SACRED SPACE IN THE CITY
MINISTERING IN THE CITY: A CREATIVE EXPERIMENT

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Sacred Space in the City

For the first time in history, a majority of the world’s population is now living in urban areas, and this is no less true of Ireland. Two thirds of the Irish population live in the cities or the suburbs. Historically, places of worship have been a key point of reference in urban life and residential development, and often featured prominently on a city skyline. But in contemporary architecture the lime-light has been taken over by office blocks or shopping malls, and any buildings or gathering places are stripped of any religious symbolism lest they offend. This reflects the secularization that has taken place in society and the separation between the sacred and the profane that exists in many people’s lives. “There is a crisis of interiority in our culture and with it a great alienation of the self from its spiritual roots and sources.”

Yet, there has always been a special connection between faith and the city. ‘The Church originally took shape in the large cities of its time, and made use of them to spread.’ In the face of the present-day secular challenges that one finds in the city, it is faith that motivates one to keep a presence, and to see God present in the life of the people:

Faith teaches us that God lives in the city in the midst of its joys, yearnings and hopes, and likewise in its pains and suffering. The shadows that mark everyday life, such as violence, poverty, individualism and exclusion cannot prevent us from seeking and contemplating the God of life also in urban environments.

Being parish administrator in the north inner city has been a very enriching experience for me. However, when I first started I was a bit apprehensive. How does one minister in the inner city? How does one connect with people? How does one make the sacred relevant for them?

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The parish, though situated right in the heart of the city, is a much marginalized community with a long history of social issues. I wanted to reach out to people and make our parish a bit more vibrant. Church attendance was very low and many people maintained their link with the Church only through the rituals of christening and funerals. I tried to be creative and organize activities to draw more people to the church, such as initiatives promoting devotion to Venerable Matt Talbot⁴, whose remains are kept in our church, which opened up the Church to visitors and pilgrims. Yet, with time I came to know the people and have come to appreciate better the place that the Church holds in their lives.

When the locals speak of the Church ‘they speak of their parents and grandparents, of the rituals of their childhood, of influential mentors, companions and friends in their lives.’⁵ They have a strong sense of nostalgia, and they keep the memories of their loved alive by having plaques bearing their names fixed on to benches where their ‘nanny used to sit’. Month’s minds and anniversaries are remembered scrupulously and funerals are always very well attended and an occasion to rally together. For them the Church is a sanctuary of memories, a guardian of family connections, keeping alive the ‘network of human relationships’⁶ of which they are a part of.

Indeed, there is something sacred about memory. Whenever we gather together to keep alive the memory of loved ones, an aura of reverence, respect and silence always descends on the assembly. John O’Donohue reminds us that there is an ‘invisible sanctuary of memory’ which is secretly constructed in ‘the narrative of individual lives’⁷.

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⁴ Matt was a Dubliner from the inner city who died in 1925, and was renowned for his holiness, having overcome a crippling alcohol addiction, through prayer, penance and acts of charity. He has been a heroic inspiration to very many people in recovery and his shrine situated in the parish attracts quite a number of pilgrims from Ireland and abroad.

⁵ Clark, William A., A Voice of Their Own. (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2005), 183

⁶ Ibid

This invisible sanctuary remains elusive to us unless we cross a threshold so as to enter into a sacred space, a space which can engage us, both individually and collectively, in ritual, word and music in order to nourish our spirits, to regenerate our souls, and to help us reconnect with a reality higher than ourselves. The church in the inner city serves as a tangible threshold for the local community.

**The Sacredness of Place**

Places take on a particular significance for individuals, communities and even nations, if a link had been forged through some strong experience, memory or even manifestation of the divine. The place becomes a source of inspiration and takes on an element of the sacred.

In the play *the field*, by John B. Keane’s, we have a clear example of how a space has been storied into a meaningful place. The play reflects the indelible connection in Irish society that the people have to the land, stretching back centuries to early medieval Ireland, when the *tuath*, an area of territory, was controlled by a tribal group or clan, also known as the *tuath*. It is of great significance that the meaning of the word *tuath* has nuances of both land and people, signifying a certain sacredness that a particular land held for a particular people.

Walter Brueggemann describes the importance of place as follows:

Place is space that has historical meanings, where some things have happened that are now remembered and that provide continuity and identity across generations. Place is space in which important words have been spoken that have established identity, defined vocation, and envisioned destiny.
It is people that en-soul the places that they are connected with, that they animate with their particular story, making them significant spaces with deep historical meaning. In turn with time, these places impact the people in a way that keeps alive their story and their vision. It forms the new generations in particular passing on to them the collective story, and in time of crisis energizes the people by reminding them of their roots and identity. “This connection to place shapes us, often unknown to us. To some degree, there can be no real sense of identity without an undergirding connection to place. It shapes and forms our belonging.”\textsuperscript{12} These places become a space that en-soul the people.

