

Healing a Wounded Church: Diagnosis and Treatment

The inspiration for this talk came from an observation by the Swiss theologian Hans Kung in his recent book: *Can We Save the Catholic Church?*

Admittedly, people will ask me: what can individual bishops or theologians do, considering how gravely ill the Church is? . . . I can, perhaps, offer services similar to those of a doctor or physician. Better yet – those of a therapist who can help a critically ill patient, in this case the Church, not by offering superficial explanations and excuses but by providing a fundamental diagnosis that goes to the roots of the illness and by suggesting an effective therapy which will contribute a little to the patient’s recovery (Kung 2013, 44).

I undertake this reflection because I care about the future of the Catholic Church. The condition of the ecclesial patient can best be described as serious (Kung 2013, 251) and this gives rise to concern. This is not a time for platitudes and reassurance, telling the patient that he / she is looking fine and will be back to robust health as soon as the antibiotics kick in. In the view of Hans Kung the Catholic Church is suffering from a “debilitating and potentially terminal illness” (2013, 1) and if we care about our Church we need to acknowledge the terminal state of the patient. Perhaps at this stage I should pose a question and ask you whether you think Hans Kung is exaggerating or is it a case of the patient lacking insight into the gravity of his / her condition? I suggest you refrain from answering this question straight away. In cases like this there is always a temptation to shoot the messenger. Let us postpone judgment until we have examined his argument.

Kung’s Historical Perspective:

In presenting his argument Kung takes an historical approach. He first sets out to understand the origin and development of the illness and then goes on to look beneath the surface at the underlying causes before going on to prescribe treatment. He points out that the problems we see today are in fact much older and go back to the Middle Ages (2013, 107). Over the centuries malignant elements were allowed to deform the countenance of the Church and these continue to cause disease in the Church today (2013, 107). Kung traces the historical development of what he calls “the Roman System.” He describes it as “an ecclesiastical system of power and domination in which the pope enjoys and exercises over the people and the institutions of the whole Church, a monopoly of power and the right to determine what counts as truth.” (2013, 94). He singles out for attention the papacy of Innocent III. Under Pope Innocent the “Romanization” of the Catholic Church reached its summit. Instead of the older title ‘Vicar of St Peter’, Innocent III preferred the title ‘Vicar of Christ’ (*Vicarius Christi*), which he claimed as an exclusive Roman prerogative, although up until the twelfth century, it had been commonly used for every bishop or priest (2013, 109). A later Pope Innocent IV who became Pope in 1243 had the audacity to call himself ‘*Vicarius Dei*’ (Vicar of God) (2013, 110).

Kung notes that when we examine the crisis facing the Catholic Church today we have a tendency to look at surface symptoms. He claims that an historical approach helps us to look beneath the surface at the underlying causes. What are the underlying causes of the “Roman System” as we experience it today in the church? Kung

identifies seven distinct processes that became entwined to form the roots of the “Roman system.” I list them here in order to give you a sense of what he is attempting to describe.

1. Roman Monopoly of Power and Truth (which I have already referred to)
2. Juridicism and Clericalism
3. Hostility to Sexuality and General Misogyny
4. Propensity to Violence and Crusade Mentality
5. Reversal of Papal Worldly Power Into Papal Impotence
6. Refusal to Reform
7. The Reformation: A Radical Answer to the Church’s Unwillingness to Reform (Kung 2013, 109-139).

What is Your Diagnosis?

In 2003 a group of academics and administrators working at the University of Notre Dame compiled a list of issues or problems that would reflect the concerns of various groups in the Church – men and women, older and younger Catholics, active and inactive Catholics, liberals and conservatives. (D’Antonio et al. 2007, 68). This list was then used to survey a cross section of U.S. Catholics who were asked to rate each issue as being “a serious problem,” “somewhat of a problem,” or “not a problem.” Before giving you the results of the survey I am going to ask you to fill it out for yourself.

The results of this survey were as follows:

The sexual abuse scandal topped the list. Two facets of the scandal are considered to be serious: “that some priests have sexually abused young people (85% said it was serious) and “some bishops have not done enough to stop priests from sexually abusing young people (77%). But the laity have two other concerns as well. 62% of Catholics say that “the shortage of priests and sisters” also is a serious problem. Next on the list was that “young adults are not involved in the church as much as they should be,” with 53% saying the situation is serious.

In the middle of the list are concerns that “parents don’t teach their children the faith the way they should” (49%), “there are too many men with a homosexual orientation in the priesthood” (42%), “the church’s teachings on sexual morality are out of touch with reality today” (40%) and “women are not involved enough in Church decision making” (38%).

