

We are not museum keepers but gardeners to help things grow
23rd March 2013 Newmarket-on-fergus, Co Clare

Believing and Belonging is the overarching title for the ecclesiological section of today reflections. This could be read somewhat like an imperative – believe and belong, or like a mere statement of fact if you believe you belong... But to be fair believing and belonging is not an uncomplicated reality. Do we feel as if we believe fully – or maybe even more relevant to this brief reflection, and the ecclesial nature of this reflection, do we feel as if we fully belong... Ultimately that is what I hope to reflect on today – our sense of belonging, our sense of ownership, our sense of being part, this church. Do we belong or do we feel that we are at the margins... somewhat separated...

John XXIII to whom the quote about “opening the windows to let in air” is attributed is also accredited with the line that I have taken for my reflection today “We are not museum keepers but gardeners to help things grow”. My question is therefore, do we as the people of the Church, feel as if we have a role in helping things to grow... Do we feel like cultivators with equal rights?

La Sagrada Familia: What viewing the Church teaches us...

To begin our look this afternoon at the church we hope to build I decided to look first of all at a singular magnificent church that is being built. I am sure you have seen, in reality or in images, Gaudi's *La Sagrada Familia* in Barcelona. It is a most magnificent building.

Gaudi's emblematic work is a basilica replete with Christian symbolism. His intention in building this basilica is that it would educate all who see it. A church that when viewed even from the outside would teach us about the faith. A church, in that sense, that is a sign of what the Church should be... Since surely our church should even from a quick look from the outside should teach us about what the church is like and should be like (the descriptive and prescriptive nature of viewing church)

Since the death of Gaudi in 1926, others, like disciples, have been commissioned to continue this work.

One such artist, the Catalan sculptor and painter, Josep M. Subirachs was, in 1986, asked to undertake work on its Passion Façade. It is a task to which he gave almost twenty years of his life (1987-2005). Arguably one of the most dramatic figures in this work is his representation of the centurion Longinus.

We know this story, at least in part: the gospels, in two locations, tell us of a Roman soldier who pierced the side of Jesus with a lance (Jn 19:34) and of a centurion guarding the body who, having witnessed all that had

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happened, proclaimed “In truth, this man was Son of God” (Matt 27:54). Although unnamed here, the apocryphal of the *Acts of Pilate* later conflate these two persons into one and name him Longinus. Since then many traditions have emerged around this centurion and his place in Christian tradition has been cemented by several statues and artistic representations; not least of which must be Bernini’s statue in St Peter’s basilica, Rome. However it is Subirachs’ representation that concerns us here. He depicts Longinus mounted on his horse with his sword dramatically piercing the side of the church... the side of Christ... It seems like an audacious claim: to equate the Church with the side of Christ. I wonder if we were to reflect on this would we be happy with the Church being presented as the side of Christ?

Is our Church the Side of Christ? Are we comfortable viewing it as such?

Why or how can it be the side of Christ?
Why or how is it not the side of Christ?

In preparing for this day I looked at both the theology report and the listening report from the sessions that took place in your diocese from March to May 2012. It made for interesting reading...

“... the feedback reflected *much of people’s disappointment and pain* about the reality of Church as it is experienced in the ground and a desire for structural change”

(This is the Church that is the side of Christ)

“*non-participation at local level is frequently associated with lack of connection with the hierarchical Church* (remember we are exploring here our belonging and separation from the church) and for some is a fallout from the child sexual abuse scandals which ‘continue to drain energy’ at local parish level”

(This is the Church that is the side of Christ)

a prevailing perception that the Church is *unable to relate to people’s lives* (again belonging and separation) and to some sections of society, and is felt to be silent on social and economic issues which impact on people. Unemployment, the economic crisis and emigration were issues frequently named

(This is the Church that is the side of Christ)

It is clear from the conversations that there are many good experiences of a collaborative model of parish ministry between priests and people throughout the Diocese and that many lay people are assuming roles in their parishes “in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is promoted.” (Pope Benedict XVI)

However it is clear too that partnership is not always the operative model on the ground. *Members of some Parish Pastoral Councils feel they have very little role in their parishes. They report resistance to change and a reluctance ‘to let go of power’ on the part of some priests* (belonging and separation). People in parishes like this articulate a sense of being stuck.

