

## The Church as a Fragmented Mirror:

What sort of unity are we called to in a Global Church facing tensions within and without?

The day it appeared my good friend Fr Peter Fleetwood sent me a short very positive review of *Querida Amazonia*. I downloaded the whole text and read it late that evening. And what a beautiful experience that was, initially.

Francis starts with the ancient religious idea of the dream which we have just explored at Christmas with Joseph and Zechariah, the one who goes with the dream and the one who initially struggles against it. I remember my own experience of fasting and walking barefoot and sleepless on St Patrick's purgatory in Lough Derg in the West of Ireland. And then the second night sleeping a dream washed sleep the like of which I have never had since, and awakening to a renewed creation and a profound sense of the presence of God and the unique holiness of the everyday saints I walked among.

Francis starts with the power of inspirational dreams. And then four lyrical chapters follow, as much poetry as prose, full of the reality of the context, cultural, religious, political and economic of the Amazonian region. A wonderful critical vision of its importance to the whole planet, of the sanctity of its diverse peoples, its fauna and flora, its creatures, of the river and the land. Wonderful, my heart lifted. And then came the final two sections on ministry and the lack of priests and lack of access for the Christians of Amazonia to the Eucharist and the commending of the leading role of women, yet with no opening up to ordained ministry. These sections seemed written in a different voice, a different spirit and whether or not of Francis, certainly not the spirit of the Synod which I had followed carefully.

Since some very clever commentaries have emerged, Austin Ivereigh's being one of the most subtle but also Christopher Lamb in this week's Tablet. They and others point to the clear direction of the Synod, of its final document and of Francis telling people to go back to the Final Document it to find the way forward.. He directs the Church to the voice of the Synod rather than to any lone papal or theological or clerical elite voice. He is redressing a centralising imbalance in the western Church of centuries and especially

since Papal Infallibility in Vatican 1. But that is not how it is read by his many opponents in the Vatican and among various Bishops Conferences around the world. They rejoice that the clerical mind-set and voice, the patriarchal and elitist male-centred frame of reference, remains firmly in place.

Any contemporary models of Church have to deal with, what the French Dominican theologian Christian Duquoc, in an essay in 1993<sup>1</sup>, calls, the Church as “*a broken mirror*” which reflects the Christ she exists to bear witness to in fragments. No one model or even collection of models (Cf. Avery Dulles “Models of the Church” (revised edition) 1988) can encapsulate the mystery. Indeed the new Testament itself is like a series of mirrors whose images complement one another but never to the point of one dominating the others.

Indeed where one reflection has dominated e.g. the Johannine *Logos/Word* thematic in the third, fourth and fifth centuries Greek Fathers there has been an imbalance within the theology that followed (cf. the work of Von Balthasar, Danielou, de Lubac, Congar *et al.* to open up again the other images within the scriptures and tradition. What Duquoc and the ecumenical movement have realised is that if this is true of the New Testament communities (cf. Schillebeeckx’s monumental *Christ* in 1980) it is also true of the body of Christ in its multiple polycentric forms in our world. We are body of Christ not the head hence the Council’s use of the People of God as a metaphor that could balance too strong an identification of Church and Christ. The Pentecostal spirit of the risen Christ, like the Kingdom which Jesus lived to bring into being, are bigger concepts, capable of being partially realised and mirrored but not fully encapsulated in some definable political reality.

These images self-consciously point to the graced, given, called nature of the community of disciples. The Church in its various forms is a called reality. It comprises the variety of communities that have responded to God’s call in

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<sup>1</sup> Duquoc, C. “Jesus Christus, Mittelpunkt des Europa von Morgen,” in Huenermann, P. ed., (1993), *Das Neue Europa, Herausforderung fur Kirche und Theologie* (QD 144), Frieburg i. Br., p.105f

Christ and the Spirit. And for all the abiding fragility and at times bloody-minded stubbornness of its leaders and members, like the Israel of old, it remains still the Spirit-endowed body that actively remembers the living God in history and time, and in the murkiness and mixed motives of contemporary politics and economics, within which it is variously entangled like the wheat and the weeds till the Lord comes.

In referring to the Church as a shattered mirror, I am trying to hold together two very clear realities of the body of Christ, firstly that it has a role to reflect in the world that is to continue- the reconciling work of Christ in creation; reconciling men and women to one another and to God and healing the brokenness of creation that is the result of human selfishness and sin. Just as Israel was called to be a sign to the nations of a state so organised that at its heart were the widows, the strangers/foreigners/migrants and the orphans, all the powerless ones.

