

Limerick Diocesan Synod. March 18, 2015

At Mass today the first reading is that wonderful piece from Second-Isaiah(Is 49: 8-15), describing a kind of 'second Exodus' as the Jews began returning from their exile in Babylon. This reading finishes with a verse which the Jerome Biblical Commentary calls 'one of the most touching expressions of divine love in the whole Bible' –

*'For Zion was saying, 'The Lord has abandoned me*

*The Lord has forgotten me'.*

*Does a woman forget her baby at the breast,*

*Or fail to cherish the son of her womb?*

*Yet even if these forget,*

*I will never forget you'.*

And so, we are told, at a time when the People were at a very low point, 'the Lord consoles his people and takes pity on those who are afflicted', urging the heavens to 'shout for joy', the earth to 'exult', the mountains 'to break into happy cries', because, as the Gospel goes on to tell us, God our Father is 'the source of life' and 'the dead will leave their graves' (Jn 5: 17-30).

The Catholic Church in Ireland, and indeed world-wide, has recently experienced many sad and desolate years of exile, often a self-induced exile. You will recall the terrible shame at the revelations of clerical sexual abuse and its mishandling by authorities, the intimations of financial and sexual scandals within the Vatican itself, the sense of crisis that surrounded the conclave of Cardinals gathered to elect the new Pope – to name but a few of the causes and signs of our distress.

And now, with Pope Francis at a global level and with the call to diocesan synod here locally in Limerick, the Lord is again showing us that he never forgets his People, we are experiencing a renewal of hope, we have reason to be grateful.

Secularisation

In his address to you last November Paul Philibert (ref) put it so well: a synod is a way of spiritually re-founding a diocese, we are called to be agents and not just clients of the church's mission, full-time and not just part-time Christians through our baptismal calling, so that in our families, our work, our struggles with unemployment and poverty, our questions and doubts about faith and the church, we live our vocation to nothing less than holiness (LG, n 40), each of us.

We do so at a time when, as Paul VI described, 'the split between the Gospel and the culture is without doubt the drama of our time' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, n 20) – we inhabit a culture, a way of life, in which 'God is missing, but not missed', so that our habitual feelings, desires, imaginings (and indeed thoughts) operate more spontaneously at a horizontal level and we have to consciously stretch and focus in order to become aware that, in the words of Hopkins, 'the world is charged with the grandeur of God'. More than 50 years after Hopkins, in the middle of the last century, Paddy Kavanagh could still without hesitation observe that 'God is in the bits and pieces of everyday'. But

in our time even so genial a poet as Seamus Heaney was altogether more circumspect and although full of a sense of wonder, of the marvellous, the numinous even, still he was less inclined to associate this simply with God or, much less, with Jesus Christ and in a posthumously published interview he noted that ‘...Christian myth is so contentious and exhausted’.

This secularized and even secular world that we inhabit was summed up well by a group of Jesuits at a General Congregation in 1995, writing to their fellow Jesuits (but with equal application to all of us):

*‘...the boundary line between the Gospel and the modern and post-modern consciousness passes through the heart of each of us. Each Jesuit encounters the impulse to unbelief first in himself; it is only when we deal with this dimension in ourselves that we can speak to others of the reality of God (Our Mission and Culture, n 20)*

And perhaps that is the first challenge before us as we embark on this path of synodality, this journeying together – the challenge to admit our lack of faith (Lord, I believe, help my unbelief – Mk, 9: 24) and by means of our time together, our study, our sharing, our mutual witness, to strengthen one another in faith and find better ways of sharing this faith with our culture which, for the most part, is not so much hostile, as indifferent. It is in this mystery of ‘encounter’, so often spoken about by Pope Francis, that we will discover strength in our weakness and get glimpses again of the call to holiness that Philibert spoke about.

