

## Another Beginning?

The thrust of this article is three-fold.

One is that ongoing change is now a permanent reality for the Catholic Church. A first step is to accept this reality.

Two, dealing with change means 'living in the grey', that's accepting and embracing difficult questions that have no ready-made 'black and white' answers. It's about dealing with ambivalence in a culture of modernity. An example is offered.

Three, in a very different dispensation church governance and pastoral practice require that a 'respectful listening' to the People of God be sewn into our perception of what the church does. A template is offered.

## Change

Change is a difficult sweet to suck on. Everyone seems to recognise its pervasive presence and experience its impact yet so many, in modern parlance, seem 'not to get it'.

Nowhere is that more true than among Irish Catholics. While we give due deference to the concept, we hesitate to name the reality. That's understandable, of course, for a church that prides itself on continuity and tradition, but unhelpful in terms of responding to it.

Change just is and life, as we have known it, is over. That's a general principle but it applies specifically to the Catholic Church – if we can bear that reality. While most smile wistfully at the oft repeated words of the late Archbishop John Charles McQuaid on returning from the Second Vatican Council that 'no change will worry the tranquillity of your Christian lives', 50-plus years later many still imagine that change can be 'managed'. All the evidence is that it can't.

For the Irish Catholic Church, the tectonic plates really have shifted. While we are much given to listing some of the indicators of that change – decline in church attendance, ageing clergy, apathy to religion, a loss of institutional authority and such like – and can be proactive in attempting to respond to them as best we can, effectively we're trying to build a scaffolding around a house that has already collapsed.

All the targeted parish programmes, all the parish councils in the world, all the experts sitting in offices with secretaries and computers, all the prayers in Christendom won't put the old church back together again. It's day is done. And the question is not whether the substance of this paragraph is depressingly 'negative' but whether it's true. What is certain, Louise Fuller wrote recently, 'is that Catholicism as we know it is now an anachronism'.

This is more than what might be described as 'Ireland's Catholic twilight'. We can actually see it for ourselves. We can measure it variously in the rolling back of Catholic influence in society, in the disappearance of religious artefacts, in media hostility to all things Catholic and in comments of politicians like Bríd Smith, TD who two years ago told the Dáil that 'the Catholic Church should be put in the dustbin of history'.

We can see it in the casual implication on the television evening news that religious Sisters

(after lifetimes of unpaid service to the poorest of the poor with minimal training, under resourcing by the state and working in situations of extreme emotional distress) may well be accused of murder in regard to the deaths of babies in Mother and Baby Homes if only those who know would come forward, – an example of a commentariat cheer-leading the popular tide of demonisation by judging the past through the lens of the present. And we see it in Pope Benedict's recent intervention that the ills of the Church can be explained by the unvarying mantra – 'It was the Sixties that done it!' –the embarrassing equivalent of a schoolboy's excuse, 'the dog ate my homework', or the politician's explanation of surplus funds, 'I won it on the horses'.

But most of all we can see it in our churches as we survey a biblical remnant holding grimly to a mix of community custom, familial loyalty and an ever-diminishing dividend of social respectability. 'I'm not sure why I'm here,' a parishioner told me once, 'but I turn up anyway'. It won't last. When the heart is gone out of something, the mind invariably follows.

While we may garner some comfort from the continuing popularity of family rites of passage like First Communion and Confirmation and the ever-resilient Irish tradition of funeral attendance, no matter how we compute the positives (or the 'green shoots' as we sometimes optimistically describe them) it doesn't look like even the bones of a workable future for our Church.

So is that it then? Not so much a gradual on-going diminishment as the last one out the door turning off the lights? Not really. For whatever the future holds for the Irish Catholic Church, the first essential requirement is a recognition and acceptance of where we are. And we're not going anywhere if we don't know where we are.

