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Daring to Hope?

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In a recent edition of the *Sunday Times* Martin Jacques wrote an article entitled 'The Erosion of the Establishment' in which he offered an analysis of the British Establishment at the present time and suggested that it is too attached to its past successes to be able to deal with the crisis of modernity. What he had to say could be applied with some modification to the Church and to the Church in Ireland in particular.

The Establishment depended on hierarchy, which in turn survived on the myths and mystiques with which it surrounded itself. However, since the 1960s these myths have been shattered. The social cohesion which supported them has disintegrated. Society has become more fragmented and pluralistic and people have become more self-possessed and individualistic. People *know* more about the institutions of society and *trust* them less. The centre of gravity has shifted from the top to the bottom, from the Establishment to popular culture and the latter sets the tone.

The media too have helped to demythologise hierarchy. They have brought us closer to it and backstage. They have also shown that the members of the hierarchy have the same failings and commit the same indiscretions as the rest of humankind.

A further reason for the decline of hierarchy is its longevity and continuity. Britain has an undisturbed monarchy since 1688. The civil service, the Treasury, the Bank of England, the Foreign Office and the legal system all bear the marks of antiquity. The British Establishment has had remarkable success in the past – its institutions and hierarchies helped to build an Empire which was still a major world force until the end of the Second World War. Since then it has been in decline. Now Britain is simply a medium-sized European power.

1. *Sunday Times*, 16 January 1994.

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The decline was accelerated by Mrs. Thatcher's leadership. She came to power promising to revive the economy and a return to Victorian values. Whatever she did with the economy is has not been to the advantage of the majority and she certainly did not succeed in restoring Victorian values. The fact that she failed to deliver on the promises which she made increased the sense of helplessness and disillusionment with the institutions of society. (Similar parallels have been drawn between Thatcher, Reagan and Pope John Paul II. All three were charismatic leaders, with high media profiles but all equally ineffectual in realising radical reforms. Those whom they led were not really changed in any significant way despite their own determination and commitment to very specific reforming agendas.)

The institutions and hierarchies of British society stood it well in the past. The sense of stability and continuity saved Britain from the worst consequences of the social and political upheavals which overtook Italy, France and Germany since the eighteenth century. These are values which cannot be overlooked or denied. However, Italy, France and Germany seem to have coped better than Britain and have not suffered the same scale of decline. Rather, the upheavals, the wars and the revolutions have all had the effect of unseating the ruling elites and providing new blood, new imagination and energy with which to face the issues thrown up by modern culture. They have made for more adaptable and flexible responses to the issues created by a rapidly changing world. By contrast in Britain at present, the temptation is to look to the past, to get back to basics, to attempt to retrieve old methods and structures as a way of coping with modernity. As a strategy this does not hold out much promise. It smacks more of nostalgia than of creativity.

ECCLESIAL PARALLELS

The parallels between that analysis and the Church as an institution are striking. Much that has been written in the media and in theological literature over the past few years underscores the point. In a recent issue of *The Furrow* (Jan. 1994), Owen O'Sullivan analysed the Church in Ireland along similar lines. His article was entitled 'The Silent Schism'. In it he said, 'the silent schism in the Church is not about doctrine; it is about power . . . it is a conflict between power as dictation and power as dialogue'.³ Joe Dunn's most recent book makes similar points in greater detail.⁴

2. John F. X. Harriott, 'Reflections on Leadership', *The Way*, 29 (October 1989), 4: 296-311.

3. 45 (January, 1994), I:7.

4. *No Lions in the Hierarchy* (Dublin: Columba Press, 1994).

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There is the strong tendency in the Church to centralise power again in Rome, to attempt a return to the pre-Vatican II models of control and leadership by dictate. Such a method will not work in a modern society which is constantly growing in its appreciation of the need for participation by people in the formulation of policies which affect their lives. Reliance on the dictate of any form of hierarchy alone is not a viable option.

There is the added problem that the hierarchy is ageing. The average age of the diocesan bishops in Ireland is about sixty-five years. The average age for parish priests is probably higher. Both groups in positions of leadership were formed in the pre-Vatican II theology with its well-argued certainties and its emphasis on authority. In the early years of their pastoral ministry those now in positions of leadership experienced the acceptance of their own authority in a wide range of situations and were probably reaffirmed in the success of their work by full churches and complying congregations. The desire for such former securities must still surface as an occasional temptation for many of them.

However, the old models, the old myths and mystiques are no longer either convincing or effective for a growing segment of our congregations. Nostalgia for a pre-Vatican II past provides no way forward for our young people, for women and for the growing numbers of people who feel excluded or marginalised. In this country we have had the demythologisation of the hierarchy in the Bishop Casey affair; the cameras have been backstage in the lives of many office holders in the Church and they have shown the weakness and flaws of many of the institutions run by the official Church in the past. Even Angela Macnamara has gone public on what she claims to have seen.⁵ One could list the catalogue of issues which highlight the crisis of the Church in Ireland today. The list is too familiar for it to be necessary.

WHO IS TO BE BLAMED?

At present there is a strong tendency to blame the hierarchy for much that is wrong with the Church in Ireland and indeed in many other parts of the world. There is validity in this only to the extent that either we or the hierarchy think that they can direct the action of God in the world or that they *alone* are responsible for the Church. We need to remember that they serve God and the Word of God in a very important but specific, and at times, limited way.

Amidst the renewal which has been going on in the Church for the past thirty years, one of the most significant points being

5. 'Vocations to the Religious Life' in 'News and Views', *The Furrow*, 45 (January, 1994), 1:54-5.

repeated is the fact that all the baptized have a role and a responsibility for the life and work of the Church.⁶ The Church is no longer seen or thought of simply in terms of the hierarchy alone. All of us belong to the Church, the People of God, the Community of Disciples and so all of us have to shoulder responsibilities for its progress and mission. The *Code of Canon Law* makes the point clearly:

Since they share the Church's mission, all Christ's faithful have the right to promote and support apostolic action by their own initiative, undertaken according to their state and condition.⁷

It is time, rather than bemoan a vanished past, that we involve ourselves wholeheartedly with the present, that we turn again to the virtue of hope and engage in a more critical dialogue with what God did for us in the past and be open to the surprises which await us as they awaited others before us. We need to let the Spirit of God, and not our own instincts for control, have free rein. In this regard the lessons of scripture and our own history of the Church in Ireland may have much to say to us in our present situation. In both cases we meet people who were prepared to engage creatively with God's loving overtures as they were led into a new and exciting future.

HINTS FROM THE SCRIPTURES

As the Hebrews journeyed towards the Promised Land they protested to Moses about their fresh hardships and wanted instead to return to the former securities and certainties of their existence in Egypt. They persisted on their journey, nevertheless, because they realised that their God had always been faithful to their ancestors in the past whenever they were in difficulty. As they sang their songs of liberation on the way, they imaged a new future in which they trusted their God was involved and so survived to prosper in the land promised to Abraham and his descendants.

Centuries later, as they returned from their captivity in Babylon, they hit again on difficult times. Once more, now under the guidance of Ezra and Nehemiah, they called to mind the goodness of God in former times, despite their own weaknesses and sinfulness, and began to image a new future on the basis of their radical trust in this same God who always proved faithful.

6. 'These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ ... sharers in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ' (*Lumen gentium* 31). Cf. also *The Code of Canon Law*, canons 216 and 298. Similarly, *Christifideles /aici* speaks constantly of the special responsibility of the faithful for the mission of the Church.
7. Canon 216.

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In such a spirit of confidence the task of resettlement was accomplished.

The remembrance of God's favours, the recall of God's faithfulness to the covenants, the creative celebration of these in song and story, were important for Israel throughout its history. Indeed it was against such a background of recall and celebration that Jesus shared the Last Supper with his disciples. He took the stories of God's fidelity in the past, together with his own reliance on it, and reinterpreted the crisis of his own imminent death in the light of it. He spoke confidently that, out of the darkness which loomed before him, God would once again act favourably, effecting a new liberation for them and all people. This trust was vindicated in the new life of his resurrection, the new creation affecting all people.

The lesson of the scriptures is that a nostalgia for former securities is not the *locus* for our future liberation or renewal. Rather, they point to the need for a remembrance which is creative. They invite us to tell the stories and sing the songs of God's proven goodness so that our imaginations can be fired, new futures envisaged and the energy for their realization provided, and all because God is constant in love for the people who are God's own.

