

One Flock One Shepherd

An editorial in *The Tablet* (25 July, 2020) voiced the opinion that as the Corona Virus pandemic is not anywhere near over, now is not the time to consider its implications for parish life. It went on to suggest that the Vatican might have been premature in publishing that week a document on reform of parish life.

A new model of Church - Parish emerging?

One can see the value of biding time and not rushing to draw lessons from the pandemic as it still rages throughout the world and at the same time it is good to see the Church considering reform in parish life. The big questions I see facing the Church at this time and which must be among the first to be answered (or at least considered) are: do we return to a model of parish that we had in pre- Covid-19 times, or do we devise a new model of church in the parish?

It has become the mantra almost of these hurting times that there will be no going back and that a “terrible beauty” lies ahead in what is deemed the “new normal”. Is it wise for the Church to change its parish model on the dictate of the virus? There would be an element of prematurity also in allowing the virus to set the pace for reform just as it seems to be setting the pace for everything in society just now in the struggle to overcome it. Perhaps, we should name the reality differently and suggest that Covid-19’s lockdown and standstill has given us time to reflect more on the need for change, a need that was already with us prior to the virus.

Reflection on the gift and use of Technology

There is no doubt but during the days of lockdown we were given insights into the communication capabilities of the local Church which in some cases were considerably lacking while others were “in touch” through various forms of media outreach long before that. The lockdown caused many parishes to catch up very quickly and it will be very unusual in the future to find a parish not up

and running in utilising modern technology to bring God's Word into people's homes.

It is one thing to have the medium in place to transmit the message, but the question as to how well we present the message will need to be assessed. Will Mass over the Webcam continue to be the only offering and will it remain the flat impersonal narrow reproduction of altar based activity that some people found uninspiring and boring, as was previously the main public criticism of our Eucharistic celebrations?

Calmness and Patience

We are still journeying through the pandemic. The emphasis is still on personal and public safety and the state of our future remains unclear. It is too soon for the Church to draw conclusions about its future direction. Right now, we need to be calm in our approach and accepting that there will be a mixed bag of relative success and failure in our attempts to eventually emerge from this time of crisis as a Church which has learned and is prepared to implement lessons about its parish model of Church.

Adapting to the "New Normal"

There seems to be common acceptance of the prospects of a "new normal". However, we should not underestimate the reluctance of people to change in any dramatic way. It would not surprise me (depending on the duration of the virus) that people will make every effort in time to restore things to the way they were before Covid-19. One can almost hear voices of disagreement shout back that "no way is that going to happen!" The world changes slowly and two world wars, nuclear threats (a miscellaneous array of things like the Cuban Crisis, AIDS virus, Millennium Bug, Foot and Mouth, Swine Flu, Ebola, Bird Flu), various epidemics have all hit the world in the past and were life-changing experiences. Yet, the change from all of these was not necessarily overnight but was an evolving and often more subtle change than people had imagined would take place. Humanity has an instinct to restore order and I feel that for the Church to pin any hope for reform or change on

the effects of the Covid crisis alone could be disappointing in the results.

To borrow and slightly tweak Dickens' line, one might say that the Covid-19 crisis is the worst of times. For instance, the time of reflection provided by lockdown makes it the best of times too. This brings me to an important point for us bishops, priests, and lay Church ministers and that is the need now for a gentler language in our dealing with one another. I sometimes sense that the language of the Gospel which is the language of love has been missing from our reaction to the pandemic. We as a Church have been as shocked as anyone at the arrival of the virus and like many, we have been recovering from the shock ever since. In both closing and re-opening our churches we (correctly) acted according to a set of rules that reflected a very functional response. We are good at functionality but at times we are weak at responding in a human and more understanding way. Hence, we speak in directives and adopt an official advisory tone which no matter how correct and well intentioned can come over as cold and detached.

Listening to and using the voice of Love

I am certain that there were times and there will continue to be times when people need a gentler and warmer voice – the voice of love. Covid-19 has hit our first World country and our first World Church in a manner we have not been accustomed to in many of our lifetimes. Such health crises we have regarded as only occurring in poorer countries, but this virus is rampant and spreads everywhere and of course the poorer countries suffer the most from it. I think we are all shocked at this new reality that our prosperous and forward-thinking country can be so hurt and incapacitated by this virus. To help us cope with the now and the immediate future we as faithful Church members need to comfort one another with the message of Christ and the riches of our Faith.