Sadly, the detritus of denial is strewn all around us. It's evident in the effort of leaders to be 'positive' in writing straight with crooked lines, no matter how unconvincing, when the dogs in the street can see that what we need is a dollop of reality to give a tint of credibility to what we're at. It's evident in the Gadarene rush back to the nineteenth century in the puerile belief that a long-discarded version of church can be resurrected by priests dressing in traditional clerical garb and congregations worshipping in a language hardly anyone understands. It's evident in the pretence that the problem we have as a church is not what we teach but the way we communicate it.

The difficult truth is that such examples are really ways of rejecting the reality of change and, by extension, rejecting the possibility of reshaping a different church.

This hasn't happened overnight. The more judicious observers in the now distant past were aware of the probabilities, not least people like Walter McDonald and Peter Connolly of Maynooth who, in different generations, could sense how a narrow, oppressive version of Catholicism would fail to stand its ground in a different world. I'm old enough to remember Connolly hopping in the chair, bristling with ideas about how Ireland would soon discard its much-vaunted Catholic loyalty on the basis of not finding it 'useful' while his colleague in the department of English, John McMackin, rested languidly in the seventeenth century where Dryden reigned supreme and everything had a beginning, a middle and an end.

Like Seamus Heaney's own faith, 'the loss occurred off-stage'. Almost imperceptively a medley of experiences aligned which, over a few decades, gave the majority of Irish Catholics the freedom to choose. Part of that context was a failure to read 'the signs of the times' or to provide the impetus so that the Second Vatican Council might have a fair wind. All the while church life continued in its traditional groove: ignoring the spirit of the Council, patronising women, controlling men and appointing monsignors. It was a calamity waiting to happen but those who knew better couldn't be told.

In 1979 the visit of Pope John Paul – drawing on his huge personality, the historic nature of a first papal visit, the centuries-long loyalty embedded in Irish Catholicism and the positivity of a compliant media – was a great tide that camouflaged the unease percolating under the surface. The severe and now questionably sainted John Paul ticked us off about divorce, contraception and other dangers to our faith as vast crowds of Catholics, Protestants, agnostics and atheists fell silent but weren't listening.

In 2018, the visit of Pope Francis, drawing on his warm personality and the hope his election had elicited, drew smaller crowds, a less compliant media and a fixation on the great fault-line of Irish Catholicism, the child abuse scandals and our failure to deal with them. Despite a buoyant papal personality and our much-vaunted hospitality, what remains is a stunned sense of how so much has changed in so little time.

In the space of four decades, the two papal visits bookended the decline of Irish Catholicism; the first falsely promising the beginning of a new glorious age of Irish Catholicism; and the latter announcing the end of a version of Catholicism no longer acceptable to the vast majority of Irish Catholics.

### **What can we do?**

It's evident that we're not going to be going anywhere if we don't know where we are. Little wonder that Francis keeps banging on about clericalism. Its tentacles stretch into hearts and minds convincing priests that we're a different 'ontological' species, that we're important not just for what we do but for what we are, that wearing soutanes sustains identity, that personal ambition is a worthy option. Clericalism is a debilitating condition, leading to presumptions of status and expectations of preference and, even still, after all that has happened, the bizarre notion that all the kings' horses and all the popes' men will be able somehow to put it all back together again.

If we want to move towards a synodal Church, we can no longer afford to indulge those who cling to the wreckage of the past, as if holding on to Belloc's nurse 'for fear of finding something worse'. In the early 1950s when Irish bishops flexed their muscular authority at will, Seán Mac Réamoinn characterised J. G. McGarry's subtle and unobtrusive policy as editor of the *Furrow* as 'brostaigh go bog' (*hasten softly*) – a version of Peter Hebblethwaite's later comment about 'giving a haircut to a drowsy lion'.

We can no longer afford that indulgence. While McGarry had to voyage around the menacing promontory that was Archbishop John Charles McQuaid, who was given to

describing contributors to the Furrow as ‘heretics’, no such peril (and no such excuse) exists now that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith seems to have, under Francis’ watch, run out of apostates.

There’s a deeper loyalty demanded if the Catholic Church in Ireland is to survive beyond a nominal cosmetic presence on the periphery of Irish life. Indulging the sensitivities of incompetent leaders or the preciousness of delicate souls feeling the heat of the kitchen or cute theologians running with the hare and hunting with the hound are all now off the agenda.

