Armagh: The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis. Jan 19th, 2019

Good morning everyone.

Many thanks to Mary for her words of welcome and to the Justice and Peace group here for invitation to speak.

I look forward to exploring with you this morning a way forward for the Catholic Church in Ireland, but also for religion in general, and in particular Christianity and all our churches. I will do so by first offering a read on the ‘signs of our times’, the significant factors, positive and negative, which we face, and then, with the help of Pope Francis, a path into the future.

I look forward to the discussion: my argument, as you will see, is that no one of us –including Pope Francis-has a monopoly on the truth, and it is only by talking and walking together that we will advance. I note in particular the distinctive nuances of your situation in N. Ireland and the N. Ireland churches: you will be better able to analyse those nuances yourselves, but, as you know, you are very much a part of the situation in the island of Ireland, Europe and Britain, and indeed of global trends, all of them highly influential.

I want to begin with two ‘compositions of place’, word pictures, one rather solemn and the other less so, which will help to orient our reading of the signs of the times. First, think back to the papal visit last August and the solemn occasion in Dublin Castle where the Irish State welcomed Pope Francis. The greatly admired speech of the Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, included his hope that the papal visit might mark the opening of a new chapter in the relationship between Ireland and the Catholic Church – a ‘new relationship between church and state in Ireland – a new covenant for the 21st century’. However I want to draw attention also to an earlier part of the speech where he praised the contributions of Christians and of the Catholic Church in particular at so many different levels to the well-being of the State, noting in particular the areas of health, education and care of the poor, and stating: ‘It is easy to forget that the Irish State, founded in 1922, did not set up a Department of Health or a Department of Social Welfare until 1947’ (now the two largest and best funded Government Departments, accounting for more than half of Government spending between them today). This picture speaks to contrasting images of the shift from Christendom (close church/ state collaboration) to secularization.

The second picture does so too and is by way of a story, borrowed from Michael Conway, which may or may not be literally true. It is told that one day the Bishop of Galway was walking the prom in Salthill when he spotted a lady on the beach wearing a bikini. He sent his priest-secretary down to her to point out that in his diocese only one-piece bathing costumes were allowed. The secretary went down to the lady in question and explained the ruling; she apologised profusely and asked the secretary if he might inquire from the bishop which piece he would like her to remove! (Furrow, Sept 2017). Think of the issues involved here – secularisation, yes, but also authority, hierarchy, patriarchy, feminism.

Let us move on to a closer analysis of the contemporary signs of the times, bearing in mind these two pictures, to which I will return.

Part One: The signs of our times

I am looking at the ‘signs of our times’, the context within which mission is carried out. I will do so with broad brushstrokes, focusing mainly on cultural realities, with some reference to economics. You will be conscious of the historical roots of much of what is said.

First: The place of the Catholic Church

Sociologist of religion Gladys Ganiel published a study in 2016 entitled Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland. She defines a post-Catholic Ireland in terms of ‘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’. She argues that the future of the faith in Ireland will depend on the development of ‘extra-institutional’ forms of religious expression (religion practised *outside* or *in addition to* the institutional Catholic Church). It is interesting to note that in a post papal visit survey Gladys Ganiel discovered that of the 80% of respondents who did not attend any papal event, the greatest number (51%) gave indifference as a reason, while 30% cited disagreement with the way the Church has handled abuse- indifference, then, trumped anger about abuse as a reason for not attending.

Among other reasons for this loss of prestige and moral authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland are the scandals of clerical child sexual abuse, institutional abuse, how these were mis-handled by authorities within the church, and the terrible pain and suffering of survivors and their families. We have recently experienced how these matters led to a dark cloud over the visit of Pope Francis. I would add, particularly among younger people, the non-reception of church teaching on sexuality and gender. And, in relation to young people again, the perceived in compatibility between science and religion leaves them incredulous about claims to literal truth around stories like Adam and Eve: religion, in this context, can seem like fairy-tales, fit only for children.

Secondly, the cultural context of secularism and secularisation.

