

## **The times implore our true involvement<sup>1</sup>**

**Ned Prendergast**

*It is he who gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers in roles of service for the faithful to build up the body of Christ*

Ephesians 4: 11-12

Your Grace Cardinal Brady, Bishop Clifford and good co-responsible members of the Armagh Diocesan Pastoral Council, I feel it a great privilege to address a true beacon of the emerging church of the future which is a tribute both to the leadership that brought it about and to the generosity of spirit of all who are part of it. I thank my old travelling companion Tony Hanna, who in spite of all he knows of me, nominated me to speak to you.

There is always something special for me in coming to Dromantine where in the 1920s my grand-uncle Fr. John Prendergast SMA was the first bursar. To him fell the task of converting this magnificent Palladian mansion into a seminary and for putting the stations of the cross into what was formerly known as 'the pleasure gardens'. Although I never knew him I am told he was a down-to-earth man who wanted the seminarians here to thrive on the kind of wholesome fresh eggs he remembered from growing up in rural Kilkenny. So he wrote to his brothers and sisters asking each of them to donate a dozen hens to be sent by train to Newry. They obliged and on a given date several dozen hens left the train station in Thomastown for the adventure of their lives. The descendants of those hens served here until the 1960s in a hen-run whose location is still remembered by the older priests. For a Kilkenny hen the trip to Newry was as near to going on the missions as it gets for a hen. The story is told that when they came up here, a black and amber Kilkenny jersey was sent with them so they wouldn't be lonely for home. It is said to have been purloined by a groundsman over from the Crossmaglen area and I suppose you can guess the rest.

### **Interpreting the times**

If we think we live in extraordinary times we should think again of the lives of people like Fr. John. Following a noviciate in Wilton in Cork he went to Lyon in France for Theology and was only settled in there when in 1903 the French Government closed down the churches and seminaries of France. He was subsequently ordained in Cairo, found himself as chaplain of third class - in the British Army for the Dardanelles and Gallipoli, was in the Lawrence of Arabia campaign up to Damascus and arrived home in 1918 to an Ireland he scarcely recognised. He stepped down onto the platform in Thomastown station with the uniform of a British army officer over his Roman Collar. He was lucky not to be shot. His youngest brother Michael, an IRA man who had been in the Easter Rising in Dublin, was sent to meet him and, seeing the uniform, turned the horse and trap around and left the reverend war hero, mentioned in dispatches, to carry his case up the eight steep miles to Mongmacoda. Fr. John must have found Dromantine and his work here a peaceful haven before he volunteered for the founding SMA mission to the USA dying in a poor parish in the racial ferment of Georgia during the Second

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Oliver: A Dream of Trees, New and Selected Poems, Beacon Press, Vol.1 p 247

World War when it was not possible to bring his body home. He rests in the SMA graveyard in Washington DC and I carry today a little gold cross inscribed with his name that used to be attached to his pocket-watch. It came to me via New Zealand and that it is back here today for the first time since Fr John bore it out of here on his way to America is testament that time and events are cyclical as well as linear.

All times are extraordinary in one way or another and ours may seem exceptional only because these are the times in which we find ourselves. Since Vatican II Catholics have grown used to looking at the world in terms of interpreting 'the signs of the times'. As we look back and forward I often think of the year 1968 when like Fr. John and my grandfather who accompanied him initially, I set out to become a priest. I often think of four things that were happening in 1968 that were signs of the times then, that impacted on my life more than a little, and that are still impacting on these times in which we find ourselves. In the summer of 1968 there were student riots in Paris with a new valuing of freedom overtaking the older value of obedience. It was the 'summer of love' in San Francisco with that new freedom flower-powering itself into almost all future conceptions of relationships and sexuality and wholeness. Summer 1968 also saw the publication of *Humanae Vitae* which said 'steady on there' to Paris and San Francisco in a manner that, some would say, undermined the authority of the church in the eyes of the world and perhaps also in the eyes of its own people. Finally, on Christmas Eve the crew of the Apollo spacecraft took that first photo of earth from space - subsequently called 'earthrise' - which redefined perspective and took over where Gulliver's Travels left off in subverting our notions of large and small. The dogmatic differences that separated the peoples of the earth looked small indeed from that perspective and Ireland suddenly seemed a particularly small place.

