

## What hope for Faith?

*(A talk given by Alan McGuckian SJ at the Down and Connor Faith and Life Convention in Belfast, 26<sup>th</sup> September 2015. This talk arose out of very helpful conversations and guidance from Michael Paul Gallagher SJ and Brendan Comerford SJ.)*

Let me quote from two German theologians to whom I will return: Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict 16.

Rahner once famously said: “The believer of the future will be a mystic or they will not be at all.”

On Christmas Eve 1969, Joseph Ratzinger gave a Radio reflection during which he said the following:

“From our present crisis the Church will emerge having lost weight. It will need to start again from small groups and from a minority that can put faith at the core of their experience. It will be a more spiritual Church, a Church of the poor, where people can glimpse something utterly new, a hope for their lives, an answer they have secretly hoped for.”

The ‘Crisis’ is still with us and we can see the Church losing weight, in terms of numbers, influence, respect and status. A crisis is a time of trouble and confusion but it is also a time of new possibility. Back then Joseph Ratzinger put his finger on some of that possibility: small groups of people who can put faith at the core of their existence; a more spiritual church; a church of the Poor (where else have we heard that?) where people can glimpse something utterly new ... an answer they have secretly hoped for ...

I find something terribly radical about a small group of people putting faith at the core of their existence ... living in hope of something utterly new. As a member of a religious order

I guess that kind of thinking comes naturally. We have a personal link to a reality that waxes and wanes through history and lives in hope. Last year 2014 we marked the second centenary of the Restoration of the Jesuits in 1814. For forty years before that the order was almost wiped out. In 1814 there were five Jesuits in Ireland. By the 1960s there were hundreds of Irish Jesuits who had built up schools and universities, retreat houses, publishing houses and a whole lot else in Ireland, Zambia, Hong Kong, Japan, Australia. We are now on our way back down again in numbers. But I can be totally sanguine about that because we have been there before and, with God, there is always the possibility of something utterly new, a hope for our lives, an answer that we have secretly hoped for.

### **Friedrich Von Hugel**

If we are all to be mystics, as Rahner says, how does that fit in with everything else?

Friedrich Von Hugel, a Catholic lay Theologian at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century said that there were three elements that must be present in the faith of any believer if it was to be healthy: the institutional element, the critical (analytical) element and the mystical element. In ways they correspond to the development of a person from childhood to maturity.

The child receives; 'I believe because I am told' and I trust those who have told me, hopefully with good reason.

The Young adult questions; they try to work things out for themselves to their own satisfaction: 'I believe because it is true'.

Later in adulthood one learns to love and live as a mystic: 'I believe because it answers my deepest interior experiences and longings'.

You can see how those three things are part of an organic development. In ways they are like a three legged stool. Indeed any one of them without the other two will be problematic. The stool will not stand.

**Element 1.** If I look at my experience of Catholicism in the light of those patterns I can see strong traces of the Institutional element: ‘I believe because I am told’. This is not simply an acceptance of intellectual propositions as in: I accept that Baby Jesus, born in Bethlehem, is the Son of God because Mammy says so. I accept that Jesus died to take away our sins because that was what Miss McKenna or Fr McKinley taught us. At that institutional stage there is also a big response of the heart. I want to identify with Mammy and Daddy and **our** community; and this is **our** faith. My stance in the world at this stage is Identification. I get my sense of myself by identifying, either consciously or unconsciously with others – living or dead - whom I idealize and would very much like to please.

The virtue of loyalty comes in very strongly here. Loyalty is a fine thing; the only danger with it is that it can easily become partisan and self-serving. ‘My Daddy is bigger than your Daddy’. ‘My church is the best church’ and that makes me feel good about myself when there might be a whole lot of other reasons for me not to feel so good about myself. Don’t get me wrong; having a strong and reliable institution founded by Christ himself to guide and teach us is a great blessing, but for a human being to believe simply because I am told and to remain at the level of loyalty is not enough.

Let me share my own experience. The Institutional element of faith was and is hugely important to me. As a little boy in the 50s and 60s I identified completely with our faith. I vividly remember in Garron Tower we learned to sing the Latin parts of the mass. At mass every Sunday we sang the creed from the *Missa de Angelis* ... I really loved singing the Latin and I now remember the line I loved the most was: *Et Unam Sanctam Catholicam et*

*Apostolicam Ecclesiam*. (I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.) The memory still moves me as does singing that line of the creed ... **but** faith in the Church is not the most important part of the Creed.

