

Forward Together in Hope

18 March 2015

Every year I spend time with the young people of the Diocese at our Diocesan Youth Council, and this year was no exception. Last Saturday I spent almost all day in the Youth Village listening to what our young people had to say. I always find it uplifting and enriching to spend time with these dedicated, committed and questioning young people who are searching for ways to deepen their relationship with Christ. They are very keen to belong to the Church, very keen to be part of it, very keen to contribute to it and want to be listened to in it. It was a reminder of one of the things Cardinal Tagle of Manila said in Wembley arena the week before at the Flame Conference: 'Young people have a great desire to belong to something bigger than themselves, to counter individualism'. This was my experience of being with young people at the Youth Village last weekend.

I have been thinking about the questions young people ask, the vision they have and their amazing capacity to keep in touch with each other through social media, and I've been wondering what huge changes have taken place in our Church in the Diocese over the years I have ministered here. I've been helped to understand this a little more clearly as the result of an article I read recently in the Irish Pastoral Magazine, *The Furrow*. It was about a remarkable French layman, Friedrick von Hugel. He lived between 1852 and 1925, and lived most of his life in England because it was easier for him to explore his ideas about the Church in this country than in France. His understanding of how we grow in the faith is helping me appreciate what has happened over the last 50 years and how we might need to face the next 50 years.

Von Hugel believed that when we're very young we need a strong 'Institutional' dimension to our faith, we need to have a deep sense of belonging to people of faith, we need clear beliefs and a sense of God through our religious rituals, liturgy and teaching. This stage helps us feel safe and secure, we feel certain about things.

As we get older it is vital for us to ask questions, to enter what he calls a 'Critical' phase of life. This can happen for some people during their teenage years, when we need to question so much in order to find meaning for ourselves. We need to appreciate that there are some things in our religion that are more important than others, that being part of a religious gathering can indeed enrich my life. We might question the story of Adam and Eve and begin to discover that our choices can be either good or bad. This searching and questioning feeds our minds and offers us an opportunity to make our own the teaching we received when we were young. This stage needs to be encouraged and supported. There can be no questions that cannot be asked.

The hope is, that as individuals and communities, we eventually move into a final phase of faith which he calls 'Mystical'. This is where we know in our hearts that we are loved unconditionally by God, God knows us personally. We simply become grateful people. We may find ourselves drawn to silence and stillness. It is also the time when we move to becoming more compassionate. In general we move from being concerned with accumulation, achievement and approval, to contemplation, companionship and compassion. It's not that we become more complacent and distant from the terrible things going on in the world. Indeed what hurts any of our sisters and brothers will hurt us. It is more that we wonder how God sees the world we live and ask how we might contribute to alleviating suffering, speak the truth about our world and seek to appreciate the presence of God in everything and everyone around us.

Going back to the Youth Council...I remember a few years ago when I met with them, they said: 'Now we asked you questions in the past, we would like you to ask us some questions'. I forget what questions I put to them, but it was very interesting to hear what they had to say to me. One of the things they said to me was: 'We get the information about things in our schools, but we need more. We need that will move from the head to the heart, we need something that speaks to our hearts, something that will give meaning to our experience'. They said: 'Just because we're young doesn't mean that we are only interested in noise and loud music. We need education in stillness and silence, so that we can get in touch with what is going on deep within us.' That is a very important lesson for us to learn, because there is so much emphasis on doing things instead of being. Very often we are just existing and not living, not getting in touch with what is going on deep within us.

It must be about 30 years ago I heard Fr Hugh Lavery saying something like this: 'The Word of God must move from the Bible into the head, but it must not stay in the head, it must move into the heart. When it moves into our heart it brings about transformation and change in our lives. Then we can speak with conviction with authority. We will not be speaking with the small part of our bodies we call the head, we will be speaking with the whole of our being. There will be force and power behind it.'

I also remember hearing someone say recently: 'When it moves from the head it must move not just to the heart but to the feet, in the sense that we go out there and we evangelise.' We must go out there and touch the world with our lives and transform it. When we touch the world and transform it then we are true disciples and living the kind of life that Christ wants us to live.

When I joined the diocese in 1966, six weeks after my ordination, that's almost 49 years ago, the 2nd Vatican Council had just finished. At that time we were being invited by the Fathers of the Church to move from being too Institutional to become more open to new ideas, to become immersed in the Scriptures. At that time there was the opening up of the Word of God, and thank God in our Church today there is that terrific emphasis on the Word of God. More and more people are opening the Bible, more and more people are praying

the Word of God and allowing that Word to come into their lives, influence their lives and have a transforming effect. It also emphasised the need to engage with the hopes and fears and anxieties of the men and women of our time. We are still engaged in this new learning and searching. This came through to me with our young people, they are searching for meaning, they want to go deeper.

Some of us find it very difficult to move from a strictly Institutional understanding of faith and Church to something more critical, more open and more inclusive. It is important to emphasise the need to question. Questioning seeking deeper understanding. It is then that we deepen our faith.

Again, Hugh Lavery said: 'Tradition is not a question about being stuck in the past. If we are stuck in the past, we're dead.' Tradition springs from the past, we build on the past, live in the present and look to the future with hope.

Some of us find it very difficult to move. We are all at different stages, but we are all gifted with the charism of Baptism and the call become disciples of Jesus in our world today.

I just want to emphasise about Forward Together in Hope. It is not necessarily about closing churches or closing buildings. More than likely, some churches will have to be closed, we have to face reality. But the emphasis is on discipleship. How can we become living, vibrant communities? That is what our Church is about – Discipleship.

Our hope is that we will, as we mature as individuals and communities, become more compassionate, more grateful, more contemplative, or, as Von Hugel calls it, more mystical. Cardinal Tagle might say that we become people 'looking beyond ourselves'. This is certainly not about becoming so 'heavenly minded that we are no earthly use', it is about not forgetting the institution or the questions, it is about wondering and being open to the guiding Spirit urging us to see deeply into our world to discover the presence of God within it. We don't let go of our belonging to the Institution and we don't stop asking questions, we move from our heads and our controlling way of doing things into our hearts and a more risky way of seeing things and people.

We can feel very secure with laws and rules and regulations but if we are just sticking to laws and rules and regulations, we won't grow. Our faith will not be deepened.

That great German theologian, Karl Rahner, once said: 'The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he or she will not exist at all, if by mysticism we mean...a genuine experience of God emerging from the very heart of our existence.'

That is the key, entering into a deep and person relationship with Christ. Getting to know him, not just getting to know about him. Not keeping the information in our heads, but letting it move into the heart, experiencing the power of God deep within us.

I firmly believe that the call to Discipleship which is at the very heart of Forward Together in Hope is a call to go on this journey. It will help us deepen our knowledge and love of Jesus, to think about how we live as Christians in our world, and eventually to appreciate the profound and reckless love that God has for each one of us. I hope that you will all do everything you can to fully engage in this Renewal process so that everyone in the Diocese can accept the invitation to journey towards the future with Hope.

Thanks to the article by Philip McParland in the February (?) Edition of the Furrow.