

## Ministry in Transition<sup>1</sup>

Michael A. Conway

### A) Introduction: Culture and Theology

I  
About a week after my ordination, one of my neighbours asked me about the parish to which I was going to be sent. When I replied that I was going back to Rome to study for one more year, she looked rather perplexed and observed: ‘That’s funny, ‘cause I’ve always heard that you were a bright lad!’ Thankfully, the Lord had taken her before I went to Germany some years later, as, at that point, she would have considered me really stupid! This reflected something of the prevailing attitude of the times: as a young person you trained for your life’s task, and that was adequate for most professions. For my neighbour (and not a few priests), theology was something you did in seminary to prepare you for ministry and, to the end, was deemed to be perfectly sufficient for life. In Maynooth jargon, there was ‘stuff /bull’ to be learned; once you got through whatever had to be done for your exams (bull), you retained the basic knowledge (stuff) for working in a parish! Most of what you learned, of course, remained very much in the background and might even be forgotten.

By and large, perhaps ironically, this system functioned well. And the main reason for it working—and I’m very sorry to say this—had very little to do with the quality of the theology that you received in Maynooth (and I’m not commenting on that!); rather, it was that the stability of the culture that you grew up in was in an immediate and direct continuity with the culture within which you would eventually come to minister. This foundational stability of culture meant that you could, for the most part, simply replicate what you saw growing up in your own parish and that you had experienced since childhood. This was pretty much adequate to the needs of the parish and the diocese within which you yourself would eventually take up ministry. You did what your parish priest did before you; you learned a few new ideas and ways of doing things in your first years of ministry, and that, then, served you well. *The stability of the culture was the major guarantee for the continued functioning of ministry.*

Things have changed considerably over the last two decades, where significant changes at the level of culture are changing the very dynamics of faith and belief in society. This is having an

---

<sup>1</sup> Address given at a conference for clergy of the Galway diocese, *Ministry in Transition*, Galway, 27-29 January 2014.

enormous impact on ministry, and we need to begin to understand something of these changes if we are to find our bearing.

## II

In terms of culture, we live in a matrix that we never grasp in its entirety. We cannot stand outside of it and view it independently and objectively. We are always already involved. We cannot turn it into what Heidegger calls a 'World Picture' so that we might analyse it and understand it perfectly. This makes it somewhat more difficult to study. We do not so much see and believe our own society's patterns, thoughts, and feelings; rather we approach life through them. We know it because we live in it, just like a fish lives in water. Someone has remarked: *We don't know who it was discovered water, but we're pretty sure it wasn't a fish!*<sup>2</sup> Culture is always bigger than our knowledge of it, which explains why it can so significantly surprise us with its developments. Not only that, but you cannot really reverse the dynamic of change when it has taken place deep in the fabric of culture. You cannot, so to speak, 'correct' a development and force things back into an earlier mode. You can, of course, to some degree, steer culture, but even this is quite limited. There will always be a significant margin between what you anticipate and what is actually realized. The gap will depend on the degree to which your intention and your project resonate with the wider culture. This inherent power of culture is really only recently being understood. Louis Dupré, who taught at Yale, writes:

Culture changes . . . have a definitive and irreversible impact that transforms the very essence of reality. Not merely our thinking about the real changes: reality itself changes as we think about it differently. History carries an ontic significance that excludes any reversal of the present. Nor is it possible to capture that changing reality in an ahistorical system.<sup>3</sup>

This is a rather complicated way of saying that we cannot change the dynamics of culture; there is a certain fatality written into the culture so that we must learn to live with(in) it and structure life from within it.

---

<sup>2</sup> The remark is from John Culkin (see Howard Gossage, 'Understanding Marshall McLuhan,' *Ramparts* 4, no. 12 [1966], 37).

<sup>3</sup> Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), 6.

### III

Now this has enormous implications for ministry and for how one understands the place and role of Theology in the life of ministry. And when I say ‘Theology,’ I don’t mean the study of the large tomes of ‘great’ theologians; rather, I mean the way that we ourselves talk about faith, the understanding that we have of that faith, and the understanding that we have of what we do when we minister in a parish or wherever. We all have a theology, a theo-logos, a word that we say about God, about Church, about community, and so on. And it seems to me that if culture is such an important feature of the world within which we minister, and if there are major changes taking place in that culture, then, surely, what we say and how we say it must change too! If not, we run the risk of being ‘un-hearable’ in a culture that no longer has an ear for us.

This attention to the present culture is only the mirror of a theology of the incarnation—where we view culture itself as existing in relation to Christ and strive to discern there the locus of redemption:

If all things exist in Christ, then the cultural is not something entirely separate from him; the cultural is that through which God’s redemptive grace operates. Christ, we could say, is the origin and consummation of culture, in the same way as he is both the prototype and the fulfilment of all that is properly human.<sup>4</sup>

### IV

I would now like to highlight three features in contemporary culture that are important background music, so to speak, to the challenge of ministry. Necessarily, I am generalizing, so this doesn’t apply to every single individual and in every single place; but these features are significant enough in terms of the general culture to be worth isolating and reflecting upon. They have an enormous impact on how religion and belief are worked out in our culture. And these in turn have implications for how we do our theology (personal and ecclesial) in this present context.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Graham Ward, *Christ and Culture: Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 113-14.