The Irish Catholic Church has paid a high price for mollycoddling those who want to stick with Plan A because they never imagined they might want a Plan B, for those who remained silent even though they could see what was happening and for those whose contribution to the looming crisis was little more than holding up a damp finger to see what way the wind was blowing.

These are truly Titanic times for the Irish Catholic Church so shuffling with the deckchairs is an indulgence beyond reason. Make-believe, illusion and denial need to be named and shamed. In present circumstances not facing the truth is, a form of religious treason.

The focus now has to be on intellectual rigour; on a communicable theology that connects with the lived experience of people; on a robust commitment to a respectful re-imagining of our Church; on an honest acknowledgement that clergy in the interests of the gospel need to divest their control and authority; and on a consensus that a robust synodality is the obvious and only way forward.

What we don’t need are pious platitudes about saying our prayers or condemnations about the terrible times we live in or blaming Satan or secularism or whatever convenient excuse absolves us of personal responsibility for the unravelling of our Church. Or, worse still, some vague hope that, you’d never know, soon there might be a turn in in the road when things will revert to where they were, please God.

There was a time when Catholics were less questioning, less educated, less conformist and less critical. It’s different now, as we know. Now the priest in the pulpit is probably less educated, less in touch with life, less articulate and less intelligent than many in the pews. Catholics will no longer endure an insensible theology or a spirituality of fear. And what a priest has to say will be subject to the same remorseless criticism as anyone else and if it’s simplistic or pious or plain gibberish, it will be cursorily dismissed at the court of reason and common sense.

## **Complexity**

A difficult truth is that the easy answer is no longer a convincing riposte to a difficult question. In the seventh chapter of the Rule of St Benedict, though the title ‘De humilitate’ might at first suggest otherwise, Benedict’s concern is not humiliation but ‘to help free his

monks from the need to seem more than they are'. That's a quote from Erik Varden, a Benedictine abbot, who has his finger on the pulse.

On March 19, 2001, Varden was browsing in the bookshop of the Sorbonne and his eyes rested on a slim yellow booklet placed on prominent display. It bore the title, *Notre besoin de consolation est impossible a rassasier* ('Our need for comfort is insatiable') and instinctively he knew he had to buy it. Now Abbot of Mount Saint Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire, Varden has carried the volume with him since, re-reading it at regular intervals.

In his recent book, *The Shattering of Loneliness*, he translated the first two paragraphs of the Swedish original as follows:

I lack faith and, for that reason, can never be a happy man; for a happy man should never need fear that his life is a pointless, aimless race towards certain death. I am heir to no suitable, fixed place on earth whence I might attract the attention of some god. Neither am I heir to the sceptic's well-concealed rage or the atheist's ardent innocence.

I do not, therefore, dare to throw stones at one who believes in what I doubt, or at one who worships doubt as if it, too, were not encompassed by darkness. I should be hit by such a stone, for of one thing I am sure: that man's need for comfort is insatiable.

I stalk comfort like a hunter stalks his prey. Wherever I glimpse it in the woods, I shoot. More often than not I hit nothing but air, though sometimes a kill plops down at my feet. Since I know that the constancy of comfort is no greater than the wind's in the crown of a tree, I make haste to devour my victim.

The lines were written by Stig Dagerman, poet, novelist and critic, described by Varden as 'a meteor in the twentieth century literary firmament', a gifted writer who lived intensely, 'his resolute nihilism' keeping him 'balancing on a precipice that reached out over a menacing world'.

At 31, he died by his own hand.

The context of Dagerman's substantial writings was the 1940s – a decade of purposelessness and hopelessness during which he hovered between insight and despair, at once recognising the insatiability of comfort and the impossibility of achieving it, the loss of meaning and the pull of death, with no god to create a sustaining upward movement.

With the decline in a religious sense and the loss of the context and vocabulary of faith, Ireland in the twenty-first century is now facing into Dagerman's experience of purposeless and hopelessness. With no god to raise heart and mind, or even to distract from the still sad music of hopelessness and the looming spectre of death, society will be forced to confront the question – is this all there is?