Central to our rapidly changing culture are secularisation and secularism in their varying forms. With regard to secularism, the notion that ‘God is missing but not missed’ has become increasingly common among Irish citizens, affecting believers also. Sociologist Tom Inglis, in a 2014 qualitative survey, found that only two of the hundred people he interviewed in Ireland (a Muslim and an African-born Pentecostalist) said they were influenced by faith in their everyday decisions: for the rest family, friends and sports were much more spontaneously present in their hearts and minds and on their lips than any thought or mention of God. Inglis concluded that ‘…the institutional Church and Catholic language, beliefs and rituals are no longer significant webs of meaning in daily life’. [[1]](#footnote-1) As a Jesuit document dating from 1995 noted, we are all affected by this: we are not simply ‘outside our culture’, ministering to it: we are part of it, influenced by it, and so can expect doubt, uncertainty and critical questioning to be part of our life of faith, and dialogue and witness (rather than simple precept or command) to be central to our missionary way of proceeding.

As to secularisation, we have moved from a situation where ‘traditionally in European culture the institutional church was a major presence in terms of the ordering of society. Apart from explicit religious activity that was connected with the sacramental life of the church, its presence was experienced in a whole series of areas, which included education, healthcare, community building, social cohesion, sport, and, indeed, a range of other social activities’ (Conway, Sept 2017). All this has been gradually changing in Europe thanks to the Enlightenment and Modernity. The change came later in Ireland – in the South due to non-engagement with the Enlightenment, in the North perhaps due to issues of national identity and religion, in both cases influenced by our fraught relationship with the UK.

The Second Vatican Council had, in principle, come to terms with this secularization aspect of modernity, acknowledging the relative autonomy of the secular. But, as Varadkar’s comments make it clear, it is one thing to accept something in principle, another to negotiate the change on the ground. The story about the Bishop of Galway illustrates this so well: the modern public space in a democratic pluralist society is no longer governed by ecclesiastical fiat- rather ideas and values are thrashed out and established through public debate and discussion by citizens, who, in principle, enjoy equal access to the common conversation that leads in time to common values.

In some sense, to anticipate the argument, it may even be true, as Pope Francis hinted at in a 2004 homily reported by Ivereigh, that secularism may be the child of our reduction of Christianity to lofty doctrines and precepts, of our ethicism, rather than an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, mysterious icon of our merciful God. An affirmation, in other words, of relativism and human autonomy in the face of what was perceived as an ideological imposition.

It has become clear that the search for faith is conducted now not so much at the level of reason and argument, but rather on the cultural wavelength of feeling, desire and imagination, with attitudes and assumptions often unconsciously adopted and transmitted digitally through social media. The idiom of narrative, story-telling brimful of personal and communal experience is likely to communicate more effectively than apologetics couched in abstract metaphysical propositions, however cogent (see recent referendum). A deferential experience of authority has given way to the authority of experience. Inglis and Conway note how the demise of the institutional power of the Church is part of the decline of social hierarchies, in particular patriarchy, with long-term processes of informalisation and individualisation now embedded.[[2]](#footnote-2) Authenticity is deemed more important than formal office.

What is valued today, according to theologian Michael Conway, is an alternative order, a new ‘social imaginary’ (Charles Taylor), which is more egalitarian, with enormous appreciation for the human person and authenticity and which embodies that ‘rejection of insignificance’ (de Certeau), referring to the previous silencing of marginalized voices in our culture (women, the LGBT community, children). Equality, freedom (especially freedom of choice) are greatly valued. Conway argues that what is required for the Church in this new, evolving cultural matrix is a less top-down command-and-obey type teaching and communication, and more open space interaction nourished by the gospel and common life which facilitates an adult taking of responsibility for our lives of faith. He concludes by saying of the Catholic Church in Ireland: ‘I think we can say that the once powerful, monolithic institution is being slowly disempowered and what remains will need to be re-shaped into a new, more culturally appropriate constellation’.[[3]](#footnote-3)

It can easily be seen that there is a major disjunction (prescinding altogether from the damage done by clerical abuse) between this contemporary culture and the institutional, hierarchical, patriarchal model of church which has prevailed despite some changes since Vatican II.

