

The Church in a New Reality

I have been asked to share some reflections with you about the life and mission of the Church in these unprecedented days and how we might emerge from the pandemic and learn how to live in a new reality.

First of all then, permit me to share with you the pastoral theological principles which will guide my reflections in this talk. Pastoral theology engages with many other disciplines in order to discern what God is saying to us in the Church today and how we might respond to this revelation. Pastoral theology certainly reflects upon the history of the pilgrim people of God, and when we do this, we realise there are previous examples of plague and war which have affected our ways of being Church in a particular time and place.

When we are engaged with socio-cultural values it is very easy for us to borrow the methodologies which belong to other disciplines, especially those of the social sciences. The underlying thesis of my own doctoral research insists on the need for there to be a truly theological method underpinning our reflection. Other methodologies may be helpful. Leo Perdue, for example, suggests that 20th century Old Testament scholarship has been seduced by the Enlightenment Project of historical source criticism. He proposes that this has been overtaken by 'sociological analysis and literary criticism'.¹ Therefore, he suggests that we should employ other categories of constructive imagination in order to understand the unfolding history of Israel. This may be fascinating and helpful. Nevertheless, by the end of his book, one has the sense that Perdue has himself been seduced by a social scientific paradigm.

Pastoral theologians often speak of the pastoral cycle. There are different models, but basically they all have four elements. Beginning with experience, then theological reflection or analysis, leading to a learning from experience and finally, action. In some respects, this is an ancient model of reflection we see at work in the Old Testament, when Israel reflected on her experience after the exodus journey. The narrative presents a people who rebelled against God, took God's retribution in servitude, entered into repentance and finally experienced restorative salvation. It is fascinating to me to see these two cycles at work today. Some comment in recent months is nearly a perfect example of the deuteronomic cycle. The COVID-19 pandemic, it is suggested, is God's punishment on a world which has turned away to sin and idolatry, even in the Church. I say nearly a perfect example. This approach often misses an important element, the need to proclaim the hope of salvation which is at the heart of God's unfolding plan for his creation. On the other hand, many were suggesting during the months of lockdown, that it will soon be over and we can get back to how things were beforehand, a cyclical sense which is more about the optimism of the affluent than Christian hope. I have a

¹ Cf Leo G Perdue, *Reconstructing Old Testament Theology: After the Collapse of History*, viii

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suspicion, this pastoral cycle is pedalling fast, not exactly going around in returning circles, and will take us to a new place in the months ahead.

And so to my own preferred method for pastoral theological reflection, a method which underpins my own observations about the Church in a new reality. In essence, this is the Cardijn model of see, judge, act or as I prefer, attending, imagining, and serving. I use these verb forms to indicate that this is an ongoing process which is never complete. Seeing is not the same as attending. Some of you may be familiar with a 19th century German illustrator's cartoon. When you first see this, you could be seeing a young woman or an old woman - the same drawing but the perception is different. One needs to make a Gestalt switch in order to see the other face in the same data.

It is the same with imagination. Imagination is the conscious heeding of the Christian tradition within the pastoral process. It is the unambiguous acknowledgement of a divine saving-presence in the life of the Church. Imagination restores the created and teleological purposes to the agenda of human life after the rationalist attempts to destroy their credibility. In so many ways, facile optimism has been replaced by weary scepticism in many segments of contemporary western societies. Imagination is the theological response to this post-enlightenment philosophical fatigue. The modern mindset is so often defined within the false optimism that has replaced Christian hope. Imagination is needed to develop a vision of the Church, large enough to breathe in this anthropological atmosphere. In this imagining, we have to find the courage to invoke the One who shared our human nature with 'the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.'²

And then to service. A truncated process which only includes attending and imagining could lead to Gnosticism and Pelagianism, the sense that Christian life is about an esoteric knowing or a burdensome need to succeed by our own efforts. Paradoxically, an understanding of servanthood saves us from all this, and keeps us truly Gospel-rooted. Look to the parable of the sheep and goats.³ The sheep didn't even know they were serving the needs of Christ, so they weren't doing church as a kind of celestial insurance policy. The lockdown was demanding in so many ways. Nevertheless, we continue to hear stories of humbling and profound servanthood with neighbours serving neighbours in a most generous manner.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Permit me to make a final set of observations about my own method for pastoral theological reflection. And let me at this point bring onto the stage, Bernard Lonergan. Of all the tools

