

LEAVING ‘THE CHURCH’

A Painful Blessing?

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I HAVE LONG BEEN FASCINATED by words that begin with *dis*.¹ Disavowal, dissatisfaction, discouragement: you can add any of your own to the list. As we use these words an interesting phenomenon occurs. The *dis* component and the element that follows it merge together so totally that the image originally contained in that second element fades away and is lost. The shape of the word as a whole causes us to forget the *avowal* or the *satisfaction* or the *courage* that is being trumped in the merger.

That leads me to *disillusioned*—a much-used description in today’s world, especially, perhaps, in relation to the practice of one’s faith. When people are asked why they have abandoned the practice of their religion—or, as it is frequently put, ‘left the Church’—they will often answer that they have become disillusioned. The response may be attributed to any number of different causes: the abuse of children by priests; such abuse being covered up by members of the hierarchy; revelations of smarmy intrigue within the Vatican; or the Church’s hostility to women or gays; or—well, you fill in the blank. All of these things are reprehensible, to be sure. They should trouble any thinking adult deeply. In the face of such ugly and unjust behaviour, it would seem not totally inappropriate at least to raise the question of continued allegiance to the Church. For some people, to ‘leave’—or at least to stop practising—may be their most honest response to the question.

That is, *if* what they had committed themselves to in the first place was an illusion.

The Nature of Disillusionment

Disillusionment: another noun is shrouded in that cocoon—illusion. The etymology is quite apt: becoming disillusioned is being separated from an

¹ ‘Latin *dis-* was related to *bis*, originally **dvis* = Greek *δίς* twice, < *duo*, *δύο* two, the primary meaning being “two-ways, in twain”.’ (OED)

illusion. Unfortunately (as with many common expressions whose wisdom comes from painful experience) its full import has been blurred through daily use.

To be disillusioned means, what? It means to give up, to let go of an illusion, a false 'truth'. Something we had treated as our hold on reality is now gone. In fact, the word tells us that it has been *taken away*. The expression, after all, is generally used in the passive. We do not (cannot?) dis-illusion ourselves. Illusions, once accepted, are too powerful for that. Something (or someone) else, something we did not initiate, does the taking away. And it can be violent. Do we not sometimes say that our illusions have been 'shattered'? The language is almost as wrenching as the experience itself.

It turns out that there is a paradox attached to the word *disillusioned*. The experience itself, the stripping or shattering, is painful. Yet, in its essence, disillusionment is an experience of liberation. Its initial outcome is freedom from unreality. To be dis-illusioned is to escape from a hall of mirrors. Becoming free of an illusion would seem, then, to bespeak a return to reality. Which is surely something devoutly to be desired.

Or is it?

Becoming free of a false conception of reality does not of itself offer a return to the solidity of true reality. Disillusionment may remove an unreliable support and then leave people in depths so painful that they find themselves with no bearings at all. Many who find themselves deprived of one illusion quickly turn to some other equally unreliable crutch, some other illusion, or perhaps to a succession of such illusions. The demands of reality are harsh.

'Illusory' Church?

What are we to say, then, about disillusionment with 'the Church'? When people find themselves distanced from a Church that had given them hope and meaning in a difficult world, it may be helpful to explore some of the ways in which that hope and meaning were in fact illusory. The purpose is not to pillory them (we should rather celebrate them for finally being liberated from their illusions). We do it, rather, in the hope that those of us who continue to believe might receive the grace of liberation from subtle traces of the same illusions. (In the mysterious ways of divine pedagogy those who have 'left' may be an offering of the Lord's grace to us who 'remain'. They may challenge us to confront, and commit ourselves, to the challenge of life in a different—more real—kind of Church.)

At the top of the list of ecclesial fantasies is surely the illusion of a *perfect* Church. For some centuries in the past ecclesiologists did define the Church as a *societas perfecta*. From a very early time the faithful had, of course, professed belief in a Church that was one and catholic and apostolic—and *holy*. But that holiness was something quite different from the much later attribution of 'perfection'.