What then about little Ireland and today? We now know that we live in a nation that in interpreting the 'signs of the times' as David McWilliams put it, sadly mistook an overdraft for a boom. We have come to realise also that we live in a church where the abuse scandal and its fallout is like a spinnaker we can't take down, threatening to take the church onto the rocks of destruction, or turn it upside down or drag it out to sea. I met an old priest recently who told me that for the first time in his life he is losing hold of his Teilhardian belief that things are always getting better in the direction of the Parousia and the Kingdom of God. I found myself consoling him saying that if it is the worst of times it is surely the best of times as well, that it is a Prophet Isaiah moment when the Holy Spirit is abroad in the Tianaman Square of our church turning over tables that need to be turned over, cleansing us for better days to come.

He looked at me and said: 'do you think so?'

### **A 'sign of the times' encounter**

A couple of months ago something happened to me that I will use as a kind of master metaphor for interpreting the signs of the times in what I have to say about the church we inhabit now. It falls to me as part of my work with CEIST to speak to school staffs at the beginning of the academic year and in late August I found myself in Ennistymon Co Clare. The theme of the talk, requested by the school, was that of hope, indicating the toll

the times are taking on them and the virtue they think most appropriate to the moment. Arriving at dusk the evening before, I checked into my accommodation and made my way on foot up to the location of the school, to be sure of directions for the next morning and to get a feel for the place. Just as you reach our school in Ennistymon you pass the ruins of the convent and its church, very tall buildings that tower over the roadway leading into the school. The convent was sold to a developer who did not get planning permission and left it there. Vandals have had their day with evidence of fires, the usual graffiti and worst of all the lovely stained glass windows of the convent church that looked down on the town have been burst out. It is a depressing sight, Dickensian in its bleakness and you could not but be stopped in your tracks as you pass it by. If you were to ask me on that August night to interpret the signs of the times as I was encountering them I would have told you that in going to work in a Catholic school today you pass the ruins of convent and church. I might have added that the little Catholic school was a kind of orphan and that I was merely representing a foster parent. I could not put these images out of my mind as I drifted off to sleep but the next morning I entered a school that was brimming with life and humming with energy, a place where young people are loved into fullness of life, a school with lovely teachers and a beautiful prayer space, - the church of today alive and in action.

After a morning that lifted my spirits I parked outside the ruins as I left and tried again to interpret what it was saying. As I did so I began to hear two voices gradually getting clearer. One was the voice of Fr. Michael Rogers in Glendalough looking down on the valley there and showing us how the church mutated down the valley from the original monastic foundation towards the later diocesan cathedral and further along to the Augustinian ruins. As one foundation lost life and vigour and became corrupt in some way it was replaced by a reformed institution which in time succumbed to the same fate and so on. He drew comparisons with our experience of church today. As institutions fold he said, new ones spring up, green shoots appear, and you have to believe the Holy Spirit is at work. The most difficult times, he said, must surely be the in-between times, between leaving the old and moving to what is new. Leaving the shelter and moving across no-mans land towards the unknown. Times surely like the times we are in, the times this Pastoral Council surely inhabits.

The other voice I imagined was a New Testament voice asking outside the ruined buildings: why look for him here? He is not here. He is gone before you into Galilee. Follow him. -Christø I imagined a voice saying, -is not here in these ruined edifices but in the edifices where the people are. If you want to draw near him, go there. To places like that little school, humble as the stable in which he was born, in the shadow of the ruins and within a stoneø throw.ø

Where are the new edifices we must move towards? Can we name them? The house of yearning? The house of longing? The house of indifference? The house of despair? The house of hope? The houses of the poor? The house of humility surely. The house of democracy?

