

## **Why Remain a Catholic Today?**

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### **Introduction**

Asking why one remains a Catholic can be like asking what makes you the person that you are. The answer is more likely to resemble a symphony than a thesis. It may have to do with the story of that journey you have been on all your life, the seasons of your heart, and that voice calling you throughout to come and follow. It may therefore involve a confession of faith. But more than anything else it will have to do with the people in your life.

One of the people who has been a big influence on my life phoned about ten days ago to say she saw in her parish newsletter that I was giving a talk on ‘Why remain a Catholic today?’, that she was coming to Mt. Saint Anne’s and that it had better be good! Normally such a message would put you on your mettle but when the person in question is your first primary school teacher that you met in the Spring of 1954 when you were not yet four years of age and you are now 60, you sit up and pay attention. That I have never lost contact with Sr. Mildred or she with me, and that she is here tonight, says something of the influence she has been on my life.

Sr. Mildred is part of the reason I remain a Catholic today. As my first teacher she was my first contact with the world outside my family, and she was such a benign and loving presence. With her colleagues Mother Kevin and Mother Lawrence she painted a picture of the world that added colour and shape to a picture already being painted in a family home out the road where my grandmother was the high priestess of the household. If Mildred and Kevin and Lawrence prayed at every turn of the day they were only in the halfpenny place compared to my grandmother. She prayed like a hermit, led the rosary every night, read the Messenger and Blessed Martin Magazine and the Far East and bought us sweets from Connolly’s van. My mother was the next matriarch of the spiritual order, a member of the Children of Mary who thanked God for every blessing, turned to him in every crisis, and led the second decade of the Rosary. My father’s was the third decade and he was an assured acolyte who gave a kind of gruff vindication to the whole scenario. I owned the fifth decade for a while, following my older sister Margaret at fourth, but things got complicated when enough younger children arrived to cover all the decades of a separate mystery. And then there was Fr. Bob, a glorious mystery all to himself. When our beloved priest uncle came home from Carlow College he was the soul of adventure and generosity and a gold frame on the whole picture if such were needed.

### **Our brothers and sisters keepers**

The first point I would like to make is that in determining what we become and what we remain, we are our brothers and sisters keepers. In all of our lives there are people who paint pictures of the world for us, who hold us, who are ministers of influence for us and people also who scandalise us. When Jesus told us to be fishers of men (ie of each other) and when he said it would be better that a millstone be tied around your neck rather than scandalise a child – you get a sense of the value he placed on the sacred influence we are on each other.

Being a member of a church is a question of the company one keeps. In the Catholic Church it is the company of the living and the dead. It is on the one hand that host of people who have knocked on the door of silence for centuries, who have found that silence not to be unresponsive, who have made footholds with words, who tell each new generation that beyond the door of silence there is meaning rather than meaninglessness. It is the company of Mary and the Apostles, of Augustine of Hippo, Francis of Assisi, Therese of Lisieux and the Cure d'Ars, of John Henry Newman and Teilhard de Chardin, of Micheal Paul Gallagher, Peter McVerry and Sr. Mildred. Behind the human company dead and alive is divine company experienced in the Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity and the revelation in that Incarnation of the nature and imagination of God, of love as the DNA of creation, of the intimacy of the Holy Spirit with our lives. It is the company you tap into every time you attend the Eucharist, open the scriptures, go on your knees or set out to love with Christian awareness.

A few weeks ago on March 17<sup>th</sup> I was thinking I am Catholic because St. Patrick came to Ireland. Then I thought of my ancestors and how their lives and example have not been wasted on me. Then I go to work or phone a friend and meet people who lift me every day with the example of their lives. As an Irish Catholic, when you step on your toes and look beyond all that has happened recently, you cannot help having pride in so much of Catholic history, history written with a big H and history written with a small h, as in the history of your own people. The small 'h' s of heroism and holiness and humanity served. The call to sainthood answered. The community of saints built generation upon generation.