<sup>5</sup> In choosing these three features, I do not wish to suggest that these in any way ‘explain’ the dynamics of contemporary culture. ‘Explaining’ culture through causal sequences is utterly naive and reflects more than anything else an understanding of continuity that has been inherited from nineteenth century positivism. We cannot ever anticipate or suppress the spontaneous and contingent element in culture, which will always disrupt the (ontological) temptation to proffer completeness.

## **B) The 'Ethics of Authenticity'**

I

The first feature that I'd like to reflect on is a value that has been around for a long time, but which more recently has moved to centre stage in terms of the crucial values in our culture. And that value is authenticity or sincerity as expressed in ideas or exhortations such as: 'being true to your self,' 'finding your true self,' or 'searching out your true path in life.' These are all matters of finding your own expression for a unique identity that is yours alone. This value has come to prominence as a mass phenomenon since about the 1960's; the roots of this emergence, however, go back to the Romantic movement of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, and further back to the Reformation.<sup>6</sup> And in that sense, it is not new, but it has been slow in its specific emergence as a mass phenomenon with a widespread general impact. Up to more recently, only an elite minority had the luxury of being able to structure their own living around this principle.

Some of the factors that have contributed to this new emergence include a post-war consumer revolution, where people could afford (in every sense) to concentrate more on their own lives and on their more immediate family. There was, for example, less a need to be embedded in a larger community, where poverty forced people to interact more widely and necessarily (particularly in rural settings). Other factors include: the general move towards towns (where people lived more on their own), the easy availability of new goods and services, the emergence of liberation movements (particularly, women's liberation), a reaction to the totalitarian dynamics of the war period, etc. The conjunction of a multiplicity of such factors facilitated, in time, freer individual lifestyles. The post war period would eventually see the growth of an independent youth culture and, with it, a new creativity that would in time have an enormous impact on the changing character of wider culture.

In the wake of such developments, the 'pursuit of happiness' took on a new meaning. There was a new emphasis on expressing your own taste, creating your own individualized space according to your own needs and likes or dislikes. In an earlier generation, only the very wealthy could afford this kind of lifestyle. I remember when I was very young, being on holidays in my Grandmother's

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard: Harvard University, 2007).

house and visiting some of the neighbours with her. The other houses were almost identical inside: on the wall hung the Sacred Heart picture; there was the open fire with the crane; the dresser had large serving dishes on the bottom shelf; on the mantelpiece were the same ornaments; and so on. It was apparent that everyone lived roughly in the same way and followed the same style, for want of a better expression. (Now, of course, you're more likely to see a poster of 'Lady Gaga' taking the place of *The Mother of Perpetual Help*!)

A more distant discovery of this value, which may resonate with you and remind you of your school days is to be had in *Hamlet*, where Polonius is giving his advice to Laertes who is being sent to Paris, and his rather dull admonitions culminate with the extraordinary lines:

This above all: to thine own self be true  
And it doth follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man

Commenting on these lines, Lionel Trilling observes that here '[Polonius] has conceived of sincerity as an essential condition of virtue and has discovered how it is to be attained'<sup>7</sup>

What has emerged and is spreading out into the fabric of the wider culture is this value of 'authenticity,' of being true to yourself. It has come to crystalize around the idea that each one of us has his or her own way of realizing our humanity. It is much too simplistic to reduce this down to egoism and to see it as a turn to hedonism (as is often done). Rather, it has now become what could be termed *an ethic of authenticity*. In other words: this is the proper way to be; an obligation, if you like; how one ought to live. A simplified expressionism now infiltrates everywhere and phrases have become familiar such as: 'do your own thing,' 'find yourself,' 'realize yourself,' 'release your true self,' etc. This is an essential component of contemporary lived ethics; it is a significant 'good' in our culture, and this is so whether you object to it or not. I don't think my grandmother would have understood any of these expressions (and I suspect she would have judged them to be highly self-indulgent!)

Be that as it may, as a core value, it now means that an important task for each person in life is *to find* and live out this unique expression of one's own identity. This is viewed against its opposite,

---

<sup>7</sup> Lionel Trilling, *Sincerity and Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1974), 3.

which might be characterized as surrendering to conformity with a model that is imposed from the outside (by society, by the previous generation, by religion, by the Church, or by the political establishment, etc.) So it is really a powerful reacting to conformism and a worldview that is seen as crushing individuality and creativity. It is interesting that the theologian Paul Tillich said to a class that was graduating from Harvard in 1957: 'We hope for more non-conformists among you, for your sake, for the sake of the nation, and for the sake of humanity.'<sup>8</sup>

## II

As you might imagine, this centring of the value of 'authenticity' has an enormous impact on the fabric of society. And of course, it has a shadow that is not always immediately visible. Some things are now much more difficult: community building; achieving equality in society; caring for the vulnerable and the dependent (who can be more easily neglected); dealing with the loss of stability; and securing the levels of safety in society. And, of course, it has an impact on religion, on believing, on Church life and derivatively on ministry.

