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## Signposts to the Future II: Beyond the Automatic Life of Faith

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In concert with many others, Pope Francis has pointed out that in terms of our ambient culture we are witnessing a monumental change of epoch.<sup>1</sup> To complement this, he affirms, too, that as Church we need to ‘cross a new threshold’ to accompany that change in our culture. Such accompaniment is intrinsic to the mission of the Church. This situation, undoubtedly, involves a very complex transformation in our culture and of our world, our society, and our Church.

There can be no doubt that a real death is taking place when it comes to Church and religion in our culture. It is not a superficial transformation or a passing phase. Although it is the end of something, it may also be a whole new beginning, particularly, if we respond appropriately. Are ‘we’ going to take action? And – the all-important question – who are the ‘we’? In this short presentation, I would like to reflect on one aspect of the changing face of faith-life in our culture.

## CULTURE AND AUTOMATION

In terms of our culture, we have witnessed and continue to witness major shifts in our engagement with and investment in the tasks of life. Industrialization, technology, the computer, the internet, social media have transformed our relationship to the world; natural, social, cultural, and possibly religious. What fifty years ago would have taken a week to do, may now only take a half an hour or so. We no longer expect to have to invest as much of our own energy

1 Material from this paper was presented (online) at ‘Hope Alive! Diocese of Kerry Mission 2024,’ 22 January 2024 and as a presentation, entitled ‘Signposts to the Future II,’ given at the *Croi Nua Spirituality Centre* (Missionaries of the Sacred Heart), Taylor’s Hill, Galway, 28 February 2024. See also the earlier Michael A. Conway, ‘Signposts to the Future: Synodality, Church, and Culture,’ *The Furrow* 74 (2023): 195-204.

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to have a job done or to achieve something; with a JCB, now, a farmer can completely change a field in an hour. Learning, travel, work, and so on have all been affected.

More and more, whole areas of life are becoming ‘automatic.’ Someone remarked that ‘even my car is now automatic!’ The characteristic feature of this dynamic of ‘automation,’ what makes it so desirable, is that with the minimum of personal input, you get the maximum of reward, achievement, or benefit. The basic rule is that ‘with less, you get more.’ We try to minimise so that we can maximise. And the drive toward greater and greater automation is very clear in terms of our wider culture. It is a major feature of our world. And, of course, marketing exploits this too.

We have, however, already discovered that there have been consequences that we did not always foresee and that have forced us to think again about this dynamic of automation. We did not foresee, for example, the consequences for the environment of the industrial revolution, or even the implications for human relations of social media. So, we are aware that it is not always good to follow a path of minimal personal input for the sake of maximal, automatic output. It must be accompanied by critical and informed reflection that pays attention to possible consequences and, even, unforeseeable implications. The dynamic of automation has, however, marked us all.

#### FAITH LIFE AND AUTOMATION

Now here’s what’s interesting. I’d like to suggest that when it comes to religion, faith, and Church in today’s world, we are moving, and we need to move, in the opposite direction. And this can make Church life and being committed to one’s faith life quite confusing and, indeed, complex for many of us in our culture. When it comes to faith life, the principle of minimum personal engagement will not engender faith life in any real way and permit it to flourish, and this is the case even if you go to Church regularly. Faith life cannot really get off the ground for you if you are not in a position to invest in it as a personal reality. And without this personal investment, it can all but die as a living reality in your life.<sup>2</sup>

In our present culture and into the near future, we will have to move away from a religious world view, where everything was done in a largely automatic way and move to one that requires a real, conscious personal commitment and investment. This is so not only in terms of one’s own personal faith identity, but also in terms of the shared faith-life that is the local Christian community and, therefore, Church.

2 It cannot, ever, however, be extinguished entirely.

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I think that we have here a monumental change, and it is disconcerting for many, some of whom see themselves as belonging staunchly to the Church. The path that we need to take has already been sketched out for us at the Second Vatican Council in the mid to late 1960's, but which we have hardly, as yet, begun to realize.

So, I'd like to reflect a little on this change of direction; from a world of faith life and Church, in which so much was done automatically to a world now where faith life must not only be expressly chosen at the personal level, but which requires personal commitment and investment if it is to be sustained, if it is to be an enrichment of your person, and, in this way, contribute to your flourishing as a human being.

Now for the sake of this short contribution, I am, of course, schematizing what I am exploring to a significant degree - and, therefore, necessarily, simplifying the issues - but the basic movement can, I believe, be expressed in such a form as to allow us to reflect on these dynamics, so that we are in a better position to make our own decisions about how we live out faith life. My hope is that in this way it might be of help to you as you seek to develop your own faith life in a contemporary context.

