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# The FURROW

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## Signposts to a Future: Synodality, Church, and Culture

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A good number of years ago I worked in a parish at the edge of the city.<sup>1</sup> I knew all the roads, the backroads, the shortcuts, and the throughways in the parish and surrounding area. In the meantime, thirty years hence, there has been a huge development in that part of the city; most of the roads have changed, new housing estates have been built, and many expansive areas of green fields have disappeared. And the entire infrastructure has been modified. Now when I drive through the area, I need most often to rely on the signposts to be sure that I am on the right road to get to my destination. It's strange when something or a place that was so utterly familiar in the past becomes unfamiliar, even confusing, in the present. It's destabilizing when your knowledge no longer corresponds to your lived and living experience.

There is something equivalent to be had when it comes to faith and religion in our contemporary culture in Ireland. Much has changed at the level of experience. It, too, can be confusing for us. In this short paper I'd like to suggest a few signposts that might help in navigating the terrain. They are directed at understanding the new 'layout,' as it were, and might hopefully (literally) point to a viable future. Clearly, what I have to say is in no way meant to be comprehensive but may help in understanding the fascinating place that we are now in when it comes to the journey of faith.

## THREE PHASES OF CHURCH AND CULTURE

When it comes to the connection between Church as an ecclesial community and the ambient culture, we can, helpfully, speak of three phases or epochs. Each phase marks out a particular constellation of Church and culture, which, in turn, determines to a significant degree the capacity and ability of the Church to evangelize within

1 This is an abridged version of a talk given at *Croí Nua Spirituality Centre*, Taylor's Hill, Galway on 21 September 2022.

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the epoch in question. Understanding the relationship between the Church and the culture helps a faith community to chart its own journey and effectively reach out beyond its visible boundaries to fulfil more wholesomely its task of being the sacrament of salvation for all.<sup>2</sup>

In the first phase, corresponding to the inaugural period, the Church was a minority group in the culture that was interior to the Roman empire. It had no significant social or political power beyond the impact of the message itself of the Gospel and the Good News that it proclaimed. What attracted people to the community, above all, was the proclamation that the foundation of this community was charity (*caritas*), whereby each person, made in the image and likeness of God, was deemed to be a vital member of a community that was dedicated to realizing the kingdom of God among us.

The second phase saw the emergence of a powerful alliance with the Roman empire, and, with this, the foundation of a State-Church. This phase or epoch is sometimes called Christendom. Now the Church's destiny was conjoined with that of the political order *per se*. This led over time in many quarters to an intolerant totality that did not know what it was to respect and value difference.<sup>3</sup> This was then translated into brutality, abuse (of various kinds), and, oftentimes, a deep betrayal of the foundational inspiration of the Gospel. It also gave the institutional Church *per se*, and particularly its office holders, an enormous level of power in every aspect and sphere of life. This phase began to fall apart with the Reformation and the wars of religions, and, to a significant degree, we are still experiencing the vestiges of this same collapse. This, in turn, goes a significant way in explaining the disjunction that has now emerged between the institutional Church and the wider culture at large.

We have now moved into the third epoch, which from the Church's perspective is definitively inaugurated by the Second Vatican Council. The Council marks the end of a certain way of being Church in the world and in doing so re-establishes vital connections with other churches, other peoples, other religions, and the wider culture. Just before the Council opened, the great French theologian Marie-Dominique Chenu spoke of what he

2 See *Lumen gentium*, No. 48. Here the Church is declared to be established by Christ as the 'universal sacrament of salvation (*universale salutis sacramentum*).' This is one of the most important insights to have emerged from the Council, and this understanding impacts every dimension of the Church's life.

3 You can see this concern, for example, in the stipulation of *cuius regio, eius religio* (whose realm, their religion) at the Peace of Augsburg in 1555. This, however, was already a step in the direction of recognizing greater freedom within the Holy Roman Empire.

termed ‘the end of the Constantinian era of Christendom.’<sup>4</sup> He saw this in dramatic terms as both an end and a beginning, and as a beginning it was a ‘magnificent hope.’ From now on the Church is understood to be the sacrament of salvation for all peoples, and with this insight we’ve entered a new stage in the historical journey of the Christian Church.

