

# Rediscovering Our Catholicism

— *the Wood and the Trees*

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Séamus O'Connell

Clichés and caricatures are part of our way of coping with reality. The summary and perspective they offer can provide a handle for new situations and experiences we encounter. They work precisely because they capture a key dimension of a reality. As a consequence, they are reductive and of necessity are both true and untrue. In the crisis in which the Catholic Church in Ireland finds itself, we risk taking refuge in clichés and in caricatures of our faith. When we lose track of our faith we risk missing the wood for the trees. When we lose track of our faith, we risk replacing the Bread of Life by consecrated hosts, replacing repentance by confession, prayer by piety, theology by apologetics, and history by nostalgia.

Part of this confusion arises because we all, from time to time, lose sight of the realities at the heart of our faith in its Catholic expression. There are deep realities at the heart of how Catholics see the world, follow Christ and respond to what God has done in him.

#### THE ABSENCE OF A THEOLOGICAL APPROACH

Amazingly, in our reflection and debate about the crisis in Irish Catholicism, there is a singular lack of theological reflection. Maybe this is because of our deep-seated neglect of seeking to understand our faith. The last two centuries have seen us imprint Catholicism on the physical landscape of Ireland and spread 'the faith' across the globe. However, we have been better at building and spreading than we have been at seeking to understand what it was that we were so zealously seeking to enshrine in our new churches, chapels, convents, hospitals, missions, schools and sodalities. There certainly was more than the planting of our particular ethnic identity; however, as a people we have never been particularly concerned about trying to understand our faith in a way that is more than the episodic. In other words, *fides quaerens*

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*intellectum* ('faith seeking understanding' is St Anselm's definition of theology) has not really figured in the life of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Theology is about as important in Irish Catholicism as is an iOS6 for users of the iPhone!<sup>1</sup> For good reason we leave iOS6 to the experts; the same might apply to theology to Irish Catholicism: important but not important for us.

## REVELATION AND IRISH CATHOLICISM

Though usually below the horizon, the most important document of the Second Vatican Council and the one with most far-reaching consequences for our self-understanding as Catholics is *Dei Verbum*, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. Far from simply turning our gaze to heaven, *Dei Verbum* asks believers to see the world in which we live and move in a new light. Its second paragraph reads as follows:

Through this revelation [i.e., through Christ and in the Holy Spirit] ... the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to people as friends (see Exod 33:11; John 15:14-15) and lives among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship (*societas*) with himself.<sup>2</sup>

Here is wood we often miss for the trees: Catholics believe that God speaks to people as friends. Put another way, according to the Catholic Church, God's fundamental stance towards us is friendship. Granted, we do not always preach this or live it; but it does define us. It is also foundational for huge swathes of Christianity across the globe ... but that does not make it any less defining for Catholicism.

God is on our side. Authentic Catholicism believes God is for us (see Rom 8:31). This foundational truth is frequently lost from our reflection, discourse and debate. Maybe it is so foundational that we cannot see it, but surely the renewal of the Church is permitting this fundamental truth to be heard and felt. The challenge for those of us who preach is to keep this God before us. If faith comes through hearing (see Rom 10:7), we could do worse in the Year of Faith.

Added to this, the invisible God is not only on our side, but

1. iOS is the operating system for the Apple iPhone. It is the computer programme which enables it to work

2. *Hac itaque revelatione Deus invisibilis (cf. Col 1,15; 1 Tim 1,17) ex abundantia caritatis suae homines tamquam amicos alloquitur (cf. Ex 33,11; Io 15,14-15) et cum eis conversatur (cf. Bar 3,38), ut eos ad societatem Secum invitet in eamque suscipiat. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum), §2*

dwells among people – not only Catholics or Christians, but all people. We have grossly misinterpreted this and in two ways.

First, we have tended to see being the People of God as over and against other peoples – thus, if we're the People of God, then others (Muslims, Hindus, even Jews, and certainly unbelievers) are not!<sup>3</sup>

Second, we have tended to interpret God's presence among us in a very individualistic way: that God is with me as opposed to God being within us.<sup>4</sup>

## SCHEMA REJECTED

That may be difficult for us to imagine today, but it is essential that we engage with these realities. The long journey of *Dei Verbum* bears witness to this. Like all Council documents, it did not appear out of thin air. What we now have is the result of a long and difficult journey that began during the preparatory commission for the Council in 1960 and which came to a head on the Council floor with the rejection of the draft document (or *schema*) with the title *De Fontibus Revelationis* (on the sources of revelation) just days after its introduction on Nov 14, 1962. This rejection of the *schema*, *De Fontibus Revelationis*, by a 60% to 40% majority on November 20, 1962, caused such a furore among the Council Fathers that on the very next day, November 21, the Pope requested that discussion be halted 'and the *schema* ... sent for revision to an as yet unappointed commission.'<sup>5</sup>

Striking is the speed of the *schema's* rejection. There were two principal reasons for this: first, the dissatisfaction of a significant

3. This also happens in a biblical key: the popular sense of the New Covenant implies that God has effectively cast the so-called 'Old' Covenant to one side. In our reflection, preaching and imagining, we frequently imply that the New Covenant has surpassed the Old. This betrays little awareness of God's faithfulness to himself and to his promises (see Romans 9:4-5, a text taken up by Vatican II in *Nostrae Aetate* §4). Throwing out the Covenant makes the same sort of sense as throwing out one's wedding album upon receiving the christening album of one's first child!

4. This happens here too in a biblical key: we never tire of citing Jesus' saying that 'the Kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17:21) as an indicator of the interiority of the Kingdom. This, however, is to misinterpret the Lukan Jesus. In Luke 17:21, Jesus says, 'the Kingdom of God is among ye (in Greek, *entos hymôn*); the Kingdom is a reality within the community of believers. We could say that the Kingdom is the inner life of the Church.

5. Karim Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II: A Redaction History of the Schema De Fontibus Revelationis, 1960-1962* (Brill's Series in Church History 41; Leiden: Brill, 2010), 272.

number of theologians with the circulated draft;<sup>6</sup> and second, the genuine empowerment felt by the Bishops who had assembled for the Council. For Karim Schelkens, church historian at the Catholic University of Leuven,

While John XXIII's conciliar opening address, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia*, was particularly influential in [determining the opening atmosphere of the Council], a sense of liberation on the part of the world Church from the Holy Office also predominated. An episode like the postponement of the election of conciliar commissions on October 13, 1962, bears clear witness to this reality. The first days of the Council also facilitated concrete contact and the exchange of ideas, observations, etc., between bishops and theologians.<sup>7</sup>

Again, there is more than the release of pent up energy. Unlike Jonah's plant (see Jonah 4:10), the Council Fathers began to express 'something that had been long desired and awaited during the decades after World War I and especially since things had begun to open with Pope John's announcement of the Council.'<sup>8</sup> The vast majority of Bishops began to express maybe what they could not yet name, but would later call in the opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes*,

The joys and the hopes, the sorrows and the anxieties of the people of this age (*hominum huius temporis*), especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the followers of Christ. (§1)

It is vital to name this. Giuseppe Ruggieri, in his observations on the emerging theological awareness of the Council Fathers, interprets it as follows:

[T]he period from November 14 to December 8 [1962], and especially the week of November 14–21, which was devoted to discussion of the *schema* on the sources of revelation, represented a turning point that was decisive for the future of the

6. Among those who strongly opposed the *schema* was the 35-year old Joseph Ratzinger who already, on October 15 – four weeks before *De Fontibus* made its appearance on the Council floor – presented a well-worked draft of the first chapter of a new *schema* to Otto Semmelroth, Karl Rahner and Bishop Hermann Volk of Mainz. See Semmelroth's diary, cited in Schelkens, 266, n.6.

