

Welcome: Mary Vallely

Mary Vallely welcomed everyone, and in particular Gerry O'Hanlon, S.J. She said she had an image of a group walking a road together: pope, bishops, priests, religious and lay people, all talking and listening to each other, with Jesus in the middle. Where they were heading to she did not know but the conversation was flowing and the journeying was good. She said:-

"We had Francis Campbell, the former UK ambassador to the Vatican, a Newry man, speaking to an ecumenical assembly here in The Market Place a few weeks ago. He came across as a man of deep faith whose every act was informed by his faith. When reminding us how to pass on the legacy which we have received he stated that it will only be handed on in a better state "if we engage, if we build, if we invite and promote."

If we ENGAGE... This, today, is a rare opportunity for us all to engage with each other, clergy and laity. We need to listen to each other, to be people, not "hearing without listening" as in the Simon and Garfunkel song, but actively listening to one another; to engage in conversation first of all." She then introduced the prayer:

Prayer (said together)

Lord, help us to commit our lives to making the Gospel come alive each day.

For those who have no voice,
we ask you to speak.

For those who feel unworthy,
we ask you to pour your love out
in waterfalls of tenderness.

For those who live in pain,
we ask you to bathe them
in the river of your healing.

For those who are lonely, we ask
you to keep them company.

For those who are depressed,
we ask you to shower upon them
the light of hope.

Lord, we ask you to give to all the
world that which we need most — Peace.

Come, Holy Spirit, into our hearts; help us to listen to your voice and give us courage and compassion as we journey on together as baptised people, each of us precious in the eyes of God.
Amen

Talk: Gerry O'Hanlon, S.J.

Note: This is a summary of Gerry's comments. The full text can be read at: [LINK](#)

Contemporary culture

Our contemporary culture, with all its faults and superficialities, has many important values. Among them are an appreciation of the dignity and freedom of the individual, the importance of minorities, the requirement for evidence-based knowledge, and the notion that authority has to be exercised in a way that is shared and inclusive, taking account of all voices, including of course those of women.

The way the Church is currently organised

The dominant model of Church organization within Catholicism up to recently has been the antithesis of these values. Its structures have been heavily centralised, its mode of teaching by way of clerical magisterial judgement and its governance by means of male hierarchical authority. This means, then, that while citizens are treated like adults, baptised Catholics often feel they are treated like children. There is a fracture between faith and culture, more particularly between culture and the way the Church is organized. The effect is schizoid, and the attractiveness of the church is greatly diminished.

Pope Francis' Vision

The Second Vatican Council tried to change some of this, in particular by proposing a more collegial, conciliar model of governance and a notion of baptism bringing with it privileges and responsibilities around teaching and governance.

Pope Francis has taken all this a step further with his proposal of a 'synodal Church'. He means a Church as People of God, in which governance is appropriately de-centralised, with more responsibility given to local and regional churches to make decisions that affect them. Similarly these decisions, as well as church teaching overall, are to have input from 'the sense of the faithful' (the lived experience of baptized Christians) and from theologians. For this to happen he encourages a culture of open discussion and debate in the Church, of dialogue, with appropriate structures and institutions at parish, diocesan, regional and universal levels to allow this to happen. He is confident that –as in the early church and indeed in the first millennium in general–the diversity and even controversy that will inevitably result may maintain unity by means of the use of 'communal discernment'.

Scriptural basis

The Scriptural paradigm of this model (walking together along the road) is Jesus walking and talking with his early disciples 'along the way', in particular the scene in Luke 24 on the Road to Emmaus – the despondency, the biblical and theological instruction, the recognition with the breaking of the bread, the sense that 'were not our hearts burning within us', and the missionary desire to share the experience with the others. All the ingredients of communal discernment are present here. And in Acts 15, confronted with the first major crisis for the early church (the conflict around how to respond to the evident attraction of the Gentiles to the Good News), the Council of Jerusalem replicated this inclusive model of communal discernment to arrive at a resolution.

Francis is not proposing this institutional revolution for its own sake. Rather, it is in function of our encounter with Jesus and the mission which flows from this, in particular the mission to the poor and to our planet. If the church continues as it is, so out of synch with our culture, it cannot fulfil its mission to be a 'light for the world', but is at risk of becoming a self-referential, sect- like reality, and 'a culturally irrelevant minority'.

