

Meeting of General Secretaries of the European Bishops' Conferences

July 2, 2021

Speaking notes of David Quinn

Worship during lockdown

During the pandemic we faced an unprecedented situation almost everywhere in Europe. We were prevented from holding public worship.

This varied in length from country to country. Sweden never banned public worship, but did place severe limits on numbers who could attend.

Every other part of Europe I can think of stopped public worship in one or more lockdowns.

Almost all did so in the first lockdown starting last March.

But then some allowed public worship again faster than others.

Sometimes it took court cases, or direct intervention from the bishops.

In Italy, the bishops protested in May of last year when museums were allowed to reopen but you still couldn't go to Mass. They prevailed. Public worship has not been stopped since.

In France, a traditionalist Catholic group took a case and won.

In Germany, a Muslim group took a case and also won.

Courts judged the issue of proportionality. Did public health considerations warrant a public worship ban?

They also looked at the issue of discrimination. Were some sectors being allowed to reopen before places of worship?

In Ireland, we had the longest lockdown of anywhere. We could not go to Mass for something like 42 out of 60 weeks.

At one point last autumn, you could go to a hairdresser or gym but not to Mass.

Court cases have been taken, but either the plaintiffs lost, or the case was never heard.

We imposed a third lockdown after Christmas and we could not go to Mass again until the middle of May.

In England, public worship was stopped in the first lockdown and again for a short time in the autumn. But then faith leaders objected. They demanded evidence that this was justified. The ban was lifted and never again reimposed, not even in the big wave after Christmas.

Litmus test

I think this has provided something of a litmus test for how well regarded and respected Churches are in society.

It has also been a litmus test for how we balance freedom versus safety.

It has been a litmus test for the Churches themselves. How do we balance freedom of worship against safety?

In some countries, Churches have simply listened to public health experts without resistance, without asking for evidence showing it is necessary to totally stop public worship.

In other countries, Churches have been quicker to stand up to public health experts and Governments and make a strong case for restarting public worship.

Some of this comes down to self-confidence and how we think we are viewed by society.

In Ireland, the decline of the Catholic Church has also helped to drag down the other Churches. For example, the Protestant Churches were also sidelined, but probably would not have been if Irish society still had high levels of practice.

Faith schools in society

We see the same thing in another arena; education. Catholic schools in Ireland are seen as outmoded, but Protestant-run schools are also losing status as the Catholic Church loses status.

Pope Paul VI wondered in *Ecclesiam Suam* about the place of the Church in society.

The place of faith schools in society is a sort of proxy for this. Does the State respect and recognise the right of faith schools to exist?

Will it give them public funding?

Have they freedom to teach what they want to teach?

Are they forced to teach things they don't want to teach?

Can they maintain their identity when many pupils and parents belong to different faiths and none?

How popular are they even in very secular societies like Britain?

Why are they popular? (It is because of snobbery? Is it because they are good schools? It is because they are Christian?)

But their popularity even in secular societies shows that being secular doesn't necessarily mean hostility to religion because if it did, these schools would not be popular.

Mind you, a compromise is sometimes made; these schools often teach a sort of 'Catholicism-lite' so as to challenge and discomfort no-one.

The Church as a proxy for civil society

If the State does not respect the autonomy of the Churches, then it probably won't respect the autonomy of civil society in general.

When Paul VI speaks about "the relationships, which the Church of today should establish with the world which surrounds it and in which it lives and labours", it has to be concerned about the health of civil society in general.

If the State is trying to take over or dominate all schools, that is bad for the Church as well. Conversely, if Church schools are respected, this is good for civil society in general.

What is the general attitude of the State towards funding civil society? Does it fund independent hospitals, for instance? If not, then the only independent hospitals will be those that cater for patients with private insurance.

So, the Church must fight for the independence of civil society, and in doing so, its own independence.

This also means fighting for the autonomy of the family and the primacy of parents as educators of children. The State (or social media) cannot be the primary educators.

A few words on the media

Few things shape the view of the general public of the Church more than the media (and entertainment industry).

Negative stories about the Church abound in some countries, negative portrayal of Christians are commonplace, but usually there is simply dumb incomprehension of how anyone can be a religious believer today.

When I go on programmes, I am sometimes treated as a curious anthropological specimen.

There is no easy way to solve this, but if we want dialogue with the world, it must include dialogue with journalists.

This goes beyond simply having press officers. It also means building personal relationships with journalists, building relationships based on trust. Sometimes this will mean being willing to give them stories, even off-the-record, because journalists love stories, and if they know you are a good source you can use that to try and ensure more accurate portrayal of Church issues.

It also means having plenty of people willing and able to go on programmes, especially when this involves contentious issues. Otherwise, it will be assumed our positions are simply indefensible.

Concluding remarks

Do we still have self-confidence in our message? Do we still think we have a future here in Europe? Does the West itself still have a future?

What do we think we are? Do we still believe we are part of the Community, through time, of the Followers of Jesus Christ, and that Jesus Christ is Lord, the Way, the Truth and the Life?

Do we believe we have something to contribute that is unique and uniquely special?

The answer Paul VI gave to both of these questions was certainly Yes.

Perhaps we first have to re-evangelise the Church, before we can attempt to re-evangelise the world.

The world needs a renewed Church, because the world, starting with our own home here in Europe, also needs renewal. This starts and finishes in Christ. This remains our mission and our message. It is certainly the message of Pope Paul's 1964 encyclical we have been discussing at this conference.

Thank you.