

An Open Space in the City

– *Galway Cathedral at Fifty Years*¹

Michael A. Conway

THE END OF AN EPOCH

The first time that I stepped into this Cathedral was as a first year student in St. Mary's College. Our beloved dean, Fr. Garvey, brought us down to the Cathedral to see Bishop Browne lying in state. The significance of the person, the occasion, and this place were all lost on me: it was a half-day off school and that was what was most important! I did not really know who was Bishop Browne; nor that he had built the Cathedral. And I can only, now, imagine how proud he and all the people of Galway must have been on the opening day of this magnificent place.

And yet, many years later, as I reflect on the inauguration, I cannot help but think that, despite all its glory, despite the magnificent celebrations on that day, it was an ambiguous occasion. It was the last great public gesture in the city of a culture, a way of life, and an understanding of faith, that had already collapsed in the rest of Europe. In Rome the Second Vatican Council was in session and was already looking to a new future for the Church, conscious that it had much to learn in terms of engaging with the modern world and with other Christian Churches, and, indeed, with renewing its own self-understanding. This is still, fifty years later, a work in progress. If you watch the footage of the inauguration day – and you can do so easily now on YouTube – you realize very quickly that at the time there was no sense whatsoever of the dramatic change, which was already taking place across Europe in terms of religion, church, belief, and faith, and that was soon to arrive here in Ireland. It is striking how massive an event it was in the city. It was religion, faith, church, culture, politics, and so on, all on display. Cardinal Cushing was there; Eamonn de Valera was there; as were the Mayor, the corporation, other bishops, and politicians of all persuasions, army personnel, and so on. There is a real sense that everything and everyone stopped in the city for the day. There was also, of course, an extraordinary uniformity of mind and spirit. This has now all radically changed. The celebration on that day was not the beginning of a new epoch for the Church here in Galway, but, rather, it marked the accomplishment and the end of an outgoing era. It's somewhat ironic to see that now in hindsight.

But you realize, too, that this Cathedral, unknown to itself, if you like, has had to respond to entirely new circumstances in terms of an emerging world, greater cultural diversity, and even conflicting attitudes to what it is that we call 'church.' We are in the middle of that too. Since that opening day, a lot of turbulent water has passed under the Salmon Weir Bridge, which, incidentally, used to be called the 'Gaol Bridge.' I'm not going to rehearse the stories for you here this evening. You've lived through them, and you see things changing every day as you walk through the city. Over the last fifty years, everything has been reconfigured: Church, faith, hierarchy, cultural background, and personal belief. This reconfiguration would be effected not so much by Church

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leaders, but by those who come and go, who visit, and who do not visit, this exceptional space in our city. During the last fifty years, men and women have found equally their own voices, their own minds, and their own spirits. Church-life and leadership, building community, and personal faith, these have all changed. As a city and a diocese, we are now deep in transition: we are slowly leaving behind a form of church that no longer serves our needs, and we are moving, willingly and unwillingly, towards a new constellation that will have to learn to respect freedoms, to listen to others, and to build communities on the foundations of difference. The rather triumphalist public displays of the inauguration day have already given way to something more subdued, more humble, and more personal.

To put all this in other words, the Cathedral itself, this space, is on a journey. There is a path to be taken and there are milestones: the day of inauguration was the first such milestone, Bishop Browne's funeral was another, and the celebration of this fiftieth anniversary is yet another such milestone. There is at this point a past, a present, and an unknown future. But the past is not lost; it lives on in a certain way in the present. You probably know that, on this site, before the Cathedral, there was the old Galway Gaol. And the symbolism of a Cathedral replacing a jail was never lost in any commentary on the building. When requesting the site from Galway County Council, Bishop Browne would write: 'A cathedral replacing a jail is the most perfect symbol of the triumph of a people who were proscribed for being Irish and Catholic.'² I'd be a little less confident; after all we too can still act as if this place were a jail, binding and imprisoning people in ideas and to practices that have had their day! The past is never entirely obliterated. I should add that the County Council sold the site to the diocese for a nominal fee of £10!

