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Taking the long road - Dr Patricia Kiernan

Renewal means taking a long, hard look at ourselves as a Church writes Dr Patricia Kieran.

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Before recommending a course of treatment for any patient, a medical doctor engages in a diagnosis, based on a careful reading of symptoms. The prescribed course of treatment, as a pathway to good health and renewal, emerges as a corrective response to the body's ailments.

In analogous terms, the Catholic Church in Ireland shows multiple symptoms of illness. Much of this illness stems from the twin ailments of myopia or short-sightedness and amnesia or memory loss. Both necessitate corrective response. There can be no talk of renewal without tackling the foundational symptoms of the Church's malady.

In terms of Church life, this illness is not only numerically manifest in the declining numbers of participants at religious events and services, but in the rising numbers of people who classify themselves as non-religious, and the multitudes who feel lethargic towards or disenchanted with the Catholic faith. Church members feel confused, frustrated and betrayed by the fact that the Church, which they profess faith in, became enmeshed in multiple abuses of power and covered up the sexual violation of children.

Remedy

There is no magical physician who can cure the Irish Church with a simple remedy. For many Church members it seems reasonable to point the finger of blame at the hierarchy. In popular perception, at the time of the publication of the most serious and damning revelations about clerical child sex abuse, the hierarchy hadn't the guts to come out, admit responsibility and speak honestly out of the raw depths of its shame.

Yet, renewal in the Church will not arise from one group scapegoating another. The division of the Church into a villainous hierarchy and lay victims is seductive but overly simplistic. Renewal will come from honestly examining the chasm between what we often profess, teach and preach and how we live our lives. Renewal will lead to a more realistic recognition that both hierarchy and laity are capable of great hypocrisy and sin and are in need of metanoia or change of heart.

Church members sometimes suffer from myopic vision as they focus on the superficial appearance of faith over its substance. We are capable of much talk about belief without genuine commitment. The Irish Church is particularly at home with the bi-focal vision necessary to be adamant that our children attend 'the best' Catholic schools or make their first communion when we have no thought of personally doing anything to enable them to grow in faith. Sometimes sacraments become social or cultural events which are used to hide the chasm between belief and practice.

Often, we haven't the gumption to opt out of or opt in to our Catholic faith. We slumber into sacraments. We fumble along doing what everyone else is or is not doing. We don't think enough or feel enough about our faith to take it seriously in many aspects of our lives. While we need a culture of compassion and not condemnation in our Church, we must recognise that being a member of the Catholic Church entails commitment and active participation.

How can we cure our myopia? First of all we shouldn't gaze exclusively at the Irish Church. We forget that the Irish Church is part of a Universal Catholic Church. Half of the world's Catholics live in the southern hemisphere. Our Eurocentric vision forgets that while our Church is ailing, other centres of Catholic faith and life are vibrant and growing. While renewal is not going to come from the mere citation of global Catholic statistics, it does help to remind us that, in the noughties, the number of religious vocations has risen in the southern hemisphere. Between 1978 and 2004 the Catholic population in Africa has tripled. We need to place our own ailments in a bigger context. We have much to learn from our Catholic brothers and sisters in other continents.

Each one of us needs to look deeper, harder and more honestly at ourselves. We need to take responsibility for our faith. We need to live our faith honestly and to go back to the basics. In past eras, in times of great crisis, renewal has come from following the teachings of Christ, returning to biblical sources, practising faith regularly and

communicating faith effectively. As a Church we've never really prided ourselves on familiarity with scripture. That was for Protestants. Perhaps in future we might cultivate a climate where we actually read scripture and see it as a living source for our faith.

Struggle

Our second ailment, amnesia, means that we've forgotten much. We've forgotten the struggle of previous generations to hand on faith to us. It's not just the Mass rocks and the penal crosses that remind us of this. Many of us have forgotten what we believe in and because we're vague on this matter we're unsure how to hand faith on. Those of us who want to return to the world of rote learning and the catechism have also forgotten the inadequacy and often the brutality of those methods.

We've forgotten that, in isolation of a life committed to social justice and compassion, attendance at Church is an inadequate indicator of faith life. We don't just want bums on seats. We need more. Some of that more comes in the form of things we've now forgotten, like the importance of regular personal prayer. We've jettisoned so many simple things like blessing ourselves before eating. We're in danger of losing a lot of our prayer tradition, from the Angelus, and the Rosary, to local customs of pilgrimage, the visitation to holy wells and the pattern days.

We've forgotten the now unfashionable times of fasting and abstinence. We need backbone to renew our Church and we need times of penance and fasting to aid us. I'm not suggesting that we turn back the clocks. A romanticisation of 1950s Irish Catholicism won't get us far. Our population is highly educated and critical and we need a nuanced, intelligent interaction with our faith.

However looking at ourselves more honestly and remembering the many supports and external manifestations of our faith might help us in the future. We have to marry these with a more thinking, critical, compassionate Catholicism.

How might we renew our Church? By remembering that while the Church in Ireland is ill, it is not too late to effect change. We know that a naïve positive appraisal or condemnatory rejection of all things Catholic won't get us far. We need to be realistic

and honest about what we can achieve. We need to be prepared to look at ourselves closely, to put our faith into action, to witness to it publically. Lethargy is a luxury we can't afford.