In terms of religion per se, the most important single factor that is emerging in this matrix is that of 'choice': one belongs to a religious denomination because it is the right one for you; it is where you can best express yourself and where you can find yourself. The key thing is that you are in a particular church through your choosing. It is your own choice. Of course, you may well, and many do, stay in the church with which you have grown up, but, nonetheless, the sense must be there that corresponds to your own person, that it is 'authentic' for you.

It means, further, that in the general culture the emphasis is no longer on which church is the true church or the true religion to the exclusion of others, but on which one is right for the individual person. This is an enormous change. Now, certain legitimacy is given to all, equally, and the plurality itself is understood to be a good thing. This means, further, that 'truth' in terms of religion has shifted its focus from, if you like, the external forum (which is the true church?) to the internal forum (which church is the true one for me?). The one exception to this is when it comes to those groups that are perceived to be religious sects in society (probably because they are deemed generally to be 'inauthentic').

---

<sup>8</sup> See Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 476.

Now this matter of choice has a number of implications: first, you must find the right religion or faith for you—i.e. you must search (and your choice may not be the church/faith that you were brought up in). And the right option may even be no church/religion at all. Secondly, at some point, many, if not most, people will go through a period of ‘not belonging’ and ‘of searching’. This is, and, perhaps, will be, perceived increasingly as normal and healthy. This is a growing category in our culture and one that we need to be particularly mindful of in our ministry. In the past, we put enormous energy into preparing children and young people to become members of the Christian community. There is now a need to put at least some of that energy elsewhere, namely, into that group of ‘searchers’ so that they are really met when they knock on the door of Christian faith.

The emphasis on choice means, of course, that any dimension of ‘coercion’ in any form in matters of religion is absurd (and this includes coercion on the macro-political plane). If our ministry does not, and is not clearly seen to, respect individual integrity and freedom, then what we might have to say cannot even be heard in contemporary culture, never mind get a positive response.

Because of the fundamental choice and the mobility that goes with there being multiple available options, a further challenge for ministry is maintaining any community over time. Since joining is not simply a once and for all decision (choice), but means that you may move off again if it is not right for you, ministry in any community means being in an dialogical situation with everyone. This, at least, would suggest that there needs to be more than one voice meeting the needs of a spectrum of people: young adults, seasoned parents, elderly, and so on. All such groupings increasingly expect a specific and tailored response to their presence in the community. One person cannot do this. And this, of course, raises important questions for the future.

### **C) Reservation, Belief (s), and Believing**

The second feature that I would like to draw your attention to today has to do with belief and believing in contemporary culture. What I would like to do is give you an idea of how difficult, generally, belief and believing have become. For various reasons, the nature of belief and of believing has changed radically over the last four decades. And this, of course, has an impact on religion in our culture.

In an earlier dispensation, let's say forty or so years ago (in the general public sphere), belief and believing was most immediately thought of in terms of the 'object' of belief—the 'what' that was to be believed. It was deemed that this 'object' was simply to be 'handed on' from one person to the next.<sup>9</sup> I believe something; I tell you about it; and you either believe it or you don't. All the attention was paid to the 'what' of belief. This was discussed, argued about, written up, promulgated, and so on. An important further feature of belief was that of an 'authority': the proper authority ratified the 'object' to be believed. And this ratification was often crucial if any particular 'object' was worthy of belief. In matters of faith and religion, for example, if the bishop said that this or that was what was to be believed; then, this or that was simply believed with no great further questioning. You will remember the famous: *Roma locuta est, causa finita est* (which, incidentally, in this exact form, was never used by either Cyprian or Augustine). For your proverbial average person in the pew, in matters of faith and religion, it was the priest and the teacher who determined, or, at least, communicated the 'what' of belief. In this framework, the handing-on itself, for want of a better expression, was evidently a one-way system. And, clearly, an instrument like the 'catechism' would be the ideal tool in such a world-view. It secured the 'object' and made life easy for the person, the 'authority,' charged with 'handing on' the faith.

This principle of an authority ratifying an object in the dynamic of believing went well beyond the confines of the church: if a doctor said something in a matter of health, it was simply believed, etc. In all cases, 'beliefs' were something that were there, independent of one's own subjective take on the world. Others, for the most part, had already determined their content, and it was simply taken on or rejected at face value. If whatever was to be believed came from the right source, the right authority, you might say, then it was automatically believable, and, indeed, could readily and confidently be believed.