As a theologian and ecumenist Brendan Leahy had noted in 2006<sup>1</sup> ‘...the need to promote a culture of synodality’ and ‘...that dissatisfaction had been expressed at how this synodal praxis had been realised’ since its recommendation at the Second Vatican Council’. Now as Bishop he has convened this Synod, inviting all in the diocese ‘to travel together’, noting that ‘everyone has an opinion worth listening to’ and including those ‘who might consider that they do not have deep faith or seldom take part in worship or feel they have lost their faith’ (letter of Bishop Leahy, September 2014). In doing so he is being true to his own theological insight and also to the way Francis as Bishop of Rome is articulating a new way of being church, dreaming of a missionary option or impulse in the Church ‘...capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitable channelled for the evangelisation of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation’ (EG, 27, quoted in Bishop’s Letter).

This is an exciting time for all of us in the Catholic Church, and a time when we can learn a lot from fellow Christians who have travelled this path of synodality for a long time. More than ever we are all learners at this stage of our journey, invited to take a risk of letting go of our more traditional, full-time cleric/ part-time lay way of being church in order to travel together.

I have already identified one particular challenge facing us, that of secularity, a challenge which the reflection and sharing, the catechesis, prayer and witness of the synodal process are well equipped to meet. I want now, always in this learning mode, to identify two further challenges which it seems to me are important, and I invite you throughout to be aware not just of what you think but also of how you feel as I outline these challenges, since, as the Bishop has indicated, this whole process is

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<sup>1</sup> Brendan Leahy, *People, Synod and Upper Room: Vatican II’s Ecclesiology of Communion*, in Dermot A. Lane and Brendan Leahy, *Vatican II, Facing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Dublin: Veritas, 2006, 49-80 at 65

not simply one of discussion but is a 'period of discernment', something I want to come back to at the end of my remarks.

### A Poor Church for the Poor

At the heart of the missionary vision of Pope Francis for the Church is his prioritizing of the poor – the economically poor, the sick, immigrants, the marginalized of any kind. For Francis the preferential option for the poor is '...primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological or philosophical one...this is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor' (EG, 198). His central intuition is that Jesus, the expression of who God is, had a special care in his Kingdom for those cast to the side by the rest of us, and this theological 'given' grounds all the cultural and sociological realities which follow.

Francis responds to the challenge of this reality at many levels –in symbolic and practical ways through his visits to the immigrants at Lampedusa, to prisoners, his embrace of the sick, his provision of washing facilities for the homeless at the Vatican, his reform measures with respect to the Vatican Bank and sexual abuse, and his constant privileging of the poor in all that he does and says.

At the macro-economic and analytic level he deplores the fact that in our world 'inequality is increasingly evident' (EG, 52) and that 'while the earnings of a minority are growing exponentially, so too is the gap separating the majority from the prosperity enjoyed by those happy few' (EG, 56). He criticises 'trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world' (EG, 54). He says 'no' to a socioeconomic system of exclusion and inequality which spawns violence (53; 59). He speaks of the need 'to resolve the structural causes of poverty', noting that the problems of the poor need to be resolved 'by rejecting the absolute autonomy of the markets and financial speculation and by attacking the structural causes of inequality', stating that 'inequality is the root of social ills' (202). All people, including the poor, deserve not just nourishment or a 'dignified sustenance', but also a general 'temporal welfare and prosperity, which requires education, access to health care and above all employment' (192). He is aware of the environmental dimension of this problematic and has promised a more extended treatment of this shortly.

He believes in listening to the voice of the poor, whose popular piety is a source of theology (*a locus theologicus*, 126), and who, sharing in the 'sense of the faith' have much to teach the rest of us who should allow ourselves be evangelized by them (198). And, in a very interesting comment on the agency of poor people, he says: – 'I am convinced of one thing: the great changes in history were realized when reality was seen not from the centre but rather from the periphery' (address to Religious, November 2013 –see also Address to Popular Movements, 2014).