All of this means that we are at present still in the throes of the transition from the second to the third epoch, where we can, indeed, look back (and recognize what we have known), but also look around and see much that is unknown (disaffiliation, new questioning, indifference, and so on). We can, of course, only attempt to look forward (and, at most, imagine what might be). When we do look back, what we see is Christendom, where the dynamics are those of what might be termed ‘ecclesio-imperialism,’ for which the Church together with the political, social, and cultural orders formed a unity. This unity, even at local level, meant that it was the Church that was the dominant power, represented in the person of the priest. It’s the world that most of us grew up in, that has collapsed, and that will continue to collapse. On this score, what we have now is the end or the last days of Christendom.

And even though most people recognize and agree that Christendom is now over, it is, nonetheless, the case that to a high degree the *dynamics* of Christendom still live on among us. Church leadership often continues to function in the mode of Christendom, ecclesial decision making still replicates the inherited modalities, and communal ecclesial life still follows the inherited patterns of the pseudo-unity of Christendom. These, tragically, are now leading progressively to an even greater exultation of the life of faith in our culture, particularly in a European context. Many in Church circles are far less capable or willing to admit that the *dynamics* of Christendom, too, need to change as we come to terms with living in this new epoch.

#### SEPARATION AND SECULARIZATION

In the place of this single, homogeneous world, where everybody had their place and there was a general agreement as to how everything should be done, we now have a programme of separation. Various areas of life have become separated out from the explicit connection to Church and religion: politics, the arts, medicine, (increasingly) education, peoples’ personal lives, and so on. There is at present a massive dynamic of separation, of differentiation, of disengagement, that is a real characteristic of

4 Marie-Dominique Chenu, ‘La fin de l’ère constantinienne,’ in *La parole de Dieu*, II, L’Évangile dans le temps (Paris: Éd. du Cerf, 1964), 17-36, at 29.

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our times. And this is now a central feature of our culture, society, and world. And so, now, if there is to be a faith life, it must be able to live with, accompany, and blossom in this new kind of culture, marked by difference, separation, respect for otherness, parity of esteem, and so on.

This dynamic of separation is called most usually secularization. If there is going to be a faith life in our culture it must be able to negotiate a world marked by secularization and the separation of domains. And given that we claim that the gospel can be welcomed and lived out in any culture, then, it must be possible for it to take root and be lived out in a secularized world. And that is something that Vatican II saw clearly. The culture had changed, and the church was changing, too, to accompany that change of culture. *And what has become very clear is that this programme of separation is good for the life of faith; it is not a loss for faith life per se.* Thus, for example, Walter Cardinal Kasper, in his book *Mercy* points out the irony that

the secularization at the beginning of the nineteenth century that initially was experienced as an act of divestment and injustice – and actually was – has turned out to be a point of departure for spiritual renewal.<sup>5</sup>

I would like to understand why this is so and see what the implications might be when it comes to valuing the movement of secularization.<sup>6</sup>

Firstly, if, in your heart and soul, you are still living in the world of Christendom, then, when it comes to the movement of secularization, you will see and experience an enormous loss; of power, of prestige, of influence, of familiar ways of doing things, of what you judge to be important, and so on. You will also be somewhat disconcerted, perhaps disappointed, and maybe, even, despairing of our present situation. You may worry about family members, the Church, the future, and so on. Those who lament the implications of secularization (and who accuse it in the public forum), who see it in negative terms, are those, who wish, consciously or not, to live in that unified world of Christendom. They would like to go back. They would like to restore, even partially, the ecclesio-imperial dynamics, which, ultimately, have

5 Walter Cardinal Kasper, *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York: Paulist, 2014), 173-74.

6 The best single study remains Hermann Lübke, *Säkularisierung: Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Freiburg i. Br.: Karl Alber, 2003). See also the excellent chapter, 'Chiesa nell'oggi ; Tra fine della cristianità e secolarizzazione,' in Roberto Repole, *Come Stelle in Terra: La chiesa nell'epoca della secolarizzazione* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2012), 11-40.

to do with a world based on a foundational unity (even if it's deceptive), whereby a small cohort of people have certain power-over-others.