At the bottom of the list are four issues that less than one-third of Catholics considered serious: that “laypeople are not consulted enough in forming the Church’s moral and social teachings” (31%), that “laypeople no longer live up to the obligations involved in practicing the Catholic faith” (30%), that “there is poor religious education in parishes and Catholic schools” (27%), and “that bishops and priests no longer hold Catholics accountable to Church teachings” (25%).

The authors of the survey conclude that “although laypeople are concerned about a number of problems, they seem to have a pretty clear sense of what the most important ones are: the sexual abuse scandal, the growing shortage of priests and relationship between young adult Catholics and the Church (D’Antonio et al. 2007, 68). If I were setting you an exam question I could ask you to “compare and contrast”

Hans Kung's analysis of the problems facing the Catholic Church with the survey of American Catholics. The survey approach is to identify major concerns and if church leaders are to address the credibility crisis that the church faces today they would do well to pay attention to the major concerns of lay Catholics. If leaders are seen to address these problems, lay people are likely to respond with renewed confidence in their leaders. "But if leaders give their attention only to issues that laypeople consider unimportant, the laity will become more cynical and alienated from the Church." (D'Antonio et al. 2007, 152). I don't wish to downplay the value of such a survey but I want to say that if one is serious about the church engaging in a reform process, then the analysis of Hans Kung is indispensable. Kung as you know takes a serious view of the clergy sexual abuse crisis. He has referred to it as "the worst credibility crisis since the Reformation." In his view the crisis results from a backlog of reforms, halted for many decades and culminating in the cover-up and the widespread abuse of children (Kung 2013, 2). I will make some further observations on this issue towards the end of this talk.

Treatment for the Illness:

In line with the model of treatment outline by Kung, I will now proceed to outline the treatment options for the ecclesial patient. In Kung's view radical therapy is required if we want to ensure that the Church will remain viable in the future (2013, 251). He distinguishes between what needs to be addressed in the long term, medium term and the short term (Kung 2013, 252). In other words, not every reform can be achieved straight away and we may have to settle for interim solutions in the short to medium term.

Personally I found this to be one of the most valuable insights to emerge from Kung's historical approach. In his book he identifies 15 issues that require action. I have reduced the list to ten for the purposes of this lecture:

1. The Norm for the Reform is Not Any Canon Law Fabricated by the Church but the Historical Jesus Christ as Testified in the Bible
2. The Church Should Concentrate on its Core Functions and at the Same Time Face Up to Its Social Responsibilities
3. The Pope Must Strive to Maintain Community Within the Church
4. The Roman Curia Should Not Be Destroyed, but it Should be Reformed in Accordance with the Gospel.
5. Competent Expert Staff Appointments Instead of Cronyism
6. Openness and Restructuring of Church Finances
7. Eliminate All Forms of Repression in the Church
8. Allow Priests and Bishops to Marry
9. Open Up All Church Offices to Women
10. Include Clergy and Lay People in the Election of Bishops Again.

Who Is Going to Take Up the Reform Agenda and How Might They Go About It?

Many of the questions I have posed up to now could be termed *what* questions: what are the problems facing the Catholic Church, what are the causes that gave rise to them and what are the treatment options open to the patient?

I now move to address the question *How?* How is this system going to change?

Specifically I wish to explore the leadership style of Pope Francis and look at his effectiveness in helping this dysfunctional system to change. Speaking as a therapist

who works from a family systems perspective I tend to view the problems of the church in systemic terms and to recommend systemic leadership as the best way to help that system to change. I see Pope Francis functioning in the Vatican as a systemic therapist endeavouring to change the way the system functions. How is he doing this?

He is simply behaving differently, doing things differently. He hasn't stated openly that he sees the church functioning as a dysfunctional family but the statements he makes and the manner in which he carries out his role, would seem to indicate that he does. He is attempting to define himself within the system. Saying how he wants to dress, where he wants to live, choosing a name that has never been chosen by a previous Pope. When Jorge Mario Bergoglio came to live in the Vatican City he came to live in a very rigid, rule bound, protective closed system. He is helping that system to change by breaking some of those rules, being true to himself, attempting to question the culture and the accepted way of doing things. Some journalists have remarked that Francis is his own man – he has a well developed sense of self. It is this quality that allows him to give leadership to the dysfunctional family of the Catholic Church

The way to go about changing a system is to define who you are within that system. Pope Francis has made a number of identity statements which speak for themselves: In his *La Civiltà Cattolica* interview he is asked point-blank: Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio? After an initial silence he replies: I am a sinner. He goes on to point out that this is not a figure of speech: "I am a sinner."