In time, this whole structure of belief and believing would be utterly dismantled. This came initially from two fronts. On the first one, corresponding to the emergence of the natural sciences, it was soon claimed that the only 'objects' that had any reality were those that could be turned into facts, and most eminently, scientific facts. If it could not be seen, touched, and measured, it did not exist. And so the 'object' itself of belief was questioned: justifications and explanations were required, facts were elicited so that one could 'confirm' for one-self that yes this was 'believable' and worth believing. If these could not be produced, then, for some, there were no grounds for

---

<sup>9</sup> Of course this dynamic of being 'handed-on' is concomitantly close to the idea of tradition (tra-ducere).



belief. Only what could be 'confirmed' (experientially, you might say) was 'believable' and worth believing. Anything else was myth. Thus, in one sweep almost everything to do with religious belief was wiped from the table. This tradition lives on in the likes of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, and variants of it are widespread in contemporary culture.

On a second front, almost in opposition to the first and stemming from the Enlightenment, was the determination (chiefly, by Kant, but later by Gadamer and the hermeneutic tradition) that an object, any object, is profoundly shaped by the subject that perceives/receives it. We colour everything that we behold. There is no neutral 'thing' or 'belief' out there that can stand independently of us and could in some way be handed on, or pointed out, to us. In short, there really is no uncontaminated 'object.' *Everything is fashioned and re-fashioned by ourselves as we receive, interact with, and transform our world.* Religion belongs to a moral order that has no independent anchoring in this world. It is profoundly marked by the subjective.

But there was more to come.

As the structures of society began to change, particularly, toward a greater sense of equality, it was not long before focus turned to the inherent inequality that undergirds authority in all its forms. Through the 1960s and 1970s a much more critical spirit emerged in Irish society (it had already been emerging in mainland Europe since after the War), and this, coupled with a more extensive education (with more young people going to third level), would lead to a less differential attitude toward all authority. This change in attitude was eventually galvanized by a spate of scandals and revelations on diverse levels (politics, church, medicine, etc.).<sup>10</sup> This is now part and parcel of the background noise of the daily news. Gradually it became clear that you could not take someone at their word *simply* because of the position they held in society. The dimension of authority in the older order of belief and believing, the guarantor, has collapsed. It was realized that there is no neutral transaction or communication. There are agendas at play, there is a politics at work, and there is almost always self-interest in the detail. All of this, at the very least, modifies, if it does not distort the integrity of the act itself of proffering what might be believed. And this can no longer be ignored, or, better, it is naïve to do so.

---

<sup>10</sup> See Klaus Mertes, *Verlorenes Vertrauen: Katholisch sein in der Krise* (Freiburg: Herder, 2013).

There are, of course, complex issues (scientific, philosophical, political, socio-cultural, and otherwise) behind each of these determinations. My point today is not that of an engagement with this complexity (extremely worthwhile, and, even necessary), but rather with simply observing that all of this has changed radically how we think about and relate to belief(s) and believing. It is no longer a simple or a naive affair. The person who might believe, and we all have to believe, on all kinds of levels, has developed a critical distance from both the possible object of belief and the person presenting what might be believed. This is new in our culture: each person cannot but tread carefully.

For those in ministry, it is important to recognize and understand this. What can appear as rebuttal or rejection, may, in fact, be essentially something else altogether: it may be simply a responsible reservation in the face of an important life choice. From now on, 'believing' and especially religious 'believing' is taken to be something that is deeply personal and not something that one takes on likely or easily.

#### **D) 'Institutionality'<sup>11</sup>**

It is sometimes said that we have gone from a fixed, ordered cosmos, within which everything had its place, to an ever-expanding universe with an origin in an unknown past and in which everything is open to change.<sup>12</sup> In other words, we've gone from the extreme of stability to the extreme of novelty. In this transition a metaphysical way of seeing and understanding the world has given way to one that is much more indebted to a functional understanding of the world. Everything is open to change, and we can no longer see things as being finally determined. This means that we see the world less in the dogmatic terms of how we know it to be really and more in terms, simply, of how it works best for us. The 'truth' is closer to what works well than to any deep meaning that we might suspect or intuit about the world.

This transition has impacted right across society, where older dispensations and institutions have had to change and continue to change so to be in harmony with this more practical way of understanding things. Up to the Enlightenment institutional structures could be justified on the grounds that they mirrored the stable order of the cosmos. They were given, and, as such, even,

---

<sup>11</sup> I am using the word 'institutionality' to designate the quality of being institutional, embracing the act of setting up, working and living within, modifying, and closing down any such enterprise in a culture.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion of this point, see, for example, Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

the expression of divine will. And each person had his or her place in this stability. This could not be changed, and if anyone attempted to change things, the fear was that everything would go awry. Hierarchy in all its forms was fixed from above and did not need to be questioned. In this older dispensation *the person served the institution* (and that was the language that was used), epitomized, for example, in the Feudal system.