What is the fundamental, metaphysical weakness of Christendom? It is built on a conception of unity that, inevitably, stabilizes itself, becomes fixed, and crystalizes into uniformity. Gradually, you find that there is little room for creativity, for change, for personal exploration and conviction, for initiative, for diversity, for otherness (in the most concrete of terms). The unity itself, no matter how rich it might be, initially, becomes, in time, monotonous, and monotonous, inevitably, leads to sclerosis and death. Christendom has its own demise built into it. Like a star in the cosmos, it eventually burns itself out in time. It becomes too rigid.<sup>7</sup> And Christendom as a manner of living faith is now a burnt-out-star. And in that sense, it is already over, even if much of its worldview and its dynamics still live on among us.<sup>8</sup>

When people complain about secularization and, falsely, see it as the abandonment of faith or a movement that is counter to faith, what they really want is to go back to that burnt-out-star and re-liven it. And this is often attempted at great investment and cost (and this, scandalously, may even be financial). It is, however, the work of Sisyphus. It will not get anywhere because the principle of life is elsewhere. It will not permit the Church to advance on its journey in history.

This collapse, however, is not the end of faith-life. Christendom no longer mirrors the life of faith as it might flourish in our present culture (and as it has now been understood and formulated at the Second Vatican Council). I know that this is counter-intuitive because, at the end of the day, what I'm suggesting is that death (and that is what we are witnessing in so many places) is necessary to life. But then, surely, there's no better foundation on which to consider and build the life of faith, its real import, its challenges, its hopes, and its vision for humanity. Once, you see this, not only can you not go back, but you are energized to move to the horizon that is always ahead.

#### A SECULARIZED CULTURE

Let me reflect a little now on this situation of being in a secularized world and culture. What does secularization do? Well, it separates out, it creates polarities, it opens a space for difference and for respect, and it allows other perspectives, other horizons, other ways of thinking; in short, it puts multiplicity, rupture, diversity,

7 Pope Francis regularly warns of the danger of rigidity.

8 See Michel De Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire* (Paris : Du Seuil, 1987).

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otherness on the same (metaphysical) level, as it were, as unity, continuum, conformity, and uniformity. It restores dignity to the other and to otherness in what is most often taken to be a realized economy of the same. It creates the real possibility of freedom and diversity, and, in doing so, opens, equally, a genuine space for conversation, for dialogue, for discovery, for different ways of living, and, I'd like to suggest, also, for new ways of exploring and living faith.

The separation that is secularization involves a kind of splitting in two, and this splitting in two is something that we find at the dawn of all creation: night from day, darkness from light, earth from water, man from woman or woman from man, and so on. Separation is necessary to creation and creativity. Duality is creative and life giving. It is two, not one. And when these two poles work in harmony, when they co-operate with one another, when they enhance each other's contribution, not only do you have the dance of difference and the movement of creativity, but you find, there, inevitably, new life. If you have only one pole you will fall fatally into the emptiness of egoism, the monotony of uniformity, stability, and boredom, and the darkness of indifference (and there is plenty of that around).<sup>9</sup> If there is only one pole, you end up with a dead unity. The moment that you have an other over against you (in that real, substantial sense), you have the possibility of real conversation, of dialogue, of discovery, of creativity, and of new life. This, I believe, is one of the great learnings from secularization.