There is beauty in other ways also, to the point where at times I think it is the poetry and metaphor of it all that holds me most – all that is found in the liturgy and the sacraments, the sacred music, the art and architecture small and great, from monastery cells to great cathedrals. Even when the circumspection about 'remaining Catholic' prompted by scandal takes you out to the edge of your faith, you find yourself saying like Peter, Lord where else is there to go? There is the sense that having been exposed to the word of eternal life, the bread of heaven and the water of salvation, you do not need, as Chesterton put it, to drink from a different pond.

For me, being Catholic is the locus of my faith and of my prayer. It is the spiritual story I am part of. It is the particular community I belong to and without which I would be diminished and bereft. It's the language I have been taught to speak, the picture of the world painted on the walls of my imagination. It is also in a real sense the work I am called to do since, as Teresa of Avila put it, 'Christ has no body now but yours'. Above all it is the face of God I have been shown and the imagination of God presented to me in the incarnated second person of the Trinity.

### **Falling in love**

John McGahern said in his last memoir that 'all that survives does so by acquiring lovers'. The reason the Catholic Church survives and the reason that so many people like you and me remain Catholic is that we fell in love with the church, usually when we were

very young. Maybe it would be more theologically correct to say that we fell in love with Christ first - but I am not sure which was the chicken and which was the egg. Our faith tells us that it was neither chicken nor egg because the 'first love' is something we received rather than anything we did. I don't know when I became aware of that 'first love' but I have had a sense of it all my life, like the joy that catches you when the sun comes up over the road as you drive to work. I can never remember an instant when any part of me wanted to reject Christ or any part of him. Part of him in my experience has always been 'church' and he was always a huge part of the church I came to love.

I fell in love with church the way you fall in love with the landscape of home. The way you fall in love with the world and the people and the rituals around you, the passing parade of it all, like the crows coming home and the wild geese passing over, season following season.

In the rural Kilkenny of my youth we were never too far from Jerusalem or Rome. At Christmas, Bethlehem was an upland village somewhere over the brow of the hill, accessible as the stars coming out and you closing your eyes, as real as the sheep my father was shepherding. There was a manger in the cow-house outside my bedroom window and the evening star over Analack (the hill looking down on us where my grandmother came from) called to wise men everywhere, even to a child. The gospel narratives held little surprise to the rural children that we were. In Holy Week the tree of Calvary could have been hewn in Upper Grange and the Easter stone rolled back in Powerstown Quarry.

### **A change of key**

If being of church is a note struck in the symphony of your life, it is a rare symphony that doesn't have a change of key. There is always a minor chord and a change in tone.

I fell in love with the church in the way John McGahern fell in love with it, the way Colm O'Gorman fell in love with it, the way Mohandas Gandhi fell in love with the Beatitudes of Jesus and recited them every day of his life, the way the mystic Jewess Simone Weil fell in love with the Catholic Church but never was baptised into it.

John McGahern's artistic temperament and experience suggested to him that the Irish church of the 1950's crucified freedoms. The church rewarded him for his insight by taking his job away and playing its part in undermining his faith. But having fallen in love he never quite jettisoned the picture or the language and was buried from his parish church with the papers noting the next day that there were 6 priests on the altar.

Colm O Gorman who has also written lyrically of his love for the Catholic church as a young boy went on to tell the story of how he was alienated beyond words by the sexual abuse of a priest, and the fact that it was allowed to go on.

Gandhi lived and died as a fervent Hindu and would Christ have wanted him to be anything else?

Simeone Weil remained at the door of our church, never entering by way of Baptism, because she felt that in doing so she would be turning her back on so much of mankind. Yet her influence on Paul VI was immense and crucial to the Second Vatican Council's decree on The Church in the Modern World.

I cannot think of remaining Catholic today without being mindful of John McGahern and Colm O'Gorman and Mohandas Gandhi and Simeone Weil. Finding yourself near the hearth does not mean that you don't see those outside the door with a mixture of sympathy and recognition. You ask yourself the question: why do I remain here if others who fell in love are out there?