This is shown particularly in the reality that, as grand-parents know so well, faith transmission has become problematic. Nuala O’Loan notes that teachers of children preparing for First Holy Communion and Confirmation ‘have been aware for quite a while that the wider cultural shift away from religion has made passing on the faith an extremely difficult task’ (Irish Catholic, Oct 19, 2017). Papal biographer Austen Ievereigh, speaking of the Latin American situation and evangelization, notes the conclusions of the CELAM council at Aparaceida, that in the new context of cultural and religious pluralism the ‘transmission belts were broken’.

Conway, speaking of Ireland, notes that the notions of ‘handing on the faith’ by parents, and children being ‘brought up in the faith’ speak to an era of relative homogeneity in which socialization in faith and church were the default reality. This is no longer so – for all the reasons given concerning antipathy to institutions and loss of any naïve sense of the transcendent- religion is now firmly based on freedom. The figures of pilgrim and convert speak to this new situation: identity is not simply given, fitting in to a pre-ordained context, but must be negotiated through trial and error – the pilgrim image implies that the search for meaning is still very much alive (I’m spiritual but not religious….sociologist’s Grace Davie’s notion of ‘believing but not belonging’) but involves intentionality and choice, based on experience, rather than simple inheritance. Similarly, at various points, choices are made and the convert comes into being – in both negative (rigid) and positive (freedom of spirit) senses (leading, perhaps, to Davie’s refined notion of ‘vicarious religion’, in which religion is performed by an active minority on behalf of a much larger number, who implicitly at least not only understand but also approve of what the minority is doing’ – Ganiel, 16-19).

Thirdly, economics

Thirdly, a further characteristic of our Irish context – and mutually symbiotic with the cultural context just described- is our part in a global narrative which encourages a narrow form of economic progress which is indifferent to other values. The crisis in housing and homelessness, and in healthcare, are two glaring symptoms of this approach in Ireland, as well as our failure to meet environmental targets.

This neo-liberal economic model, with its characteristic individualism and consumerism (the esteem for freedom of choice is at least partially due to this form of capitalism), has colonised the socio-political and cultural spheres in a way that, despite great gains, has spawned inequality, has disregard for the poor and the earth, and has introduced a coarsening of public discourse and a cynicism around politics and elites. The individual, then, is strong, the common good weak, competition and instant gratification trump solidarity and restraint. An interior life can be difficult to develop in the context of the ‘globalization of indifference’ characteristic of a consumer culture which trivializes meaning, and a digital information over-load which majors on sound-bites. An encounter with the living Jesus and his mission of hope to our world as articulated in The Sermon on the Mount and Mt 25 are light years away from this hegemonic model.

What is required in all this is not a simple so-called counter-cultural hostile stance to the world and the culture that we find ourselves in. This was not the option of God, of Jesus, of Vatican II when it spoke of church as ‘a light for the nations’. God’s spirit and Word are already there before us, in nature and in history, and we need a cultural discernment to sort out the really good that is there in our world and which we need the humility to learn from, as well as countering that which is anti-human and anti-creation. For this to happen, to provide a context in which we can encounter the graciousness of Jesus Christ and be resourced to fulfil his mission, we require the kind of church which is fit for purpose for our new cultural context, without being untrue to its own roots in revelation.

Part Two: A Synodal Catholic Church in Ireland

In a recent book I have tried to show how, as it happens, Pope Francis is proposing a synodal model of Church, rooted in a faith encounter with Jesus Christ and committed to his mission, as the appropriate institutional response to our changed world.[[4]](#footnote-4) Remember Conway’s ‘open-space interaction’?

Francis has directed the Catholic Church in an unambiguous way back to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council, with its focus on the Church as the People of God and characterized by collegiality and conciliarity. He has expanded the notion of collegiality beyond that of episcopal participation by using the term ‘synodality’ to highlight the role of all the baptised in their participation in the three-fold ‘office’ of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet (teacher) and king (ruler). This ‘synodal turn’ has the merit of retrieving ancient Christian truths (like collegiality itself and the ‘sense of the faithful’), as well as offering a more inclusive, participative and conversational space in which individuals and communities can negotiate their own identities with integrity today.