(This is the Church that is the side of Christ)

At local parish level there is a legacy of hurt and a breakdown of trust in the institutional Church arising from the abuse scandals. Words such as ‘let-down’, ‘betrayed’ are frequently used. Others speak of their faith being ‘shaken’/‘shattered’.

(This is the Church that is the side of Christ)

The question remains or in fact is now calling even louder for our answer – is our church what it should be? Can we equate it with the side of Christ? Do we feel as if we are gardeners with a role to play in cultivating a future or are we separated and more easily identified as attenders of a museum – we pass through but feel we are not welcome to touch anything...

Belonging or separation a stark reality

“The Church is essentially an unequal society, that is, a society comprising two categories..., the Pastors and the flock.... So distinct are these categories that with the pastoral body only rests the necessary right and authority for promoting the end of the society and directing all its members towards that end; the one duty of the multitude is to allow themselves to be led, and, like a docile flock, to follow the Pastors”¹

These were the words of Pius X in an encyclical, *Vehementer Nos*, written in 1906. We must ask – since the topic for us today is believing and belonging how did we get to this state of understanding of the Church? How did this come about or was it always this way? Were there always 2

¹ *Vehementer Nos*, 1906 n.8

(we could argue for more and explore how the clergy might not feel part of the decision making but for the sake of simplicity we focus on two groups).

The origins of it all...

We begin by looking briefly at the emergence of the Church..

Unquestionably, if we turn to the scriptures in search of 'evidence' that Jesus founded a church we will search in vain.

Remembering that these are texts with an agenda (in that the gospel writers want us to believe in Jesus and in the communities that emerged from him – they are open about this (they don't predate the Christianity they preach!))... Noticeably, Jesus is accredited with using the word church only three times: once in his affirmation of Peter; "you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church" (Matt 16:18) and twice when, in speaking of a sinful person, he notes "if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him...." (Matt 18:17).

We see however that it is found twenty-three times in Acts, sixty-five times in the Pauline corpus and on many occasions in other post-resurrection accounts. Observing this reality we must ask: is Church is a post-Jesus concept?

Even if it, and all we are admitting here is that he didn't leave some blueprint for us to follow (this in and of itself is good in that it shows that the church we have is something that emerges and is therefore open to continual reform and growth), still it remains something inherently good and divine in that it is a divinely led human response to the invitation of God.

What did Jesus do?

So what then did Jesus do? What did he leave us to follow? What was noticeable about his work?

John Fullenbach notes that an often under-appreciated theological concept is that of gathering... Jesus more than anything else gathered... this action of Jesus offers us an insight into his intentions. Jesus cures, forgives, challenges, teaches, loves, and serves, but above all, in each of these situations, he gathers.²

At every available opportunity Jesus included people: the rich (Lk 19:1-10) & poor (Lk 6:20); the educated (Lk 14:1-6) & uneducated (Matt 11:25-26); the rural in Galilee (Mk 1:14) & urban in Jerusalem (Mt 23:37); the healthy and sick (Mk 4:23); the righteous (Mk 2:17) and sinners (Lk 19:10). Jesus welcomed all. He created community – a community of people who believed they belonged – a community of equals who believed that they had a role to play.

² John Fullenbach offers good insight into gathering as a theological concept – cf. Church: Community for the Kingdom

Developing the mission

Stepping on then from Jesus we need to see what it is that they did – how was his invitation continued by those who followed him?

It is the actions of these first believers that teach us what they saw as their role in this church.

So put simply we ask now what did the first disciples do in response to the post-resurrection invitation to “go therefore and make disciples of all the nations” (Matt 29:19)?