Secularization is not in opposition to faith life; it belongs with and even to the life of faith; and, in that sense, it is essential. Karl Rahner, one of the most distinguished Catholic theologians of the twentieth century said, for example, that 'there is a good sense in which the world is secular, the world as it exists with its possibilities, with its pluralism and the antagonism which this inevitably entails.'<sup>10</sup> And Edward Schillebeeckx, an equally distinguished Catholic theologian, says that secularization is far less a comment about God or religion or faith and much more about 'a radical transformation of our relationship to the world.'<sup>11</sup> Secularization has taught us to view the world, the Church as an institution, and human dynamics differently, more soberly, more critically, and less naively. Without it, in so many ways (that I cannot discuss here) we would give free rein far too easily to some of the darkest dynamics of the human condition, which, are, sometimes, dressed up, even, in religious garb.

9 Egoism, monotony, uniformity, etc., are rooted, even etymologically, in 'unity.'

10 See Karl Rahner, 'The Church's Commission to bring Salvation and Humanization of the World,' *Theological Investigations*, vol. 14., trans. David Bourke (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1976), 311.

11 See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Approches Théologiques: Le Monde et L'Église* (Paris : CEP, 1967), 135.

So, we are not, now, in a situation of an either/or, where you must choose between a world of faith and a culture without faith. No. It is, rather, a matter of negotiating a living, creative tension of both/and, which, in turn, is the situation of encounter, conversation, and concern. It takes place, firstly, for yourself, in terms of enriching your own life, and then, for the Christian community in terms of finding a new path forward, and finally, for the institutional Church as a whole, in terms of finding those structures that better serve the needs of gospel life in a contemporary setting that is a secularized culture. There is an interesting poem from Herman Melville (the author of *Moby-Dick*) that captures the importance and vitality of polarity when it comes to creativity.

ART

(by Herman Melville)

In placid hours well-pleased we dream  
 Of many a brave unbodied scheme.  
 But form to lend, pulsed life create,  
 What unlike things must meet and mate:  
 A flame to melt – a wind to freeze;  
 Sad patience – joyous energies;  
 Humility – yet pride and scorn;  
 Instinct and study; love and hate;  
 Audacity – reverence. These must mate,  
 And fuse with Jacob’s mystic heart,  
 To wrestle with the angel – Art.

The Church journeys in time; there is an enormous temptation to want to go back. But you cannot do so in any credible, substantial, or sustainable way; and if you do, it is at the cost of cutting yourself off from the life force that is our common humanity. It sabotages its own creativity.

Of course, if you are used to being in the position of institutional power over others and this is taken away from you, you will experience the change as a loss. And when something is taken away from you, you may, indeed, react negatively. You may feel disappointed, undervalued, or rejected! No one likes being stripped, involuntary, from what they perceive to be theirs (and power is most often experienced and treated as a possession). But there is no growth when it comes to the life of faith without loss, without a *kenosis* (an emptying, to use St Paul’s language). For the life of faith, loss engenders life because death accedes to new life in resurrection; that is the very heart of Christian faith. It is not a nice,



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pious idea; it is a real, living dynamic. When you understand this (reality) about faith, you understand the depths of Christian faith, and when you can live this, then, you facilitate God's Spirit at work in our world for the good of all. And, of course, you advance on your own faith journey.

Christian life never seeks power over others, and when some of us do, we undermine faith, always; personal, communal, and ecclesial. There is, undoubtedly, an intense experience of death at play at present in terms of Church and Church life, but with the eyes of faith, what I would like to suggest is that it is possible to see *the life of faith renewing itself* as it prepares to move into a new phase in the great, redemptive journey that is that of the Church through time.

### CHANGE TO REMAIN FAITHFUL

You cannot resist death when it arrives; there is a real fatality attached to it; you cannot control it; and you cannot determine its outcome. No matter what your position might be in the Church, you are being called to conversion; to change your way of seeing, of interacting with others, of how you take responsibility, and so on. *The Church has its future through those of us, who are prepared to change responsibly and in fidelity with what we have inherited (which, emphatically, does not mean repeating the past)*. That's where you will find hope, and, ultimately, that is where you will find love; love for others, all others; love for the Christian community, even for those in it, who, for whatever reason, are unwilling or unable to change, or even value what is at stake; love for yourself, as you move to a new place in your own journey of faith. We are all called to change if we are to remain faithful to faith.

