

The Church in the World Today

Therese Carroll RSJ

Abstract: *Does the Church hinder progress in the world? This essay argues the Church does not hinder progress but rather, at times, sits impotently in a world where it is being called to engage in life-giving, productive and meaningful activities. The world requires of the Church effective pastoral dialogue on matters of concern and significance in people's lives. The world expects a meaningful relationship with the Church that makes real the experience of God's love.*

Key Words: church and world; human progress; pastoral dialogue; church – mission; church as witness; authority

The Church, as a social entity, is part of the world and therefore called to engage with the world. She is called to be critical of herself and to be a witness of God's saving love to the world.¹ If the Church is called to be this reality in our world, then the world rightly has certain expectations of the Church. The world expects a meaningful relationship with the Church, a Church that witnesses to God's love, to witness signs that the Church critiques herself and changes accordingly, a Church that provides the world with a means to experience God's healing love.

Whether the statement 'the Church either hinders progress in the world, or at best ignores the world' is a valid assessment will be evaluated in the light of these expectations that the world appropriately has of the Church.

There are two ways of looking at this statement and assessing its validity. Firstly, the Church in the form that we know it, is one form only, and is a limiting and incomplete view of Church.² The picture we have is of an institutional Church that provides structures for the community of the faithful to experience the love of God. In the Western world this form of Church is the commonly acceptable notion and concrete reality, however it is dramatically limited. Second, and a more complete view, the Church is always developing and being recreated and in reality its true form is more than the institutional body. It is fluid, changing, and abstract in form and practice.

The World's Relationship with the Church

One very provocative way of picturing these two different forms in relationship as totality of Church is the image of the twin sisters Mother Church and Sophia.³ Using this image I want to pose the challenge that we generally view the Church only in the limited first form like Mother Church, without her twin sister, or vice versa. The Church can, and without a

¹ Karl Rahner, "The Function of the Church as a Critic of Society" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 12 (New York, Seabury, 1974), 229.

² Vincent Donovan, "Refounding Church: A Paradigm Shift," *Chicago Studies* 31 (1992): 215.

³ John Thornhill, *Sign and Promise: A Theology of the Church for a Changing World* (London, Collins, 1988), 203.

doubt does exist in a more complete form than we acknowledge. Using the image of the twin sisters, Mother Church and Sophia,⁴ interacting we are challenged to see the totality of Church, the potential fullness of the Church and its relationship with the world. Rosemary Haughton in her work *The Catholic Thing* identifies the image of the twin sisters as a means of healthy self criticism of which the Church is capable, being always open to the expression of the mystery in new and original ways.⁵ A renewed self-awareness is growing in our world so that we now witness other forms of Church such as sign and sacrament, herald, servant, liberator.⁶

The Church witnessing God's Love to the World

Three important Vatican documents, *Lumen Gentium*, *Gaudium et spes*, and the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad gentes: AG*) speak about the Church's engagement with the world as "universal sacrament of salvation."⁷ It is through God's people and in human relationships that God's love and salvation is received. Sullivan in *The Church: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* describes the Church as a means of salvation this way:

Ordinary men and women, and ordinary things like bread and wine, were going to be signs and instruments of divine grace. And if we think that all men and women, and all the things, that God has specially chosen as signs and instruments of grace what we have is the Church. That is why we call the Church the sacrament of salvation; it is the continuation of the sacramental economy that God instituted with the incarnation of his Son.⁸

It is precisely here that we can begin evaluating whether the Church hinders or ignores the world as the actions of the Church witness to God's liberating love. If the Church is to be a convincing sign of God's love, then justice, peace and joy, will be evident in human relationships.⁹ The areas of authority and inclusion will be used to illustrate the nature of the Church's actions.

⁴ Thornhill, *Sign and Promise*, 203. "The first, 'Mother Church' is more familiar, she is preoccupied with matters of the head, canonical order, doctrinal orthodoxy, time-honoured practical wisdom. Her twin sister, 'Sophia', however, is given to the things of the heart; and this makes 'Mother Church' uneasy: 'You never knew where she would be or what she would be doing.'"