But – and this is the real challenge for us- can we listen to these fine words and not simply give assent with glazed eyes and pass on (the Levite and Priest in the story of the Good Samaritan) but allow them to disturb us and open us to experience the realities of poverty and deprivation not just globally but here in the Diocese of Limerick? You will have delegates at the Synod from poor parishes, mixed ones, comfortable ones: can there be a renewed engagement as Church with the often harsh realities facing people daily on estates in Limerick where there is multiple disadvantage, as outlined in the recent talk by Dr Niamh Hourigan (March 11<sup>th</sup>)? Can we allow ourselves to really

hear the voices of those among us who tell of the hardships associated with drug addiction, domestic violence, lone parenthood; the fear and intimidation generated by criminals; the daily struggle to meet basic human needs so that issues like the teaching on contraception or women priests can seem like irrelevant luxuries and even attendance at church can feel like alien and too big an 'ask'?

Central to our synodal experience is the readiness to be Spirit-led, to try to come closer to God's dream for our world (his Kingdom), in which the poor have such a special place. Think, as St Ignatius did, of God looking down on our world and of what God sees. Think of God looking down on Limerick. And so, can we be practical, can we let the voice of Myross, of South Hill, of St Marys, of Ballinacura Weston, of wherever there is suffering and pain in our diocese, be heard in such a way that we are engaged, involved – not so much that we look for immediate solutions, but that we allow the Holy Spirit to stir us and then gradually to lead us in the direction of solutions.

These solutions may lie at the macro level in terms of critiquing government policies that cause hardship or at the more micro level in exploring concrete projects locally like job internships or practical ways to facilitate education (the great means of breaking the cycle of poverty) or, indeed, in using the professional expertise among us to suggest other ways of helping. I am aware that much is already being done, by civil authorities and indeed by the Diocese: but can we allow this Synod to challenge all of us, as church in Limerick, to find new ways of engagement?

You know the story in the Gospel of the Rich Man (Dives) and Lazarus, the poor man begging at his gates (Lk 16: 19-31). Maybe because we are bombarded with so much information and opinion we are often left feeling powerless in front of the world's problems and Pope Francis has perceptively drawn attention to what he calls a 'globalization of indifference' (EG, 54). Can we, in this period of discernment, allow our indifference to be challenged, can we allow ourselves as church in Limerick to be disturbed by the poverty and hardship close to us? And perhaps – to pick up on the suggestion of Francis, who clearly does not want all this to remain at the level of fine words and whose approach is characterized by urgency, passion and authenticity- the best way to face this particular challenge at synod may well be to listen attentively to the voices of those among us who are at the cutting edge of this poverty.

#### Church reform

Another challenge for your Synod is the invitation to engage in a 'resolute process of discernment, purification and reform' (EG, 30) in response to the call to conversion of not just the Church universal, the Church in Rome, but also each particular Church, including of course the Church in Limerick. Pope Francis from the beginning has linked the vocation of the church to be missionary – and so, outward looking- with the need for church reform, which is 'demanded' by pastoral conversion (EG, 27).

The main lines of the required reform are clear enough. Apart from particular areas like the Vatican Bank and sexual abuse, Francis has called for a less centralised and more collegial church at all levels – the 9 man Council of Cardinals, the more dynamic Synod of Bishops, more effective and not just affective authority for National and Regional Episcopal Conferences, real and not just token

consultation of all of us, honest and open debate, a more visible and authority-sharing role for women, a CDF less inclined to censorship and more in service of both bishops and Pope.

Underlying this vision of a new kind of church and the reforms necessary to bring it about is the theological and scriptural privileging at Vatican II of the Church as the People of God, with the 'sense of the faith' or 'sense of the faithful' functioning as a real source of church teaching and testing, through reception, of the authenticity of that teaching (EG, 119/198). Of particular relevance in this context is the 2014 document from the International Theological Commission *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church, authorised for publication by Cardinal Mueller, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This document notes with care the significance of the 'sense of the faith' as a gift of the Holy Spirit by way of which church teaching is formulated and authenticated through a process of discernment by the whole Church and notes the importance of providing means – including 'particular councils...diocesan synods' – through which this 'sense of the faith' may be accessed.

