

IMAGINING A CATHOLIC FUTURE

The Tyburn Lecture 2013

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On 21 November 2000 at exactly 8pm, the life of Irish taxi drivers changed irretrievably for the worst. For years their grip on political power, aided by two strong unions The National Taxi Drivers' Union and the Irish Taxi Drivers' Federation, had held the number of such cabs on the ground way below demand. Potential customers queued for hours; taxis were fought over; cabbies made fortunes, licence plates changing hands for as much as £80,000. All meaningful progress was being blocked. Then on that date at that time, with the unions across the road in Buswell's Hotel asked to wait for a phone call, the Minister of State in the Department of Environment Bobby Malloy suddenly and without warning deregulated the industry. With immediate effect anybody could be a taxi driver so long as they had a decent car and paid £100 (if suitable for a wheelchair user) or £5,000 (if just an ordinary vehicle). All they had to do was turn up at the licensing office with a car and their cheque - and they'd leave a taxi-driver. Needless to say the cab drivers revolted: blockading the roads, striking, protesting. There was some violence, and the Minister needed police protection for a while. But then it died down. The customers liked the new dispensation. What had seemed impossible was now suddenly obvious. The arguments against - so compelling so shortly before, backed as they were by power - now seemed beside the point at best, indefensible at worst. A Taxi Hardship Fund was set up, to try to help the worst cases. Some tax relief was thrown their way. But the world had changed. For the taxi-drivers it could no longer be held at bay.

Another world that changed around the same time was that of Harold Gracey, the District Master of the Portadown Orange Order who through the mid to late 1990s had been at the centre of that Order's refusal to accept that their loyalist July march could no longer go down the Catholic Garvaghy Road after leaving Drumcree Church. The Parades Commission banned the procession from taking this route and the violence that followed received global media attention over a number of years. But just as with the taxi drivers (though on a longer time frame) things settled down. The protests thinned out. Gracey found he had fewer and fewer allies. Eventually he ended up in a caravan there by

himself, for nearly a year, supplied with food brought to him by visiting friends and family - but mainly alone. The London *Telegraph's* obituary said of him that he used proudly to refer 'to the example of that earlier Ulsterman, Davy Crockett, at the Alamo, seemingly unaware that Crockett had been killed in that battle.' Unaware too that the Alamo was against the drift of history which was towards Texas and away from Mexico just as only a little while later no short term victory could sustain Texas's independence from the irrepressible United States.

Gracey never worked out how his facts could resist the changing world around him. It is not just a matter of the coercive power of law - though that plays a part. The taxi-drivers congregation of customers let them down, embracing the new world with abandon. Gracey could no longer bend opinion to his view of facts: passion dissipates; attention wanders; 'things move on'. He ends up in a caravan, once a leader of men now an obscure eccentric. But if things do indeed 'move on', should we always move on with them? The greatness of a secular politician lies in his or her ability to spot where history is going and then put him or herself at the head of it, leading followers in a direction that is then seen to work, not so much a caravan on a hill as a citadel of power. On this analysis, like him or loathe him Gerry Adams is a great leader, as was Tony Blair until his wrong-turning over Iraq.

But how does a faith community (which in a way is what Gracey led) cope with change? Surely here world history cannot be as Hegel said always 'a court of judgment'? But is the alternative Gracey's caravan, magnificent but beside the point?

A few years before the very first bouts of violence were exploding at Drumcree, 140 or so years ago, Pius IX was making his own pitch to resist the seemingly irresistible, drawing together in one place (in 1864) a range of propositions, or as they were designated 'errors', which the Church had had occasion in the past to condemn and which denunciations they were now repeating. Read today some of these seem still make sense but many are almost quaint (the error of saying 'The decrees of the Apostolic See and of the Roman congregations impede the true progress of science'; the Church's condemnation of 'the pests' of 'socialism' 'biblical societies' and something called 'clerico-liberal societies'; the supposed mistake in asserting that 'the Church has not the power of using force'). There is no doubt that the Church can say that it has escaped from many of the absolutist positions it then took, albeit a few generations after informed opinion had moved on. We all know the

Galileo story. But in truth the Church's views have not so much changed through the operation of a particularly impressive form of ecclesiastical reflection and reason as been rendered redundant by a shift in power away from it and towards secular and national authority. The revolutions of 1848 had terrified Pius IX into his (in the strict sense) reactionary syllabus of errors and the collapse of temporal power brought about by the unity of Italy six years after its promulgation did more to rebut its underlying force than any amount of thoughtful discussion. It is power that makes truth in the world, not reason. The Popes' Vatican skulk between 1870 and 1929 was the equivalent of Harold Gracey's tenure in his caravan, and just like Gracey's it eventually came to an end.

So after 1870 the Church has only had its flock to worry about, not any longer its land. And it is a flock that now has to be accepted as living either in a geographic space dominated by another religious perspective (Iran; Pakistan; India) or in a secular culture which is more or less hostile to much of what the Catholic Church - shed of its land, wealth and secular power - now stands for. But what does the Church stand for? Only when we answer that can we imagine alternative futures and reflect on which we might want.

Recent years have seen one view in the ascendancy, seemingly utterly entrenched, but – against all possible odds of even just a few months ago – another, extraordinarily different version of being a Catholic seems to be about to break through. Of course I now need to generalise and perhaps even to caricature (this is a short lecture) – but in both generalisation and caricature there will often be found grains of truth and I hope that will be the case here.

The first of the two approaches I am going to discuss began in the latter years of the long rule of Pope John Paul II and was carried on with careful determination by his successor Pope Benedict XVI. Those who find themselves drawn to it strike me as people we can usefully describe as reluctant concessionists. These are the Catholics who, though they might not say it, feel in their heart of hearts that it was the syllabus of errors that was accurate and civil society that has indeed taken a series of wrong turnings. Theirs is a deeply nostalgic view. They celebrate Trent not so much for what it did but for what the Roman Curia then made of it, a centralised, global Papacy. They hanker after a world of papal power but failing that (and even they do not contemplate a winning back of the Papal States by the mustering of that use of force which the Syllabus had claimed as of right) then at very least they

want a world of strong Papal influence over civil society. It was right and proper that the Archbishop of Dublin should have been a key influence in the drafting of the Irish Constitution. Chile's Pinochet may have had his dark side but he had acted decisively against the 'pest of socialism' and did much to secure a respectful position for the Church in the new military state that he went on to entrench. Franco the same. Even Berlusconi – for all his melodramatic histrionics and increasingly overtly pornographic behaviour – listened to the Church and did not act against its wishes. It is the Church that matters, not the individuals within it (much less those who do not belong).

This Church is a church of priests, power and clerical authority, deferring to the Pope, demanding of everyone else. Where civil power does not impose the Church-favoured solutions it desires, then the Catholic flock has a duty to help secure these as a matter of obligation, delivering Church-solutions even where the 'pest' of liberalism insists on leaving the issue to individual conscience. For the reluctant concessionist, it is obvious that all Catholics engaged in public life should act on the basis of their faith, delivered by authority not reason. Professor Tina Beattie should be denied a platform for her views at a Catholic university despite being already invited there because of her being a co-signatory to a letter to the *Times* that is perceived to defy authority on the issue of same-sex marriages. As the then Cardinal Ratzinger (writing, we should note, with the then Archbishop Tarcisio Bertone out of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) put it in 2002: 'The Church recognizes that while democracy is the best expression of the direct participation of citizens in political choices, it succeeds only to the extent that it is based on a correct understanding of the human *person*. Catholic involvement in political life cannot compromise on this principle, for otherwise the witness of the Christian faith in the world, as well as the unity and interior coherence of the faithful, would be non-existent.' It followed that 'a well-formed Christian conscience does not permit one to vote for a political program or an individual law which contradicts the fundamental contents of faith and morals.'¹

Note that this is not about securing conscience rights for Catholics in civil society – not to have to perform an abortion; not to have to assist in a state-sanctioned death; not to have to marry a gay couple. Rather it is concerned with imposing the Catholic view on all. Now from a reluctant concessionists perspective this makes absolute sense: it flows naturally from the view that the Church

¹ **DOCTRINAL NOTE** on some questions regarding The Participation of Catholics in Political Life
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20021124_politica_en.html

is 'a true and perfect society, entirely free' – the denial of which is number 19 in Pius's Syllabus of Errors. Of course not all Catholics are so willing these days to fall into line with an authority no longer backed by civil or even (for many) a credible theological arm. But the reluctant concessionist is ready for this. Lots of countries will continue to supply priests. And anyway if this version of what it means to be Catholic leads to a slimmed down Church, fewer believers, more obedience - then so what; as in previous eras of persecution what will emerge will, like Hopkins's Falcon, be 'a billion times told lovelier more dangerous...'.