⁵ Thornhill, *Sign and Promise*, 203. "As she puts it, Catholicism is a project, an enterprise, responding to a heritage that is bigger than the self-expression which it may find through any particular person or historical movement. That heritage is the mystery of the Christ-event, ever expressing itself in new and original ways. The Church knows that we will never fully express the greatness of the mystery, and that we should never be surprised when that greatness overwhelms us with a new form of expression."

⁶ Thornhill, *Sign and Promise*, 202.

⁷ Francis Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), 109. "In *Lumen gentium* we read: "Christ having been lifted up from the earth, is drawing all men to himself (Jn 12:32). Rising from the dead, he sent his life-giving Spirit upon his disciples and through this Spirit has established his body, the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation" (LG 48). *Gaudium et spes* declares: "Whilst helping the world and receiving many benefits from it, the Church has a single intention: that God's kingdom may come, and that the salvation of the whole human race may come to pass. For every benefit which the People of God during its early pilgrimage can offer to the human family stems from the fact that the Church is the 'universal sacrament of salvation,' simultaneously manifesting and exercising the mystery of God's love for man (GS 45). Finally, the *Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad gentes: AG)* opens with the statement: "The Church has been divinely sent to all nations that she might be the universal sacrament of salvation" (AG 1)."

⁸ Francis Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, 122.

⁹ Francis Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In*, 123. "The Church is a sign of salvation for the world by being a community that manifests in its very life the things in which St Paul tells us the kingdom of God consists: "The kingdom of God is not food and drink, but justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14:17).

Authority in the Church

The area of authority is so significant in evaluating the Church as witness to God's love because it is at the heart of all human relationships and how each person experiences the other, and indeed God's love in and through the other. The image of the twins, Mother Church and Sophia, reminds us that a dialogue of head and heart provides a holistic sense of Church and the interaction of her members. Authority misused or misplaced leads to power over, control, oppression, violence, and war.

Jesus brought his disciples together teaching them about authority as a means of personal and social liberation. Our Church today has much difficulty in understanding the kind of authority and freedom that Jesus taught. We have created a Mother Church so concerned with rules, doctrine, canonical order, institution, and concrete form. Our history reminds us that we are a Church in and through the grace of the Holy Spirit, inclusive of the Sophia aspect, the aspect that calls us to notice matters and movements of our heart.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the Church today witnesses to the world pagan power and authority rather than the power and authority that Jesus taught. Donovan in *Refounding Church: A Paradigm Shift* suggests that "authority in the Church, as it is understood and practised in the Church, is defective. He reminds us that Jesus warned his disciples about authority "among the pagans those in authority make their authority felt, they lord it over those under them, but with you [he said] it will not be that way."¹¹ The authority that Jesus gifted his disciples with was a power to liberate and empower those with whom they encountered. Authority that empowers is not the authority we usually experience in our contemporary Church. Our Church witnesses that same pagan power that Jesus warned his disciples about. Our Church is cautious to share authority and power in case the institution as we know it falls away and allows for new forms to emerge. The authority we know and experience in the Church disempowers and excludes whilst simultaneously witnessing a defective kind of authority in the name of Jesus. It leaves us wondering how women, homosexuals, divorced, oppressors, to name a few, can be included in the universal sacrament of salvation when exclusion and marginalization occurs without dialogue.

The Church: A Means for the World to Know and Receive the Healing Love of God

Optimistically though, the image of the twins, Mother Church and Sophia, emerges here again and reminds us that there is a holistic Church continually being created. Small communities are experiencing the power and authority that Jesus spoke of, and lived. Donovan in *Refounding Church: A Paradigm Shift* describes this power:

This new form of power, a PARADIGM SHIFT, a refounding, a place where power would be relational, where it would be mutual, where it would be a circle of healing for all those involved, where one person was empowered by the other and the first one did not lose the power; it would be a mutual empowering.¹²

¹⁰ Donovan, "Refounding Church," 218-219.

