

A Fractured Family

I have a very limited knowledge of theology and even less knowledge about canon law or catechesis. I would never be accused of being an intellectual Catholic - I couldn't even begin to dialogue with the "powers that be" on any aspects of faith development.

But I've lived through fifty seven years - a small enough life by most people's standards. No big contribution to the on-going development of the human species or the betterment of the planet! But I have *learned* during those fifty seven years - and I continue to learn every day. The day that I stop learning will be the day I die.

And most of that learning has been very painful - I don't move from where I am unless it's too uncomfortable to stay there. Because, as far as I'm concerned, the **real** learning, the learning that matters most, is the learning that I know so little - the learning that MY reality is simply that - MINE. I cannot see and understand the world except through my own inadequate lenses. No matter how much I THINK I see reality and understand reality, I can't actually move beyond myself. None of us can.

And that knowledge leads me to a place of humility - a place where I always have to accept that reality for others is not necessarily the same as reality is for me. The best I can hope to do is try to understand other people's reality by listening to them with an open heart and mind.

So what I offer here is just my observation - I don't claim it to be true. If it makes sense to others, well and good. If not.....

I think the time for Irish Catholicism to matter is running out. It's not gone past the point of no return yet. Catholicism CAN still be a spiritual home for us, a place where our people can find sustenance and nurturing and belonging.

And the reason why I feel we still have time is that the media is so "Anti Catholic" (if that's how you like to describe it!) While most of the readers of this site are probably annoyed/angry about the anti-catholic bias they perceive in the media, I rejoice in it.

In the chicken and egg situation of " Does the media form public opinion or does it reflect it?", I suggest that the time to realise the struggle is lost is when "church" matters don't even merit a report in the media. They're irrelevant to the majority of people.

I see the current situation like a family. The children have loved, respected, trusted and been led by the parent (for convenience, I'll call the parent the father.). The father, with a misguided sense of love, has kept the children in an immature state of development by constantly reinforcing the notion that he knows best. All the children have to do is accept his superior knowledge and authority, because he loves them and knows what's best for them. The children have been quite comfortable in allowing the father to direct their steps - it makes for an easy, comfortable life! They simply

accept that he knows what's best and accept that he cannot do anything wrong. The father is up on quite a pedestal.

But something happens - the father makes a very bad mistake and tries to cover it up. He spends a long time denying that he has done anything wrong and, when he finally has to admit his error, he claims that he has it all sorted out now. The realisation that father can get it wrong and his denial of the mistake shatter the trust and belief of the children. The children, being individual people, have different reactions. One child is totally reassured by the father saying "I got that wrong, but it's all sorted now and everything else I've said and done is right". That child is happy to believe the father and go back to trusting and being led by him.

Another child reacts with anger and starts to question everything the father has taught him in the past - if he could be wrong about this, what else might he be wrong about? This child confronts the father and challenges him and questions all the teachings he has previously accepted blindly.

A third child flies into a rage and lashes out in anger and hurt saying "I'll never forgive you and never believe anything you say or do again. You never listen to me. I'm out of here and out of this family!"

So this is where we are now, I believe. There are many people who firmly believe that the institutional church has acknowledged its wrong-doings and we can go back to where we were before. They are the people who truly and sincerely believe that the only way for the church to survive is for the "children" to follow the teachings of the magisterium with true obedience and humility.

There are also a great number of people who are now questioning and challenging the structures and teachings that they had previously accepted. (And, as is probably quite obvious, that's where I see myself.)

Then there are those people who have left the church in anger and disgust. They lash out at the church at every available opportunity and they get satisfaction out of seeing reports that justify their anger. I am quite happy to see these people rail against the church, because they do so out of a terrible hurt. They have been betrayed and they hate the parent who has let them down so badly.

But that anger is a good sign - that anger means they still have strong feelings. While it may be hard to take it that they hate the church, it is actually a thousand times better than having no feeling as regards the church at all. The opposite of love is not hate - hate is actually a very close relative of love. The opposite of love is actually a total lack of caring. When a relationship breaks down, there's always a chance it can be repaired until it gets to the point where each person's welfare is of no relevance whatsoever to the other person. While there is hate and anger, there's always the possibility it can be turned around.

But it will only be turned around if both parties show a genuine realisation that the other person matters so much they are willing to go to any lengths to restore trust. If the father in my scenario still insists that he's right and he is the superior, adult authority and that the child (who has had a very intense and painful growing up period) must go back to being led by him, it's doomed to fail.

If the church hierarchy in this country continue to stay in their bunker, only coming out to reiterate that they have the "real truth" and the proper path in life for a Catholic Christian is to accept their teachings and directions, then they will eventually drive even more people away. The child who is challenging and questioning the parent will eventually give up if father continues to refuse to talk with him/her. The child who has rejected the family will eventually convince him/her that there's no point trying to reason with a father who doesn't listen.

I think that father has to realise that the only chance her has of reuniting his family is to sit down humbly with the child who wants to talk - to listen without any already formed answers to the questions and suggestions that this child who loves him wants him to hear. And he must be open to accepting that he may have to change. In that way, the child who has left the family might just see that father is changing and that he/she may one day feel able to come back in from the cold.

Of course, it's always possible that father doesn't really want to have to bother with his "wayward" children. He would be quite happy for his pesky questioning child to walk out and join his estranged brother so that the family unit could settle down happily. It would consist only of those who said "Yes, Father. Whatever you say, Father. You're always right."

Pope Francis seems to like using family relationships as models for church relationships (I think he may have learned that from someone who was around a couple of thousand years ago). That being the case, I wonder how many of the hierarchy would actually like to see themselves as the father I've described above?

So, bishops of Ireland, if you consider yourselves to be important members of the family, why aren't you talking with us?

[Jo O'Sullivan is an ACI member and contributor to our website]