### **Experience, belonging, searching and ownership**

The American theologian John Westerhoff analysed aspects of the affiliation and adherence that is involved in faith by referring to four essential elements of biography: experience, belonging, searching and ownership. I cannot help being aware that the reason I remain Catholic while others do not may relate to the way my experience, belonging, searching and ownership was different from theirs.

Maybe I experienced love where others experienced abuse. I know my experience would have been different if I had been a woman in the church, or gay, or divorced or sacked from my job as a teacher, or sexually abused by a priest and that abuse covered up. If my father had beaten or abused me maybe I would not now say the 'Our father who art in heaven' in quite the same way.

Maybe I belonged in a way others didn't quite belong. Maybe again it might not have been quite so easy to belong if I had been female, or very poor, or any of a range of spiritual handicaps found on the register of exclusion, the things that keep people out on the periphery of belonging?

Maybe my life gifted me with the privilege of searching where others had more pressing matters. Like what you hear in the current Trocaire radio advertisement: dial one for eviction from your home, dial two for having to sell the only thing you own to feed your children... Theo Dorgan was talking on radio last week about how pushing tyres around the Dunlop factory in Cork in order to feed his family drained the life from his father who might otherwise have been a poet too, just like his son. Simeone Weil said that 'we live our lives by the quality of our awareness' and there is large variation in the opportunities for awareness that people get in their lives.

Finally there is the matter of ownership. Maybe I have had the kind of life that allows you to own your faith rather than be bullied out of it by abuse or alienation or the sheer plod of staying alive. And so I have had the privilege of reaching a point where like Rowan Williams I can say 'this is where I can say that I am'.

I have been a privileged Catholic and, as we all know, privilege bears a certain amount of odium. Even if I bear my privilege with circumspection I hear that voice saying that from

those to whom much has been given, much is expected. When I think like that I feel a failure. I also feel a little bit like Job before God visited all those trials on him and I pray very earnestly those words of the Our Father which ask that we not be led into temptation.

### **Reason!**

In all of this I don't want it to sound as if remaining Catholic arises out of some kind of psychotherapeutic need, some kind of 'what happened to me' story like some people construct around Catholic guilt. Or worse still that it involves some kind of idolatry. It is good to be clear in your mind about certain things. Christ wanted a church. You come back to that over and over again. He called disciples and gathered a community around him. I didn't get Christ without church and with all its flaws I recognise the church as something he instituted.

I am clear also that Church meets and has met a need for a fundamental orientation in the lives of billions of people like you and me, giving meaning to our lives, calling us to love our neighbour and leave the world a better place. And I am clear that today the faith perspective offers a liberating window out of the carousel of 'breaking news' and 'ad. breaks' promoting 'bling' and 'lifestyle' that could rob the precious moments of your life from you entirely.

I am clear that my affiliation to church is a matter of reason as well as a matter of love. Pope Benedict's address in Westminster Abbey, quoted by Nuala O'Loan in her talk to this series, is very worthy of our consideration.

### **Another look at experience**

Before moving on I want to take one last look at the question of experience, specifically the question of one's experience of God. I remember listening to Br. Philip Pinto (Provincial of the Irish Christian Brothers) asking the very difficult question: 'What can you say of God that you did not find in a book?' That question prompts me to say the following:

No day in my life that I have prayed has been the same as the day I did not pray.

The worst days in my life when I have prayed have been the days when I have been closest to God.

I have never been denied the grace to get through a day.

I have never placed a burden at the feet of God without taking it back up as a lighter burden.

No matter how deep the pit, Christ has been in the pit before me and it is in that pit that I am sure to find him.

I know without a shadow of a doubt that my prayers are heard and 'answered'.

I know that when I have asked God to show me the way he has never let me down.

And don't think I am losing the run of myself when I say that along with 'keepers' I have been sent envoys and angels and that sometimes I have recognised them.

### **A twist in the story**

Another change of key! I want to complicate my own story of remaining with Church by telling you that I went off to be a priest in 1968. Among my classmates was the chairperson of this evening's proceedings.

