

KILLALOE: DEC 12, 2011 – GATHERING OF PRIESTS

1. DISCERNMENT:

I have been asked to say a few words about discernment, since this is often spoken of in terms of the process to find a way forward in the church. I will stick to a few salient points, building on what Bishop Kieron has already outlined.

First, discernment conjures up the belief that what we do in planning for the future is not only our own work, but is, primarily, the work of God, of God's Holy Spirit. Today's first reading at Mass from Numbers (24) alerts us to this: Israel, a group, like the church – seeking God's counsel, which we know is personified by the Holy Spirit, in matters of leadership. Similarly, as referred to in our opening prayer, we are like Samuel, listening, trying to discern what is the true voice of God; like Mary, hoping to say yes. No amount of strategic planning and management speak is of any use unless grounded in this belief. At the same time, according to the law of the Incarnation, we do also need keen minds, open hearts, strategic planning and management speak, expert facilitation – calling on God is never to be used as an excuse for not using human means. But discernment means that we use these means in the context of prayer, the context of the bigger picture of our relationship with God. And we believe in the Holy Spirit whose role it is to lead us to the fullness of truth, who is the principle of development within the Church, who allows us to remember and appropriate the person and message of Jesus in our contemporary context (Jn 14/Acts).

Secondly, an important part of discernment will be trying to ask for freedom in ourselves and in our group to approach issues without bias, without prejudice, open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. You do not have to like the idea of this or any other meeting, members of a group do not even have to like one another – what is called for is a basic openness, honesty, integrity, and ability to trust that others, even when they disagree with us, are speaking sincerely (St Ignatius, who was not naïve, could yet recommend: 'it is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false' - *Spiritual Exercises*, n. 22). Perhaps for us priests, who know one another so well, this will mean not writing anything off just because it's said by Father X, and we all know that he would say that, wouldn't he?! Isaiah, 43, 18-19 is apt: 'Remember not the former things nor consider the things of old: behold I am doing a new thing...' We need to open our hearts and minds to the new action that the Holy Spirit is bringing about in the Diocese of Killaloe, in service of the whole Church and of God's Kingdom, at this historic time for us all.

Thirdly, the actual process of discernment will involve the kind of thinking, feeling, listening, discussing that is proper to all human decision-making, all in this context of prayer. Ignatius speaks about this in terms of consolation and desolation, and I will speak about this again later today. However, suffice to say for the moment that one can expect in any discernment moments of conflict, discouragement, weariness as well as moments of peace, renewed hope and energy. It is a great blessing to have a skilled facilitator like Anne to guide us through these moments.

Fourthly, building on what Kieron said, I suppose one should distinguish between discernment as a kind of preparatory brain-storming and then discernment as actual decision-making around precise options all of

which may be good, the actual drawing up of a plan. Lonergan speaks about as ascending process of questioning our experience, coming to some kind of understanding, making judgements, out of which come decisions, which then need to be confirmed, may need to be revised. We are probably at the earlier stages of this process today, preparing the ground, even if there may well of course be decisions to be made, like what is the next step, do we meet with laity in the Spring, and so on. This earlier stage is important, not a waste of time: we will not make good decisions unless we come to some kind of shared grasp of the relevant questions, a shared understanding of our situation (reading the 'signs of the times'), including the issue of the appropriate authority of the principal actors (laity, priests, religious, bishop, Irish Episcopal conference, other Episcopal conferences, Pope), all in the context of the bigger picture of our relationship with God. At the same time, rightly, there will be pressure not simply to be part of yet another listening exercise and talking shop that goes nowhere: Ignatius again says that love is shown in deeds rather than words.

Finally, just to share a personal experience and judgement: I was part of a delegation that went to meet Cardinal O'Malley and his team of visitors to the Dublin Archdiocese. At that meeting the Cardinal agreed with the prediction that we had a small window of opportunity of perhaps 5-10 years left in Ireland to address the urgent crisis that afflicts our church, unless it is to become a small minority group in Irish society without cultural relevance. We all, most of us at a much younger age, heard a call and our hearts burned within us: well, even if it's all a bit late and we're a bit tired, it looks like the Holy spirit is calling again – what about it?!!!

