

BETWIXT & BETWEEN

**Address by Sr Liz Murphy, Secretary General of AMRI,
Launch of Association of Leaders & Missionaries of Ireland
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INTRODUCTION

Over the two hours or more here at Emmaus we have been in a most interesting space as we completed two EGMS – for CORI and one for IMU. We are about to commence the EGM of a new entity now registered as the Association of the Missionaries & Religious of Ireland. The anthropologist van Gennep in the late 1800s would call this time *Betwixt and Between*, an invisible time as a journey is made in three phases: separation from the known where we are stripped away from the familiar; followed by a middle state between ending something and starting something else. The final state is induction into a new place and being assimilated into it. We could simply say we leave something behind, turn towards the new, and step right into a new and unknown future. In between finishing and starting is a peculiar time, an imaginary place which is neither there nor here, where boundaries are blurred, there is a kind of twilight zone which is neither light nor darkness. I think of it like the Greek god Janus whose head turns backwards towards the past and forwards towards the future but it is the turning that is significant. We talk about ‘turning fifty’ or ‘turning sixty’! For some of us it might be nearer to ‘turning seventy’! We talk about the leaves in Autumn *turning* or indeed a few weeks ago we were talking about spring appearing as winter disappeared. Did that happen when we saw the first snowdrop or the daffodils that seemed to bloom very soon after Christmas, or seeing new born lambs in early January? Much has been imperceptible. What we do know is that we are in a new place now that 2017 is well and truly underway.

As I reflected on this I am reminded of the dawn of the millennium at the end of 1999 and the when the year 2000 was about to appear. We wondered, somewhat naively now, would computers work on the 1st January 2000 and they did! I still wonder on the eve of each new year will my phone and computer recognise the turning?

Various writers recognise this kind of movement. Viktor Turner in the 1960s was writing about **rites of passage** and talked about thresholds and liminality, stepping through doorways into new places and into all that is involved in that journey. Diarmuid O’Murchu makes constant reference to this in his writings on religious life. Liminality is a place of ambiguity, a time of disorientation, where in the ritual of transition people no longer hold their previous state, and don’t quite know what lies ahead.

LIMINALITY

Liminality is not just about journey but it is also about belonging, about relationship and the structures that help us relate to each other. There are places between structures - as many congregations well know in our attempts to restructure – many doing this for more than the first time. What is it like being in a non-structure or in an anti-structure? Many immigrants know this place all too well and could tell us a lot about non-structure as so many have crossed unknown and unkind seas in wandering to places whose names they don’t even know

or a language that is totally foreign to them. So, liminality is about our structures and how they are created, dissolve and are recreated for their own time. Ned Prendergast outlined this very well in his recent *Furrow* article called *Open Ground*. As structures begin to change or dissolve cracks appear and as Leonard Cohen famously pointed out in his song *Athem*: “there are cracks in everything that’s how the light gets in.” Turner says that it is in the cracks we become most aware of ourselves.

Liminality is challenging because we like to keep things tidy, in neat categories, and we don’t like being temporary for too long. Jean Houston calls us “people of the parenthesis” as we make our way from where we are into new territory. In the best-selling book *Megatrends*, which was on the curriculum when I was doing *H Dip* in the early 1970s, John Naisbitt said “we are living in the time of the parenthesis, the time between eras. We are not quite leaving behind the past where we relied on institutions, built hierarchies and looked for short term solutions to everything. But we are not embracing the future either.” He said we were doing “the human thing” where “we are clinging to the known past in fear of an unknown future.”

THE BETWEEN

Paul Ray and Shery Ruth Anderson in their rather recent book *The Cultural Creatives* call this time **The Between** ... a time between stories, a time filled with opportunity, a great and yeasty time. We survive, they say, indeed we live in these times if we do two things: (i) make uncertainty our friend and (ii) if we can get a clear vision of what lies ahead. So how do we move ahead? We start as the ancient navigators did by gathering up maps for the journey ahead. These maps do not come from the past but from scenarios of the future and insights learned from the times in the past where there was danger and opportunity. We are living today in what one writer called “the edge of history” where what is called for is not fortune tellers but deep sea divers who are prepared to plunge beneath the obvious looking for possibilities, alternatives, and are willing to analyse and seek out the implications of these.

