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A time to choose what matters

A priest / university lecturer takes up a challenge from Pope Francis, and asks whether a harmonious and mutually-reinforcing home-school-parish partnership could become a legacy of the Covid-19 tragedy.

Addressing a gathering of Argentinian young people at World Youth Day in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, Pope Francis invited them to go back to their dioceses and shake things up, make a mess (hagan lío!). How might this call apply to youth ministry in a time in which everything appears a mess, when the Covid-19 pandemic has put everything up in the air?

In *Evangelii Gaudium (EG)*, Francis draws on his Ignatian roots, in particular the tradition of discernment, in challenging the Church to place mission at the heart of pastoral structures and activity. He calls for a, 'wise and realistic pastoral discernment', involving the faithful, pastors and bishops, which, 'seeks to abandon the complacent attitude that says: "We have always done it this way"', and which reshapes, 'the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization'. (EG 33). Shaking up structures and methods allows them to be sifted, and to settle in a new configuration, which will bed in and become stable forms which will bear fruit.

The current Covid crisis, which has caused so much pain, loneliness and bewilderment, is also a time in which new creative forms of evangelisation and community life are emerging. Pastors, educators and lay faithful are finding new, experimental ways to worship and communicate the gospel.

How will individual dioceses, parishes and the wider Catholic Church emerge from the pandemic? Which initiatives, methods and structures will settle down, be discerned as possessing long-term value, and be developed in the months to come? Pope Francis has challenged us to exercise judgement during the pandemic, viewed as, 'a time to choose what matters and what passes away, a time to separate what is necessary from what is not'¹. What does this challenge mean for ministry with young people in today's Catholic Church?

Responding to the challenge: predictors of faith

In the past 15 years, several important sociological studies of young Catholics in the UK, Australia and the US have been published, which clarify opportunities for evangelisation and formation. I would like to review the evidence, and apply some of the insights, in order to initiate debate on possible post-Covid futures for Catholic homes, parishes and schools.

In the US, Christian Smith and his team tracked the religious lives, attitudes and practices of a cohort of young people of all faiths and none from their teens (13-18 years of age) to emerging adulthood (18-23 years of age), conducting a phone survey of 2,458 emerging adults and interviewing 230 of them, and subsequently isolating and analysing the data of the 16% who had been brought up or had self-declared as Catholic at age 13-18². The responses of the emerging adults with a strong attachment to their faith and its practice could be recovered from their teenage surveys and interviews, allowing the predictors of a trajectory to young adult faith engagement to be analysed.

Among the predictors of emerging adult faith among teenagers who became religiously engaged emerging adults, those consistently very important are: Strong parental religion, modelling and support; High Importance of Religious Faith; Belief in divine miracles; Many Supportive Religious Adults; Attending a Catholic high school; and Frequent reading of Scripture.

The team found, in addition, that combinations of factors among teenagers are particularly significant as predictors of emerging adult religiosity. The highest combination was [Importance of

Religious Faith + Parental Religion + Supportive Adults in the Congregation + Believe in Divine Miracles] – this gave teenagers a 48% chance of being in the highest category (greater than 75th percentile) of religiosity as emerging adults 5 years later, compared with the highest single factors: Importance of Religious Faith (26%) and Parental Religion (24%).

A study by Crocket and Voas in 2006, based on British Household Panel Survey data, came to a similar conclusion regarding the importance of parental faith in the UK³. Where both parents in a two-parent household practice their faith at least monthly (regardless of religious affiliation / denomination), the chances of their young adult children doing the same was 45%; where one practices it was around 21%, and where neither practices, it fell to around 2.5%. The incidence of teenage children adopting religious affiliation when both parents are religious was 54.8%, one parent religious 30.3%, and neither parent 4%.

A 2019 study in the UK by Francis and Casson involving 2,146 young people aged 13-15 who self-identified as Catholics, updates and confirms Crocket and Voas' insight⁴. They discovered that higher levels of connection to the Catholic faith and church attendance among teenage Catholics significantly correlates with both mother's and father's levels of identity and church attendance, and with talking about religion with their mother and father. Less important but still statistically relevant were peer-related factors, while there was also a minor positive correlation with attending a church school. The findings led the researchers to conclude that,

‘those young people who feel connection with the Catholic Church (by self-identifying as Catholics) seem to do so because their parents see themselves as Catholic. Young Catholics who practise their Catholic identity by attending church seem to do so primarily because their parents are Catholic churchgoers’.

As with Crocket and Voas' study, the influence of both parents operates cumulatively, with the stronger influence being when both parents attend church. In contrast to Crocket and Voas, the 2019 survey was not limited to two-parent households, and the findings apply across the range of whether the parents live together or not. It may also be concluded that in single parent families, the influence of the parent takes on heightened importance.

