



COURAGEOUS CONVERSATIONS – Dedicated to Dialogue *(by Daniel O’Leary)*

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*ACTA stands for ‘A Call to Action’. It is a new ‘movement’ comprising lay, religious and ordained Catholics who are anxious about the future of the Church in the UK. This is the text of the keynote address at their national meeting in Leeds earlier this month.*

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*Put yourself in courageous conversation with the cliff-edge of your life, no matter how frightening it seems. Courageous conversation needs courageous hearts (David Whyte)*

There is a terrible power in fear. There is a transforming power in courage. As is well known by informed Roman Catholics in England and Ireland, fear is a deadly virus at the core of so many of our current Church misfortunes. On the one hand it leads to the silence of the bishops, the silence of the priests, and, on the other, to the silencing of both. It is at the heart of the sex-abuse scandal. And at the heart of clericalism.

There can be no courageous conversations while clericalism sits at the table. Because clericalism cannot converse – it operates on a one-way system. It is wired for transmission only, not reception. It has no imagination. Nor can it really reflect on itself. Albert Einstein once remarked, ‘The system/thinking/consciousness that brings about its own collapse can never be the cause of its own renewal’.

So, first we acknowledge the fear in ourselves. Then we face the negative attitudes of bishops, other priests and parishioners who disagree and resist and oppose our purposes, our efforts to make a difference. Is it fear that keeps priests from coming to our meetings? It is – but not always. Last week I asked that question of a few priests who came to a local ACTA gathering; ‘We are not



afraid of what others may say about us' they said, 'we're here because we love the Church'.

#### THE QUESTION OF ANGER

What kind of image do we want to create for ourselves in ACTA? Friendly, compliant, flexible? It won't be easy, for many people in our ACTA meetings, to be true to their strong feelings and yet to dialogue in a very controlled, polite and politically-acceptable way. Many feel deeply about the injustices of past dismissive and prejudiced decisions by various hierarchies, the unnecessary suffering put on so many of God's People – and they do not want to be forever complicit in those decisions. There are, then, many people with much anger in them, even much rage. This is only too understandable. Jesus was often that way too. His anger was a very a fierce one, a very justifiable one – and a very human one.

There is a question here - should we be careful about expressing our emotions and disagreements too forcibly about many things? Or not? But we still are committed to speak 'truth to power'. We can be *too* careful, *too* anxious about staying on the right side of the hierarchy so as not to be scapegoated as dangerous, disobedient or aggressive? One factor here is, that as long as we are obedient and non-threatening, we can easily be side-lined or ignored, as so often before. But might we gain more clout and respect by saying things honestly and openly as we feel them? It might – but it is a risky business! Yet sometimes it is only when faced with large numbers of motivated, well-prepared and persistent people that institutions begin to listen. At this stage in our evolution there is a need to anticipate the twists and turns of the road ahead.

There are many lessons we can learn from the painful journey of the Irish Priests' Association and the Austrian 'We Are Church' story. One thing is sure – the road ahead will be no easy ride, no primrose pathway through applauding crowds, only a rocky, risky climb up uncharted mountains and cliffs of fall. If we



want to find the perfect way, there isn't one. We chart our own course in the ever-new Spirit – for others to follow if they wish.

Now Jesus and the two Francises *were* and *are* trouble-making challengers and a nuisance to the *status quo*. 'A Call to Action' and 'Courageous Conversations' are very active words. To keep people interested, hopeful and actively involved, it is important to remember they need signs, this time round, that we intend to follow through on our aims. Some ACTA groups have warned about being talking-shops of discontent rather than engaging with hierarchies in a definitive way.

Here again, depending on the situation in each diocese, the softly-softly approach may be the wisest whereas, in places where a bishop refuses to meet up with ACTA members, another strategy must be discerned and pursued. Either way, what is important is to be self-aware, authentic and compassionate. And vigilant. Because fear, like the ego and the devil, comes wearing many holy and very reasonable disguises.

#### ANOTHER WAY

Jesus showed no undue loyalty to his Jewish religion. He radically critiqued it and warned people against having an idolatrous relationship with it. It did not seem to assume for him the huge presence it does for us. Our allegiance is to the Lord of truth first, and then to his well-intentioned but flawed and sinful institution. How do we give witness to that allegiance? How can we be Church in the way we long for?

