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Have we lost the faith?

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In what precisely have we lost faith?

Clearly from the context, we're talking about religious faith, and so I need to make it clear at the outset that I am thinking broadly in terms of the Christian heritage in Ireland. On the island of Ireland today that is not as reasonable a definition of Irish religion as we might have assumed a generation ago. I think I am right in saying that Islam has now more adherents in the Republic of Ireland than has Methodism. But I am talking primarily in terms of the Christian deposit of faith.

But please indulge me if I suggest that we need to do some careful definitional work even when we talk about the Christian tradition and the losing of faith. And I want to suggest that there are three layers we need to distinguish when we speak of the loss of Christian faith.

The first is what we might call the Christian culture, using that term in its sociological rather than its aesthetic sense.

The second layer is the Church itself.

The third is what I will call in shorthand "the Gospel", the core of the faith..

These three layers / three dimensions (call them what you will) may interact and interweave, but they are distinguishable from one another. So, my answer to the question "Have we lost the faith" would be,

in the case of the Christian culture, "notquite, but more or less",
in the case of the Church, "nearly",
in the case of the Gospel, "partly"!

So let me unpack all of that a little

1. The Christian culture in Ireland.

Using what I think is a very useful definition of "culture" from the American business guru, Edgar Schein, I am speaking of culture as "that pattern of shared basic assumptions that a group learns as it solves its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid., and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems.."

The culture of the Republic of Ireland is no longer - consciously or unconsciously - a Christian culture to any great degree. I think that the word Christendom in some ways sums up better what I mean. Christendom was that long swathe of history from



early mediaeval times through to the Enlightenment when, in Western Europe, the point of reference of all things was Christianity. It was the overarching reality from which other realities took their being and took their meaning. Post-enlightenment Europe has slowly moved itself beyond Christendom, and now all we experience is the after-burn. It can be rather a powerful after-burn, but then Christendom was around for a long time.

Christendom produced greatness and awfulness. Yes, we can blame the horrors of the inquisition and the Crusades on Christendom. But, as I have written elsewhere, Christendom also gave us Chartres Cathedral and the Mozart Requiem.

However, Christianity as the defining culture for Ireland is fast disappearing. Christianity is not the point of self-definition for our country any longer. Nor do I think that I really mourn its passing, because I am not convinced that the Christian faith is really quite suited to being fashionable or uncritical of itself, as any prevailing culture will, almost inevitably, tend to be.

2. The Church?

Well, let me begin by saying that there is one thing at least (and possibly not too many more) on which I find myself in agreement with Cardinal Ratzinger. I do believe that we should not speak of a multiplicity of churches. There is one Church. Where of course, I then part company from him is that I don't see that single Church as being the Roman Catholic Church all by itself, with everything else consigned to the category of ecclesial communities, which is a slightly polite way of saying, "Not the real thing but not entirely on the wrong lines.." No, I firmly take the view that there is one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church and that within that Church there are rather a large number of traditions - a Roman Catholic tradition, an Orthodox tradition, an Anglican tradition, a Presbyterian tradition, a Baptist tradition, and so on.. And I wouldn't put too high a wall or too unyielding a wall around the Christian Church. Clearly, we are speaking of those who acknowledge the Lordship of Christ, and the work of the Spirit of God in and through communities of Christian disciples. (However, you do not particularly want to hear my views on the doctrine of the Church!) But what I have said is of some significance when we start to ask if Irish men, women and children have lost faith in the Church. Because it is far too easy to be smug and say that they have lost faith in this Church or in that Church, but not in the Church itself. I think that we have all been tarnished, diminished and degraded. We have also, in our own ways, all been responsible. The causes are clear enough -



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Sectarianism.. in our efforts to keep the troops together, to keep the tribe in existence, we consistently demonised each other's religious beliefs, parodied them, poured scorn on them.. We have no right to be surprised when the monster we created for our own purposes turns on us now and shreds our credibility and, indeed, our witness to the truths of the faith

Corruption.. it is of course one particular tradition that is bearing the brunt of public attack for this. I have no wish to defend or mitigate the appalling actions of some of those who were given the care of powerless, vulnerable children, created by God to be loved and to be treated with reverence, and who abused that trust by abusing (in a different sense) those children. But corruption is not confined to one tradition. Whenever power becomes the purpose of an institution, corruption in some shape or form will follow. We should all walk out to face the country with true penitence, when it comes to matter of corruption.

Irrelevance.. We continuously answer questions in which people - if they were ever asking the questions - have no interest whatsoever. The level of self-indulgence is staggering. Of course there is timelessness to the core of the faith. But society changes and is changing more and more rapidly with every passing year. To pretend that we live in an idyllic wonderland where everything would be fine if people would just go more often to Church more often is little short of obscene.

Grandiose pretensions.. Would the carpenter of Galilee recognise anything of himself in the life of the Church today. Most of what I have said about sectarianism, corruption and irrelevance can be summed up in the extraordinary lack of humility that has characterised the Church in this country, in virtually all of its traditions.

Have we lost faith in the Church? Nearly, and not without a great deal of provocation to do so..

3. The Gospel..

The Church of Ireland recently produced a report on sectarianism entitled The Hard Gospel. Perhaps that is the best title to give the third layer of "the faith" we need to consider.

I think that people have partly lost faith in the Gospel, because the Culture and the Church have never presented a hard gospel. Jesus Christ probably antagonised more people in his life on earth than he convinced. The consequence is that people tend to be patronising about Christ, and to think that they can metaphorically pat him on the head and give him a mark out of ten. I think it was that doughty Ulsterman, C



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S Lewis, who reminded us that we can hate Christ and we can reject Christ. The only alternative to hating him or rejecting him is to worship him. Patronising him, feeling a nice "Christmassy" goodwill to him, is not a viable option. I think that in a woozy, new age, post-modernist mode of thinking of religion as a helpful relaxant for those who find it useful, the infinitely loving but starkly uncompromising figure of Jesus Christ has been placed in the "leisure pursuit" category of human activity. So, yes, there has been a loss of faith in the Gospel, but not the right Gospel, not in the Gospel that will not only comfort but which must also challenge, haunt, and disturb, and which cannot be patronised. The real test for the Church is whether it will ever again preach that Gospel.

Can the Church as Church row back from this loss of faith? Clearly I have to believe it can, and not simply to preserve my job and my pension. But the Church must learn a new humility. If it does not come out with true penitence and confess that it has utterly failed the Gospel, and betrayed the Christ it is to proclaim, and mean it as it says it, we have little to which to look forward.

I believe that the Church is always necessary for the carrying forward of the faith, for the transmission of the faith from one generation to another, but there are times when it can only do that by admitting that it has failed in that task, by its sectarian tendencies, by its corruption (at times a nauseating corruption), by its inability to confront the realities of life in the world around it and to relate those realities to the Christian gospel, and by its pretentiousness and lack of humility. If it could do that and mean it, I think it could be forgiven.

As for the Christian culture, in the religiously pluralist world in which we live, I do not believe that Ireland will again have a culture that is monolithically Christian. I cannot claim to be over-worried. To be the epitome of a prevailing culture makes one dreadfully uncritical of self, and utterly inflexible. Certainly the days cosying up to the prevailing political forces of the moment must go, and for ever.

No, I'm not keen on a return to Christendom. But I am keen on restoring faith in the Gospel that it would be a renewed Church's task - an unassuming, penitent and unpretentious Church's task - to communicate.

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