A more specific finding emerged from an Australian-based 2018 article by Francis et al, which focussed on a sample of 6,256 young Christian churchgoers aged 8-14. The researchers discovered that ‘Parental encouragement, in the sense of offering opportunities to talk about God, is the key positive factor influencing positive attitudes’⁵. The researchers recommend that a strategy is formed by churches to help parents initiate and respond to conversations with their children about God, as well as maximising opportunities for the development of peer friendship networks within the church setting.

Forming a strategy

How might this evidence help form a post-Covid strategy for young people? A first important point which emerges is that the traditional catechetical triangle between home, school and parish, appears to be reaffirmed. Each of them is represented in the ‘consistently very important’ category, and above all, combinations of factors exponentially increase the likelihood of emerging adult faith. How can the triangle be strengthened, and how in particular can school and parish support the home, which appears to be the key?

Faith formation in the home

In light of the evidence, parents should find renewed heart and impetus in the importance of their influence on their children's faith development. They should also be heartened to know that example is key rather than a high level of specialised faith knowledge among parents: 'What parents do is more important than what parents say'⁶. Sociologist of religion Stephen Bullivant applies Heinrich's hypothesis of Credibility Enhancing Displays (CREDS) to this phenomenon: if a person undertakes something difficult for the sake of a cause, it increases the plausibility in the eyes of others, especially those who give credibility to the person as a role model. e.g. a young person towards a parent⁷.

The Covid-19 lockdown has precipitated the unprecedented closing of churches for many months: in light of the importance of parental influence, could a balanced, harmonious and mutually-reinforcing home-school-parish partnership be a legacy of the tragedy? This year Catholics have had to celebrate Holy Week in a more creative way: by making Palm Sunday door displays from greenery or paper crosses, taking the family crucifix from the wall to kiss it on Good Friday, or making an Easter garden from spring flowers. Post-Covid, could families continue to learn new skills and develop the potential for a home-centred catechetical and devotional life?

In a thought-provoking Tablet article during lockdown, Fr David Neuhaus SJ wrote about celebrating Passover with his Jewish family⁸. He reminds readers that Jewish tradition was changed radically after the destruction of Temple in 70AD, after which a complete reimagination of what it meant to be Jewish had to take place: its sacred centre moved from the Temple to the synagogue and family table. The core of the e.g. the Passover and sabbath celebrations are the family meal, accompanied by beloved traditions of the lighting of candles and the sharing of food. The table becomes a place of prayer: a more full, conscious and active participation could not be imagined. Neuhaus wonders whether Christian families could learn from their Jewish cousins and imbue family meals with a more sacred significance.

These sentiments echo those of American spiritual writer Richard Rohr. He calls for a rediscovery of the sacredness of everyday life, and the common priesthood of the baptised reaffirmed around the family table, with the parents presiding: 'maybe God is calling his Church to resanctify the home and to relocate the ordinary feasts there'⁹. He points out that children and young people thrive on traditions and rituals, which give a rootedness to family worship and faith identity. Rohr's insight represents a deeply Catholic view of a sacramental world and the sacredness of the family, and both he and Neuhaus may well provide a prophetic voice for the post-Covid future. A slow accumulation of family faith traditions – building from a simple washing of hands before meals, lit candle and grace before meals – can enrich family life, whether or not the family has a dining table, and whatever they are eating.

Families will require help in all of these endeavours. In light of the findings discussed above, Francis and Casson recommend to bishops and pastors that they should prioritise invest in the education and formation of Catholic parents. If this is so, how can schools and parishes truly support and empower parents and families?

Schools supporting parents

During lockdown and its aftermath, the home has become the site of learning in the absence of school. While not suggesting that this is an ideal situation, it may be that some initiatives from that period may be of lasting value: parents may have gained some confidence and skills by virtue of becoming more involved in their children's learning, while teachers may have developed new creative pedagogies and means of communication with parents and pupils. Could some of this be

carried forward in the religious sphere? Focussed tasks, investigations and other activities based at home could augment classroom learning: these need not be onerous, and could be engaging, fun and proportionate. In the primary sector, home/school workbooks have been a successful feature of sacramental preparation in Scotland for many years. Similar workbooks could be created for year groups in the non-sacramental preparation years, and/or for other liturgical seasons, supporting parents in speaking to their children about God. The creativity of teachers would generate many more ideas.

During the lockdown, organisations such as diocesan RE advisers, Catholic development charities, and ITE providers such as the St Andrew's Foundation, have been producing tweets with daily creative RE suggestions, videos and online prayer resources for teachers, parents, students and children, which could be maintained post-Covid. There are also many websites and blogs offering suggestions of crafts, prayers and food for every liturgical season and feast day. The school (and parish) could act as a conduit, directing regular focussed communications to parents regarding digital resources for family prayer, catechesis and celebration.

