

Reform of the Church

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Brian Lennon, s.j.

Introduction

Any conversation about reform of the Church needs to start with the vision which gives the Church its purpose. Francis, early in his new role as Bishop of Rome, quite correctly stressed this. There is no point in laying down Church rules unless the loving basis from which these are meant to come is first made clear. The task of the Church is simply to make visible the love of God. That love, for Christian, starts and ends with the Trinity.

1. Vision

As Christians we come from and are called back into a community of Three. A Christian is never first an individual, but always a member of a people, a people who belong in the bosom of God. Too often we avoid thinking about the Trinity. We have no adequate images to do so, despite the centuries-old tradition of Patrick and the shamrock. Yet, to know Christ, to be caught up in his life, to be orientated towards him, is to be caught up in the Three Persons.

Jesus was consumed by love for his Father/Mother and in John 15 Jesus tells us 'I love you just as the Father loves me' (9). In the Last Discourse he pours out the love that he has for the Father/Mother and that the Father/Mother has for the Son. 'Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. It is into this love, this relationship, that he invites his followers.

We babble about what this might mean. We can use our interpersonal relationships as analogies: they give us glimmers of what an utterly other-directed love might be. Children – sometimes – draw us out of our own self-absorption into other-care. We can gaze at the beauty of nature, or listen to the mystery of music or poetry, or be caught up in dance. We can read theological treatises. All these can lead us beyond the banality of the visible. But none can prepare us for the experience of finally meeting God face to face.

The Church, then, comes from relationship, it is founded on relationship and it is called to be relationship.

That is a tall order for any group of human beings.

The task gets more difficult when we look at Christ's own life. His teaching was important but it is secondary. First we have to love Christ. To do that we have to enter into his life, to look for glimpses of his life from the inside. There are two aspects of his life that seem especially relevant to the Church today.

First, like any thinking person, Our Lord was a searcher. Many find this impossible to accept: Christ is divine, so he must have known all things. While this is true, it is also true that as a human being Christ obviously did *not* know all things. He had to search, to learn, to be taught, like everyone else. It is worth contemplating the Son of God sitting in his high chair as a baby and throwing his bread on the ground. Then Mary or Joseph, or one of the brothers or sisters picks it up and puts it back. And then he throws it down again. And then... well you can guess the rest.

One of my favourite New Testament passages is the story of the Canaanite woman in Mt 15: her daughter is suffering from terrible illness. She wants her healed. She screams. She goes on screaming. She makes a show of herself and becomes a terrible nuisance to the disciples. So finally they go to Jesus and ask him to deal with her. Stop her screaming! And what does he do? He refuses, and on the apparently reasonable grounds that he is Jewish: 'I have been sent only to those lost sheep the people of Israel'. She is 'not one of ours' – a favourite phrase of ours in Northern Ireland. But the woman persists. And in doing so she grovels. She begs. 'Even the dogs eat the leftovers from their master's table'. And Jesus is converted: he changes his mind. He learns that his mission is not only to his own people, but to outsiders. He pre-figures the great struggle of the early Church in moving from an all-Jewish community to one that included the Gentiles. He is converted through dialogue, through confrontation. And he is converted through dialogue with a woman.

The Incarnation scandalises so many because they cannot accept that God has entered truly into our world, that he therefore entered into a specific culture – one that was highly patriarchal, that he inherited the biases and limitations of that culture, and that he therefore had to be drawn beyond these biases. In this instance he grew because he was challenged by this woman.

Jesus was tied down by the set of ideas and values that surrounded him. But he was a learner. And his learning, as for all of us, came through a community, through encounter with others.

Secondly Christ was filled with doubts. The temptations show him struggling: turn these stones into bread; be a magician. A temptation is something inside us, which disturbs us. We are drawn towards conflicting paths. Jesus struggled with this temptation and rejected it. But the temptation ended only for a period. We can see it again in his angry response to Peter's assurance that his disciples will never allow him to be crucified. Peter is only trying to be helpful but he gets a mouthful for his trouble: 'Get behind me Satan'. The anger suggests that Peter has touched the button of doubt in Jesus: is there not some way to fulfil the Father's mission than heading towards Jerusalem (Lk 9:51), towards the Cross? The question comes up again in his collapse in Gethsemane: 'Take this chalice from my lips'.