Paul Ray and Sherry Ruth Anderson point out how to approach this by working with three scenarios:

The first scenario they outline is **Falling Apart** – which of us wants this? The second is **Learning to work together**, not staying with old competitive ways where conflict reigns supreme and division ensues. The third scenario is **Muddling our way towards transformation**. We can be very creative when we are up against the wall. Different combinations that are middling, muddling, searching, might not be attractive but they are great places of learning. If we fall down we can learn to get up again! “Whatever you love opens its secrets to you” was a saying of George Washington Carver who discovered so many different uses for peanuts. The curiosity to explore, to follow a vision is energising. It is a sense of longing to know more about what you love and not even thinking of parting from it until you have uncovered its secrets. This is an affair of the heart.

So what is it really like to be no longer at ease in an old way of life but not yet established in a new one. This is living true paradox. “Birth is the death of the past we have known; death is the birth of the future we have to enter” is a wise statement, and *The Between*, with its danger and its promise is right where we are now. At such times it is so important not to take sides,

not to distrust, not to engage in conflict but to build bridges, sustain relationships, collaborate together. President Trump please take note!

The contemporary writer, Richard Tarnas in his book *The Passion of the Western Mind*, brings the whole area of transition, transformation, betweenness into a completely new place. He says that we are going through a collective dark night of the soul – wandering as the Exodus people did into a new world view, a new vision of our planet, our world, and we are truly privileged to be part of this ... but as John Dalrymple once said it “costs not less than everything.”

In her book *Winds of Change*, written several years ago, Joan Chittister talks about the past and the future. She offers as symbol of the past the story of Esther in the Old Testament who was reluctant to take on leadership. Mordecai sent her a message saying:

Don't think that just because you live in the king's house you're the only one Jew who will get out of this alive. If you persist in staying silent at a time like this, help and deliverance will arrive for the Jews from someplace else; but you and your family will be wiped out. Who knows? Maybe you were made queen for just such a time as this. (Esther 4: 12-14)

In looking towards the future she turns to the women who came to anoint the dead body of Jesus. They came prepared ... with oils and spices. They were determined in their journey and they knew the task at hand. They arrived undaunted but well prepared.

For us today we need Vision ... the guidance of the Magi star that directs us towards the Bethlehems of today, shining on the mangers of need all around us. The Gospel is our 'weapon of mass instruction' and our concern is the *landscape of soul*.

PILGRIMS TO A NEW PLACE

Earlier this morning the former members of CORI carried clay/soil from different parts of Ireland – from a 16th century monastery in Donegal, from a contemporary garden in Cork and from various areas here around Dublin. This soil symbolised the rooting of religious life in the land of Ireland, in the places where many of us were born and reared, joined our various religious congregations and ministered over the past number of years and continue to do so. Later in the morning water from some of the famous wells of Ireland (from Knock shrine, from Brigid's wells in Kildare and Clare, from Doon well in Donegal), symbolising the oceans travelled by missionaries far and wide, was carried forward by members of IMU and is now here in this central container.

Here in the central sacred space is a container with soil waiting to be filled, waiting in that liminal space for you to call forth a new entity, a new structure which isn't quite there in name even yet as we await its calling forth. This entity resembles what Pope Francis says the church is – *a construction site*. It awaits, it has been made ready for ... bulbs and plants for all seasons but it needs leadership. In the course of this afternoon the expectation is that not only will a new entity come into being but an Executive will be elected to serve us, the members of religious congregations, societies of apostolic life and the three specific lay organisations. A construction site needs various talents – architects who design, surveyors who measure and calculate, diggers and brick layers, plumbers, electricians and designers.

But houses are made to be lived in, they're not just ornaments. I look forward to working with the new Executive into the future. During the past weeks of liminality some staff have concluded their contracts and new staff have joined us like Aoife whose voice greets you on the phone or is your first point of contact by email.

CONCLUSION

As we move forward into a new place in the coming minutes I take strength from a twilight poet, a displaced Nigerian man now living in London who wrote *Mental Fight* as a long poem about entering the 21st century. In that poem he says

Already the future is converging with the past ...

You can't remake the world without remaking yourself...

Each new era begins within

It is an inward event, with unexpected possibilities ...

Our future is greater than our past

We are better than that ...

Will we allow ourselves to merely drift into

An era of more of the same

An era drained of significance, without shame,

Without wonder or excitement

Just the same ... boring and predictable

Or might we choose to make this time

A waking-up event

A moment of world empowerment?

... we rise and fall by the choice we make

It all depends on the road we take

And the choice and the road each depend

On the light that we have, the light that we bend

The light that we use or refuse ...