Everything in my life pointed that way. All the experience, the belonging, the searching and ownership. But six years later in 1974 when the time came to put a collar around my neck, I ran! Fr. Richard McCullen, our revered Vincentian spiritual director, who went on to be confessor to Paul VI (he got good practice on Noel and myself) told me to follow the direction that my feet were pointing, and it became obvious to me that my feet were pointing out the door and down the road like something out of a Bob Dylan song.

What had happened?

In coming to understand the road my feet had taken I reflect on four things that were happening in 1968 as I made my way to Maynooth, four things that changed the way Catholics see the world ever since and four things impacting on a young seminarian with all the antennae he could muster out on his slates. In May 1968 there were student riots in Paris. It was followed by 'the summer of love' in San Francisco. In the middle of that summer, on July 25<sup>th</sup>, *Humanae Vitae* was published. On Christmas Eve 1968 the crew of Apollo 8 took a photograph of a pale blue dot appearing over the horizon of the moon which later became known as 'Earthrise'. It was the first time we saw a photograph of earth taken from space.

The student riots in Paris were, they said, all about freedom! Obedience was giving way to freedom and creativity. There was a growing sense of life as a gift to be lived to the full according to values that went beyond obedience and sacrifice. Before I headed for Maynooth I spent the summer of 1968 working in a shoe shop on Grafton Street and was part of a folk group at night singing songs of freedom and love and 'a new world somewhere they called the promised land'.

And so to the summer of love. Does anyone remember 'If you're going to San Francisco, make sure to wear some flowers in your hair'? The new world somewhere was about sexual liberation too, and a new awareness in the air shouting subliminal insults at the celibacy I was attempting to embrace. It would proclaim to the mind of a young seminarian the freedom to be sexual like everyone else, the way God had made you, to have a family of your own and to work your transformation to wholeness within the sanctity of marriage. Saying to you that we do not have to go to God alone, whispering that celibacy might be a beautiful gift but an unnecessary searing. That it might be like asking you to grow in the manner of a tree that takes its shape and reaches for the light while leaning into a harsh wind.

*Humanae Vitae* was in a way the Church's answer to the riots in Paris and the summer of love in San Francisco. As we now know, church authority took a hammering on the

matter and still does. Time Magazine on its front cover had a picture of the Pope with a caption that said: 'Stop me if I told you this joke before'. Freedom was also coming to mean freedom to regulate family size and fertility and in the face of that emerging freedom Church authority seemed to have missed a turn on the motorway. Like missing the turn for the M8 and ending up in Limerick when you should have been in Cork. As I arrived in Maynooth that September Mons. Francis Cremin was already the herald of *Humanae Vitae* to white faced clerics and in his declamation of the truth that would govern the world he communicated an authoritarian bravado that you felt, even at the time, was somewhat unhinged. I'll never forget being chosen to do a BBC interview where questions were about how the priest of tomorrow would handle contraception in the confessional! It was a desperately uncomfortable position in which to be placed when sometimes you felt more in common with the flower children than with Mons. Cremin.

And then there was that first photo of earth taken from space. Do you remember that mind altering contextualisation of our little lives. The beginning of a new understanding and a new story that was ecological and universal. We could talk about it all night. We could begin now to see ourselves as star dust, to think bigger, to get out of the smallness, to open our minds, to see vast tracts of that globe that were not even 'Catholic'! Down the road lay the cosmic Christ and quantum faith!

Those four emergences had a profound affect on me in that crucial period between 18 and 24. The changing world seeped into my bones in ways that at a distance of 40 years I am only beginning to understand. Each of these developments in its own way altered the world in which we live. They have had a profound effect on the Church and where we are today.

In 1974 I packed up my bags, went off and became a teacher for the next quarter century, married a lovely woman, set up home, was Dad to my two boys, left school eventually to work at MIE in a project called *Re-imagining the Catholic School*, went on to CEIST which many of you will know is a Trust for Catholic schools, and turn up here this evening still a Catholic! [For many years I had dreams of waking up laid out prostrate on the floor of the Chapel in Maynooth in the middle of the ordination ceremony breaking out in a cold sweat wondering how I was ever going to explain Rosalie and the two children.]

