

In Brokenness we awaken.

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As fallout continues from the Murphy Report and anger at Church leadership takes its course, the residual feeling you meet in people is one of brokenness. It appears that the picture we cherished of ourselves as the caring church of a warm hearted people - with a heroic history of service to the vulnerable and legendary partisanship to the plight of underdogs - has been shattered. With that shattering has disappeared part of our belief in ourselves. For many in Ireland the struggle to calculate who we really are now and where we go from here is fettered to sticky questions about who we were in the past and how in the name of heaven we ever got to where we went.

While the questions apply across the whole range of our nation's psyche and institutions, a fact not adequately recognised yet, there are more uncomfortable questions for Church than for anyone else. We believe the Church to be Jesus' legacy to the world, the bearer of his vision of love, the sacramental community whose life of radical loving witnesses to God's love for the world. We are followers, we would have believed, of the one who said it was better to have a mill stone tied around ones neck and cast into a fathomless sea than give scandal to a child.

Betrayal of Jesus has been a motif of the church since its founding, just as betrayal of God was a constant theme in the Hebrew Scriptures where the prophets saw the history of God's relationship with his people as a narrative of infidelity on the part of people. The prophet Hosea characterised Israel as a harlot, a theme that St. Augustine was to take up in relation to the Church a thousand years later. We know that the first pope, the apostle Peter, denied Jesus three times before going out to weep bitterly. The history of the church since has not been short of cause for weeping and the Murphy Report, like the Ryan Report before it, has rubbed our noses in a corporate capacity for infidelity in our own time.

A moment of awakening

People who have suffered will often tell you that in brokenness and breakdown we awaken. As Peter awoke to the realisation of his betrayal, we awaken now. What woke Peter? What changed him? What wrought the shame that led to bitter weeping? Was it a look he got from Jesus, a momentary wordless meeting of eyes? What, you might wonder, was in that look?

When you read the Murphy Report you don't have to read between the lines to be awakened to its import. It's all there, fairly and squarely. But there are many ways of reading between lines. While wading through the chapters I imagined eyes looking out at me between the rows of text. At first I imagined the eyes of abused children looking out in condemnation of the collusion my sixty years of relatively untouched and happy life implies. Then it came to me that the imagined eyes looking out might be the same eyes that looked at Peter, the eyes of a God hopelessly in love with sinful humanity, eyes of brokenness and compassion, of truth and salvation, eyes of charity, the eyes of one who

wrote in the sand and called a halt to the throwing of stones, looking at us now saying 'go, each of you, and sin no more'.

In the eyes of the follower of Christ there has to be something chillingly sacred in the Murphy Report, something of the Holy Spirit at work in the world. We would be foolish to relegate the Holy Spirit to holy places and holy books. Might not that Spirit be most active in the foul rag and bone shop¹ where crooked sinfulness tangles with goodness, truth and beauty, the basement where victories are won for humanity, the unseemly places where the hardest yards are made for the Kingdom of God. The Murphy Report as a sacred text? Why not! If truth and goodness and beauty come from God and have their origin in Him, can we not find divinity and providence in a report which brings home to us the grace of plain truth wedded to implicit standards of goodness and beauty eloquent in absence and betrayal.

Given the twisted dynamics of sinfulness and the turns in the road of God's relationship with his people, it should never surprise us when God writes straight with crooked lines. In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis begins a discussion of holiness in words that echo the Prophet Isaiah:

'Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seek to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of... The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for.'²

The following is one of the ways in which Isaiah envisaged the Lord's hand operating in history:

'For the Lord of hosts has a day against all that is proud and lofty, against all that is lifted up and high; against all the cedars of Lebanon, lofty and lifted up; and against all the oaks of Bashan; against all the high mountains, and against all the lofty hills, against every high tower, and against every fortified wall.'

(Isaiah 2:12-15)

In the aftermath of the Murphy and earlier reports very few Catholics are in any doubt that something needing to be knocked down within our church has begun to topple and that a rebuilding towards what church is intended to be lies ahead of us. In brokenness we awaken. One of the outcomes of the various reports has been the volume of truth spoken to the church in the past months. In the midst of all that has been said in anger and hatred, much has been spoken also in love³ from many quarters including people who although scandalised, bewildered and broken, have as much desire to walk away as to cast their mother out on the street. While a great many lay people have written and spoken

¹ Yeats, W.B. *The Circus Animals' Desertion*

² Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*: Fontana Paperback 1990 edition p.172

³ Ephesians 4:15

passionate criticisms from within a love of church, it was the voice of two priests that drew me most. Writing in Reality magazine in January Fr. Peter McVerry SJ said the following:

‘The Catholic Church in Ireland is in crisis, a crisis of its own making, one that is not going to go away. This crisis goes much deeper than the actions of individual bishops, or even the Vatican. Without root and branch reform, the church, as it currently exists in Ireland, will die – and I will shed no tears. I believe in the church; I have received so much from the church; I believe that the vision of Jesus is vitally important for our time and that the church is the bearer of that vision – but not in its present form.’

In the midst of debilitating chemotherapy Fr. Martin Tierney wrote almost joyfully in *The Irish Catholic* in December that the Murphy Report was the best thing for Irish Catholicism since Matt Talbot.

Gratitude

I have come to the conclusion, and I am not alone in this thought, that the only proper spiritual response to the Murphy Report begins in gratitude: gratitude for the gift of truth given to us all; gratitude for the gift of credibility given to victims and their families; gratitude for the reminder that no one is exempt from the sinfulness and brokenness of the human condition; gratitude for the profound lessons in humility for anyone who wanted to hear, for what Timothy Radcliffe called the demolition of pretensions to glory and grandeur so that the Church may be a place in which we may encounter God and each other more intimately;⁴ gratitude for those crusts of stagnation, unresponsiveness and ecclesial deafness beginning to crack and break; for the renewed chance to build the people of God, to put in place the church dreamed of at the Second Vatican Council, the chance to put absent mothers at the heart of church and give to our lay sisters in Christ a dignity denied for centuries; gratitude for the eyes that look out at you between the lines of text and for the new eyes through which we can now see what we were host to and the protective culture that made all that possible; gratitude for the chance to share in the words spoken centuries ago to St. Francis of Assisi: ‘Go and rebuild my church which you see is falling down’. Gratitude finally for the words of Isaiah (43:19) whose truth is evident before our eyes: See, I am doing something new! Now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?’

The challenge now

If we begin in gratitude we must not rest there. Christianity without ‘metanoia’, that change of heart that leads to a different way of being and acting, may not be Christianity at all! The change of heart has to bear fruit and there are things we must stop doing, things we must start doing and things we must continue doing.

Some have already taken action and left the Church. Some holding on to faith by fingertips have let go. Scandal hurts. Others are looking around, maybe for a last time, searching for eyes that will meet theirs, hoping that those who can say something helpful are not looking at the ground. Women who know that a culture where their absence left

⁴ The Tablet 2 January 2010

children more vulnerable than they otherwise would have been, are wondering if their continued presence in the church offers ongoing collusion with that culture. Many good people, up in arms at the culture of pay, pray and obey are wondering what kind of withdrawal of their money, their prayers and their obedience will bring that kind of church to its knees.

Those of us who commit to stay with church because we still believe in its missioning by Jesus and its divine star in spite of human brokenness, cannot avoid the increasing realisation that faithfulness and the nudging of the Holy Spirit may imply a call to radicalism and stand-up dissent. If you are a Catholic, in the aftermath of what has been done in your name, can you deny any longer the call to find your own voice, to abandon fear and put the ounces of your weight on the line for the Kingdom of God.

How we will be judged

Ecclesiastes tells us that there is a season for everything. We are in a new season in the Church's history and we will be judged by what we did at zero hour when the cold wind blew. In times to come it will be asked of us if we atoned and repented and went out to weep bitterly. It will be asked if we stinted in making up to victims or if on the other hand we used every fibre of our imagination to soften hearts made cold as stone by too long a sacrifice.⁵ It will be asked if we dug deeply into our sinful church's common currency, its sacramental nobody-does-it-better remedy for sinfulness: repentance, forgiveness sought and given, charity, transformation, redemption.

It will be asked if at this time of painful epiphany we set out to re-imagine the Church in Ireland. If together as faithful men and women (a much better typology than laity and clergy) we looked at the spiritual, psychological, social, cultural and theological antecedents that led us to host abuse. It will be asked if we challenged unchristian cultures that had grown in our midst, from Dublin to Rome. It will be asked if we found in our darkest hour the moment to renew our commitment to the service of humanity and to servant leadership of that commitment. It will be asked if we re-ignited the church's passion for the poor, the outcasts, the abused, the silenced, the un-believed. It will be asked if we were radiant in our Christian response, if we lit candles or cursed darkness.

For those of us involved in education, judgement will be made not only on how we addressed our own hearts, but what we said to each other, and what we said to the young. Were we pawned off by those who said the young were taking no heed; or, did we have the wisdom to realise they were watching everything and seeing everything and if they were to see and hear Christ at all in any of this story they had to see and hear Him in us. We will be asked if at the zero hour for the church that was his legacy to us, we mutely allowed the young to be scandalised, and betrayed him yet again. We must be in no doubt that a Christian abandoning of the force-field in which the young find themselves will not serve those young people or serve humanity.