Pope Francis' strategy is worth noting. In his immense courage and inner authority is he showing us a kind of Third Way? Is he dismantling the Roman Curia, not by attacking it verbally, but by doing things differently eg appointing a team of eight Cardinals to share with. 'Do not domesticate the Holy Spirit,' he repeated; 'It is pushing the Church; it is pushing us'. Only fools resist the Holy Spirit, he said, and only hypocrites (law-obsessed priests) deny that Spirit to the needy on the grounds of ecclesiastical regulations. He warned that 'A self-



referential Church with a spiritual worldliness, a stubborn self-assurance and a narcissistic theology will always be a bad leader'. Referring to the curse of clericalism he spoke of the peacock, so impressive from the front but not so captivating from the back! This is our Pope speaking!

What might a way forward look like? The best critique of the old and inadequate is the pursuit of the good; to make the new happen. The best way to make one's point is to live the renewed way; to provide an example of the better option. Daniel Berrigan said the best way to make the future different is to live the present differently. To meet in love and mutual support, to develop a life-style and communication, to pursue the Gospel ideals, to grow a permanence and a commitment that is simply an example of how things could be done. This seems to be the Third Way that Pope Francis is setting about *his* call to action in his efforts to purify the institution, and to have courageous conversations with the Vatican Curia.

There is a lot of excitement and expectancy, possibility and power within the ACTA groups. Already a change in the meaning of 'being Church' is emerging through our welcoming, listening and mutual respecting, bringing much needed healing, sustaining and new life to many. And those hurting, needy, disillusioned people will continue to come to us, with others, when the word gets round. That might be the shape of a Third Way. Not dominated by, or confined to parish boundaries or clergy or splinter-lay-groups, the potential expansion of the vineyard is great. Patience and trust, transparency and openness, and a selfless commitment to the universal good will bring a huge harvest. Because bishops will trust us, not when we please and cosy up to them, but when we courageously speak the truth to them, clearly, honestly, professionally and compassionately.

There just is a need for a formation of all of us, maybe especially the priests, as many of the groups have articulated. In our ranks there are many people well-versed in theology, in the history of the Church, and well skilled and wise in dealings with all kinds of situations – domestic, parochial, inter-faith. To



encourage and empower such people, the releasing of their gifts must be one of the first steps on our journey. It would not be the first time that the *sensus fidelium*, the graced common-sense of people, saved the Church. When it comes to modelling the Church we wish to create, we priests have so much to learn.

## FORMATION AND EMPOWERMENT

Courageous, creative, collaborative and compassionate formation for lay adults is one of the most requested ways forward at our diocesan ACTA meetings - a plea for respect, humility and trust, as our common baptism, priesthood and prophetic gifts are shared in mutual empowerment. A relevant theological underpinning is repeatedly requested for parishioners and priests, and the nourishment to grow spiritually while preparing for a deep commitment to a long haul – a vital nourishment too long denied to them.

How do we deepen our understanding of the content and process of dialogue? I suggest, for a start, having another look at three excellent but already forgotten working papers of the Bishops' Conference various working papers of recent years – *The Easter People*, *The Sign we Give*, and *On the Way to Life*. If we are not aware of our recent history we will simply keep on repeating it. All three brief documents are intrinsically and seminally connected with the heart of Vatican II as it everything about ACTA.

15 years after Vatican II the 1980 National Pastoral Congress took place. Fired up by the insights and revelations of the Council, 100,000 people contributed to 20,000 replies, 1,500 lay-folk and 42 bishops came to Liverpool – after years of preparation in deaneries and parishes in every diocese. The Official Report *Liverpool 1980* and *The Easter People* followed immediately. The Easter People began with the heading 'Initiatives in Shared Responsibilities in a Sharing Church'.

Different reasons are given for the amazing and immediate collapse of all that wonderful effort. Here are two – the fact that there was no inbuilt strategy of



continuity to effectively carry forward the impetus given by the Congress, and, as revealed by the English Cardinals decades later, this most promising movement of the Holy Spirit was brought to a halt because of panic signals from a Rome that was alarmed at the emerging influence of God's People in the Church in England.

*The Sign we Give*, a Bishop's Conference Working Party's Document, was prepared 15 years later, the fruit, no doubt of the seeds of *The Easter People*. In the Introduction, Bishop Christopher Hollis wrote 'It contains the seeds of a revolution that will radically change the structures of the Church'. He believed it would achieve this by making us think more deeply and imaginatively about the theology and practice of collaborative dialogue and ministry. Last year, in his new and excellent book '50 Years Receiving Vatican II', moral theologian Fr Kevin Kelly writes about *The Sign we Give*: 'I highly recommend this remarkable document as essential and inspirational reading for all committed to genuine collaborative ministry.'

It has immediate relevance to almost all the points, requests, questions asked by most of our ACTA members. We could do worse than work our way through some of the chapters of these magnificent documents at a few study-days for our members. They would provide a heart and a head for hope, direction and meaty solid content at our meetings, and guide us away from too much repetition and complaining, much of which is inevitable. But these documents and reports are lying yellow and limp, or frighteningly pristine, under catechisms and new translations in Bishops offices and presbyteries around the country.

Here in Leeds diocese in the 90s, based on *The Sign We Give*, we launched a project to achieve its aims and the aims of the National Congress and of the Vatican Council, much the same aims as we have today. We published and promoted booklets about a future Church that would be human, spiritual, green, feminine, inclusive, poor, penitent and so on. We slowly developed a 'Council for the Laity' (one of the few in the UK) to balance and communicate



with the diocesan 'Synod of Clergy'. But then, our dreams all went down the drains of fear when once again the plug was pulled and the fresh sweet water flowed so swiftly away. As one priest put it, the open granary doors through which people were slowly coming to bake their own bread, were slammed shut - in the length of one grey day.

I mention these facts, not in blame or resentment - well I think not, anyway! - but for us to learn a bit from recent history and avoid repeating it, and making unnecessary mistakes in our current efforts. There is so much wisdom, theology, guidance on almost everything we seek for today, in these three documents: they were all officially approved in recent years, before the present distressing situation set in. The provision of some central accessible and relevant sources would save us reinventing the wheel over and over again in our current work. Such resources could be a dedicated website, some study days around the three working papers I mentioned plus selected Vatican II themes, a travelling team of lay and religious facilitators and so on.

#### THEOLOGY AT THE CENTRE

10 years after *The Sign we Give*, another Bishops' Conference Working Party produced *On the Way to Life* (2005) – the third document I mentioned. Written by the Jesuits it was intended to form a basis for all discussion and planning of approaches to the faith – in parish ministries, preaching, religious education and in dialogue with others.

We can gather from it that theologians hold that our stances, beliefs, attitudes, particularly regarding many of the points now raised by ACTA members, are based on a theology. This fact may help us significantly when weaving and working our way around these issues. They point, in general terms, to two theological approaches: A 'fall/redemption'- centered theology which tends to be conservative, dualistic, safe, legalistic. This very inadequate - and, when presented as the only Christian story of our human condition - utterly destructive doctrine, can be seen as the fundamental reason for the splintering of our Church.



An earlier theology is needed to ground, balance and critique this over-emphasis on a seminal Fall. A 'nature and grace'- centered theology sees Incarnation as planned from the start – and not because of an original sin committed by Adam and Eve. According to this theology, as beautifully articulated in *On the Way to Life*, grace is everywhere. We are all equal before God. There are no insiders or outsiders anymore. God has no favourites. And God just cannot stop loving us extravagantly and unconditionally. Because that is what Incarnation reveals, and that is the mind-set and heart-set that changes everything when we come to the table for courageous conversation.

Until Church leaders become re-acquainted with the inspiring theology of nature and grace, of a new humanism of the incarnate life, they will carry a constant and deep-seated fear of a multi-faith, multi-cultural, pluralistic world, of the demands of a young, postmodern society, of the amazing, emerging cosmology (with astonishing daily discoveries about the fact of evolution) that asks 100 challenging questions of our faith and beliefs and doctrines.

Until they learn to get a theology of creation and incarnation right, so to speak, they will continue to resist offering a Gospel-based Eucharistic hospitality to sinners, the equal treatment of women in the governance and pastoral leadership in the Church, the whole-hearted promotion of ecumenical dialogue with a view to sincere unity and intercommunion, and the full acceptance of Vatican II theology.

Because of a flawed theological understanding of the Fall, a lack of trust lies at the root of the Roman Curia's suspicion of collegiality, of listening to the hearts of the faithful about many aspects of Vatican policies - such as the silencing and investigating of priests and Sisters, the banning of general absolution, the introduction of the New Translation, the ignoring of lay people's graced capacity for discerning and disseminating God's ways – and other issues on the ACTA files.





Referring to many sections of people marginalised by the church, but especially perhaps to women, Sr Joan Chittister argues that ‘when any group feels it has the right to distrust or suppress any other part of the human race, then God is not there.’

Pope Paul VI called for a personal response from each member of God’s People (thus restoring the *sensus fidelium* of the priesthood of the baptised), ‘without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take the initiative freely, to infuse their own Christian spirit into the mentality, laws and structures of the wider Church’.

What is at stake is not just a short-list of issues regarding the inner renewal of the RC Church, but also its liberation to play a huge part in transforming the whole world. We have so much to say to the leaders of the nations.

I honestly believe that the recovery of this old, orthodox and traditional understanding of Incarnation will provide us with a clarity, a powerful support, and a worthy negotiating context for our courageous conversations in the future.

#### IT IS HAPPENING ALREADY

Is the Holy Spirit whispering to us that it is all more urgent and serious than we think? Did not Einstein say that ‘The last thing to collapse is the surface!’ Something like that has happened in Ireland – at a few levels. And at a few levels, too, something beautiful is being born there. Our role now is to save the Church. It is as challenging, magnificent and terrifying as that!

Today, in the way we are meeting, listening, sharing, disagreeing, trusting, arguing, we are ‘doing and being the Church’ we visualise and long for, love and must surely suffer for. Today is already an example of the community of hearts and minds we have patiently and impatiently waited for – not a preparation for it, or a building up to a great and future victory for it. No, it *is* already the spirit-inspired and open dialogue that essentially belongs to the



Church of God's People, happening right here and right now. We are small, vulnerable, unsure - but not alone. 'When the time is right', wrote J.H.Murray of the Himalayan Expedition, 'when the first steps are taken, when we move, Providence moves too. All manner of unforeseen forces, supports and powers come to facilitate our journey to the summit, to the horizon, to empower and guide us – the path clarifies, the rocks beckon, the winds fill our sails, the sea is calm, the angels come.'

### OUR OWN INNER WORK

Authentic hearts are needed to persevere on the journey we are beginning. There is the utter necessity of doing our own 'inner work' so that courageous and compassionate conversations will happen. They will not happen if we hold any resentment towards others, or if, in the pursuit of the particular passion of our own hearts, we fail to listen to our fellow travellers. Without a profound awareness of our emotions and how to share them, as Pope Paul II emphasised, the road will be too long and difficult for us, too many obstacles around and within us, and our great little hearts will just give up.

Without a self-awareness of our passions and motivations, the cause will surely be lost. 'Know yourself well' we are advised in the Gospel, because as within, so without; the bad tree cannot produce good fruit, and the good tree will never produce bad fruit. James Hanvey SJ, in his touching 'Because you give me hope' article about the new Pope, writes of the primacy of the interior life as the condition of the fruitfulness of our self-sacrificing service. Only from the humble spiritual centre of our being does that invincible inner authority emerge – that discernment of the freedom that is at times intoxicating, at times crucifying, but the birth-right of all God's beautiful people.

Fr Hanvey ends his meditation on Pope Francis with these words about the grace of transcending the old into the new. 'Transcendence', he writes, 'creates a new and open space of redemption, of honest, personal and intimate encounter. It begins in trusting the other, offering a hospitality, going out to meet them with generosity, treating them with dignity and simplicity. It looks in to a *human face*, not an ideology. It listens, and seeks to listen, to



## A Call to Action

understand before judging. It knows that it must seek forgiveness before it offers to forgive. These are the spaces where the Holy Spirit is quietly at work and the Church is reborn'.

*We acknowledge and thank The Furrow, who have copyright on this article and will publish it in their July 2013 edition.*