In contrast, when institutions and institutional structures are understood in terms of functionality, this is inverted, so that *the institution is understood to serve the person*. And this explains why, for example, the element of accountability now takes centre stage, and why people are outraged if those in particular positions (especially of authority) do not act according to the expectations that accompany their positions. When there is serious failure, it makes perfect sense that they seek resignations. The answerability is not only upwards, say, to God (if you recognize this), but, more crucially (!), outwards to all others who are integrated into the same system. Indeed there is a prophetic element in Benedict XVI' resignation in that it underlines this connection between one's position and the service that one gives or cannot give (as the case may be).

Institutionality is increasingly understood to be a matter of mutual benefit. It is what works for us together with the greatest possible level of equality and freedom. Ideally it works well, but if it does not work, then it needs to be changed. It is not fixed in either time or place. A key element is that of mutuality: there must be an element of mutual consent (even if it is tacit) in order for the structure to survive. Otherwise, it will simply be abandoned. This means that the system is beholden to those who are integrated into it and cannot survive without their implicit, and increasingly explicit, consent.

Institutionality is always a matter of means; it is never about an end in itself. It is fundamentally, and this is coming more and more to light, a matter of service! If this is true in general, then it has a bearing on the institutional structures that we have inherited in our shaping of Christian living. This is a particularly acute question at the moment at parish level, where the clearly foreseeable drop in the numbers of priests requires us, in any case, to restructure what we do at this level.

## **E) Looking to the Horizon**

### ***a) Placing the Past in the Present (not the Present in the Past)***

In terms of the continuity of Christian life and identity, there is a fallacy out there that would suggest that being faithful to the gospel and the reality of a living church means being concerned primarily with preserving what has been inherited from the past: taking the 'tradition' in all its complexity and handing it on to a new generation or group as perfectly intact as possible. It reflects a mentality or a mindset that sees faith exclusively in terms of what has been and that hides behind categories such as conservative or traditionalist, and with not a little hint of superiority. When such positions take on a limiting function, either for oneself or for others, they sacrifice the present for an illusion of the past. They reflect, ultimately, a fear of the present and of the future. They go forward by trying to go backwards: they attempt to retrieve the 'past' (which is impossible) in the hope of finding the future.<sup>13</sup>

They also emasculate the dynamic, living force of the present and, indeed, the future for the sake of an ideology that is shaped by an artificial construction of the past. *This serves only to alienate incrementally the life of faith from the present reality.* And this death cannot be faithfulness to the living, challenging, welcoming power of the gospel. In its complete integrity the gospel is always a living force, now, in the present. Speaking of this temptation to dwell in the past the French bishops simply declare: 'We refuse all nostalgia for past epochs where the principle of authority appeared to be imposed in an unquestioned way.'<sup>14</sup>

On the eve of the Second Vatican Council, 11 October 1962—that's before I was born, to put this in perspective—Pope John XXIII gave an address in which he countered, with an infectious optimism, those who took a pessimistic view of the changes in society:

We feel we must disagree with those prophets of gloom, who are always forecasting disaster, as though the end of the world were at hand. In the present order of things, Divine Providence is leading us to a new order of human relations which, by men's own efforts and even beyond their very expectations, are directed toward the fulfilment of God's

---

<sup>13</sup> The 'past' is always a mediated construct that is hermeneutically conditioned; there is no immediacy with the past. Neither is there an absolute narrative of the past; rather, the present has an infinite capacity to proffer a normative account (which, of course, is not equivalent to an absolute relativity).

<sup>14</sup> Les évêques de France, *Proposer la foi dans la société actuelle: Lettre aux catholiques de France* (Paris: Cerf, 1997), 20.

superior and inscrutable designs. And everything, even human differences, leads to the good of the Church.<sup>15</sup>

The task, as I see it, is that of unravelling Revelation in the present, which, necessarily, includes a vital dimension of attention to tradition so as to discover anew the life of faith in the present culture in a new situation. There is, therefore, an important reception of the past, but this retrieval is always relative (in every sense) to the present.

What we have to say, and how we say it, must resonate with our culture and our times. We should not try to place the present in the past (that's what traditionalism does); rather, we should place the past in the present and, thereby, extend it as a living enterprise. We are to appropriate the trace of the past so as to nurture the present and in that way 'enlarge the old with the new' (*vetera novis augere*), to quote Leo XIII. The Church is always a Church of the present time. When visiting Reims in 1996 John Paul II, in a homily, remarks: 'The Church is *always a Church of the present time*. It does not regard its heritage as a treasure from a past that is gone, but as a powerful inspiration in order to advance in the pilgrimage of faith on routes that are always new.'<sup>16</sup>

And this has implications for how we understand the role of theology in ministry. It means that we cannot, for example, ignore our present culture and a theological reflection on it so as to continue on as if it did not matter. Nor can we just root out our old seminary lecture notes, blow the dust off them, and hope that by brushing up on Cremin's moral theology (or I should say, canon law!) we'll be able to respond to the *kairos* of the present. No. We need, rather, to pay attention to our present time (and a theology thereof), which has its own concerns, and which reflects life in all its manifestations, including the life of faith.

