

Reading the Signs of the Times
Address to the Synod of Limerick
Limerick, November 15th 2014

A New Ecclesial Context

As the Synod of Limerick begins, it must do so by reading the signs of the times. In doing so, today, we could begin by acknowledging the fact that we are in a time and place of great promise and hope. The election of Pope Francis and his style of ministry has restored greater credibility to the Church, to its institutions and its engagement with the world than it has had for some time.

In the lead up to the election of Pope Francis and since, there has been a new freedom in the Church, a new willingness among bishops, especially, to speak honestly, even if their views call aspects of the Church's teaching or practice into question. For example, Cardinal Schönborn of Vienna said he regretted that the Austrian bishops hadn't dared to speak out openly on necessary Church reforms, "We were far too hesitant. ... We certainly lacked the courage to speak out openly."¹ The recent Synod of Bishops has shown how that freedom of speech has brought a fresh spirit of renewal to bear on the Church and encouraged a real dialogue with the world and its struggles. The methodology of the Synod indicated that the collegiality of the bishops was once again being honoured as the Pope asked the bishops present to name realities in honesty and freedom, as he had already invited the whole

¹ (Meeting between Austrian Bishops and the Pope, Jan 30, 2014 *This story appeared in the Feb 14-27, 2014 NCR print issue under the headline: Cardinal: Pope has already changed church.*)

Church to do by means of the questionnaire he had sent out in preparation for the event. He said in his opening address to the bishops and the delegates: "... it is necessary to say all that, in the Lord, one feels the need to say: without polite deference, without hesitation. And, at the same time, one must listen with humility and welcome, with an open heart, what your brothers say. Synodality is exercised with these two approaches." His approach to Church governance has contributed to a restoration of confidence in the ability of the Pope, the bishops and all the faithful to read the signs of the times more authentically.

The Pope's letter Apostolic letter, *Evangelii gaudium*, also restored to the bishops a greater sense of responsibility for the local Church over which they preside. He said: "It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of the local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound 'decentralisation'".² Later he says: "Excessive centralization, rather than proving helpful, complicates the Church's life and her missionary outreach."³ For him the willingness to engage with the pastoral situations in bold and creative ways is far more important than preserving structures or traditions for their own sakes. New structures, styles and methods of evangelisation must be sought to respond to current needs and situations. This new approach is offering freedom to individual bishops and episcopal conferences to be more imaginative and daring in fashioning pastoral strategies to deal with contemporary pastoral problems. Their proper pastoral responsibilities have been reasserted for them. This creates a new opportunity for the Church in Ireland. It is no longer necessary for the bishops to sit and wait for instructions from Rome nor need they fear that Rome will want to intervene too quickly should they attempt bold new pastoral initiatives. What is beginning today is the

² *Evangelii gaudium*, No. 16.

³ *Ibid.*, No. 32

Bishop of Limerick, with his priests and people, embarking on that path of discernment in the local Church to discover how best to address the pastoral needs of this diocese. It is a joint effort on the part of all the baptised, it is not the Bishop acting alone.

When the interim report from the Synod of Bishops was published, some weeks ago, it sent a very positive signal to the world, using and calling for a language that is more sensitive to the real life situations in which so many people struggle to respond to the call of discipleship. “Imitating Jesus’s merciful gaze, the Church must accompany her most fragile sons and daughters, marked by wounds and lost love, with attention and care, restoring trust and hope to them like the light of a beacon in a port, or a torch carried among the people to light the way for those who are lost or find themselves in the midst of the storm”.⁴ The report speaks of the law of gradualness, acknowledging that people are at various stages in their journey of life and faith. The Church’s task is to accompany them, to encourage and to lead them to realise their deepest expectations. This fits perfectly with Pope Francis’ restoration to the prominence of the image of the Church as the Pilgrim People of God. We are fellow pilgrims, moving forward at varying paces, towards our ultimate homeland. While on the way we respect the fact that we can move at varying speeds according to our abilities. We don’t sit in judgement on those who are slower, rather we offer them encouragement and support so that they can progress towards the goal which they deeply desire.