Searching for the language and means towards Renewal

It is a great challenge as to how we do this. I cannot honestly suggest a clear pathway for change or practical guidelines we

should implement for renewal of Church–life as we face the future. It will require far more reflection than I have given it to date. Some things that we should not do are clearer and by not doing them we might see our way to doing what would be more right.

- It is not a time to fall back on pious platitudes and hollow words of comfort – it is more honest to acknowledge our fears and our uncertainties facing the crisis.
- It is not a time to encourage blind faith or blind trust in God – our faith is always shaken by crises in our lives and it is a time now to pray for a strengthening and deepening of personal faith.
- As a Church concerned with falling numbers in pre-Covid times, we must not be opportunistic and view the crisis as a moment of return to God – no, it is not so much that we should be hoping for an increase in numbers coming back to their faith/Church, but as a time to be reaching out and going out of our Church’s comfort zones to be with one another at this time.
- It is not a time to circle wagons of faith and delude ourselves into thinking that this is the early onset of and return to basic Christian communities – if anything it is a time when we are being forced to realise that the day of the Church as being a strong institution as well as finding its local identity around the physical church building might probably be over.
- It is not a time to hold fast to old ways and refuse to learn anything new from the crisis by insisting we get back to the way things were in the Church - we must learn to let go of some mores that we mistook for healthy faith-living. Our countryside is dotted with ruined churches and monasteries; old ways gave way to new and it was painful back then and it will be painful now too. Covid-19 is teaching us the hard lesson of our scripture that in it is in dying we are born again.

- Covid-19 is not the *Apocalypse Now* of our time – our preaching must be hope-full and not burdened with declaiming messages of woe. Whether we speak God’s Word from the pulpit or over social media we must not abuse any such medium by even a tiny hint that this experience of Covid-19 is God punishing his people.

Fight or Flight...?

Human nature being what it is we have brought a fight and flight approach to our coping with the pandemic. We are eternally grateful to frontline workers who are continuing to fight on our behalf. Many people have reacted in flight mode by isolating themselves according to H.S.E. guidelines and this is a good thing for as long as we are asked to behave in this way. Some have been so gripped by fear that they have extended the public lockdown to a new sphere of worrying personal lockdown.

Sadly, there are those who do not think it their obligation to accept any form of responsibility for the common good and they have disrespected most forms of protection as advised by the health experts. I wonder if it is not a case of their being unable to deal with painful reality and that they have gone into a form of denial. The temptation is to judge them in a harsh light, but I feel the better approach is to keep channels of communication open and to re-inforce the model of best practice at every opportunity.

Openness to a new reality emerging

It is early days yet and the future is uncertain. Change will be a gradual thing as we come in time to decipher any lessons to be learned from this crisis. We might begin to build on the two early lessons that lockdown taught us: People’s openness to reach out to one another in a manner that spoke of Christianity in action and the opportunity for personal reflection it gave all of us. We have lived for a long time with the Vatican II view that the church is the people of God. There is no better time than now to harness the potential of good in the collective *Pobal Dé* of our Church. Those of us in leadership as priests or bishops might rethink our approach

to leadership and reflect more on the notion of following the lead we see being given by our lay sisters and brothers at this time. It would be very scriptural in the sense of the Good Shepherd mirroring the action of the shepherd in Christ's time who followed their flocks.

Hope and courage of the Shepherd willing to lead!

It may be that we have laboured Pope Francis' line exhorting us to smell the sheep; but its relevance cannot be overlooked at this point of realising a new solidarity with our co-disciples. If the Church has any purpose in today's world it is its original purpose of spreading the Good News of God's Kingdom on earth. Our ways and means of doing so change with the times and the current times are calling us to be a spiritual presence in the world. I think it will require courage and humility to be the spiritual voice in today's world, but it is again a scripture oriented calling: "the voice of one crying in the wilderness 'Prepare the way of the Lord.'" (Isaiah 40:3). The Church is called to be a prophetic witness today, but it may take us time to understand how best to be prophets. The current pandemic may be our long road to Emmaus in the company of a Christ whom we only partly recognise. We look forward in Hope to the day when our eyes will be opened, and we will fully recognise Christ.

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