Within this theological and scriptural overview it is clear that the role of the local bishop, of Conferences of bishops, of the Synod of Bishops in Rome and of the Pope himself as called to teach authoritatively is not in question. What is at issue is the renewed insistence that in so teaching they bear in mind all the proper sources of such teaching – Scripture, Tradition, previous church teaching, the signs of the times, what is happening at the periphery and so on – including the lived wisdom of the Christian community ('the sense of the faithful'). This teaching, after all, is not meant to be something imposed from on high, out of touch with human experience, but rather an authentic expression of the faith of the Christian community.

As Francis puts it himself (EG, 31) at times in this process the bishop 'will go before his people, pointing the way and keeping their hopes vibrant. At other times, he will simply be in their midst with his unassuming and merciful presence. At yet other times, he will have to walk after them, helping those who lag behind and – above all – allowing the flock to strike out on new paths....' And he will have to encourage dialogue 'out of a desire to listen to everyone and not simply those who would tell him what he would like to hear'.

You get the picture – the encouragement of the kind of open, honest, sometime robust dialogue which has been well modelled already in the first part of the two-stage Synod on the Family in Rome, with its fearlessness in tackling at least two 'hot potatoes', the admission of divorced and remarried people to communion and the status of gay people within the Christian community. The kind of dialogue which takes seriously the words of the Melkite Maximos IV Saigh at Vatican II: 'repressed truth turns poisonous'.

What is being proposed, then, is a more collegial church at all levels, a *communio* in which the baptismal dignity of all is respected, and all this to occur at local level too, with a renewed sense of the dignity and relative autonomy of each diocese, always in communion with the universal church.

You will have your own ways here in Limerick of determining your agenda for this upcoming Synod. I simply make the point that, in principle at least, there should be space for people at Synods to express what is of concern to them as a Christian community, be that on matters like secularity and poverty, but also on contraception/divorced and remarrieds/gay people (which we are asked to respond to anyway for Rome next October), or on the role of women in the Church, the question of

married priests and so on. If synods are one important means of discovering the 'sense of the faithful', it would be perverse to muzzle them that real concerns are not allowed or encouraged to surface.

I make this point because I am well aware that there are legal provisions governing the conduct of a Synod which add weight to its conclusions but which might be construed as limiting its agenda; and of course there are issues which no local bishop on his own can determine authoritatively but must refer on 'up the line', as it were, if the diocese is to remain in communion with the Catholic Church. However I think it would be quite in order, even in matters which require further processing, for the Synod to voice its concerns over particular matters of non infallibly defined current Catholic teaching and for the Bishop to publicly share these concerns with the rest of the Church, including of course the Pope. This is exactly the kind of process the Pope has been urging on the Brazilian hierarchy in the matter of married priests.

Of course there must be due order in our synodal programme. We cannot discuss every issue at once, nor put the whole world to rights overnight! And there may well be a certain wisdom, as we learn the skills of discernment in doing it, in taking less contentious issues first, leaving more controversial issues until we have cultivated the necessary trust and skills-set. However, to name one 'hot potato', a clear-sighted analysis of our present and projected shortage of priests (without prejudice to prayerful efforts to encourage vocations and to the management-based approach of parish clusters) would indicate the need to consider seriously more radical alternatives before it is too late, and always in order to provide that Eucharistic nourishment for the faithful that is our right.

#### A Word about Discernment

You will find a very fine and helpful treatment on discernment and its relevance to the process of a Synod in Eugene Duffy's 2012 piece in *The Furrow* (63, June 2012, 295-303). I want here to offer you some observations from my own experience and understanding of discernment, gleaned mainly from the Ignatian tradition with which, of course, Pope Francis himself is very familiar.