And are there edifices we need to vacate? Maybe those offices and roles not essential to preaching the Gospel? The houses of old comfort? As men we have to ask ourselves especially, if the edifice of patriarchy is not in ruins? And you would imagine that the dark house of misogyny is one that we would not want to place a foot in again. Yet we would not seem to have vacated that building. Baroness Nuala O'Loan at the National RE Congress in Tralee last week was eloquent on the millions of female babies aborted each year because their mothers succumb to the notion that boys are better. She raised it as a justice issue. We are all for justice but maybe we are spangled by the continuation of a belief in our church that only men can be this and only men can be that. Saying that the matter of the ordination of women is closed sounds to me like saying that we are locked into the ruined edifice of misogyny. And I cannot resist the whisper that allowing ourselves to be locked into such ruins is sinful. Sin never comes without a price. I heard the other day that when filling out recent census forms in the USA, 30 million people indicated that they were formerly Catholic. Can that number be true? If it is, how many of them left because we tried to house them in ruined edifices? The absenting ones are still growing here at an alarming rate. Young people do not seem to be at all interested in the accommodation we are offering. The words in Psalm 129 should terrify us: If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour.

### **A new evangelising moment**

I did not come here today to be pessimistic but to talk of the ground we need to cross to the new edifices of a renewed church, part of which you are already creating in what you are doing here. And I want to say from my own experience in a new Trust for Catholic schools, as a recent member of a Parish Pastoral Council, as someone who speaks occasionally to groups of priests and to gatherings of the faithful, that I struggle to comprehend the welcome that is out there for Christ in the edifices of yearning and longing and despair and that the times implore our true involvement. It is not as if we have to wait for a significant evangelical moment. We are in the midst of it. Those houses of yearning and longing are full to the rafters, the doors are wide open and Christ is already there waiting for us to catch up with him. The houses of indifference are not so much open as openable. The houses of despair don't have any doors anyway.

How do I know this? I know the following from my experience:

When I move out beyond the horizon of my own certainty to the no-man's-land of my uncertainty I invariably meet people there who in their uncertainty want to talk about whether life is worth the candle and what it is we should be passing on to our children.

When I tell people that I work in Faith Development they say to me that my work must be very difficult. When I reply that on the contrary I have never met anyone uninterested in the journey of their lives, the seasons of their hearts and the voice calling them -all life long, their eyes flicker with recognition.

When I quote to people the words of Timothy Radcliffe that Christians are distinguished by some special kind of freedom, some special kind of happiness, some special kind of hope and some special kind of courage - they want to hear more.

When I say to people in our schools that there is a story we enter, a community we belong to, a language we speak, a way that we pray, a work that we do, a face of God that we see and a face of God that we show ó they too want to hear more.

When I see an old friend of mine regretting that he did not pass on to his children what his father passed on to him because he was a child of the sixties and they are children of the naughties, I know that there is a hunger that will not abate, a search that will not end, a tug that will not let go and a longing that will not go away until we recognise with St Augustine that our hearts are restless Lord until they rest in youø

People are beautiful, vulnerable, yearning, despairing, openable, waiting. The hungry sheep look up and are not fed. They are like sheep without a shepherd. What a tragedy if we hunker in ruined edifices, clutching onto discredited certainties, or worse still too ashamed to cross the street because the world knows now that there is darkness in us too and that at best we can only be wounded healers.

### **Advising the Cardinal**

As an advisory group in these in-between times, what will you be advising the Cardinal?

You will surely be advising him to work with the Holy Spirit to wash what is stainedí to heal what is woundedí to water what is barrení to bend what has become rigidí to warm what has become coldí to direct what is going astrayø<sup>2</sup>

In advising him you might listen to the voice of a Leitrim man, John McGahern, when he said, "All that survives does so by acquiring loversø<sup>3</sup>. What do people love about the church? Keep that. What do they not love ó check if it looks like a ruined building.