There is a poem by Sydney Carter called *Present Tense*:

Your holy hearsay is not evidence  
Give me the good news in the present tense

---

<sup>15</sup> Discorso de Santo Padre Giovanni XXIII, 11 ottobre 1962, accessed January 15, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_xxiii/speeches/1962/documents/hf\\_j-xxiii\\_spe\\_19621011\\_opening-council\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_xxiii/speeches/1962/documents/hf_j-xxiii_spe_19621011_opening-council_it.html), nos. 3, 4.

<sup>16</sup> John Paul II, 'Homélie du Saint-Père Jean-Paul II, Aéroport de Reims, 22 September 1996,' accessed January 15, 2014, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/speeches/1996/september/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19960922\\_centenario-clodoveo\\_fr.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches/1996/september/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19960922_centenario-clodoveo_fr.html) (emphasis original); see also Les évêques de France, *Proposer la foi*, 103-4.

What happened nineteen hundred years ago  
May not have happened  
How am I to know?

The living truth is what I long to see  
I cannot lean upon what used to be  
So shut the bible up and show me how  
The Christ you talk about  
Is living now.

### ***b) Places of (Re-) Commitment***

Responding to the present culture cannot be a matter of strategy as if it were the case of a Public Relations exercise that would seek somehow to renew the face of the church with a cosmetic makeover, that would make it more attractive looking and in this sense dupe people into joining. That neither respects the integrity of the mission of the church as a life that renews itself, nor takes seriously the very culture within which it seeks to enable gospel life. There is no dignity in riding roughshod over the very culture in which one seeks to nourish the seeds of redemption.

Given where we are, it seems to me that the way forward might involve two commitments or, perhaps, better two re-commitments: the first, and I'm taking my cue here from the French bishops, is a re-commitment to our own engagement with the life of faith. This is really a re-commitment to care for your own spiritual wellbeing; care of your own soul, if you like. It is easy to get despondent when we see so much of what structured and is structuring the life of faith ceasing to be relevant for so many in our communities; and to allow that to cloud something of our vision of God at work in our lives and in the communities in which we serve. Committing afresh to your inner vision and interior life can be the source of an enormous richness, freedom, and stability: in the first place, for yourself, but also for others who encounter you. This turn to the self is not a misplaced ego-centrism, but, rather, responsible self-care. It is also the only real place of challenge. In circumstances that are similar to our own the French bishops point out: "The critical situation in which we find ourselves drives us ... to the sources of our faith and to becoming

disciples and witnesses of the God of Jesus Christ in a more decided and radical way.<sup>17</sup> So, in what you might see as an ironic twist, the change in the place of religion and faith in our culture is an invitation for us to explore new directions in the life of faith for ourselves. And this step can only be an optimistic one.

The second re-commitment that I am suggesting is to our own culture as it is now in 2014 with all its colour and diversity, with its challenges and difficulties, and with its aspirations and its dreams. We ought to live in the community of the Church as men and women of our own culture and our own times. If we are not people of our times, it will be very difficult not only for us to discern God at work in our culture, but it will be equally difficult for us to preach the gospel in an idiom that can be heard by those whom we encounter. It would be extremely difficult to experience us as people of good news and gospel action. Others would only see in us religious fanatics whose identity belongs to another age. Again, if I may quote the French bishops: ‘Thus we are called to propose the Gospel not as a cultural or social counter-project, but as a power of renewal that calls us (les hommes), every human being, to return to the sources of life.’<sup>18</sup>

So the (re-)commitment that I am suggesting might be understood as a personal commitment to the gospel and a commitment to our times: in one case, re-committing ourselves and our own engagement in the world to the God of Jesus Christ and all that that might entail; and in the other, being fully present to our culture so as to be capable of discerning and realizing the new possibilities for the life of faith that already scintillate within that culture. If these two commitments are not working together for us, it is difficult to see how we might bring them together for the benefit (i.e. redemption) of the wider culture.

Ironically, and you all know this from your experience, our greatest strength as priestly ministers, and this has always been our strength, is that, in our various ministries, we have accompanied people: in their moments of joy, anguish, despair, hope, life, and death. Really, put simply, it is this journeying with people that we need to continue to do. It will, however, be in a new way: far less as those who live and think within the closed boundary of a common understanding and much more as those who eke out a community life within an open space that respects difference, otherness, and freedom. However you might frame it, the redemptive power will be in the journey,

---

<sup>17</sup> Les évêques de France, *Proposer la foi*, 21.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

not in arriving at a particular destiny. For far too long, we have focused on the destination without giving due recognition to the journey. The challenge will be to strive to achieve harmony without feeding our own need to create uniformity.