The underlying presupposition of discernment is that God is active in our world, in our personal lives but also in our history, and that we may gain insight into God's dreams and hopes ('God's will') for our world through prayerful reflection that is both personal and communal. This presupposition, once accepted, is a source of great confidence, peace and gratitude: we may feel confused about what to do, afraid of the future, unsure of our own capacities to map the way forward, but discernment reminds us that this is primarily God's work and that we may rely on the gift of the Holy Spirit in what we are undertaking. Don't then panic or despair at the load of issues facing us: there will be good organisation, skilled facilitators, a spirit of prayer, and above all we have the constant words of the Lord: 'Do not be afraid' and his promise of the Spirit. You can see this kind of robust confidence in the way Pope Francis leads the discernment of the Synod of Bishops on the Family. Our aim always, as in the first Council of Jerusalem, is to come to a point where we can say: 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (Acts, 15: 28)

Next, taking a cue from this same Synod in Rome, I note the words of the Pope after the first session: we have, he said, 'one year to mature, with true spiritual discernment, the proposed ideas and to find concrete solutions to so many difficult and innumerable challenges that families must confront' (Concluding Discourse, 18 Oct, 2014). These words draw attention to one striking characteristic of

true discernment: it involves not just discussions ('another talk shop'!) but decisions – so, nettles must be grasped, nettles as difficult as the ones I have referred to in that Synod. Of course decisions should not be rushed – it may require another year, another synod- but it should be quite clear to all concerned that the discussion matters, decisions will follow, there are consequences.

Discernment involves a kind of 'felt knowledge' involving the intellect and the senses. You may expect in the long haul till April 2016 to experience many different feelings as the process evolves. You might ask yourself again how did you react when earlier this evening I spoke about secularisation, about poverty, about church reform, about the challenges that face us as church in Limerick and universally – did you feel hopeful, encouraged, energised or did you feel sad, annoyed, downcast –or a mixture of both?

This is the whole field of what Ignatius calls 'consolation and desolation' by which we are drawn closer or driven away from what God wants, and we will begin to develop skills in reading these signs of God's presence. For those who are genuinely seeking to be close to God it may be said that any increase of faith, hope or love (even without accompaniment of strong feeling) is a sign of consolation: and it can also be that feelings of sadness or disturbance can be helpful in alerting us to a false sense of peace, a spiritual complacency, a failure to respond to challenges – think of the Rich Young Man who went away 'sad'; think of our own comfort zones, our reluctance to rock the boat, to distinguish between respect for and excessive deference to authority. In general, however, a sense of peace, of joy, of hope, of encouragement are signs that the group is moving in the right direction. And, when a decision has been made, we should see, after a period of time, for confirmation of the decision in a sense of peace – think of the reaction of the community at Antioch to the decision of the Council of Jerusalem ('they rejoiced' – Acts, 15:31)

Many commentators note that dialogue rather than debate are more appropriate in the process of discernment (see Duffy/Philibert/Lonsdale et al). There is a danger in pushing this notion too far: when issues matter there will inevitably be disagreement and conflict, this is the nature of the human project and is how we come to deeper truth. And so we need vigorous debate – in the end truth is a matter of insight and judgement, not of consensus or negotiation, and so we should value loyal dissent. Decisions arrived at through consensus but lack of truth will inevitably come back to bite us: the order of our world is as it is and does not change because we, mistakenly, decide otherwise.

A good facilitator will know when to suggest the appropriateness of the cut and thrust of debate, and when to focus more on the kind of respectful dialogue that listens with as open a mind and heart as possible to those with whom we disagree. I think Richard Gaillardetz expresses it well with regard to Ecumenical Councils and the same may apply in our context:

'At an ecumenical council, saints and sinners, the learned and the ignorant, gather together. They share their faith, voice their concerns, argue, gossip, forge alliances and compromises, enter into political intrigue, rise above the intrigue to discern the movement of the Spirit, worry about the great tradition in which their identity is rooted, seek to understand the demands of the present moment and hope for a better future' (America, 13 Feb, 2012).

