

The Future of Church: Looking at the data of the European Values Study.

Keynote address to the Limerick Diocesan Conference, Dundrum, Co. Tipperary.

Introduction

5 The data we have looked at mark a sad array of negative information: declining vocations, fewer people attending Church, less confidence, less certainty. There is also good news: strong support for the priest on the ground, relatively positive attitudes toward priesthood as a life choice, deep hunger for God and things spiritual, and a strong belief in the Church as a place where spiritual needs can be met. Ireland has still the highest practice rate in European Community,
10 second only to Malta in all of Europe.

Nonetheless, in one commentator's words, we face the risk of becoming a church of spiritual tourists who can no long speak the language of the divine, a church that needs only open at Christmas and Easter to deal with those who come for reasons of nostalgia rather than faith. So we live in changing times,
15 when old certainties have been lost, new doubts are raised, and the future appears quite uncertain.

But these changes are not signs of immanent death. They are certainly signs of a crisis, one that has become more acute in the last decade. But the root meaning of the term crisis is important here -- a crisis is an opportunity, properly
20 defined as a stage in a sequence of events at which the trend of all future events is determined. In terms of our Church, the turmoil we face is surely a crisis; it is not necessarily a bad thing.

Because I believe that such change is no bad thing, I stand before you today, somewhat fearful, to share with you as best I can on the issue of shaping the
25 Church for the future. I do so from my experience of twenty years as a priest in the Church, years that have been both wonderful and challenging. Let me start with that experience.

My own story

30 I have served in three parishes. I was ordained in 1982 and went first to a rural parish in the diocese of Dublin, then to an inner-city type parish, and finally to an affluent suburban community. In all I spent 11 happy years in pastoral ministry. I knew the work I was doing was valuable, I felt fulfilled, and I had a strong sense of God being in his heaven and all being right with the world.

35 Looking back, it certainly seems to have been a different world. There were over 100 students in the seminary. Church attendance was relatively high, nationally close to 90% weekly. The faith appeared strong and there was a strong sense of the spiritual and the divine in people's lives.

40 There were certainly moments of difficulty and darkness, moments when it was anything but sweetness and light, but overall it was a good time. Then in 1993 I was sent abroad for further studies. It was not long after the scandal of Eamonn Casey had burst upon the Irish church.

45 It was during the end of my first year abroad that stories began to surface about child sexual abuse in Ireland. My initial reaction was one of disbelief and dismissal. But things got worse as the scale of the problem became apparent. Not only did we have among clergy men who had offended in such a criminal and heinous manner, we also have had to come with an internal culture of power and secrecy that has failed until now in the management of the problem.

50 As I talked with priest friends in the diocese, I found that many shared my own sense of profound alienation from the authority structure. This is characterized by a deep and abiding loneliness, growing frustration, and increasing loss of confidence about the future of the Church. It is an alienation that is paralleled by the anger and bewilderment of many ordinary Catholics. The data we have seen suggest that this alienation is directed toward the institution but has not
55 eroded faith in God.

In these times I have learned to listen to friends who care for me. I have also learned to begin to listen to Christ in prayer. But above all else I have learned that I need to listen to myself and my own faith conviction in prayerful silence before God -- what do I believe about myself, who do I allow to set the agenda
60 for my life, who dictates my behaviour? I think this is a major question for all who belong to the Church today.

The Nature of Listening

Walter Burghardt, the famous Jesuit theologian and preacher, has suggested that listening is rarely easy:

65 ‘The command of the Father from the cloud was clear: “Listen to him”... Why? Because Jesus is at once God’s Son and God’s Revelation. Here is the prophet par excellence. This is not pious poetry; it is profound truth. Jesus is God’s revelation to us; he is the point of personal contact between God and us. How does Jesus speak to us? What kind of time do we devote to hearing the Lord in
70 our daily lives?

‘Listening to Jesus is not the same as listening to others. The same intensity, yes; the same openness; but a greater risk. When the Father told Peter, James, and John “Listen to him,” he was saying “Obey him; do what he tells you; follow him.” To listen to Jesus is to be his disciple, to listen the way Abraham listened
75 to the Lord and left his “country and kindred and [his] father’s house”. Is this how we let Scripture speak to us? Are we saying “Speak, Lord, your servant is listening,” or do you really mean, as one scholar rephrased it, “Speak, Lord, and your servant will think it over”?’

80 **The need for consultation**

Before we can begin to think about hearing what the Lord is saying, perhaps we need to hear what the voice of the Church, in terms of its people, is saying. For this reason the process of consultation becomes critically important.

