Reforming the Catholic Church - Speaking Notes, Gerry O'Hanlon sj

Introduction:

Thank you for inviting me to be with you today. I look forward to sharing some reflections with you on ‘reforming the Catholic Church’ – the title is good, a transitive verb, it implies action, and I will be asking what kind of action and by whom. I am well aware, of course, of your own commitment to this cause and the great work you are doing, and this makes it all the more stimulating to share these reflections with you.

I need not overly rehearse our context. Growing secularisation, the fall-out from the scandal of clerical child sexual abuse, position on sexuality and gender which have not been received over many decades, an intolerance of dissenting voices and so on – you will have your own list. Suffice to quote the remark of Gladys Ganiel in her very interesting study Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: in Ireland there has occurred a ‘shift in consciousness in which the Catholic Church, as an institution, is no longer held in high esteem by most of the population and can no longer expect to exert a monopoly influence in social and political life’ (4). Of course, as many have repeatedly said, the Catholic Church at its best would not wish to exert such a monopoly influence – but neither, in the words of Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, does it wish to become ‘an irrelevant minority culture’.

At the heart of any reform impulse, it seems to me, is an experience which may seem very remote from reform: I refer to that encounter with Jesus Christ which is the foundation of every Christian life. Think of Jesus saying to Mary Magdalene: Mary; think of his words to the Rich Young Man – he looked steadily at him, and he loved him; think of the words of the Father to Jesus at his Baptism and Transfiguration – This is my Beloved Son…; think of the way the OT speaks of God’s mercy and compassion in the physical terms of guts, heart, bowels – God is moved, deeply, loves us deeply and personally. Ideally all the baptised will have some experience of this deeply personal love in their lives, and out of it develops a real relationship which shapes all that we do. Reform attempted from this place is qualitatively different from reform springing from systems management and organization alone, no matter how rightly fuelled by righteous anger and a zeal for justice. Our anger and justice are rooted in love: this is a rich radical position, more capable of lasting and inclusive reform. Someone who feels and is loved is impelled to announce Good News, impelled to act in this spirit – and Luke in his Acts of the Apostles is replete with this sending of the Holy Spirit to transform the lives of the early disciples and their surrounding world.

Given this – and it’s not to be taken for granted! it’s also true that the prospects and methods of reform will depend on the context in which it takes place. I want to suggest that while both Pope J-P II and Benedict XVI offered in their leadership seeds of reform (think of JP II re news ways of envisaging the papacy; think of Benedict’s stress on communion and his hermeneutic of reform – not discontinuity!), still an altogether more favourable context has emerged with the pontificate of Francis. I want to look more closely at this, always looking for approaches to the questions what kind of action does reform demand, and by whom.

Pope Francis

Pope Francis completed the fourth anniversary of his pontificate last March, 2017. Media commentary in Ireland tends to focus on particular areas of interest surrounding his papacy – his
pastoral style, opposition to his recent teaching on the admission of divorced and remarried Catholics to communion, his attempts to tackle clerical sexual abuse of children (mediated in particular through the experience of Marie Collins), the dissatisfaction in many quarters around the method of appointing bishops, and the shortage of priests. Referring to this latter point, the outgoing Papal Nuncio, Archbishop Charles Brown, was recently reported as saying: ‘We’re at the edge of an actuarial cliff here, and we’re going to start into a free fall’.

All these – and many other particular issues are of great importance, but arguably they do not identify the underlying core of what Francis is attempting to do with the Catholic Church. Many theological and media commentators abroad have spoken of a revolution, never mind a reform. I want to explore here how and why we in Ireland have been slow to appreciate what this core revolutionary strategy is, a strategy which is crucial in influencing almost all the particular issues mentioned above.

Francis and Church Synodality in the Third Millennium

Francis himself described the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium (EG, The Joy of the Gospel, 2013) as ‘programmatic’ (EG, 25). Throughout this document his focus is very much on ‘initiating processes rather than possessing spaces’ (EG, 223 – ‘time is greater than space’ – 222-225). What Francis means by this somewhat cryptic phrase is that ‘we need to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events’ (EG, 223). In other words, Francis is convinced that radical change is not the same as ‘obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains’ (EG, 224) but is more likely to emerge from a more patient and genuinely inclusive process.

