

BELONGING TO AN HEROIC CHURCH - truth, vision and the faithful

As for the part in the rich soil, this is people with a noble and generous heart who have heard the word and take it to themselves and yield a harvest through their perseverance. (Luke 8 : 15)

The Church as transcultural not counter-cultural

In the midst of the current maelstrom in Western Catholicism, there are three powerful constituencies at war. The first constituency centres upon the desire for holding to tradition, the constituency of traditional catholic conservatives, more pejoratively referred to as catholic fundamentalists. The second constituency is motivated by the desire for reform, the constituency of catholic liberals, who in turn are also belittled as being seduced by pervasive relativism. The third force, the silent majority of baptised catholics who seldom enter into the sacramental life of the Catholic Church, hold that the ongoing battle between the other two constituencies and indeed, the Church itself, is irrelevant. Critical condescension towards this third constituency, as being enslaved to secularism, is one of the few areas of agreement between the other two constituencies.

These three constituencies find critical expression in the Parable of the Sower. The seed which falls on the hard ground, on the edge of the path, can be seen as the faith among the traditionalists. Hardened by what they see as the constant erosion of the truth of the Catholic faith, they become increasingly marginalised and alienated in our contemporary, secular culture. The seed which falls on the stones, which can take no root, is representative of the mindset of relativism. The seed which falls on good soil and initially grows but then becomes choked with the cares of this world, reflects the suffocation of the spiritual life by the concerns of the secular world.

The seed does, however, fall in all of these three places. All of these constituencies have something profoundly valuable to say about the future of the Church at this time of axial change. Instead of attacking fundamentalism, relativism or secularism, committed catholics need to harvest what is essentially good in each of them. In doing so, the Church needs to become transcultural rather than being stuck in a siege mentality of seeing itself as counter-cultural. Gathered up, respected and integrated, the seed from each of them can then become implanted in the really fertile soil, which is the heroic heart in each one of us and in committed Christian communities, persevering together with one voice, free from conflict, frustration and anger.

The purpose of this article is to tentatively suggest three essential elements that this transformation of the Church would involve through gathering up the goodness that these three cultural movements offer. In doing so, I also wish to make reference to Dr. Seamus Freeman, who became the Bishop of Ossory on December 2nd, 2007. I live in the Diocese of Ossory and I have listened with

increasing admiration as he has reflected upon this challenge since he became the bishop of this diocese. He has done so by emphasising the following three essential priorities for Church renewal, being the truth, vision and the faithful which respectively allow for the wisdom of each of these constituencies.

1. Truth – hearing the word

The great gift of the traditional voice in the Catholic Church is the witness that it gives to a transcendent moral order and authority which we are ignoring at our peril. It is the truth of this divine authority, properly interpreted and understood in the complexities of human life, which sets us free. When Seamus Freeman was ordained Bishop of Ossory, he chose as his motto *'Libertas in Veritate'* – the truth shall set us free. (John 8 : 32) This sentiment finds expression in note five of the recent pastoral letter of Pope Benedict to Irish Catholics in which he calls us *“to establish the truth of what happened in the past, to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again, to ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected, and above all, to bring healing to the victims and to all those affected by these egregious crimes.”*

The difficulty, however, is that our perception of the truth is always severely limited. We are always struggling to discern the truth of divine love in any given situation. For the truth means the whole truth and the whole truth is known only by God. Cloaked in a veneer of truth, a partial 'truth' can often be the most deceptive lie because it appears so convincing until the broader truth is revealed. The pernicious and devastating effect of the use of partial truths was exposed in the employment of *'mental reservation'* by authority figures in the Irish Catholic Church.

For the Church to be renewed, the conservative, traditional strain in each one of us needs to be constantly tempered with the recognition that our understanding of Christian revelation is severely limited and is simply, invariably wrong. Each day must be a new, heroic departure in searching for a deeper and wider understanding of the revelation of the exhaustible mystery that is Jesus Christ. The Christian dedicated to the whole truth never leaves the novitiate. In fact, he or she never gets beyond the first day. The search for truth is therefore, also a call to humility. We must be always ready to see the severe limitations of our own understanding and be ready to surrender anything that impairs us from seeing more clearly and serving more fully the revelation of Jesus Christ in the world. For as Blessed John Henry Newman wrote, *'Every feeling which interferes with God's sovereignty in our hearts, is of an idolatrous nature...'*

2. Vision – taking the word to oneself

The great gift from being constantly open to the larger truth is that a life giving vision emerges. It is the yearning for new vision, new life, which is the divine instinct at the heart of relativism. Relativism is underscored by a beautiful aim, to seek the greater, the more beautiful, the experience of the divine as unlimited. The shadow side of relativism, however, as so powerfully expressed by Pope Benedict, is when it becomes a dictatorship, when it denies the objective truth

that we must choose between different versions of what is good and that some ways of living are simply and objectively far better than others. Unrestrained relativism leads to chaotic confusion. Without discernment of priorities, clarity of vision cannot emerge.