Despite the burgeoning online opportunities, there appears to be emerging evidence of an increasing attainment gap in general learning during lockdown along socio-economic lines, exacerbated by lack of connectivity. Much thought and ingenuity would have to be employed in finding local practical solutions which build support, confidence and capacity among parents, and which avoid over-reliance on technology. In addition, the supportive, formal role of the Catholic school will continue to be essential, without it having to bear sole responsibility for faith formation.

Parishes supporting parents

How might parishes support parents? High quality liturgy and opportunities for social gathering after Sunday Mass can foster a welcoming environment, attractive to young people and parents alike, helping to cement relations with supportive religious adults and nurturing peer friendship networks. Post-Mass gatherings can also provide a model for home-centred liturgy – themed decoration, food, prayers, and song. Parishes could also take the opportunity to review their own part in sacramental preparation, by e.g. considering adopting peer-led programmes such as Faith Friends, which is led largely by parish teenagers.

Parish social media can also provide a platform to share good news stories, advertise initiatives, and project an impression of an alive parish, as well as creating supportive networks among parents and young people. In the Covid aftermath, parishes can continue to employ their new-found focus, technical ability and creativity to provide encouragement, and foster digital community and the sharing of resources. Young parishioners can take the lead in such digital outreach. Once normality returns, parishes could also intentionally plan to equip parents with knowledge, skills and confidence for faith formation, for example via pre-sacramental catechesis for parents, and focus on family-friendly liturgy and social events to grow a supportive community of parents.

Of course, young people are not just recipients of faith formation: they are the Church, and are essential not least to support the faith of their peers. Much of the spiritual energy in Scottish Catholic Church today (and no doubt elsewhere) comes from young people responding to the needs of others: HCPT – The Pilgrimage Trust, the hospice movement, SCIAF/Missio/Mary's Meals, pro-life initiatives, and clubs for those with additional learning needs to name a few. Parishes would do well to discern new needs and empower young people to respond. For example, the Covid crisis has highlighted and exacerbated loneliness among older people at home or in care homes, who in future

could be visited by teams of young parishioners. In these and other ways, young parishioners can help to shape the future in very specific ways.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 crisis is occasioning much soul-searching and speculation about how the pandemic will shape future societies in myriad unpredictable ways. Pope Francis call in *Evangelii Gaudium* for a discernment of pastoral structures and their efficacy for mission, and his view of the pandemic as a crucible for judgement of our priorities, place the Catholic Church and its mission to the young in the spotlight. Forced to rethink Catholic life by the suspension of worship and Catholic schooling, the time may be ripe for a re-evaluation of who, where, and how the Catholic faith can be presented, transmitted and embraced as a living salvific message of hope to a new generation. A true partnership among families, teachers, clergy and religious, fellow parishioners and peers, can help young Catholics to embrace the faith of their childhood become the saints of the 21st century.

Fr Stephen Reilly is Co-ordinator of Spiritual and Pastoral Formation at the School of Education at the University of Glasgow. He is a priest of the Diocese of Motherwell and former parish priest, school chaplain, diocesan RE advisor, seminary teacher and pastoral centre director.

¹ Pope Francis, *Extraordinary Moment of Prayer and Urbi et Orbi*, 27th March 2020

² Smith, C., K. Longest, J. Hill, and K. Christoffersen, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults In, Out Of, and Gone From the Church*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014)

³ Crocket, A., and Voas, D., Generations of Decline: Religious Change in Twenty-first Century Britain. In *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 45/4 (2006), pp.567-84

⁴ Francis, L. J., and Casson, A., Retaining young Catholics in the church: assessing the importance of parental example. *Journal of Religious Education* 67:1 (2019), pp. 1- 16

⁵ Francis, L. J., Penny, G. & Powell, R., Assessing peer and parental influence on the religious attitudes and attendance of young churchgoers: exploring the Australian National Church Life Survey, *Journal of Beliefs & Values* 39:1 (2018), pp.57-72.

⁶ Francis, L. J., and Casson, A. (2019), online.

⁷ Bullivant, S., *Mass Exodus. Catholic Disaffiliation in Britain and America since Vatican II*. (Oxford: OUP, 2019) p.105

⁸ Neuhaus, D., Learning from our Jewish Neighbours. *The Tablet*, 18/4/20. p10

⁹ Rohr, R., *Hope Against Darkness: The Transforming Vision of St Francis in an Age of Anxiety*. (Cincinnati: St Anthony Messenger Press, 2011). p.64