## **F) On the Horizon: Some Practical Considerations**

I have really been sketching out some principles that it might be helpful to be attentive to (in terms of a theological reflection) as we approach the task of responding in ministry from within our contemporary culture. I'd now like to turn to some more concrete issues in the light of this and simply open a conversation.

### **a) Priestly Life 'on the Edge'**

Priesthood is caught up in the transitions and the dynamics to which I have drawn your attention and, partly, at least, as a result, is in a significant crisis within the culture; and this, of course, may be true also for individual priests who find themselves at sea for whatever reasons in these changes.

In the past (again let's take 40 years ago as a marker for the sake of comparison), the structure of society and of the Church meant that the priest was an elevated position in the community that made him the fulcrum in parish life. Without his presence the system could not turn; it would simply go to ground and collapse. Every parish had to have at least one priest, and if for any reason he had to be absent for even a month or two someone else would have to replace him. I was amazed to hear of some of the older priests who worked in St. Mary's cycling out to places like Claregalway and Craughwell to say mass on a Sunday to fill in for someone; think of it cycling enormous distances after having been fasting from the night before!! There was a *necessity* built into the system, and the role of the priest was central in that necessity. Of course, the other side of this was that people had an enormous respect for their priests, love even, and they welcomed the priest really as an extended member of the family (and that was true even when he were a slightly cranky oddball!). He was the keystone for the parish and a reference point for each family, and people appreciated this. This brought with it great support for the priest: all of us have received a Christmas cake, or a bag of coal, or a salmon, or a bag of vegetables, or a bottle of poteen from parishioners in this spirit of appreciation of your presence in the parish. The other side, however,



was that this carried with it an enormous responsibility for the priest; you had to maintain your place for the good of everyone. Parish or community identity was a primary good, so that if you left ministry, there was a sense that you were letting down a swath of people (family, parish, diocese, Church), and this was judged harshly (as a selfish act). I suspect that many priests paid a high personal price for being in this position.

Some of this model, of course, still lives on, but it is becoming less and less the normative way of seeing and understanding the position of the priest in the community. Why? Because it is ultimately based on a principle of hierarchy, and this principle has been, and is being, eroded in the wider society. It is interesting that the Dominican theologian and philosopher, Herbert McCabe observed that all power-over-structures in the Church and hierarchy (in that sense) will be undermined in time by the centrality of the love commandment, which ultimately establishes everyone as equals: 'Love can coexist for a while within structures of hierarchy, of superiors and inferiors, but in the end it corrodes and subverts them precisely because its drive is always towards equality.'<sup>19</sup> That's an interesting idea.

In terms of priesthood, there is a perceptible change being established that springs, no doubt, from within the wider culture; but, which, I would contend is really to be sourced in the Christian subsoil of our culture. The priest is seen far less as the formal and strategic centre of parish life and much more as an equal in the enterprise that is community. Now, priesthood is seen and understood to be a personal calling, first, in terms of your identity as a person, and, only secondly, in its connection to the wider community. One does not *necessarily* depend on the other. The most important is the personal: it is considered to be what you desire to do with your life; what is authentic for you. This is, of course, appreciated; but it is not seen in any privileged way to be intrinsic and indispensable to community life. You put your personal life at the service of others in a dynamic of mutual benefit; and it is no more than that. There are no grounds for an element of hierarchy. If, at any point, and for any reason, you decide to do something else with your life, this is not only graciously accepted, but even admired and respected. You are no longer a priest for ever like Melchisedeck of old; rather, you are a priest for that part of your life, where it is right for you, where it resonates with your personal vision for who you are. And, ironically, this is further ratified, when you realize that most people now presenting in seminary have already another 'life,' so to speak, behind them!

---

<sup>19</sup> See Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2002), 4.

You can see the change, also, if, for example, a priest now decides to leave ministry because, say, he has met somebody and wishes to get married. The scenario is quite likely to run something like this: he will stand up at his last Sunday homily, explain to the people that he is leaving ministry, tell them what his next step is going to be at this point in his life. Most likely, he will get a round of applause, and, generally, most people will understand this to be a 'good' thing. Fifty years ago, he would have quietly disappeared, and an element of shame would have hung in the air. Again, what has changed has not specifically anything to do with religion or priesthood per se, but the cultural matrix, and this has implications for everyone who shares this matrix.

It is very important to understand this change because, otherwise, you will find yourself at odds with your world. Not only will many of your expectations be frustrated, but also you will fail to nurture the personal resources that you need in terms of sustaining your own life's choices. In terms of your identity, it is increasingly important to be firmly rooted in yourself, taking full responsibility for your own life's journey. This is what others increasingly expect of you. It should not be interpreted as indifference. Our responsibility is primarily to ourselves, and, only secondarily, to others. This is an enormous change, and, make no mistake about it, it is also a relief. We are not primarily responsible for the salvation of others' souls! And, of course, if you are not attentive to your own person, it may lead to great isolation (even, and maybe especially, in a busy, active parish). So it is enormously important that you insure that you care for your own needs at all levels: physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual. It must be said that such dynamics may, in time, completely change priestly ministry; it is difficult, right now, to foresee how it will develop.