² Jn.1.14

³ Mt 25.31-46

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needed for us to reflect on the Church in a new reality, we need what Lonergan calls reflective insight. Insight is an activity which is part of the stable structure of cognitional activities.⁴ However, the knowledge we have through insight is without boundaries and so cannot be easily structured. According to Lonergan, in order to examine this knowledge, we need the kind of insight which comes from a true model of discernment such as that proposed by St Ignatius of Loyola and used by many today in order to discern where God is at work in their life situation.

How do we know anything? The act of knowing involves a cognitional process. The key to understanding Lonergan: knowing in itself is insufficient - until it leads to responsible action. Hence my insistence on servanthood. Now I am very aware that there is no time to pursue this in any necessary detail. So I am simply going to present to you Lonergan's four imperatives by which I seek to underpin my pastoral theological reflection of attending, imagining and serving:

be attentive	(by looking intently at what's there)
be intelligent	(by rearranging the data searching for links, patterns, insight etc)
be reasonable	(by judging and checking what you understand against what is given)
be responsible	(by evaluating, deciding and acting in the light of the exercise)

Needless to say, these imperatives have opposites:

be attentive:	sleepy
be intelligent:	stupid
be reasonable:	silly
be responsible:	cowardly

Well that's the hard work of the talk done. And by the way, I am very conscious that some of you may already have given in to the temptation to be sleepy. Thank goodness your snoring can't be heard on zoom - or you might wake the others up!

But bear with me if you may. If we apply Lonergan's four imperatives to this evening's topic, the Church in a new reality, then we may fall flat on our faces at the first stage of the reflection, being attentive to the data. Is it intelligent, reasonable or responsible to reflect upon the Church in a pandemic whilst we are in the midst of the storm? And as I write this, there is certain evidence, we are approaching the second spike in the virus. It is possible I think, for us to say something. The popular Anglican writer Tom Wright, interestingly writing

⁴ Cf the Lonergan Institute website on cognitional structure

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under his academic name N T Wright has been quick off the mark, publishing a book *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and Its Aftermath*. (If you don't want to buy the book you can see him talking about this on YouTube.)

And so to the data, to which we must attend, be imaginative and seek ways to be a serving Church. The pandemic has spawned a new popular vocabulary. We speak of lockdowns, social distancing, shielding, essential and non-essential activities. There is testing and tracing, magic numbers such as 30 and 6. This vocabulary frames a new experience. We speak of the new normal and some are exploring how we might live with the virus in a meaningful economic and social manner. From our own Catholic perspective, along with other Christians and religious traditions, places of worship were closed for a considerable period of time, some still are. We will not quickly forget the emptiness of Holy Week and the Triduum, all against the backdrop of the Holy Father, a solitary figure in an empty space in front of St Peter's Basilica, speaking to us on a dark and wet Rome evening about the Gospel storm on the Sea of Galilee. Again, there is a new vocabulary to speak of our liturgical experience. We learnt to live with live streamed Masses, hold graveside funerals for our loved ones and perhaps felt out of sorts within a general dearth of church-based activities.

This might all add up to seeing the data from one perspective, for example's sake, the "old woman" in the optical illusion picture. And already I find myself feeling uncomfortable if this should form the whole of the narrative. It would create a faulty hermeneutic. Fortunately, there have been many signs during this pandemic of an imaginative contemplation of the mystery shared in the Incarnation, full of grace and truth. Families speak of a new experience of the *ecclesia domestica*. There was a new found experience of communion in family meals and shared prayer. Many found Internet-based sites which have deepened their understanding of our faith, and helped them to pray. And then there are the ubiquitous zoom gatherings; families, social groups, prayer meetings and discussion circles, even webinars. All this, against a remarkable experience, as I have already mentioned, of people going out of their ways to help their neighbours, to make the mystery of Christ the Servant King a reality within our communities.

