

What is the Spirit saying to the Churches?

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‘What is the Spirit saying to the churches’ is an oft repeated expression in the Book of Revelation. After 2000 years of Christianity, it is a very apt question for us today. At this early stage of the third millennium our Church establishments are in crisis. Could it be that the life and teaching, death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ is no longer life-giving in the 21st century? I doubt it. While Jesus does not walk this earth in person, he has sent us his Spirit to be with us for all time. We have seen throughout the centuries that people have recognised and responded to this Spirit. Prophets, saints and mystics have always been with us, some well known, and others not so. This selfsame Spirit of God is still with us today, I sense, in a very powerful way.

We have seen and continue to see God’s Spirit at work. When Pope John XXIII announced the Second Vatican Council, he invited people to pray for a new Pentecost. I remember reciting that specially commissioned prayer at school and wondering what a new outpouring of the Spirit would look like. The Catholic Church got a glimpse of this new Pentecost during the years of the Council. Great signs of God’s Spirit were present in the Council’s desire to embrace the ‘signs of the times’, up-date to the 20th century, and to be respectful to other Christians and different religions. Over the years since then barriers of mistrust and division among Christians of different denominations continue to give way to mutual respect and understanding. We trust in God’s Spirit to help us to go forward in peace, love and friendship. What the Spirit brings is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control.¹ Peoples lives are transformed as they learn to surrender to the Spirit.

My own strong sense is that God’s Spirit is calling for a radical change in the Catholic Church. Many deeply committed Christians are calling for reform in our Church, especially regarding its leadership. The horror of the abuse scandals and cover-up of same is turning out to be a catalyst for reform. Anger, dismay, hurt and betrayal at the revelation of these scandals is being transformed into a strong and prophetic energy calling for inclusive and transparent leadership. Clear, open, two-way communication is needed between the hierarchy and the faithful. Respectful listening and honest dialogue would be part of the way forward. If the wisdom of religious and laity was brought to bear on its decision-making procedures, the Church would be more in tune with the people of our time. The gifts of nature and grace of the ‘people of God’ are a mine of transforming energy waiting to be tapped. This powerful energy could bring about change if appropriate channels of communication were put in place.

Many people recognise the election of Pope Francis as the work of the Spirit. The Pope is asking us not to tame or domesticate God’s Spirit. ‘The Holy Spirit is God’s strength’ and

¹ Galatians 5 v 22

'pushes the Church to move forward'.² Wouldn't it be a wonderful grace if the halls and rooms of the Vatican were places where the most serious occupation of the people there was discerning how the Spirit was working in their personal lives as well as in the wider Church. When Pope Francis greeted the people immediately after his election, he called himself the 'Bishop of Rome'. This is part of his title and responsibility. Perhaps these words are also prophetic? Bede Griffiths, an English Benedictine monk, said that the Pope of that time 'would be the last of the 'big' Popes. After him, the Church would decentralise'.³ People, like Bede Griffiths, often have a prophetic sense of where things are going without knowing the details of the way forward. The time has come for the situation to develop further. In his Apostolic Exhortation 'Evangelii Gaudium', Pope Francis states 'it is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of the local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound 'decentralisation'⁴. Could collegiality come to the point where each country could exercise its own authority especially in the area of choosing its own leaders? The Pope has made a great symbolic gesture by moving away from the Vatican Papal Palace. What if he were to live in St John Lateran's, the See of the Bishop of Rome. Such a move would give space for Catholic Christianity to be more inculturated in the various countries of the world. There has been a precedence for a more 'localised' Christianity in the Catholic Church.

A Christianity that had a very loose link with Rome did exist. It not only existed but flourished. I am referring to our own Irish history when Christianity blossomed between the 5th and 12th centuries. It was a community-based/monastic Christianity rather than hierarchical. Yes, there were bishops. They often resided in the monasteries where the Abbot or Abbess exercised leadership. The great monasteries of Clonmacnoise, Kildare, Glendalough and Bangor are well documented and today their ruined churches, splendid round towers and sculptured high crosses give powerful witness to this graced period of our history. Many of our towns and cities had ancient monasteries as their foundation. Ruined small monastic sites are to be found throughout the country and on many islands off shore. Illuminated Gospel manuscripts, Annals and Liturgical books are preserved in libraries and engraved sacred vessels in museums. It was not until the 12th century that the diocesan system was introduced. This happened after the Synod of Rath Breasail in 1111.

Women played a strong role in establishing Christianity in Ireland. Brigid's monastery in Kildare became quite a powerful Centre and was a renowned place of hospitality. Ita established churches throughout Munster. Many towns and villages still bear her name, e.g. Kilmeaden, Co. Waterford, as well as Kileedy and Kilmeedy in Co. Limerick ('Kil' translates as 'church', the 'm(o)' is 'my', and 'ead'/'eed' is 'Ita', the Irish for Ita, thus 'the church of my Ita'). The daughters of Leinin, (a 6th century chief) set up their own church at Killiney, which name still honours that fact, Cill Inion Leinin, the church of the daughters of Leinin. Other women, Gobnet, Attracta, Moninne and Samthann evangelised the west, east, north and

² Homily of Pope Francis, 16th April 2013.

³ William Johnston Arise my Love Orbis Books 2000 p 70.

⁴ Evangelii Gaudium The Joy of the Gospel Veritas 2013 p 16

south of the country. Here, as in the Acts of the Apostles, we see good examples of women's leadership. What has happened to women in our Church? At present women are taking their rightful place in society, exercising their leadership roles as Presidents, Prime Ministers etc. My own intuition is that the Spirit is inviting the Church to break through what could be called 'gender apartheid'.

It is possible that Ireland has something to offer the universal Church. In the early days of Christianity here, countless Irish monks went forth as 'peregrini Christi' i.e 'pilgrims for Christ'. Columbanus, Gall, (St Gallen in Switzerland evolved from St Gall and the Abbey is an UNESCO World Heritage site), Killian, Fursa, and hundreds of other monks helped to re-establish Christianity throughout Europe. In the 20th century, our missionaries have gone worldwide bringing the Good News of the Gospel and improving the lives of people throughout Africa and in many parts of Asia and South America. Towards the end of the 20th century, the Church in Ireland faced its shadow side. The Church had to own its vulnerability. A new, simpler, humbler, Church is emerging, maybe one that in the strength of the Spirit has something to offer once again to the wider Church. There is a movement among the people of Ireland for Church reform. Organisations like, 'The Association of Catholic Priests', 'the Association of Catholics of Ireland', 'We are Church, Ireland' and countless other smaller groups are calling for this reform. Would Pope Francis be interested in meeting a group of discerning Irish pilgrims?

Now, is the time for all of us to take our responsibility to be finely tuned to how the Spirit of God is breathing in our midst, in our times and circumstances. Discerning the presence of the Holy Spirit in our own lives, and in the Churches too, is a deep concern for many of us. I would really like to see this discernment being taken very seriously at leadership levels of our Churches. Prayerful, reflective listening to what is going on around us and what is happening deep within our own spirit is a key to discerning how the Spirit is working. Personal meditation, especially in relation to the Word of God in Scripture is a powerful means of being finely tuned to God's Spirit. We notice our inner movements of feelings, thoughts, attractions and repulsions. In sharing our personal inner world with a spiritual director or anam chara (soul friend), we become more aware of how the Spirit is leading us in our lives. As this process deepens, we begin to live from a discerning place. As groups and communities enter into this experience, we allow the Spirit to move more freely in our midst.

What a gift of grace it would be if this discerning the presence of the God's Spirit among us could be the norm in our Christian Churches.