All this points to the inherently provisional nature of our discernment, which, unless under conditions of solemn dogmatic statements at an Ecumenical Council, for example, are always fallible.

After all, even that Council of Jerusalem I have referred to, which decided on the most contentious issue facing the early church (the relation with the Gentiles) did so with some 'terms and conditions' (dietary considerations) which were later quietly dropped. This does not mean that because certainty is rarely available then we should be paralysed. No, like in the rest of our lives, we make the best possible decision as a group that we can now, ask for confirmation, and if this is not forthcoming we try again.

This is what it means to be a pilgrim church, always learning, and subject to the divine pedagogy at the heart of which is God's great patience at our slowness to learn, even our hardness of heart. And so there may well occur what Ladislav Orsy calls 'the paradox of peaceful mistakes' (ref) – as a group we may sometimes fail to discover the objective truth or take the right options and, for now, because this is the best we can do, we are asked as a community to share one another's burdens (including the burden of less than perfect judgement) and God, who knows all this, is content and shares the divine peace with us (62-68).

'God's will', then, is not to be conceived as some pre-scripted blueprint which we are asked to discover and then slavishly copy. Von Balthasar spoke of a drama co-written by God and us, others speak of God's dreams and hopes. We need to avoid the extremes of thinking of God in a Deist or Pelagian way – it's all over to us, on our own – or as a Being with a detailed and set plan, demanding of us only absolute compliance. Rather God is 'intimior intimo meo', at the heart of my being, at the heart of history, luring us towards goodness and love, and infinitely forgiving and merciful in the context of our sins and wrong turnings.

And so, because we are such a diverse constituency, which many passionately held views, it may be that consensus, however welcome, is not possible on particular issues and we may have to vote, with the ensuing challenges around unity in charity this may bring to the winning majority (no triumphalism; respect for dissent) and the losing minority (remain in unity; trust in God's providence). As the current Archbishop of Canterbury (Justin Welby) has said: 'Reconciliation doesn't mean we all agree. It means we find ways of disagreeing – perhaps very passionately-but loving each other deeply at the same time, and being deeply committed to each other'.

It will help us too enormously, as individuals and as a group, if we pray for that kind of freedom of spirit, compatible with passion and conviction but overcoming our rigidities and compulsions, which can open us up to God's dream for us in Limerick at this time.

Discernment, then, is emphatically not the use of prayer as a flight from reality, a softening of our brains and a dulling of our feelings. Rather it involve a robust engagement with the real world, inclusive of sharp analysis and anger at injustice, passionate stances, but from the kind of faith perspective that opens us to consider with freedom the views of others and gives confidence, serenity and peace as we make decisions that give us life as a group.

Conclusion:

Pope Francis has a very wise passage in *Evangelii Gaudium* (222-230) where he notes that 'time is greater than space' (meaning that we need to give priority to initiating good processes rather than looking for immediate results) and that 'unity prevails over conflict' (meaning that while we must not ignore or conceal conflict, still it is possible to build communion amid disagreement). A Synod is



not a one-off event – however welcome this may be- but rather should be a regular occurrence at diocesan level, a way of being church. It is unrealistic to ask a Bishop on his own, or with clergy, to tackle the many challenges we have identified here, and the others which you yourselves have noted. But together we are in a stronger position to do so, we are modelling how Jesus and his first disciples followed along ‘the way’. We need this way of proceeding, and, as we walk together, we can with confidence hope to experience the ‘joy of the gospel’. We may hope to share that experience of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus who, in a state of confusion, gloom and fear, were gifted with the real presence of the Lord and who were able to say: ‘did not our hearts burn within us’ (Lk 24: 32).

Gerry O’Hanlon, S.J.

Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice