

## FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND DIALOGUE IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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*I know that the writer does call up the general and maybe the essential through the particular, but this general and essential is still deeply embedded in mystery. It is not answerable to any of our formulas. It doesn't rest finally in a storable kind of solution. It ought to throw you back on the living God. Our Catholic mentality is great on paraphrase, logic, formula, instant and correct answers. We judge before we experience and never trust our faith to be subjected to reality, because it is not strong enough. And maybe in this we are wise.*

[From a letter of Flannery O'Connor to Sister Mariella Gable, May 4 1963, in Sally Fitzgerald, editor, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979, 516-517.)]



Flannery O'Connor was born and raised and lived almost her entire short life in the deep south of the United States. Apart from the Southern culture, her life was profoundly shaped by at least three other significant factors. Firstly, she was born and raised in a very strong Catholic family. She maintained a deep commitment to her Catholic faith throughout her life. Secondly, she inherited a superior intellect and a particular gift for writing from her father. Thirdly, she also inherited from her father a fatal illness – lupus – which killed her in 1964, at the age of 39.

As the epigraph to this reflection suggests, she was willing and able to speak her mind. Any attitudes that seemed to her to misrepresent the human condition, drew her most trenchant criticisms. When she thought those representing the Catholic Church misrepresented the human condition and what is on offer in the Incarnation, she was similarly critical. For example she wrote in a letter to “A” on January 17 1956: “Smugness is the Great Catholic Sin. I find it in myself and don't dislike it any less.” (In Sally Fitzgerald, editor, *The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979, 131.)

Her willingness to speak her mind, helped place Flannery O'Connor on the margins. Those committed secularists and rationalists who had made up their minds that religion is mere superstition misread and often mocked her. Those committed Catholics who had taken up ideological positions on either the right or left, found her hostile. All of which could mean that she was, in fact, someone who got lost in her own world and never quite connected with reality in any but a negative way. It might, however, mean something quite different. It might mean what the black writer, Alice Walker, thought it meant:

“Essentially O'Connor .... is ‘about’ prophets and prophecy, ‘about’ revelation, and ‘about’ the impact of supernatural grace on human beings who don't have a chance

of spiritual growth without it.” (Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mothers’ Gardens*, Harcourt, 1983, 53.)

My inclination is to agree substantially with Alice walker.



Immediately following these words in the letter to Sister Mariella, Flannery O’Connor warns: “I think this spirit is changing on account of the council but the changes will take a long time to soak through.” It is just over 46 years since Flannery O’Connor wrote those words. I wonder what she would say now?

I believe her criticism is as pertinent and urgent now as it was then. Implicit in that criticism is the sense of exclusivity and closure, a sense that “we have the answers” and do not need to search any further or listen anymore. Thus she writes: “We judge before we experience and never trust our faith to be subjected to reality.”

The sticking point is dialogue. Dialogue is at the heart of the Second Vatican Council. Dialogue is the focus of Pope Paul VI’s first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964). Dialogue also seems to have been uppermost in the mind of Pope John Paul II. In his remarkable encyclical, *Ut Unum Sint* (1995), he writes:

The capacity for ‘dialogue’ is rooted in the nature of the person and human dignity. .... the human person is in fact "the only creature on earth which God willed for itself"; thus we cannot "fully find ourselves except through a sincere gift of ourselves" (cf *Gaudium et Spes* 24). Dialogue is an indispensable step along the path toward human self-realization, the self-realization both of each individual and of every human community. (28)

Pope Benedict XVI writes similarly:

If God is a dialogical unity [referring to the Trinity], a being in relation, the human creature made in his image and likeness reflects this constitution: thus he is called to fulfil himself in dialogue, in conversation, in encounter.” (Homily for Trinity Sunday (2008).)



Pope John clearly envisaged a Council like no other in the history of the Church. In an exhortation – *Sacrae laudes* – he had referred to the Church "crossing the line into a new age". The eminent historian, John W O’Malley SJ, observes that “there is scarcely a page in the council documents on which ‘dialogue’ or its equivalent does not occur.” (“Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?” in David G Schultenover, editor, *Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?* Continuum, 2008, 79.) The distinguishing focus of the council – with its inescapable implications for the Church of the future – is summed up by O’Malley:

The decisions of previous councils were directed almost exclusively to the clergy. Vatican II departed from that pattern by addressing Catholics of every status. Most remarkable was the attention it paid to the laity. Then in *Gaudium et Spes* it addressed 'all humanity,' all persons of good will – Christians and non-Christians, believers and non-believers. Vatican II thus took greater account of the world around it than any previous council and assumed as one of its principal tasks dialogue or conversation with that world in order to work for a better world, not simply a better Church. It dealt with war, peace, poverty, family, and similar topics as they touched very human being. This is a breathtaking change of scope from that of every previous council. (Op cit, 62-63)

I believe it is fair to say that, among other things, in that “new age” to which Pope John XXIII refers, the Church will (eventually) be shaped by dialogue. The emerging Catholic Church in our time – and it is always emerging – will be clearly a continuation of the Catholic Church of tradition. But it will also eventually become a very different Church as it slowly – and not without much pain and heartache – grows into that vision suggested by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council.

