

“Fidelity to the essentials: Christian initiation and transmission of the faith”.

Bishop Donal McKeown

Bishop of Derry

Chair of Irish Bishops’ Committee for Youth and Young Adult Ministry

bishop@derrydiocese.org

In Ireland, it has been long assumed that national or ethnic identity and religious belonging are closely linked. The existence of very many Catholic schools, fully financially supported by the state in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, has led to the situation where much of the education in faith for young people has been sub-contracted to the schools. And the schools are then blamed when the system does not work. We have had to rediscover the family and the parish community as the primary locus of initiation and growth in the faith, where the Catholic school can play a supporting role but never be burdened with the whole task. Religious education can support but never substitute for evangelisation and catechesis.

One of the challenges for the Irish Church has been the development of a ‘circle of care’ approach to growth in faith. This is based on the principles enunciated in *Share the Good News*, the National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland, published in 2010 and in *Called Together, Making a Difference, A Framework Document for Youth Ministry in Ireland* (2009). These documents present a clear strategy and structure supporting the best ways to move from Christian initiation through growth in faith at home and school and then the move to the challenging world of adolescence.

I propose

- to note the pastoral conversion that this has involved for the Irish Church;
 - refer to key elements which are currently available to provide the circle of care; and
 - note the core essentials in any formation that is faithful to the faith.
1. Recent challenges - such as secularism, scandals and a general loss of faith in institutions of all sorts – have called the Irish Church out into unfamiliar territory. The country – North and South – has changed from being an environment where the language of faith and the Church were ubiquitous and part of the background to all events, to a situation where, in some quarters, it is now almost socially unacceptable to speak of Church and faith or seek to defend Christian principles in public. That context makes it very difficult for young people and adults to learn how to speak the language of faith – and very many can end up with a few scraps of religious vocabulary but none of the syntax.

This has meant that the Irish Church has had to move beyond questions that arose from a service model of Church - such as “How do we get enough priests

to say all the Masses and celebrate all the funerals?” – and take on the strategies of a missionary Church. That is based on the conviction of Pope Francis that

the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation. The renewal of structures demanded by pastoral conversion can only be understood in this light. (EG 27)

That has meant three major changes in emphasis for all pastoral strategic planning, and specifically in the area of youth ministry.

- a. A focus on teaching the faith by word, gesture and example.
 - b. A readiness to take risks with trust in God as we undertake an Exodus journey;
 - c. Clarity that the Gospel message is centred on changing the world and not just helping us cope with it as it is.
2. Different dioceses are moving at a variety of paces. However, a number of key options are becoming available to support growth in faith, appropriate to the various stages of human development.
- a. It is clear that, in the Catholic worldview, the community is not just part of the necessary context for handing on faith but also a core element in the content of that faith. Thus all invitations to conversion and to growth have to take on the vertical and horizontal relationships that link us to God and to one another. That may be difficult to emphasise in a culture where individualism is dominant and where sacramental celebration risk being reduced to the level of a holy Disneyworld. In some cases, parishes have had to struggle in order to reclaim celebrations of First Communion and Confirmation from schools, even though, for many, the school community has become the principal locus of ecclesial experience.
 - b. The outcome of this process has been the development of pre-sacramental programmes designed to support the parents and the school through activities linked to the Sunday liturgy. This communitarian dimension is essential as children move away from being centred mainly on themselves and their little domestic world to the realities of the wider community. The experience of the faith community can affirm belonging and welcome to young people, as well as rooting their faith in the weekly Eucharist.
 - c. Since Confirmation in Ireland is celebrated at the end of primary schools (11 or 12 years of age) a follow-up is necessary as new friendships are formed. This has led to the development of a four-year programme called GIFT – Growing in Faith Together. This seeks to offer an annual catechesis

in the context of young people being helped to explore faith, learning the language of faith and dealing with questions of belief in contemporary society. The parish which developed this strategy has finished the programme with a week-long *peregrinatio ad Petri sedem*.

- d. For those who wish to continue their faith journey as disciples of Jesus, some 10 years ago, a priest in my current diocese developed the Pope John Paul II awards.¹ This is a parish-based initiative for 16-17 year olds and is now active in almost all Irish dioceses. It involves a commitment to
 - i. Parish involvement
 - ii. Social awareness activities
 - iii. A written and/or oral presentation on what it means to be a baptised member of the Church.

The awards can be obtained at a number of levels, depending on the time commitment involved.

