

Generous Love in Multi-Faith Ireland by Suzanne Cousins  
Number 8 The Braemor Study Series Launch CITI March 14 2018  
Address by the Archbishop of Dublin, The Most Reverend Dr Michael Jackson

## DIVERSITY AND THE CONTAINMENT OF CONTAMINATION

Robert Frost's much-loved poem tells us that we have *many miles to go*. The research undertaken by Suzanne Cousins and given voice in her MTh dissertation, the publication of which we celebrate this evening as Number 8 in The Braemor Studies Series, attests amply to this reality when we come to issues of Inter Faith understanding and engagement in Ireland. There are many reasons why all of us should be engaged in Inter Faith understanding; and there are many reasons why many people resist and reject such engagements. Diversity in Ireland is bedevilled by a phrase I came across once and remembered. It is: *the containment of contamination*. I heard it used in the context of a conference by the Director of the Church of Ireland Centre in DCU, Professor Anne Lodge. I accept that it is more a sociological than a theological term but, when you stop to think of it, it elucidates a lot of how we have dealt with one another over the course of history in Ireland; and history and theology are readily intertwined in Ireland past and present. The way the model works is that those who hold power at any given time tend to use that power not to expand the open pasture of inclusion but to exclude and to confine and to restrict The Other. Such restriction means that the very voice and contribution of The Other to civic life and civic values begins to look irrelevant and in turn becomes impossible. The wilful exclusion of pertinent and factual information about The Other may give us that swelling feeling of not being contaminated. But that is a delusion. The self-same feeling pushes our backs into a wall. It is a wall built of the bricks of self-imposed limitation that truncates our development of understanding and freezes our experience of generosity. And generosity is a two-way street. It was, after all, John-Paul Lederach who pithily said: *diversity is our friend*. And so our society, South, North, West, East, can all too easily allow itself to become self-polarizing on all fronts. Conventionally, popular public opinion has tended to see 'The North' as the place where this psyche is a default setting of identity of oneself and of others' selves. There is ample evidence that it is not confined to Northern Ireland nor has it ever been. But we do not like uncomfortable facts, sure we don't.

## PASTORAL PRAXIS AND BIBLICAL PERMISSION

Suzanne Cousin's thesis is driven by a concern for pastoral praxis. This intention both respects and is realistic about the fact that ecclesiastical life in the Church of Ireland is primarily pastoral; pastoralia has been and will continue to be the place where things happen and where service is generously and compassionately given in the name of God. At the same time, we are increasingly regulated from without in matters of inclusion and diversity and this in and of itself raises fresh questions about who we are in a world that is and always was wider than the church even if we preferred not to acknowledge this fact. We also have scope for playing a responsible and reactive part in institutions, schools, colleges, universities and hospitals for example, but also in governmental engagement through the provisions of The Lisbon Treaty, to mention one. This

publication gives us the opportunity in a structured way to begin asking the question: Might we move from reactive to proactive in such contribution?

The point is powerfully made in the book that incomprehension breeds insecurity and that our fallacy is that we can use ignorance, either our own or that of others, to copperfasten certainty. The author's invitation to push out the boat remains wisely cautious. Her invitation is to engage in *partnerships of difference*, a concept she draws from David Ford. But the research that accompanies and underwrites her more expansive argumentation amply backs up that caution. Suzanne is no exponent of dialogue as an end in itself, devoid of implications or outcomes. She uses a memorable phrase: ... dialogue is like baptism – we step in, but we have to get out or we rot. She takes as a foundational Scriptural text 1 Thessalonians 2.8: *Our affection was so deep that we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but our very selves* as a Pauline-derived method of Inter-Faith mission and as an encouragement to do so. This walks hand in hand with her conviction that Jesus Christ Incarnate re-works the so-called Golden Rule; and that this requires of us that we love God, love our neighbour and love our enemy. Through such a reconfiguring of a belief system that can all too easily become tired and disengaged, she sets faith, hope and love over against cynicism, scepticism and fear, with the hope of an outcome consisting of healing, wholeness and salvation. Again, these can be set alongside love, hospitality and friendship as a generosity of Christian self-understanding. We have many triads that reflect a Trinitarian life on earth if we can but embrace them. Here we have what is always essential in a faithful and confident Inter Faith engagement: understanding of your own Faith tradition, obedient adherence to it, knowing what you are talking about in commending to others, for their acceptance or rejection, what you hold dear – that is, the Faith-foundation in Jesus Christ as a member of the Holy Trinity and expressed in Holy Scripture and in the mission of the church – the very things which matter most to you as a child of God.

