

Why do I bother?

By Jo O'Sullivan

Since I joined the ACI and have tried to play an active role in the organisation by starting up a local ACI group, I have found myself being asked, by people from different persuasions, "What do you hope to achieve?"

It's easy enough to reply "To promote the objectives of ACI". "And how do you hope to do that? What do you think you can actually DO?" often comes straight after it.

I think that people generally have their own answer to this question even as they ask it!

There are those whose answer is that it's whistling in the wind to try to effect change within an institution that has the weight of "2000 years of Tradition" behind it and has a hierarchical, class-ridden structure that has never allowed any real, meaningful contribution (apart from financial, of course) from its grassroots members.

I say that, by joining together with others who want reform in the church, by forming a large cohort of people who say "We need to change", we will *have* to be listened to by the hierarchy. And then they say "They'll never listen to you. They'll never change. Ignore the hierarchy altogether - get away from the parish structures altogether and form communities of faith peopled by the laity - the common priesthood - communities where equality is not just something to which lip-service is paid, but something which permeates to the very core. You're beating your head against a stone wall trying to influence the hierarchy"

Then there are others who have already decided "You're just a bunch of cranks trying to destroy the church." This comes from those who feel the church is doing just fine and that all the current troubles emanate from those Catholics who have started speaking out against some of its structures and teachings.

And, of course, there are all the people who aren't in the least bit interested in the question at all! Sure all those Holy Joes (Jos!) trudging off to church on a Sunday are just poor deluded eejits anyway. It's all a great big con-game, a scam of massive proportions - the result of poor fools needing to have a simple answer to "Where did we come from?"

So, in all honesty, I wonder sometimes why I bother! Why don't I just keep my head down and look after my own wee world? I'm beating my head against a stone wall while being a trouble-making crank and a stupid idiot! I KNOW that I shouldn't let other people's perception of me bother me, but, for somebody as ego-ridden as I am, it hurts.

But, I can actually answer the "crank" accusation very easily. With my hand on my heart I can assert that I am NOT trying to destroy the church - I deeply value the religious code that has formed me. I value the structures which allow me to access a faith community wherein we meet regularly to "touch base" in our spiritual journey and partake of nourishment for the soul to sustain us. I value

that the core beliefs in that religious code are relational - that my personal journey consists of my relating to all and everything in the world around me in love. Or to put it in other words, MY path with and to my God involves loving the world "As you did to the least of these, my little ones, you did to me".

And again, with hand on heart, I truly believe that my church doesn't have it all right. I honestly feel that there are teachings and structures currently in the church which do NOT show love of the little ones - the little ones being any of us who are not treated as equals, or, even worse, confined to the margins by virtue of our very nature.

To the accusation of being brain-washed, deluded eejits I can actually say I agree with some of it. I feel that I WAS brain-washed to a degree within the brand of Catholicism in which I grew up. I WAS kept in check by threats of eternal damnation - to the extent that if I even allowed myself to THINK about questioning any of its structures or teachings, I was committing the sin of pride and deserved eternal punishment!

But I have moved past that stage and I still feel that there is a creative force driving us forward to an ever more maturing, selfless and loving state (all the while being pulled back by the immature, selfish and greedy forces, of course!) I'm comfortable calling that positive creative force "God" and I'm easy in my heart with trying to develop and improve my relationship with(in) that God all my life. I'm delighted that a man called Jesus lived two thousand years ago and showed us how we could become more mature, loving and selfless - we needed to be taught. We're still messing up on following his teachings - but we keep trying! I can also accept that that man, Jesus, was not like other men - he lived and taught in a way that showed he was actually a fully mature part of the positive creative force that is God. Or, as we Christians like to say, he was God Incarnate. (I'm starting to sound holy now, so I'd better pull back!)

I know that none of this is going to change the minds and hearts of those who don't believe in the existence of God, but perhaps it might show them that we're not necessarily as "deluded" as they think? I can dream!

So, I've dealt with the "crank" accusation and the "deluded eejit" accusation. That leaves the "banging the head against a stone wall" accusation.

This is definitely the most difficult to deal with - because I find myself constantly swaying from one side to the other. Perhaps it IS "saothar in aisce" (I just can't find the words in English to encapsulate that phrase - "wasted work" doesn't have the same ring to it) to wish to engage with the hierarchy in order to work together to bring about change. Perhaps it HAS to fall apart so that a more mature model of "church" can rise from the ashes. Perhaps Catholicism as we now understand it is going to become a small, exclusionary, fundamentalist Christian sect and cannot offer a spiritual home as a "catholic" faith anymore. Perhaps those of us who long for change, who hunger to be part of a church which is open and welcoming to all who seek spiritual nourishment, will gradually come to the realisation that it's never going to happen within Roman Catholicism.

That niggle is constantly there for me, as so many of the people who have come to that conclusion are people who have dedicated their lives to being church - people whose spiritual development is way beyond mine.

But, for now anyway, I can't give up on my "parish" version of church. I NEED to touch base with and within my community every Sunday. I NEED to know that we gather together to be Christ to each other (not in a "holy" way, of course - just to show that we appreciate/care for/value/support each other) as we "check in" with our Creator and get nourishment for the next week. I'm fine with the notion that we have a pastor - somebody whose role it is to be at the centre of the parish circle and exercise leadership.

I totally accept that the structure that is church has to have scaffolding around it. It was that scaffolding at a local level that allowed us to make a list of people who'd be willing to look in on elderly neighbours when we had the snow-bound period a few winters ago. It's that scaffolding which allows our children to make Christmas cards for the people on the "sick list" of the parish. It's that scaffolding which allows the numerous acts of care that happen via coming together for Sunday Mass.

But if that scaffolding stifles those on the inside and is a barrier against those on the outside, perhaps we have to look for different scaffolding!

I don't have any answers. I don't know what new scaffolding should look like.

All I know is that, as part of the ACI, I want to seek a way forward. I want to be a member of a church which offers a happy, welcoming, joy-filled home to anybody who seeks it. We all need to belong and to be loved.

So, that's why I bother, I guess!

[Jo O'Sullivan is member of ACI and has become a regular contributor to our website.]