

ON BRIDGING THE GAPS

INTRODUCTION - A PASTORAL NEED

There seems to be a pastoral need to reflect on the gaps that arise between how people experience their own aspirations and daily lives, and how they experience the Church.

Gaps are of various kinds. Perhaps we should start by acknowledging the gap that affects us all – the gap between the call to holiness and our own unfinished conversion. The only remedy for this gap is our own deeper conversion.

Where the gaps involve lack of faith, there is an element of mystery. We remember St Paul's warning that our battle is with "principalities and powers". Jesus found himself confounded by lack of faith among his own kin "and could work no miracle there" (Mk 6:1-6) Their lack of faith would have hurt him. Our opportunity to share his grief comes when we are confronted by sluggishness, complacency or indifference among our people,

We also "suffer with" when parishioners share with us their grief over children or grandchildren who were brought up in the faith but no longer practise it – yet seem to be living good lives, and are sometimes generously involved in works of charity, justice, peace...

Why do some who no longer practise feel that the Church has nothing they need? And why do many who do still practise, and who love the Church and give of themselves generously, tell us, sometimes on their own behalf, sometimes on behalf of others, about feeling disconnected from, un-nurtured by, alienated by, or marginalised within, the Church. Why, even for some who know well the meaning of the Mass, does coming to Sunday Mass feel unrelated to their own rightful aspirations and their daily lives?

Before we address those questions, we first need to acknowledge that there are others again who are joining the Church notwithstanding all the negative publicity, or returning to the Church after time-out, or 'hanging on in' in spite of feeling hurt. These, too, must be taken seriously.

And so these reflections will be formatted as follows:

- I) Taking seriously those who join, return to, or 'hang on in' ...
- II) Gaps and disconnections – catalysts for disenchantment
- III) Taking our cue from the Holy Spirit – catalysts for change
- IV) Appendix - case studies

PEOPLE WHO JOIN, RETURN TO, OR 'HANG ON IN' THE CHURCH

- Some find that the Church meets their desire for prayer and for transcendent experience:

Professor Tina Beattie, theologian and a convert, believes that a number of women are attracted to Catholicism because of the emptiness of contemporary society.

“In quite a consumerist age, when secularism by no means affords a meaningful alternative, the Catholic Church becomes very attractive as a repository not only of meaning and hope but of art and culture. There is always a romance about Catholicism,” she said.

Despite institutional failings, Professor Beattie, director of the Digby Stuart Research Centre for Catholic Studies at Roehampton University, says the Church still speaks to people “about cosmic meaning and redemption”. (The Revolving Door – Women who join, leave and then return to the Catholic Church,” *The Tablet*, London, January 2012)

- Some stay or join because they feel at home even in the messy-ness of the Church. How “sinners and tax collectors” felt in the company of Jesus is how people should be able to feel in the Church.

“Someone once said the Church is like a wise old grandmother with a lot of rubbish in her back yard”, says author Joy Cowley, who converted to Catholicism 30 years ago. “On the outside, all you see is the back yard. Inside, you see the wisdom.” (Karl du Fresne, *The Listener*, April 6, 2013, Page 16)

- Some join or return because of good experiences at important moments in their lives, and good memories:

“So what makes some Catholics remain true to their faith, and others return to it, when so many are lapsed? Monica O’Connell of Wellington, who returned to the Church four years ago after a gap of 35 years... Health and Safety Team Manager for the Council of Trade Unions, says she came back to the Church after seeing her mother die from cancer four years ago. Deeply impressed by the warmth and support shown by her mother’s New Plymouth parish and its two priests, she began attending the Church of St Mary of the Angels in Wellington. Coming from a family with a strong belief in social justice, OConnell was attracted by the Church’s social teachings...(Karl du Fresne, *ibid.* page 111)

- Some stay because it is their Church and they are not going to be pushed out:

“I stay in the Church with difficulty, but I stay because I have, through Baptism, both a right to be there, and a share of responsibility for the quality of the Church’s life.” (quoted in *Made in God’s Image*, February 1990, page 111)

- And so on - like so many hares before the Hound of Heaven. In all of them we celebrate the faithfulness of God.

II

GAPS AND DISCONNECTIONS - CATALYSTS FOR DISENCHANTMENT

The problems are real even if they arise from perceptions of the Church that are sometimes wrong. Too often, though, those perceptions are based on people's experiences.

Historical note:

In the 11th century, Pope Gregory VII rightly tried to extricate the Church from an unhealthy dependence on the emperor and secular powers. (Today we take for granted the separation of Church and State.) In his time the eventual outcome of his efforts was a Church that increasingly isolated itself in a kind of "spiritual realm" and a world that went its own way, culminating in the Enlightenment's sense of not needing the Church

If the Council could acknowledge that "believers can have more than a little to do with the rise of atheism" (GS.19), we cannot be too surprised by our own people's milder forms of detachment. In the midst of some very mixed signals, it has become easier for people generally to think of the Church as a pious option – for those who need it.

