

Response to the Surveys (clergy and laity) 21 Century Faith in the Republic and Northern Ireland

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This large scale survey is timely and to be commended in its scope of questions and issues of concern. In particular, it is elucidating not only to study the results in tables but to read the wide range of answers, some of which hit right into the centre of the divisions, prejudices and myths that continue to prevail amongst some Christians in Ireland.

In the following I will reflect on several theological, ecclesiological and social issues pertaining to the report:

1. Survey as a method in ecclesiology and ecumenism

I was particularly heartened by this survey, as it is a rare occasion where one gains an insight into contemporary faith life.

Karl Rahner's wrote, over thirty years ago, to take seriously the 'factual faith of the people' in relation to working towards church unity. Rahner noted that what the believer *actually* receives in his or her own church is basically to be found in all churches: belief in God, the acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as saviour, forgiveness of sins, prayer and hope for eternal life. Thus he advocated the 'normative meaning of factual faith', the operative theology of the faithful, as one might put it, as a point of reference in our search for unity.

In many ecumenical documents mention is made of the apostolicity of the whole church. This includes foremost the people of God and then the tiny percentage of theologians and church leaders. However, while the people of God are referred to in most ecumenical documents, their actual life of faith is neither examined in detail nor taken seriously as a contributing factor in dialogues. Theological-sociological studies and

surveys among denominations would be of revelatory significance how *de facto* apostolicity, catholicity, holiness and unity are lived and understood among contemporary believers. In short, it would be significant to find out how the people of God understand their faith and the role the church plays in and for their life of faith.

As theologians, we often may not like to admit what appears to be true, namely that most theologians and *episcopoi* would not consider it worthwhile undertaking such investigations, as bishops and theologians - and not the people - are theologically trained and thus, as one might put it, basically “know more and know better”. Naturally such analyses would be large-scale undertakings as such surveys would have to be conducted in local churches. But it would indicate that those who engage in dialogues and those who are responsible for reception are truly serious about ... the *whole* church, and that “the people of God” does not simply connote a politically-correct theological term. With insights gained from such studies – which could be started in local, national contexts - ecumenical dialogue in general and a commonly worked-out understanding of the marks of the church in particular, would become a more holistic enterprise, in which church dogma, contemporary theological discourse and the actual faith of the people of God could be integrated into a credible, systematic and practical ecclesiology.

In order to reach new perspectives ecumenical bilaterals and multi-laterals could take into account the hermeneutical principles which liberation theology started over thirty years ago: 1. to be guided by and investigate the actual faith contexts of the people, 2. to confront these results with church dogma, creeds, confessions and academic theology, and 3. to draw some comprehensive, synthetic, and hopefully inspiring conclusions.

Realistically, such studies cannot always be undertaken, nor are they essential or even to be recommended in relation to every issue. Official dialogues need to be continued as they have built on one another. Yet, this kind of method might be employed and tried out on certain, mutually agreed themes – especially those where dialogues have reached an impasse - and it would definitely offer new insights. Not only would the results be interesting in themselves, but they could instil renewed life into the ecumenical movement at large. Most importantly, such methods would transcend the lip service so often paid to the importance of the people of God. Moreover, it could also further

collaboration by theologians of various denominations, as advocated in the Charta Oecumenica.

Despite some problematic factors which are associated with surveys of this kind – such as, for example, bias or agendas which might be evident in survey participants' responses – I hope there will be further similar surveys, both in Ireland and abroad.

2. Improving perceptions of the concepts of 'reconciliation' and 'ecumenism':

What emerges from the two surveys is the need for a comprehensive effort to create a more positive understanding of 'reconciliation' and 'ecumenism'. While the majority of the respondents, both lay and clergy, have realistic ideas of what these terms connote, there are responses which indicate distorted, ill-informed and cynical conceptions. In the light of the snail's pace in ecumenical reception, on the one hand, and the prejudiced views of some members of churches towards another, this result does not surprise. However, it behoves the churches and ecumenical bodies in Ireland to make a decided attempt to attend to the need for well-informed and more positive ideas on these issues, especially in churches in Northern Ireland. The entrenched anti-ecumenical expressions in the survey, even if relatively few, are somewhat shocking, especially in the light of the Good Friday Agreement and the many ecumenical ventures which have been undertaken over several decades in this part of the island.

A concrete suggestion: The ISE in conjunction with all churches in Ireland could produce a brief, attractive pamphlet which explains both terms, 'reconciliation' and 'ecumenism', and present an outline in which future key issues in ecumenism and reconciliation in Ireland are addressed. This pamphlet could be distributed in all congregations North and South and could be received and discussed at local parish level. - The cynicism about, and consequent disinterest in, Ecumenism which now prevails with some may hopefully be counteracted by such an initiative.

3. 'Evangelical' – what does it mean?