The death of Christ was the final test of his searching and doubting. It is difficult for us now to be amazed, as we should be, at the decision of the early Christians to celebrate this death. The Cross was the last thing that Jesus wanted. Instead he wanted people to accept his teaching, to turn to the Father, to love others, to create a society of respect, to overcome hypocrisy, to banish the cruelty of domineering and abusive religion. The Cross was the failure of all these hopes.

The Cross showed the absence, the silence, of the Father/Mother: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' Where was the God who was going to rescue him? As a Jew Jesus prayed the psalms. So often they are a cry for help, and end with a note of wonder and gratitude that Yahweh has rescued the people. But on the cross there was no rescue.

Modern rationalism would not have helped Our Lord at that point, any more than it can help any of us when we will face the same question as we come to die ourselves. But his Jewish faith gave him no obvious answer either. The cross was the end. Because we tie the cross and the resurrection together we can minimise or overlook the finality of Christ's death. Death for Christ, as for each of us is an ending. There is no obvious coming back from it. Corpses speak no words. All hopes and dreams die with the disintegration of the body and the mind.

Or so it seemed.

The early followers of Christ rejected the cross as the end. In the first place this was because they saw the Cross as Christ's ultimate faithfulness to his Father/Mother. The suffering, his abandonment by his friends, the silence, the failure: in the face of all this Christ still trusted in his Father/Mother. He trusted in life. He trusted in the ultimate power of love over evil. He faced the question that each of us face individually and as members of communities: can we say Yes to life, not as we would like it to be, but as it is? Can we say Yes to life in the face of the death of our loved ones? Can we say Yes to it in the face of our own sins, and the communal evil of humankind, from the Holocaust to child abuse, to hypocrisy?

The second reason why those early Jewish followers of Christ did not see the cross as the end was because they experienced Christ as being alive. They did not see him rising from the dead. But they experienced him. They told stories to try to tell what this experience was like. It was one that changed their lives. It turned them from terrified women and men on the run to people ecstatic with joy and hope, a joy and hope focused on their experience of Christ.

All of this is relevant to the purpose of the Church. The Church exists to bring this mystery of the Three Persons in One, and the life of Christ to life today. And we are called to do this as a community. From the very beginning his followers came together as a community. When they did they celebrated the Eucharist.

The Eucharist was the way that they remembered and gave thanks for the gift they had been given. In it they were caught up into the life of Christ. They were made one with the journey of Christ from the Father/Mother into the flesh of the world, into a life of searching and doubt, through the cross, to ultimate trust, to the resurrection, and finally back into the life of the Three.

The purpose of that journey was to redeem the world, to bring the world back into relationship with God. On the Cross Christ gave himself to the Father/Mother. But that giving included not only himself but also all for whom he died, namely every human being. The Father/Mother loves all human beings as God's own children. If we are – for the most part – incapable of giving up our own children, much less is the Father/Mother capable of doing so, since God is at least as good a lover as we are. In the Eucharist we are caught up in the once-for-all gift of Christ to the Father/Mother, together with every other person in the world. We are brought into the inner life and love of the Three.

Any gift as wonderful as this comes with a heavy responsibility: in this instance to make the relationships of the Three Persons visible in our own world. It makes no sense to be made part of the Three – to be divinized as some of the early Christian theologians taught – and then to abuse, ignore, or overlook God's children, who also are part of this journey into the life of Three.

This is partly why Rowan Williams sees the Eucharist as the place above all where the prayer of Christ becomes our prayer 'and the life of Christ becomes our life in the sacramental tokens of his body and blood ... A church which is serious about unity with Christ, is a church which is devoted to growing and nourishing that life of prayer which is Christ's life in us'. In the Eucharist the prayer of Christ becomes our prayer: the visible life of the church should therefore teach us to pray in a way that roots us in Christ's own prayer day by day. That prayer should come from, and lead back to a living of life in the world in a way that models the inner life of the Three.

2. History

As a Church we fail often this mission, and do so disastrously. So often the Church has led the powers of darkness, destruction and division. The abuse crisis is the most recent and one of the most awful examples. But it is not new. Child abuse has existed in every society in history. What is new is that the vast majority of people now no longer accept it. Secondly, the degree to which Roman Catholic Church leaders covered it up has been and is being exposed.

