

## **THE DOMESTIC MODEL OF CHURCH** *- the contemporary call of the laity?*

While attending recent meetings in my own parish in County Kilkenny concerning the establishment of a parish council, I have been struck by the genuine loyalty to the local Church of those who attend. My wife, Linda and I read during the liturgy at our parish church and we cannot match the commitment of the other readers shown through their regularity of attendance. When I was at a funeral mass in my hometown in Tipperary during the summer, I was equally taken by the presence of at least ten Eucharistic Ministers upon the altar during the celebration. Yet, in reflecting upon these established models of lay ministry, I cannot also help sensing that there is something inchoate and limited about them. It is as if lay people have no other creative options within the Church than to try to fit into, or even prop up an eroding clerical model. While the diocesan or clerical model of Church is the rock upon which our Christian faith is preserved, one has to ask whether this existing model can ever be adopted or refined to realise the contemporary calling of the lay person in the Church.

With the dramatic decline in the numbers joining the priesthood and religious life in the Western Church, lay people can no longer avoid their particular calling or vocation. We have to admit to the truth that there is a searing uniqueness to the calling of the lay person that follows from the relationship of each one of us to Jesus Christ. The necessary response cannot, however, come from initiatives that are led by those in the priesthood or in religious life. It must come from the lay person, the ordinary member of the Church, the baptised, not the ordained. The unique calling of the lay person cannot be realised unless it is reflected in the very structure or constitution of the Church itself. The kernel of the problem is that the Church is not so constituted as to challenge the lay person to realise a call that in its insistence brooks no opposition or excuses. The potential of the lay person cannot be realised unless a new, additional model emerges within the Church in which the lay person is at the forefront and in which the priesthood and those in religious life assist but do not lead.

It is important to realise that a new *'model'* or structure as opposed to a new *'movement'* is urgently required for lay participation in the Church. There are a number of contemporary movements in Christianity which have emerged through lay people which are clearly inspired by the Holy Spirit. The engagement of the lay person in a movement is, however, defined by the objectives of that movement. A new structure for lay people is significantly different because it could allow the lay person to contribute to the Church in a proven, recognised way whilst remaining free from the restraint of an existing movement which has a pre-defined vision and objective. Furthermore, at a time when the institutional structure of the Western Church is undergoing profound change and erosion, there is a paradoxical need for a new structure which is also rooted in tradition, proven to be of the Holy Spirit and to work for the good of the whole Church. If we are to find a new model of lay involvement in the Church, from where can we discern its emergence?

### *Marriage as the door of hope*

There are prophetic voices at this time who counsel us that marriage is a foundation stone for the renewal of the Church. One such voice is that of Jean Vanier, founder of L'Arche, who addresses this theme in his book *'A Door of Hope'*. He states that for society to convert itself, or rather for men and women of today to turn away from materialistic egoism, the married couples of today must burn with new hearts and new spirits, hearts of flesh and spirits of fire as spoken of by the prophet Ezekiel (chapter 36).

If the sacrament of ordination is the starting point of priestly life and professed vows form the basis of religious orders, the initiation of the lay person into spiritual adulthood can be grounded in the sacrament of marriage. When a man and woman become truly united through their shared love of Jesus Christ, this sacrament becomes for them an ordination from God and they make a profession of sacred vows to each other and to Him. For the calling of the married person and of the celibate in Christian life is one and the same. It is a calling to chastity, to follow the vision of faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ to the end. This was underlined by Pope John Paul II in the course of his homily in Limerick on October 1<sup>st</sup>, 1979 when he said that true love and the grace of God can never let marriage become a self-centred relationship of two individuals, living side by side for their own interests. In a Christian marriage, a man and a woman surrender to their joint relationship in Jesus Christ and therein find a calling not just to love each other and the children with whom they may be gifted. They are also given a calling to act as agents for the Christian vision in a wider context, to say something about the beauty and glory of the Christian faith through their home.

The suggestion that marriage should form the basis of a new lay model of involvement in the Church may not find favour with committed Christians who are not married and who do not feel called to this way of life. There is one particular justification for this approach, however, which I wish to explore, namely that marriage and family life provide the optimum means of re-discovering the lost beauty of Christianity, the incomparable glory of our faith that is experienced through relationships.

### *Family life and the re-discovery of beauty through relationships*

The transcendent nature of our being calls forth three experiences in life, those of beauty, truth and goodness. When we reflect upon our experience of Christian faith, we can certainly identify the emphasis upon truth and goodness. We have, however, lost our sense of the beauty or the glory of Christian faith. Beauty holds truth and goodness in the right balance. When beauty is lost, truth becomes embroiled in a battle between dogmatic principles and goodness becomes reduced to a struggle between competing moral arguments. It is beauty, however, which attracts the human soul and wins the heart over to the person of Jesus Christ. When the beauty of the Christian experience is re-discovered, He becomes the Lord of one's heart not because of any dogmatic principle or moral argument but because His person, His life and His message are incomparable in beauty to anything else that is offered in human life.