This ‘inverted pyramid’ model of Church, a revolutionary paradigm shift (for the Catholic Church) which values decentralisation and subsidiarity, consultation and open debate, dialogue internally and with our culture, a share of the faithful in church teaching and governance, is more attuned to the spirit of the age. It also retains, through its notion of ‘communal discernment’, the ability to distinguish critically between mere fad and whispers of the Spirit that are authentic.

The image that draws together much of what I said to date (about encounter, mission, the signs of our times), is that of Jesus walking the byways of Palestine with his male and female disciples, and, more particularly the scene of the two disciples (male/female?!) on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24). Think of this latter: sad/discussing (theology)/joined by stranger, Jesus/explains- the Word, Scripture, theology/seated at table, breaking of bread (liturgy, sacrament)/bursting to tell the others (mission), and did not our hearts burn within us (consolation). See also the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15) – debate, decision, ‘it seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit’, received with joy….!

Francis wants a Church that is ‘entirely synodal’ at all levels. This will respect the fundamental equality of all the baptised and be critical of clericalism in all its forms. British Jesuit psychologist Brendan Callaghan[[5]](#footnote-5) has pointed out that the ‘gains’ for clergy that come with a dysfunctional clericalism include special status, power and a lack of accountability, with horrific consequences for the safety of children and others, as Pope Francis himself has increasingly noted in his identification of clericalism as a root cause of abuse of power, conscience and sexual abuse. Interestingly, Callaghan goes on to note the ‘gains’ for laity that accompany the acceptance of clericalism, including the avoidance of responsibility and a clearly defined role, as well the security and ‘reflected glory’ that derive from dependence on another.

This new model of Church will offer spaces for the sharing of faith, doubts and searchings for truth among its members, with outreach to alienated and fellow searchers at a time of deep secularisation. It will be conscious of the mission to announce and facilitate the coming of the Kingdom of God by its socio-economic, environmental critique and its privileging of the lens of the poor. It will respect the disquiet among the Catholic faithful caused by certain neuralgic teachings, in particular on sexuality and gender, and be a catalyst for sound doctrinal development. It will offer the promise of more accountable governance, with the involvement of laity, including, of course, women, thus providing a safer space to counteract the perennial threat of abuse.

In this new model, as Irish sociologist of religion Michele Dillon (Postsecular Catholicism, Relevance and Renewal, Oxford University Press, 2018, 164) pithily observes, ‘the cat is out of the bag’- Catholicism is returning to a tradition of respect for open debate and the ‘voice of the faithful’, present in its own patrimony, and suitable to address the post-secular culture of authenticity. In doing so, as parents do with children and then in the different world of teenagers and adolescences, the Church is learning a new language as it enters into a deeper relationship with all her members – a new language that is more culturally attuned (Dympna Mallon).

It will, in short, be a ‘field-hospital’ to those who suffer and are troubled, and a more attractive icon to all of the Jesus Christ who captivated his disciples with his authority, mercy and tenderness, and his intimacy with the one he called Abba. It will dare to propose nothing less than a call to holiness for all the baptised and to announce Good News to all the world. For all this to happen, as well as a change in attitude and culture, there will also need to be appropriate institutional and structural change, so that councils and synods become a common feature of ecclesial life at all levels –parochial, diocesan, regional and universal.

One thinks, in short, of what Francis himself wrote in EG 27: ‘I dream of a missionary option, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation’. He is a strategic thinker, playing a long game: ‘time is greater than space’ – processes will yield more lasting results than quick political gains.

There is much opposition to what Francis is proposing, and yet he is proceeding apace. The two-year Synod on the Family (2014-15) was an interesting test-case. Widespread consultation and encouragement of frank debate transformed this synod from functioning as a somewhat bland rubber- stamping of pre-written Curial documents, as had become common, to a vibrant and authentic debate, often keenly contested, on issues of real concern to the faithful. The resulting loosening of the position on the access of divorced and remarried Catholics to Eucharistic participation was the fruit of the process and, hopefully, the harbinger of further such developments. His approach was also apparent in the recent Synod of Youth (we in Ireland need to imagine our walking with young people in a new way: Eamon Martin on young people as ‘agents of evangelization’) - it is becoming embedded in the culture of the church. There was open talk of decision making roles for women, a more inclusive outreach to the LGBT community. And this year there is an Amazonian based synod promised which will have married priests and decision making roles for women on its agenda.