To discover that our Church had so much abuse in it, and that the protection of the Church was so often put before the suffering of children, that was a hard lesson for many of us to learn, and we were slow, outrageously slow to respond to it.

We can think of other outrages in history, the Crusades, the barbaric wars of religion, the continuing discrimination against women, the abuse of theologians, the repression of thinking, the isolation of lay people, the imposition of teaching that was wrong, inappropriate guilt laid on so many shoulders.

That history has understandably tempted many of us away from the Roman Catholic Church. Other Churches can seem very attractive, and many have found new life in them. Dropping out also has its attractions. Those who do so will often keep their faith and come back to Church for births, marriages or death. But how will their children or grandchildren find faith? Secularism is also tempting: to be free at last from all the superstition, the authoritarianism, the cultural blindness, the patriarchy. Free to be rational human beings who accept that this life is at it is, that we got here through evolution, that there is nothing beyond this life, and that we need to be mature enough to give up projection and wish fulfilment.

In the end those of us who stay can only do so because we can still experience God within our own Church: corruption certainly pains God, but it does not block the possibility of God's presence. But if we stay we have a deep responsibility to work for reform.

3. The new bishop of Rome and reform

When I heard that they had appointed a Jesuit as bishop of Rome, I was astonished. I had often thought that Carlo Maria Martini, former archbishop of Milan would have made a great pope, but also that this would never happen since he was a Jesuit. So when Bergoglio appeared and I learnt that he was a Jesuit, I assumed that he must be right of Attila the Hun. How wrong I was.

His interview to Jesuit journals published in September 2013 is astonishing.

First, he calls for a re-balancing between the centre and the local church. 'Re-balancing' is now a code word within the RC church. For the bishop of Rome to use that term is a commitment to reduce the power of the curia and increase the power of local Churches.

Secondly, Francis from the very beginning has referred to himself as the Bishop of Rome, not the Pope, or Supreme Pastor, or any of other majestic title. He speaks Italian often on public occasions. He does not greet people in a range of different languages at the Angelus. All this is to emphasise that his primacy is rooted in being a bishop of one diocese.

Thirdly, he has emphasised collegiality, a major theme of Vatican II, which locates authority in bishops world-wide being connected with each other, working together with the bishop of Rome, and also bringing laity into their decision-making processes.

Fourthly, he has focused first on the message of joy that Christ's life, his love for his Father/Mother, his death and resurrection offer to the world. Only within that context can we

talk of specific, very important moral issues such as abortion. Further there are a range of moral issues which are important – a comment that does not reduce the importance of abortion.

Fifthly he has recognised the place of baptised Christians in a way no recent bishop of Rome has done: ‘all the faithful, considered as a whole, are infallible in matters of belief, and the people display this ... this infallibility in believing, through a supernatural sense of the faith of all the people walking together.’ The infallibility in question is not that of the bishop of Rome, but of all the faithful.

Sixthly, while he has not changed Church teaching on gay rights he has at least emphasised Christian charity: if people are gay, who is he to sit in judgment on them? The Church does not want to condemn them.

Seventhly he wants to see women play a role in the exercise of authority in the Church: ‘The feminine genius is needed wherever we make important decisions. The challenge today is this: to think about the specific place of women also in those places where the authority of the church is exercised for various areas of the church.’

In a later interview with *Repubblica Cultura* he condemns proselytism and again brings out the joy of being loved by God: ‘Follow me [says Jesus] and you will find the Father and you will all be his children and he will take delight in you. Agape, the love of each one of us for the other, from the closest to the furthest, is in fact the only way that Jesus has given us to find the way of salvation and of the Beatitudes.’

He agrees that Heads of the Church have often been narcissists, flattered and thrilled by their courtiers. The court is the leprosy of the papacy.’ The major fault of the Curia is that it is Vatican-centric: This ‘view neglects the world around us. I do not share this view and I’ll do everything I can to change it. The Church is or should go back to being a community of God’s people, and priests, pastors and bishops who have the care of souls, are at the service of the people of God.’

4. Changes needed in the Church

So what are the most strategic changes that we need in the Church?

a. Cardinals

Bishop Francis has highlighting the importance of Cardinals by appointing seven of them to act as his special advisors. But Cardinals dress and sometimes act as if they are courtiers, something Francis obviously opposes. So why not limit the term of office of cardinals to 5 or 10 years, with no special titles for ex-Cardinals? Doing this would emphasise the role of service rather than honour.