¹¹ Donovan, "Refounding Church," 218. He says "I have been in the Church for many years. I do not know how to say this. I have never seen authority carried out properly, never! NOT the authority that Jesus was talking about. What kind of authority was that? It was not this other kind of authority which I would call "pagan" authority. That is what HE called it. I might even call it "male" authority. UNILATERAL. This type of authority is a sole possession of someone, and were that person to talk about sharing authority, it would mean doling it out....it would mean a system of powerful people and powerless people."

¹² Donovan, "Refounding Church," 219.

I know of a number of small Christian communities, and have been privileged to become a member of one of these communities, where this kind of power and authority is experienced. Communities where all members have power, where power is shared, participation is open to all, where all members have a right to participate and speak.

These small communities witness to an image of the circle of healing, empowerment, that Donovan talks about is rooted in Scripture and the relationships that Jesus risked; risked because the kind of power that he preached called him to vulnerability and unconditional love (Jn 4:1-30; 8:1-11; 12:1-7; Mt 26:6-13; Mk 14:3-9; Jn 13:1-20; 9:1-12; Lk 13:10-17; 9:1-6; Mt 10:5-15; 7:24-30; Mt 28:16-20.)

Many of the scripture stories depict Jesus sharing his power, and empowering through healing those on the margins, or unclean ones. Healing ministries [and institutions] in our world are places where the world witnesses to the Church as God's healing and empowering love (Mk 2:1-12; Mt 12:9-14; Mk 5: 21-43; Mt 15:29-31; Mk 8:22-26).

I think one of the difficulties we have when evaluating the Church as witness to God's liberating love is that we expect that the dominant view of the Church and its members, particularly those in formal leadership roles, is without human frailty and limitations. This expectation of Church by the world presumes that those human beings leading and/or participating in Church have "arrived" at the end of the spiritual journey to wholeness and holiness. This expectation limits God's message of liberation to human beings as pilgrim people. How does this kind of power that Jesus teaches become part of our relationships and our Church institutions?

Church Critiquing Herself and Changing Accordingly

The Church so often lacks integrity with the world due to its apparent lack of self-critique and seeming lack of transformation. The arrogance of Church leaders shines through in lack of pastoral awareness and dialogue on some of the hard questions impacting on the daily lives of social beings. Questions and issues related to increasing feminization of poverty, caring for older people, sexual preferences and lifestyle choices, reproduction and family, thirst for spirituality and life's meaning, abuse, violence, oppression, and war.

A question and history that cannot be ignored is the one of sexual abuse by those in leadership and whether the Church has reflected on its misuse of defective power. How has the acceptance of responsibility changed the Church? How has the Church reconciled and liberated those affected? How can the world witness God's universal salvation?

Yet at the same time, one of the most hopeful signs of renewal and increasing energy in the Church is the emergence of spiritual movements and renewal throughout the world in many varied forms. For many people the workplace provides the nourishment and opportunity for an experience of Church in the support and development of their spirituality and sharing of spirituality in community.

The Future

Donovan's *Refounding Church – A Paradigm Shift* provides a refreshing view¹³ in accepting and urging that much of the past Church can now be "let go" to allow for a new reality to emerge - when one door closes another one opens. A paradigm shift is needed if the

¹³ Donovan, "Refounding Church," 215. Under the title "The author suggests a paradigm shift is needed if we are to recast the Church to serve in today's world."

Church is to serve the world. Donovan says that perhaps the most significant shift in our paradigm needs to be that the Church will be transformed from the outside:

The greatest eucharistic ministry will be performed, not with a lot of people clustered around an altar fighting about who is going to say the words of consecration or absolution, celibate, single, male or female. The greatest significance might well be the outside sign. The future of the Church might lie outside the Sign, outside the Temple. It has always been true that the Word of truth, the Word of prophecy, is spoken outside the Temple, not inside the Temple.¹⁴

Contemporary political theology provides a means of challenging the Church to be a true sign of God's universal salvation.¹⁵ It will continue to evaluate the interface and effectiveness of the relationship between the Church and the world.