So the Church is meant to be alongside men and women in their hopes and fears pointing a way forward to a more truly humanising way. But secondly it must always do this in the particular historical, social and political contexts in which the disciples of Christ find themselves in this, and every, age. Contexts that are extraordinarily diverse such that Church ministry and practice can never be totally uniform if it is to touch such diversity at the depth of the brokenness of which it needs healing. Cf. Schillebeeckx in *The Christ* on Paul's multiple approaches to expressing salvation in Christ to communities who needed very different types of healing and redemption..

The Church, one, holy, catholic, and apostolic, is indeed one thing but it is not, nor ever has been, uniform and the attempt to make it such is a forlorn phantasy. This became evident in the early weeks of the Second Vatican Council when the Bishops sitting next to men of their own age, but not culture, began, in between the sessions, to share the reality of church life in Chicago and Calcutta, London and Lima, Dublin and Durban and then to make it clear to the curial offices that had prepared the early documents that their theology, starting from first scholastic principles, did not engage with

the reality of the challenge of the Gospel of Jesus to the local Christian cultures from which these pastors came. You know the consequence, the prepared documents were thrown out and re-written with the help of scholars from around the world who were in touch with the zeitgeist.

The three months turned into three years but what the Council did was start a process of ever widening consultation and collaboration, and what we see in the work of Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* , in *Laudato Si* in *Amoris in Laetitia* in the first four sections of *Querida Amazonia* is the spirit of the Council, of consultation and collaboration, being pushed forward to engage with our world today which is not the late industrial western led world of the 1960's where we thought Atheism and secularisation were the great problems. What we have discovered since is how our sustained exclusive focus on the Church itself is a distraction from the potential destruction of the planet itself and the increasing destruction and loss of the revelation of God in the very creation which we have so cavalierly abused. Scientists calculate we are losing over 100 species a day as opposed to one to five a year fifty years ago.

At the same time there is a struggle going on internally between different understandings of Church and indeed of what it is to be Catholic which leads to the fragmentation of the vision that first Israel, and then the community of Christ, was meant to offer to the world. To caricature this somewhat we are influenced by two different but related uses of the word Catholic:

**Two Underlying Models of "Catholic" and their Implications for Christian Life Today**

*Kath'holou* –throughout the world  
Ignatius, *Smyrna* 8:2. Focus on the world  
– grace is building on nature.  
Cf. Gerard Manley Hopkins "God's  
Grandeur".

*Catholica* -fullness of faith  
Focus on Church and *regula fidei*. In  
Augustine's *City of God* the World is in  
crisis and saved by entering the Church.

**Whichever Context is primary makes a Difference**

The World has its own integrity, needs to  
be entered with compassion & sympathy.  
We don't bring Christ but discover *seeds  
of the Word*. Humans as co-creators Gen.  
1:27-28. Recognise sin but build *shalom*  
& pursue justice. God is present both in  
Revelation and signs of the times.

But the Church can purify and elevate  
culture. Emphasis on holiness and truth.  
Apocalyptic-eschatological reading of the  
signs of the times. Church can light up  
crisis. Points to the heavenly city - the  
already and the not yet.

**Different responses to Pluralism and Modernity**

Acknowledges and engages difference as  
enrichment. Modernity seen as a  
development of Christianity, to be  
critically shaped and nurtured cf.  
*Gaudium et Spes*.

God is one and creation reflects the  
divine unity. Modernity is ambivalent,  
possibly a heresy cf. Milbank. *Gaudium et  
Spes* fails to give an adequate account of  
fallen humanity (Emeritus Pope Benedict)  
or of the truth it desperately needs .

**Identity within Difference**

Identities are constructed and  
provisional. Have to be able to recognise  
multiple identification if to live in peace.  
The church as *pilgrim people* building  
*kingdom* in new circs along the way.

Identity involves "*seeing the form*"(von  
Balthasar's *Glory*). Identity is found  
inward, so we go out to engage a world  
that cannot discern its own reality/self.  
Reflects Dionysius (6<sup>th</sup> C.) and the *exitus*  
and *reditus* of neo-platonism. Nurtured  
in old liturgy and some of the Church's  
spiritual traditions.

**Transformation: Personal and Structural**

Aquinas: Grace builds on nature; it's  
distinct but not separate or external.  
Transformation also involves institutions,  
and societies and structures. Includes  
church structures not just individuals.

Dialectic of sin and grace, focuses on the  
person, and their repentance and  
holiness cf. Augustine and the Pelagians.  
The Church is not sinful, only some of its  
individual members.