Many like Dagerman, as in the quotation above, will long for a god who might have connected the lived reality of his life with a God who gave meaning and substance to the human journey. The hungry sheep will look up and not be fed unless there's some credible

breaking of the bread to mediate something of the comfort and the solace of God's presence in the world.

But are we able for it? For who will there be to articulate Dagerman's dilemma: the thirst for meaning combined with a conviction that faith in God seems impossibly remote in the lived reality of a life? Who will attest to the presence of a God who loves us beyond all reason and all imagining? For priests, we will have none. And the few we have may not be up to it.

For the public square in Ireland in terms of the existence of God seems a series of soap boxes competing for attention rather than searching for light – from the cynical atheist disparaging any kind of belief through the wavering agnostic to the dogmatic believer pushing a particular denominational adherence. Across the wide spectrum of belief and unbelief in Ireland there's little respect much less reverence for the individual journey.

Dagerman's testimony is but one facet of a wider culture that transcends the usual and predictable coordinates of agnosticism and atheism in their many colours and deserves a respectful hearing – in Ireland as in Sweden. But whereas a certain Nordic breadth of vision respects the truth of things, in an Irish context the overwhelming presence and experience of religion diminishes the possibility of an honest debate.

Indeed, the debate that Dagerman sought to articulate isn't possible in Ireland, not because we know the hunger isn't there but because we lack the freedom to honestly respond to it. Freedom, yes, but even more the lack of intellectual rigour to allow the values we cherish to stand their ground in the public forum.

The jury is out on whether the Irish Catholic Church has a discernible future, apart from a ceremonial presence on the official side-lines of Irish life or a refuge for those ill at ease with the modern world. Because its presence as such, apart from being a convenient scape-goat for the ills of Irish society, has virtually disappeared in the media, in public debate, in modern Irish writing, in the lives of the young. Once we mattered too much in too many ways, now we've moved beyond antipathy into apathy.

The late John O'Donohue used to lament how the avenues to the great Catholic heritage were effectively blocked off by those who had reduced Catholicism to anathemas, instead of being opened up to possibility and promise. Seamus Heaney touched this chord when he wrote that "Catholicism has given me the right to joy: People talk about the effects of a Catholic upbringing in sociological terms – repression, guilt, prudery. What isn't sufficiently acknowledged is the radiance of Catholicism. It gave everything in the world a meaning. It brought a tremendous sense of being, of the dimensions of reality, the shimmering edges of things. That never quite vanishes. The older I get, the more I remember the benediction of it all'.

I can almost hear the spirit of John McGahern applauding in the shadows for both lived with doubt and denial, but who is there now to articulate that religious vision?

**A template for the future?**

For some years the priests of Killala diocese – 22 mainly rural parishes in north Mayo and west Sligo – wondered what might be done to arrest the decline of the church. A number of options were presented and discussed, including a diocesan synod and a listening process. Nothing of a compelling nature emerged and the eventual decision was to ask the people of the diocese what they thought should be done – on the minimalist basis that the one thing we couldn't do was to do nothing.

A steering committee comprised representatives of the four deaneries – in each two women, one lay man and a priest – as well as a priest co-ordinator and Bishop John Fleming.

Some problems arose:

(i) was this a paper exercise where a box was being ticked or did we really want to know what people thought? And, if we did, would we actually hear it and implement it? Or would whatever report emerged gather dust on a shelf in the diocesan office?

(ii) would whatever process emerged have an open agenda? What if the people of the diocese wanted to discuss the ordination of women, the celibacy requirement for priesthood and the Church's teaching on LGBT?

Eventually the issues were resolved with Bishop Fleming giving a commitment that

(i) whatever suggestions emerged that were within the diocese's capacity to pursue would be incorporated into diocesan policy, and

(ii) whatever suggestions emerged that were not within the diocese's capacity would be forwarded to the Irish Episcopal Conference and to the Apostolic Nuncio who would be asked to forward them to the relevant authorities in Rome.

