The Credibility of the Catholic Church as Public Actor

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Abstract

This article assumes that there is a profound crisis of credibility in the Catholic Church today. This is distinct from the issue of the credibility of Christian faith or the credibility of theism, for many who believe, indeed many Catholics, are affected by this sense that the Church, as a public actor, lacks credibility. Moreover, while it would be a mistake to seek the roots of this lack of credibility within general appeals to "modern unbelief," so it would also be a mistake to imagine that it is purely a matter of "image" or as a direct result of the revelations about clerical child-abuse and its cover-up. It argues that modern society has evolved, through painful experience, a healthy scepticism about large organisations and with this has developed a set of social values (e.g. mutual responsibility and transparency) that are at odds with many of the values (e.g. hierarchy) that the Church has inherited from its past. Far from seeing these developments as part of a pathology of modernity, they can be seen as the work of the Spirit and a challenge to the Church to embrace new ways of being a witness to the truth and new ways of embodying the Christ in its living.

Keywords

Catholic, Church, Credibility, Transparency, Authority

> "I cannot be the only Catholic who is already halfway through the Exit Door, and who is pausing, wondering whether it is just possible that something might happen that is the first hint of a new dawn?" – Michael Hoskin (82).

Our human situation

Anyone looking at the credibility of any large organization today does so within an historical context with deep roots. The slaughter,

then unparalleled, of the First World War introduced into our con-
sciousness a scepticism of all large claims made by big organisations
calling for our loyalty. The parents who erected a modest plaque to
their son's memory "who died on the field of honour in France" are,
to us, speaking in a foreign, ancient and discredited language. The
legacy of that war is a healthy suspicion not just of nationalism and
other cults of the state, but of large organisations that claim to work
for our good, because we know that: "he did for them both with
his plan of attack." Any international organisation, proud of its high
level of internal cohesion and communications, such as the Catholic
Church, cannot hope to be immune from this suspicion.

The twentieth-century was also the century of the great "–isms"
each promising its own salvation and leaving in its wake a trail of
destruction. Large-scale rhetoric, all-embracing claims, groups with
vast networks to communicate their visions were matched by min-
imal delivery and deliberately inflicted misery. Once again, it was
those who had not committed themselves to these great systems who
eventually picked up the pieces. In the aftermath, we have a hard
won awareness that the big organizations that we do need should be
build from the bottom up by consensus and in answer to specific
needs. The U.N. is not the Congress of Vienna, nor is the W.T.O.
a reformulation of imperially driven "Free Trade". Moreover, amid
the misery of those systems has emerged new visions of humanity –
almost uniquely in history without the explicit appeal to religious au-
thority – such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which
mark a real achievement in creating a vision, focussed on the small
and vulnerable, in the aftermath of the megalith-scale approach to
humanity that can be found in the actions of Hitler, Stalin, Mao Tse
Tung, Pol Pot, or any number of others who have sought to lead their
people from the front. Styles of leadership, monarchical in shape, that
were unquestioned for centuries are now seen to be abusive of power
even when there is no specific event of abuse. Appeals to divine
approbation for any such system, as the Church does claim, merely
remind us that it was not so long ago that every potentate claimed
such mystical approval, but when we see *D.G.* on our coinage do we
still think that a king or queen rules by God's favour?

Religion, also, has produced some shocks. It is a matter of debate
as to whether the First World War created a crisis of faith or merely
accelerated a trend whose roots lay in the breakdown of a rural
society and industrialisation. But clearly the contempt that resulted
for all the churches, in every country, from blessing the colours –
or as happened in France, where the Church saw supporting the
Third Republic as a way of gaining post-war credit – has created
for many a suspicion at both the large and small scale. It seemed
as if all "big boys" wanted to play together at the expense of actual
people. Thrones, states, rulers, army officers or police will never

reject support from any source, and religion was fulfilling its natural civic function when it supported them, but as they became discredited, it seemed ever more incongruous that bishops and church institutions had been among their most ardent and vocal supporters. One can always point to the exceptions; but we have a taste deep in our mouths that power supports power at our expense. In the light of bitter experience, we can be thankful for a little scepticism before any religion's demands on our loyalty.

One religious shock is unique in that it did not happen in the exotic east, but in one of the homelands of our culture: the Holocaust. We do not simply do theology in the aftermath of Auschwitz, but if we engage in any way with religion in its aftermath without reflecting upon its implications, we are not functioning as learning, conscious animals. Old loyalties and enmities had often been allowed to fester for centuries without question. Now one of the oldest of those enmities took on such a new and virulent form that it became destructive as never before. Defenders of the churches can raise a mighty defensive artillery at this point to exonerate Christianity in the face of Nazism, but a more widespread and diffuse truth remains: instances of religious hatred abounded and can still abound. Indeed, the new directions taken at Vatican II towards other churches, towards Judaism, and other religions are inverse testimony to that dark inheritance. That legacy is also part of our historical context: religious structures that are perceived to be monolithic are suspect; and absolutist claims for particular religions or systems are now held at arm's length. Such claims have led us astray before, and we do not want to repeat mistakes.

Closer to us in time are all the "-gates". Historians have always taken it for granted that organisations operate to protect themselves, preserve and extend their power in decision-making, and seek to cover their tracks while burying their mistakes. Young historians are trained to sift archives, to deal with the complexities of diplomatics, and to employ that ancient search-engine: *cui bono fuisset?* But these skills of suspecting the motives of the mighty, which have so often brought opprobrium on historians from churchmen and theologians, are now far more diffuse in society. When Mandy Rice-Davies said in exasperation "He *would* say that, wouldn't he?" she made a point that few at that time had seemingly thought about. Today, we simply assume that when a banker or someone similar is being questioned that many of his answers will fall within the category of self- or group-protection. With the Watergate cover-up, whatever was left of the sense of the awe of majesty that "they" had a better understanding and better standards was shattered. The Watergate break-in was not as shocking as the covering-up after the fact. A new ethical dimension entered our general consciousness: transparency. For anyone in any form of authority or leadership, this is as much a fundamental ethical

demand as honesty with the accounts or care of life and limb. With increasing force, *the need for transparency has moved through our culture* but to those who reject it, there is the horrid fact that almost ever week we have another scandal where the lack of transparency is seen as part of the problem.

If transparency is a virtue called into being by our cultural matrix, surely people need not extend it into the sphere of religion. Surely they, as religious people, could stand apart from power as the guardians of an ancient or spiritual dimension where such demands are unnecessary? But drip-by-drip, with the church fighting a fierce political and legal rearguard, the church has been found to be involved in cover-up after cover-up, in country after country, and this has been found to be happening as far back as the investigators have chosen or been able to go. The child sex-abuse scandals have not merely shattered trust, but their cover-ups, combined with in-grained habits of formal secrecy and clerical *esprit de corps*, have produced a situation where the church is seen to be in as great a need of an infusion of transparency as any other power-structure. Claims that the church is not a power structure but a "mystery" are not only a failure to understand the problem, but are seen as proof of the problem and of there being much to hide.

But the danger in any study of the question of credibility today is that it simply focuses on child-abuse and its cover-ups. Such a concentration, explicable in the moment in which we live, fails to see that every organization that claims to teach the truth, show people how to live, and be a political actor in society faces challenges to its credibility that have been building up over the past century. While there have been challenges to credibility before, notably of the western church in the aftermath of the Black Death, and of the Roman Church in the sixteenth-century, this is something new. It is a part of modernity. *The crisis of credibility should be embraced as an invitation to grow in our awareness of who we are and what we have to offer as the People of God*. But alas, I suspect that for many Catholics it is an unwelcome intrusion – modernity is itself suspect – or it is simply ignored as one of those questions that seem just "too big"!

I want to try to tie the question down using four overlapping frames that may help us to see the way the credibility gap enters into our discourse and action at every level.

Frame I: Dissonance

There is no better introduction to dissonance than George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where institutions and even language

have become so corrupted that they cannot be trusted. The "Ministry for Information" deals with censorship and "peace" means war; "newspeak", the language of that unpleasant land, is a series of misdirections. The link between what is signed – but still understood – and what is meant is broken; communication is no longer credible or a vehicle of trust. One can only preserve one's integrity – or seek a human integrity – by subversion because there is no credibility within the whole system of language and the inter-relationships it describes. "Newspeak" has become a synonym for language used by power-organisations when presenting themselves in a good light. So we have "Whitehall-speak" when "restructuring" means redundancies; "army-speak" when we hear of "collateral damage"; and there is also "Vatican-speak" when "authentic" tradition means the Vatican's own understanding of tradition. Modernity has become suspicious of such misuse of language – and rightly so – and so it is incumbent on religious leaders (as a religious value) to communicate in such a way that it promotes credible communication as a value in itself.

However, "dissonance" is also a key to other aspects of the crisis of credibility. If a lie is a breakdown between the linguistic and the experiential worlds that is made deliberately, then incredibility occurs when the linguistic and experiential levels so diverge or come into conflict that I can no longer know whether or not to take the statements seriously – and so I must withdraw my trust. Sadly, it is easy to find dissonance both in language and in practice in the church. In language we use warm and woolly words to create a sacral veneer when we are simply keeping an organisation running – and which as a human organisation is subject to the same stresses and problems as any other. One example: parish clergy do not like seeing their role defined as functionally equivalent in terms of duties or skills to the manager of small branch franchise selling fuel, groceries, or fast-food – and indeed there is far more to being a presbyter than being a manager. But failure to acknowledge that, within our present system, many of the demands made upon a cleric are those of a small-scale manager has been the source of confusion and misery. It often means that management is very badly done by people who resent doing it and who are inadequately trained and supported. We provide a seminary education that is not suited to the tasks that will be encountered, and we create expectations that cannot be met. Often the result is that not only is the job not done, but there is a personal cost to the men involved that has created a failure rate that would be not be tolerated in any other organisation. Yet the language used is that of "evangelisation", "service", "ministry", and (at the personal level) "vocation", while the reality is that of devoting time to people-management, small-scale human-resources dispute-resolution, plant

maintenance, and oversight of a budget, with the "sector distinctive" skills of *leitourgos*, *didaskalos* being just a part of the mix. "But surely", comes the reply, "one must see the larger picture". That, however, is the nub of the problem of credibility: why must one see beyond the language used, why not seek to match the language to the reality at the outset?