Call to change

Francis has given us the encouragement and principles to effect change. We now need to try to translate what he says into our way of being parishes, dioceses, national and regional churches. We need to promote interactive spaces in our local areas which will encourage that central encounter with Jesus, and enable us to discern what form the mission to our contemporaries should take. We will learn to do this by trial and error, over time. We can hope that our Bishops will give leadership in this vital matter.

As of now, the Church is no longer capable of speaking on the same cultural wavelength of our times. There is a huge disconnect. Francis is pointing us towards a re-engagement, the discovery of a new language, which will affirm what is positive and more effectively critique what is negative in contemporary culture. This means a lot of dying to customary ways of doing things, a de-construction of the habitual, a call to embark on new voyages of discovery. As Francis puts it: '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' (EG 27). We need 'new wines, new skins', keen strategic and tactical thinking, and the courage in face of opposition and the unknown that comes with the Lord's repeated reassurance: 'do not be afraid'.

End

The meeting then broke into small groups. The following are some of the points raised:

Traditional RC church neglected Scripture. This is very important.
In pre-Vatican II we sacralised people without evangelising them.
People use language others cannot understand and this excludes people.
We need to find a bridge between our joy and reaching out to others.
We feel nervous about approaching Protestants because we think they know so much about Scripture. We are in a miasma of thoughts where we do not understand ourselves - a sort of Limbo. Protestants would be surprised to learn of our uncertainty.
We need a Christ centred encounter that makes room for the Holy Spirit and listens.
You can see a liminal space as either positive or negative. I was born after Vatican II and I have no wish to go back to it.
A priest in a parish listened to people and this enabled lay people to get involved. All of us need to be leaders, as well as priests and lay people. As lay people when we do discern something we need the courage to speak out about it. Listening should be 80%, speaking 20%.
We need to get over the idea that we are not worthy, and start appreciating our own talents.
The way to go forward is to get back to old practice of prayer, etc.
Getting back to old ways of doing things: there is a big movement to introduce children to meditation, and also a lay contemplative movement.
People talk about Scripture, but they have not been introduced to God. Do that first, and then the rest will follow. There are a lot of things in his talk that I did not understand. God is missing, but God is not missed. That is very important. I work with people who are marginalised and they do the 12 Steps: God is mentioned in at least 5 of those steps. But we have to get them to experience God. We need academics, but we also need people who can reach out to ordinary people.

Gerry O'Hanlon response:

We have to find a way to communicate with each other. Pope Francis is very good at this. He talks about the holiness of everyday life: the woman who goes shopping and meets a friend who wants to slander people, and she resists, and then she goes home, and she is tired but her son wants to talk and she listens, and then later on she is discouraged herself and she says a decade of the rosary.

We are in a learning space at the moment. In the early days of ecumenism people would look at contested issues, and find points of similarity and difference. Now they are using 'receptive ecumenism', which means we learn from each other and write up what they learn.

I remember when I was a student in Queens I met RC students who were terrified of Protestants asking them about the Scriptures.

If we put the focus on Jesus, out of that will of course come doctrines. But in any relationship we often don't know what is going on. And that is good. Archbishop Rowan Williams responded to an interviewer looking for a Yes or No answer to questions about the resurrection: and in response he said: did you ever think that the lust for certainty is a sin? Meeting President Higgins he said he envied people of faith because of their certainty. But we should have uncertainty.

A BBC interviewer, who was from Ireland, told him that one of her nephews came into the house and hoped his grandfather would vote Yes to the gay marriage referendum, and he said to them that he had 14 grandchildren, and on the law of averages one of them must be gay. So this shows that parents and grandparents get stretched.

Discernment is not talk for talk's sake: it is for decisions. At the Synod on the Family people on the right understood immediately what was going on: reversal of a decision by John Paul II in 1987. And because there was a real discernment it led to a new approach about divorced people and Communion.

If you look back at the Council of Jerusalem, or the 4th century where they fought cats and dogs about who God is. Between 325 and 375 there was turmoil after the Council of Nicea. According to Cardinal Newman the people who were true to the faith were the laity, and it was the bishops who got it wrong. So the teaching authority of the church is more than the Pope, or Pope and bishops: it also includes theologians and lay people. Anglicans admit that their parliamentary process is not always suitable for a firm decision.

The core to everything is the relationship to Jesus.

Further questions/comments

A friend of mine would spend a night a month in a Shinto temple, and all prayed in their own

way. And something positive happened. Quiet openness, listening to God. Before you start sharing in an ecumenical group spend time in prayer.

A lot of what Gerry is saying seems similar to the Eastern Church, and related to what Robert Keegan is doing.

