative interpretation of scripture, doctrine and liturgy are also heading on a similar trajectory, referencing metaphor, embodiment, consciousness, oneness, wholeness.⁴ Some traditionalists may see this as a threat to core doctrinal tenets. However, should Christian and other faiths model the many shades of how we humans are, the case can also be put that the growing category of those who believe in 'something' are more likely to 'engage' with faith (not just as an object of airy fascination).

At stake is one of the greatest riches life has to offer. Faith belief is, in ways, a fluid experience between healthy scepticism and wondrous surrender amidst the ceaseless movement of life. The mystery that brought our creeds and belief systems into being, the marvels that sustain them, and the ongoing wonder all this might point to, may have greater appeal to contemporary receptivity than more dogmatic approaches. For example, it is now acceptable to incorporate the idea that the teachings of Jesus and Paul contain many insights into human psychology, motivation, and desire. In the past such insights were sometimes veiled in purely theological or 'spiritualised' language, accentuating the body/soul divide.

Re-enchancing a distracted age may require additional skills in ministry. Discerning the call towards more loving relationships, making wise choices, is, as stated, partly a human art form. The other part, arguably greater, is our dependence on the grace of God. At risk of oversimplification, perhaps some comments might be helpful regarding the first part - discernment as 'art' form.

Any practice that grounds attention to the present moment encourages interiority, the gateway to inner freedom. There are an infinite number of Eastern or Western practices, therapies, and techniques one can learn. Accessing the inner world of feelings, emotions and impulses does require careful guidance and supervision. However, broadening perspectives in this regard is healthy. Many generations of us were first schooled in a split perception of love, as in the image of a God who demanded we be good as recompense for corruption.

Observing our response to encounters with others different from ourselves, or even suffering, can enlighten. How did it change my life – my inner disposition, my attitude, my perspective?

4 Brian O'Leary, *To Love and Serve*. Dublin: Messenger Publications. 2020. p. 296-299.

Given the human tendency for distraction, moments of ‘presence’ to self, other, or God are often fleeting. Perhaps educational settings, whether civic or religious, might in future relook at how best to *encourage* reflection and interiority as integral to responsible living. There may be scope to further explore such in inter-faith dialogue, or with those of a singularly secular persuasion.

Foundations may be set in stone, but the search for ever new building blocks (or language) is part, if not the main part in the quest for authentic living. As the Pope says, needed action is urgent!

Sin. “Most people today are uncomfortable with the language of ‘sin’. Our society has a strong moral sense, articulated in terms of human rights, mutual tolerance, the imperative to preserve the environment and to care for the vulnerable. But if one talks about sin, some become uneasy. It jars with the contemporary imagination, evoking an unhealthy tendency to wallow in guilt. But in my translation of the Bible, ‘sin: translating a variety of Hebrew and Greek words, occurs almost one and a half thousand times. One cannot engage with a Christian imagination without unlocking the language of sin and forgiveness.

- Timothy Radcliffe, *Alive in God*, (London: Bloomsbury Continuum) p. 120.