The key element here is that once you allow things to be named and discussed, not denied and viewed as taboo, then you are already on the way to change.

However, it is clear that Francis cannot accomplish this fundamental ecclesial change of direction on his own. By its nature – synodal involves us all walking together-it will depend on the faithful, and in particular the Bishops, understanding and accepting what he is proposing. I think I can say that at last the Irish Bishops are giving this model serious consideration, as indeed are those in France, Australia, and elsewhere in the world. Change is happening.

It remains the case, however, that what is involved here is, in the words of eminent canon lawyer and theologian Ladislas Orsy, a search for ‘a better balance of vital forces’[[6]](#footnote-6) and not a simple elimination of dynamic poles. There will be matters where it is appropriate that the Pope exercises primatial authority through executive powers and not wait for a more prolonged exercise of communal discernment involving the whole Church (sexual abuse/financial reform) And, as ARCIC III makes it clear, we need to explore how to combine the on-going executive and teaching role of bishops and priests with deliberative lay involvement. But Pope Francis has pointed to a clear way to go.

It is the way to go, I repeat, only if grounded in an experience of our encounter with Jesus Christ and the mission which flows from this. At a time of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman-Ivereigh), when the ties of belonging are weakened and the traditional transmission belts of faith are broken, the temptation for many, including the young, beleaguered by modernity is to retreat into a neo-conservative enclave. Francis is telling us that, as in the early church, a situation of urban pluralism, the way forward is not, like Peter, to be terrified by the waves as he left the boat, but to listen to the ‘do not be afraid’ of the Lord and to rely on his mercy. This will not happen by appealing for the retention of legal and State privileges for the Church, but rather by ‘going out’, by being with those who suffer most from globalised secularism and neo-liberalism, who perhaps do not go to Church but who experience the action of God in their lives, and devising ways forward from a dialogue with them. Discern and reform is the way forward.

Conclusion: We are at the start of a journey, or, a new stage of our journey. The crowd in Acts, after the preaching of Peter, asked ‘what are we to do?’ (Acts 2, 31). Later, in a crisis which nearly tore apart the early church (about the place of the pagans/Gentiles) and pitted Paul against Peter, matters were settled at the Council of Jerusalem ‘ it seemed good to us and the Holy Spirit’ (15, 28).

This, a time of great weakness and humiliation for our Church, is also, paradoxically, one of excitement and opportunity. We are being asked to renew our faith and sense of mission by moving towards the synodal church that can nourish these conversations and be suitable for reaching out to our world. Given our current situation, as Archbishop Diarmuid Martin noted several years ago, we will certainly be a minority church in the future, and the only question is whether we will be ‘a culturally irrelevant minority’. To avoid that, to be true to our mission of being a light to the world, I think we need to change along the lines Francis himself has indicated.

I am most interested in your thoughts!

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1. Tom Inglis, Church and Culture in Catholic Ireland, *Studies,* 106, Spring 2017, 21-30 at 24 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Inglis, op cit, 21. See also Thomas G. Casey, S.J., *Wisdom at the Crossroads,* Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018 for an expose of the thinking of Irish Jesuit Michael Paul Gallagher on the centrality of culture in understanding modern developments in Ireland and indeed Europe and developing countries in general. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Michael Conway, Faith-life, Church, and Institution, *The Furrow,* 68, September 2017, 461-474, at 474 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For more detail on what follows, see Gerry O’Hanlon, *The Quiet Revolution of Pope Francis,* Dublin: Messenger Publications, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Brendan Callaghan, ‘On Scandal and scandals: the psychology of clerical paedophilia’, *Studies,* 99, autumn 2010, 343-356, at 351 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ladislas Orsy, *Receiving the Council,* Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009, p 12 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)