Pope Francis makes another statement of identity in *Evangelii Gaudium* where he seeks to explain what his life is about: "I am (have) a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world." He explains that it is inherent to his sense of self: "It is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self." (273). Having stated his own identity as a missionary disciple, in the same document he goes on to tell us who share a common baptism what we should be about. We should be "missionary disciples." (120). I must confess that I have never heard the adjective missionary used with the noun disciple before. He tells us "we have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded by this mission of bringing light, blessing, rising up, healing and freeing." (273). By speaking in this way he is attempting to articulate not just a personal sense of identity but equally important, a corporate sense of identity for the church community.

I ask myself why Pope Francis places such emphasis on the missionary dimension of discipleship? Not surprisingly, I come up with a systemic answer. He feels that for some time the church has been introspective, self-preoccupied. And so in *Evangelii Gaudium* he talks about the need "to move from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry" (15). Arising from the clergy sexual abuse scandal the church lost public credibility and went into a bunker, "tomb psychology" mode (to quote a phrase used by Pope Francis Par. 83) or in a phrase used by Yves Congar it reverted to "becoming a synagogue." (Philbert 2014, 7).

A Straight Talking Cardinal:

It is widely accepted that Pope Francis' address at the pre-conclave meetings known as the General Congregations had a significant impact on the outcome of the papal election a few days later. Speakers were allotted five minutes, his address lasted three-and-a-half minutes. I quote two sentences from the speech which succinctly conveys his diagnosis concerning the state of the ecclesial patient.

But the Church had got too wrapped up in itself. It was too navel-gazing. It had become 'self-referential' which made it sick. It was suffering a 'kind of theological narcissism' . (Vallely 2013, 155).

It took courage to deliver this diagnosis. I invite you to ponder on what he might have meant in describing the state of the patient as 'sick' and suffering from a 'kind of theological narcissism'. A good number of those who heard this address must have agreed with his diagnosis. A few days later they chose him as the best person to bring healing to the sick patient. To those who wish to understand the leadership style and objective of Pope Francis I draw their attention to his diagnosis of the patient. His leadership role at this time is to coax the church out of the "upper room." His way of doing this is to call the church to be faithful to its identity and its mission. He spells out for us the kind of church he prefers:

I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out in the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a church concerned with being at the centre and then ends up by being caught in a web of obsessions and procedures (49).

Here we have Francis' diagnosis of the present state of the church. His leadership intervention is to tell us that as church we need to constantly go out and to keep our mission focused on Jesus Christ and his commitment to the poor (97). And as group leader he models this for us by going out into the streets himself. In the language of those who write about the psychology of leadership he is mobilizing us by making himself a "category prototype." (Haslam, Reicher & Platow 2011, 147).

In his Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* he puts forward four axioms or principles for what he calls "building a people" which I translate into four principles for changing a system. They give us a glimpse into Francis systemic ways of approaching leadership and change.

1. *Time is greater than space* (222). This axiom is a counsel to accept our limited achievements in time with hope of their final fulfilment in God (Drew Christiansen 2014 20). Mary Ward spoke similar words of wisdom: "I will do these things in love and freedom and leave the rest to God.
2. *Unity prevails over conflict* (228). He takes up this theme in the *La Civiltà Cattolica* interview where he states: "we must walk united in our differences there is no other way to become one." Like a good family therapist he wants us to accept our differences as a step towards healthy living.
3. *Realities are more important than ideas* (231). According to Drew Christiansen this axiom marks the difference between Francis' pastoral pragmatism and his predecessors' intellectualism (2014, 21).

4. *The whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of the parts* (235.). Pope Francis draws on the axiom to point out that we can work in a small scale in our own neighbourhood, but with a larger perspective.

Reframing is a technique used by family therapists to “frame” a reality in a new light. Pope Francis does a skilful piece of “reframing” in *Evangelii Gaudium*. “Let us not say that things are harder today,” he counsels, “they are simply different.” (263).

I would describe Pope Francis’ diagnosis of the church and his style of leadership as systemic. He sees issues in systemic terms, he is primarily interested in changing the culture and changing attitudes. He seems to have the qualities necessary to give systemic leadership in this highly dysfunctional family. In his *La Civiltà Cattolica* interview he talks about learning from life experience. He says that his experience as Archbishop of Buenos Aires taught him the importance of consultation. I can’t help but think of him functioning as the family therapist living in the Vatican. Not all interventions made by family therapists are successful. Will he be successful and to what extent? Will he survive in the role long enough to effect real change? Systemic change takes time. The change of attitude and culture Pope Francis talks about does not happen overnight. It will require a new generation of leaders. It is worth recalling the experience of the Israelites as they journeyed for forty years in the desert, they needed a new generation of leaders to bring them to the Promised Land.