**Element 2.** The young adult questions and seeks to figure out how things work and why they are so. If we take the analogy of things mechanical ... all my life I have been perfectly happy to rely on the say so of others who tell me that if I put enough petrol in at the back and stick the key in the wee slot beside the steering wheel and turn it the engine of my car will burst into life and away we go. There were other young lads who grew up around me and from an early age nothing would do them but they'd start getting in underneath the car, opening the bonnet, figuring it all out, putting new bits in to make it go faster. Those guys know about cars; I can just drive one. Those guys had moved to the critical stage.

How does this element manifest itself in our lives of faith? A personal sharing. The young lad who, through family and other influences like good priests and teachers in Garron Tower, was clinging to his catholic identity even though the 60s and the Beatles and the sexual revolution was exploding all around, went off – following two older brothers! – and joined the Jesuits. Going through novitiate and seminary formation I was exposed to some of the major figures in the history of Christianity, including one of the great mystics Ignatius Loyola and his way of praying. But as regards the critical element ... I had the privilege of studying theology full time for four years. During this period I couldn't but come to some appreciation of the beauty of the teaching of the Catholic Church. I saw how the Church spent about four centuries wrestling with coming to a balanced and fair articulation of who Jesus Christ is and therefore of who God Father Son and Spirit are. In doing that the Church taught western civilization how to think, how to engage in intellectual activity. I think I

moved from Identification to Internalisation which is the acceptance of a belief on its own merits and the taking on of a commitment for its own sake.

Back to the Creed ... now my heart should sing at *Consubstantialem Patri, per quem omnia facta sunt*. We now say 'Consubstantial with the Father' in the Creed every Sunday. Some of the greatest minds in all of history, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, fought over that word, in Greek *homo-ousios*, of one being. That one word was the fruit of centuries of labour. I came to appreciate that the faith of the Church is not the grown-ups' equivalent of fairy tales but the most wonderfully nuanced articulation of a vision of reality imaginable.

**Element 3.** Later in adulthood one learns to love and live as a mystic: 'I believe because it answers my deepest interior experiences and longings' Using the word 'mystic' can make it sound very exotic; you think of St Teresa of Avila in the 7<sup>th</sup> Heaven or Padre Pio and the stigmata. But it is meant to be for everybody. I remember as a very little boy looking up at my father when he was praying at mass and being very moved by it. God was obviously very real for him. When I came to see other aspects of my father's life in the light of this I recognized a consistency. The faith answered his deepest interior experiences and longings. That is the kind of mystic Rahner had in mind.

We all know people who live this element of the faith. They are people who love God and experience their lives as a gift from God. They delight in the faith given to them through the Church in the scriptures. They have invariably weathered storms in their lives with the help of prayer and they are usually very much at home in their own skins. When people are at this stage Jesus' words; 'I no longer call you servants. I call you friends' make sense to them.

(At this stage of my talk I was going to go on and say that obviously our experience in Ireland has involved a big emphasis on the Institutional element and that both the Critical and

the Mystical elements have been underdeveloped. I think I **will** say something like that but before I do I want you to ask yourselves: How are those elements present in my experience of faith? Are they all present? Is one more dominant than the others? When I shared this schema with some friends lately one of them asked me spontaneously: Is it possible to have the third element, the Mystical, without the other two? There are all kinds of questions to tease out here.) Take 2 minutes.

**(FAITH IS ALWAYS INFLUENCED BY SURROUNDING CULTURE)**

It is important to remember that we here, whether we are 17 or 77 are more than likely to have developed all three elements to some degree. In this day and age you do not hang in there enough to give up your Saturday unless the faith has grasped your mind and your heart – at least a little bit.

For now I want us to try and put ourselves into the shoes of the many people, both young and old who are not moved to come here today, who don't come to worship with us any more.

I remember years ago hearing Cardinal Daly speak about the rise of secularism and the drift away from faith. He said: when people believe they have lost God what has happened is not that God is distant from them but that there has been a huge cultural shift taking place right under their feet.