And how can we forget the quiet, the calm roads, the cleaner air in the skies, the sound of birdsong and for those of us with a contemplative spirit, the space to encounter our demons, our psychological reality, the things we normally don't have time for or hide from with too much activity. And as we watched Andrea Bocelli sing his 'music for hope' in an empty Duomo Cathedral in Milan, against the pictures of silent Italian cities in the depths of lockdown, I went deep into my soul and wept. And as we emerge from those months and enter this new normal, I am already beginning to yearn for the

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space and time to listen again to Wagner's prelude to act one of Lohengrin, and to allow that sublime music to take me to someplace I need to be.

Cue Karl Rahner. I cannot claim to understand everything Rahner wrote. But this is clear enough, 'the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.'⁵ One senses, more than fifty years later, we might be entering the future Rahner wrote about. If only we have the imagination to grasp the opportunity. How many are longing for time before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration, seeking spiritual direction and sacramental reconciliation.

In the midst of the pandemic, the Holy See has published the long awaited Directory for Catechesis. Here we find a renewed focus on evangelisation, a strengthening of the purpose of catechesis, enabling someone to experience a new personal relationship with Jesus and what this means, to be inserted more deeply into the life of the Blessed Trinity (which by the way, our Christian brothers and sisters of the East are only too well aware of in their long spiritual tradition).

There is a new Instruction, *The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church*. This text presents what is already known, that the parish is meant to respond 'to a precise pastoral need, namely that of bringing the Gospel to the People through the proclamation of the faith and the celebration of the sacraments.'⁶ The Church is missionary by nature, and this should be seen in the life and ministry of the parish community. The bombshell for me is this quotation, 'the territorial configuration of the parish, however, must confront a peculiar characteristic of our contemporary world, whereby increased mobility and the digital culture have expanded the confines of existence.'⁷ I am tempted to paraphrase this when people complain to me about their parish, go where you will find life! I think that many do, and the new reality has actually been there for some time now. It is nevertheless, tragic when a considerable number of people do not find life in their Catholic community and feel they must go elsewhere to do so.

And then there is Fr James Mallon's new book, *Divine Renovation Beyond the Parish*. Some of it is about number crunching and strategy. To put this in perspective, a priest from another diocese looked at the falling statistics for mass attendance in his diocese in recent years, compared them with the post-lockdown statistics, and suggested that we are now five years down the line in terms of decline. It doesn't have to be like that. James Mallon quotes Pope Francis in 2015, 'we are not living in an era of change but a change of era'. And a Mallon quotation I love, 'someone once said, the Church is like an

⁵ Cf Karl Rahner, *The Christian of the Future*, 1967

⁶ *Instruction*, 6

⁷ *Ibid* 8

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addict, she will only be open to change when the pain of remaining as she is would be greater than the pain of change.’ And next, an idea which fits in well with Rahner’s assertion, ‘the Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all’, Fr Mallon writes, ‘Mission without holiness can be accommodation. Holiness without mission tends towards isolation. Holiness balanced with mission fosters missionary engagement.’

I would love to go on and have the opportunity to explore these themes with you further. Unfortunately, we have run out of time this evening. So let me finish with a final reflection. I have never seen any conflict between being a contemplative and acting as a missionary disciple. And within this seeming tension may I propose, the real question is not about the Church in a new reality. The more pertinent question is about *the Church* as a new reality, continuing to reflect upon what the Lord is saying to us through the circumstances in which we find ourselves. One senses, the pain of remaining as we are, is about to become greater than the paschal suffering of death and resurrection. Let us not be like the servant who buried his treasure in the ground, hoping to hand it back safely at the end of time. But rather, let us trade what we have been given, taking risks, allowing the Lord to grow new fruit, because that’s the point, God has a loving plan for our Church and the whole of creation, and we are meant to be helping him with the harvest rather than wringing our hands in self-focused despair. Amen.

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