In the survey a great number of respondents referred to themselves as 'Evangelical', in fact, a much higher percentage than one would have expected. It would be worthwhile to investigate further, i.e. by survey, interview or other means, what 'evangelical' means for

clergy and lay people and how it differs to those who would not refer to themselves as such.

Is it largely a negative term used to separate oneself from others? Is it positive with a simple stress on spreading the gospel without fundamentalist implications? What could the notion of 'evangelical' *positively* contribute to ecumenical dialogue, reconciliation and the universal church?

Moreover, it would be worth considering how the focus among some Protestant responses which evidenced a decided focus on the centrality of salvation in Christ could be appropriated positively in ecumenical discussion and ecumenical activity.

4. Clergy and laity: Call to renewed commitment to ecumenism

In a general context of growing apathy towards ecumenism it is not surprising that clergy spend less than 10% of their time on ecumenical activities. Thus all churches and ecumenical bodies ought to work towards a re-visioning of ecumenism and together call for, and encourage, ecumenical renewal and commitment. Church unity does not happen overnight; it is an ongoing process. Therefore ecumenical activities on parish, diocesan and national levels need to be furthered. This means in particular that clergy and laity in all churches are continually encouraged to engage in ecumenical initiatives. Given the sharp historical divisions among Protestants and Catholics in Ireland in the past, one is almost taken aback to read that over 48% of the laity in this survey have never been involved in any ecumenical endeavours.

5. Individualism and the Church

One of the most striking results of the survey is the minor influence of faith leaders in people's thinking about religion, God, and the experience of faith. This is not altogether surprising given that we now live in a culture which largely advocates individualism and materialism. In short and simplified: the richer we are, the less we seem to need God, the church and even each other. In addition, the horrific church abuses have been influential in creating cynicism and even hostility towards the church in recent years.

However, this trend is also reflective of more long-term developments: the Protestant tendency towards a more private faith, and the legacy of Vatican II which

encouraged a more personally oriented faith and the appreciation of individual conscience in ethical decision-making.

Against this background, ministers of faith are challenged to lead lives which give true witness to their faith, and to preach with insight and conviction. It is obvious from the survey that people long for authenticity and a faith which does not shy away from action. Faith and action must go hand in hand, as otherwise the profession of faith is not credible. It is not by chance that people like Frère Roger of Taizé, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Mother Teresa, Oscar Romero and Martin Luther King inspired thousands. Each of these witnessed an openly professed faith by personal discipleship and action. Prophetic voices *and* prophetic action are essential to make people think again of how being Christian without community is ultimately empty, as God in Godself is a loving communion in tri-unity. Love, or being a follower of Christ without others, is, of course, a contradiction in terms.

6. Prophetic witness

One respondent noted that the churches should speak out louder and more boldly. This suggestion is to be taken seriously. Faith leaders should not be afraid to speak out for reconciliation and ecumenism. And it would be desirable that they frequently will speak with *one* voice. If church leaders refrain from, or do not think it important to speak in some unison at least, they can hardly expect their flock to take the need for reconciliation and church unity seriously. In this, church leaders must not only agree on the contents of what they say, but be aware of how they say it.

In this context, too, it is appropriate to keep in mind that Jesus lived and preached the radical message of the kingdom of God, a kingdom wholly other to any neo-capitalist, oppressive and totalitarian systems, i.e. to what makes up the status quo in most cultures. In that sense the church has a prophetic mission, challenging thereby all that which opposes peace, justice and the good stewardship of creation. Terry Eagleton, in his recent book, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, puts this in no uncertain terms: ‘Any preaching of the Gospel which fails to constitute a scandal and affront to the political state is in my view effectively worthless.’ (p.58) His words may be somewhat extreme but he has a point.

7. Towards an ecumenical manifesto in an Irish context

The Charta Oecumenica was published in 2001. A short document, it was 'designed to promote [in Europe] an ecumenical culture of dialogue and co-operation at all levels of church life, and to provide agreed criteria for this. However, it has no magisterial or dogmatic character, nor is it legally binding under church law. Its authority will derive from the voluntary commitments of the European churches and ecumenical organisations. Building on this basic text, [the churches]... can formulate their own local addenda, designed to meet their own specific challenges and resulting commitments.'

Thus, clergy from all faith communities in Ireland might reflect on appropriating this Charta in an Irish context and draw up a manifesto or Charta to which they would commit. However, it has to be said that many of the ideas expressed in the Charta Oecumenica have yet to be fully realised. As is often the case with ecumenical documents, theoretical aspirations and their practical concretization do not quite go hand in hand. Yet, the Charta might give impetus to the Irish Churches to come up with our own ecumenical manifesto. - However, one should stress that such an undertaking would only be fruitful if the Churches were committed to put their ideas into practice.

Further points for future discussion:

- Religious education: multi-denominational schools as an important way forward in reconciliation in the North of Ireland
- An urgent concern for all Christian denominations and religions: The Ecological Imperative