Conclusion

The Church and the world are indeed inextricably linked, interdependent, organic bodies. Schillebeeckx in *Church: The Human Story of God* describes the inseparable link, the "unbreakable connection" between Church and the world, the "anamnesis," that is, the living recollection among us of the absolute saving presence of God in our world history.¹⁶ He says "Churches are the places where salvation from God is thematized or put into words, confessed explicitly, proclaimed prophetically and celebrated liturgically."¹⁷

The world looks to the Church for example, inspiration, leadership and guidance. Sometimes, very often in fact, society is disappointed when the Church fails, e.g. abuse of power, exclusion of women and homosexuals, lack of attention to the poor in our world.

Witness to the gospel is evidenced first and foremost by being harmonious in ourselves. The world looks for this among members of the Church as a starting point to evaluate the integrity of the Church as actions speak louder than words.

The traditional institutional Church that the world sees is a Church of rules somewhat devoid of compassionate relationships, whilst the world needs a modern Church where the love of God is seen and experienced in dialogue with the rule. The world declares its disappointment that the Church is offering nothing new. The desire among people for spirituality is so strong; however the institutional Church is not offering anything substantial in that sense.

This paper has revealed that the Church does not hinder progress but rather at times sits impotently in a world where it is being called to engage in life-giving, productive and meaningful ways. The Church's lack of pastoral dialogue on matters of concern and significance in people's lives is an inherent weakness.

The common view and experience of Church is the institutional form of Church, however the form is, as previously noted dramatically limited and incomplete. From this stance the Church is often seen to be irrelevant to a complex world rather than hindering progress; more erring on the side of ignoring the world really. In contrast, we can become aware of a more complete view of the Church; the Church as developing and being recreated and in reality its true form is more than the institutional body; as fluid, changing, and abstract in form and practice. From this place the Church is developing a

¹⁴ Donovan, "Refounding Church," 223.

¹⁵ Johannes Baptist Metz, *Theology of the World* (New York: Seabury, 1969), 107. "Political theology is a critical correction of present day theology inasmuch as this theology shows extreme privatizing tendency. It is a positive attempt to formulate the eschatological message under the conditions of our present society."

¹⁶ Edward Schillebeeckx. *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 13.

¹⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx. *Church*, 12.

greater self awareness, capacity to self-critique, openness to insights from the outside world, and always potentially new. From this space the Church has potential to be a positive influence on the world and vice versa.

Walter Kasper in *Faith and Future* seems confident that the Church of tomorrow will be “simpler and more unpretentious,” and the witness of a few to the world convincing and confronting, however the future unknown. He says

No one can know whether it will be so or how precisely it will turn out. There is only one thing we do know from both the Bible and history: the future of the Church will be determined by the saints, by the holy men and women who open themselves completely to the working of the spirit. They are witnesses to the God who is not dead but alive and is continually reawakening life in the Church in astonishing and unexpected ways.¹⁸

A final reminder that consciousness will assist a fruitful relationship between Church and the world I conclude with another challenge to the Church by Donovan in *Refounding Church: A Paradigm Shift*. He takes hold of the Church and shakes it to wake from its dreaming and ignorance of the grace and beauty of the world:

Our world is a sacred place. It is time now for the Church to be evangelized by the world. I use those words “evangelized by the world,” very deliberately. The full meaning of the gospel will come from the world and ourselves in dialogue with the world.¹⁹

Author: *Therese Carroll, a Josephite Sister, is former trustee and current mission services leader of Catholic Healthcare Limited and a member of Stewardship Board of Catholic Health Australia (former Chair 2003-2006). She has recently completed her Masters of Arts (Theological Studies) at the Catholic Institute of Sydney.*

Email: therese@unwired.com.au

¹⁸ Walter Kasper, *Faith and the Future* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 62.

¹⁹ Donovan, “Refounding Church,” 221.