2. WHAT HEARD FROM LAITY: SOME IMPRESSIONS FROM THE NOV 27TH LISTENING DAY WITH LAITY

1. A generality: openness (people spoke personally), honesty, critical and sometimes angry, but great life, energy, courage, willingness to hang in, with difficulty, if it can help in bringing about change. A naming of our reality (Leonard Cleary) and its urgency.
2. A certain ambivalence, not about change, but about the shape of it, corresponding to different groups that were more radical, centrist, and conservative. So, for example: 'if only there were more priests again', 'need of clerical leadership' v. 'this is time for laity to step forward, real change needed and they can bring it about'. Little sense that this ambivalence and these different groups were an obstacle to discussion – the commonality was more striking.
3. There were considerably more women than men present: a number noted the irony of this, in the context of the church's treatment of women. When some of the same points about the disconnect between the church as institution and people's experience on the ground were put to a delegation of bishops, one of the bishops, acting as devil's advocate, asked if this was not a D4 agenda – there was nothing I have heard in D4 circles that wasn't also said in the Bunratty Castle Hotel on Nov 27th!
4. The need for clustering seemed to be taken for granted, whatever about the painful details. What was at heart of the discussion was meaningful co-responsibility of laity, including decision-making- the dawning realisation that the church is theirs/ours in that context, no longer a matter of 'helping father do his work', 'father saying mass', the priest saying 'will you do something for me' – more a change of mind-set; the social justice agenda; concern about young people (few enough young people there on Nov 27th); need of formation

5. A great love of their priests, their local priests; and a sense that priests may be finding it hard to 'let go'.
6. A lot of personal suffering – disappointment at clerical child sexual abuse and its mishandling; inability to hand on faith to children, young adults, to answer their questions re credibility of church; sense of need of more formation and yet wondering would it be used, respected.
7. A questioning whether anything would come from this, a request to have it communicated about, for information about a next step.

A concluding observation, related to the notion of 'the discernment of spirits': I had been present at a formal church occasion, sponsored by the Episcopal Conference, in Ballymascanlon the day before I participated in the Killaloe event with the laity. There were many good contributions and contributors at the Ballymac event, and yet I left feeling discouraged: it reminded me of what one of the participants at Killaloe said about the New Missal – it's like putting up new curtains in a house when the roof is falling in! The Killaloe event was addressing real questions and that alone gives energy.

3. THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION ON WHAT I HAVE HEARD: GOSPEL: MT 21, 23-27

'What authority have you for acting like this'?

It's interesting how in the run-up to Christmas the Church makes few concessions to any sentimentality in its choice of readings to prepare us for the birth of baby Jesus. The austere example of John the Baptist in the early part of Advent, and now this contentious discussion about the disputed question of authority.

At one level Jesus hadn't a leg to stand on: he wasn't one of the tribe of Levi, he didn't have formal authority to teach in the Temple, the chief priests and elders were right. And yet: something new was happening here before their eyes, formal authority had to give way to the 'authority of experience' of the person and teaching of Jesus, a person whose very being and mission always pointed beyond himself to his Father and the Spirit he would send. And, to be fair to the religious and civic leaders involved, they recognized this, their certainty, if not their hostility, was challenged: 'So their reply to Jesus was: we do not know'.

We live in times when trust has been lost in many of the established authorities of our State, including (as From Hope to Crisis said) the authorities of the Catholic Church. What to do? Let me approach it in a roundabout way, taking on board some of the comments of today.

1. It is good to be reminded of Christ's promise to be with his Church until the end of time, to recall that the Church has gone through other very dark periods and survived, to caution against a striving after perfectionism that is unreal ('the wheat and tares grow together'), to note that in an age of deep secularisation our relationship with Jesus Christ (faith, prayer) needs to be at the heart of our response. But we need also to recognize the urgency of our present situation, the reality that, as Bishop Donal Murray put it: We have no guarantees that the Catholic faith in Ireland will not decline to virtual extinction as it did in other regions, like North Africa, where it was once vibrant' (Let Love Speak, Dublin: Veritas, 158) – that, in other words, Christ's promise

does not necessarily apply to Ireland, to Killaloe, unless we cooperate with his Holy Spirit. This cooperation will always have prayer and faith at the centre, but should also involve the renewal of structure and institution: it is a curiously disembodied spirituality which could imagine that ecclesial renewal is possible without attention to organizational matters.

2: A spirituality of courage/anger

I was speaking recently with a senior priest within the Archdiocese of Dublin and he told me that some priests were finding the present situation so difficult, not just because of the demoralisation due to the sexual abuse scandal, but also due to the fact that they found it really hard to work in teams (whether with other priests or with laity – so that clustering and parish/pastoral councils were a real challenge), that often laity didn't come forward, and that when they did it was often laity of a very far-right kind who then succeeded in dominating the agenda of the parish council and of the parish itself.