When one translates this conviction into the ecclesial sphere Francis spells out very clearly that what is required for the third millennium is a ‘synodal church’, in which there is free and open debate and consultation. In this new context the pope acts as head of, but also member of, the college of bishops, and a reformed Roman Curia sees itself at the service of the whole church (in particular of the Pope together with the Bishops). Again, in this new paradigm, collegiality is to be present at all levels of the Church. This will mean that more effective authority is given to National and Regional Episcopal Conferences. It will also mean that the ‘voice of the faithful’, and the role of the baptised as sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly offices of Jesus Christ, are clearly brought to bear at local, intermediate and universal levels. This implies some lay involvement both in governance and in the formation and reception of teaching at all levels of the Church.

The terminology used to describe this ‘inverted pyramid’ way of looking at the church centres around two words in particular – synodality and collegiality. In a helpful conceptual clarification Ladislas Orsy notes that ‘collegiality is a Latin legal term and in Western ecclesiology it refers to the external constitutional structures and operations of a corporate body. Eastern Christians prefer to speak of ‘synodality’, which is a Greek theological term and signifies an invisible unity created in ‘those of the road together’...by the indwelling Spirit’. Orsy goes on to suggest that ‘it would be a wholesome theological position – both in the East and the West- to hold the synodality, 'being on the road together’, generates collegiality, ‘getting together’. The invisible communion is incarnated in visible operation’, and he recalls that all this is true to the advances made in synodality/collegiality
in Vatican II where ‘...the conciliar discourses, debates, and battles were part and parcel in a process of ‘development of doctrine’.

And this is what Francis has been doing since the start of the pontificate. He has located himself primarily as Bishop of Rome, within the College of Bishops, and has attempted to give institutional form to this ecclesial and papal reform by working together with a Council of Cardinals, by renewing the dynamic authority of the Synod of Bishops, and by urging local and regional Episcopal Conferences and individual bishops to assume their responsibilities to govern their own dioceses, always in consultation with the faithful.

This decentralisation of governance is to be in communion with the rest of the church of course, but requires bishops to be particularly attentive to the signs of the times in their own spheres of authority, so that, as bishops, they will sometimes be ahead of their flocks, sometimes walking alongside, and sometimes following along behind, and all the time consulting and listening, not least to those who tell them things they may not want to hear (EG, 31).

The world-wide consultation of the faithful, prior to and during the Synod on the Family, no matter how clumsily and unevenly carried out, was an important earnest of this transition to a more participative and inclusive church, based on sound theological principles, the practice of the first millennium, and the demands of contemporary culture. It has led already to a more open culture of debate within the church and to that modest, if controverted, development of doctrine contained in the Papal Exhortation ‘Amoris Laetitia’ (AL, The Joy of Love, 2016), fruit of the synodal process.

Vatican commentator Joshua J. McElwee notes the change in church culture that the Pope is bringing about, ‘playing a very long game, trying to shift the church’s vision of its mission and its stance towards the world’. He quotes eminent moral theologian Lisa Sowle Cahill to the effect that ‘the pope used the synod process as a way to consider possible developments in church teaching without causing open divisions in the church’, and describing Francis as a ‘wonderful ecclesial politician’.

I would add simply at this point that for Francis it is clear that ecclesial reform is always in function of mission, of our encounter with Jesus Christ and his proclamation of the Kingdom of justice and peace already beginning in this world, Jesus who is the personification of God’s mercy and love. At the heart of this reform lies a personal and communal discernment of what it is God wants of our church now, a discernment that takes account in its formation of doctrine of the ‘sense of the faithful’ (not least popular piety and the voice of the poor), the voice of theologians, and the authoritative role of pope and bishops. It also allows for lay participation in church governance. The potential for change in this more inclusive ecclesial way of proceeding is enormous. And it includes the dream of Francis of ‘a poor Church for the poor’.

Opposition

Another experienced Vatican commentator, Marco Politi, has written a forensic account of the opposition to Francis, the English translation of which takes the story up to 2015. Tellingly, the title of Politi’s book is Pope Francis Among the Wolves, with a sub-title of The Inside Story of a Revolution. Politi states that ‘Francis’s revolution has a name: the missionary transformation of the
church’ (127) and he identifies ‘collegiality’ as a principal pillar of this revolution (127). He notes that the opposition to the attempted shift from an imperial, monarchical church to one that is more synodal and collegial comes from many sources.