⁵ Yeats, W.B. Easter 1916

A question we need to answer

One telling question that gnaws at our soul in the time we are in is whether the events and responses outlined in what has been reported are damaging to faith. There are perhaps two parts to any answer to that question. Does scandal damage faith? Of course it does. Are there wages to sin? Of course there are. Why else would Jesus have been so hard on those who gave scandal? Scandal spreads darkness. We already mentioned those hanging on by fingertips that have let go. If faith involves what we experience, how we belong, where our search leads us, and what we can say finally that we own⁶, we can see elements in the scandals we have encountered that offer life denying experience, obstacles to belonging, darkness at the end of search and discouraged ownership of the gift of faith.

If you look at it another way, however, the scandals do not affect our faith at all. 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 we know how a religious sense sets the implicit standards we defend and fuels the righteous anger we are experiencing. 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. This is not the end of religion or faith or church. It is rather a challenge to take the call of religion, faith and church much more seriously.

Nothing in the Murphy or Ryan reports undermines our calling as teachers to love our students into wholeness, to foster life to the full in them. It certainly does not undermine our call to notice the ones with far away looks in their eyes, those looking out the windows into space, those waving flags asking to be noticed. It would be a tragedy indeed if we spent our energy fulminating about abuses in the past while oblivious to the suffering of children under our noses.

Remembering who we are

While we are called upon to repent and atone and apologise for so much arising out of what we have come to know about our unfaithfulness to the person and message of Jesus Christ, we are not called upon to apologise for our existence.

The Church is Jesus' legacy to the world, the bearer of his vision of love, the sacramental community whose life of radical loving witnesses to God's love for the world. That

⁶ Westerhoff, John (2000). Will our children have faith? (Rev. and expanded ed.). Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing.

legacy, that vision and that hope were never more needed than now. We are that church. That church has failed and sinned and betrayed its founder. It needs to change its heart and change its head and change the direction in which its feet are pointing. But calling for the Church's destruction is not what is needed.

We are followers of the one who said it was better to have a mill stone tied around ones neck and cast into a fathomless sea than give scandal to a child. In making the Church the safest place on earth for children and in leading the protection of children in society at large, we return to the footsteps of Jesus and the path from which we wandered.

We are followers of one who sat around tables of every sort but turned them over when it was called for. We have left tables unturned, even within the Church, that he would have upturned long ago. When Bishop Jim Moriarty said he resigned because there was a culture he should have challenged, he gave us a salutary homily on Christian action and left us to wonder at the range of cultures each of us colludes in, gender cultures, power cultures, cultures of privilege and exclusion which we are asked to address and overturn if we are to be worthy of the name of Christ.

It goes without saying that if the Church is us, it is not primarily about bishops or the self-obsessed narratives of the moment. It is primarily about women and men making sense of their lives, mothers and fathers raising children in a difficult world, wanting their children and all children to be good and happy and safe, trying to honour marriage vows, to be good neighbours and good citizens, trying to leave the world a better place. These are the people of God, the ones the clergy profess to serve.

The true story of the Church is the story of the Gospel told and re-told everyday in countless Christian homes, parishes and communities across Ireland. It is the story of priests leading their communities in prayer, of doctors healing the sick, of teachers educating children, of the poor finding generosity and compassion. It is the story of parents and children persevering in faith, hope and love. It is the story of God's mercy sought and received, of God's love for men and women revealed in the sacraments.⁷

A final word

One thing we need to remember is that any effort we make to put Christ in a narrow box of our imagining, is doomed to failure. It might not be popular to say at this point in time that the Christ who sat around the table of sinners especially is not only with us in our sinful brokenness, not only with the abused as he has been in their long journey of suffering, not only with the good priests and religious let down by colleagues and leaders, not only with the people in all kinds of places treated with rough justice and an absence of charity, but is also with the abusers whose lives we can scarcely admit to the court of what is human, countering their self-loathing with a love no less complete than what He offers to any of us sinners. That is the Christ whose Gospel subverts our certainties and whose glance illuminates our failure to love, no matter what form that failure takes.

⁷ Gary O'Sullivan The Irish Catholic, December 3, 2009

If our response to the Murphy Report begins in gratitude, grows through repentance and matures in Christian action, the love of God is perhaps the only place to end. Nothing can separate any of us from that love (Romans 8:35). It is the light shining in the darkness. It is the call to wakefulness, repentance and transformation made over and over again. It is the love of one who wrapped himself in our sinfulness and who knocks on the door of every heart waiting for an invitation to enter and lift us up, singly and corporately, out of the sticky mire we came to see more clearly in the winter months we have recently endured.