A very significant dimension of the ecclesiology of Pope Francis is the emphasis that he gives to the presence of the Spirit in the Church. He mentions the Spirit forty-eight times in *Evangelii gaudium*. This is indicative of a trust in the gifts with which the whole Church is

⁴ Interim report, No 22.

endowed and of all of the baptised to contribute to its mission. The Pope is very conscious of the fact that using the gifts of the Spirit will involve tensions and difficulties as the Church attempts to discern the way forward in various situations but he is confident that the Spirit will ensure an outcome that is ultimately good. “Differences between persons and communities can sometimes prove uncomfortable, but the Holy Spirit, who is the source of that diversity, can bring forth something good from all things and turn it into an attractive means of evangelization. Diversity must always be reconciled by the help of the Holy Spirit; he alone can create diversity, plurality and multiplicity while at the same time bringing about unity.”⁵ Later he says: “To believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in everyone means realizing that he seeks to penetrate every human situation and all social bonds [...]”.⁶

His emphasis on the Spirit brings into prominence the need for discernment or reading the signs of the times. This is an on-going task for the Church and for each of its members. There is no ready blueprint that can be handed out from the centre nor plucked from some text in the Bible. Rather, discernment acknowledges the dynamic interplay of Gospel and life, of faith and culture that always characterises the life of discipleship. Our personal relationship with Christ has to be lived in world that is constantly changing and therefore demands that we continue to engage with the circumstances in which life locates us. We must always use both faith and reason to read the signs of the times, if we are to act responsibly.

Our Societal Culture

This leads us, then, give some attention to the cultural situation in which we currently find ourselves. One could look at the European Values Survey, which is conducted every ten

⁵ *Evangelii gaudium*, No 131

⁶ *Ibid.* No 178

years and see how adherence to the Church and its practices have continued to decline steeply over the past thirty years. A few examples will suffice: those aged 18 – 44 and those 60 or older. Approximately 15% of those 18 – 44 describe themselves as not belonging to any religious denomination; among those 61 or over only 5% so describe themselves. 30% of those in the first category pray daily, while 16% never pray; in the second category, 80% pray daily and only 2% never pray. 25% of those in the first category attend Mass once a week and 78% of those in the second category do so. About 13% of those in the first category don't believe in God and only 3% in the second don't believe in God. In the words of M. Breen and C. Reynolds, "the Irish pattern is one of declining core beliefs, a more pronounced decline in practice, but still remaining 'outstandingly religious' compared to much of Europe. The decline, particularly in relation to practice, suggests the applicability of secularization, and "Euro-secularity" as a suitable explanation and description of these patterns of religious change. And while "believing without belonging" appears to be a relatively useful way of partially describing the resistance of the Irish case to these secular trends, the proportion who belong *and* believe, who practice regularly and accept all the core Christian beliefs, seems to distinguish the Irish case from the pattern in much of Europe. Despite the decline in practice, the subjective importance Irish people attribute to God in their lives seems to underline the non-triviality of the relative permanence of these religious beliefs. The important qualification in this regard is that Irish people, in a pattern that is broadly similar across Europe, view family, friends, work and leisure time as more important than religion."⁷

⁷ Michael J. Breen and Caillin Reynolds, "The Rise of Secularism and the Decline of Religiosity in Ireland: The Pattern of Religious Change in Europe", in THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY IN SOCIETY, <http://religioninsociety.com/journal/>, (Champaign, Illinois, 2011 www.CommonGroundPublishing.com)

The Belgian theologian, Lieven Boeve, offers a different perspective. He notes that what is happening in Europe is not at all the disappearance of religion but its *transformation*. There is growing evidence in Europe that younger people are more interested in religion, but not in traditional organised religion. They will describe themselves as being in search of the spiritual rather than in being religious. “The younger generation” according to Boeve, “would seem to attach new importance to more traditional values such as faithfulness, social order, and so on. The exceptions here are the ethical items that affect private self-determination, such as the use of soft drugs, abortion and euthanasia, homosexuality, suicide, and so on. These are indications of a selective re-activation of traditions and a new openness to religion.”⁸ However, he would suggest that “believing without belonging” is too strong a statement of the reality. Believing presupposes some level of engagement with the Christian faith, but this is not very often the case. The younger generation is growing up in a context where there was no faith practice and therefore the links have been broken and the resulting spirituality or religion is not really grounded in the Christian tradition. This leads Boeve to describe the current situation as one of “detraditionalisation”, meaning that apart altogether from a decline in institutional expressions of faith, we are now in a situation where there has been a general interruption of the tradition so that the older generation is no longer capable of effortlessly passing on faith, beliefs or practices to the next generation. Christianity is no longer capable of shaping the younger generation in many parts of Europe. The result is that young people now shape their preferences and identities in a much more personal and individualistic way and even if they do choose to express their spiritual search in more traditional ways, this too is a very individual, personal choice.