Suzanne favours a pedagogical approach to pastoral practice because it champions an education that is in itself an empowering act of freedom, a means of transforming the world, in line with the educational philosophy of Paulo Friere (*Pedagogy of The Oppressed* 1970). She goes on to argue that such pedagogy enables personal growth through understanding, compassion and action. My own simple-minded way of expressing this is that you become a participant in your own narrative for good. Gladys Ganiel is quoted as saying that good pedagogy leaves learners: *excited about working for peace*. Suzanne draws on The Hard Gospel Project, if not indeed long forgotten, at least firmly filed away in the life of the Church of Ireland, as opening the door for The Church of Ireland *ourselves*, not least because it is a house that we courageously built for ourselves – so why not inhabit it and why not share it with others?

## OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CHURCH OF IRELAND

What is particularly important in this book is that it invites the Church of Ireland to have a look at its Anglican self. The questions are asked about the relationship between mission and Inter Faith encounter. These are important questions, honourable questions, essential questions. The not unreasonable assertion is made that mission is evangelical,

that it is an outworking of The Gospel. The Five Marks of Mission of the Anglican Communion are invoked as offering a way of witnessing as a disciple of Jesus Christ and of engaging with people of Other Faiths without contradiction. The Five Marks are described as being a yardstick for mission praxis and as being in accordance with Creedal Trinitarianism. They are also described as pointing to the role of the church in providing counter-cultural resistance to the very popular narratives of fear and elective exclusivity to which I alluded earlier. The role of the Holy Spirit in this work is also underscored and differentiated as follows: the prior work of the Holy Spirit brings about conversion, regeneration and renewal; the work of the Holy Spirit in an Inter Faith context brings about embassy, hospitality and dialogue.

... NOT SO BLEAK ...

My final and brief section is concerned to thank Suzanne for this probing and fair-minded book. It is the fruit of painstaking research and of critical reflection. One thing I would suggest and it is this: It may not be quite so bleak! The Diocese of Cork produced a very important document on Inter Faith matters particularly with Muslims in the city. Limerick has had a flourishing Inter Faith life and has shared this with the rest of the Church of Ireland. The Dublin City Inter Faith Forum produced the first Inter Faith Charter of any city in Europe and members of the Church of Ireland are deeply involved in this along with members of a very wide range of World Faiths and of the internal traditions within such World Faiths. It has worked in partnership with Dublin City Council and two successive Lord Mayors. The Charter unashamedly addresses the public space needed for religious identity rather than simply for cultural identity and, therefore, gives voice to religion *per se* as a vital dynamic part of who we are in Ireland today, yesterday and tomorrow. Our complexity and our opportunity are such that Ireland is now an island home for more than two hundred nationalities. Most recently, on February 2<sup>nd</sup> 2018, The Dublin City Inter Faith Forum, chaired by Mrs Hilary Abrahamson, of The Terenure Synagogue, launched The Five Marks of Inter Faith Encounter as the focal celebration of five years of the life of The Forum. There are many other activities and projects of DCIF where members of the Church of Ireland participate including the annual Walk for Peace. These are, in and of themselves, moments rich in blessing.

My final, final plea is that we avoid caricature and its violence. It has become all too easy to move from excitable incomprehension to entitled ignorance. It is not the Way of the Cross. It is wrong to consider all Muslims as terrorists. It is wrong to turn our face away from all Muslims simply because we are content to fall into the first trap of Inter Faith encounter: comparing the best of ourselves with the worst of The Other. Suzanne's book catapults us into the religious world in which we live in Ireland, North and South, East and West, in its diversity and complexity, in its humanity of encounter. I give her the very much deserved final word from her book: 'There is hope because of grace and the economy of gift, and because there is God, who is generous love.'