Long-lived institutions also suffer from factual dissonance. My favourite example is that of the august institution the Board of Trade, whose President was a member of the Cabinet and has had such worthy incumbents as Sir Winston Churchill. To celebrate its bi-centenary in 1986 there was, as one would expect, a special meeting of the Board. What you might not know is that that meeting was the first that had taken place since the nineteenth-century! Situations change, growth and decay occurs, and often we are left with systems, which may have once been useful, but which over time have so embedded themselves in our practice that they are now quite dissonant with what we realise we should be doing and proclaiming as a church. Another example: I hope it is agreed that it is an oxymoron to talk about "buying grace" and, equally, that a *do ut des* vision of religion, however deeply it might be embedded in human religious consciousness, is unworthy of both God's transcendence and our understanding of covenant. Equally, that the notion of the Eucharist as a spiritual commodity, a quantum of force, or that it is the specific work of the presbyter rather than that of the assembly are accepted as perverse teaching. Now look at what is directly implied in the *practice* of Mass stipends. Note: I did not ask you to look at what is the "theological" explanation or defence of this practice, but look at what people are doing and saying they are doing in carrying on the practice, and look at what signals that practice is sending out to others as the practice of the church? The fact that the Code of Canon Law warns about the danger that it could be seen as a commercial operation is proof that that is exactly how it is seen.

It is indeed hard to eradicate such a practice – and there is the ever-present prescription for inactivity in the form: "do not disturb the simple faith of the people" – but the accumulation of such anomalies between what-is-formally-taught and what-is-perceived-from-what-is-done has the effect of undermining the whole. This phenomenon affects all organisations with a history, hence my reference to the Board of Trade, but in the church's case, the loss of credibility touches not just the organisation but faith itself.

If this last point seems extreme and factual dissonance between what we consciously proclaim and the signals we transmit is seen as just a matter of some peripheral practices, then consider this example which suggests we have deeper problems with our historical inheritance. Consider this sentence:

Illi viri sacerdotes novi testimenti sunt, et in mysterio eucharistico officiant.

Is there anything wrong with this statement? Surely one needs priestly orders to officiate at Mass? But now consider this argument from a Lutheran exegete: the papal injunction against the ordination of women is in keeping with the deepest beliefs of the Catholic Church on ministry because Catholics do not model their priesthood on the New Testament models of ministry but on a fulfilled variant of the Levitical priesthood; and since only intact males could enter sanctuary of the temple, so too Catholics cannot ordain women! Most Catholic theologians would reject this, and not a few would see it as a parody. We do profess that there is only one *sacerdos/hiereus* in the new covenant; and link that to a different early theology that sees the whole people as *genus electum, regale sacerdotium* (1 Peter 2.9) in which "priests" are *presbuteros/presbuteroi*. But my Lutheran friend is a modern scholar studying what religious language means by looking, not to a dictionary or what its users claim it means, but how it expresses meaning in usage and action. He looks at the structures surrounding ministry and finds (1) a cult of sacred persons: intermediaries who enter the temple where ordinary believers cannot; (2) a cult of purity where marriage is seen as making someone incapable of ordination; and (3) a cult of deference that assumes a contact with the holy not granted to others. All these aspects of the "priesthood" (we might note that while etymologically "priest" comes from *presbuteros*, functionally it is equivalent to *hiereus/sacerdos*) can be traced to the use of the Old Testament to create a social character for the *ordo* (in the Roman imperial sense that is a mix of our categories of "class" and social "rank") in the fourth-century (whose taxing units, *paruchiae*, we still use to organise our organisation and pay those in the sacred *ordo* who live there). Hence, Christian ministers became the equivalent of the *flamines* and *pontifices* of the Roman civic cult (this was explicitly stated in the Council of Elvira) and Levitical trappings filled out the picture. The cost was that baptism was no longer seen as making us all one in Christ, because the Christian body now had to be layered in parallel with late Roman society. Moreover, this is still the case: clergy still dress distinctively, use titles such as "father" and "reverend" that imply the subordination of others within Christ. The bishop of Rome still uses the highest of the pagan sacerdotal titles: "*pontifex maximus*" and my Lutheran friend recently heard a choir in Germany practicing the "*Ecce sacerdos magnus*" to welcome a new bishop. So whatever we say about ourselves and our ministry, there is a massive dissonance with what is seen, perceived, and lived. We believe one thing in our textbooks and another in our practice.

Tackling dissonance on this scale, which would merely bring our practice into line with our teaching, would entail a level of disruption few existing *presbuteroi* would contemplate with relish, while it would be most off-putting to the clerical tastes of many contemporary seminarians. When we think of the issue of credibility and dissonance, it is disruption on this scale that we must face. However, one might reply: we have done all these things for so long, we are so comfortable in our old shoes, and this is a tradition sanctioned by holy wisdom and saintly practice! Such arguments for the defence would be telling if it were not for the fact that we do not relate in faith to the tradition, but to the encounter with the living God within a tradition.