They did, according to Gerard Lohfink, three striking things:³

a) *They moved from Galilee to Jerusalem.*

On first viewing this action is entirely illogical: why would the disciples leave Galilee? It is, after all, here that they encountered the risen Christ. Surely they would have remained here hoping to encounter him again. But in spite of this, and against what must have been every fibre of their being (because surely they didn't want to separate themselves from him), they moved to Jerusalem. They did this because of the Jewish belief that it was in Jerusalem that the last events would occur. The disciples, the first community, were conscious of their role in preparing for the end times. They left Galilee, therefore, to prepare not only themselves but ultimately ***also all of Israel*** for what was to come.

b) *They engaged in preaching & baptising.*

These disciples did not come together merely for the sake of gathering themselves; they came together for a purpose. They were convinced that they had something to offer the world and so they spoke about it fearlessly, when and where possible. They longed to be a sign for the Kingdom and they wanted to make Israel believe in that sign (Acts 2:14-40; 3:12-26; 5:29-32). They desired to *welcome new members into their midst* (Acts 2: 41) and, ultimately, they desired to continue the welcome of Jesus to gather and to include... (Is that not the bedrock of the invitation of God for all – come to me)

c) *They quickly reconstructed the twelve – they wanted to unite that which was separated.*

Once again this action seems illogical. After all, the addition of one more was, in terms of work output, insignificant: eleven could preach and baptize almost as prodigiously as twelve. However this would not, nor could not, content them. Conscious that they were to represent the twelve

³ Gerard Lohfink draws attention to these three actions. Cf. G. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*

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tribes, and therefore act as a sign for all of Israel, their number needed to be complete (Acts 1: 15-26). Their gathering was symbolic of the eschatological gathering of the Lord: all were welcome.

These are the actions of a group who wanted to work for, and with, people to bring about the kingdom - to spread the Good News.

But there is a separation – we are not all gardeners...

So how then or why was there a separation?

In the early communities of faith, we see no distinction between 'laity' or those holding 'office' (remember we are only taking a simplistic approach of separation). We note that the term 'laity' is not to be found in the scriptures at all. We do note however, that those who followed Jesus were perceived as a group of equals. The scriptures refer to the followers of Jesus not in any hierarchical sense but rather as "believers, elect, chosen, saints and brethren" – all were the same united and made equal by their common belief.

The early followers of Jesus were a group who are unified by the teaching of the Apostles, (cf. Acts 2:42), a group committed to the collective living of their vocation. As St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians tells us

I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says

"When he ascended on high, he took many captives, and gave gifts to his people."

... So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...

(Eph 4: 1-11)

We note here, and we could take from other scriptural examples, that these gifts are given for the common good there is no hierarchy. Everyone one in that group had a role – each of them believed that they belonged! They believed and belonged... their role was to contribute to the group – they had a part to play...

Many Gifts one service so HOW DID it change?

At first the Church, rather than having any distinguishable or recognizable differences within the community, was united by focusing on the differences between the Church and the rest of the world. That is to say that they looked on a them and us of the church and the world around them (We believe and they don't). They perceived themselves as strangers to the sinful world around them. (their belief made them belong... (we could as an aside question is the fact we "all" 'believe', ie that Christianity is the religion of Ireland, has contributed to the lack of belonging we experience??))

The Belgian theologian Edward Schillebeeckx proposes three factors that lead to a feeling of separation between the laity and the clergy (between those who work in the garden and those who visit the museum).

1) Firstly and possibly most significantly was the period following the peace of Constantine.

At this time Christians were no longer persecuted and therefore the easily identifiable distinctions between the church and world were becoming blurred. (There also emerged at this time the monastic tradition. The distinction between the world Church and the 'non world' church (the monks) was now seen more as a distinction between the Christians of the world and those of the monastic or religious tradition).

2) Secondly, privileges

as a result of the peace of Constantine, clergy and monks were increasingly granted privileges and rights within society under the patronage of secular powers, thus reinforcing the growing distinction between those in 'office' and the rest of the community of believers.

3) Finally during the patristic period, the already blurring distinction between monks and clergy

This was in some sense removed altogether as many monks presented themselves for ordination, and the clergy of the day began to take unto themselves many of the monastic traditions such as celibacy and the monastic spirituality. Very soon it transpired that the clergy were those in receipt of good education and the laity were perceived as illiterate.