Indeed the inner city can best be described as a tuath, whose particular story of hardship and suffering has bonded them very much with their place of origin. Over the years the locality had been allowed to run down, as it was neglected by the authorities. The docks and local workshops had long been closed down and job opportunities had become scarce. In the 1980’s an era of addiction was ushered in, as the scourge of drugs infiltrated into the area, ruining many lives of good young people and families who were unscrupulously exploited. Most families would have lost a loved one, as some of its most promising young lives ended abruptly and tragically. Many times over the years our church would have been filled with the tears of the people, and the community had every reason to remember and grieve.

But these ‘sacred’ spaces are not limited only to religious buildings, but any space or building which has become significant to a people. For the locals, it is the Monument\textsuperscript{13} which they had erected in memory of their loved ones when they took a firm stand against the drug

\textsuperscript{13} The sculpture, entitled ‘Home’ by Leo Higgins is a monument to the memory of all those who had died as a result of heroin, and is situated not far from the Five Lamps. Depicting a doorway made of limestone set around a central flame of gilded bronze, Home was the culmination of a unique project planned in conjunction with relatives of heroin victims. The local community had expressed the wish for some form of permanent marker to the memory of their lost children, families and friends. In 1996, an antidrug meeting held in the locality, triggered off a street campaign with marches against the drug dealers who had colonised the area, that eventually culminated in the unveiling of the Monument in the year 2000. (Kenny 2006)
barons. Every Christmas they gather together near the monument for the lighting of the Tree in memory of their loved ones. It has become an annual ritual in which speeches are made and stars hung on the tree, each representing someone known to have died locally from heroin. Having a monument created a kind of spiritual presence of lost loved ones, helping family members in their grieving process.

The GPO in Dublin is another clear example of such a ‘sacred’ space, because of the events that had unfolded there a hundred years ago, and has now become the focal point of the Irish collective consciousness that speaks to them of freedom and nationhood. Indeed, my time in the inner city also coincided with a very special year of memories for a nation remembering the pains and struggles of birthing itself: transformed utterly: a terrible beauty is born. It was also for me a time of discovering places of significance. A local historian became for me the Virgil who guided me through the purgatory of the past, when people went through hell in their search for a paradise. He unlocked the hidden memories enshrined in the area of the tenements, the great lockout and the uprising. Indeed there are so many connections in the parish with the events of 1916, not only geographically but also how the different family connections.

**Part II: Ministering in the City: a Creative Experiment**

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14 The site of the GPO was originally sought after by the Bishop of Dublin of the time as the site for the Catholic Cathedral. Permission was denied by the British where reluctant to have an Irish iconic symbol on the main Avenue of Dublin. It is ironic that now the GPO is indeed iconic, and has become the sacred site of the Irish nation, in front of which important State commemoration of the uprising has been held. The GPO was chosen by the insurgents because it housed the radio signal for the Morse code that transmitted to the outside world. They wanted to prevent the British from calling for help and reinforcement. When the GPO was taken over, continuous messages were transmitted by Morse to inform the world of declaration of Independence. The signal was picked up by several people, and is considered to be the first radio broadcast, since, up to then, all signals on radio had a particular intended receiver.

15 William B. Yeats, Easter, 1916

16 Terry Fagan, a local historian with the North Inner City Folklore Project. (McGrath 2016)

17 In Dante Alighieri's *The Divine Comedy,* the ghost of Virgil is Dante’s guide as he travels through Hell, Purgatory and Heaven on his path toward spiritual redemption.
Michael Conway rightly observes, “Every generation has its own spiritual needs … the way of the past can never adequately nourish or met the desires of the present. There is a discontinuity creative of the future.”\textsuperscript{18} How does one connect to a younger generation, who are very much part of a materialistic and secular society that is reflected in the urban structures in which they live? How does one pass on the sense of the sacred to someone who has hardly, if ever, experienced anything beyond their senses?

The best place to start was from where they were at, and that meant tapping on to their strong family ties. A casual conversation with the chaplain of the Community Secondary School in the area, together with some creative thinking, eventually led to a project in which one of the Year groups would set out to record the plaques in the local church as part of the local heritage. This involved their coming to the Church a number of times to take photos of all the plaques, to be put on a website so as to make them accessible to a wider number of people. In the process they learnt about the need to be connected with our roots, and explored the idea of how memories of loved ones create a sacred space. The idea was to get them in touch with their own inner need to find moments and spaces to spend in reflection and prayer.