⁸ *God Interrupts History: Theology in a Time of Upheaval* (New York, London: Continuum, 2007), 19.

This is the situation that is now facing us in this country, probably more acutely in the urban situations than in more isolated rural communities, but none are immune from the trend.

One can observe this even among students studying theology. They do not have an inherited vocabulary of faith. They lack a familiarity with many of the Christian symbols and practices that older generations take for granted. On the other hand, they fit perfectly into Boeve's description of a generation who attach new importance to faithfulness and social order. They are much more accepting of what authority demands than those who were at college in the 1970s or '80s.

In a recent article in *The Furrow*, Michael Conway described rather well the features of this new approach to life, in terms of an ethics of authenticity, where simply being true to yourself is a priority.⁹ Conformity is not a value. So, you choose the church to which you want to belong, if you choose at all to give expression to your spirituality. You search around for the kind of faith community to which you want to belong. This puts a new demand on ministry – how do you meet those who are genuinely searching for meaning and direction in life. Perhaps as much energy has to go into this task as into the traditional work of catechesis. It may involve working with parents whose teenage or adult children are reacting to the faith of the home and reassuring them that this exploration by their children is an important stage in their journey of faith. This style of ministry and the accompaniment that it might entail reminds us again of how important it is to begin to think of the Church in terms of the Pilgrim People of God.

⁹ "Ministry in Transition", *The Furrow*, 64 (March, 2014), 131-149.

Conway draws attention, too, to the fact that traditionally what we believed was handed on by authorities that we implicitly trusted. This is obviously no longer the case. Authority today has to be credible, authentic and be seen to live from the values it proclaims. The content is also scrutinised and in a society that so values empirical validation for what it accepts as truth then message proclaimed must be seen to make a difference to life here and now.

Then there is a major problem with institutions. We are living in a world that we understand to have evolved, that continues to evolve, and that is in process rather than eternally fixed. Change is the very nature of things and therefore institutions and processes, like those in the Church, which claim a certain immutability, are not taken to be so any longer. We have seen, too, how large institutions can be manipulated by individuals for personal gain and countless other individuals made to pay the price. The Church itself has not been immune to this, any more than the states or banks or big corporations. Institutions are there to be of service, they are not there to obligate us. So, today we have to be seen to be capable of openness, honesty and change. As John XXIII reminded us a long time ago, the message of the Gospel does not change, but our expressions of it can and often need to change. Here, too, Francis is challenging us: "We must be bold enough to discover new signs and new symbols, new flesh to embody and communicate the word, and different forms of beauty which are valued in different cultural settings, including those unconventional modes of beauty which may mean little to the evangelizers, yet prove particularly attractive for

others.”¹⁰ A Church that is outward focused is more likely to be attractive than one that is concerned with protecting itself and consoling itself in any kind of pious ghetto.

In summary then, in this situation in which we find ourselves, we have to take seriously that personal search for meaning and values in which people are involved. Being in touch with that inner journey in our own lives, and being able to articulate our own relationship with God will probably be one of the most important contributions that we can make to our contemporaries. Furthermore, we have to be ready to accompany them on their own journeys in a positive, non-judgemental disposition. This, too, is what the Synod is asking us to do with families as they struggle to live out the Gospel amidst their challenges and struggles. Our personal relationship with God is also profoundly social.

Emerging Needs to be Addressed

During my time working with the Western Theological Institute we conducted many listening processes in parishes of all six dioceses in the West of Ireland. At the end of it, it was possible to predict about eight themes which would emerge in any gathering of parishioners. In fact, one could have put the themes on a chart and asked those present simply to rank the first five that they wished to address. Obviously, that would not have been to respect the groups or the process put in place. More recently I was involved in the preparation of the Diocesan Plan for the Diocese of Killaloe¹¹ and here again the same themes emerged. So, I can take these as indicative of the issues about which people in parishes are concerned. This is what is emerging as a reading of the signs of the times.

¹⁰ *Evangelii gaudium*, No 167

¹¹ *Builders of Hope: Pastoral Plan, Diocese of Killaloe 2013 -2020* (www.killaloediocese.ie)

There is a major concern about how existing Christian communities – which may or may not be co-terminus with canonical parishes – will be sustained into the future. Who will lead and guide these? Who will proclaim the Gospel and who will lead the community in prayer when there is no ordained priest present? What kinds of liturgies are appropriate in those situations? How will the Eucharist be celebrated?