CULTURAL CHANGE AND DISCONTINUITY

Human beings have always marked the landscape and used it to create places not just to live in and bring up their families, but also to celebrate, to construct a social life, to honour the dead, and to worship their God(s). You can see this trace all over the country in ruins and in buildings that have survived the vicissitudes of time. There is always a trace of the past in the present. Indeed, in a wider sense, our cultural present is built on such an inheritance: drawing continuously on the past to imagine a new life in the present. Think of the achievement, of, say, *Riverdance*. This trace of the past in the present marks out, too, an absence. Others have been here, and are now gone; parents, grandparents, great grandparents, ancestors. If you visit, for example, the ruins of Corcomroe Abbey in the Burren, you will find there a powerful sense of Christian life that still guards a spiritual presence for us; but, more remotely and more alien to us I suspect, if you go to Dún Aonghus on Inis Mór, you will experience there an enormous question mark on the edge of Europe between land and sea, past and present, time and eternity.

What all this says, very clearly, is that every generation has its own spiritual needs and, despite the importance of what we have inherited from the past, the ways of the past can never adequately nourish or meet the desires of the present. There is, if you like, a discontinuity that is creative of the future. This is not to suggest, by any means, that the past is not important, vital even to the present: there is continuity in ideas, in desires, in hopes, in ways of doing things, and so on. The past can be a great source of stability and insight in times of great change when we seek out signposts and maps in order to negotiate the complexities of life. But the present never replicates the past; and it is an illusion to think that this was ever the case. We are not doomed to a soulless repetition of a past that is exhausted. That is why imagination is so important: it is the

² Bishop Michael Browne, 'Letter to Galway County Council,' as reported in *The Galway Observer*, 20 April 1940.

origin not only of creativity, but also of the future. Of course, we should never allow others to use the past to imprison us: for every age there is that fundamental dignity of finding its own expression and of charting its own spiritual path.

AN EXCEPTIONAL SPACE

Galway is in so many ways a wonderful city. The city-scape is blessed with character and places of exceptional historical and aesthetic significance: the Spanish Arch, Nemo's pier, St. Nicholas's Collegiate Church, and, privileged among them, at least for this celebratory year, the Cathedral. These are places of deep resonance and, in some cases, of powerful connection: with the past, with other generations, with other Christians, with other people and, for many, with God.

The Cathedral is no ordinary place; it is not, in particular, a fixed, stable monument to, and from, the past. It is always more than the architecture, the limestone, the Connemara-, Estromoz-, and Carrara-marble, the art, the mosaics, and the stained glass windows. These do, of course, capture something of the identity of this building. But they are never the whole story of what is this place. Architecture and physical materials, taken on their own, describe only a dead thing. To quote the Jesuit, Michel de Certeau, there is 'a poetic and mythic experience of space' that is just as important for the human condition as any other experience.³ This place is a living presence, among us and through us. It is more than stone and stained glass, mortar and marble; it is people who gather here every week to celebrate the Eucharist; it is those who come here to nourish their spirits in a multiplicity of different ways; it is those who minister here; it is those who visit here as friends, as tourists, or simply as the inquisitive. Without us, there is no cathedral. We are intimately connected to its identity. As we change, so too, will it change. It will not be precisely what it was; and what it is – which to some degree is always invisible – will unravel in time along paths that we cannot now foresee.

In looking to the past we see a generation that has gifted us with this extraordinary space; it is, of course, a testimony to their faith, to their culture, to their generosity, to their concern for the future, and to their concern for us. We were their children. But we, for our part, must not just look to the past. It is incumbent on us, too, to look to the future: to our children and to our children's children. We cannot repeat the past, even if that was what we wished to do. And we must not try to do this. What is ahead will certainly draw on what has been, this gift that we have received; but it will also be a new creation, a different way of living and inhabiting this space that is our Cathedral: a different way of understanding it, a different way of appreciating it, a different way of passing it on to the generation that comes after us.