Such consultation cannot simply be one of lip service. The work of the members
85 of the Church cannot simply be those things which the individual priest decides to delegate so that he can play more golf. We need a radical rethink about how we structure the church at grassroots level. We must get away from thinking of a Church in which participation is nominal. But in the end, a time must come when listening is translated into action, when good intentions are translated into
90 efficient responses, when spoken words become the harbingers of genuine change.

The Crossroads of Choice

We do, indeed, stand at a crossroads, with several possibilities before us. The real issue seems to be what kind of Church we want to have, and by extension for
95 us believers, what kind of shape we want Irish society to have. Either we are passionately committed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and to extending it to the whole world, or we are not. There really is no in-between position. In this case we cannot afford the luxury of sitting on the fence.

I suggest to you today that if we take the call of the gospel seriously, then we
100 must carefully examine our vision of the Church in a very practical way. We can often despair about our empty churches and our declining congregations and can wrongly blame our young people. What we truly need is to take a long hard look at ourselves and our reality as the Church - do we in fact proclaim in our lives, again and again and again, the great message of salvation in Christ, not
105 as something to come but as something lived here and now?

Imagine what the Church might be like if every member of it took that message of salvation seriously, -- if we were a community focused on the gospel of Christ Jesus and committed to putting it into action, a place where worship of the living
110 God was vibrant and alive, a collection of people whose love and compassion were evident for all to see, where people were given priority over possessions, where primary needs took precedence over indulgent wants, where life was lived to the full in God's image and likeness, where challenge and possibility and growth and freedom were at the core.

115 Such a powerful vision of the Church is certainly discomfiting -- it demands accountability, it provides challenge as well as care, it calls us to put our money where our mouths are, to put our time and talent and treasure at the disposal of others for the sake of the common good.

It is always easy to wring our hands in despair, to talk about what things might
120 be like if only somebody else would do something, to sit back and pick holes with every effort that is made by others. But the gospel calls us to leave such commentary behind, to get stuck in and get our own hands dirty.

We are all called to be of service, we are called to get involved; we are called to be bearers of the good news of the gospel, of hope, of reconciliation, of
125 possibility. We are called to dream the dream of what the Church might be if it were to be that which God intended.

In one sense, then, the data I presented this morning are quite irrelevant. Our task is to imagine Church as it should be, driven by vision rather than the need to utilize resources efficiently.

130 The real invitation of the scriptures is to dream the dream, to have that vision, to reflect on what a vibrant Church focused on the Risen Christ would look and feel like. How would our worship be different? What would it mean to be a member of such a community? What would it take? What might it cost us?

135 **Making the Dream Real**

Clearly, dreaming can be a long way from reality. The real challenge of our time is to put the dream into action, to help to bring about the kingdom of God. How are we to do that? What must we do? What must we cease doing?

Are there things that the institutional Church does, that we do as local church
140 here in Limerick or elsewhere that we do as individual members of the Church, things that have no basis in the gospel of Jesus Christ?

So, let me ask some very contentious questions. And indeed let me say at the outset that I do not have answers, but that I do say there is nothing to be gained by refusing to engage in honest dialogue about such questions!

145 § If Catholicism is a faith that demands an adult response to Christ, should we still be engaged in infant baptism?

§ What about confirmation – if it is an affirmation of baptism is it something we should be doing while candidates are still in school?

150 § Indeed, what of schools: is the increasingly secular environment in most Catholic schools the right place to offer catechesis?

§ What of priesthood – is this a sacrament that should be available only for men, as recent Vatican statements clearly indicate? Who should be presiding at Eucharist – in some passages in St. Paul, there are some presiders appointed by him, apparently without ordination.

155 § And what of matrimony – if this is a sacrament for life, is it too easy to be married in Church? Or should we consider the reality of divorce and examine the place of divorce in the lives of Catholics as a possibility?

160 § It seems to me that there is always a potential for disaster in the Church when it comes to the exercise of authority. Who can teach with authority? Who holds authority? How is authority handed on from one generation in the Church to the next?

