

The World in Crisis: the Response of the Church

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'The Eucharist: Communion with Christ and with One another'

'In so far as you did this to one of the least of these you did it to me. ... In so far as you neglected to do this to one of the least of these, you neglected to do it to me.'
Matthew 26:40, 46.

V.McB:

Opening remarks: We are today living in an era of unprecedented growth in new knowledge and understanding of the world around us. We are potentially in a better position than ever before to improve the health and general wellbeing of society at large. Instead, we are faced with an unprecedented range of global problems which are at, or fast approaching, crisis level - most particularly, food and water security, energy, climate change and an economic meltdown which has spread across the globe like a toxic virus. Here we will focus specifically on the fallout from this economic downturn in Ireland within the theme of our Congress - *Communion with Christ and with One Another*,

mindful that most all of the issues to be addressed are by no means specific to Ireland alone; they have a more global dimension.

Causes: The crisis here in Ireland has largely arisen because civil governance in the recent past has failed the nation. By civil governance we mean control of society by that deadly triumvirate of property developers; bankers, both national and international; and elected and appointed governors comprising politicians, senior civil servants, and statutory regulators, aided in turn by auditors - those watchdogs who did not bark! They share a collective culpability for predictable outcomes whereby the social values of ethics, honesty, civic responsibility and morality were subverted by unbounded materialism and avarice in an increasingly secularized society. The nation's patrimony, solvency and sovereignty have been wilfully squandered, leaving public and private debt at staggering levels: Millions of euro of debt became billions virtually overnight.

Consequences: What are the consequences? The profile of Ireland's more than 700,000 designated poor has altered radically whereby the traditionally poorer sectors of society have broadened out to include a 'new poor' made up of people, such as those formerly self-employed, who heretofore were far removed from the poverty trap and, as yet, fall outside the State's social welfare support system.

The severe financial constraints placed on many young couples, and indeed the not so young, who are locked into high levels of negative equity, increasing mortgage interest rates, and decreasing disposable incomes pose a clear threat to the family unit, which is the cornerstone of society. The Social Doctrine of the Church clearly states that *'The family does not exist for society or the State but society and the State exist for the family.* The related threat of social unrest which occurred in autumn 2011 in the UK, prompted the British Prime Minister David Cameron to conclude that the family unit was indeed under serious threat, and that society was on the cusp of serious breakdown.

Why has this happened? As many observers have noted, several interconnected factors have contributed to this scenario:

1. *The fiscal crisis in the nation's finances and the collapse of the banking sector which has created an unprecedented level of both public and private debt in the country:* The reckless lending by European banks – mainly German banks, at no risk to themselves - contributed significantly to this collapse. And, most seriously, the transfer of the private debt of property developers and the banking sector onto the shoulders of the already heavily burdened taxpayer - and this happened with the stroke of a pen!
2. *The transformation of this fiscal crisis into an employment crisis with chronic, large-scale unemployment (currently running at 14%), under-employment, and little sign of significant relief on the horizon:* Unlike in the past, the safety valve of emigration in search of work elsewhere is, with few exceptions, no longer a viable option, even for many of those bright young graduates leaving our third level institutions without the hope of meaningful employment for the foreseeable future.
3. *The burden of crippling negative equity arising in particular out of the housing market downturn, coupled with a loss of savings and pensions due to the collapse of the financial markets.* The level of personal debt for many, both young and old, is now a life-long burden which will pass on to the next generation unless remedial steps are taken. The situation is further exacerbated by the growth of unregulated financial agencies which prey on those most in need; and by the progressive reduction in disposable income due to the draconian measures enacted by government to redress the nation's indebtedness. Many of the younger generation now, sadly, view themselves as 'a lost generation', both socially and in many cases, spiritually.

A change of culture: In effect, an insidious culture has grown up which flies in the face of those Christian social teachings laid down by Pope Leo XIII more than a century ago and subsequently refined by encyclicals over the years which responded to the ever-changing needs of an evolving society, without compromising the fundamental tenets of our core beliefs. We are also mindful that we have lost sight of the major positive changes proposed by the Second Vatican Council. It is surely time for a more tangible appreciation of these

recommendations on this the fiftieth anniversary of the Council and, in particular, to heed Blessed John XXIII's plea to practice what he termed 'holy liberty' in our open discussions on the way forward, or as one delegate put it, not to discount what he termed 'loyal opposition'. This he believed was essential to effective collegiality throughout the Church.