### A WORLD OF AUTOMATIC FAITH

We are, all, leaving behind us a world that was marked significantly by an 'automatic' faith life. In the past (say up to about 20 years ago), there was no real distinction between the 'world' and the 'Church': they formed a totality or a unity (at least here in Ireland), and there were few exceptions to a basic model of communal and societal unity.<sup>3</sup> Everyone, together, belonged to the one world; the whole town or village or neighbourhood went to mass, everyone went to the local school, everyone was baptised, confirmed, married, and buried in the local Church. And all this within the confines of a unified world in which the Church had the central role. And it would have been somewhat odd to have tried to stand outside that totality or unified world. And this goes some way, perhaps, in explaining why many of our distinguished writers and artists needed to leave Ireland to develop their independence of mind and talent. They needed the freedom from that enclosed, unified world, something that would have been too difficult to achieve when one was embedded in it.

Now, in that world, many did, indeed, discover a deep-rooted faith life that sustained them through all the complex vicissitudes of life. There can be no doubt about that. But there was a shadow to the uniformity of that unity. The most serious one in terms of

3 There were, of course, people of different faiths, for example, but not on an adequate scale that would have disrupted the basic model of unity.

faith life being that you did not really have to consider things for yourself, autonomously, independently, with a real sense of having multiple options. You could say that you were spared that task, so to speak. You did not have to exercise your own freedom of committing personally to a way of life that was *de facto* taken for granted. You did not have to invest in any major way in discovering your own distinct path. The automation of that world led more easily to a certain de-personalization of the life of faith, a loss of any great sense of personal freedom, and a limitation of the alternate paths that might have been taken. There was, in fact, little else available to you.

In the worst-case scenario – and this was not uncommon – you ended up being infantilized, and infantilizing yourself, in the domain of faith life, where you took direction from others, be they parents, teachers, priests, or bishops. In a real sense, you did not have to grow up and seek for yourself. The answer was given, long before the question was even asked. And many authority figures were happy to oblige and collude in these dynamics. And there are still many in our church and in society at large, who would wish to continue replicating these dynamics.

In a certain sense, going along with the automatic model or world was the easy option (and this explains why it remains so attractive for some), but it: (1) robs you to a significant degree of your freedom and your responsibility in terms of finding and living out your own, adult faith life; and (2) permitted some in the community, for better or worse, to invade other persons' boundaries and keep them trapped in an infantile mode of faith life, where they remained 'objects' of the life of faith. In such a world persons became 'objects' of ecclesial life in losing their dignity as being 'subjects' of their own faith lives : namely, autonomous, free, and self-determining.

The temptation here on both sides – to surrender one's responsibility (or, at least, not to develop it), on the one hand, and, on the other, to invade other persons' intimate space – reflects a dangerous, dysfunctional, social mechanism that you still find in Church circles. It can no longer be a credible way of living faith and Church in our world.

#### AUTOMATION LEADS TO LOSS

The source of tragedy here for the life of faith is the *automation*. Because so much was, and remains, to some degree, automatic, it was never questioned. And because it was never questioned, it was never reflected upon, and because adult faith life was never reflected upon, as it became more problematic in terms of changes

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in the culture, it was simply let go. What happened was that the whole richness of the life of faith disappeared in our culture, quietly, ‘offstage’ to use Seamus Heaney’s word.<sup>4</sup> And it now means that faith life has become alien for many in our society. You see this, for example, when you preside and celebrate funerals. Even though people are present and doing their very best, they find it difficult to make a real connection to the liturgy. Without an interior connection, one remains, to a certain degree, on the outside, like an onlooker, a sort of non-participating participant. You remain outside because your own inside is outside. And this cannot be ‘fixed’ or remedied through any word or simple action. The ‘liturgy’ is often understood and set in the register of being at a ‘play’ in the theatre, and oftentimes not a very good one.

There is, however, a faint sense that something might be lost, but we no longer know what it is, and we cannot even characterize it or put language on it. So, we use the word ‘agnostic,’ which is exactly the right word: we no longer know, from the Greek word *agnostos*, which means unknown, unheard of, or forgotten (and, perhaps, unknowable). That’s the place, where the programme on TV, ‘The Last Priests in Ireland,’ left us at the end of the documentary, in the unknowing of the human condition.<sup>5</sup>

This is a huge feature of our world and society, and whether you understand yourself as a person of faith or not, you cannot escape these dynamics of, and in, the surrounding culture. And it seems to me that if we are to seek to be Church in our world, we must engage with these dynamics as persons of faith (for one’s own integrity), as communities of faith (in terms of a healthy and open communal life), and as Church (in terms of being a living, contributing presence in our culture).