Even when we recognise the complex nature of what we mean by "tradition" and our relationship to it; most of us slip, *de facto*, into a simpler view of tradition being what I saw when I was a child in my home parish – this is, after all, the definition used in advertising. But this notion of the traditional is a false friend for what we remember from our childhood is not what actually happened in our home parish, but the salient past that is present and comforting to us now. Memory is an activity serving a vision of the present moving into the future, not a recording (as on videotape) of the past. It is this present-dimension of memory recalling the salient past that is the epistemological flaw in the so-called "hermeneutic of continuity", which is actually only a recipe for further dissonance. The better course is to think of tradition in the words of Pablo Picasso: "tradition is having a baby, not wearing your grandfather's hat".

Frame II: Mythic Fracture

Every religion, every great event in human culture, lives within a myth, a story that is itself larger and more all embracing that all the empirical details of the system, and within that myth all the details are simply "facts". The Church of the west, and its later form as Catholicism, is one such myth, and much of its mythic structure has been in place since the Carolingians. This myth is how we represent the church to ourselves. A variant of it is the face we present to others. The myth is the matrix within which all the other deeds, decisions, statements, and attitudes cohere, make sense, with the effect that it sometimes makes death appear preferable to its abandonment. A myth is a far more all-embracing phenomenon than a paradigm (in the sense of a scientific paradigm) in that a myth is far less open to empirical description and usually is seen by those who live within it as coterminous with reality itself.

Here I want to look at just a couple of aspects of this myth and note that while many still behave as though all were living within the myth, for others the myth has ceased to have any value. One of the core elements of our myth is that we are a whole and, as the Catholic Church, we are embrace everything, so that those who do not accept this identity are "our separated brethren" or simply "schismatics" or worse. Those not with us lack something; and if they were to return to us they would somehow find themselves fulfilled. Within this myth, other Christians, who are not linked to the Church of Rome, are not "different Christians" or "other Christians", but can be defined as "non-Catholics", which relates to their ontological status within the People of God. This means that today when we seek ecumenical relations, particularly with the ancient churches of the east, we often end up in corner: lovely words, yet nothing happens. The problem is that we both want to speak to those who think of themselves as belonging to distinct "churches" while preserving our myth with its notion of our entirety. So while we desire to engage in dialogue, which assumes equality in the modern understanding of the term, we also want to make use of scholastic distinctions about the Church "subsisting" in the Catholic Church. What rarely dawns on Catholics, but is immediately obvious to a "non-Catholic", is that once one makes any such a distinction, one has unwittingly re-installed the distinction between church and schism, only in a more user-friendly form.

This notion of our integrity, so much part of our Catholic myth, has other dimensions. It means that we think of ourselves and preach that we are connected almost uniquely and wholly securely to our origins; we have not failed in anything! To quote a strap-line I saw on café-church in Nottingham recently: "what Jesus wanted is what we offer [!]" and we Catholics might add "and we have done so continuously in perfect continuity with him." Moreover, it is part of our faith that our encounter with the living Anointed One is identical with that of his first followers, but that does not mean that historically we form a simple chain. When this theological dimension of the myth encounters the "facts" within the myth – an encounter that takes place on the level of historical investigation – the whole myth is found wanting; and the Church's claims, in turn, lack credibility. This lack of credibility has been growing since the arrival in the mid-nineteenth century of critical scholarship on the scriptures and the history of beliefs, and its effects have been rippling out ever since undermining the myth of Catholic totality. Grudgingly the biblical dimension was accepted (though its implications are often simply ignored in preaching and non-academic teaching), but the theological dimensions have had hardly any impact within formal structures, and still face determined opposition. By contrast, those who are not Catholics

look on our mythic claims with the curious look of amazement that would come over a Latin cleric visiting certain Greek monasteries and telling them he is allowed to receive communion from them, only to be told that he would be welcome to become a catechumen and begin his preparation for Holy Baptism.

This mythic fracture is not just a phenomenon among theologians. We live in a society where we reject sectarianism, officially endorse ecumenical endeavour, and a society where most Catholics are married to those who do not share their faith. Ecumenism is not worked out in scholarly colloquia or elaborate meetings of church leaders, but at a million family breakfast tables with questions like "which church are you going to today?" or "where are the kids going?" or "why is it such a big deal anyway?" Such contact has often led to people wondering what the fuss is all about, and to practical solutions such as going to one church one week and to the other on the following week. These endlessly varied solutions, when brought before the official notice of the Catholic Church, are often looked upon as evidence of poor catechesis or a symptom of a great malaise such as "religious indifference". They are usually nothing of the sort. These are pragmatic and, we hope, successful solutions, entered into by sincere disciples of the Lord, in a world that is known to be more complex than that envisioned in the myth of Catholic totality. In the face of that more complex world the myth's hold over particular decisions is broken.