Given that the Church is not a democracy, how do we find the authentic voice of our God and discover the way in which the Church should walk in that light?
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§ And what about the community? Is there any sense in which the people who gather on a Sunday from all corners of the parish can be said to be a community if there is little or no interaction among them during the week. If there is no faith sharing during the week, if there is no time of common prayer in smaller groups? The experience of the Church in South America indicates that the only way to develop a parish is by creating small communities within the parish that meet on a regular basis, so that the parish becomes a community of communities.
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The problem with most of these questions is that the answers lie outside our shores. These are issues for the worldwide Church. But the local experience of Church that is created for people here in Limerick, lies in our own hands. Irish Catholics should be able to experience a rich tapestry of lived faith in the local community. That much we can do ourselves. It should be abundantly clear that the current model may sustain structures without nourishing faith. Is what we are doing really palliative care for a dying Church?
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The Call to Change

Our faith can suffer from the accumulated tradition of 2000 years, some of which is important, some of which is irrelevant. But as bearers of the light of Christ, we must distinguish between the two. Being a people of faith means we cannot settle for the quiet life, doing things because we have always done them.
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As one cynic put it, the only requirement for Irish Catholics in the past was to pray, pay and obey -- everything else was organised by those with a calling to the Church. The net result is that we have had a vicarious kind of religion in
190 which the work of the Church was left to a professional grouping while the vast majority -- the laity -- were left outside of any mechanism of power, service, or genuine involvement.

That constitutes a major part of our problem today. Not merely the exclusion of the laity, but rather the confusion that exists within the Church about ministry,
195 power and service. What we have done is to professionalize the ministry into a single order of significance, the priesthood, and add to it all the power and control that can exist in the Church. So what we have ended up with a large group of ordained administrators who often see their primary task as parish organisers rather than one of preaching the gospel.

200 What of priesthood in all of this? Where does the ordained ministry fit in? As one woman asked me "if the laity are doing everything and running the parish, what will the priest do?" This is not an easy question to answer. I suggest though that the answer lies in a renewed and recovered understanding of both priest and sacrament. Priesthood is call to relationship, by which one is
205 fashioned into a special relationship with the living God, but which is also fleshed out in a living relationship with the people of God. That relationship with God can only be fostered in prayer with a great deal of listening to the voice of the spirit. But the relationship with the people can only be fostered with a great deal of listening as well.

210 Effective priesthood, is I can use that phrase, is not simply about doing priestcraft well. Really effective ministry comes from the daily struggle to love the people of God with one's whole soul and heart and mind. It requires some level of accountability and openness, some level of genuine friendship and shared life, some level of care and challenge, between and the priest and the
215 people.

Responsibility for the development of that effective ministry does not lie with the priest alone. Just as a marriage requires commitment from both parties, so too does the development of priestly life and ministry require huge commitment from both the minister and the community.

220 Priests are called to be companions on the journey of life. The root meaning of companion comes from the Latin, *cum pane*, meaning those with whom one breaks bread. And what an appropriate term for the priest who presides at the breaking of bread, whose life task it is to walk with those in need of support and sustenance, of care and comfort, of affirmation and affection, of life and love.

225 The work of the priest only begins to make sense when it is a ministry born of relationship with the ordinary men and women who constitute God's family.

Priesthood cannot be exercised in isolation for its real meaning is found only in the depth of relationship with God and with the people who constitute the Church. Any future understanding of priesthood, therefore, must be rooted
230 clearly in the context of relationship in which listening plays such a vital role. We who are priests need to listen closely and attentively to what the voice of the Spirit is saying in the Church.

The Vatican Council spells it out clearly that "it is the first task of priests as co-workers of the bishops to preach the gospel to all."¹ That task of preaching is
235 intrinsic to priesthood.

Without wishing to give any offence, it often seems to me that the preaching of that word, in a way that is vibrant and alive, is somewhat absent in our Church at this time. Far too many of our people go away hungry from Mass Sunday after Sunday because they have not been offered a message of substance for
240 their spiritual lives.

In many pulpits, Sunday after Sunday, what is trotted out is a series of pious clichés, stitched together with little apparent regard for the whole. If my children

¹ Presbyterorum Ordinis, #4

245 go to my neighbour to be fed because I am not feeding them at my own table,
the shame is surely on me rather than my children. Our impoverished approach
to preaching must be rectified if people are to be truly nourished by the Word
each Sunday. Without such a renewal of the preached Word, we cannot justly
complain if people go elsewhere, or stop coming, simply because we are not
feeding them.

250 The importance of preaching is something of which we priests need to be
reminded. It is in preaching that we truly have something to offer the people of
God.

St. Peter says in the New Testament that we must give reason for the hope that
is in us. Today the Church in Ireland needs to hear that message of hope. We
need to hear it and to share it. We need above all to believe in it.

255 Perhaps today we might simply resolve together to continue to reflect deeply on
our faith as we listen to the Spirit and one another, to walk fully in the light of
Christ and to let everyone see the hope that is ours as we journey toward our
glorious destiny. May our good and gracious God bring to completion the work
that has already begun. AMEN.

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