If I was among you, advising him, what would I want to remember?

I think I would be remembering a number of insights from my own experience and I share them with you by way of anecdote:

I remember visiting an old cousin who is a pastor in San Diego and him telling me I had arrived on a good day because he was holding a barbecue that evening to thank the committee who ran the parish fete. I asked how many would be there and he replied two hundred and fifty. When I asked him to explain such a large number he said that the only thing he really knew about building parish communities was to thank people. "If two people arrive and you thank them, tomorrow you will have four. If you say thanks often enough eventually you will have a standing armyø

When I took this advice back to our own Parish Pastoral Council we decided to hold an annual Mass of Thanksgiving to celebrate all the groups working in our parish. On a quick calculation we imagined the number of groups to be about fifteen but it turned out

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Kung: *Why I am still a Christian*. Continuum, pp 80-82

<sup>3</sup> John McGahern: *A Literature without Qualities* in *Love of the World*, Faber and Faber p. 183

to be more than twice that number. There are more people than ever involved in ministry in our church and with our constant thanks and encouragement this number will continue to grow.

One of the memories I would bring with me would be of a night in a deanery in my native Diocese of Kildare and Leighlin when I was asked to speak to a gathering of the faithful in the aftermath of Pope Benedict's letter to the Irish Church. A moderate crowd was anticipated but the hall was full to the rafters, women outnumbering men by a large margin and many of them spitting fire. In response to the twin messages of the evening that 'we are listening' and 'remember you are the church' one woman was fit to be tied. 'Don't lie to me about listening' she said, 'when no such thing is happening'. She posed a question: 'what would it be that I am to look out for that would tell me you have heard?' Her concluding words were: 'don't fob me off about me being the church when you exclude me as a woman and give no forum to my voice as a lay-person' I would remember that woman and her words.

Part of the reason those words are pertinent arises from the 'protective model' whereby the church (as authority as opposed to church as people) manages its relationship with its people. I give an example of a meeting of pastoral councils in a deanery of the Dublin Archdiocese where feedback was being taken back to Archbishop's house. I was 'volunteered' to report back from the group in which I was placed, mostly female as is the trend in such things. When I had finished reporting on views about parish restructuring I went on to relay what was expressed in the group about the role of women in the church. It was at this precise moment that the person making notes for the Archbishop put down her pen. When I asked her why she was doing this she replied that the topic in hand was not relevant to the agenda of the evening. The faces of the women in our group spoke of the despair they felt at another door being locked in their faces.

One of the things a first generation of lay ministry in the church must be aware of is disillusionment and despair. We must remember that darkness always opposes light and we are never going to live in a perfect world without struggle. Although to be avoided as much as possible sometimes the voice of despair is prophetic. I read to you from a letter of resignation from our Pastoral Council from a young woman called Catherine Tierney, who I was privileged to nominate to the council as my own term ended. She does not mind her name being mentioned or her letter being quoted. The following is an extract.

*For all the time and energy spent on meetings and sub-meetings in the last 2 years, I don't really see what impact it has made pastorally. Even now, as I leave the PPC, I couldn't clearly explain its purpose. At the beginning there seemed to be a lot of energy and enthusiasm for what might be possible. That seemed to have diminished. Certainly my energy and enthusiasm has gradually and steadily waned. My point I guess is that if the PPC model were a working, effective structure, surely this shouldn't or wouldn't happen?...The various parish groups continue to do great work within the parish. They operate independently of the PPC. They were there before the PPC, they'll continue after...*

*What does 'pastoral' mean?... Its hard to be truly pastoral unless we reflect on the identity and state and maturity of our own faith. Who is this God we believe in? Have we directly experienced him in our lives lately? Does he inform our key decisions? Do our friends, co-workers and families experience us any differently to others who are non-practicing. What does this being a practicing Christian / Catholic actually mean? There were many Catholic bankers, developers and speculators who were consumed by greed, profligate in their behaviour and I'm guessing brought their wives and families to Mass every Sunday.*