If a significant mythic fracture has occurred for the Catholic Church, how does that relate to the issue of its credibility? Once mythic fracture has occurred, anyone who continues acting within the myth gives a surreal quality to all their statements and actions. The action takes on the character of a curiosity, but in terms of actual living it is deemed irrelevant, the pursuit of a world that is past. In such a situation everything that is valued by "tradition", consciously invoked, becomes tinged with the label "old-fashioned" and the related concerns are thought to be academic, otiose, or downright silly. In such a climate, the church acting "in accord with its tradition" is discredited in the face of those who are just as serious in their discipleship. The church seems ensconced in a frilly fussiness about antiquated details, rather than seeing the new big picture.

There have been a succession of mythic fractures over the last three centuries – "the discarded image" as C.S. Lewis called it – and very often the church has seen itself as simply part of the *ancient régime* valiantly struggling to catch up. This phenomenon of being on the losing side in the succession of changes, all the various revolutions, which have transformed human societies over that period is probably due to a basic aspect of human religious structures. We tend to ritualise patterns of behaviour and then perpetuate them,

giving them new meanings, long after the specific situations that gen-
erated those patterns have passed away. This means that as society
changes, the basic religious response is a ritual pattern which perpet-
uates responses to past needs. Evolution is always taking place, but
conscious demands for change while focussing on our basic insight,
the Christ-even, goes against the religious grain. One could illustrate
this phenomenon from virtually any religion in any period, but a
Catholic example is apposite. When I was a small boy, I stood one
step below the praedella waiting to serve "last cruets" at Mass, and
watched the priest methodically sweep the corporal for crumbs and
the more scrupulous did this with great care in the manner prescribed
by the rubricians. I recall that as I stood there I often wondered why
did he not just take more care not to "make crumbs" (as my mother
often instructed me at home) and save himself this bother. At this
point you need to note (1) that the bread was broken over the paten
in the 1570 rite, so no crumbs should have fallen beyond the paten,
and (2) one of the great boons of "altar bread" was that it was de-
signed to be crumb free (so there should have been no crumbs to
sweep). It took me many years to get to the bottom of this ritual:
until the tenth-century when, for economic reasons, unleavened bread
appeared in the west, a large loaf (much like that used in the Ortho-
dox churches today) was used and its breaking produced any amount
of crumbs (hence the corporal to collect them) and these had to be
swept up. But we had grown so used to sweeping up the crumbs that
we continued to do it for almost a thousand years before we realised
there were no longer any crumbs to sweep!

   This tendency to perpetuate the past within religion has two addi-
tional effects on the issue of credibility. First, we become immune to
our own quaintness and people's reactions to our behaviour; incom-
prehension becomes their fault and the result of their unwillingness
to understand. This reaction is the common human response to dif-
ference, but it is incompatible with a commitment to evangelization
which is about making oneself understood. Secondly, having retreated
more or less continuously since the Enlightenment, a certain com-
plex has evolved within church circles that if we are out of step with
modernity, then we are "counter-cultural" - and most probably right!
This attitude is a variant on the Golden Age of the past myth and
it fails theologically on three basic issues. First, Christian perfection
is not to be identified with any historical moment in the Church's
life but is to be seen as our straining towards the eschatological.
Second, our belief in the Holy Spirit means that truth is to be found
in every situation and our challenge is to integrate it into our belief.
We are, as part of our vocation as a sacerdotal people, to search out
the blessings of modernity and relate them to their origin and end.
Thirdly, over that period there have been many great opportunities to

be counter-cultural such as opposing tyranny (a very mixed record once the rights of the church were not infringed), opposing slavery (we did not consider it wrong until it had all but disappeared in Christian states), opposing abusive societies (the church has a bad habit of siding with generals and landowners), opposing warfare as a way of solving political disputes (again a patchy record), opposing the oppression of women (patchy to say the least). Holding up the gospel to criticise society is a far more dangerous business than defending the "values" that a previous generation accepted without question.

Some might argue that we can re-invent the myth? There have been valiant, indeed heroic, efforts in the past: the attempt to recreate a medieval landscape in the church in the nineteenth-century or the Thomist revival called for by Leo XIII whose effects dominated Catholic theology for much of the twentieth-century. But the religious myth in which modern people live is not something that can simply be created or re-created. Indeed, the myth in which we operate today is almost invisible to us, but we must be credible within that myth. The very fact that we can so describe the fractured myths that still animate much official Catholic thinking is evidence that it is a way of viewing our situation that no longer evokes credibility.

We should not imagine that it would be easy to move out of the myth of being the integral and direct successor to the perfect apostolic church. Let us consider another myth that has arisen since the sixteenth-century: the myth of the perfect all-embracing book. In that myth what is Christian is what-is-in-the-book-as-I-read-it, and it is accessible to me for me, and that which is not-to-be-found-there can be dismissed as non-Christian or unimportant. Both this myth and the Catholic myth are based within a belief that all that is needed is to be found in a perfect origin, and there is the possibility of a perfect continuity with that origin. We recognise the myth of the perfect book as a private world: the world of biblical fundamentalism; and we find it so incredible that it difficult to enter into dialogue with it intellectually. It is not in our world. If we were asked to demonstrate what we meant by this, we would make an appeal to historical scholarship. "Their" view of what the book is, what is says, how it says it, what we say about the same situations, and how we look upon reading ancient religious texts, all indicate that "their" approach does not do justice to the facts as we *now* study them and *now* relate them to others fields of human knowledge. Now look at the scholarship on the early church of the last hundred and forty years – and note that this is an appeal to empirical history – and ask whether it supports the classic image of the unified apostolic church? That image is as threadbare historically as the myth of the perfect book.