We can only now look in deep gratitude to those who went before us, who built and financed this space; who had the vision, the faith, and the tenacity to undertake such an exacting project in what were undoubtedly difficult times. *We-now-have because they-gave*. Cardinal Cushing preached the sermon during that first Mass on the opening day and captured well the spiritual energy and dynamism behind the building of this edifice: 'This cathedral is the indestructible, monumental accumulation of the prayers, the hopes, the ideals, [and] the faith of the bishop, the priests and all the people of the Diocese of Galway.'⁴ They have gifted us this space; and as with all genuine gifts, it has been freely and generously given. The greatest recognition that we can give in return as our way of honouring their gift to us is to imagine anew its identity in our own times. This cannot mean that we are enslaved to a particular form of Christian life; that, say, of fifty years ago (1965); rather, it means

3 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall (Berkeley: Univ. of California, 1988), 93.

4 [Richard James Cardinal Cushing], 'Cardinal Cushing's Sermon,' *The Mantle: Brat Mhuire*, vol. 8.4 (1965), 57-60, at 58.

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that we are to discover how we today might respond to the good news of the Gospel in a changed cultural setting, in a new phase of our history, and in a world of diverse social structures. How are we to follow the one who walked among us and left no trace, so that, through him, we might find our own way to his Father? How are we to encounter and follow Jesus of Nazareth, who continues to seek out each one of us in the deepest recesses of the heart? We are called together in this place, around this table, to celebrate the story of God's love for us. How are we, in this magnificent space, to discover again a mystery, which is infinite: in depth, in height, in breadth and in intensity? The Cathedral shelters this mystery, and, in doing so, it shelters us. How might we pass it on in our turn?

IDENTITY AND PLACE

Whatever you believe or do not believe, you live unavoidably in space and in our times. In that physical sense, we are always somewhere. Right now you and I are here. The Internet may have changed our sense of what is an address: but when we open our emails, or surf the net, we are still always in some place. We cannot ever be nowhere. Even when we are asleep we must lie down somewhere. Our relationship to place, in this sense, is absolute, and this explains why it is so vital to our identity. It is always with us; we are always connected to place. It is only in death that we can be nowhere. You see this connection particularly in the country, where people are often viscerally attached to their land and their locality. This connection to place shapes us, often unknown to us. To some degree, there can be no real sense of identity without an undergirding connection to place. It shapes and forms our belonging!

In recent decades, 'belonging' has become much more complex than it was for an earlier generation. We are much more mobile. We now often grow up in several different places, we move house more frequently, we do not necessarily know the person who lives next door, we travel to and from work, sometimes over very long distances, and we rub shoulders daily with others of different colour, culture, and creed. In the past belonging was rooted in a commonality and uniformity of place, language, social structure, and, of course, religion. Everyone, or nearly everyone, 'belonged': to the city, to the diocese, or to the 'faith'. And everyone, in that sense, was in the same boat! Now, however, there is greater diversity, greater movement, and, with this, a spectrum of new challenges at various levels: political, social, economic, and religious. And, all of this has an impact on our sense of belonging and on our sense of identity. We are in a new phase in our personal and communal histories; and this brings with it, no doubt, a great richness.

Now, as we move from place to place in the unfolding of our lives and as our paths criss-cross with those of others, we discover and map out 'who we are' and 'where we belong.' We do this because we have to – first, for ourselves, and secondly, for others. When you walk through the city and visit places that are important to you, you are, in fact, speaking the silent 'language of your belonging.' There are paths that you take on a daily basis, there are places that you regularly visit, there are shortcuts that make life easier for you, there are safe places, dangerous places, places that nurture you, and so on. It's a curious thing, but if you reflect back on the paths that you take every day and the places that you visit most often, you will be surprised to see how clearly it will tell you *what* you care about and *who* is important for you.