In any event, a powerful illusion has long held sway in the consciousness of many: the illusion of the Church as offering a sanctuary of purity from the moral ugliness of a secular world. Under that illusion, church people (and especially their leaders) were a community set apart from the fallible character of 'worldly' folk. Preachers and hierarchs may have protested their unworthiness, but the laity (and perhaps the preachers themselves) did not really believe it. Church leaders might have been tempted to the petty sins, or even succumbed to the temptation to commit them. But we could rely on the fact that they were protected from the really big ones. There was at least one island, one place of safety where we would be spared the burden of fighting for integrity and wholeness.

It was an illusion, of course. But a powerful one. And its seductive allure is still with us, as recent manifestations of what has been called 'the reform of the reform' illustrate. For followers of this movement the renewal initiated at Vatican II failed to achieve the utopian perfection they were looking for (which represents a misunderstanding of the council's goal in the first place). So they are going to produce a Church that will be *really* perfect. Perfectionism is still much with us. More painful disillusionment will be sure to follow.



How Do Illusions Take Hold?

Phantasms, such as that of the all-perfect Church, are very like human beings: they are born of the union of two parents. They are co-created by the interplay of two forces. On the one hand, there is the network of external messages implying that the Church's holiness must involve sinlessness. This bundle of communications is the outside factor that people who decide to leave the Church can rightly claim as one explanation for their disillusionment: they were 'sold' a bill of goods, and painful experience has led them to see through the flimflam. That explanation goes only so far, however. It leaves out the reason why the faithful 'bought' the goods in the first place.

It ignores the role of the other parent in the process: the internal need that leads all of us to accept illusory messages. We all lust after a spiritual home that will shield us from the messiness of our finite, sinful humanity. Gnostic perfection is seductively attractive. But, sadly, it turns out to be otherworldly: unattainable in this life. Utopia means, literally, no-place.

***Conscious
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By contrast, the reality that is incarnation, the embedding of divinity within human fragility and moral obtuseness, compels us to confront ambiguity. There are, inevitably, weeds growing in the midst of the wheat. And what makes the spiritual (and therefore the ecclesial) life even more difficult, is that it is never fully clear just which is weed and which is wheat. Living with incarnation—with a Church of sinners who remain so even as they are graced—requires conscious presence, intentionality, discernment, mindfulness.

Those who want to reform Vatican II and have another run at a perfect Church have apparently never grasped a crucial key to appreciating the mind of the council. The refrain that runs through the whole corpus of the council's decrees and qualifies every one of its particular prescriptions is the *pilgrim character* of the community gathered around the Lord.

In that real, pilgrim Church nothing is completed, nothing finished, nothing perfected: not doctrine, not liturgical expression, not social programme. All is on the way, open to further exploration, to further deepening, to the challenge of unanticipated experience. The Holy Spirit labours ceaselessly to transform it and make it transparent, to be sure, but all of us as Church remain resistant to that light. To demand of that real Church the experience of perfection and purity before the Second Coming is to demand that the Spirit breathe where and how we think it should.

Another Illusion

This brings us to another illusory Church: a Church that is 'out there', a Church that I claim as mine but in which I am not implicated, with which I am not interdependent—for which I bear no personal responsibility.

When some people explain their choice to leave 'the Church' they reveal that they are abandoning something that did not exist in the first place: a 'Church' external to themselves as human subjects. 'I didn't leave the Church; the Church left me' is a common refrain. 'Church' in such formulations is an external association to which one is merely attached, much as one might join the Elks or the Rotary Club. For all too many, in spite of all our efforts at a post-conciliar catechesis, 'Church' still means 'the hierarchy': them, not you-and-me, not all-of-us-mutually-responsible-while-playing-distinct-roles.

Admittedly, the Church is a social institution like any other. It has all the externalities that characterize such societal groupings: organizational structures and leaders; networks of diverse responsibilities and accountabilities. Membership is public, and it is duly recorded. Membership, in that sense, brings with it rights and responsibilities, and the potential for sanctions if responsibilities are neglected or for recourse if rights are violated. The public entity is governed by canon law.

