

## REFLECTIONS ON CONSECRATED LIFE IN EUROPE

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### Introductory words

I thank you graciously for your invitation to address you here today as you take this opportunity to joyfully and hopefully listen to the perspectives of others on consecrated life. What I am about to say to you today is the fruit of many conversations I have had with Lay Colleagues and friends since I first received this invitation, most of whom have also had close connections with Religious Congregations. I begin by acknowledging their input to my preparations.

### Core Text

I was born in the extreme North West of Ireland into a household of six siblings born to practising and devout Catholic parents. I attended religiously-run primary and post primary schools and later a Mercy Sisters' Third Level College. I began my teaching career in a Primary School run by Presentation Brothers but before the end of my first year they decided to withdraw from the school, thus ending over 100 years of service. In retrospect, it is possible for me to see this decision as the first deconstruction of the local parish-school-church nexus which was simply accepted and revered as the most powerful, formative influence in the life of my hometown community. In the subsequent twenty-five years every other religiously-run institution there made a similar decision. Today no religious -male or female- has staff involvement in any educational or health establishment in the town. Some religious still retain significant but increasingly contentious influence at the level of governance. What took place locally has been replicated nationwide. I understand that this re-positioning of religious in the social-political-cultural landscape had begun much earlier in Mainland Europe but most commentators agree that the rate of change precipitated in Ireland was unparalleled.

Irish People were beginning to adjust, accept and even welcome this substantively changed landscape and were learning to survive even the sporadic revelations of physical and sexual abuse of children which had been emerging. However, during the past nine months, Catholics in Ireland have been reeling in shock in the aftermath of the publication of judicial investigations into abuse in religiously run institutions and in the Archdiocese of Dublin<sup>1</sup>. It is fair to say that for very many Irish Catholics 'things have begun to fall apart and the centre can no longer hold'<sup>2</sup> in ways previously unimaginable. Most of them are experiencing profound disillusionment and near despair at the extent of the abuse carried out by some religious and priests. Those painful emotions have been compounded by the cover-up and mismanagement perpetrated by those in leadership positions in the Catholic Church in Ireland. In his recent *Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, Pope Benedict was sharply critical of the behaviour of the Bishops and pointed out that the scandals and

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<sup>1</sup> These investigations are called the Ryan and Murphy Reports, surnames of the leading judges.

<sup>2</sup> After Yeats, W.B., *The Second Coming*

their mismanagement ‘obscured the Gospel to a degree that not even centuries of persecution had succeeded in doing’<sup>3</sup>. There have been several Episcopal resignations and growing calls for more.

Many of my contemporaries would now ask: ‘How is it possible to explore the future of consecrated or religious life when the institutional Church in Ireland has been so discredited and Catholicism itself so radically called into question? As one of them put it: “They used to say ‘You cannot do theology with your back to Auschwitz’, but in Ireland, now we must agree that: ‘You cannot discuss religious life or the future of Catholicism with your back to the Ryan and Murphy reports’”. So, painful as it is, this must be my starting point and my constant reference in this presentation. From an Irish perspective it would seem that the question of religious life in the traditional sense has been somewhat relativised by our recent experience. And while I start with that painful perspective, I do so because I believe that it is relevant to the future of Religious life in other countries of Europe. But, ultimately, of course that will be for you to judge.

For decades, it seems now, that we were being drawn towards a horizon whose lineaments we could not yet clearly perceive. But we now realise that we simply had no idea of just how treacherous the territory ahead was. Nor did we realise how devastating its impact would be on cherished certainties and seemingly unquestionable assumptions.

From Europe, we could already see elements within that horizon. These included changes in norms of religious practice ; expressions of and approaches to sexuality; the rise and attractiveness of secular culture; the sophistication of the average European adult in terms of education and life experience (including theological education); the philosophical/mythological shift towards what has been called post-modernism; the proliferation of individualistic, consumerist lifestyles with ever-increasing absorption in technological gadgets. Alongside these emerging changes in Europe and North America, Asia, had slowly but surely invested the energy and resources of its people into successfully challenging the economic might of the West. Inevitably they have begun to demand similar lifestyles to those enjoyed here for decades. Meanwhile our one Earth has been groaning under the weight of our increased exploitation and disregard. More than half the Continent of Africa, parts of Central and South America and their peoples bore the burden of trade agreements which favoured the wealthier nations and they continue to bear the full and brutal brunt of the ensuing climatic changes.