Not only that but places are markers in our memory. You can often remember exactly the place and exactly the time that something significant or important happened for you in the journey of your life. Coupled with memory, place can hold an experience for a very long time; sometimes for a lifetime. It can even recall something that has been lost in your memory. You visit the place again, and suddenly everything comes tumbling back to you as if you were there once again – the sounds, the smells, what was said,

and what was done. The place where you met someone for the first time, who is now dear to you; the place where you lost something or someone for ever; the place in which you made a decision that changed the course of your life, and so on. We have in us, every one of us, an interior geography of important places, and like a fingerprint it is unique to each one of us.

But we have places too in common: significant places in a community, in a town or in a city, that shape community identity; places that we go to together on a regular basis to sustain our being in this world. Schools, shops, college, the GAA grounds, even a particular pub, can be an important place in a community. But in the spectrum of all such places in this city, the Cathedral is a privileged place: not just in terms of our personal identities, but also in terms of the common identity of this diocese and this city. The Cathedral belongs more than any other building in the Galway skyline. We must continue, for our part, to keep it so in every sense of that word. It must continue to be a place of welcome, a place of refuge, a place of hope, and a place of life.

I consider it to be one of the most important places in the city for the human spirit. Just in being here, this building points beyond economics, politics, and entertainment; it nurtures that infinite longing of the human spirit; it tells us that there is always more in, and to, life.

I know nowhere else in the city that has the magnitude of space and the intensity of presence of this place. There is a density here that, you could say, is meta-physical: it goes well beyond the experience of being in a shopping centre, or at the gym, or in university lecture hall. We sometimes speak of the ‘spirit of a place’ and this Cathedral has its own spirit, its own atmosphere, and its own presence. And you cannot talk or reflect on this space without acknowledging this spirit. For some of us, if not for many, this is immediately perceptible. Just walking in here evokes the sentiment that a threshold has been crossed in space and in time: from the outside world to an inner world; from the city to a sanctuary; from the busy to the peaceful. Spontaneously, without even thinking about it, we dip our hands in the holy water fonts and bless ourselves so to acknowledge that there is a threshold that we are crossing.

Arriving into this space with its density of presence is as much about us as it is about this place. We usually ignore this fact. There is a crisis of interiority in our culture and with it a great alienation of the self from its spiritual roots and sources. Many in our culture are lost in matters of the soul. The Canadian philosopher, Charles Taylor, for example, finds remarkable the deafness and the blindness of many philosophers, social scientists, and historians to the spiritual dimension of life. And Taylor sees this as particularly damaging in that it affects the culture of the media and, in general, of educated public opinion.⁵ As a culture, we far too easily alienate or even dismiss the spiritual dimension to our identity, and, in doing so, frustrate something of that essential energy that we need to live a wholesome and meaningful life. It must be said, too, that religion doesn’t always help here: many prefer to see themselves as spiritual, but not religious. Yet, to my mind, places such as this Cathedral, in an unrelenting way, call us back to our interior selves and to our origin in the divine.

There is a balancing at work in this space between the ‘without’ and the ‘within.’ When you sit here and contemplate life, your life, in this vast space, although you are still, *in you, something is in movement*. The very immensity draws your imagination and your spirit outwards and upwards. The French philosopher, Gaston Bachelard in a wonderful work, entitled the *Poetics of Space*, says that ‘Immensity is the movement of the person who is immobile.’⁶

5 See Charles Taylor, ‘Prepared Statement for the Templeton Prize Press Conference,’ http://www.templetonprize.org/pdfs/Templeton_Prize_Chronicle_2007.pdf, accessed October 6, 2015.

6 Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l’espace* (Paris: PUF, 1998), 169.