*The Catholic church is in crisis and the Irish church itself appears unwilling to tackle the crisis of falling attendance and the lack of interest of our young people. If those same young people were inspired by us active Christians, by our lives, our courage to tackle and admit our problems within the church, our kindness, our faith in God that influences our day-to-day living, do you not think that more would want to check out that version of God? A God who transforms, who challenges, who grows us up into Christ-like people....*

*At the last workshop... a concern I raised was whether we, as a council needed to grow-up, to examine our own image of God and reflect on whether it is an adult faith guided by the Spirit? To explore how we experience God in our day-to-day lives and to examine how that has changed and evolved as we matured. There appeared to me to be little appetite for this... no specific action was agreed. I suspect this is reflective of the parish.... We're comfortable the way we are. Why disturb that?*

*Against myself, I think I gave up after that.*

I asked our Parish Secretary Catriona when I met her yesterday what I should say to you today. Her advice was immediate and straight out of the Epistle to the Ephesians: "go to where the gifts are" We must make room for the prophets, apostles, evangelists, pastors, teachers - and whatever other gifts turn up- in order to build up the body of Christ.

I get a sense of those gifts here today in your presence and in the reports of the commissions I have just heard. Together in this room you are a new edifice and your pastoral plan is the pathway between the edifices of old and new. You will be champions of *Share the Good News* and *Grouping Parishes for Mission*. Co-responsibility is a good roof to be under and your aim is true: "to be the body of Christ with the help of the Holy Spirit so that we can live like Jesus in our time and place, sharing his compassionate love with all"

If I have a dream for the church of the future, of the new edifice we are building, I go back to an old edifice, to the Cathedral of St. Roque in Montpellier where I found the following notice on entering:

This Cathedral is not a museum.  
It houses a living community of faith where people have been drawing close to  
God for centuries.  
You are welcome.  
If you are a person of faith, pray here  
If you are filled with joy, give thanks here.  
If you are searching, search here.  
If you are in pain, seek relief here.  
If you are in despair, seek hope here.

I know you will never forget that a Catholic Parish (or whatever form a new pastoral group takes) is essentially a place where people are in contact with Jesus Christ. It is only out of that mystical contact that we hear his message to go out into the deep and let down our nets for the catch. As I have been saying in different ways today, the nets we cast are the nets we weave. We need to pay attention to our nets. If the nets are not catching, something is wrong. If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do the builders labour.

### **Conclusion**

We live in strange times surely but maybe the issue is not about the times at all. I quote from a sermon by St Augustine<sup>4</sup>.

You say the times are troublesome, the times are burdensome, the times are miserable. Live rightly and you will change the times. The times have never hurt anyone. Those who are hurt are hurt by human beings. So, change human beings and the times will be changed.ø

I want to end with a poem about a sow to book-end an address that began with hens. It is called 'St. Francis and the Sow' by Galway Kinnell<sup>5</sup>. St. Francis gave us that phrase spoken to him by the Lord 'rebuild my house for it is falling down' Rebuilding the church is one thing, re-teaching it its beauty is another. I leave you with the thought that you are beautiful in the eyes of the Lord in the work you are doing, and, that part of the work of the Diocesan Pastoral Council is to re-teach the church its beauty as St. Francis taught the sow.

The bud  
stands for all things,  
even for those things that don't flower,  
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;  
though sometimes it is necessary  
to re-teach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely

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<sup>4</sup> Sermon 311,8

<sup>5</sup> In *Soul Food, Nourishing Poems for Starved Minds* edited by Neil Astley and Pamela Robertson-Pearse, Bloodaxe Books p.114



until it flowers again from within, of self-blessing:  
as Saint Francis  
put his hand on the creased forehead  
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch  
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow  
began remembering all down her thick length  
from the earthen snout all the way  
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail  
down through the great broken heart  
[remembering]  
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.