**Practices**

The construction of the story of God's  
working in the world revealing the  
"seeds" of the Word and Spirit Lk 4:18f.  
A saving history of redeeming and  
liberating grace.

We look out from the grace reflected in  
the liturgy to bring others in. The  
strength is its own interiority. Liturgy  
repeated reveals the divine economy in  
the world.

*(With acknowledgement to an unpublished paper of Robert Schreiter, Catholic Theological Union, Chicago, given at  
Heythrop College Pastoral theology Conference, November 2007.)*

Both these umbrella understandings are in the Church and, to a degree, are necessary to the church's functioning and flourishing but when they become fixed and when we gather exclusively under one or the other then we move into another sort of fragmentation, which has haunted the Western religious traditions, we enter idolatry.

At the heart of our current sinful condition is the loss of the mystery of God and the loss of the uniquely valuable and pluriform creation the creator entrusted to us. Entrusted to the creatures created in God's relational image and likeness, you and me. Because we have lost our true focus, in the God whom we image, the likeness that our life is meant to have has found alternative images to latch on to, and we have become what we crave and possess. We create ourselves in the likeness of the things we own or aspire to. This is the very definition of idolatry.

We lose consciousness of the unique image of God within us, which each of us, every human person, has, the capacity to reflect and manifest the divine uniquely and which remains in us to be awoken. This image when no longer actively rooted in a healthy living relationship to God settles for lesser likenesses and it is these we bring to each other and the world around us and so reality fragments and the unity and purpose of creation cannot emerge and evolve in its God given vocation. Instead finding other images to draw into itself, it becomes isolated. And so the human person called to link the Divine and the living creation, to enable each to be realised in each other, instead focuses on idols that block that flow of energy. And everything becomes fragmented, disjointed, out of order. But as Porgy and Bess sings it "*.. it ain't necessarily so!*"

In meditating on Christ, the human face of God, we can rediscover the true image within us and become re-aligned on him. And as that happens the creative Spirit is enabled once again to flow through us to each other and to the wider creation and from the creation back through us to the creative healing source of all life. We are not the *Lords of Creation*, we are called to be the *connectors*, we enable the flow of the life of creative grace or we

disrupt, block and destroy it. We are still learning to see this emerging story and embrace our part in it.

So what is always at stake is our relationship with God, and our vision of each other, and of the divine image in all human life, and how we will choose together to relate to this holy creation which the creator saw and saw it as good.

To this end the Stories we inhabit effect/define the way we live. They answer the basic question “Why?” And they...

- give life meaning and purpose
- enable us to make necessary if difficult changes
- deal with our negative individualistic, greedy and competitive natures.
- point the way to a viable future

So we need a story that reflects the sum of our human knowledge and understanding and guides our action to meet today’s needs.

“Tell me your image of God and I will tell you your politics!” Says the late Marcus Borg. Among the many models of God we find in our fractured mirror are the following two....

God as transcendent Patriarch – source of hierarchy and orthodoxy and righteousness, supporting a politics of authority, domination, and power as control, legitimising imperial corporations and governments, just look at the magnificent apses in Ravenna, San Vitale with Christ the *pantocrator*...

But then there is also God as universal Spirit – manifest throughout creation – sustaining co-operation, compassion and sharing and the models of politics and economics that might yet flow from this.

Both are in the Scriptures.....

But the actual story that underpins much of our present world goes something more like:-

Making money is life's purpose. , shopping a civic duty, markets our moral focus, financial institutions our temples, economists the priests who absolve us from personal and collective sins against life....

Pope Francis rightly calls this idolatry. This story of Sacred Money and Markets is false and is leading to environmental devastation, economic desperation, social alienation, and moral and political corruption.

But in the face of the devastating effects of this corrupt story another is emerging....a living economy for a living earth. But time is running out.....However, as a sign of hope, you are modeling ways of relating in the Synodal process that are more widely transferable and can really make a difference.

The Synodal process emphasises service, which Jesus models as the only acceptable authority, even to the cross "*It shall not be so among you: but whoever would be great among you must be your servant ..*" Mth 20:25-27 "*it shall not be so among you.*" But of course it has been. I give talks all over the country and I wish I had a fiver for every time I've heard "*..but Father...or the Bishop won't let us do that, or won't talk to us etc...*" Rather sad and pathetic that those created in the image and likeness of God and restored again in Baptism should ever be so craven.