I want to counterpoint that kind of honest observation – and some similar ones from today - with that further note about consolation and desolation that I spoke about in the context of our previous consideration of discernment and our experience of it today. In his rules for what he calls the 'discernment of spirits' (Sp Ex, 315) St Ignatius notes that in the case of those who generally are on a good path in life 'it is characteristic of the evil spirit to harass (them) with anxiety, with sadness, to raise obstacles backed by fallacious reasonings that disturb the soul...it is characteristic of the good spirit, however, to give courage and strength, consolations, tears, inspirations and peace. This he does by making all easy, by removing obstacles so that the soul goes forward in doing good'. Analogously we may apply what Ignatius says of the individual to our situation as church, as church in Killaloe: we are ageing as priests, we have all kinds of real difficulties and resistances, but we also have great resources and, above all, the presence of the Holy Spirit to make all things easy. Facing real questions, naming our reality, not being ostrich-like...it is difficult of course, but a relief, and we thank God that we are on this path. And so, while there is no way around the natural frustration and resistance that may accompany meetings like this, we need to accept with humility the 'messiness' of the Incarnational process that is involved and to celebrate the steps forward that we can make – like, for example, the decision to carry on the process at parish/cluster level, and to establish a theology group to accompany it.

2. A theological vision of the local church

I was struck by what Ann said earlier by how some problems are best solved by the imagination rather than by more technical means. Eugene Duffy gives the theological background to clustering (Furrow, May/June 2010) – the image of God as Trinity, the notion of church as communion, a more inclusive theology of priesthood, collegiality, a spirituality of collaboration. He notes the gains in pooling resources, whether they be in terms of finances of scale or in terms of trained lay liturgists/catechists, the kind of pooling which has emerged as a plus in our discussions today. This is all in a context where F. X. O'Connell (Doc and Life, Nov 2011) notes that 23% of parishes world-wide do not have a resident priest (very similar to the 22% mentioned by Bishop Kieron at one point in his address to us about the situation in the diocese here). Duffy (and Elizabeth Cotter- see Grouping Parishes for Mission, 2011) outline the different possibilities in canon law for how parishes may be grouped, including leadership of a local church by

laypersons –(who already of course may preach (but not homilize), preside over Sunday service in the absence of a priest, solemnize marriages, administer baptisms and conduct funerals –see O’Connell,22))- under the duty of oversight by a priest (Canon 517,2- see Grouping Parishes, especially 27-33).

The details will be important and will require the kind of shared decision-making involving Bishop Kieran, you all and the lay people you serve. Of equal importance, however, is the vision which inspires the change. This is not just an administrative necessity – though it is altogether very human and ironic that such changes, already envisioned by Vatican II- should only now come about because of our crisis, our shortage of priests- but is good theology. What Duffy is outlining is a return to the early church’s intuition that what Jesus prescribed was not very detailed, that church leadership and structure should correspond to the particular pastoral need and situation. Furthermore, what is central is the local community, the multitude of charisms and roles which are needed to make it a eucharistic community of service, among them being the priest who is called on to exercise a leadership role collegially.

In the mid to longer term future this will surely mean a more radical look at the theology of priesthood in terms of the requirements of celibacy, the ontologically distinct understanding of priesthood which so easily elides into an exclusivity and elitism, and a re-examination of the reasons given for the inability to admit female candidates for ordination. But in the meantime, lest we use our frustration at more global issues as a pretext for delaying our own local role, we need to focus on what is immediately possible within the authority given to us. This will mean thinking in terms of the needs of local Christian/catholic communities, the roles necessary to fulfil them, and seeing priesthood as central rather than at the apex. The vision, then, is one where, as scriptural scholar Anthony Campbell puts it, the Holy Spirit is calling for ‘a move from a focus on elite ministerial or priestly figures to a wider involvement of the community of religious faith in the living of the faith’ (138 – The Whisper of Spirit). The vision, in short, is the Church as People of God, with a communion of minds and hearts which means a rebalancing of present roles and ways of acting. Priests at the moment often feel over-burdened and fear that change is just one more burden on top of others. However, with a bit of the imagination that Ann spoke of, might not this change to the community as carrier of responsibility offer real hope to priests of relief from the oppression of shouldering it all on their own?

This means a letting-go, a ceding of power, a willingness to let mistakes be made. It is like the vulnerability of God in creating an evolutionary world characterized by an order that includes randomness and waste, human error and sin; in coming to this world as a baby, a human being, patiently trying to woo us to love from egoism and narcissism, suffering the consequences of rejection but telling the disappointed disciples that ‘did you not know that it had to be so’? And so, whatever way power and authority will be exercised in future in the church, whether at parish, diocesan or universal level, it should always be exercised in this spirit of kenosis, of emptying. This does not mean that tough decisions are not taken or that one tries to please everyone. It does mean, however, that the dignity and proper roles of all are respected. Mt’s gospel shows us that the question of authority is perennially disputed: we need however to take cognizance that the ‘heavenly authority’ is characterized by this basic respect.

3. Back to the issue of authority: different levels

A lot can already be done at local and diocesan levels. I mean, with good faith, lay people can effectively be included in decision making, good formation can be given, more roles may be identified, there can be a real sense of the People of God emerging. And this kind of emerging reality can lead to new laws and new theological developments at a wider level.

Because, of course, if push comes to shove, if a particular priest is not sympathetic to this agenda, present church law (canon 129) is quite restrictive on the decision-making powers of laity, which remain to a large extent discretionary and are quite out of sync with the rhetoric of 'co-responsibility'. Furthermore, as articulated on Nov 27th, there is a whole raft of widely shared concerns by laity (the role of women; the situation of divorced and remarrieds; the questioning of teaching on sexuality, including contraception and the official position on homosexuality; the sense of distance and even alienation from the Irish Episcopal Conference and the Vatican itself; the need to look at a new theology of priesthood already adverted to) which this Diocese on its own cannot address.

And so there may be a need to distinguish between the immediate and more local, and that which is also important but more global. There are stirrings elsewhere in the Irish church (Down and Connor/Ossory/Armagh/Kerry/Tuam and so on); and abroad in places like Belgium, Austria, Germany, Australia. Since we are a communion, since we have a shared responsibility for our universal church, can we also begin to think in terms of creating networks, beyond Killaloe itself? An obvious way for priests to do this is by active membership of the Association of Catholic Priests.

Going back to the gospel reading, it would be wise to avoid any facile equation of the bishops, the pope, we priests with the priests and elders of the people, and to say Jesus was one of the laity. There is a danger of course that this will happen among those of us who are reform-minded, that babies will be thrown out with bath-water, that we will move towards a democratic and ultimately anarchic populism that has lost its sense of authority as gift from God, of the institutional as a gift to strengthen and order the charismatic. What we are searching for is not self-will in that sense, is not the addressing of present needs and pastoral situations that simply ignores the past, but rather what Ladislav Orsy calls 'better balances without damaging vital forces' (12).

And yet – and this is where the example of Jesus in disturbing the establishment does matter – it is clear from all the turmoil in our church, that the present balance is not correct. Brendan Leahy calls for a great culture of synodality in our church if it is to be a true communion; it is clear that lay people have not been allowed the effective co-responsibility which the pope has called for; the Irish Episcopal Conference, whatever about individual bishops, does not have an effective working culture and does not offer inspiring leadership; and the papacy, as John-Paul II indicated in 1995, needs a new form to make it a truly effective sign of service and unity. In this context it is important to privilege the voice of the laity, the *sensus fidelium*, not in a way that simply accedes to anything they say (they say many different things!), but in a way which engages in an adult conversation about the way forward and which is grateful for the kind of different perspective and energy that can release us from paralysis and hopelessness. In this sense, and

quite in keeping with Scripture and Vatican II, we do need a more democratic culture in our church. In particular, before addressing particular requests or demands, it is important to set up the kind of conversation which allows adults to share their faith experience – and out of this conversation there will be an opportunity for those who have questions about current church teaching and practice to ask them, and those who are charged with teaching authoritatively (which also means attending to the ‘sensus fidelium’) will have an opportunity to explain the rationale of the status quo and the possibilities for development that arise.

4. CONCLUSION:

It would be wonderful if we could all (radical, centrist, conservative) approach this together, it would be good if, at the very least, we did not block what needs to be done. Not all of us will have the energy or talent for change, but can we at least delegate, step back a bit, allow the energy of laity to find real expression? One thinks of Gamaliel in Acts 5: ‘let them alone...for if this plan or this undertaking is of men, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them. You might even be found opposing God!’

Scriptural scholars note the initial success of the public ministry of Jesus – might he have hoped that he would be accepted by the people, the crowds, even the authorities? It didn’t turn out that way. To be human, as Jesus was/is, is to experience the future as unknown, as mystery, caught up, if one is a believer, in that greater mystery of God. And because the mystery of God is one of inexhaustibly patient love, it means that we can trust that, if like Jesus, we allow ourselves to be led by the Spirit we will find the right way forward. And so there is no complete blue-print, no magic formula. But this is not to say that we shouldn’t celebrate the steps we have already taken –by coming here- and plan the next one, trusting in a process which is Spirit led. Put out into the deep, was what Jesus said, quoted by John-Paul II; do not be afraid! None of us is too old or beyond God’s grace (a thousand years if like a day – now is the time!) not be to be able to have that experience of the two disciples on the way to Emmaus; did not our hearts burn within us! And we are asked to approach our journey with the urgency which the moment demands, but with the patience and sure hope of God who does not overcome resistance by violence but by the constancy of commitment and love.

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Some further reading:

Anthony F. Campbell, S.J., *The Whisper of Spirit, A Believable God Today*, Michigan/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2008

Brian Lennon, S.J., *Can I Stay in the Catholic Church?*, Dublin: Columba, 2012 – out shortly after Christmas

Gerry O’Hanlon, *A New Vision for the Catholic Church – A View from Ireland*, Dublin: Veritas, 2011

Ladislav Orsy, *Receiving the Council*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009