Even in the most traditional of places, significant numbers of parishioners felt that obligatory celibacy was an unnecessary imposition and a barrier to many in responding to a call to ordained priestly ministry. Others often raised the issue of ordaining women. Most recently, the response of women in the Diocese of Killaloe, to the proposed introduction of the permanent diaconate, is indicative of the strength of feeling around the role of women in the formal ministry of the Church. Many of the counter arguments to the inclusion of women in the ordained ministry are not especially convincing to many people and even while this issue remains problematic, it has to be acknowledged that there are many senior positions in the Church, not necessarily requiring ordination, which could be held by women that would go a significant distance to addressing the current difficulties. Pope Francis has acknowledged the seriousness of these issues in the Church's ministry and shows a readiness to address them.

Most communities recognise the need for a variety of ministries to enable them to be genuine communities of disciples. There is a danger in the current discourse about the declining numbers of ordained priests that the rich potential of other ministries will be neglected. Could we see this as a new opportunity presented to us by the Spirit to explore other ways at our disposal to proclaim, embody and celebrate our life in Christ, to give full

expression to the priesthood of the faithful, which is fundamental to the life of the Church?

Sometimes the negativity with which the crisis in ordained ministry is discussed appears blind to the genuine opportunities that are being presented for local communities to be much more self-sufficient in resourcing themselves for their mission, allowing all of the baptised to exercise their rightful roles in mission and ministry. Imaging these possibilities may be more productive for all concerned than eloquent laments about a past that will not return. Waiting for fadó is not an option.

The expansion of ministries also calls for greater efforts at adult faith development and formation of people for particular ministries. There is no shortage of people willing to engage with pastoral activities, but there is a need for people to be properly prepared to assume these roles. Some dioceses are beginning to address this challenge and doing so with some success. I am particularly conscious of the work that has been going on in Kerry over the past few years. Formation and on-going formation at all levels is one of the great critical needs of the moment.

There is a profound awareness of the need for fostering personal and communal opportunities for spiritual growth. This need is often met more successfully by others outside the Catholic or Christian tradition. There is a rich variety of prayer traditions within the Church we could profitably explore, many of which are relatively unknown at the popular level. However, there are important developments in this area, too, including weeks of directed prayer, prayer groups, *lectio divina* and various meditation groups. One of the attractive traditions we have in this respect is that of pilgrimage, which needs far more exploration and encouragement. Witness the appeal of the Camino de Santiago, climbing

the Reek, and various local pilgrimage sites that have been revived in recent years. These events can mirror the Church as a pilgrim people, journeying together, engaging in conversation and finding God along the way.

Obviously, in every parish the youth emerge as a cause of great pastoral concern. Still, it is not an area in which there has been enough investment of thought or energy. Here we need more home-grown programmes and ways of engaging positively with our young people, who are much less complex in their thinking about the Church than we might assume. Some of the comments that I have already made regarding contemporary approaches to religion could be considered in this context. Personal authenticity rather than institutional agendas speak most effectively to them.

Care for those in need always surfaces, as one should expect. In rural areas this often means looking out for those living alone or who are housebound. There is a real awareness of the need to ensure the inclusion and integration of those who have arrived in the country over recent years. Some dioceses are more explicit in addressing issues of social justice and care for the environment. Pope Francis captured this responsibility of the Church most eloquently in his final address to the Synod, when he: “The Church has its doors wide open to receive the needy, the penitent, and not only the just or those who believe they are perfect! The Church that is not ashamed of the of the fallen brother and pretends not to see him, but on the contrary feels involved and almost obliged to lift him up and to encourage him to take up the journey again and accompany him toward a definitive encounter with her Spouse, in the heavenly Jerusalem.”

Conclusion

We are living in a time of hope and promise. There are challenges to call up our best reserves of imagination and energy. There are real signs of a new spring in the Church. The leadership in responding to the challenges, in this country, will have to come from many angles, from the designated leaders, from the charismatic element in the Church – the religious – whose role it is to stimulate the charisms of others for the expansion and building up of the Kingdom of God and from regular parish members, especially parish pastoral councils. There are great opportunities opening up for us and there is a new freedom to meet them in bold and imaginative ways. The Synod of Limerick will be a time for the people of the Diocese to scrutinise the signs of the times for themselves with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to prioritise the more urgent issues and to put in place the structures they need to respond to them with courage and determination.