Expect Resistance:

Leaders working from a systemic perspective learn to expect resistance and find ways of working with it. From his comments to date Pope Francis can’t be accused of being naïve about change as were the bishops of Vatican II. Gerald Arbuckle in his recent book *Catholic Identity or Identities* accuses the council fathers of failing to appreciate the difficulties arising from the “deeply embedded, long-standing highly centralized and authoritarian culture” of the pre-conciliar church. (2013, 47). Such cultures do not change smoothly just because a document says they should. While he applauds many of the changes of Vatican II, he says that as an anthropologist, he remains “deeply saddened” at the lack of awareness to the complexities and uncertainties of cultural change (Arbuckle 2013, 46). He believes that “if the bishops at the council had been more open to the social sciences they would have been more sensitive to and better prepared for, the explosive cultural implications of their documents when they returned to their diocese” (Arbuckle 2013, 49). If the bishops were familiar with systems thinking they would have been prepared for the chaotic, messy and painful situation that followed the council. They would also have been alert to the restorationist tendencies that characterised the papacy of John Paul II and Pope Benedict. It would seem that Pope Francis wishes to depart from such a restorationist approach characterized by a culture of fear and distrust. In his *Civiltà Cattolica* interview he states: “If the Christian is a restorationist, a legalist, if he wants everything clear and safe, he will find nothing.” I conclude from this comment that Pope Francis psychologically and theologically is able to live with the uncertainty, chaos and anxiety that is a consequence of radical change.

A Refounding Leader:

Gerard Arbuckle, whom I referred to earlier draws a distinction between renewal and refounding. Renewal, he says, tackles only the symptoms of the problem, whereas refounding seeks to make a “quantum leap” response to their causes (Arbuckle 2013,

101). It seeks to find new ways of evangelizing a rapidly secularizing world. Arbuckle describes those who will lead this rebirth as *refounding persons*. Persons who confronted with this personal and / or institutional chaos attempt to relive the refounding myth of the group (2013, 91). He goes on to describe such persons as “significantly gifted with imagination, intuitive thinking, and courage to act, they are contemplatives who act” (2013, 90). Would you be willing to ascribe these characteristics to Pope Francis?

In keeping with the systemic approach I have taken I find myself looking at Pope Francis’ leadership style as a form of systemic intervention endeavouring to bring change into a system that was stuck in a restorationist mode. Before I draw some further conclusion I wish to return to the clergy sexual abuse crisis and make some observations of a systemic nature.

The Impact of the Clergy Sexual Abuse Scandal:

Hans Kung highlighted the systemic impact of that scandal on the church

The sexual abuse scandal has shaken up even many bishops; and more and more questions are being asked about the exercise of power, about rigid dogmatism and about repressive attitudes to sexuality (213, 325)

When systems change relationships change. Relationships between parishioners and clergy, between clergy and bishops, between the church and civil authorities have all changed. To what extent has the wound cause by this scandal been healed? In the view of Hans Kung this wound “remains undiagnosed, largely untreated and clearly unhealed” (2013, 271).

I am sure that the various spokespersons for the Catholic Church ranging from Fr Federico Lombardi in the Vatican to Martin Long here in Ireland would dispute Kung’s assertion. The standard church response points to the child protection procedures put in place by national bishops conferences and to apologies given to those abused by church personnel. I think the response to the crises by church leaders has largely been a management response rather than a pastoral response. Yes, the church has responded but in a partial way. The effects of the clergy sexual abuse scandal will not disappear quickly – certainly a new Pope will not make them disappear. We will have to wait for further systemic change to take place in the church before an acceptable and pastoral response to this scandal will be forthcoming. There are still many good and caring people in leadership in the church who “just don’t get it,” and are puzzled and upset that the problem hasn’t gone away. The resignation of the last Pope and the election of a new Pope does constitute systemic change and for that reason it is a sign of hope. Several people I have spoken to have expressed the hope that Pope Francis will be around for long enough to keep that systemic change alive. The recovery of our terminally ill patient may crucially depend on such an outcome.

Questions for Reflection and Conversation:

1. What do you think of Hans Kung's metaphor that the ecclesial patient is suffering from a "debilitating and potentially serious illness"?
2. To what extent does the ecclesial patient lack insight into the gravity of the illness?
3. To what extent do you agree with Hans Kung's assessment that the sexual abuse scandal remains "undiagnosed, largely untreated and clearly unhealed"?
4. What do you think Cardinal Bergoglio was referring to when he said that the church had got "too wrapped up in itself" and was "too navel-gazing"? To what extent is it a fair description of your experience of being church?
5. How hopeful are you that the "Francis effect" will lead to systemic change in the Catholic Church?
6. In keeping with Pope Francis' style of doing things differently, what might you (your parish community) do differently to reach out to others?

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