- e. In Ireland, many dioceses use their annual diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes as an opportunity for the training and formation of new young disciples. This can be an excellent context in which to develop
 - a. A sense of teamwork across all age groups in the Church;
 - b. A sense of prayer and of renewal;
 - c. A discovery of the role of service of the sick and disabled as a constitutive element in discipleship.
- f. For us in Ireland, one of the most challenging age groups to reach is the young adults. Many are working or living away from home. One very dedicated model of young adult ministry and growth in discipleship is provided by Youth2000². It has a clear focus on prayer, adoration, moral living and community. That context also provides the solidarity where young adults can dare to practice and learn the language of faith discourse. They can also delve into their own faith journey and seek both inspiration and encouragement.

3. At the heart of all of these pastoral tools is the conviction that discipleship of Jesus in the Church is a complex pattern involving mind, heart and hand. It seems to me that fidelity to the essentials means not just ensuring faithfulness to Church teaching but also consonance between all aspects of our Christian life. This includes three elements
 - a. The content of faith.

¹ <http://www.thepopejohnpauliiaward.com/>

² <http://www.youth2000.ie/>

Young people may have learned various elements of Christian doctrine but never actually come to grasp the key parts of the Christian worldview and meta-narrative. Pope Francis states clearly that

Pastoral ministry in a missionary style is not obsessed with the disjointed transmission of a multitude of doctrines to be insistently imposed. When we adopt a pastoral goal and a missionary style which would actually reach everyone without exception or exclusion, the message has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary. The message is simplified, while losing none of its depth and truth, and thus becomes all the more forceful and convincing. (EG 35)

The Creed, of course, provides a clear summary of the core Christian dogmas. However, there are distinctively Catholic elements that are part of our beliefs, all of which take very seriously the Incarnation. That applies in our ecclesiology, sacramental theology and moral teaching. There is an element of truth in the phrase attributed to the head teacher in a Catholic school in England who is reported to have said, “*We don’t teach Catholicism as dogma. We teach it as a lens through which to view the world.*” Catholicism is not just a series of teachings and laws but emanates from the heart of the God who loved the world so much that he sent his only Son. (Jn 3:16)

Furthermore, if theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, then faithfulness to Church teaching

Is not result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. (Pope Benedict XVI Deus Caritas Est 1)

Formation and fidelity means helping young disciples to grow in their adherence to the teaching of Jesus because they have fallen in love with Jesus.

- b. Fidelity in formation also involves faithfulness to the riches of Christian spirituality, ‘the prayers’ as the early Church referred to them (Acts 2:43)

Formation in faith involves a deepening spiritual life, including prayer with the Church, prayer with the scriptures, adoration, a rich sacramental life and the celebration of the liturgical year. If we wish to develop in them the mind and heart of Jesus Christ (Cf Phil 2:5), then that means ensuring that our formation does not

drift into a spiritual worldliness camouflaged by religious practices, unproductive meetings and empty talk. (EG 207)

In a context where faith is under pressure from popular culture, there is the danger of spirituality becoming a refuge for the frightened rather than an

inspiration for the Spirit-filled disciples. Thus Pope Francis quotes St John Paul II when he says that

we must reject the temptation to offer a privatized and individualistic spirituality which ill accords with the demands of charity, to say nothing of the implications of the incarnation. (EG 262)

- c. Young people are very often idealistic. They respond well to the call to be generous to others and opportunities to be involved in outreach to the poor and needy is a constitutive element of Christian faith. Jesus invites his disciples to change reality – and not merely to either criticise it or to seek to survive in it.

Pope Francis is again quite explicit, pointing out that faith *means working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs which we encounter. The word “solidarity” presumes the creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few. (EG 188)*

Developing fidelity to the Gospel includes initiation and growth into a spirituality that develops communities of counter-cultural disciples.

Conclusion

We face very many challenges in our youth ministry in Ireland. However, we know that Jesus called disciples to himself because they were attracted by him. He taught them over a three year period and after his departure through the Spirit. He instructed them to love him and promised that the Father and Jesus would come to live in the believer (Jn 14:23). The New Testament teaches that our bodies are Temples of the Holy Spirit and Jesus told us that we would encounter him in the least of his brothers and sisters (Mt 25:40).

We can still see where fidelity to the key vertical and horizontal elements of the Christian faith can inspire young people to face the challenges of a fallen world. And that message, when proclaimed with fidelity still helps new followers

to respond to the God of love who saves us, to see God in others and to go forth from ourselves to seek the good of others. (EG 39)