We often say that ‘something moved us’ or that ‘we were moved’ to express that something changed within us. And as you are drawn outwards and upwards, just as in a mirror, you are equally drawn inwards and downwards into your depths. Here, there is a fortuitous symmetry, a mirroring, that you cannot escape. As your imagination moves through the immensity, you arrive somewhere new in yourself. You are moved. This is one reason why the human spirit, every human spirit, needs spaces such as this Cathedral. Through places like this, we come to know ourselves, and we come to discover our unique ‘place in the family of things,’ to quote the American poet, Mary Oliver.⁷ The immensity that we experience on the outside permits us and enables us, slowly, to discover our interior immensity. Bachelard speaks of *exterior space* and *intimate space*, and he says that ‘Unendingly, these two spaces, ... encourage each other in their growth.’⁸ In a way, you cannot but discover something more about yourself, when you spend time in this Cathedral. There is something amazing about being here. In this space we can breathe in that expanded sense of the Spirit moving among us: as individual persons in our solitude and, above all, as a diocesan community gathered with our Bishop. This space marks a centre, primarily for this diocese, but also for a parish and for this city: it is a place of expression, of expansion, and even of ecstasy. It is enormously satisfying for the human mind, heart, and spirit simply *to be* in this place.

A PLACE OF EPIPHANY

But I think we can say even more. For many of us, this space points directly and immediately to our God. It is a place of privileged encounter with the divine. In this Cathedral the Christian story is not only told over and over again, but is realized in the very celebration of the sacraments and in the regular gathering of the Christian community. As such, it is a place of epiphany, a site of faith, where we know that God is present among us. Everything about this space – the architectural forms, the stained glass windows, the art, the music, the smells, the colours, the sounds, the readings, the liturgy – these are all structures of divine presence. They serve the possibility of God revealing himself, and being among us, and being with us. This building can catch you off-guard, and, suddenly, you can find yourself being drawn into that Christian mystery around which it is built. A shaft of light in the evening coming in from the West can blow open an insight for you, and, suddenly, your world is opened and you are, once again, assured that your God is with you. In this way, this place can free you from your small-mindedness, from the narrowness of your understanding of who you are and why you are here. We are all, always, to some degree, too limited in our vision, too self-centred in our generosity, and too unexciting in our living.

The Cathedral opens an altogether different kind of space in our city. At its core, it is an invitation to expand our horizon: for ourselves, for others, and for our world; to see and acknowledge the extraordinary in the ordinary. It invites you to take time out from the frenetic activity that is the mark of our culture, to come here, either alone or in communion with others, to sit, to reflect, and to come home to yourself and to your God. This space invites you to open up to the mystery of your own being; to open yourself to the mystery of others; and, ultimately, to open yourself to the mystery of a God, who is revealed as Father, Son, and Spirit. It is an invitation; and it is no more. It respects the integrity of your person and the dignity of your freedom. I can put all this in another way: this building, this very space, is *an invitation to love*. That is the reason that it is here at the centre of our diocese, and, at the heart of our city. In a way, at some point, each one of us needs to find such a space, so that, in our own way, and in our own time, we

7 See Mary Oliver, ‘Wild Geese,’ in *Wild Geese*, Selected Poems (Hexham: Bloodaxe Books, 2004).

8 Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace*, 183.

might be renewed in mind, in heart, in spirit, and in soul.

PLACE OF PRAYER

I cannot speak about this building without affirming that, when all is said and done, this place is a place of prayer. In what is at first a very curious observation, the Dominican theologian, Herbert McCabe says that ‘prayer is a waste of time’! And he means that not in a negative way. You could put it like this: it is good to waste time in this place. This is not to say that prayer is meaningless. So much of our living and our activity are about ‘using our time,’ about being productive, and about justifying our very presence. But the thing is that there is very little human freedom at play when what we do is directed to some goal or project. We are being used by the very world around us in someone else’s dream. Prayer counters all of that. There is, ironically, nothing more counter-cultural or radical in our modern world than prayer. That is why McCabe delights in observing that ‘For a real absolute waste of time you have to go to prayer.’⁹