A number of reports including the Irish government commissioned Nyberg Report on the banking sector identified the key agent in this new culture as the emergence of a 'herd mentality' or 'group think' which demanded unqualified cooperation within an institution on decisions handed down from on high by leaders who often operated oblivious of the situation on the ground, and who did not tolerate dissent of any kind. We have also become overly influenced by this dominant narrative in Ireland, in Europe and globally in trying to put a patch or two on a failed economic model – the so-called neoliberal model.

The financialization of economies: There are serious critiques about the extent to which recent growth has been a consequence of what one might call the 'financialization of our economies'. By this we mean the creation and spread of mostly unregulated innovative financial products of a predominantly speculative nature with little benefit to the 'real economy'. One wonders why world leaders have not reacted to this and are not more responsive, for example, to the Vatican's calls for a global regulatory authority; or why the Irish and other governments resist the imposition of a tax on such financial transactions that might yield significant revenues for cash-strapped governments as well as curtailing the more speculative culture and activities of traders?

In reality, money has moved from being a straightforward facilitative and instrumental means of trade and business and has instead become a market commodity in itself. And by the same token so has risk which has also become a tradable commodity, often with very negative consequences (A bad debt created by a miscreant lending institution can be sold on several times over which divorces the final owner of the debt from any sense of responsibility to the unfortunate

initial borrower). The net result is that everything is fair game for those traders who go down that path, with inadequate regulatory and little moral compass.

This ‘group think’ culture has also dictated the remedial measures adopted by the Irish government under direction from Europe through the so-called EU-IMF troika. These measures are considered by some international experts, notably, the Nobel Laureate, Paul Krugman, to be inequitable and unnecessarily punitive for the Irish population. The preferential treatment meted out to those who created the problem, driven by a ‘too big to fail’ approach, has almost entirely overshadowed the plight of the individual citizen and those small enterprises that are teetering on the brink of survival. Banks are currently more interested in self-consolidation than in helping small businesses to survive. With the runaway train of compounded and uncompromising austerity having greatest impact on the poor and the marginalized, this approach can hardly be viewed as equitable in any sense of the word.

Challenge: How then do we proceed? One particularly succinct view of the way forward was articulated by Prime Minister David Cameron in the aftermath of unrest in the UK in 2011. The challenge, he said, was to cultivate a peaceful civil society with a generally accepted code of morality and ethics that permeates behavioural norms, civil governance and the economy, and that will support long-term sustainable cultural and economic development in a multicultural and religiously diverse community.

In achieving such noble aims, it seems to us that we really ought to use the current crisis to think outside the box, to be imaginative. We need to bring other voices into the debate, other points of view. One such voice is that of the Church. For that voice to be heard, however, it is necessary to address the prevailing climate of mistrust *in* the Church by those outside it, and *within* the Church by those committed laity and religious who are distressed by recent events.

In order to address this core problem one must first identify the underlying issues which have created such mistrust in the Church?

Those disenchanted Catholics perceive the Church's own internal polity to have a monarchical and less than transparent culture; they are concerned with the Church's attitude to women; they cite the revelations about clerical child abuse and its mishandling; they are concerned with the Church's stifling of open debate in a way that does not accord with normal due process, and, in this regard, there is widespread concern here in Ireland at the recent sanctions imposed on Irish priests and theologians who raised issues that rest uncomfortably with Church authorities: One might well ask, does this approach by the Church resonate with our theme of communion with one another or with the exhortations of Blessed John XXIII fifty years ago? As one learned commentator recently put it, has discipline been confused with dogma?

Many people too are dismayed by the application of the principle of collective responsibility on priests and religious orders who are deemed to carry the collective blame for the miscreant behaviour of the few - one guilty, all guilty: Surely this flies in the face of natural justice? Is it right to address one injustice by perpetrating another?

These perceptions remain real obstacles to the kind of message the Church wants to communicate to global actors on the secular stage.

That said, the Church has responded positively to the challenge of re-establishing this trust. Major steps in that direction are reflected, first, in the adopted theme of our Congress - *Communion with Christ and with One another* –which places Christ at the very core of our being and reaffirms those fundamental Christian values which define our relationship with God and with one another through communion and dialogue with one another; second, with a recognition now by the Church in Ireland that a culture of silence and deference within the Church was unhelpful in dealing with the problems of child abuse; and, third, by the call by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin for an independent, external, examination of the most serious case of child abuse, clearly signalling the need to review the Church's internal procedures in dealing with such matters.