Secondly, lift the ban on lay people becoming cardinals. Obviously this would also allow the appointment of women, so the majority of cardinals should be female. The argument for this is simple: if God has banned women for all time from ordination (although it is not clear to me where or when she did this), this is one way in which women can play a serious role in the government of the Church.

b. College of bishops

Mary McAleese has pointed out accurately that there the college of bishops is simply a concept. An institution needs a structure, regular meetings, a constitution, a staff. None of these exist. They need to be set up.

c. Strengthen child protection internationally

We in Ireland know the destructiveness of clerical abuse. Patriarchy, leading to clericalism and deference, was at the root of the abuse crisis. There are patriarchal societies all around the world in many of which our Church is a trusted and powerful institution. These are surely dangerous places for children. The Vatican imposed sanctions on those it saw as erring theologians. How come there is so little talk of it doing so in the area of abuse? This is not only about stopping abusers. It is also about putting in place effective protocols, systems and oversight.

d. Abolish canon 129

Canon 129 excludes lay people from any significant decision making in the Church. This is against the models that we see in the New Testament. Delete it.

e. Ordain married people

The Eucharist is at the centre of Church life. In a few years many will be deprived of it because of the lack of priests. Yet there is a ready supply of vocations to the priesthood among married people willing and able to serve. Ordain them, and invite back others who have left the active ministry. It is nonsense to say that married people cannot be priests when the Church already has married clergy in Eastern Rite Churches in full union with Rome, and in the new Ordinariate.

f. Require all dioceses to hold regular synods and empower lay people in these

This is something that Francis has already pointed to. It is simply restoring Church practice to what it was in the first millennium.

These suggestions are easy to make, but no one should underestimate the difficulty in implementing them, both because of the opposition they would generate and because of the organisational complexity involved. Further, institutional change will not of itself find the language, symbols and myths to communicate the mystery of the Trinity in today's culture of virtual relationships, of gross national product, of advertised human beings, of external appearance, of clerics reverting to late 19th century Roman clerical dress. People are often given

garbage instead of intimations of mystery. Yet changes like these would help the Church to breathe again because the people of God (which includes all clergy as well as laity) would be involved in discernment.

5. How can change come about?

Many seem to hope that Francis on his own can change things. Paradoxically since the Church is currently a monarchy, it needs a monarch to turn it into a democracy. He is unlikely to be around for more than 6-8 years. He could leave in place structures that will have become so strong when he leaves that they cannot be undone. Certainly if he appoints a significant number of women as cardinals it would be difficult for his successor to undo that.

Just as Francis himself was converted from his previous views, so also this can happen with leaders elsewhere. One example of this was in the 1950s. The Church's attitudes to Jewish people was then terribly negative. But Gertrud Luckner, a Holocaust survivor, brought together a group of lay people in Frankfurt. Together with Jacques Maritain they lobbied for change. For years they got nowhere. Eventually the Vatican sent Augustin Bea to investigate them. The outcome was surprising: he was converted by their witness. Then John XXIII came to the papacy, made Bea a cardinal and president of the Council for Promoting Christian Unity. He played a major role in Vatican II's change of the Church's view to one which sees the Jews as our elder brothers and sisters in the faith.

So much change is also needed at our local level in Ireland. Most lay Church members are involved in secular organisations. In these they would not tolerate the abuse of human rights, the sexism, the bullying that goes on in the Church. (The process to examine theologians in the Church is an instance of bullying). So how would they go about changing issues such as these in a secular organisation? They need to respond in the same way within the Church. Change is unlikely to happen through polite meetings. There is a need for forceful demands, the use of law, the withholding of collections, pressure through contacts in Rome, and other means.

Conclusion

I started with a vision of the task of the Church and I have descended into the humdrum of structural change. I make no apology for doing so. Visions need organisations to implement them. In the case of the Church the current structures are literally a scandal: they block people from seeing the vision. Commentators are correct who prioritise prayer and vision over structures. But they are wrong if they think that we can communicate our vision in structures immersed in values contrary to the vision.

I believe change will come. No doubt those changes will in turn raise their own problems. As those of you in other Churches know well, lay people and especially women can be so awkward! But I say, bring them on, so that the Body of Christ can breathe and celebrate and dance.