REMINDERS FROM THE IRISH CHURCH

Various periods of the Church's existence in Ireland tell their own story about hope and creativity. They echo something of the biblical attitude to change and the need for new vision. The early Celtic Church managed to dialogue with the pagan culture and institutions which preceded it, successfully incorporating many of its features into its own celebration of the Christian mysteries. It worked such a successful system of adaptation as to be recommended later by Pope Gregory the Great as a model in the mission to the Anglo-Saxons.

Again through the harshness of the Penal Code, when Catholics were severely disadvantaged socially, economically and religiously, the faith of the majority survived with remarkable vigour. There were no external supports and even the internal laws of the Church were of little help in the circumstances. Instead, a deeply rooted faith in God combined with outstanding courage, flexibility and ingenuity on the part of priests and people enabled the Church to survive, poised to prosper when more favourable circumstances presented themselves. So, when Catholic Emancipation came in 1829, the next fifty years witnessed an amazing revival. The rebuilding of the Church, both spiritually and materially, which took place between 1830

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and 1880, is remarkable by any standards, given the poverty of the people, including the occurrence of the Famine in 1847. Enormous funds were gathered to build churches, convents, schools and hospitals. Again it was a combined effort, on the part of priests and people, all seen to be part of a response to the call of God, whose presence was sensed in all that was happening at that particular point in history.

These few illustrations from our own history may remind us of our current need for flexibility, creativity and the support of various initiatives which may well be capable of moving us forward into a better future. Our ancestors, like the people of Israel earlier, avoided the trap of despair or the false security of resting in familiar institutions.

SIGNS OF A NEW FUTURE

If we take stock today there are many positive indicators at work suggesting the promptings of God's Spirit and perhaps crying out for acknowledgement, encouragement and support. Much of the work that was done in the past in parishes, charitable and educational institutions, has borne fruit. There is still a high regard for education, including religious education, with committed teachers and staff, who continue to offer a service of faith once offered by religious when such was not otherwise available. Similarly, our health and welfare systems have come of age. Those who work in these areas, too, very often do so with a deep sense of vocation and a profound regard for the dignity of the person, including the spiritual dimension.

When one stops to examine what is happening in the life of the Church in this country there is much to give reason for hope. There is still a deeply rooted faith in a majority of the population – if not always expressed in conventional ways. Witness the vast numbers of people around the country, who have taken courses in theology; who attend prayer or Bible groups; who make regular retreats, even in their own homes, very often directed by lay colleagues; who participate in parish liturgy groups and the preparation of young people for the sacraments; who work with various youth groups; who visit hospitals, nursing-homes, people who are house-bound and prisoners; who are members of the St Vincent de Paul Society; who participate in support groups for the bereaved, the separated or divorced; who are involved in CMAC and various aspects of family ministry; who work with people trapped in addictions; who work with women's groups in deprived areas of our cities; who work with travellers; who are involved in various community care activities; who are committed to various organisations working for justice, peace and

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reconciliation at home and abroad. One could also cite the major adaptations made by many congregations of religious men and women to give more effective witness to their commitment to the poor and marginalised (often involving much pain and abandonment of former securities). The list goes on. The gifts and generosity of those on it can be seen as part of the work which is building the Kingdom here and now.

These various initiatives need to be highlighted and celebrated joyfully by all who belong to the Church. In this regard the hierarchy have a very important role in confirming the good work that is being done by so many in the service of God's reign. The presidency of Mary Robinson has shown how important it is to celebrate these various good works and to encourage them. Her visits to Somalia, to Warrington, West Belfast, small inner-city initiatives for renewal and to hundreds of rural development projects have done much to highlight the importance of small local efforts which may otherwise not receive much attention or recognition. Such recognition and celebration promotes further enthusiasm and goodwill.

CONCLUSION

The temptation for the Church in Ireland today, especially for its leadership at times, may be to succumb to the fascination of its success in the recent past, when it had a controlling influence in education, health care and other areas of social policy and when the authoritative word of priest or bishop carried significant weight. Such a temptation is not unlike that attributed to the British Establishment by Martin Jacques, an option in which he sees little future. The lesson of our biblical history and our Irish experience is that we must look forward, relying on the power of God to build a new future with us, provided we are prepared to take risks, to be imaginative and courageous, willing to seize the novel opportunities which are constantly being offered to us. There are plenty of them in evidence at the moment awaiting exploration and celebration.