Internal reform within the Church, while necessary in itself, is far from being an inward-looking agenda only; it is missionary in nature. Father Gerry will now consider some positive, very practical, steps that can be taken in pursuing this missionary goal.

G.O'H:

The vision of reality: It may well be that the greatest contribution the Church can make to the global and Irish economic and financial crisis is at the level of the imagination in the formation of individual attitudes and the development of societal culture. I refer to the kind of counter-cultural vision, expressed through careful analysis and reasoning, inspired by biblical revelation but in principle accessible to all people of good will, to be found in various documents such as:

- Pope Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate* (2009);
- *Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Public Authority* by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2011);
- *Vocation of the Business Leader* by the same Council (2012);
- *A European Community of Solidarity and Responsibility* by COMECE (2011);
- *From Crisis to Hope: Working to Achieve the Common Good*, by the Council for Justice and Peace of the Irish Episcopal Conference (2011).

Allow me to explain what we mean, in the hope of stimulating your own reflections on the issue. These documents, drawing on the long tradition of Catholic Social Teaching and complemented by the teachings of other Christian churches and other faiths, outline a vision of 'the good life' grounded in notions such as

- the innate dignity of every human being,
- the centrality of the common good, and
- the significance of key principles and values like solidarity, subsidiarity, the universal destination of earthly goods, and resistance to egregious inequalities.

This vision puts the economy in service of society and of the human person.

Their aim is the kind of *Communio* (theme of the Eucharistic Congress) which is participative and inclusive, is based on those values of justice, fairness, honesty, transparency, accountability and freedom which are open to the flourishing of gratuity and love, and which extend not just to other human beings but also to our planet and of course, for believers, *a priori* to God, source and end of all

This vision needs to be applied to our current situation to show that it is not just grand rhetoric but that it has existential and real traction. We know that we are in a crisis: The challenge is to learn from the crisis and its causes so as to work towards the kind of recovery which is sustainable and is not simply a return to a failed model - to 'business as usual'. The search for a new model requires social imagination.

If you look a little beneath what is happening in our response to the crisis, the kind of language we are using, then there are serious causes for concern that we are not rising to this challenge. Thus, for example, we are having a heated debate about austerity versus growth, and perhaps, as often happens, we will eventually succeed in getting a just and sustainable balance. But, given the serious ecological concerns voiced by reputable authorities, do we need to critically re-examine our drive for growth, in particular in the Northern hemisphere, a growth which is materially based and may not yield many jobs? Can we begin to ask what is good and bad growth, to distinguish between an Ignatian *magis* in the service of God and a frenzied, diabolical quest for more that is utterly inhumane and destructive of creation? Then there is the often reckless financialization of our economies, referred to already by Vincent.

All this leads then to consequences which, understandably, infuriate people and to the call by Michael Sandal and others for a 'politics of outrage': So, for example, we have had, as indicated earlier, a 'communism for the rich' (Will Hutton) in which private bank losses have been socialised at the expense of tax payers, we have the kind of

‘culture of entitlement’ among senior bank staff and traders in the financial sector who genuinely find it hard to understand why huge salaries and bonuses should not be the norm, captive as they are to the kind of naïve realism which allows them to believe that somehow proximity to (other peoples’) money and a modest amount of skill in investing it should lead to greater rewards than those enjoyed by ‘teachers, doctors or comparably skilled government bureaucrats and corporate executives’ (Edward Hadas, *The Credit Crunch*, CTS, 2009).

Which, of course, raises other issues – why do we allow such growing inequality in Ireland, and in other parts of the world; why do senior public servants, professionals like medical consultants and lawyers, government advisors and the like get paid such exorbitant salaries? Wilkinson and Pickett (*The Spirit Level*, 2009) – even allowing for the critique - have shown that more equal societies do better on a whole range of social indices. We all know that cutting the salaries of a few government advisors will not solve our public deficit and debt: But people within Golden Circles of this kind surely underestimate the extent to which privilege and inequality on this scale – particularly galling in the case of corrupt politicians, delinquent property developers, greedy bankers and ineffective regulators – has an undermining and sapping effect on the psychology of social cohesion.

Again, we are told that ‘the market’ requires that we pay top salaries to get the best people, that ‘the markets’ will determine when governments may resume public borrowing, and so on – and these are those markets which often behave in such a volatile, irrational way! It is particularly obscene when this kind of market-driven response to our crisis leads to the cutting of services to the poor and vulnerable (one thinks of services to the disabled, for example), with the spurious invocation of mantras like ‘we’re all in this together’.