Among them are many (though not all) in the Roman Curia who find change difficult and are accustomed to a clericalism which supports ambitious self-seeking, many bishops and local Hierarchies used to a more un-thinking and less responsible role, some people of power and even criminality (Mafiosi in Italy and elsewhere) who are more at ease with a ‘gospel of prosperity’ and find the social gospel of Francis (articulated in EG and Laudato Si in particular) hard to stomach, and those who suspect that the move to synodality is a cover for changes in church teaching re gender and sexuality. Politi notes in particular the concerted opposition to Francis in Italy (where his changes are felt most keenly) and the United States, where, as Massimo Faggioli has noted, ‘there exists a robust network of Catholic universities, colleges, and lobbies that, in parallel to conservative American Protestantism, consider a traditionalist outlook on faith essential to the moral health of the United States’ (165).

Since the book was published in 2015 we have seen this opposition harden and become more visible, with a campaign of street posters in Rome and the kind of bureaucratic obfuscation resistant to change highlighted by Marie Collins in her dealings with Roman Congregations (in particular the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith). Most significantly of all, there has been the open opposition to the Exhortation The Joy of Love, spearheaded by the four Cardinals in their articulation of the ‘dubia’, with the demand for ‘yes or no’ answers and a threat of ‘fraternal correction’ if the answers proved unsatisfactory.

What is going on here? I think that, apart from understandable resistance to change, there is also a real fear that the acceptance of a synodal, collegial church is a kind of Trojan horse which will inevitably, if only over time, usher in the kind of changes, the ‘doctrinal development’ referred to by Orsy and Cahill. These changes have already been foreshadowed in the relaxing of the rules around communion for divorced and remarried people arising out of the recent Synod and they are anathema to a conservative minority. In this context Paul Vallely may express matters a little too polemically, but he is surely correct to point out that the doctrinal opposition to Francis is both exaggerated and on weak grounds (an ‘impertinence’), given that the offending Exhortation of Francis comes at the end of a intensive and wide consultation of the church, and can be shown to be in accordance with both Scripture and Tradition.

Francis himself may well be quite conservative himself doctrinally, but a more synodal church (which listens to the voices of the faithful and of theologians) is surely bound to result in change and significant doctrinal development, as well as a form of governance more in touch with the realities and challenges of our world, and less restricted by an exclusively clericalist imagination.

But if that change can be done collegially, discerning together the promptings of the Holy Spirit, as opposed to monarchically (whether through of Pope of the Right or the Left) and only in reaction to the protests of particular pressure groups, then there is a better chance of maintaining unity in the Church. A better chance too of moving from fear to hope, of facilitating individual and communal conversion in a way which allows conservative and liberals to find the greater unity that is anchored in their common love of Jesus Christ. This is the crux of the revolution of Francis, and while some individual issues (one thinks of the reform of Vatican finances and the safety of children) do demand
urgent and singular attention, other important issues are best settled within the emerging process of synodality.

This approach is illustrated, for example, by the new commission to re-examine the rules for liturgical translation (thus re-opening the possibility of a less clumpy English and other languages translation of the Missal), by the possibility of married priests in areas of need, and by the commission of men and women established to study the feasibility of female deacons, with enormous repercussions for the role of women in the church.

Francis himself has remained serene and apparently unflappable in the teeth of the opposition. He welcomes open debate, and distinguishes between opposition which is principled and open, that which is malevolent, and that which is covert. In a revealing Q and A session with the Jesuits gathered for their recent General Congregation 36 in Rome (autumn, 2016), he made it clear that this serenity is not due to any innate optimism: rather, he reveals, ‘I am rather pessimistic, always!’ and his serenity comes from that sense, at the end of each day, that ‘I realize that I have been led’, when ‘I realize that despite my resistance, there was a driving force there like a wave that carried me along’ and ‘this gives me consolation’. He goes on to say: ‘It is like a feeling, “He is here”’. It is in this context of being led by the Lord that he can recently list what he describes as the eighteen achievements of his pontificate to date (among them the Council of Cardinals, the promotion of lay men and women within the Roman Curia, the decrees regarding negligent bishops and the reform of Vatican finances).

Ecclesiologist Richard Gaillardetz has written helpfully about the shift under Pope Francis to the exercise of a more pastoral magisterium in the church, characterized by service to a synodal, listening church; by reliance on symbolic gesture more than juridical act; by commitment to the decentralization of authority; by exhibiting an appropriate doctrinal humility; by acting through the practice of discernment and the formation of conscience; and by reluctance to pronounce prematurely on controverted issues.