In any case, one should not misinterpret the change that I am highlighting today. We have, indeed, been moved, or are being moved, from the centre to the edge; *but it is to the edge of a circle, where everybody else is standing in his or her own place*. We may not be privileged, but we are no less important than anyone else. And I would suggest that, perhaps, this is a more prophetic and personally enriching place whence to live out priestly ministry.

This brings me to my final point.

#### ***a) The End of Parish (as we know it)***

In terms of ecclesial life, it is first clear that the organization of the Church is a means and not an end in itself. It is there to facilitate Christian living in all its complexity. This means that the organization of the Church ought to reflect the life of faith, and this explains why it has taken different forms in different times.

Now, there is little doubt that the parish system with its implicit hierarchy (with the priest at the apex) and its universal pretension (expressed topologically) is going to change. Not mind you because of any great desire on behalf of Church leaders (and that includes us all) to put new more relevant structures in place, but simply because the number of priests is declining at a steady rate, which means that the keystone in the parish structure will simply not be there. So, of necessity, things will have to be structured, otherwise. For better or for worse, this is now an opportunity to re-imagine the reality of ecclesial community. We have not really begun to think how we might proceed to a new vision of structuring ecclesial community living.

I'd like to comment a little on so-called clustering.

A summary scenario runs something like this: we have two parishes each with a priest; we loose a priest through falling numbers so we'll 'cluster' the two parishes, and now one priest will be sufficient to run both of them. The verb 'to cluster' serves to obfuscate what is taking place: we are neither creating one parish, nor are we maintaining the two parishes in the full sense of their original parish identity. Doing this may function for a while, but it will not be viable long term (for multiple, obvious reasons).<sup>20</sup> I would suggest that we need to be careful about short-term solutions, if we wish to ensure the survival of Christian community into the long-term future.

A number of issues are of concern.

Firstly, there is the limitation of this dynamic of clustering being nothing more than a priest-centred strategy for dealing with the falling number of priests: i.e. clero-centricism, at its worst. It is, obviously, the easiest way of dealing with a complex problem. In the long term, however, it may lead to the death of whole Christian communities, dying out with aging priests. The principle of

---

<sup>20</sup> Reasons would include: 1) as the number of priests continue to decline, there will be a need to cluster again; 2) goes against the emerging cultural understanding of how community and systems work (i.e. equality, mutual benefit, deconstructing hierarchical principles, etc.); 3) results in an increasingly anonymous relationship between priest and people; 4) reduces ecclesiology to the sacramental life.

continuity in Christian life is not the ministerial priesthood taken in itself; rather it is the whole Christian community as it manifests the living reality of the body of Christ. The ministerial priesthood is embedded in the community as a function of the life of the community. It is the life of the community that is the life of the Church. *And it is this community life and maintaining it that ought to be the primary concern in deciding what to do in the case of a reduction in the number of priests.*

Secondly, clustering in this simplistic form might also transpire to be very unhealthy for priests themselves. It could utterly de-personalize clergy if their ministry were to become nothing more than travelling presiders of the Eucharist in multiple locations with diverse communities. And in a worse case scenario, priestly ministry could become little more than presiding at funerals for families with whom one has no community connection. And this could be every day! Not everyone could manage this at a human level.

Parish as we know it is now coming to an end. We have to begin to make important decisions and adjustments for the future. I would hope that the full breath of theology and a range of contemporary disciplines might play a role in this. If we see only a problem of clerical administration, our solutions will be at that level alone. They, no doubt, may be effective for a time, but I fear that they might further undermine both priesthood and Christian-community-life.<sup>21</sup>

I know that the work that needs to be done is difficult, and I do not wish to suggest what anyone or any community ought to do. What I am suggesting at the beginning of these study days is much more modest. It is that you would begin to think realistically about what is ahead, and that we begin to take responsibility for preparing for that future.

One of the finest gifts that we can now give to the Diocese of the future (the one that we will not live to see) is whatever we might do now to prepare for that future. So I would hope that each of

---

<sup>21</sup> To give some of idea of what might be done towards a more long-term project. You might begin in your parish (or in your particular ministry) training lay people to take responsibility for some of the more important aspects of your work. Or, where possible, you might set up structures that can be effective without an over reliance on the priest: e.g., set up a team in the parish who would accompany families when there is a death in a family. They could help prepare the liturgy, accompany the family for a time after the funeral (as needed), be present at the month's mind, and again at the anniversary, and so on.

us would at least consider the future and, despite the unrelenting grind of parish life, that we would make some space and take whatever steps that we can so as to ensure that Christian living will be a viable possibility in the future. To that end these few days of reflection and study are very important.