

## Augustinians – Irish Province: An Emerging Conversation

“See I am Doing a New Thing

Part 4: Radical Discipleship – entering by the narrow gate

Edith Eger says in her book “The Choice”

“Times are changing and we are changing with them. We are always in the process of becoming”.

I have seen on several occasions, different posters which all said, “we are so busy *doing* church that we have forgotten how to *be* church”.

Over the course of the morning there have been a few themes which have kept re-emerging in the ideas I have shared with you.

The intimacy and relational encounter which God wants with each one of us is at the heart of each of these themes. If we are God’s children, pre-created by him before we were procreated into the world, it seems only natural that He would want to nurture relationships with us. If our core purpose is to *be*, wouldn’t it make sense that we would do that first, almost instinctively?

If we are created to live in love with God, are we not also created to live in love with the rest of God’s creation too? Is it not part of our function to witness that, to be the message as well as the messenger?

If we are the message and the messengers, that implies a responsibility on us to make our voices heard and to make our message understood – and that means being relevant and relatable, supporting inclusion and participation. It implies an openness to our own transformation and to be the seeds of transformation for others. It starts to sound a lot like discipleship.

Jesus tells his disciples that following him will not be easy, that they will be tested, rejected and will suffer. He points to a life of limited material possessions and no security, asking them to trust instead that God will provide for them as he provided for the prophets and for Moses and the people who followed him out of Egypt.

Discipleship for us does not pose these same physical or cultural challenges. Some people will leave all the material trappings behind and go to Africa or India or South America to live with and among the poorest people. In some parts of the world, the risk of persecution on the grounds of faith is a reality, but it is not an immediate one in this part of the world. But that doesn’t mean that our path of discipleship is an easy one. The challenges and struggles which we confront may be more subtle and even obscure, but we are still called, as Ghandi said, “to be the change we want to see”.

It is clear that our church, certainly here in Ireland is in a deep and ongoing crisis. I completely reject the notion that it is because people have lost their faith but would suggest that perhaps it is because they are struggling to find their place within structures which seem to be intent on maintenance instead of change and which value traditionalism over relevance. It is almost inconceivable that in the light of our common creation by God, his claiming of us as his own children, our interdependence and interconnection with all of creation and the calls for a new integral ecology in which all living beings are valued and respected, that the lay vocation does not yet warrant recognition on its own merits. It is equally incredible that women who represent half the population and the majority of church attendees, are not yet deemed worthy of widespread participation in the functions and governance of the church institution.

We spoke earlier about how so many of the scriptures refer to God’s encounters with us in familial or intimate terms. Elsewhere in the scriptures, the faithful, the Church community is referred to as the Body of Christ and the Bride of Christ. Both of these images are also intimate and alive – they refer to things which need to breathe and grow and live – and which will die if that doesn’t happen.

Just as Sarah's relationship with John was dying because she was more concerned about the rules, just as any relationship which we do not nurture and tend with love will eventually fade, I believe it is the same with the Church as the channel of mediation between humanity and God. The Church has forgotten that its primary task is to create the spaces where we can meet and encounter and know God at a deeply personal level. It has become its own mission, rather than putting itself at the service of God's mission – it is more Martha now than Mary and what Richard Rohr calls "spiritual busyness" has become its primary focus.

Anything which is alive, which has life, must grow to survive. If it is not growing, it is by definition, dying. Sometimes, death can be part of the growing, but if it is accepted as a natural part of the process it can be more easily embraced in that context. Any of you who are parents must know that the parenting role demands change and growth from the parent, almost in parallel with that of the child. So how do we reconcile these realities with a church, which is described as a Mother, and understood to be a living symbol of divine love, both realities which are dependent on the capacity to change and adapt, yet which steadfastly refuses to change; which understands change to be a dereliction of its duty to be constant and unchanging in the face of the secular world?

How do we square the determination to hold onto the traditionalism and the mind-set which upholds it, with the consistent use by Jesus of relevant images and contexts to allow those around him to grasp the meaning of his message and the Good News of God's love for creation?

Liberation theology, in shaping the Option for the poor, which is now a central element of catholic social teaching, identified that the poor must be instrumental in their self-liberation from oppression and exploitation and must be facilitated in that movement to self-determination. While poverty which threatens a person's existence is clearly a matter of moral justice, there are other forms of poverty which must also be challenged. The development and expansion of liberation theology and catholic social teaching created scope to identify spiritual poverty as a real by-product of a church which had become almost monarchical in its approach to the faithful and the exercise of its power. We don't have to look too hard to find poverty on many levels in modern Irish society and in my view there is abundant evidence of spiritual poverty.

Leonardo Boff has suggested that there are five principles which if embraced can encourage the church to discard its monarchical wielding of authority and return instead to the authenticity of the Gospel and the simplicity of its message. These principles are participation, solidarity, equality, diversity and communion.

They will each mean different things to different people and embracing them would not necessarily cause a seismic shift in practice or structure, but their incorporation and adoption by the leadership of the church, by bishops and diocesan structures, as well as by leaders of congregations and orders, would introduce a new dynamic, one which would inevitably have some impact on what are in danger of becoming stagnant waters.

Leaders of congregations and orders are autonomous to a greater or lesser degree in many cases and this affords them an opportunity to show real leadership, to be creative and to alter the status quo. But a good leader will understand the importance of a collective ownership of any new direction. Someone once told me that if you want to know whether or not you are a leader, go for a walk. If others follow you, you are a leader. If you are on your own, you are just going for a walk. It is not enough for the membership to give tacit or even verbal support to the idea and the leader, and then to sit back and wait to see what happens. Jesus gathered around him a group of ordinary men and women, and while he led, taught and inspired them, it was they and not Jesus who carried the Good News to others, who formed the faith communities and shaped the early church. If this is to happen again, if people are to take up the challenge to renew or recreate the heart of our faith

community, principles like participation, equality, diversity and communion must be the essential cornerstones on which that discipleship can be built.

I would suggest that radical discipleship for us, in our time and place, is rooted in our oneness as the message and the messenger. We are the message and we must be the messenger. We must be the voices in the wilderness, we must be the ones to prepare a way for the Lord, making the paths straight. Here today and in your Augustinian family settings, there may be little resistance to the exploration of a new vision for being a faith community together. But once you leave this comfort zone, there will certainly be those who do not share your vision, who do not accept your views and who are frightened by what you might seek to introduce in the way of change. Those encounters will be your narrow gates; those will be your moments of suffering. The birthing of any new life, whatever its nature, is always a painful process and much of it takes place in the dark. But when the new life emerges, the pain is forgotten and all that remains is the joy, expectation and hope.

I am convinced that focusing on relational engagement is the only way for us to move into a new experience of church. It must start with our creation by God, our precreation by Him before our procreation into this world and our response to His invitation to be loved by Him. Our relationships must emerge from our identity as His children and our interconnectedness with the whole of creation. We can manifest our oneness as the message and the messenger in our lives, by our openness to change and conversion, and by our radical discipleship. There are principles and ideas which we can use to assist and guide us, but the light which will guide us through the darkness and the struggle, the pain and the fear will be the light of love which has been burning within us since before we came to be. You can be the lights of the world.

I would like to finish with a quote from the poet Mary Oliver:

“Things take the time they take.

Don't worry.

How many roads did St Augustine follow before he became St Augustine?”