Before I packed my bags at Maynooth a bridging event happened that was to affect the rest of my life. Bishop Patrick Lennon had been in a real sense my keeper when I was a seminarian and that keeping extended beyond the moment I told him I was leaving. I remember a cold winter evening when I went to meet him at his bungalow in Carlow. I am not sure how I said what I had to say. I remember sharing the scrambled eggs he was having for tea and not tasting a morsel of it. I imagine I said I felt that I had a vocation to be a priest but the accompanying call to celibacy was leaving me cold. But I might not have been as clear as that, even in my own mind, or as courageous in saying what I thought. I remember feeling that the man in front of me was heartbroken and that in a real sense so was I. But I remember above all his generosity and his foresight. In asking me to finish my theology degree he looked straight at me and said: 'You are not finished with

the church and the church is not finished with you.’ In that moment of severing he was this brother’s keeper. It is the mystery of our lives that had someone not spoken certain words to us it is unlikely that the road of life would have taken any of us to this place on an April evening in 2011.

### **‘Keeping the Show on the Road’**

So here I am then with the whole burden of the church on my back, keeping the show on the road! You do not have to worry about my messiah complex however. God takes care of that too. I tell a little story about visiting, a couple of years ago, an old cousin who is a pastor in the Diocese of San Diego. He took me out to dinner with three of his contemporary pastors, all Irish and all colleagues of an age. When we had settled down to the first course my host re-introduced me in a jocular manner with: ‘So here we are guys with my cousin Ned who is going to save the Catholic Church in Ireland’. After a few moments silence the riposte across the table was friendly but not jocular. ‘If you were to take my advice Ned, you would let the church in Ireland die. Just let it die’. The next one repeated ‘let it die’ with the gravity of a punter at a Coliseum matinee turning his thumb downwards. The third said: ‘Let it die and let something better grow in its place’. All the heads nodded in unison. I was left with a soup spoon half way to my lips and a look of pity on their faces.

These were men in their 70s who had given their lives to the Church. Their love for the church was unquestionable, their disillusionment palpable. They were united in an antipathy to leadership in the church (what they said about their bishop is not repeatable) and to their memories of the church in which they grew up. How backward it was. The image of God they were given. The picture of sexuality and of human wholeness they had been sold. It was like the time I heard Fr. Martin Tierney say that he was praying for no more vocations. I couldn’t help thinking that if these Irish men were fifty years younger they might not be next or near the church or greatly interested in whether it lived or died. They were living in a very different world to the one in which they had found their vocations.

### **Problems with the show and the road changing**

In his address recently to the Group for Irish Studies at Magdalene College, Cambridge, Diarmuid Martin said that for too long the Church has responded in terms of keeping the show on the road, ‘not noticing that there were problems with the show and that the road was changing’

The four emergences I mentioned from 1968 changed the road for sure and God knows the show has been slow to respond. As a church we have hardly read the ‘signs of the times’ particularly well. Be it freedom or eros or authority or global issues, our church has not been all it might have been. You could be forgiving and say that church was never going to hit the perfect note, given the fallen human condition and the shadow of original sin. And you could be less forgiving to the extent that there is something tragic in the way our church has been failing Christ and failing the Gospel, especially in the inability, maybe unwillingness, to read the signs of the times. When you contrast the

prophetic beauty of the Christian message with the failure of the show (without even mentioning the sexual abuse and its cover up to save the institution), you feel sometimes that so much of what is good and true and beautiful is being compromised in the mud of a compromising world:

-When you find that a church that speaks more beautifully of freedom than any agency the world has ever known, - the freedom of the children of God that inspired democracy and human rights and cradled the idealism that set slaves free - fails to promote some of the basic values of democracy within its own institution and is unable to listen to the voice of its people.

-When you find a church that promotes truth beyond any organisation the world has ever seen says to its own people 'we have heard you' when patently it is not listening at all.