Charles Taylor, one of the great experts on culture today, says that we are influenced more powerfully on the level of images than of ideas. He says that if we really want to understand what moves people towards – or away from - faith we need to be attuned to what he calls 'shifts in sensibility' in ourselves and in others.

Let's look, very briefly, at how changing culture changes everything.

Culture here obviously refers to more than poetry, music etc. It has to do with the quality of the way we live our lives; how different generations in families relate to each other; how we deal with death; what importance we give to possessions; what counts as success? All of that sort of thing - and much more - is culture.

In rural Ireland there was a culture that was full of faith; it probably also had some superstition; but faith was everywhere. Last week Sr Mary Jo Corcoran shared some stories about growing up on a farm in Co. Wexford. Memories of her parents capture well the place of God in everything. For example if her mother was sitting reading in a room as the light was fading, if someone lit the light in the room she would spontaneously say: 'God grant us the light of heaven'. Or if her father was tying up a gate, as soon as the task was completed he would say: 'Well, Lord, I've done my bit; you may do the rest now.'

Mary Jo's stories sent me back to a treasured book of mine *Ár bPaidreacha Dúchais*. It's an Irish language collection of all the old prayers. MJ's mother's prayer was just an English translation of what had been there for generations. The next prayer was for when they turned out the lamp at the end of the day: *Nár mhúcha Dia solas na bhFlaitheas ar ár n-anam*. (May God not quench the light of heaven in our soul.)

There was a prayer for everything: for making the bed, lighting the fire, for before starting work, for finishing work.

There was a prayer for going fishing, for when you heard the cock crow.

There was prayer for when someone offered you tobacco at a wake. There was one for taking snuff. There is another prayer simply titled: *Roimh dhícheannú*, Before a Beheading.

**That was THEN this is NOW!!**

**MODERN CULTURE**

There are so many things we could say about the culture in which we are called to live the faith to day. I found a couple of simple things in a great little book *Waiting on God* by the Redemptorist, Denis McBride

### **The Authority of Experience and The Culture of Immediacy**

Now as never before experience is King. “Try it! See if it fits. If it feels good do it!” This can certainly seem to conflict with accepting things handed down by tradition or following objective moral laws. When I was young there was a natural respect for the moral authority of leaders in society and more especially in the church. Nowadays Authority needs to earn respect before people will pay attention to it. Schillebeeckx has something really telling to say about this.

“Anyone who has had an experience ipso facto becomes himself a witness: he has a message. He describes what has happened to him. This narration opens up a new possibility of life for others, it sets something in motion. Thus the authority of experience becomes operative in the telling.”

### **The Culture of Immediacy**

Increasingly today we are encouraged to know what we want and to want it **now. Right now!** We are bombarded with advertising telling us that there are a million things that we might want. And we want them fast. We don't want to wait. Who's got the time or the inclination to go spend an afternoon browsing around a good bookshop. If I want a book Amazon will deliver it within three working days – or next day if I pay a little extra. But best of all ... with Kindle I can have it on my iPad with one click. 30 seconds download time and I can be reading chapter 1. How wonderful is that!

Do you find yourself getting really frustrated at the supermarket when there's only one checkout and it's got more than two people at it? What a joy to see a bank of the self-checkouts free. You can do it all yourself, you don't have to talk to anybody and you can be away as fast as you like.

Remember what Rahner said: 'The believer of the future will be a mystic or they will not be at all.'

Ten years ago the bishops of the Basque country reflected on the fact that people were falling away from the church in their droves and they said this:

"What is disappearing is a certain historical form of belonging. Where we neglected the primary experience of faith, today's culture needs an initiation into an experience of God in the midst of human experiences. Nobody returns to faith without coming to know God as a heart-friend and seeing the need to change attitudes and life styles. All this means a conversion of priorities. We are like drivers in the dark who advance with dipped headlights". (Basque Bishops 2005)

What the Basque bishops were saying is that we trusted so long in the tradition of belonging, in the traditional practices that we didn't notice the erosion of real religious experience. We didn't notice the emergence of a real spiritual hunger that was not being met. It is in the individual's own heart that this hunger, this emptiness exists and it is in and through their own experience that God will feed the hunger and fill the emptiness.