And if the laity do not fall into line, whose fault is that? For one of the main protagonists of this approach, Cardinal George Pell, it is they who are often the problem - in a speech in Glasgow in December last year, while condemning those who 'gaze nostalgically at a pre-Conciliar golden age' he went on to note that 'too often Christ was missing from the centre of Christian formation and instead replaced with alternatives such as "global warming; the sustainability of the planet; theorising about social justice."² Perhaps this was why 'most young Catholics [from his country, Australia] talk like relativists, even when their moral views are correct. No longer is there any instinctive acceptance of moral truths, except perhaps in ecology or social justice.' This did not lead Cardinal Pell to any thoughtful reflection on whether Catholic teaching might be somehow in need of scrutiny. Instead the Cardinal argued for a return to traditional teaching on 'the four last things: death, judgement, heaven, hell', for 'if the fires of hell are never populated (in our view), then our life is likely to lack a sense of urgency. If purgatory has lapsed into limbo also, so that we are unconcerned about the necessity of purification before entering into God's presence, then we might be drifting towards supporting an unreflective attitude that heaven is a universal human right.' And - he might have added - end up caring about things like 'ecology' and 'social justice'.

On the platform with Cardinal Pell in Glasgow that day were other speakers who lamented the growth of a secular society driven by 'individualism, hedonism, materialism and narcissism' with 'a deep hostility to gospel truth (especially moral truth) and a determination to drive Christians who affirm those truths out of the public square and into a privatised existence on the margins.'³ The reluctant

² The Tablet 8 December 2012 p 32. Full text at <http://www.thetablet.co.uk/blogs/418/18>

³ Ibid, quoting first Professor John Haldane and second Professor George Weigel.

concessionist hates the triumph of secular society that he or she has been forced to acknowledge, especially when it touches on subjects over which the Church still feels that despite everything it should have total control. Definitions of life and of marriage are their specialist subjects, the areas where temporal defeat has felt the most painful. It is this kind of perspective that makes sense of Pope Benedict's otherwise extraordinary remark at Christmas last year that gay marriage was (with abortion and euthanasia) 'a threat to world peace'. And also Cardinal Brady's recent refusal to refuse to rule out excommunication for those who legislate to implement Ireland's constitutional commitment to balance the life of the unborn child with that of a pregnant woman whose life is threatened by such a pregnancy. To Cardinal Brady such legislation is 'morally unacceptable' and 'may amount to evil'.⁴ Bringing both concerns together in his Christmas homily last year, the Bishop of Shrewsbury called on political leaders to fight for 'the sanctity of human life and the authentic meaning of marriage' which he saw as part of 'a deadly struggle,' – 'nothing less than the defence of Christian civilization'. He made a direct and explicit analogy with Nazism, which 'in living memory' had also 'threatened to shape and distort the whole future of humanity.'⁵

We need, I think, at this point to remind ourselves that under the new legal frameworks being put in place amid widespread democratic support across both Protestant and traditional Catholic countries, that 'gay marriage' will not be compulsory, even for gays – just as there is no proposal for compulsory abortion or coerced decisions to end life. These interventions are about turning influence into power, combating the eightieth error in the syllabus of errors namely that 'the Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization.' If the laity do such reconciling, whether as teachers, legislators or in any other capacity, then that is always their fault, not the Church's. The Bishop of Shrewsbury has brought the Nazis into the discussion. I am reminded of Ian Hargreaves's brilliant description of how Hitler coped with the fact of his collapsing empire: it was not his fault, but rather the German people who had let him down. They were not worthy of his leadership – in a peculiar way, right at the end, he was happy to see the just punishment being meted out to them for their failure.

⁴ *The Irish Independent* 4 May 2013.