-When you find a church that preaches transformation more than any agency the world has ever seen is unable to throw the windows open on a daily basis and shake itself up as John XX III demanded fifty years ago.

-When you find a church that has preached human equality before God more than any agency the world has ever seen is so infused with patriarchy that it reserves an inferior place for half the human population and after centuries of denying our sisters their equal dignity and status as children of God can only shrug its shoulders in a time when everyone else knows that gender discrimination is atavistic history destined for the dustbin and that its survival today has more to do with hell than with heaven.

-When you find that a church that carries the value of love into this world more than any agency the world has ever seen can only view the love between a man and a woman through the prism of celibacy to the point where people hungry for meaning can no longer bear to listen. (Think of those sermons on vocation with marriage at the bottom of the page.) A church whose message is the meaning of life fails to convey the meaning of our being made sexual, man and woman; fails to say without a nervous twitch that the divine force of life is found in our sexuality, that it is a gold coin in the currency of our journey to wholeness, rather than something to be passed over in silence or left out in open ground for the pornographers to prey upon.

-When you find a church whose founder turned over the tables of the money lenders has scarcely a word to say as money lenders rob the widows' mites, evaporate the life savings of ordinary people and send fathers abroad to work away from their families.

-When you find a church that has given us such good priests to celebrate the Eucharist is so attached to old models that it proposes in the absence of such priests to close churches and settle for prayer services, rather than allow the people of God within its parishes to put forward their holiest and best (married men and women even!) to minister fully to the community of Baptism and to the community of Eucharist.

I wonder is it true, that recent English story where a priest had to leave his parish because he fell in love with a woman only to be replaced by a married Anglican minister who was joining our church because it was doing better than his church in keeping women in their rightful place!

Mohandas Gandhi once said: 'I can tell you that, in my humble opinion, much of what passes as Christianity is a negation of the Sermon on the Mount.' You may have seen advertisements for Hans Kung's new book: '*Can the Church Still Be Saved?* I haven't read it yet but apparently it calls for lay resistance to Church doctrines that are 'obviously against the Gospels'!

One of the biggest regrets of the moment is that our church appears so lukewarm in calling us forward to the Kingdom of God. Everyone knows that if as a planet we do not mature ethically and very quickly, not even our high technology will get us through to the next stage of our evolution. The church should be leading that insight, but it isn't. We should surely be doing more to hammer those swords into plough shares. If Europe is the centre of Christianity why did it sell most of those arms to Libya that it is now trying to destroy. Why are those thug gangs who sprawl across our news reports so often carrying murder machines made in Christian Europe? The church needs to restore its passion for peace, for love, for truth, for equality, for inclusion, for the earth, for the poor, for the outcasts, for the abused, for the silenced, for the unheard.

### **Speaking the truth in love**

I pray that in all of this that I am speaking truth in love. The last thing I would want to do is hurt those classmates who went on to be priests and who serve so faithfully in parishes all over Ireland. To hurt anyone who has given their life to the church. I speak as someone with great affection for those who have given their lives in that way and I speak also from the humility of knowing I might not have made a better fist of any of it, had it been my role to be priest or bishop. Someone may ask however: How can you stay with a church that you see as failing Christ and failing the Gospel?

Firstly, neither scandals nor failures are reasons for any of us to leave the church. What would ever have led us to the impression that the church is or ever has been perfect? It has always been sinful. Think of Peter's denial of Christ. Think of the Crusades, the Inquisition, the burning the Albigensian heretics at the base of Montsegur. Think of Arnaud-Amaury, the war Abbot of the great monastery of Citeaux, who led the campaign against the Albigensians. When he found that those inhabitants of Bezier he had not already slaughtered had gathered for protection in the Church of the Madeleine, he ordered that it be set on fire. When a subordinate told him that many of the people inside were not in fact heretics, he replied, 'Burn them all anyway, God will know his own'!