The question the committee was addressing was in effect whether the process would be real, respectful and transparent – three words that became the touchstone of the decisions that followed.

The process started with a six-month period of discussion, reflection and study from which emerged

(i) an analysis of priest numbers that indicated that within two decades (by 2037) the 22 parishes of the diocese would be served by 5 or 6 priests;

(ii) a spot survey of all Masses over three consecutive weekends indicated that Mass attendance over-all was at 29%;

(iii) a decision to survey the people of the parish with seven open-ended questions –

(1) Where in your everyday life do you experience love, truth, goodness, hope and joy?

(2) What is it that encourages you to participate in the life of your local church/parish?

(3) What is it you find difficult about participating in the life of your church/parish?

(4) As a Church, what are the biggest problems we face?

(5) What do we need to do now?

(6) What do we need to stop doing now?

(7) What topics would you like to see on the agenda of a diocesan assembly?

For the survey to reach the gold standard of being 'real, respectful and transparent' it was clear that it would have to be anonymous and confidential in order to elicit as truthful a picture as possible; that it should be open to everyone (apart from young children); and that its results should be compiled by a reputable independent agency. Surveys, and the accompanying envelopes, in which they were to be individually sealed upon completion, were distributed widely in every parish through Parish Pastoral Councils or, where they did not exist, through other agencies.

The Institute for Action Research (Kerry) processed the findings and the committee devised 129 proposals in 16 categories which were circulated to over 300 delegates from around the diocese for consideration at a diocesan assembly. And in order to ensure that the voting was completely private, a firm was contracted to supply a system of electronic voting when on Assembly day the delegates were asked to prioritise six proposals to be implemented in order of preference in each category.

The categories were eventually cut down to ten with 120 people volunteering to become members of ten Focus Groups: 1. Family/Pastoral Care: 2. Prayer: 3. Liturgy/Deacons: 4. Youth: 5. Management of parishes: 6. Lay participation: 7. Inclusion: 8. Women in the Church: 9. Education in the faith: 10. Vocations.

The ten Focus Groups are at present assessing how the six priorities in each category can be implemented with a planned implementation to begin in January 2020.

Two significant conclusions can be drawn from the Killala experience to date. One is that, while for the Catholic Church in Ireland on most indicators the graph is going in the wrong direction, there's still a huge commitment on the part of a significant number of lay people to value and support the Church, not least among young parents who know the importance of a sense of God and want their children to value it too.

This was evident in the interest and enthusiasm at the Diocesan Assembly of the 300-plus delegates from the 22 parishes of the diocese as well as in the relative ease with which 120 volunteers were attracted towards participation in the ten Focus Groups. The important message is that there is a real hunger for a Church based on the synodality Pope Francis continuously underlines, if Catholics believe it's being taken seriously.

The other message is that the key to attracting participation and commitment is to convince Catholics that the process respects the three-fold axis mentioned earlier – 'real, respectful and transparent'. Key elements were that the survey was confidential (and seen to be so); that the results were independently computed (and known to be so); and that commitments were given in terms of an open agenda and a follow-through (and taken on trust).

An instance of that trust and the honesty that ensued was evident in the delegates response to some of the issues beyond the diocese's capacity to implement but which they needed to register their opinions:

That priests be allowed to marry  
Agree 85 %                  Disagree 15 %



That priests who have married be returned to active ministry

Agree 81 %          Disagree 19 %

That women be ordained to the diaconate.

Agree 80 %          Disagree 20 %

That women be ordained to the priesthood

Agree 69 %          Disagree 31 %

That the Church's teaching on homosexuality and those excluded from the Church be changed to reflect the inclusion of all people regardless of sexual orientation, marital status or family status.

Agree 86 %          Disagree 14 %

### **Conclusion**

To make another beginning, three elements seem vital. One is that change is acknowledged and accepted as a permanent condition. Two, we need 'to live in the grey', to converse rather than to explain. Three, we need to commit to a listening process that is 'real, respectful and transparent'.

God will look after the rest.

Brendan Hoban