Synodality involves, as you have been rediscovering, all the people walking the way together. No exclusion. Again the example is from the table fellowship of Jesus who ate with sinners and the unacceptable. The world Jesus inhabited thought sin was contagious. Spend time with sinners and you might catch their contagion like a certain virus. Jesus lived a different model, he enacted the contagion of holiness. It works. Think of those who have most influenced you for the good. You caught it from them.

But of course the synodal process requires a profound mutual listening. It understands that each one of us is a fragment of that mirror that is the

Church. Each of us has a piece to share, to contribute, that perhaps we alone can bring to the table. I experienced this once in a Synod in the diocese of Northampton when Frank Thomas was the Bishop. Three years of careful listening, wasting nothing, drawing to a week of bringing things together. All the groups young and old, radical and fearful, practical and mystical, men and women, religious and clerics, ordained and not, all were involved. All anointed with the Spirit of their baptism. All their good ideas and suggestions were affirmed and a wonderful final celebration faced the future with hope. But Bishop Frank got cancer and died in 6 months. The authorities delayed appointing anyone for a further 12 months and then appointed a kindly but tired old man and the energy of the Synod was dissipated. The new bishop had not heard all the voices and it came to nothing. There is still great anger even today, 25 years later, that a process so blessed could be so frustrated by the inability of the institution to listen, and celebrate, adapt and implement.

Liverpool I'm sure will not make such mistakes. You will have all the structures that enable and enhance and facilitate the Synodal process. Effective Councils, local, parish and diocesan, pastoral and financial, to continue the process of listening and discerning and reporting back receiving and convalidating the Spirit's work among you so as to remain a Spirit indwelt body. Such Councils need to be broadly structured, with men and women, ordained and non-ordained, young and old members.

In a diocese like Liverpool the process has the possibility, because of your history, of being truly ecumenical. It is the one Lord we serve, and the one Spirit we are trying to listen to, wherever we find ourselves.

And as a whole diocese, journeying together, your synodal process has a civil and civic dimension. Like the Israel of old which was to be a sign to the nations, so too a diocesan community this big, that sets out to walk among their neighbours and serve the common good, in justice and truth, is a sign and an encouragement. *"Where two or three are gathered together in my*

*name, I am in their midst*" Mt 18:20. Your meetings are hallowed with the promise of the Risen Lord's living presence.

But ideas such as these need to be regularly rehearsed, re-visioned, and renewed. Above all at the heart of the remembering that is the Eucharist where we approach the mystery of the cosmic and universal Creator who cannot be defined, limited, or controlled and is still capable of the new. "*Blessed are those who are called to his supper*" is a reference to all those who have gone before us and all those who are yet to come. Precisely not "*blessed are we*", this little holy huddle of the just. In every Eucharist we are one with the victims of history who are, as Walter Benjamin reminds us, the makers of history. And our remembering of them alongside our remembering of the dangerous memory of the risen but wounded Jesus, is the continuation of their redemption in history in our refusal to allow their memory to be annihilated.<sup>2</sup>(CF. St Oscar Romero's remembering each week of all those who had "disappeared") And so within the Eucharist we weave new bonds of solidarity across time and place.

Within the Eucharist we try to grasp the ever changing moment in a wider horizon of shared significant memories. The exodus of the Hebrew migrant workers from oppression in Egypt to freedom in a new land, the words of the prophets renaming the memory and rekindling its vision of freedom for all, but especially the powerless - the widow, the orphan, and the stranger; the life and dying and rising of Jesus spelling out that freedom in one human life and the coming of the Spirit to enable the struggle for life, for freedom and dignity to continue around our Globe. How we remember all this reflects our understanding of life's meaning. Remember George Orwell's terrifying vision of the future in *1984*? The slogan of the Party which controls everyone and everything is:

*"Who controls the past controls the future:*

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, W. (1969) *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, NY: Schocken Books, p.255

*who controls the present controls the past.”<sup>3</sup>*

With no developed sense of memory we are helpless before the forces, political, economic and religious, that would control and dominate us and our suffering world. With no developed sense of memory we lose any sense of solidarity and of the possibilities of collective social transformation for ourselves, for those who come after us, but also for the victims who went before. But the synodal process you have set out on involves a profound remembering! Link that to the weekly remembering of the liberative God of the twelve tribes of nobodies, of the dead and risen Jesus, and of the enlivening Spirit and what wonderful things will be revealed in the fractured mirror of the Church that is Liverpool!

Further reading:

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<sup>3</sup> Orwell, G. (1983) *Nineteen Eighty-four*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, p.34

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