None of this is illusory, to be sure. What is illusory is an understanding of 'membership' in which I can be satisfied with duly fulfilling the external requirements while remaining uncommitted either to my spiritual growth or to sharing responsibility for the life of the community itself. I may be baptized; I may fulfil my Easter duty; I may contribute to the financial well-being of the Church. I may even have a personal prayer life that is exemplary. But what is lacking in such an understanding is any sense that by being called to be a 'member' of the Lord's body I am intrinsically and irrevocably bound to share the burdens, among them the sinfulness, of my church sisters and brothers—including those called to leadership in the Church.

The illusion consists in thinking that I can 'belong' to the Church—personally or spiritually, rather than merely canonically—while not being bound by a life-commitment to an enfleshed body of sinful fellow pilgrims. This kind of affiliation is self-initiated, and can be self-terminated. I am always at the edge, prepared to jump out of the circle. The implication of such affiliation is that if 'it' does not measure up to my expectations I will simply walk away. There is no 'they'—no people like me—who have a claim on me. In that illusory Church my baptism was not a response

to an unmerited invitation from the living Lord to share the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of a body of graced but sinful people; it was a marriage licence encumbered by a prenuptial contract.

And So to Us Who Remain

The departure of so many brothers and sisters from the Church in recent years is saddening and painful, to be sure. The least productive way of responding to it would be to presume to pass judgment on the integrity of those who have become disillusioned. It is much wiser to see it as a graced call to examine ourselves. We are challenged to review the nature of the invitation offered to us in the Church, and the kind of mutually interdependent body into which our lives have been inserted.

The late bishop of Fort Worth, Joseph Delany, reflected deeply on the departure of so many Hispanic Catholics in the United States to Pentecostal Churches. He was frequently heard to say that he had no difficulty with the idea that God could be calling these people to find God in these other Churches. His concern was, rather, about what we Catholics were doing that could be contributing to their departure. What model of church membership are we presenting to the world around us? What illusions are we unconsciously passing on to the young men and women who are the future of the Lord's Church—illusions that will inevitably let them down when they are confronted with the experience of moral failure and their own complicity in it?

How much is my church membership conditional on everybody else's performance but my own? Do I expect 'the Church'—meaning the hierarchy or my pastor, or the chair of the parish finance council for that



matter—to satisfy my personal expectations even as I remain a consumer of services with little or no sense that the other members have a claim on me to share their burdens?

Insight from the Vows of Marriage

As early as the Epistle to the Church at Ephesus we have been taught that if we are to understand the mystery of church membership we must allow it to be interpreted by the mystery of marriage in the Lord. The two mysteries are to be mutually illuminating. From this perspective it is interesting to note that the marriage vows—by contrast to the rite of baptism—are explicitly, and realistically, designed to forestall romantic illusions. On the day of their public commitment the bride and groom—both!—are quite dramatically forewarned against building on the sand of fantasy. There will be bad times as well as good; there will be sickness as well as health; there will be poor as well as rich. The bond is mutually compelling. Both parties share responsibility for the single union. And both will fall short of its demands. Perhaps we need to express a similar realism and shared responsibility each time we renew our baptismal vows.

Pilgrims on a Common Journey

It is easy to condemn the hierarchy and priests who have failed us. That they deserve our censure is not, however, a licence for the rest of us to go on blithely as though we in the pews bear no responsibility for perpetuating the illusory, clericalized model of Church that enabled their ugly behaviour in the first place.

Many dioceses are trying to reach those who have become disillusioned and 'left the Church' by promoting 'Welcome Home' programmes of one sort or another. They raise the question: why would such people want to come back to the same illusion that they have been blessed to expose? No, we would be better advised, whether as ordained or lay, to put our energies first into the painful work of allowing the Lord to reveal to us who we really are: not a collection of autonomous adherents but a body of graced-but-sinful pilgrims on a common journey to the One whom Jesus called 'Father'.

It is for us to confess the shared experience of an ever-compassionate Lord; the Lord will shepherd the disillusioned—perhaps even through us.

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