In our time in Ireland we have seen many people drift away at least from the regular practice of the faith. In Down and Connor we saw last year that the average Church attendance every Sunday stands at 20%. We have to ask; what is happening? It seems that even though the Word of God is proclaimed and the Bread of Life offered still people are dying of spiritual malnutrition and not being fed. Does that mean that we just have to try harder? There is a

clever saying that I believe is relevant: “If we always do what we’ve always done we’ll always get what we always got.” It’s not that we have to try harder. (It’s not just that.) We’re in a new world and we have to do something new. Let’s listen again to Ratzinger and Rahner.

Rahner pictures us as *victims of a frenetic life-style* that allows *little room for poetic wonder*. *Our hyperactivity* can keep us *adrift on the surface of ourselves* and unable to reach *deeper levels of desire*. We need to *pay attention to our own mystery* first. **That** is the place where God pitches a tent in our deepest self.

Many people today *live at a distance from their own depths* and so suffer *from spiritual malnutrition*. Yet God’s Spirit is already at work – when a person goes beyond his or her self towards truth or love, for instance by a generosity of service, or courage in the face of difficulties.

Rahner was acutely aware that *the language of preaching and church teaching often rang hollow for believers themselves* and that merely repeating Christian truths in old formulas had become pastorally futile.

Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict the 16<sup>th</sup>, realised something similar. During the recent Year of Faith he repeated again and again that there is a crying need for us Catholics to experience our faith as a personal encounter with God who is mystery. He spoke eloquently of a **Pedagogy of Desire**. We have to learn to be in touch with our deepest and most authentic desires. This "pedagogy" would remind us to relish "the authentic joys of life", to see family, friendship, the beauty of nature, the privilege of standing in solidarity with those in need as gift. In a typically beautiful expression he said; "Such authentic enjoyments also create *effective antibodies* against the trivialization and banality so present today."

The challenge for us as a diocese, as a Living Church, is: are our Catholic communities places where the Pedagogy of Desire goes on? Last week in conversation Jesuit Theologian, Michael Paul Gallagher said this: “in the earlier culture in which everyone was of one mind about God and the place of faith in our lives it was enough for us to plant the seed of faith one inch below the surface for it to grow and thrive. The climate was very favourable. Nowadays the seed has to be planted much deeper in the soil. There is either a deluge out there or the sun is splitting the stones, and so shallow planting will not do the job. It will shrivel up or it will get swept away.”

In the very recent past a very devout and committed Catholic man in our diocese said to me: “Father, when I was young I was taught my prayers and I have said my prayers all my life but I don’t think I know how to pray.” Somewhere in the ether he has picked up intimations of the call to a deep encounter with God but he has no language and certainly no practice to help him experience it. I don’t think that man is unique; he has been a faithful Catholic every Sunday, he has said his prayers all his life but he doesn’t know how to pray.

As we plan for the future, Parish Pastoral Councils gathered with their priests must see to it that we change the conversation so that the call to go deeper is heard, so that we let God find rich soil in which to plant the seed. Concretely that means that we must privilege things like Adoration, Lectio Divina, Prayer Guidance, Spiritual Direction. When I say ‘Change the conversation’ and ‘privilege’ these things, what I mean is this. Already these things are being offered in many places but the offer is not being taken up. A concrete example of that which is close to my heart as a Jesuit; in recent years dozens of people, mainly lay people, have trained as Spiritual Directors. Good Spiritual Directors. But, there is a great danger that the services of many of them will not be availed of.

So, on the one hand we have a problem of widespread spiritual malnutrition; the danger of living our lives on the surface, satisfied with banalities.

On the other, our church has numerous resources capable of putting us in touch with the depths of mystery and leading us into personal encounter with the living God. There is a gap

We will bridge that gap by building those resources up. We'll do that by putting our time and energy and our money into exploring them ourselves. Then we need to make them available for people who are now far away. More than that, we need to take the personal responsibility of reaching out and inviting people to explore the riches of our Catholic heritage starting with those we know and love.

Let me finish with the words Joseph Ratzinger spoke nearly 50 years ago. Let them be a challenge, an inspiration and, please God, a prophecy:

The church of the future ... will be a more spiritual Church, a Church of the poor, where people can glimpse something utterly new, a hope for their lives, an answer they have secretly hoped for.'