It must be said that our experience in the Catholic Church leading into the Second Vatican Council, has not prepared us well for dialogue. (In fact, if the truth be told, dialogue has not been too evident anywhere else in the human family during the same period either.) The concept and practice of dialogue is largely alien to all that Catholicism came to represent, particularly in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Flannery O'Connor's observation that “the changes will take a long time to soak through” therefore seems wise.



The very concept of dialogue is a most complex and difficult one, even if we are eager to take it up. In his first encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Pope Paul VI acknowledges the challenge that lies before us in taking up the dialogue as a central part of our lives as Catholics:

Thus we meet what has been termed the problem of the dialogue between the Church and the modern world. This is a problem which it will be for the Council to determine in its vastness and complexity, and to solve, as far as possible, to the best of its ability. But its existence and its urgency are such as to create a burden on our soul, a stimulus, a vocation, one might term it, which we would wish, both ourself and you, brothers and sisters, who are surely not less experienced than we in this apostolic anguish, to clarify in some way in order to prepare ourselves somehow for the discussions and deliberations which we shall try, together in the Council, to outline in our treatment of a matter so weighty and complex. (14)

In the ecclesiastical Latin, the word is *colloquium*. Thus Pope Paul's key phrase in his encyclical is *colloquium salutis*. *Collquium* is generally translated in English as “conversation.” For some reason, in this encyclical of Pope Paul it is translated

sometimes as “conversation” and sometimes as “dialogue.” Thus, the key phrase *colloquium salutis*, is generally translated as “the dialogue of salvation” but could be translated as “the conversation of salvation.” (Maybe the latter translation does not sound quite so sophisticated?)

The English word “conversation” is a helpful one to use in fact. It shares its etymology with the English word “conversion.” It therefore reminds us of one of the keys to dialogue: the desire for or at least the openness to, conversion. If I come to the encounter with a doctrinaire attitude and a determination that I am not going to change, then I cannot begin a dialogue. Dialogue will always be an event of transformation.

In the same encyclical, Pope Paul VI describes the ultimate context for all our dialogue:

The fatherly and holy conversation between God and humanity, interrupted by original sin, has been marvelously resumed in the course of history. The history of salvation narrates exactly this long and changing dialogue which begins with God and brings to humanity a many-splendored conversation. It is in this conversation of Christ among us that God allows us to understand something of Himself, the mystery of His life, unique in its essence, trinitarian in its persons; and He tells us finally how He wishes to be known: He is Love; and how He wishes to be honoured and served by us: Love is our supreme commandment. The dialogue thus takes on full meaning and offers grounds for confidence. The child is invited to it; the mystic finds a full outlet in it. (Paul VI, *Ecclesiam Suam* (1964) 70)

Dialogue is thus not just a strategy or tactic for communication. And it is much more than mere talk or discussion or debate. It is certainly something other than argument.

Dialogue is an expression of a way of being, a manifestation of a deep and abiding attitude.

Dialogue embodies mutuality, respect, a desire to listen and learn, a commitment to discovering the unity that is ours simply because we exist – beings who participate in Being.

Dialogue implies a humble recognition, indeed an expectations, that I can grow through my encounter with you.

Dialogue includes an acknowledgement that we are pilgrims together. We each bring our own particular gifts and limits to the search for what is true and good and beautiful and unifying.

Dialogue carries with it an admission that I am able to get it wrong, that on my own I am too prone to self-centredness and missing the point.

Dialogue emerges from and enhances the truth that I am a relational being and can only become who and what I most deeply am through relationships.

Dialogue is an affirmation of the other.

Dialogue is an act of love.



There will be many twists and turns, steps forward and steps backward, in the Catholic Church's attempts to continue the journey begun at the Second Vatican Council and become a people of dialogue. For one thing, the sense of being under siege runs deep in the veins of the Catholic psyche. Whether we realize it or not, we too often derive a sense of identity through adversity. In this way, being adversarial too easily becomes a Catholic trait. The adversarial approach to the world does not sit easily with the dialogical approach. With this in mind, I conclude with a piece of practical advice given by Flannery O'Connor:

It is hard to make your adversaries real people unless you recognise yourself in them – in which case, if you don't watch out, they cease to be adversaries." (*From a letter to "A," March 10 1956, Sally Fitzgerald, editor, The Habit of Being: The Letters of Flannery O'Connor, Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1979, 145.*)