This broad canvas is known only too well to you and I know that you have indeed challenged many aspects of it for decades. Sometimes you may have sounded like voices in the wilderness as you pursued your justice and peace agenda. I refer to it here simply to remind myself and you of some of the individual elements which have come together and catalysed seismic change in our time. And laterally, into that shifting ground have come the implosion of the global recession and the current challenges facing the Roman Catholic Church.

We are dizzy, disturbed and dis-eased. Like the Psalmist in Psalm 17 we might say:

The waves of death rise about us,  
The torrents of destruction assail us

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<sup>3</sup> Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland Easter 2010 [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

The snares of the grave entangle us  
The traps of death encompass us

Then the earth reeled and rocked  
The mountains were shaken to their base  
They reeled at his terrible anger  
He lowered the heavens and came down

A black cloud under his feet  
He made the darkness his covering  
The dark waters of the clouds his tent

In that latter verse is there a clue about the action of God among us? Could this demise, destruction, and death be somehow part of God's plan? As Rev. Bryan Massingale states, 'Things are ending. And the prophet dares to proclaim that this demise is aided and abetted by God's own self'.<sup>4</sup> Many commentators within and outside our Great Tradition are keen to stress that the current woes and trouble are the inevitable consequence of some outside force or sin like moral relativism or secularism or a general dilution of the faith of the people. It is much more challenging and honest, I would respectfully suggest, to consider that all that has now come to pass indeed involves the action of God among us, 'See I am doing a new thing among you' (Is.43:19). We will not be able to see that new thing if we do not believe that God is using this darkness as his cover, if we cannot be at ease with the idea that God's tent is hidden in the cloud of dark waters. Equally it is more challenging and honest to see and confess our individual and collective involvement in and responsibility for creating the kind of world that is now being laid waste. And perhaps most challenging of all are these words, again from Isaiah

The Lord has given me a disciple's tongue  
So that I might know how to reply to the wearied  
He provides me with speech  
Each morning he wakes me to hear,  
To listen like a disciple  
The Lord has opened my ear. (50:4)

For, I believe, we are being deeply challenged as disciples to be prophetic, to both openly acknowledge and mourn the passing of the old whilst simultaneously becoming involved in birthing the new.

One of the biblical figures who has insistently been part of my musings in preparation for this presentation has been Nicodemus. A contemporary of Jesus, I think of his social and religious role as being somewhat akin to your own – resourced with the prestige and power of a particular religious tradition albeit in political and cultural situations less than sympathetic at times. I think of his coming to Jesus under cover of darkness because of his intuitive recognition of 'the new thing'

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<sup>4</sup> Bryan Massingale, *'See I Am Doing Something New!' Prophetic Ministry for a Church in Transition* 20<sup>th</sup> Assembly of Priests in Milwaukee, 2004, pg. 4

perhaps being incarnated in the life and message of this man of Nazareth<sup>5</sup>. And although attracted by Jesus words and actions, -‘No one could do what you do if they had not come from God’-, Nicodemus found Jesus’ vision and wisdom deeply challenging and confounding – ‘But how can a grown man return to the womb of his mother to be born again?’ he protested. He is faced with the complete transformation required by Jesus of those who wish to *see*, not to mention *enter* the kingdom of which he speaks. For Nicodemus, the Pharisee, this radical demand means going back to make a new beginning. It means unlearning all the sacred assumptions from yesterday. It means letting go all the cosy protections and even busy schedules for projects and religious duties. It means letting go of concern with the externals of holiness and instead being prepared to undergo complete metanoia.