I would simply add that pastoral in this context should be understood to involve the relationship between faith/the Church and the world, but not as the antithesis of doctrinal. The attempt was made by some to reduce Vatican II to ‘only a pastoral Council’. This is part of a classicist mentality that wants to consider doctrine as eternally unchanging, with a concession only to application. This attempt has been cogently rejected by many theologians operating within a more historically aware consciousness, among the Bishop Johan Bonny (there should not be an antithesis between the pastoral and doctrinal), Raphael Gallagher (theology does not consist in a first act of ‘pure’ or ‘real’ theology, followed then by a concessionary pastoral theology which involves a more merciful application of first principles – rather, there is a reciprocity between the two movements) and Edward Hannenberg (the doctrinal development that can emerge from properly discerned ‘anomalies’ in pastoral practice).

One of the more interesting points to emerge from Politi’s analysis of the opposition to Francis is the extent to which it is rooted in inertia or apathy, in passive resistance or sometimes a passive-aggressive mentality, rather than overt hostility. He references the satirical wit of Italian comedian Maurizio Crozza in this context – his skit features Pope Francis plodding along the Via Salaria at 7 am carrying a refrigerator on his shoulder to give to a widow; Francis asks ‘what door do we deliver to?’ and one of his two splendidly dressed secretaries who don’t lift a finger to help him answers
Number 1321, Holiness’...a prostitute, groups of ciellini (members of Communione e Liberazione), Roma football supporters, and two cardinals come along and ask him for photos and blessings. The widow refuses the present because it is the wrong colour. ‘It could have been worse’, murmurs Francis as he sets off homeward. (Politi, 209-210)

At the oral presentation of his book in the Loyola Institute in TCD Politi invoked another image to describe what is happening in the Church: Francis is like a star soccer player, many spectators admire him greatly, they urge him on – but very few get on the pitch with him to ensure victory. At their recent Ad Limina visit to Rome it was reported that Francis told the Irish bishops they had to be like goalkeepers, fielding balls from all angles. What kind of role is the Irish Catholic Church, bishops, priests and laity, playing to ensure that the Francis revolution gains ground?

The Irish Catholic Church and the Quiet Revolution

Although, regrettably, we don’t have any formal account from the Irish Bishops concerning their recent ‘Ad Limina’ visit to Rome, Archbishop Eamon Martin is reported as saying that the Irish Bishops were very encouraged by the ‘open attitude’ and ‘listening mode’ of both the pontiff and the Holy Sea curia. The pope did not lecture them with a prepared text but sat down with them in a relaxed and informal way, so that this was a ‘quite extraordinary ‘meeting’ – ‘he didn’t present us with an agenda of the things he wanted us to talk about. The dominant thing was that he was asking us and challenging us about what it means to be a bishop in Ireland or anywhere today’, urging the bishops not to be ideological but ‘to meet with people the way they are’. Archbishop Diarmuid Martin added that ‘nothing was off the agenda’ in terms of topics, however controversial, and Bishop Nulty of Kildare said that the work ‘conversation’ best summed up the experience (I.Times, Saturday, Jan 21, 2017).

Francis urged the bishops to exercise ‘an apostolate of the ear’, to listen to what the faithful, and especially young people, were saying. In summary, the Pope acted (in accordance with the revolution he is proposing) in a synodal way, like Jesus walking with his disciples, and the bishops were enthused. But why, then, don’t they themselves act in this way with us, the faithful of the Irish Catholic Church, when they can see how clearly fruitful this more inclusive mode of proceeding is from their own experience?

The picture on the ground in Ireland is not entirely black. We were promised a ‘structured dialogue’ by the bishops back in 2010. Some dioceses have had good listening exercises – I note in particular the very effective Synod in Limerick under Bishop Brendan Leahy, the listening exercise in Killmore under Bishop Leo O’Reilly which resulted in a tabling of the issues of married priests and female deacons at the Irish Episcopal Conference, the extended listening process in Killaloe under the then-bishop Kieran O’Reilly which resulted in a diocesan pastoral plan and an empowered laity which was able to resist the proposal to introduce deacons (not in the plan) and the wisdom of the Bishop in postponing that idea for further consideration. And there are others.

But for the most part one gets the impression that the bishops are happy to surf the wave of the Pope’s popularity without really engaging seriously with the content of his message (where, for example, is the detailed Irish Episcopal analysis of Evangelii Gaudium or Laudato Si, with some kind of programme to tackle inequality and the ecological question? Where are the guidelines for the implementation of Amoris Laetitia, in particular around access to communion for divorced and
remarried people, as well as a more open consultation around sexuality and gender?). And, in particular, one gets a sense of a lack of engagement (apart from some notable and encouraging exceptions) with the revolutionary core of Francis’s way of proceeding, that turn to synodality, which is the key to so much else.