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The old distinction between the world and the believing community was now removed, replaced as such, by the new distinction between believing people and those in religious office or 'the clergy'. Those who watch and those who do. Those who are served and those who serve...

A rediscovery of the old in the midst of the dust of today...

During the Council, and after it as a result of its work, there was a real new appreciation of the equality of the roles of all within the church.

Many Gifts one service so WHY SHOULD it change again?

WHY?

- The apostolate of the laity derives from their Christian vocation and the Church can never be without it. (AA 1)
- In the Church there is a diversity of ministry but a oneness of mission. (AA2)
- The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head (AA 3)
Decree on the Apostolate of the laity
- Thus every layman, in virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, is at the same time a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself "according to the measure of Christ's bestowal" - LG 33

How?

- The laity carry out their manifold apostolate both in the Church and in the world. In both areas there are various opportunities for apostolic activity. We wish to list here the more important fields of action, namely, church communities, the family, youth, the social milieu, and national and international levels. Since in our times women have an ever more active share in the whole life of society, it is very important that they participate more widely also in the various fields of the Church's apostolate. (AA 9)
- Whether the lay apostolate is exercised by the faithful as individuals or as members of organizations, it should be incorporated into the

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apostolate of the whole Church according to a right system of relationships. (AA 23)

- “Full, conscious and active participation” in... (SC) - not only in liturgy but in the life of the church. Karl Rahner is clear on why our daily life needs to impact on our liturgical or prayer life....

How to facilitate this in our Church today?

- Bishops, pastors of parishes, and other priests of both branches of the clergy should keep in mind that the right and duty to exercise this apostolate is common to all the faithful, both clergy and laity, and that the laity also have their own roles in building up the Church. For this reason they should work fraternally with the laity in and for the Church and take special care of the lay persons in these apostolic works.(AA25)
- **Special care should be taken to select priests** who are capable of promoting particular forms of the apostolate of the laity and are properly trained.

We must therefore actively seek and select priests who will engage people in the church – the role of the priest is to involve, to thank, to encourage... the priest should not take onto himself but rather should be the one in the community to actively seek out others for the work..

The exhortation *Cristifideles Laici* tells us that all the members of the church – lay and clergy, make up the one people of God and the Body of Christ.

By using the parable of the labourers in the vineyard (Mt 20: 1-16), the document calls us to recognise that the call of the Lord is “not only of pastors, clergy, and men and women religious. The call is addressed to everyone: lay people as well are personally called by the Lord”. The document is clear in underlining the fact that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council were merely **re-echoing** the call of Christ in their summoning of all the people of God - to labour in the vineyard. Therefore – to talk about equality in the church and equal responsibility for this mission is simply to speak of nothing more than a return to the original intention of the Lord, which had unfortunately been lost.

The church, after all, cannot hope to achieve its mission here on earth without all of its members involved in the task.

Separation

Separation then is the key reason for our difficulty. It is the reason we don't feel we belong. It is the separation that causes the disconnect between believing and belonging...

Separation is not a good thing anyway - Separation from the world originally (church and world), the separation of the clergy and monks from people was not good ... so we need to be careful about more separation now...

Benedict XVI, our Pope Emeritus once said in an interview as a young theologian that he envisioned a Church of the future that would become a leaner, smaller, purer church... I dare to suggest that this might be a dangerous road. Separations have proven unhelp - God, we saw, tried to unite, to bring together, to gather... We do not want to be separate from the world and we do not want to be separate from each other.

I think if we presume that today is about looking for the role of the laity in the church then we are framing the question incorrectly. Is it not that we should be looking for some role for the laity in the Church? Because the church is the laity - after all being a lay member of the church is the foundation existence for every member of the church (no one was born pope) - we are, therefore, simply looking to rediscover the role of ALL in the church...

But we need not panic.. building church is a slow process

Think again about Gaudi's church - it has taken over 100 years to build and is not yet finished - ours has taken 2000 years and it is not yet finished

His church when viewed teaches people that more has to be done... so does ours..

He was once asked about the length of time it was going to take to build his church - his response was my client is not in a hurry - nor is ours...