

# Pastoral Renewal and Adult Faith Development

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'...we are in a living system which is changing every day.'

At the national pastoral conference in September, we presented an account of the group reflections which we hosted at the International Eucharistic Congress. (See *Intercom* September 2012). We reiterated our finding that, in relation to the challenges of 'Communion and Co-responsibility coming to life in pastoral practice', similar dilemmas were identified by participants from four continents. We suggested that this means, in each case, shortcomings in collaboration is 'more than somebody's fault' – that rather than looking for individuals to blame, we need to interrogate the prevailing models, structures and culture of the Church.

Some debate followed which led to this clarification: of course in addressing 'the system' we must be acutely aware that people make systems, and that we with others make the systems of which we are part. This point is pivotal in any consideration of that 'co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety' which Pope Benedict has repeatedly emphasised.

As I listened to Morning Ireland on RTÉ on the day following our Taoiseach's Sunday afternoon telephone conversation with the German Chancellor, I heard CDU member of the Bundestag, Ralph Brinkhaus, observe: 'we are in a living system which is changing every day'. As far as the European Union and in particular its financial situation are concerned, we certainly are!

Our Church is a living system. *Lumen Gentium* refers to the 'sacred nature and organic structure' of the priestly community of the baptised (LG 11). Elsewhere Anne has offered a framework for correlating core elements of our theology of church as a communion with the defining characteristics of living systems.<sup>1</sup> Here, the important consideration is the power to change systems – where does it reside?

## Structured dialogue

The need for change – for spiritual renewal and practical reform – is a recurring theme in our Church context at present. The pastoral conference was designed with the stated purpose of supporting the work of renewal and reform. A key component of this conference was the afternoon devoted to a structured dialogue between bishops, priests, religious and lay people. It is important to emphasise that all we could do at the time was test a method and await the learning.

We are writing ahead of a reflection day which has been organised, where the learning from the conference will be processed in some depth by a representative group from among participants, but from feedback to date it seems that the method by which that dialogue proceeded may have much to recommend it. The key elements, I suggest, include the following.

The profile of participants: lay people from all around the country made up more than half of the gathering of over 200 people. Six bishops participated on the day of the dialogue. Approximately 40 priests and 50 religious (men and women)



completed the gathering. In a real sense, the Church was present in microcosm.

The investment of time in building up relations: members of the gathering had engaged, over a day and a half, in a variety of conversations, formal and informal. While not wiping out the obvious diversity of the group, a noticeable unity had also been generated. The atmosphere was conducive to seeing and hearing one another anew.

The consolidation of common ground: proceedings during the period before the dialogue were deliberately aimed at deepening of understanding and insight, nourishing appreciation and enthusiasm, as well as fostering commitment to the mission which is shared by all in the Church.

Guiding principles: all were encouraged to 'speak with good intention and on purpose, to listen with attention and compassion, and to hold in safety all persons present, as well as persons talked about or even thought about'.

Sectional groups: diversity of vocation and role was recognised and was the basis on which of bishops, priests, religious and lay people were formed.

A focus question: in this case it was 'what are communion and co-responsibility in the church asking of us as bishops/priests/religious/lay people at this time?'

I listened with attention and compassion as spokespersons for ten groups addressed the full gathering after the group conversations. I heard contributions that were real and credible spoken with respect.

The sectional groups were again asked to meet, and to take the questions: what did you hear and what do you want to say now to others in the gathering. This time I heard public expressions of appreciation and commitment.

It was appropriate that at this point the community proceeded to celebrate Eucharist.

No one could expect that this one afternoon's work would be sufficient to our needs as Church at this time, but for further reflections on what we can learn from it about dialogue in our Church watch this space.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> In *Pastoral Ministry for Today*, Tomas Grenham, ed. Dublin: Veritas 2009.