⁵ <http://www.dioceseofshrewsbury.org/about-us/homily-for-midnight-mass-at-shrewsbury-cathedral-christmas-2012>

The reluctant concessionist may not want to go so far as this, but the price they then have to pay is hypocrisy. Civil partnership is awful until 'gay marriage' is suggested at which point suddenly the old heresy becomes the rock of common sense. The Church continues to ban contraception where the effect is to undermine the natural law that 'sexual intercourse is an integral act for love and life' as Bishop Egan of Portsmouth put it recently when praising *Humanae Vitae* as 'prophetic'.⁶ Indeed some forms of contraception seem on the church's teaching to kill unborn children because they act to prevent pregnancy after a man's sperm has fertilised a woman's egg. What is Bishop Egan doing about such wholesale mass killing in his diocese? Or any Bishop for that matter? Or Cardinal Brady in relation to the fact that many women among his Irish faithful, North and South, simply go to Britain to (as he should put it if he is being honest) kill their children. Instead he seeks to influence legislators not to pass a law that will never be other than theoretical because all of its work will in reality continue to be done by its neighbour, reliably Godless Britain. Why not tackle that real mass killing? The answer of course is that twenty years ago his predecessors and their enthusiastically hard line laity tried to do exactly that - forcing constitutional change to carry the struggle beyond Ireland's borders, injuncting students for supplying information about abortion overseas, and eventually obtaining a high court order prohibiting a young girl, pregnant as a result of a rape, from leaving God-loving Ireland for God-forsaken Britain. Here though they overreached themselves. The Irish could not cope with the logic of their position - and the Supreme Court came to the rescue with its ruling in what became now as the *X* case. The girl could go.

Germany has just had its *X* case moment. In January this year, a rape victim was turned away from two Catholic hospitals because the doctors treating her feared they would lose their jobs if they advised her about the 'morning after pill'. Surly they were right to be afraid - this is like advising murder, is it not? Seemingly, after all, no. The Archbishop of Cologne Cardinal Meisner has apologised, describing himself as 'deeply ashamed', and promising that in future at Catholic hospitals non-abortifacients could be offered and advice given as to where a termination could be obtained, the sort of advice that had been banned in Germany by John Paul II since 1999. The dirty immoral work is done somewhere else so as to preserve the Catholic position from having to live with the consequences of its perfection.

⁶ *The Tablet* 5 January 2013 p 33.

Fear drove the actions of those German doctors, and fear is perhaps the dominant emotion in reluctant concessionists, fear of Hell, fear of the secular world, fear of change, fear of the future. They spread fear too, the fear of those German doctors, the fear of a person who can deny treatment to a patently sick pregnant woman because 'this is a Catholic country' leading an inquest jury in the west of Ireland to call for clarity in the law so as 'to remove doubt and fear from the doctor...'.⁷ The fear, too, of priests that they will be reported to Rome for the delict of heresy, real or imagined. I have said little about priests in this lecture and won't say much now - other than to guess at how vulnerable such men have felt and how they have been rightly and courageously mobilising in their own defence, like trade union activists in a bygone era of persecution, fighting fear with solidarity.

This is not, now, the only Church on view. I had no idea when accepting the offer to give this lecture that any other vision of the Catholic Church could ever again be other than a shout from the dissenting margins. Perhaps that is what it still is: we shall see. What we do know is that things have become, suddenly, much more interesting. None of us can tell why Pope Benedict so dramatically threw in the towel. I like to think that he had a glimpse of what life would be like in Harold Gracey's caravan, fighting heroically like Pius IX who just like David Crockett lost in the end. Benedict's evangelisation of Europe has failed. Civil society - many Catholics among them - heard what he said, and promptly rejected it, not in the grip of some evil torment, but knowingly and in a thoughtful manner, reasoning back to His Holiness with a different kind of logic. To George Pell and by extension Benedict there is this magnificent answer from a letter-writer to the Tablet, Olive Powell, writing as follows:

'Is Catholic identity to be redefined as fear of damnation and hell? It offers, of course, an easy pathway to substantiating clerical power.... Part of the ebullient atmosphere in the Church following the Second Vatican Council came from deep personal experiences, among both clergy and laity, of being freed from spiritualised threat and fear. The essential motivation to live as Catholic Christians was rediscovered to be love, not terror, bringing the possibility of healthy, adult self-acceptance.'