But it is faith, and only faith, that can live through and beyond death. Only faith knows of resurrection. And what you can now do is seek to live the very dynamics of faith that is self-renewing, whereby you yourself become a locus of death and renewal. You allow it to happen in you and in your life, in freedom. You become the transition. You permit the change that is necessary for the ecclesial community to be alive in you so that you move forward, not in despair and denial but in faith, love, and hope. These are the great theological virtues, and they are the energy of transition and new life. *The Church comes alive in you, not as something that you belong to, but as something that you are.*

### JOURNEYING TOGETHER (AKA SYNODALITY)

I would now like to take one final step towards the future that has emerged from this healthy dynamic of secularization. It will

in time, I believe, open a new avenue in terms of being Church. This will not be a complete break with what we now have but will contribute to opening the possibility of a blossoming of gospel life in the culture at large.

The Church as an ecclesial community must change in time. It is not a stability, and nothing about it is an absolute stability. You could say that *it is its own stability in movement*. No part of Church life and structure is outside of history, which means that there is nothing that is not subject to the dynamic of change, growth, and redemption. The archbishop of Turin, Roberto Repole, reflecting on the contribution of Vatican II, remarks that ‘the Church ... is a historical subject, that journeys in time and that, while offering its contribution to the history of the world of humanity, receives simultaneously much from it.’<sup>12</sup> It is vital to recognize this dimension of receiving from the culture; this ratifies not only the duality (as I’ve just outlined), but also the importance of dialogue and the enrichment that goes with this. The Church is not a self-contained, immured enclosure in the culture. To a significant degree the Church is alive in the culture only when it gives *and receives*. And it is only in receiving from the culture that it remains, quoting again Repole, ‘*alive, active, and confident* both in God and in this particular historical and cultural epoch that is modernity in which, in one way or other, we are deeply emerged.’<sup>13</sup> We belong in history, in culture, in conversation, and in dialogue with others; we bring to the culture, and we receive from it. And it is only through this exchange and conversation that the Good News of the Gospel can emerge in our epoch, not as a possession (maintained, supposedly, by a few), but as a life shared, immanent and transcendent in every moment. This can happen, clearly, only if we go out to others, not as people of power, advantage, and privilege, but as learners, seekers, and, ultimately, people of hope. And all of this must be honest; otherwise, we only prepare our own moral defeat.

We have a specificity in the world that is not built on the rejection or denigration of others and our culture, which, after all, is our homeplace, together with our families, our friends, our neighbours, and our homeland. You regularly hear complaints about the wider culture, especially from Church office holders, but that is not the voice of Christian faith; it is the old, cantankerous voice of Christendom, raging against the loss of its place in the pyramid of social and political power. We journey with others, with our neighbours (no matter who they be), with peoples of other religions, other Christian denominations, and we journey,

<sup>12</sup> Repole, *Come Stelle in Terra*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

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too, with people who, for whatever reason, do not wish to scribe themselves into any nominated worldview. All these journeys are, from a certain perspective, part of the Christian journey (for the Christian). This is a foundational truth for the Church in our world. The gospel and with it the life of faith is not an instrument of power, separation, domination, or alienation; on the contrary, it commands us to go out to others, again and again, in ways that are appropriate, life-giving, and open to the Spirit working among us. And it is the Good News of the Gospel itself that draws us and others together in their own good time.

**Looking and Seeing** A walk in the forest, or just looking at a solitary tree can provoke as much loving wonder and awe as gazing up at the architectural masterpieces of our most ancient churches. In his encyclical letter, *'Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis says : 'the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God's creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet'. God is in every speck of dust!

– PAUL HIGGINSON, *Doing Christianity*, Dublin: Columba Books, 2023, p 146.