Shortly after Seamus Freeman became the bishop of Ossory, he gave a public lecture in Kilkenny entitled '*Without vision, the people perish*' (Proverbs 29 : 18). The highlighting of the absence of vision from the outset of his tenure as bishop has since been underwritten by his ongoing, allegorical reliance upon the life of Blessed Felix O'Dullany (Delaney), who is believed by many to have been the Abbot of Jerpoint Abbey, in County Kilkenny, at the end of the twelfth century. His tomb is on the north side of the high altar in the ruins of this abbey, where his eyes, set in stone, has been rubbed away by the faithful. To the present day, people invoke his intercession for healing diseases of the eye. The remembrance of his life is a representation of the abstract principle that our spiritual vision is impaired when we confuse a partial truth with the whole truth and that a debilitating impairment must then ensue. The importance of removal of impairment of vision is also echoed in note twelve of the letter of Pope Benedict where he writes that "*A new vision is needed, to inspire present and future generations to treasure the gift of our common faith.*" How can we be initiated through this new vision? Perhaps the following five elements are intrinsic to a renewed vision for Western Catholicism and arise in the following sequence.

(a) Contemplative life

Vision is found through contemplation. By contemplation, I mean nothing more nor less than being still before God. Every form or practice of prayer, which leads to inner stillness is contemplative. The stillness enables us to see through the undisturbed, to listen without interference and the vision and the voice of the Author then emerges. The cultivation of a contemplative, prayerful life in every single person is therefore the first, most basic and important aim of Catholic faith.

(b) Vocational life

Vision emerges through contemplative people who realise internally that they have a unique vocation, which cannot be repeated. To be able to discern one's vocation, however, one must be formed in the faith. Adult faith formation is therefore the second imperative of a renewed Church, enabling people to discern what they are being called to be and do. Vibrant, current, constant and attractive presentations of the faith are therefore an urgent necessity so that people become ready, equipped and able to practically realise their unique vocation. Labels and limiting language also need to be filtered and ruthlessly treated as spam. The use of such terms as 'the laity', 'ministry' and 'pastoral care' are hopelessly redundant and belong to a by-gone age of clerical privilege and caste. Similarly, the idea that the vocation of every person can be served by the emergence of a 'lay diaconate' is also antiquated and perpetuates anew the structural discrimination in the Catholic Church against women.

Instead, the Catholic Church needs courageous, strong, conviction-based people who give all that they are and have to spiritually serve others and to profess the vision of Jesus Christ in this world. In fact, we need a new understanding of what professionalism is – excellence in the provision of service through a personal profession of faith. We need professionals of faith, spiritual professionals, people who are totally dedicated and educated in the faith, who contemplatively act from the deepest reference point, serving the true Master in their unique, vocational profession of faith. There is no longer any room for the luxury of mediocre, amateur clericalism which all of us have subscribed and succumbed to, men and women, whether ordained or not.

(c) Domestic life

Another constant theme in the reflections of Seamus Freeman is the importance of the first three years in the formation and life of the human person. If an infant experiences a holding environment of love in the first three years of his or her life, the ability of that person to have faith in the Christian God of love thereafter is grounded in the unconscious experience of infancy through adulthood. The converse is, however, also tragically the case. If an infant's need for love is neglected, the soul in that person becomes closed off in a way that is difficult to retrieve or even properly fathom in adulthood. The fostering of the holding environment of the home, where the parents of a child support the infant and each other, is therefore the next essential of a renewed Church. In addition to being the optimum environment for nurturing the experience of being loved in the infant, a loving, secure home is also the ideal place where the vocation of the human person can be truly nurtured and supported in communion with others.

(d) Social life

Standing for the importance of the home, based on the permanent, sacramental commitment of a man and a woman, is not just an imperative for the fostering of the infant or the support of one's vocation, it is an imperative for social cohesion and solidarity. The Church needs to say this constantly, without apology to anyone, as part of a renewed mission of social concern, or more particularly, social prophecy. The Church must say boldly, clearly and intelligently what the consequences are for society when the centrality of God and the service of the divine Order are abandoned. Increasingly, the Church is becoming aware of the importance of articulating environmental concerns and the development of ecological awareness. This is greatly welcome but there are other, more controversial issues, which the Church has been markedly silent upon. When we set upon a course of extraordinary avarice and acquisition without the necessary finance in this country, manifested in absolute recklessness in the banking sector, why was the Church so silent? The Church needs to constantly challenge the social institutions that make and form society, beginning with itself. It is also called to incessantly challenge every person to engagement in the service of the least fortunate in our society. The realisation of the latter objective does not entail re-invention as the constant, heroic work of social concern groups, exemplified by the work of the Society of St. Vincent De Paul, demonstrates.