When I think of the future of consecrated life in Europe I think it will involve for you men, a leap of faith and allegiance as radical, as dramatic and as demanding as that required of Nicodemus. You may first have to do it ‘under cover of darkness’. Initially, you may have to hold your fire for a time – as Nicodemus did, when despite his initial reticence, he spoke prophetically against injustice when the Pharisees were involved in an early attempt to arrest Jesus<sup>6</sup>. But there will come a time, very shortly afterwards, when you will have to do much more. You may have to help others to bury ‘the dead’ in decent burial grounds, including buying the expensive nard and spices and finally rolling over the giant stone. You may have to consent to letting die that which needs to die, so that God’s ‘new thing’ may have the space and sustenance to emerge. And then?... Then you must witness to the Resurrection, support the new flourishing of work for the kingdom, support the uneducated but committed with the skills and resources to make manifest glimpses of the kingdom.

You will no longer be a part of the ‘Sanhedrin’ – you will have had to divest yourselves of religious prestige. There may be leaders of Christian groups and communities that you are part of or visiting who will not be as well educated in scripture and tradition as you. But they will have been witnesses to the ‘new thing that God is doing among us’ and their fire and passion and capacity for healing will be acknowledged and confirmed by you as gifted by the Spirit.

As you know the Greek word which we translate as ‘disciple’ was ‘*manthano*’ – and so conveys in its roots the concept of being a ‘learner with others’. The challenge of those who are to live consecrated life as disciples in the future will I believe be, first and foremost, to retrieve that ancient meaning and become *learners-with-others*.

Returning to Massingale who says ..

*‘a new Church is coming. It will be browner and poorer, more sensuous and feminine, less clerical and more collegial, less concerned about charity and more conscious of justice and more multilingual and polycentric than the one we know now. ...It will be a new Church yet it can only come with the passing of this one’.*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John 3

<sup>6</sup> John 7

<sup>7</sup> Massingale, 2004 As above, pg. 6.

I believe the death of one and the midwifing of the other will be the business of those consecrating their lives to God. Not everything in our tradition needs to die or must die. Far from it! But each of us, as committed disciples, as co-learners, must peel away all that is inessential. We must return to the roots of the message and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth and the core ritual of breaking bread and sharing the cup. This will take place in faith communities that witness to life, healing, truth, reconciliation, justice, and profound respect for and action on behalf of the least, the little ones and the lost. Such witness will involve us again in challenging prophetically the political, economic and sometimes social status quo and the short-sighted destruction of our one earth - the interconnected life system which sustains all life as we know it. Therefore we will no doubt once again all find ourselves relegated to the margins, being called on to take up our cross, to be *for* the kingdom and *for* the poor and the oppressed – for that is where our founder chose to locate himself. This is a huge challenge for all of us – religious and lay- and enthusiastic as we lay people may be, we cannot respond to this challenge on our own. We need your help, encouragement and mentoring. Is it possible for me to mention some of the ways I think we lay people would be looking to you for example and guidance?

As one Irish theologian puts it<sup>8</sup>:

‘Jesus of Nazareth called disciples to incarnate the vision of the kingdom in a permanent way of life which would make credible the dream that God has for the world. He asks them to live in service to the humanity of others so that the roots of oppression – the pathologies of the heart, the hungers for power, prestige and possession would be overcome’. ...He wants them to ‘be together in such a way so that there would be no discrimination, no sectarianism, no indifference to the suffering of others, no fatalism in their minds or imaginations before the flawed structures of family, society, church and community’.

Because we are so acutely conscious of just how flawed these structures may be, I believe lay people feel called to a new, critical awareness today of just how easily organisations and institutions can deviate from their foundational vision and begin to achieve perverted effects, while retaining the honourable vocabulary of their origins. They will need to test the credibility and consistency of any group that claims to incarnate the vision of Jesus in its life and praxis. They will be searching for those genuinely living in continuity with that foundational vision. They will be listening for the prophetic voice, which, even in situations of shame and fear, is prepared to speak out on behalf of those whose humanity is being trampled in the world. Timothy Radcliffe’s description of the post-resurrection community is apt here:

‘The Resurrection was made visible to the world in the astonishing sight of a community reborn. These cowards and deniers were gathered together again. They... were shamefaced at what they had done, but once again they were one. The unity of the Church is a sign that all the forces that fragment and scatter are defeated in Christ’<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> Bredin, Eamonn, *Praxis and Praise*, Columba Press 1994, p. 190.