Frame III: Vectoral Accountability

One major obstacle to the church's credibility is the lack of responsibility and accountability that has emerged in investigations carried out over recent years as a result of the abuse of children becoming known. Judges have expressed shock that such complex organisations have been put into such incompetent managerial hands, and at how patterns of secrecy had become so in-built that those who operated the systems did not even see how they transgressed the rules of natural justice.

What is all the more surprising is that the Catholic Church would seem to have a thoroughgoing internal system of accountability. The cleric promises obedience at ordination to his ordinary. The bishop is appointed after a careful scrutiny by Rome and is held to account. The system is regulated by law. Rome carries out investigations of theologians and institutions, and is not slow to claim powers over speech and writing that would be found abusive of human rights in most developed countries today. Most clerics live with one eye on their bishop – and bury their frustrations and resentments; while virtually all bishops in the modern world work with the awareness of constant surveillance from Rome, and act so that it can be clearly seen by that surveillance that they are not "doing their own thing". So how did it happen in such an environment that child abuse could grow to be such a problem without it even being mentioned?

Functionally most clergy think of the Church as hierarchical, in the strict sense. To imagine the church as hierarchical is not simply a matter of a pyramid-shaped flowchart or a chain-of-command structure. It is to think of it in the precise terms of Pseudo-Denis who introduced the myth of hierarchy into Christianity as saw it manifested in the social structures of those who formed its ruling class (*ordo*). Hierarchy is the notion that holiness, grace in western terms, power, authority, authorization, and authentication flows from "the higher" to "the lower". So, how do I know that my little gathering in a village is part of the divine redemptive plan? Because it has been authenticated from above, and that by stages authentications can be followed upwards to heaven itself. In western terms this means that divine authentication comes through Christ's vicar: the Bishop of Rome. But while each use of power or authority can have its lineage traced back to a higher source, the authority and power flows in just one direction: downwards. This belief, rarely stated in its full form, manifests itself in virtually every aspect of Church life. Let us imagine a large gathering of Catholics who cannot find a priest yet want to fulfil their Sunday obligation: can they authorise one of the men in their group to preside over their Eucharistic meal? No – absolutely not – for that authority must come from one who has it,

and it cannot arise from below no matter how great the need (otherwise, in Catholic eyes, many non-Catholic ministers would have valid orders). So, while we may talk about ministry as "a response to need", no need, however great, can generate ministry. Let us imagine a group of Catholic students in a university wanting to set up a discussion group. Unlike their fellow Christians who will just do it, they will seek approbation from the Catholic chaplain, who, in turn, will invariably see a need for an oversight role such that it ceases to be a genuinely student-led group! Imagine someone asking prayers for the sick: will they imagine their prayer is more likely to be heard if it is mentioned by them when they stand making priestly intercession at the Prayer of the Faithful or if an ordained minister "offers Mass" for the intention? Right through Catholic thinking and behaviour the notion of hierarchy is part of our mythic world.

Because authority flows in just one direction in that world, responsibility also flows in one direction. The priest or the bishop is responsible to higher authority *for* their people, they are not responsible *to* their people. If it were otherwise, there would have to be structures such as one finds in other Christian congregations to hold ministers to account. Catholics can and do complain about their priests to their bishops but this is noise in the system. It is not the case that it is part of a minister's role to be responsible *to* those to whom he ministers – he only need answer *to the bishop* for how he has discharged the duty entrusted to him by the bishop. In such a world, so long as "duties-upward" were performed, men could rest content that they had fulfilled their duty, but they failed to see that they had other duties to those who looked up to them as leaders. This may seem a hard judgement but as I read the various Irish reports recently I was struck by the frequency with which contrite clergy noted that they had carried out what was required in Canon Law while not seeming to notice more basic, uncodified, demands. The pervasiveness of *hierarchia* in Catholic thinking has produced a culture of vectoral accountability: one is answerable / responsible in one direction only, namely, towards whence one perceives one's authority to come.

It should not be imagined that this notion of hierarchy with its concomitant view of a one-way responsibility to the authorising source, is somehow a preserve of the Catholic Church. Its functional origins lie deep in the mythic past of sacral kingship (there is a curious counterblast to the notion in the Judges and Samuel). It was given its legal form in Roman jurisprudence. It is reflected in Acts when Paul's appeal to the imperial court superseded the authority of the lower court; and it was given its intellectual form by the Neo-Platonists, particularly in Iamblichus and Plotinus, from whence it entered theology, both east and west, through Pseudo-Denis and the *Liber de causis*. It fitted the world of the emperor in Constantinople and of the Holy

Roman Emperor in the west, and reached its apogee in the Boniface VIII's *Unam sanctam*. But, some churches aside, recent centuries have not been kind to the notion of hierarchy. The modern view of authority, responsibility, and two-way accountability can be seen in the opening words of the U.S. Constitution: the people "ordain and establish" their own government. This classic piece of eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought echoes through every modern piece of constitutional thinking. It forms part of the myth of every statement of rights, and it is fundamental to the use of power in our societies. We can even see a religious formulation of it in the preamble to the Irish constitution: "all authority" comes from God, but it is the Irish people who "adopt, enact, and give to ourselves this constitution."