The re-discovery of the beauty or glory of Christian faith is the key to the renewal of the Church. Its beauty or glory is the radiance of love and this love is revealed in relationships. The foundational relationship is that between the human person and God in prayer. It is here that one can contemplate the Lord and allow His attractiveness to become the centre, the holding point of one's life. From this primary relationship, one is then given a renewed sense of the beauty of one's life as heroic as the relationship with one's own, unique, personal vocation in life comes alive through discernment. Life becomes heroic when one sacrifices one's own life for others in community. In doing so, one honours a third relationship, namely between oneself and others in the bonds of marriage, family and friendship. As these bonds are renewed, one is finally called into a new relationship with society and creation itself. In a renewed spirit of justice, one wants to extend beyond the relationship with loved ones and open out in compassion with those who are marginalised by society. One's eyes are also opened to the beauty of creation and to the importance of its preservation for future generations.

At the heart of Christian faith is the glorious vision of the Lord drawing all unto Himself and to the Father through these four central relationships. When the magnetic attractiveness of Jesus Christ begins to take centre stage in the human heart, all that is discordant in one's life is woven into a new integrity through these relationships becoming vibrant and alive. One's life develops a new sense of order and coherence around Him. I take the word *integritas*, being the latin for integrity, to describe this phenomenon in a person's life. In this pattern of redemption in each human life, it is as if God is re-creating a universal, divine mosaic in which each one of us, as intrinsic pieces in the whole, are gradually re-configured to the centre of creation – the presence of God upon a Cross. In restoring each one of us in our relationships with the Father, with ourselves, with each other and with our environment, the Lord restores the integrity of this created world from which the beauty and glory of God is revealed. This divine plan is expressed most eloquently in the prayer of the Lord in the Gospel of St. John :

*And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them;  
that they may be one, even as we are one.” (Jn 17 : 22)*

This vision of Christian beauty finds particular, intense expression in family life. There is no family that does not experience selfishness, discord, tension and conflict and there are many and varied forms of division in family life. At the same time, every family is called by the God of peace to have the joyous experience of reconciliation so that relationships are re-established and integrity restored. In this way, family life is the crucible in which the fullness of communion willed by God and the beauty that is revealed through oneness finds its most honest and concrete expression. The family is the human, earthly context for the incarnation of the desire of the Lord that all may be one.

Family is the means by which God came into the world. Family is the basis of the greatest parable of the Lord, the story of the Prodigal Son. Family is even something more, however, something articulated repeatedly by Pope John Paul II between September 1979 and November 1984 during his weekly audiences concerning the theology of the body. He emphasised that the most fundamental and intense form of

human community is the unity of man and woman in the covenant of marriage and family life. When this communion is characterised by authentic self-giving love, marriage becomes a communion of persons which reflects God's own Trinitarian life. Love within marriage and family life is a reflection of the love between the persons of God and it is for this reason, above all, that this context is suggested as the basis for a new model of lay involvement in the Church.

### *The domestic model of Church*

The question then arises as to how the glory of the Christian vision can be more fully revealed through the role of married people and those in family life. How can we proceed to discover the beauty of these relationships and the glory of the Christian vision through a domestic model of Church? My wife, Linda and I have experimented with this question over the last six years. We have tried to facilitate a centre for Christian prayer and reflection at our home where we live with our four children. This centre is called *Integritas*. Certain essential elements of a domestic model of Church have emerged from our limited experience and from consulting those whom we have looked to for guidance during this short time.

#### *(a) Prayerful*

The first element of this model of Church must be found in its commitment to prayer and contemplative experience. The regular practice of Christian meditation and contemplative prayer defines this model because it can prophetically stand for the need for the whole Christian Church to re-establish the importance of prayer and the foundational relationship of life between the human being and God. This preference for contemplative experience affords the human person the opportunity to directly experience the incomparable love of Jesus Christ, to be penetrated by His love in the core of one's being, to be utterly transformed by Him. At the centre in our home, weekly prayer is based upon the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola* in daily life. They are chosen because of their immense potential to enable one's life to become concentrated upon the person of Jesus Christ and to reflect upon how God speaks to us through the central relationships referred to earlier.

#### *(b) Reflective*

In placing the practice of prayer as the foundation stone of this model of Church, there is a corresponding need for this model to provide for a way of reflecting upon the experience of Christian prayer and to restore the relationship with one's own unique calling or vocation in life. This can be realised by having a supportive programme of Christian spirituality in which those who are experienced in Christian prayer and discernment come and offer guidance. The personal experience of prayer needs to be married with an ongoing theological and spiritual education which can be provided by those in religious life who can visit and offer support in this way. It is especially important that a lay initiative draws upon those in religious life in this manner because the capacity for self-deception in spiritual matters is immense. A programme of Christian spirituality has therefore emerged at our own home where we have been constantly supported and assisted by friends in the Dominican and Jesuit Orders in particular.