<sup>9</sup> The Tablet April 10, 2010 Issue

Some of what I believe Lay People are seeking may be already present in the communities that you represent but I think that they may approach you hoping to find certain priorities and different emphases including:

1. A renewed emphasis on **being** rather than **doing**: This may sound clichéd but I believe it is important to listen to what is implied in this distinction. We lay people have noted the dramatic increase in the amount of activity engaged in by most Religious Congregations, despite depletion in numbers and increased age profile. Indeed Albert Nolan, in his most recent book makes the disturbing suggestion that ‘busyness’ is one of the great sins of our time<sup>10</sup>. So I would go so far as to suggest ‘Ease out of all projects ‘! Instead choose to inhabit fully and live completely the essence of your distinctive charisms – and obviously these will all be variations on aspects of the foundational Christian community I referred to above. Just to take an example from my own experience of working with the Oblates in the Anglo-Irish Province. The Oblates can readily name off the prominent elements of their charism and while all of them are true and valid what struck me most is one that is rarely mentioned formally. That is their extraordinary ability to offer hospitality to the visitor, friend, outsider, marginalised, refugee. My own suggestion to them, for example, would be to capitalise on that facility which is certainly part of their charism and is something that Lay People desire and would benefit from in the anonymity of modern living.

I believe we must take seriously Karl Rahner’s prophesy about the Christian of the future when he says– ‘The devout Christian of the future will either be a mystic...or he will cease to be anything at all’. Thomas Merton in his poem ‘In Silence’<sup>11</sup> catches exactly what I am trying to say:

Be still...  
Do not think of what you are  
Still less of what you may one day be  
Rather  
Be what you are...

O be still, while  
You are still alive.  
And all things live around you  
Speaking  
To your own being  
Speaking by the Unknown  
That is in you and in themselves

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<sup>10</sup> Nolan, Albert *Jesus Today: A Spirituality of Radical Freedom* Albert Nolan: Orbis Books (USA), 2006.

<sup>11</sup> From ‘*The Strange Islands*’ – Poems by Thomas Merton

2. **A commitment to non-patriarchal, non-authoritarian and non-racist ways of organising people and activity:** Before I elaborate on this I want to compliment you on inviting myself and Ana to address you these days. I don't want to underestimate the significance of that decision and I know that it is probably boring at this stage, (as a good friend put it to me recently), to be still raising the question about the radical re-thinking required in relation to the role of women in the Catholic Church. In general given the global and local networks of most Religious Congregations, founded in Europe, you have an extraordinary opportunity to model the kind of inclusivity required of those who believe that all are equal in the sight of God. Such modelling would in itself be the most powerful social comment of all, on discriminatory, exclusive and racist practices. We lay people feel a pressing need to not only know that such inclusivity as this is theoretically possible but that it is actually happening in a credible way and that it would be possible for us to be part of it.
3. **A recognition of just how powerfully counter-cultural is the choice of living in community:** In this European culture with a such a strong individualistic inclination—(statistics from the UK recently stated that over 50% of adults live alone; the Irish figure is closer to 35 % but growing with every census) the choice of women or men to live together, as the Oblates in the Anglo Irish Province put it – ‘sharing life, faith and mission’ is a starkly counter-cultural choice<sup>12</sup>. After the Vatican Council the emphasis on community to seemed expressed itself in improving interpersonal relationship. And while this was of value, perhaps there was a loss of necessary emphasis on *relatedness* to a shared commitment to a particular mission and vision. Such a relatedness model de-centers attention away from pre-occupation with one another's foibles, instead fosters a new *communitas* of equals and maintains the focus always on the kingdom, which Pope Paul VI described as ‘the only absolute’<sup>13</sup>.