(e) Eucharistic life

This fifth and final aspect of a renewed vision of the Catholic Church is a synthesis of these other four areas of spiritual life. The Eucharist draws all facets of Christian life together for it is the only possible expression of the invisible essence of membership of the body of Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist, we remember that each one of us is an indispensable part of the body of Christ and the body of Christ is uniquely present in each one of us. In the liturgical expression of this synthesis, there is no room for the mediocrity that has been tolerated and practiced for so long. We need a renewed commitment to how beautiful the sacrament of the Eucharist needs to be expressed. People need to be drawn to this sacrament, just as to the Christian vision, because of the beauty and glory of the heroic re-presentation of the life and death of Jesus Christ and the expression of His resurrected presence in solidarity with each other. Preparation of the weekly celebration of this sacrament by the entire community needs to be re-discovered as central. Homilies need to be patent expressions of a week of prayerful reflection not clichéd, tired expressions cobbled together at the last moment on the morning of the service. Poorly executed, haphazard liturgy devalues all concerned, the widespread, amateurish standard of which would never be tolerated by the standards required of the secular world.

3. The faithful – yielding a harvest through perseverance

In the practical realisation of this vision, the Church has so much to learn from secularism. The Church must always return into the world, bringing the vision of Christian faith into every forum that wishes to deny its primacy. In order to do so, the Church needs to be made fit for this purpose through ruthless, secular honesty, which cuts through clerical casting and complacency. The difficulty with secularism, however, is that it loses sight of the larger truth that we are only instruments and that our efforts must be dedicated to a purpose greater than ourselves. Our giftedness is itself entirely a gift from God and is given to serve the divine purpose that all be made one and reconciled in God. All wisdom is plagiarism. Only stupidity is original. The vision must therefore be incarnated, realised by those with a noble and generous heart, who know that everything good comes from God and that all that they are and do belong to God.

When we apply the positive of a secularist approach to the pastoral letter of Pope Benedict, certain terminology in the letter becomes patently unhelpful and does not withstand scrutiny. For instance, the letter refers to the '*lay faithful*'. There is, however, no corresponding use of the term the '*priestly faithful*'. There cannot be one without the other. Let us abandon the use of the word '*lay*' and boldly discern the divine action in every single person, secure in the whole truth that the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each person for the profit of all. (1 Cor. 12 : 7). In order to do this, the faithful have to be listened to at the deepest level and then challenged to become heroic.

Earlier this year, during ten sessions in the diocese of Ossory, there has been a most comprehensive process of listening engaged in by Seamus Freeman. This

process underlines the third theme which he seeks to emphasise – the future rests with the faithful, everyone of whom is called to be heroic. The faithful hero and the heroic community of faith move beyond the conventional support of encrusting church and social structures which have also engendered fear and produced life-repressing conformity. They also move beyond engagement in incessant, adolescent criticism of the Church into spiritual adulthood, taking responsibility to be the change that they want to see.

In order to this, however, they have to confront a particular problem identified in the unnervingly truthful conclusion of the seminal essay of Michael Paul Gallagher S.J. entitled '*The Disturbing Freshness of Christ*' (2008). In it, he identifies '*threshold paralysis*' in the faithful. Many people admire depth and religiousness in a vague way but they cannot do what the hero or the heroic community must - cross the threshold into the Christ-encounter that is the core of faith. He notes that the realism of the Gospel seems too much. The claim that this Jesus of Galilee was (and is) the Son of God seems too definite, ill-mannered and arrogant to claim. Yet, there is a deeper reason for this threshold paralysis, being the unconscious awareness of the cost of truly following the vision of Christ. For the truthful, visionary following of Jesus Christ will always result in constant, unpleasant reactions from others which range from misunderstanding to naked hostility. If the encrusting structures of church and society are to be challenged and transformed, alienation and hostility from those who mistakenly attach their significance to these structures is inevitable – and cathartic.

The human life of Jesus Christ proves this primarily. It is also one of the great cultural achievements of Christianity that through the terrible tribulations of its martyrs, it brought about a new appreciation of the patient, hopeful and joyful endurance of suffering. The Parable of the Sower itself culminates with the definitive statement of this heroic disposition. The fertile soil is the heart of the hero or the heroic community, being the one staying true to the vision of faith and yielding a harvest through patient endurance. Above all, it is the heroic, self-sacrificing hearts of such people that the future of Church now depends upon.

In emphasising these three priorities of truth, vision and the faithful, Seamus Freeman also underlines that they must precede the alteration of structures and not vice versa. If we can become open to these three priorities, other problems arising from encrusting structures will be resolved because they will be safely shattered and dismantled thereafter. In short, we must look for spiritual life first and the structures and centres of faith, which serve spiritual life, will then be born. These emerging structures and centres will be new and varied in form. One such structure is that of a domestic centre for Christian spirituality. In a further article, I hope to set out what this looks like in a practical way and identify its contemporary, spiritual importance, based on the experience of working to establish such a centre in the diocese of Ossory over the last ten years.

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