The Catholic/Christian vision: This vision views the human person not as ‘*homo economicus*’ but according to that ideal of integral human development in which economics and finance are the servants of the person and of society. This vision opposes any idolatry of the markets. It looks for the kind of ‘richness of sufficiency’ (Asian

Ecumenical Statement) which values health, education, family and friendship, greater equality and environmental sustainability, and sees money as a facilitating mechanism of exchange between those other goods. But how can this vision be realised?

Church Response: In the context of the excessive ‘group think’ that Vincent has adverted to, it is desirable that other voices, including the voice of the Church, are heard in the way that challenges the dominant discourse and may lead to more considered and critical solutions. At its official teaching level the Church has never claimed detailed technical competence in terms of economic issues, and this is both humble and correct. Therefore, we should not expect the delineation of a new economic model to come from the Church alone. Nonetheless, one could wish for more on-going inter-disciplinary engagement between Church voices and those of technical experts like economists, business people, shapers of culture and politicians. Could the Church be more pro-active in establishing fora where these issues might be debated, in particular the link between vision and practical reality?

For this to happen, of course, it would help greatly if the Church’s own credentials as an ‘honest broker’, prepared to abide by the normal rules of public discourse, were clearly flagged (Patrick Riordan). Vincent has outlined some of the many other ways the Church needs to change in this respect. Were this to happen, it would then be a reasonable expectation that the Church could contribute to the emergence of a new model, more in tune with the EU ideal of a ‘social market’ – not least by stimulating the social imagination required and by its careful analysis of principles and values.

A key area for Church involvement is of course that education of desire (Aristotle and Ignatius), that transformation of culture and values which is so necessary if a new economic model is to emerge. Politicians can do a certain amount of leading, but they depend too on the readiness of people to follow. We have seen enormous shifts of culture in terms of the rights of women and ethnic so-called minorities in our time – we can hope for the same in the economic area, and the Church can be an important actor in this drama, if it wants to be. This

is so not least because of the impressive body of Catholic social teaching, the track record in so many situations of need and deprivation, and the deep adherence to the person and teaching of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion:

*‘In the world you will have trouble. But take heart!
I have overcome the world.’ Jn 16,33.*

The ideals presented by Church discourse can lead us to a false sense of ease with regard to solutions to our present crisis. The issues are complex and there is powerful resistance to change, especially by vested interests. We know too that we live in eschatological times – the victory of Christ over the world will achieve its final form only at the end of history. Nonetheless, we do well to take heart, to look for anticipations of that victory now, and not to put limits on what can be achieved in the name of a ‘realism’ that owes more to a resigned despair than to Christian hope. We owe it to ourselves, our children and grandchildren, the poor and vulnerable, our planet which is our home, to strive with passionate intelligence, under God’s loving grace, to bring about the Kingdom. As Church we can contribute both prophetic vision and sapiential respect for technical complexity to this great work, the ‘labour of God in creation’ (Ignatius), the ‘groaning of the Spirit in all creation’ (Rom 8). It is this Spirit, poured out anew in this time of Pentecost, which turns the fragmented diversity of Babel into that rich communion in the image of our Trinitarian God.

V.McB;

Final comments: In the spirit of our Congress theme, ‘*Communion with Christ and with one Another*’, we are indeed blessed here in Ireland in many different ways: in the true sense of solidarity, renewal, and outpouring of goodness at parish level; in the Trojan work of many charitable organizations working in unison with the Church, both here and abroad; in the spontaneous compassionate and caring response of young people; and in the recent creation of deacons to obviate the decreasing number of priests in our Archdiocese, all of which are heartening indicators that Ireland’s people, working

together, will overcome this current crisis. Ireland can also be rightly proud of those legions of priests, nuns and lay missionaries who over many centuries left our shores to bring God's word to the far reaches of the world. We are forever indebted to them and we should never lose sight of their lasting legacy.

Ireland is a nation that does not readily bow under adversity. The faith in Ireland has survived the prolonged Penal Laws of the 17th century; it has survived occupation, civil wars, the growing pains of a new nation, and it has survived an earlier economic meltdown in the 1980s. The unwavering faith of earlier generations is foremost in our minds and, with the help of the Almighty, Ireland will emerge as a chastened but much wiser and committed nation.