The centenary of the uprising amplified the whole initiative, as it was amalgamated by the school authorities with another project in which another Year group was researching on the children who died in the revolution. They had originally wanted to have the Proclamation day commemoration, which each school was asked to have on the 15\textsuperscript{th} of March, in the Remembrance Gardens. But that year this was not possible, because of other ceremonies being held there for the centenary. What better alternative then for the students to have their joint Proclamation Day celebrations and the Plaques project precisely in the local church.

It was indeed a wonderful experience to see the church filled with students from the area and beyond, and through drama, song and ritual being able to connect with the collective story of a nation and discover the key role that their *tuath* played in it. Further it provided them with an opportunity to do something concrete for the poor youth of today by making a donation to a local youth charity from the funds they managed to collect.19

**Conclusion**

The role of the Church in society has changed drastically over the years. This is reflected in the life of the local community. Though they may not be church goers, the presence of the church is important for them, not in the way we understand, but one of solidarity, reassuring them that they have not been abandoned.

I have come to see that the church’s role is not so much a ministry of *doing* but more a ministry of *presence*, and to recognise the basic goodness that is inherent in the people. The Church is for the people a sacred space that “nurture[s] that infinite longing of the human spirit, [as] it tells us that there is always more to life.”20

As the Archbishop of Dublin himself affirmed, “*Inner city Dublin has a great history of people looking after one another, especially when times are hard. That goodness springs up natural.*”21 The goodness of the inner city is nourished by faith; we see it in Matt Talbot who shared in the life and goodness of his own people. We see it in the elderly women I visited once on a sick call who sits in the kitchen corner, gazing out of the window being reassured by the sight of the church rising up above the houses. Indeed it is “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters”. 22

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19 See Appendix below: The Sacred in Memory: Remembering the Children of the Uprising.
21 Rev. Diarmuid Martin, Homily 50th Anniversary of the Parish of Our Lady of Lourdes
22 EG 28
Bibliography


Websites


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Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (EG)*, 24 November 2013

THE SACRED IN MEMORY: Remembering the Children of the Rising


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by Fr Richard Ebejer SDB

1916 was a Year that changed Ireland forever. A hundred years on, the significance of the uprising still impacts the new Ireland that emerged from the chain of events that it unleashed.

The younger generation played a significant role in that week of upheaval, and up to 38 children under the age of 16 lost their lives. As the 1916 centenary is marked in various ways, it is the younger generation that will perhaps be impacted most by these celebrations. 15th of March was Proclamation day, and throughout Ireland schools have marked the event in different ways. One particular school has chosen to mark this day in a special manner by remembering the Children of the Uprising.

Larkin Community College is located right in the City centre, only a five minute walk away from the GPO. That means that many of the students’ great-grandparents and families would have lived through the historic events. Larkin School have engaged with the Gaiety School of Acting to create a unique presentation, which they called: THE STAGE IS SET: six days that divided a city.

They wished to hold their memorial presentation in a space that is held as sacred, where they could honour the child-victims. What better place than the local Church of Our Lady of Lourdes, which is a sanctuary of memory, housing hundreds of plaques on benches that bear the memories of loved ones, and is a place of prayer and worship.

Guests were welcomed with a daffodil on arrival, bearing a name of one of the Children of the Rising; the programme opened with a song, and students named the 38 victims. This was followed by a set of three different drama.
In preparing for their presentation, students had delved deeply into the lives of the children and their families of 1916, in particular Joe Duffy’s Book on the Children of the Rising. They created their own imagined stories arising from their reading on the period; the first drama revolved round the life of the youngest victim, 22-month old Christina Caffrey.

The students then explored the life of James Plunkett through a dance sequence that created scenes to remember his story. Students finally took Sean O’Casey from the page to the stage through their enactment of an extract from *The Plough and the Stars*. In all over sixty students were involved.

Students wanted to connect the Children of the Rising with the vulnerable children of today. They did this by asking for a donation from the audience to the event, to go directly to the Don Bosco Care Homes, which provides a home to children at risk who cannot live with their families anymore.

At the end of the programme, guests were invited to plant their daffodils in the Church’s Memorial Garden, and view an exhibition set up by the students.

There is something sacred about memories; in keeping memories alive we create a sacred space, where we reconnect with ourselves, with our roots and with a higher purpose and hope for the future.