7. Schelkens, *Catholic Theology of Revelation on the Eve of Vatican II*, 273.

8. Ruggieri, 'First Doctrinal Clash,' 232.

Council and therefore for the future of the Catholic Church itself: the turn from [a] Church ... which was essentially hostile to modernity and in this respect the heir of the nineteenth-century restoration, to a Church that is a friend to all human beings, even children of modern society, its culture and its history.<sup>9</sup>

#### A NEW UNDERSTANDING

The aftershocks of two World Wars, the horrors of the Holocaust and the realization of what we were capable of doing to ourselves, but also a new understanding of what lay at the heart of human life, a rediscovery of the Liturgy (in the liturgical movement) and of the Bible (in the biblical movement), and the presence of vocal non-Western bishops, brought the Council Fathers to recognise that there was another way of perceiving the world and God. Its unsung qualities notwithstanding, it was clear that the proposed *schema* did not adequately engage with reality as the bishops now perceived it. In this, their pastoral charism came to the fore: they were being shepherds, they were attending to their flock. With the rejection of the first *schema* of the document on Revelation,

the Council had perhaps made one of the most important changes in the doctrinal development of the Catholic Church: the choice of a teaching that was 'pastoral.'<sup>10</sup>

And in being pastoral it gave expression to its catholicity – its openness to what God still does in creating us. Rather than cutting ourselves off from the world, locking our doors (see John 20:19), and building dividing walls (see Eph 2:14), authentic Catholicism looks at the world and seeks to understand the world. Here too is a call for Irish Catholicism in the Year of Faith.

The conviction of the goodness of creation (see Gen 1:31) and its blessedness is the foundation of the Catholic way. 'The Word became flesh' (John 1:14) is not just a statement about Jesus, it is also a statement about the world. In and through creation God makes himself known to us. God could not give himself to us, had he not created us! From here come the sacraments. For example, a Catholic theology of marriage is rooted primarily in our theology of the sacredness and character of human life. Rooting the sacramentality of marriage in what is essentially a fundamentalist reading of the Bible is seriously to miss something basic about

9. Giuseppe Ruggieri 'The First Doctrinal Clash [of Vatican II]' in Giuseppe Alberigo ed, *The Formation of the Council's Identity* (History of Vatican II: Vol. 2; Maryknoll: Orbis / Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 232

10. Ruggieri, 'First Doctrinal Clash,' 266.

the holiness of marriage and subvert the Bible.<sup>11</sup> From this radical engagement with the world comes the Catholic commitment to education and to healthcare. A Catholic school cannot be a school whose horizon is the Catholic church. Catholic healthcare is concerned with all that is truly human, not just about when and where a particular procedure may be carried out.

This giving comes to its highpoint and goal in Christ. It is *with* him (see Mark 3:14) and from him and through him that we come fully to know God, the world and ourselves. And yet Christ too is curiously absent from our reflection, discourse, and debate. There is little mention of his mercy, his prophetic way of life, his welcome for those wrongfooted by the powers and dominions of their society and culture. A Christianity without Christ is like religion without God. And a religion without God is a very destructive reality – for religion!<sup>12</sup> The Church, ‘like a stranger in a foreign land, presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God.’<sup>13</sup> In this Year of Faith, might we not do well to explore our own ‘stranger-ness’ and in so doing come home to the sources of our Catholic faith, and recover from being interlopers in a land we no longer understand. Can that be done without Christ? Can that happen without seeking God or each other? Can the word be heard if there is not silence?

11. See, for example, John Barton, Anglican priest and Oriel and Laing Professor of Biblical Interpretation at the University of Oxford: ‘The Bible is not the be-all and end-all of the Christian faith. Attempts to make it so all too often twist it to ignoble ends, and mean that we do not hear it speaking with its own voice.’ *What is the Bible?* (3d ed.; London: SPCK, 2009), 106.

12. Jürgen Moltmann famously mused about the effect of the practical atheism in Christianity. See Jürgen Moltmann, ‘Und die Bible ist doch links!’ *Der Spiegel* 40 (1968): 172–5.

13. Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei* (11 October 2011) §6

**On the palm of his hand.** Alzheimer’s disease often arouses our deepest fears about forgetting and being forgotten. A faith tradition that teaches us about a God who will know our name even when we have forgotten every name we have ever known, including our own, can be a comforting reminder to both people with the disease and their caregivers. We can embody the presence of that remembering God in their lives and remind them that the God who created them will never forget or forsake them in this life or the next.

– RUTH MARIE THOMSON and ELAYNE LIPP, *Ministry with Persons with Mental Illnesses and their Families*, (Ohio: Augsburg Fortress, ed. Robt. H. Albers, William H. Meller, Steven D. Thurber) p.225.