Church scandals do not undermine our faith because we have always known about sin and about the fallen human condition. There are no surprises in what we have come to know. We never understood Christ as taking on anything other than sinful humanity. The central mystery of our faith involves his dying on the cross to redeem our sinfulness. His

call to us has always been about a response to sinfulness and no new chapter alters the constancy of that call.

Our faith remains unshaken in another significant way in that there is a religious sense that sets the implicit standards we defend and fuels the righteous anger we experience. None of what has happened undermines the place of the soul or the belief in the infinite value of human love. None of what has happened undermines the values of goodness or beauty or truth, but to the contrary. None of what happened terminates the quest for belonging or the search for wholeness or transcendence. None of this puts to an end our yearning for joy and hope, the two words that are the beginning of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. We are not at the end of religion or faith or church. We are rather encountering a challenge to take religion, faith and church much more seriously.'

### **The real question**

The real question maybe is not whether you or I remain with the church but what are we doing about the church we belong to, our church, the church that we are. Where are we going to put the precious ounces of our weight? In answering we can do no better than look always to Christ and to the Holy Spirit. What is Christ asking of us? Where is the Holy Spirit in all of this?

I have a sense of Christ, while living as we know in the hearts of all who follow the gospel of love, as also turning over tables in all kinds of places. I have a sense that he would be no more pleased at our shenanigans than he was with crusades and burnings and inquisitions. That he is whispering to us, shouting to us maybe, that faithfulness involves rebelliousness in the manner of his own rebelliousness. That his call to us, translated into the moment where we find ourselves, is a call to radicalism and dissent towards the disregard for the poor of the earth, the tolerance of war, the keeping down of women, the abuse of the planet, the abuse of wealth, the abuse of business that makes certain coteries of insiders obscenely wealthy while others go without.

And where is the Holy Spirit in all of this? Very busy at the moment in the Middle East one would imagine! On the plane to Brussels with Michael Noonan this week, one might like to think! In our church we have a sense that the Holy Spirit is sustaining the hearts and imaginations of all who love. But there is a sense also that the Holy Spirit is out there somewhere in that Tianaman Square at the centre of our Church, out there waving placards at our encrusted selves and asking us to join in the mayhem of a demolition derby pulling down our pretensions to grandeur, uprooting cultures of privilege and exclusion, shattering ecclesial deafness, making new roads all over the place. The Holy Spirit is the wind tossing the pages of the Gospels that we dare to ignore. As I see it, the Holy Spirit's fingerprints are all over the Murphy Report and the Ryan Report and the hard yards made there for the Kingdom of God.

So what kind of Catholics should we remain? If being Catholic today asks for rebelliousness it also asks for our involvement in rebuilding the church towards what it is intended to be, a task that may not be any easier than restoring the Irish Economy!

Forgive me in quoting Hans Kung again when he said we need to align ourselves with the Holy Spirit to ‘wash what is stained... heal what is wounded...water what is barren...bend what has become rigid...warm what has become cold...direct what is going astray.’<sup>1</sup>

In moving towards a conclusion I believe we also need to do two other special things, to adopt a witness stance and to get involved in re-teaching a thing its beauty.

### **The Witness Stance**

The following is taken from a recent book by Judy Cannato. In a passage about meditation she says the following:

‘At some point in our practice of meditation (as in life itself) we will move past the need to ‘let go’ and instead be open to the desire to ‘let come’... For me the image of letting go presupposes attachment, a holding on to something that is keeping me from freely turning to receive that which is emerging. If, on the other hand, I am guided by ‘let come’, I find myself in the witness stance, attentive and open to what is emerging, and therefore more able to participate in that which incomprehensible holy mystery is communicating.’<sup>2</sup>

Imagine being open to what is emerging to the point where we are able to ‘participate in what incomprehensible holy mystery is communicating’! Our world is hungry for people of faith to take that witness stance and to give witness with their lives. If you don’t believe that hunger for witnesses is out there, think of all the people who have turned out in recent months to see ‘*Of Gods and Men*’ a film about the witness, even unto death, of a group of Trappist Monks living among Islamic fundamentalists in the mountains of North Africa.