Is this because, as Cardinal Cupich of Chicago has expressed, synodality, consulting with others, is ‘hard work’? Is it because of what was described above as passive resistance, or inertia? Is it fear of loss of control? Why, for example, does the outgoing Papal Nuncio not see that his ‘into free fall’ statement about priestly vocations demands more than a managerial solution of parish clusters, but must involve consultation with the faithful about more radical approaches (including the possibility of married clergy, a move which Pope Francis has encouraged the Brazilian Hierarchy to consider seriously?). Why has the Irish Episcopal Conference been so slow to enthusiastically support the Pope’s central insight around synodality and to resist the calls for regular national synods? Most bafflingly of all, why does someone so able as Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, with immense credibility among so many of the faithful and media, not use his considerable authority and influence to campaign openly in support of the papal revolution towards a more synodal church, in which the voice of laity and theologians would have a structured and institutional presence?

In a recent edition of the review Studies several contributors commented on the condition of Irish Catholicism in ways that are germane to our discussion here: Tom Inglis, sociologist of religion, shared his research findings that ‘Irish people no longer look to the Church of their upbringing as a place or ‘site’ where they practise religion, nor even as a source of meaning and moral guidance in their lives’; fellow sociologist Gladys Ganiel comments on the post-Catholic nature of Irish society and the growth of ‘extra-institutional religion’; while Dr Vincent Twoomey notes again the anti-intellectual nature of Irish Catholicism. Pope Francis has argued that to make the Catholic Church a site of hope and meaning requires a radical reform. Can the Bishops rise to this challenge and offer us the leadership which is required? Can they do so for the World Meeting of Families in August 2018, so that it becomes less a forum for platform presentations and catechesis (valuable though these are) and more an inclusive discussion which is unafraid to broach the often controversial and contested issues around sexuality and gender in a way which is constructive and attractive, as illustrated by The Joy of Love, itself the fruit of a synodal process?

And can the rest of us, lay faithful, priests and religious, resist the temptation to inertia or passive resistance and find a way to get involved, at whatever level, in promoting a more inclusive church and signal our willingness to help our bishops in their complex and daunting task? Can reform groups in particular continue to be true to their own charism and mission, but also consider the wisdom of the theorist on social movements Sidney Tarrow when he stressed the particular significance of ‘political opportunity’ (in this case the election of Francis as a reforming pope) in the struggle for any justice cause, and the wisdom of arguing for access to input and power when such an opportunity presents itself, rather than opting for singular and concrete gains which have less lasting significance?

We can miss the wood for the trees so easily in these matters. There is a quiet revolution going on in the Catholic Church, with enormous significance for now but more for future generations. It will not be accomplished overnight. But is has a better chance of success if we recognize what is at its core – the structural and cultural transformation of the Church along synodal, collegial lines in order to give
better witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ for our times- and we in Ireland have our role to play here.

Conclusion:

I want to conclude with two voices who illustrate what I am getting at here. Tony Flannery, writing back in 2013 (he may have changed his mind since then of course!), wanted the new Pope not to unilaterally change any particular church teaching but rather ‘...to create a climate within the Church where is freedom of thought and expression, where issues can be discussed and debated. Because that is the only way in which to bring about real change. Change that comes from on high is no good, and will not survive. But change that comes through a process of discussion, or dialogue, as we call it in the Church, is the enduring kind of change’. In similar vein, Lisa Cahill says Francis realises that ‘it doesn’t always work from the top down...that you have to get buy-in with the lower levels, with the local bishops and local bishops’ conference and all the priest and religious and all the laity...the lower down he can start his reform, the more successful it’s going to be in the long run’.

Of course this is hard work: differences, especially intellectual differences, can seem irreconcilable and yet we are called to go forward together as a community. And it will take generations to achieve, as we embed a new culture, a quiet revolution, in our church.

But, you know, Christianity was founded on difference and apparent irreconcilability, united in Christ – think, for example, of the Gentile question in the early church and of its gradual resolution. We are called together in truth, but also in love: and we must be patient as truth emerges, capable of living through the transition with respect for others, with hope, with love. And we can only do this if our ecclesiology, our attempts at church reform, are in service of mission and rooted in a deep encounter with Jesus Christ.

Many thanks.

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