What makes this living choice both more challenging and perhaps more attractive is the model it also provides of the opportunity to live more simply. It headlines in a practical way the linking of the minute-to-minute decisions and choices about food, clothing, waste, transport, property, staff, resources to a stated commitment to justice, peace and the integrity of creation. Many of you have done enormous work in this area and the citizens of Europe have much to learn in this regard about the practicalities of sustainable living. We need people like you to speak to us, inspire and persuade us about earth as our mother and humanity as a crucial incarnational element of the ecosystem. But we especially need to see such sustainable, simple and just living implemented in a daily, practicable lifestyle.

4. ***Your leadership role as committed religious in critical theological reflection.*** Speaking with friends recently we acknowledged that, theoretically at least, theological reflection will continue in university settings etc. But each of us voiced our concern that critical theological reflection would be more available and accessible than that. It is already a

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<sup>12</sup> Oblates of the Anglo Irish Province Mission Statement, [www.obaltesai.org](http://www.obaltesai.org)

<sup>13</sup> Evangelii Nuntiandi

source of disillusionment for us as Irish Catholics that no ecclesial comment or contribution has been made on the vexed theological questions of our time in Ireland because of the negative backlash stemming from the sexual and physical abuse scandals of the past fifteen years. We believe that lay people deserve the very best theology possible. We equally believe they deserve the very best theological education available. Such theological education should not be the reserve of those who commit to a consecrated life. Religious Congregations of Europe could take up an even stronger leadership role in encouraging and supporting that kind of theological education among lay people, not a diluted pastoral version but rather a complete, rigorous and critical one.

5. ***To create open spaces for ritual and reflection:*** There is a deep hunger among many people for quiet tranquil restorative time and space in which they can slow down, reassess their priorities, find sanctuary and healing and return renewed and refreshed to the rhythm of their daily lives. In these times Religious as well as lay people are constantly being bombarded by stimulation from various media, which no doubt affects our health and our sanity. We need open and sacred spaces for ritual and communion which acknowledge both the dignity and equality of every person and creature upon the earth, and God as the source and summit of all that is. Some of you are already offering such sanctuary but I believe there is a crying need for more such centres and more widespread access to them. However, I believe it would be important that such spaces would not simply offer set programmes but in the future would be released from the tight control of singular spiritualities.
6. ***To engage easily and enthusiastically in inter-faith dialogue:*** I am not thinking here of ecumenical dialogue although I recognise and respect the tireless work of many in that arena. Lay People are daily challenged by the multi-faith context of their work and leisure spaces. Added to the respect and dignity they have for the difference represented there, I believe many of us would desire to become more adept at speaking confidently about their own tradition. Secondly we would wish to bring that confidence into open and respectful dialogue with the teachings and traditions of other faiths. The Great Wisdom Traditions of the World are such an extraordinary resource for humanity and I believe again that Religious Congregations of Europe are particularly well placed to model an ease and enthusiasm for an on-going and animated exchange of truth and wisdom between these great traditions. Recent books by the Dominican, Brian J. Pierre and the Franciscan, Richard Rohr <sup>14</sup> are like written examples of the kind of social and intellectual engagement at the face-to-face level that I would suggest will be more and more sought after.

By way of conclusion I return to the gospel imperative to all disciples to be salt of the earth and light of the world. Part of the difficulty may be that we have heard these phrases so often that we are no longer fully attentive to their radical challenge. For to be to be salt and light for earth and world we must first love the earth and love the world – we must become people who cannot but exclaim that ‘the world is charged with the grandeur of God,... flaming out, shining like shook

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<sup>14</sup> Pierce, B.J., *We walk the Path Together*, Learning from the thich Nhat Hanh & Meister Eckhart Orbis Books 2006 and Rohr, R. *The Naked Now*, Learning to See as the Mystics See Crossroad Publishing 2009



foil'<sup>15</sup>. Because of the vocational choices Religious make in relation to that Gospel injunction, we Lay People will naturally look to you for exemplification of its truth.

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<sup>15</sup> After Hopkins, G.M. *God's Grandeur* Poem No. 7, 1918