In a world where the hierarchical model has been both abandoned and formally rejected, to have within it a group of people who structure their lives hierarchically is going to cause problems. That group's decision-making is going to seem incredible in terms of the interpersonal ethics upon which modern societies are based. The reaction of the Irish tribunals to the values used in church decision-making in several Irish dioceses is an explicit instance of this. But there are detailed lessons to be learned here.

First, the distance is not one of faith or even ethics (otherwise church leaders would not have felt embarrassed by the events or made attempts to express sympathy with victims) but a crisis of social culture. As all missionaries down the centuries have known: the church must be credible in whatever social culture it finds itself or its message will fall by the wayside.

Second, there is a rogue intellectual passion that can often be found in religiously fervent people, which is attracted to being seen as incredible, alternative, and following its own drumbeat. Such people have their own peculiar needs met in the church's faith being side-lined, and they will be the first to speak, write, and blog in favour of the institution, to encourage the leaders to be even more strident in "not being conformed to the world". But the calls of these vociferous, articulate, and very engaged combatants should be heard as those of the sirens! We must never forget the basic impulse of all our proclamation: that there is something in the message of the Christ that fulfils human longing, Augustine's *cor inquietum*, and that we find the Spirit's positive stirrings in every human culture. While one cannot say that every value in a human society is the stirring of the Spirit, it is certainly false to assume that a clash of social cultures is an indicator that that which is at odds with the church is wrong.

Third, the longer any pattern of behaviour has been operative in the church, the more it has embedded itself in law, community rituals, devotions, liturgy, models of behaviour and formal theology, often to the extent that it appears an essential part of "the deposit of faith". It is the duty of theologians to help disentangle this complex and

propose better forms of interaction with the societies in which we live, and it is the duty of historical theologians to remind the church that most of this complex arose in very specific cultural circumstances and that there was a time when these ideas were not known. While it is easy to discover alternative models of responsibility in Christian experience, we should not imagine that a notion of responsibility *to* the church (i.e. the people in real, local communities) is going to be easy! Consider this case. It is the duty of the bishop to regulate the celebration of the Eucharist in his diocese. Any male Christian with the ability to preside can be ordained. Whereas in the past levels of general education and the legal tasks imposed on clergy within late medieval and renaissance societies meant they needed a long training time, today most men could be given the key presiding skills through part-time and distance learning techniques, as is the case with deacons. So, any bishop who sees himself as serving the needs of the communities of his diocese will have no shortage of presbyters as he will, like Paul on his way from Lystra to Antioch appointing presbyters in every church (Acts 14:21–3), have ordained at least two (so that one can be on holiday) in each community! Ah! But it's not so simple! Such an action would not be authorized! The actual needs of Christians are an alternative source of authorization that is often simply invisible to us.

   If in actual practice changing to a different model of responsibility is too difficult for most bishops, that does not mean that other consequences of the existing model of authority are not undermining the credibility of the church's structures. Many pastors out of a genuine sense of concern use the language of "being there to serve their people", but these statements are usually so hedged around with qualifications that they appear risible. Rather than this dissonance between language and agency, it would be better if all concerned noted the distinction between "responsibility for" and "responsibility towards" on the one hand and "accountability to" on the other. Modern ideals of society assume that there is an identity of object between these; paternalistic societies assume the distinction. While there is no absolute need for the Catholic Church to adhere to the paternalistic model (historians, after all, can trace its introduction and growth), most hierarchs – bishops, presbyters, and deacons – see any move from that model *from a perspective within the model's own myth* and, as such, see any departure from it as a betrayal of the very authority from which they see themselves having authorisation. That being so, they should abandon the use of any language that, given today's cultural assumptions, presents themselves as "servants of" or "seeking to fulfil the needs of" people. They may believe this (just as many kings, prelates and generals have firmly believed that they were acting for the good of "their" people) but they should not state it. Stating it appears to be little more than repeating the

familiar utterances of totalitarian regimes, which has made modern people suspicious. When church leaders are suspected of the pious equivalent of "newspeak", their credibility is affected both within and without the church.

Frame IV: Transparency

The other major implication for church leaders who use a vectoral model of responsibility is that they are not likely to give sufficient attention to one of the most important developments in our political culture in the last half century: transparency. "Transparency" is a concept that arose in East Germany during the Soviet era as a means of attacking the Federal Republic, but it rapidly spread throughout western culture within societies that were throwing off the vestiges of the paternalistic state. It is best to see it as at the counterpart of a model of society where authority resides with those being governed. If we are the source of authority, we should be able to see how that authority is being exercised by those to whom it is delegated, and in that act of observation we have a check against the abuse of authority which bitter experience has told us can all too often occur. Indeed today, most of us give this two-part dictum the status of an axiom: "power tends to corrupt and absolute power tends to corrupt absolutely." As such, transparency in our world is a corporate virtue, and to act in a non-transparent manner is to act unethically.