### **To re-teach a thing its beauty**

When St. Francis of Assisi listened to God in his own time, the words he heard were: ‘rebuild my church which is falling down’. These words are still spoken to each of us today. But I want to bring you another Franciscan gift in a poem I found recently called ‘St Francis and the Sow’ written by the American poet Galway Kinnell. It puts a new slant on Franciscan re-building.

‘...sometimes it is necessary  
to re-teach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow...  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely  
until it flowers again from within, of self blessing;  
as Saint Francis  
put his hand on the creased forehead

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<sup>1</sup> Kung, Hans. 1987 *Why I am still a Christian*. Continuum edition 2005 pp. 80 -82

<sup>2</sup> Cannato, Judy, 2010, *Fields of Compassion: How the New Cosmology is Transforming Spiritual Life*. Sorin Books, Notre Dame, Indiana

of the sow, and told her in words and in touch  
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow  
began remembering all down her thick length  
from the earthen snout all the way...

down through the great broken heart...

the long, perfect loveliness of sow.'

What that sow needed, our church needs now. To be re-taught its beauty in the midst of all the mud... down through its great broken heart... so that it flowers again from within, maybe not so much of self blessing as of the grace of One who has conquered the world and who remains with us until the end of time.

If we hold a mirror up to the church showing its deformation, then all the more must we hold up a mirror showing its beauty.

### **Signs of hope**

We have work to do indeed. But there are plenty of signs of hope. Our church holds the standards by which it judges itself. We saw in his trip to Britain what a good pope we have. We have a Eucharistic Congress next year. There are new shoots appearing like the reorganisation of parishes and dioceses that is quietly underway. There are new Trusts for Catholic schools. There is hope even in the brokenness of what we have been through, the healing surgery it is forcing upon us, maybe even in the Apostolic Visitation we are undergoing. Brokenness is itself a gift as Fr. Martin Tierney understood so well when he said that the Murphy Report was the best thing for the Irish Church since Matt Talbot. There are blessings even in our lostness because unless you get a bit lost every now and then, how can you ever find anything.

The new Church whose shoots I see growing around us is one that serves humanity humbly, that gives of its blessings to anyone who asks, that instead of offering immediate dogmas to someone who knocks on its door will listen first and ask of that person what is the story of your life, where have the seasons of your heart being taking you, and have you heard yet the voice calling you? That's something of the approach we find ourselves taking in the work we do with CEIST and it never ceases to amaze us how spiritually hungry people are. The hungry sheep look up and are not fed as Milton put it. When we are not feeding the hungry sheep it is not only their tragedy but ours.

When people ask me what my job is like, working in 'Faith Development', they presume that in today's climate it must be 'awful'. It surprises them when I say that on the contrary it is a joy and a privilege. That is what it is. And it has been a real joy and a real privilege to be here this evening to talk with you about our faith and about our church.

### **Conclusion**

I end with a quote given to me recently by my old friend Tony Hanna, another one of that committee of keepers and guardian angels in whose keeping I remain a part of this

church. Tony loves to quote St. Augustine's description of the church as 'a harlot' but it is a different quotation that is involved here. It comes from Father Walter Burghardt's book entitled *Tell the Next Generation* where the author says the following of the church we have been talking about all evening:

"In the course of a half century, I have seen more Catholic corruption than you have read of. I have tasted it. I have been reasonably corrupt myself. And yet I joy in this Church - this living, pulsing, sinning people of God, love it with a crucifying passion. Why? For all the Catholic hate, I experience here a community of *love*. For all the institutional idiocy, I find here a tradition of *reason*. For all the individual repressions, I breathe here an air of *freedom*. For all the fear of sex, I discover here the redemption of my *body*. In an age so inhuman, I touch here the tears of *compassion*. In a world so grim and humorless, I share here rich *joy* and *laughter*. In the midst of death I hear here an incomparable stress on *life*. For all the apparent absence of God, I sense here the real presence of *Christ*."

**End**