I found the book very readable: very strong on the need for process over short-term gains. We did not talk re subsidiarity, and we need to talk re a national synod. The nearest thing we have are pastoral councils. But there is no organic link from parish to diocese to national councils. So bring our councils together in each diocese, with their priest, once a year. Let them share their experiences, and envision together, and also elect a diocesan pastoral council. Let the laity elect their own representatives. And also set up a national pastoral council and let them sit with the national bishops' conference.

In the Armagh diocese there is a diocesan council but it has not met for a few years.

Experience has taught me the difference between studying and praying scripture. We need a personal relationship: to find out what God is saying not to the person in the scriptural story only, but what God is saying to me now. You don't need to be a scholar, but to be silent and open, and to ponder.

Gerry O'Hanlon response

Praying together: Jacques Dupuis and Bill Johnston were two theologians. Both reflected on praying together. People in India thought Dupuis was right wing, but when he came to teach in Rome they thought he was left wing. But the Church is now more universal.

One of the strengths of the RC church is mysticism, Teresa of Avila, Ignatius, etc. Over 50% of the people who come to Bueno's Jesuit retreat house in Wales are non-RC. There is also room for scriptural scholarship. Young people are not going to accept literalism, but they need to be educated in method.

The worst thing that can happen is that people are called together and the bishop says he is listening, and nothing happens. Or one priest works in a facilitative way, but the next priest does not.

The Australian and French bishops are both working on ways to go forward in synodal way. When the recent synod on young people was being called the French bishops had meetings over two years of young people from 18-25 in groups of 8, and all the material was fed into Rome. They did it in Lourdes, and we could do the same in Knock. The Bishop of Limerick has done it, and done it well. He was told at the start that some issues could not be part of the discussion because it could not change. But others told them that you could not stop people discussing these. So what he did was end the Synod at lunch time, and then contentious issues were discussed in the afternoon, and everything was reported to Rome.

We can learn something from poorer people. There is a difference in the culture: they know the unfairness of life more directly, and these are the people that Jesus was with.

We will not have the kudos of being part of the establishment, and this calls us back to our relationship with the Lord who tells us 'Do not be afraid'. Do we believe him?

Further questions/comments

Siobhan Garrigan spoke about a group of peasants who met in groups weekly in Nicaragua and who had no priest. This was not scriptural study, but allowing them to express their connection with the scriptures. Children can also relate to scripture.

I have not heard any talk about the Eucharist, or Adoration.

There is a danger in synods being set up and not really working effectively.

Poorer people need to be involved, but middle class people also need their faith strengthened.

Through listening to each other we create a sense of belonging.

I was a teacher: now many parishes will not have a priest. In the past we automatically looked to the priest for leadership. But we set up groups for all the different areas: baptism, funerals, etc. But after 60 years I am still at the beginning.

I was delighted at Francis' election. I am much more a Francis than a Benedict person. But he seemed chaotic over the McCarrick affair. I think Francis is very disorganised. He can say one thing one day and three days later somebody contradicts it. This chaos is not helpful.

The US church used to be left wing, now it has been hijacked by people who support Trumpite nonsense. In Ireland we have much less social fracture.

Gerry O'Hanlon response

I am not averse to the demythologising of the papacy, so I like the fact that Francis makes mistakes, and that he apologises. I don't think he is chaotic at another level. He is a strategic

thinker. When he was elected there was dismay among many Jesuits because he had a difficult history in the Order. But he does know how to admit mistakes. When he was asked who he was he said that he was a sinner. And this was not a general statement, he was specific about past authoritarianism.

Pope Francis talks about popular piety: he is very sensitive to the way poorer people experience faith. Gladys Ganiel is beginning to see the strengths of institutions, and while the most important thing is our relationship with Christ, as humans we need institutions.

Adoration is very important. This is part of the encounter with Jesus. One of the key things about the Eucharist is that it is the group who comes together.

The danger of ticking boxes in holding synods. If it gets to this we are in trouble, and Presbyterians and Eastern churches have experienced this. But there is so much energy on the ground and we are not tapping into it.

Kevin Hargadan is a Presbyterian working in the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, and he has a very good critique of our current economy. Jesus was touching on a reality that when we are rich we can feel less vulnerable.

Re reorganisation of parishes and clustering: I don't see this as a long-term solution, but clustering can pool resources. But it is wonderful when lay people take on leadership.

We have to listen and respect people with whom we disagree. We have experienced this in many religious orders.

End