If one conceives of church leadership as a network of interlocking ministries which differ *in function* within the community of the baptised, then transparency is not a problem. Indeed, the structures within the *Didache* for identifying corrupt ministers are one of the earliest examples within the historical record for the use of transparency within a society. But transparency is not a notion with a long history within western societies or law, and in a paternalistic or hierarchical society it can seem little more than a needless addition, or a useful add-on for those who think the crisis of credibility is simply a crisis of the church's public image. However, we must not be lulled into such obscurantism. Transparency is now a demand in every area of social interaction and consequently will also be an expectation within the church. Moreover, so long as transparency is expected, any lack of transparency in the church will result in a lack of credibility.

Would transparency be all that difficult? Could not the proceedings of meetings of Episcopal Conferences be published? The American bishops, for example, publish far more than happens elsewhere. Transparency is more than a freedom of information initiative: it is a cultural value. It would mean that there were structures in place for the selection of deacons and presbyters within a community. It

would mean that the selection of bishops would take place openly among those among whom the bishop will minister. It would mean that specialist ministers such as hospital chaplains, seminary teachers, and counsellors would have to show they have the same personal skills and formal education that are normally expected within society at large. It would require that ministry was seen to be a community responsibility and not an individual's belief in his or her own vocation.

What if we genuinely believed that transparency is a truly human value. Perhaps the church's wholehearted embrace would itself be a beacon to governments, banking, and all those other areas of human endeavour where we seek it. The church's deep embrace of transparency would certainly enhance its credibility when it seeks to preach to money and raw power, indeed it would become an aspect of the testimony that we are called to bear towards the truth (see Jn 18:37). It would also help us create an ecclesial practice that reflects far more clearly the ecclesiology that we increasingly embrace theoretically. In a world where people expect that those who serve them (medics, politicians, police) are accountable to them, then we need to confront this choice. On the one hand we are confronted with an ecclesiology and praxis that sees the actual community in which people live, interact, and worship as akin to the local outlet of an multinational; on the other, a real community that believes it has gathered in Christ and finds from among itself those who will preside, those who can serve its various needs, help it with its outreach to the needy and the world, and give it the ability to reflect the Christ in itself and its collective ministry, which with their networking with other communities forms the *catholica*.

Conclusion

Our four elements of incredibility (dissonance, mythic crisis, vectoral accountability, and transparency deficit) are interrelated. None of them is new as a problem for the church, but it is their combination in a culture that is suspicious of large organisations that claim authority that makes our situation unique in Christian history. Hence, attending *in depth* to our incredibility – which is distinct from the credibility of faith – is a matter of the greatest urgency. Let me conclude with two items of "thick description" that illustrate the profundity of the crisis. On a cold Saturday in February this year I found myself called to the bedside of an old Irish gentleman who had suffered a stroke. In every way he was typical: a great-grandfather full of honour and hard work, coming from stock that has held the faith since the fifth-century "in spite of dungeon, fire and sword". We spent a long time in conversation and agreed to meet again. In

the standard model of such encounters he would have been expected to ask for a celebration of reconciliation, but it was clear that for him this had already occurred with his family and with God. So I thought it worthwhile to discuss this decision with him, while noting that it was a very different scene from the image of death proposed in such practices as "the Nine Fridays" or the classic image of the priest spurring his tired horse so that within hailing distance he might utter the words '*ego te absolvo*' while life was still apparent. He smiled and gave me this lapidary sentence: "I believe what I know to be true, not what *they* want me to believe!" *Requiescat in pace Domini*.

Some couple of months ago, a new Parish Priest arrived in a north London parish and said, quite naturally, that he wanted to get to know all the organisations and groups in the parish. A woman, let's call her Gladys, had been running a book-reading group in the community, which varied in size between six and twelve people. They selected, in turn, a book that an individual had found useful, then, having read it, they shared their reactions. The model is a common one in reading groups across our society. Gladys invited the new Parish Priest to come to the group when the book for discussion was Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. At once he objected that this was not a suitable book for a Catholic reading group, and, asked to suggest another, recommended Richard Rohr's *Falling Upwards*. Both these decisions were accepted. At the next meeting he prescribed another book, and when it was pointed out that it was not now his turn to pick the book, he replied that if they wished to call themselves a "Catholic" reading group, then only he, as a priest appointed by the bishop, could decide what books were suitable. Gladys, rather embarrassed as she had initially invited him, went to see him to ask why he felt it necessary to intervene like this, and was told that "the church is not a democracy" and arguing was setting her at odds with the Pope. Most of the members have now stopped attending the group and Gladys herself no longer thinks it a viable way of finding discussion partners for issues that are of concern to her.

Tempora mutans, et nos?

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