The only credible way of being Church in our world, of being a person of faith in a secularized world, is to move away from *automation* in the expression of faith life and towards a more adult engagement. And this means moving away from the automatic, the uninformed, the unquestioned, and the impersonal, and moving towards the informed, the deliberate, the responsible, and the personal. It means owning one’s place as a personal space in the Church. It means taking responsibility for one’s place in the ecclesial community and giving of one’s time to faith life and community in a way that is appropriate to your own personal journey.

We must realize that there are healthy and unhealthy expressions of faith life. There is good and bad religion, to quote Jonathan

4 See Seamus Heaney, ‘Out of This World, in memory of Czeslaw Milosz,’ in *Agni* 6 (2005): 226-230, at 226.

5 A documentary shown on RTÉ on 15 January 2024.

Sacks.<sup>6</sup> There is authentic faith and there is a less than authentic faith. There is a faith life that is alive and healthy, and there is a faith life that is dysfunctional and unwholesome (fundamentalism would be a clear example). There is an adult faith life; and there is an infantile faith life. And there is a full range of options and versions between these two extremes. And given that there is a spectrum, we can say that we are all to some degree on this spectrum; so that the hope has to be that we are growing and moving in the right direction; namely, towards a healthier expression of adult faith.

The automatic model of Church life nurtures infantile faith expression, and this for everyone, no matter what one's position in the Church might be. And it leaves a wave of emptiness in its wake. And given the dynamics of faith life in our recent past, I suspect that the unhealthy and even dysfunctional variants are more prevalent than the healthy, functional forms.

The unreflective, automatic practice that was so prevalent in the past is no longer an option for a healthy faith life in the present. It is not even desirable. Those who perpetuate it do great damage to others and to the Church. The immediate gratification that often goes with these dynamics turns eventually to frustration, despair, or dependency, none of which reflect adult life, be that faith-life or otherwise. This is a monumental shift. There are, of course, those who will continue in what is perceived to be the 'traditional' register, but they will not engender a healthy faith-life in the present and for the future. The automatic faith world was concerned primarily with exteriority, with external compliance, with conformity to doctrine, which explains why, for example, being seen to go to Church was, socially, so important, vital even. And why learning the catechism off-by-heart insured or was meant to ensure conformity of doctrine. The dimension of indoctrination and the trespassing of boundaries of personal conscience and space weren't even considered, never mind respected. And the structure of self-justification - which was rooted in an ideological understanding of faith - was extremely powerful.

What I'm suggesting has enormous implications. It means deconstructing really and truly a way of being Church that we have inherited. It means, for example, that being a passive presence in the ecclesial community is no longer credible, desirable, nor viable. In the past, for better or worse, priests, religious, brothers and sisters, took responsibility for ecclesial life. In doing this, they did enormous good, no doubt, but they also did, inevitably, damage, and sowed the seeds of subsequent resentment. Decades later, they would be pilloried for the decisions and actions that they took in a

6 See Jonathan Sacks, *The Great Partnership: Science, Religion, and the Search for Meaning* (New York: Schocken, 2012), 11.

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different era. And we are all now, to some degree, ambiguous about our recent past.

We cannot repeat these dynamics, which means that all adults in the Church must share the responsibility for ecclesial life. This to a significant degree is what Pope Francis is inaugurating with his emphasis on synodality. It is synodality that corresponds best with the needs of Church in our world of today. It is about moving in a new direction through new styles and habits of being Church together, characterised by mutual recognition, reciprocity, differentiated- and co-responsibility, discourse, and dialogue. Indeed, he points out that ‘Synodality is a style, it is a walk together and it is what the Lord expects from the Church in the third millennium.’<sup>7</sup> And on another occasions, he explains:

The World in which we live, and which we are called to love and serve, even with its contradictions, demands that the Church strengthen cooperation in all areas of her mission. It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church in the third millennium.<sup>8</sup>

To wish and desire to live the richness of Christian faith, to draw on ecclesial life *is* also to take responsibility for that life; not as a passive recipient, or interested onlooker, or exploiting passer-by. The journey of faith is personal and communal; it is about the self *and* about others; it is about your place and the place of others; it is about your needs and the needs of your Church community. To separate these out is not faith life; it is something else. You can no longer stand with integrity on the side-line of the Church; but, of course, only you can judge what the appropriate response might be from you.