*(c) Domestic*

The third element of this model of Church is what ultimately defines it and marks a return to the Christian Church in its very origins, namely the situating of a centre for prayer and reflection in a home. It is through honouring this context that one's relationships with others in the bonds of marriage, family and friendship are truly nourished. The integration of home and family life as part of the structure of the Church can offer intimacy, warmth and solidarity for the experience of one's relationship with Jesus Christ and with the Father. When home life becomes part of the institutional structure of the Church again, so many of the feminine aspects of wisdom, compassion, hospitality and warmth will have a means to become re-discovered as essential, indispensable qualities in the life of the Church. In our own home, our family has been enormously enriched by the friendships with those who visit us here. When one has young children, it is next to impossible to depart for lengthy retreats or personal time alone. By allowing one's home to become a spiritual centre, however, the personal hunger for the spiritual is met by staying put as others come and offer the spiritual sustenance that is needed.

*(d) Open*

The fourth essential element of this model of Church is that it must be open to anyone who is sincerely seeking a relationship with God in their lives. In this way, it honours the relationship of the human person with the whole of society. This quality of openness also means that this model could embrace so many people who are searching for the presence of Jesus Christ in their lives, but who, for one reason or another, cannot fully engage in the sacramental life of the Christian Church. By focusing upon the attractiveness of Jesus Christ, this model also holds the potential to bring members of the different Christian denominations together so that the spirit of ecumenism can progress within the Church. As my wife and I belong to the Church of Ireland and Roman Catholic traditions respectively, the uncomplicated potential of the domestic model of Church to foster ecumenical relations is a real experience for us.

*(e) Christocentric*

While this model must be open to anyone, it is equally important that it is not open to anything in what it offers. It consciously opts to present the person and message of Jesus Christ and the tradition of Christian faith. It is important to stress this as there is a contemporary danger that Christians are losing sight of their true vocation by their desperation to be relevant and accepted by society at large. The whole point of being a Christian is the difference between the vision of Jesus Christ and the pervasive and sometimes subtle alternatives born from the removal of God from the centre of human existence. This has been a recurring problem in the embryonic initiative in which we are involved. A small minority have, on occasion, offered spiritual guidance which is termed 'Christian' but which involves the latent displacement of Christ from the centre. As a response to this, we engage in another way of prayer on the first Friday of each month. This way of prayer is centred around an icon of the Cross and during which one of the seven last words of the Lord upon the Cross is meditated upon. These monthly gatherings enable us to return to the centre of the beauty and glory of Christian faith – the revelation of the love of God for each one of us to the utmost extent. To ensure that a domestic model of Church remains Christocentric, it must

also remain loyal to the Church and in particular, by participating in the celebration of the Eucharist in the locality. Pope Paul VI gave prophetic instruction in this respect in *Evangelii Nuntianda* (1974). He contrasts those small communities in which people come together in order to deepen each other's love for the life of the Church with communities which come together in a spirit of bitter criticism of the Church. He noted certain 'marks' of authentic Christian communities, such as that they remain firmly attached to the local Church and the Universal Church, maintain a sincere communion with the parish priests and the local bishop and show themselves to be universal in all things and never sectarian.

### *Conclusion*

The contemporary emergence of a domestic model of Church would mark a return to the formation of the Church from its very beginning. The first Church was a marginal group of families together with sympathisers, comprising Galilean fishermen, craftsmen and peasants. Women were prominent amongst them. They soon grew to include Greeks as well as Aramaic speakers, Samaritans as well as Jews, and, in due course, Gentiles. The emergence of a domestic model of Church is therefore a revival of the earliest form of the Christian Church rather than an innovation.

If this model of Church can develop in its own right, whilst drawing upon and supporting the diocesan and religious models of Church, it could immeasurably assist in the institutional renewal of the Christian Church. Many of the clergy, who are exhausted or disillusioned by the decline in their numbers and the apathy of their parishioners, could find a renewal of their vocation by the development of a domestic expression of Church within their parishes. Those in religious life could be released from the administrative constraints of retreat houses and the management of dormant, unoccupied properties and be freed to concentrate upon giving guidance in prayer, discernment and theology at these domestic centres.

The benefits of the emergence of a domestic model of Church would extend, however, far beyond the institutional development of the Christian Church. The domestic model of Church could nurture an adult laity in becoming schooled in prayer and reflection, in listening and responding to the movement of the Holy Spirit. One cannot foresee the innumerable benefits that this could have upon loosening the grip of consumerism and its erosive influence upon the relationships that give meaning and worth to human existence. For the Spirit is now saying to married couples the same words that Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at your house". (Luke 19 : 5) Welling in the hearts and homes of lay people, the Spirit is also prompting us to respond in the words of Joshua, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." (Joshua 24 : 15)

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Patrick Treacy and Linda Rainsberry facilitate *Integritas*, a centre for Christian prayer and reflection, at their home at Ennisnag, Stoneyford, County Kilkenny. Further information about this centre can be found at [www.integritas.ie](http://www.integritas.ie)