Like sleep, prayer is a great surrender to the unknown. At the end of each day, we hand ourselves over to the night, naturally, you might say, and we trust that in the morning all will be well. And yet, all kinds of things can happen for us and to us in our sleep: we can visit wonderful worlds and we can be taken through horrendous nightmares in our dreams; we can even die in our sleep. But sleep we must. In his extraordinary book *Finnegans Wake*, James Joyce, asks the question: ‘Sleep, where in the waste is the wisdom?’¹⁰ And this too, could be asked about prayer: ‘Where in the waste is the wisdom?’ Where is the wisdom in coming to this place? In making time to be here? In handing your very self over to the rhythm of letting go and of waiting (for God).

On the one hand, prayer appears to be useless, and, yet, on the other, it is utterly powerful for the human spirit that is drawn to this waste, this absence, which at every moment recedes, so as to bring to the surface what is deepest in the human spirit. That is why so many people, from very different perspectives, some explicitly religious, some not, find meditation and mindfulness so enriching. There is no greater adventure than to be entangled in this drawing of your spirit to its own interiority. It is the ultimate challenge for the human self, the one that the great mystics of the Christian tradition have taken up the most completely. It is to place yourself out beyond projects and activities, even the activities of religion, and in doing so to go to a place, in yourself, where there is nothing, desert, and then, to allow yourself to be directed from there. The Welsh poet, R.S Thomas, writes in one of his poems:

I never thought other than
That God is that great absence
In our lives, the empty silence
Within, the place we go
Seeking, not in hope to
Arrive or find.¹¹

To be attentive and to wait in such a place, to pray in this sense, is to be shaped by absence, by no-thing, in perfect freedom, beyond any conditions whatsoever; and so, ultimately, it is to be shaped by love.

To pray in such a way in this kind of place is simply to enjoy God’s presence. In its essence, prayer is not a business, it is not a spectacle, it is not something that needs to be done, and it is not a technique. It has nothing to do with endeavour, or worthiness, or authority, or ability. Maybe it’s an obvious thing to say: but every person has a capacity to pray, because it requires nothing.

9 Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies (London: Continuum, 2002), 75.

10 James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (London: Penguin, 1992), 114.16-20.

11 R.S. Thomas, ‘Via Negativa,’ in *Collected Poems: 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 1995), 220.

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This utter 'waste of time' is the most tantalizing of human possibilities. Once you discover it, you cannot ever forget and go back. Our contemporary culture finds it very difficult to accept or even understand the power of such prayer. If I let go, what will happen? Yet, ironically, prayer is the expression of freedom at its most intense. The great Christian mystics underline this over and over, again and again: the extraordinary interior freedom that accompanies the life of prayer. The Dominican poet, Paul Murray, writes in the poem, *The Space Between*:

What happened was for me
A kind of miracle
Like being suddenly able
To breathe under water
The astonishment at finding
It possible again to believe
And at finding the space
To breathe and breathe deep
Between the word 'freedom'
And the word 'God.'¹²

This Cathedral, now fifty years old, is a place of communal celebration, a place of interior freedom, and a place of encounter with yourself, with others, and with your God. It is your place; it belongs to you. For a long time, a very long time to come, and even when it begins to crumble, this place will endure, above all, as a place of prayer.

Given that I have already quoted a Dominican and a Jesuit, and that we have Augustinians here in Galway, too, let me now finish with a poem by the Augustinian, Pádraig J. Daly. It's entitled *Chapel*:

When we are gone and our lives are mystery,
Children will find this place
And wonder at its steps and spaces;

Roofbeams aspiring to sky,
Slabs of broken marble,
Leaves scraping underfoot,

Carcasses of birds,
Sleeping butterflies,
Hushed echoes of prayer.¹³

¹² Paul Murray, OP, *These Black Stars* (Dublin: 2003), 52.

¹³ Pádraig J. Daly, *Afterlife* (Dublin: Dedalus, 2010), 66.