The Church's self-imposed isolation left it ill-equipped to cope with, benefit from, or contribute to, Modernity. Even up till the 1950's, the Church was still suppressing some of its own best scholars. It was only with the Second Vatican Council that the Church opted for a humbler, radically new relationship with the world, based on genuine dialogue. This was the distinctive characteristic of its Pastoral Constitution on the Church *in the Modern World*

The people we minister to need to feel at home both in the world and in the Church. There will be points of conflict deriving from revealed faith. But there may be other points of conflict that hinder their faith? For example:

- Slowness to recognise that what people are feeling when they complain of poor homilies or bad translations is a sense of *alienation* from what they have been taught to believe is important, or is in fact precious to them.
- Pope John Paul II uses the word *alienation* in the Post Synodal Letter *Ecclesia in Oceania* where he says: "Adequate translations of liturgical texts and appropriate use of symbols drawn from local cultures can avert the cultural alienation of indigenous people when they approach the Church's worship. The words and signs of the liturgy will be the words and signs of their soul." (39) Isn't there a disconnection between our parishes' liturgies and the Catholic Maori people's "soul"? Do we "help them to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought". (Pope John Paul II, Catechesi Tradendi n. 53)
- A certain gap between what young Catholics understand by participation in the liturgy and what the Church understands by commemorating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And the difficulty we experience in bridging this gap.

- A growing gap between Christian faith which is rooted in the historical events of Christ's life, death and resurrection, and "spiritualities" that are unconnected to these historical events.
- A gap between seeing the work for Christian unity as a sort of 'appendix' which is added to the Church's traditional activities, and seeing it as "an organic part of the Church's life and work (which) must pervade all that she is and does." (*Ut Unum Sint* n.20)
- The gap emerging and steadily increasing between norms promulgated in Rome for the universal Church and the needs and practices of our local Church" (Cardinal W. Kasper)

III

TAKING OUR CUE FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT - CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

1. The most far-reaching potential for changing everyone's experience of the Church – and obviating disconnections - came with the Council's decision to place the chapter on the People of God (LG ch.2) ahead of the chapter on the Church's hierarchical nature (LG ch.3). It seems a small thing; it was huge. It was a deliberate inversion of the prevalent perception of the Church as being foremost its hierarchy with the laity being, as it were, subjects or clients of the Church.

The Council taught, contrary to previous perceptions, that *all* the baptised share in what the Risen Christ continues to do as Priest, Prophet and Prince of Peace; that through this sharing, *all* carry out their calling to holiness of life and their responsibility for the mission of the Church. The purpose of ordained ministries and hierarchy is to nurture the priestly, prophetic and princely people who *are* the Church and who carry out the Church's mission. Furthermore, it is the *whole* Church that is the repository of divine revelation, not just the magisterium (DV n.8)

A direct and practical consequence of this understanding of what the Church *is* concerns how the Church needs to *act* if it is to be true to its own nature. It means that participation, co-responsibility, consultation and dialogue are essential to the Church's proper way of acting.

Faithfulness to the Council requires faithfulness to dialogue and to the structures of dialogue, (which also implies the need to avoid slipping into the emerging culture of quick answers – being sought or being given – via the social media. Nothing adequately substitutes for face to face presence to one another in the dynamics of being the community of disciples.)

Lumen Gentium provides us with the theological basis on which participation, consultation, co-responsibility and dialogue are based, but there is also an anthropological basis: for change and renewal to be effective, people need to be the agents/subjects of it; it is not just done to them.

2. Base Ecclesial Communities already exist in South America and parts of Asia, and have proven to be a way of being Church that enables the *integration of faith and life* - the opposite of disconnection. They practise communal discernment (based on social analysis in the light of the scriptures), agreed action and co-responsibility for what happens. They carry worship over into the rest of life.

Base Ecclesial Communities are not transferable; they need to grow out of a local church's experience. Our experience in Aotearoa New Zealand suggests a need for smaller cells or communities within the parishes in order to provide the deeper commitment and formation some parishioners feel a need for, and scope for these cells to act as catalysts in the wider parish's life and worship.

3. "New Ecclesial Movements" have some similarity with Base Ecclesial Communities. They already exist in our country, providing for a deeper experience of Christian community, support for one another in living the Gospel in daily life, communal prayer, the practice of hospitality, and outreach.
4. Other initiatives/groups are already happening within parishes – groups that come together for faith-sharing, scripture-based prayer, meditation, retreats in daily life, enrichment of marriage and family life, reflection and action for justice, the works of mercy, volunteer service at home and abroad...
5. Sacramental and devotional life: signs of the Holy Spirit are also discernible in the way major Christian feasts still attract even many who do not come every Sunday; there is a constant stream of people going to daily Mass in churches right around the world; a constant return of congregations for communal celebrations of the sacrament of Penance, especially in Advent and Lent; a new-found devotion to the cross and other icons and places of pilgrimage.
6. Training for discipleship is also being provided by various groups, including Alpha, a Christ-centred, community-centred, ecumenical programme with a proven record on all the continents and with all age-groups. (Since the 1970's it has involved over six million people.)
7. Gospel-like leadership: one example of *distance* between "the world of religion" and "the world of people's lives" has been projected by the Holy See's courtly life-style and a certain dysfunctionality, which led Cardinal Carlo Martini to say the Church was two hundred years out of date. See Appendix 5 Pope Francis has been urging bishops and priests to get closer to their people (and the smell of the flock) and has been leading by example. See Appendix 6

The participants of all these various forms of renewal are saying something to us about HOW THEY WOULD WANT THE CHURCH TO BETTER CONNECT WITH THEIR ASPIRATIONS AND LIVES. They are at least saying that they desire

- a more personal experience of Christian community;
- contemplative prayer
- counter-cultural living in our secular society;
- ways of supporting one another in living the Gospel;
- to feel "at home" in the Church and to feel they belong;
- social justice and a willingness to reach out;
- greater inclusiveness.