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A Church of Many Faces

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There’s a story about the great homecoming party they gave for Jesus after he ascended into heaven. During the celebrations the angel Gabriel got into conversation with him. “I’ve often wondered how things went after my visit with Mary in Nazareth got things started,” Gabriel said. “Well,” said Jesus, “I think I got something started too.” “You only got it started? Didn’t you finish what you went down there to do?” asked Gabriel. “No,” said Jesus. “But I left my friends behind to finish it for me.” Gabriel thought for a moment. “And what if they don’t do that?” Jesus answered, “I don’t have any other plan.”

Jesus got something started. It’s up to us as church to carry it forward. Our job as church is to embody Jesus in our time and place. Our challenge is to enable people to say of us, “I look at you. I read the gospels. The two coincide.”

**Portraying Jesus**

Each of us reveals one or other aspect of the gospel — none of us embodies Jesus fully. We each portray one or other partial image of Jesus of Nazareth, a portrait that takes shape gradually through the living and dying, the give and take, the speaking and listening, the teaching and learning spread over our time on earth.

Our own face has changed since our youth. Recently I came across a group photo of our Under 11s rugby team from St. Mary’s College, Dublin. I invited some friends of mine to pick me out from the fifteen players. When they had some difficulty doing so, I was somewhat surprised — surely I hadn’t changed all that much? The truth is, I had changed (for better or for worse, I did not dare ask).

So it is with church — changed over time, challenged to belong to each century so as to enable Christ to belong to all centuries. I recall John Deane’s conversation with his intrusive God:

“Translate me into this, your century” — the church enables Christ to belong to all centuries. Or, at least, that’s what we’re called to do.
The “churches”

There are those who see the church as something eternal and unchanging — the one (and only) true church. On the other hand, those who rejoice in the fact that the church today is not the church they grew up in give thanks that it is possible for the church to change. They can’t wait for some more changes to occur.

St. Paul never wrote to “the church” as such. He sent his letters to the church in Corinth with its particular issues and problems, to the churches in Galatia with their concerns, to the church in Philippi. The “churches” Paul addressed were small local churches in Greece, Turkey and Rome. No two churches had the same type of members, no two had the same issues, and no two were asking the same questions.

Then came the churches of North Africa, the many churches of the Middle East, the local churches in nearly every European country, the somewhat independent monastic churches in Ireland, Scotland and England. Over time these various churches became centralized under the Bishop of Rome or the Bishop of Constantinople (Istanbul) — political power and church governance went hand in hand.

Later, the overseas conquests of different kings and queens enabled the European churches to establish themselves in India, North and South America, somewhat tentatively in Asia and more solidly in Africa. Their main focus was to transplant the European model of church to other cultures — with mixed results. I remember the photos from Nigeria we received in our seminary in Dublin — Nigerian schoolgirls doing Irish dancing. How successful we were becoming!

A multicultural church

But dissenting voices were heard — was Jesus a European? Wasn’t he a Palestinian Jew? Does he not belong to all people? The word “inculturation” began to be heard — let each tribe and tongue and people and nation appropriate him as one of their own. The Risen Christ transcends any one cultural or ethnic category. A multicultural church gives new life to Christianity.

A Ugandan bishop pleaded:

“Help us discover our own riches. Don’t judge us poor because we lack what you have … Don’t judge us backward simply because we don’t follow your stride … Don’t judge us ignorant because we can’t read your signs … Be with us and be open to what we can give … Be with us as companions who walk with us neither behind nor in front.”

Today we are being challenged to move from a know-it-all church to a learning church. Seen through the eyes of others,
Jesus becomes a richer person — we gain new insights into his life, his words, his focus, and his stories. The church is no longer a one-size-fits-all group. It is a living organism that interacts with its environments and by so doing changes and grows.

To which there arises a pull in the opposite direction — let’s unify practice and teaching across the world so that wherever we go we’ll meet the same church.

The tug of war continues — sometimes peacefully, sometimes angrily.

**Movement or Institution?**

Our church began as a Jesus movement. This paradoxical man saw things differently, he had God’s viewpoint on life and people. His immediate followers saw him in action and “picked up his moves”. They remembered his stories drawn from the world of nature and daily life. They recalled his healings. They spoke about the kingdom of God just as he did. They could not forget how he announced this kingdom to the poor — those in want, those who were sick, those who were treated unjustly. They — those who who were oppressed by the system, those who were headed for eternal damnation. Because these new world people were so different — physically, culturally and linguistically — Europeans regarded them as inferior. Colonialism and mission went hand in hand in the right to have colonies carried with it the duty to christianize the colonized. The church did not go overseas to learn. It went as a powerful adjunct of the colonizers. It made some minor adaptations to the local cultures, but was not open to any fundamental change. One new development, not without its pains and challenges, was the entry into the mission fields of women religious.

Missions were also organized for the re-conversion of Europe, partly in response to the Reformation. Catholics renewed their emphasis on their church as the one true church.

In our time

Four major shifts in mission thinking occurred at Vatican II (1961-1964):

(i) It is of the very nature of the Church and the Christian to be missionary. In the final lines of Matthew’s gospel the risen Christ commissions his followers: “Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to all creation.” This is to be done not by conquest but through dialogue, sharing, witness and service.

(ii) The church is a pilgrim people on a journey. No longer seen as a perfect society, the most complete possible presence of God on earth, the church becomes more ready to adapt to its surrounding environment. It becomes somewhat more humble, willing to enter into dialogue with the world.

(iii) The church is encouraged to read “the signs of the times”. Nothing that is genuinely human should fail to find an echo in our hearts. We do not claim to be the kingdom of God: outside the church there is salvation. We are no longer so ready to proclaim ourselves as the one true church.

(iv) The church sees positive values in Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. It fosters dialogue with these and other religious traditions not only to learn about them but also to discern in them pathways to God. Our superiority complex has given way to greater humility and hospitality.

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very ordinary, discriminated against, oppressed by the system, those who were sick, those who were treated unjustly. They remembered how he brought about new relationships between Jews and Romans, free people and slaves, women and men, rich and poor. They remained as small, unimportant groups in a society that didn’t pay all that much attention to them.

A few hundred years later this Jesus movement had grown into an institution. Having found its feet in the Roman world, it developed its own sacramental way of life, it spent time setting up institutions and legislation, and it produced its doctrines. It began to interact with the surrounding Greek culture. Once its message reached the borders of the Roman Empire it presumed it had reached the ends of the earth. It settled down.

**Outreach**

Latin gradually replaced Greek as the spoken language. Various controversies arose and Augustine of Hippo, North Africa, became the chief debater against the “heretics”; those who viewed human beings as capable of attaining the good life all by themselves without the help of divine grace.

The doctrine of original sin entered the picture — we needed the grace of God to combat our evil tendencies. Augustine also insisted that “outside the church, there was no salvation.” So the church must seek to convert those outside and converts must be baptized as soon as possible.

After Augustine came the monks who desired to extend the benefits of monastic life to the people in the surrounding area. St. Patrick viewed monasteries as we view today’s parishes: centres of outreach to the surrounding area. The Benedictines followed suit developing local agriculture and centres of education. “They made an Eden in the wilderness”, wrote Cardinal Newman. Later on came the Franciscan and Dominican Orders. They concentrated on urban outreach and taught in the universities.

**Colonialism and Mission**

European colonization of Africa, America and Asia followed. In the 1600s a new era of missionary expansion began —