### AUTOMATIC SACRAMENTAL LIFE

Church life as we have inherited it needs to be transformed. We have inherited a kind of sacramental practice that is automatic so that it is much closer to superstition than to living, Christian faith. There is, for example, and this is remarkable, often, little interest

7 Pope Francis, ‘Address to Members of the International Theological Commission,’ 29 November 2019, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20191129\\_commissione-teologica.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191129_commissione-teologica.html).

8 Pope Francis, ‘A Synodal Church is a Church of Listening,’ Address at the Commemorative Ceremony for the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops 2015, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html#:~:text=Your%20Eminences%2C,and%20thanksgiving%20to%20the%20Lord](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html#:~:text=Your%20Eminences%2C,and%20thanksgiving%20to%20the%20Lord.). See also the *Vademecum* for the Synod on Synodality, <https://www.synod.va/en/documents/vademecum.html>.



in the Word of God; sometimes readings are read in a completely perfunctory fashion, not attended to, not listened to, and not reflected on as an essential forum for discovering one's faith path in life. There is a corresponding over-emphasis on the eucharistic elements of bread and wine as if they are the only reason for gathering for the celebration.<sup>9</sup> You find, sometimes, a completely inflated attention being paid to so-called 'mass intentions' as if they were the only reason for being present at a particular celebration.<sup>10</sup>

There is a certain preoccupation with going to mass, with vocations to the priesthood, and with religious life, that is unhealthy and that seeks to perpetuate an expression of ecclesial life that has already been purified, so to speak, by the dynamics of history, society, and culture. To go to mass for the sake of going to mass is meaningless; we celebrate the Sunday Eucharist as a means to Christian life, not as an end in itself. It enables and realizes ecclesial life; that is what it is to be a sacrament. This needs to be much clearer. The real measure of faith life is not the number of masses that you might attend throughout your lifetime, but the quality of your lived, Christian life; the degree to which you have loved God and neighbour as yourself. The celebration of the eucharist is to empower you in that task and on your journey. Your faith life is reflected best in how you value yourself and relate to others, to the created order, and to your God, through Christ, and in the Spirit.

The challenge for us now in terms of Church in our world is to discover a more enriching way of being Church. Pope Francis - in the face of considerable resistance - is charting an original path for us, a new way, through synodality. One major implication is *the call to be adult* in our faith commitment and life; i.e., taking responsibility for ourselves, for our community, and for our Church.<sup>11</sup> The *International Theological Commission's* document,

9 Karl Rahner speaks of 'objectivist sacramentalism (objektivistischer Sakramentalismus)' as a distortion of a proper and healthy understanding of the sacramental nature of the Church and its activities (see Karl Rahner, 'Beiträge aus dem Handbuch der Pastoral Theologie,' in *Selbstvollzug der Kirche: Ekklesiologische Grundlegung praktischer Theologie*, 'Sämtliche Werke, Bd. 19, ed. Karl-Heinz Neufeld (Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 1995), 47-79, at 64.

10 For an excellent discussion of the *status questionis* as regards these issues, see John F. Baldovin, 'Mass Intentions: The Historical Development of a Practice: [Mass Intentions-Part One],' *Theological Studies* 81 (2020): 870-891; John F. Baldovin, 'Mass Intentions: Twentieth-Century Theology and Pastoral Reform [Part Two],' *Theological Studies* 82 (2022): 8-28.

11 For a discussion of the reality that every Christian is and ought to be an active subject in the Church, see the important essay, Karl Rahner, 'Sakramentale Grundlegung des Laienstandes in der Kirche,' in *Leiblichkeit der Gnade: Schriften zu Sakramentenlehre*, 'Sämtliche Werke, Bd. 18, ed. Wendelin Knoch and Tobias Trappe (Freiburg im Br.: Herder, 2003), 376-391. Rahner points out that we are only in the initial stages of a whole new awareness of what it is to be a member of the Church, particularly as laypersons.

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‘Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,’ speaks of the ethos of the Church as being one in which

every “I,” clothed in Christ (cf. Galatians 3, 27), lives and journeys with his or her brothers and sisters as a responsible and active agent of the one mission of the People of God.<sup>12</sup>

This means that the equation of faith life - which is to be concerned about one’s own journey and the journey of the ecclesial community - cannot any longer be a repetition of the past, where responsibility could be offloaded easily onto others. This does not mean that we must all contribute in the same way; but it does mean that the responsibility for being responsible is now far greater. A whole new world of faith life is opening-up for us. I hope that you can see this; and that you might desire to be part of this journey.

12 See International Theological Commission, ‘Synodality in the Life and Mission of the Church,’ [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_20180302\\_sinodalita\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_20180302_sinodalita_en.html), No. 107.