⁷ David McKittrick *The Independent* 19 April 2013 <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/medical-misadventure-verdict-on-savita-halappanavars-tragic-abortion-death-8580289.html>

The letter, published last Christmas ends by expressing the hope that 'In this Year of Faith' the Pope will 'proclaim afresh that the true urgency in our lives springs only from love'.⁸ Now we have a new Pope and exactly this kind of atmosphere. Our understanding of the Second Vatican Council is not only about such scholastic preoccupations as its continuity with the texts of the past, its connection with Church teaching, its consistency with the past doctrine on this, the past doctrine on that. It is as Olive Powell puts it so well mainly about an atmosphere: one of 'ebullience' 'joy', 'confidence', 'optimism', above all a new fearlessness. Diarmaid MacCulloch recently described it as a place where 'a humanistic culture of poetry and rhetoric flourished'.⁹ This is a vision of the Church not as a reluctant conceder of civil authority but rather as an enthusiastic engager with exactly that society.

In his last interview the great Cardinal Martini lamented that 'the church is 200 years behind the times....Our culture has become old, our churches and our religious houses are big and empty, the bureaucratic apparatus of the church grows, our rites and our dress are pompous.' But then he went on to ask 'Where are the heroes among us who can inspire us?' Well I think we have an answer now, a Pope who takes the name of Francis of Assisi, who sees himself as Bishop of Rome, who lives simply and asks questions about wealth and power, who talks in a clear way about faith and love - the embers are flaring up from beneath the ashes that Cardinal Martini thought had become so deep that he despaired of the light ever returning. As MacCulloch has put it, 'Every move that Francis has made in the opening months of his papacy has represented a confrontation (albeit one characterised by tact, eloquence and grace) with the mentality of the counter-revolutionaries in the Curia.'¹⁰

In his interview Cardinal Martini advised 'the Pope and the bishops to seek out twelve people outside the lines for administrative positions, people who are close to the poorest, who are surrounded by young people, and who try new things.' He thought that we 'need to be with people who burn in such a way that the Spirit can spread itself everywhere.' But then his very last remark was for his interviewer and therefore all of us:

'Now I have a question for you: What can you do for the church?'

⁸ *The Tablet* 22/29 December 2012, p 32.

⁹ *London Review of Books* 9 May 2013, p 28 (Vol 35, no 9)

¹⁰ *Ibid* p 29.

This is a hard question for affluent liberal Catholics. We have become used to the luxury of opposition, the alibi for inactivity so usefully provided by the reluctant concessionaries who have been in power for so long. Disagreeing with them has taken all our energy, postponing discussion of what being a Catholic really means for us. But now we need to answer Cardinal Martini's question.

There are I think three dimensions to it.

The easy part of this lies in doing what we can to reach out from civil society to this new enthusiastic vision of what being a Catholic entails. The obvious embrace needs to be with the proponents of human rights, those vast ranks of good people who are often of Catholic background and who annoy Cardinal Pell so much with their preoccupations with earthly problems. Human rights embrace not just civil and political rights but economic and social rights as well. The idea eschews capitalist hegemony and fights systemic injustice but without being manoeuvred into Marxism. It is perfect for a Church that wishes to care about the poor in a serious (rather than merely opportunistically compassionate) way. Yes there are differences¹¹ - but these can be managed if there is real dialogue and good will on both sides. Why not convene a large scale series of meetings across the world which have as their goal the production of two great declarations, a 'Syllabus of Respectful Disagreement' and a 'Concordat of Shared Goals'? Martini's twelve (I am tempted to say new Apostles) could manage the process. The project could include a search for saints on both sides - and a celebration of the spiritual energy of activists everywhere.

Second there is the personal problem of inequality, for those of us who are so disproportionately affluent. Pope Francis is shocked by the size of the Papal apartments, and chooses instead a modest guest house for his home. How many of us are capable of being shocked by our homes, our diet, by just how rich we are, compared both to the poor here in Britain and much further afield as well? What are we doing about it? Pope Francis challenges us in this way as well.

The toughest challenge of all lies in the realm of faith. Cardinal Martini said this: 'Neither the clergy nor ecclesiastical law can substitute for the inner life of the human person. All the external rules, the

¹¹ See my 'human rights - does faith matter?' in *Religion and Law* (Theos, 2012), 109-116.

laws, the dogmas, are there to clarify this internal voice and for the discernment of spirits.' Do we give this internal voice enough space in our lives? Especially now, with the Holy Spirit having intervened so decisively? We can learn not only from Pope Francis but also from the atmosphere of this beautiful space where we are this evening.

9 May 2013 (FINAL2)