

THE SYNODAL TIMES



“Synodality is what the Lord expects from the Church of the third millennium” – Pope Francis

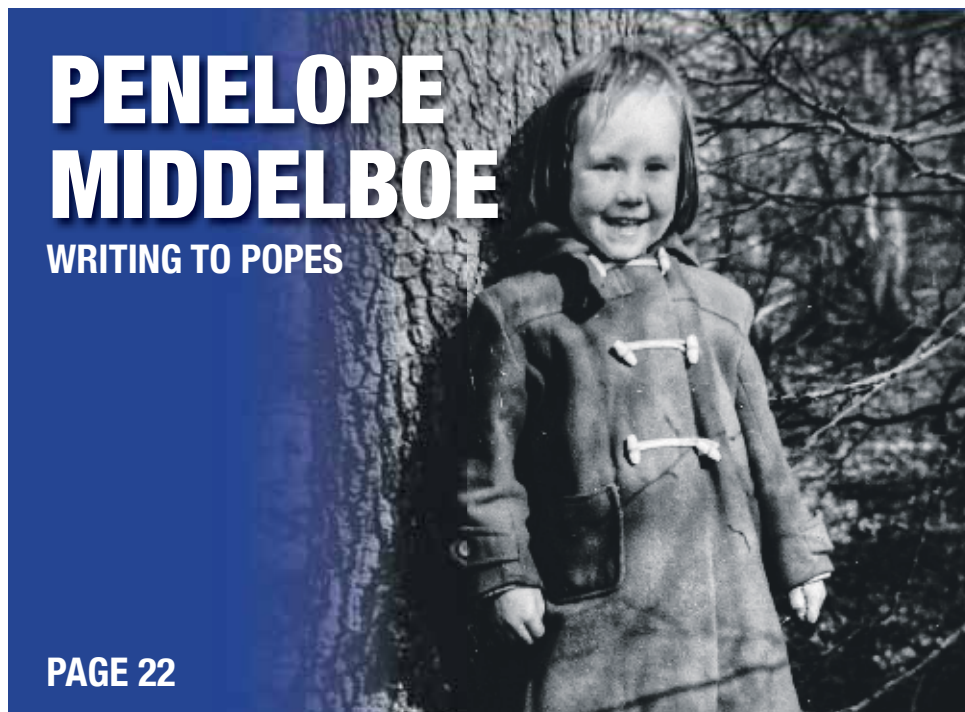
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Church in Ireland needs ‘mindset shift’ over lay ministry

Ruadhán Jones

The Church in Ireland needs a whole “mindset shift” over lay ministry, as dioceses and parishes seek to embed a synodal approach to local leadership, a leading theologian has said.

Irish dioceses have a “brilliant opportunity” to initiate a more “inclusive” model of leadership, according to the Dean of Theology at St Patrick’s Pontifical University, Maynooth, Dr Jessie Rogers.

But for this to take place, “there’s so much change of mindset that has to happen”, Dr Rogers told *The Synodal Times*.

“On one level, people are saying how do we go forward with a shortage of priests,” said Dr Rogers.

“On another level, which I hope is the deeper, truer level, is recognising that we’re in a different world... and that God gives to the Church everything that we need to be able to fulfil the ministry that he has given to us.”

“There is a whole load of possibilities”, she said, including lay-led liturgies, catechetics and corporal works of mercy, adding that it is “a brilliant opportunity and invitation for all of the Baptised to more fully live out our faith”.

However, this needs training, formation and proper preparations by dioceses and parishes to make space for lay leadership.

“People’s experience over the years is that they feel they have something to give, but there’s no opportunity in the parish,” warned Dr Rogers.

Maynooth is entering into partnership with a number of Irish dioceses to provide part-time courses on lay ministry, with 30 aspiring lay ministers from Ferns already gathering in January for a period of discernment.

The college is “in partnership with the dioceses,” said Dr Rogers, “who are looking to change their model, to make it more inclusive, to include more people... the training and formation is only a piece”.

A lot of the work the dioceses have been doing in the synod has already brought about possibilities and people on board who may not have been as involved before, the theologian and Old Testament scholar said.

She encouraged the Faithful “not to fear”, saying we are “gaining so much more than we are losing”.

However, she warned against a mindset that asks, “how do we compensate for the lack of a priest, how do we do the next best thing”.

That mindset leads to the danger of that we “miss other possibilities”.

“It’s not just, how do we fix things, how do we make the best of a bad situation – it’s a case of what surprising thing is God doing in this time and this place,” said Dr Rogers.

Pope hopes hell is empty



“This isn’t dogma, just my thought: I like to think of hell as being empty. I hope it is.”
Reported by CNS – the Pope was speaking on Italian TV.

NEXT WEEK: EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW WITH UISG PRESIDENT, IRISH WOMAN SR MARY T BARRON, OLA.

John XXIII, a letter and concern for Pope Francis

Penelope Middelboe

I fear for Pope Francis's health. I wrote him a personal letter posted on 7 December, but it hasn't left the UK yet according to the tracking number. I fear for his health because the last time I wrote personally to a pope was in May 1963 when I was six years old. The pope died before receiving my letter.

Pope John XXIII – affectionately known these days as ‘*il papa buono*’ – was dying. My class teacher at Brentwood Ursuline Convent School, who was a nun, had asked everyone in the class to write to him.

I remember the excitement and responsibility of writing to a pope. We had to do it there and then. I expect every class in the convent was being asked the same thing. The nuns were very upset he was dying. Perhaps they had been inspired by Vatican II. Anyway there was a great sense of urgency. A miracle was expected. Letters were to go to the Post Office that afternoon.

Introduction

I didn't make my First Communion for another year after that, but my mother must have already given me some sort of introduction to Christianity and Jesus because I understood what a pope was.

My maternal grandmother was a Catholic convert. She'd gone to Oxford as a blue-stocking telling her Anglican parents she would either become a Communist or a Catholic. Her father had said that if she became either he would disown her. She never spoke about her conversion and he astutely never asked.

I had been born in

Kenya, and our family had only recently arrived in England. Had I ever even written a letter before, I wonder? However I clearly knew that in a letter you were meant to write more than just one line. You were meant to give a little of yourself. And in this case, the life of the most important person we knew of was at stake.

“I had written telling him that I was praying for him to die very soon to be with Jesus. I was very happy for him”

Our letters were collected. There was a hushed silence as our letters were read by the nun and placed in a large envelope. Half-way through she stopped, looked at me and called me over. I wish I could remember her exact words but basically she told me to do it all over again. And quickly. The bell was about to go and I was now holding up the important posting. This time, she emphasised, I was to leave the theology out of it. Of course she didn't use that word.

I was confused. And upset. I don't remember being particularly embarrassed, perhaps because I was new to the school and new to the country and used to feeling an outsider. I believed I had written a good letter. Pope John XXIII was old – 81 was very old then although I doubt I knew his age – and so in my best handwriting, in pencil, I had written telling him that I was praying for him to die very soon to be with Jesus. I was very happy for him. I remember adding that because he didn't have children he didn't have to

worry about leaving them without a Daddy. I said something about hoping he wasn't in pain.

But if this was unacceptable to my class teacher, what, I asked her, could I possibly write? I was deeply sincere but perhaps she was too busy to see that, because her reply was very off-hand. ‘It's very simple, Penelope. You should do what everyone else in the class has done...’ I listened, curious to know what they'd all done, and I had so clearly not... ‘and write to say that you are praying that he will get better.’

I was appalled. I didn't want him to get better. I wanted him with Jesus. He was old and ill. But my letter was now in the bin and I realised I would have to do what she said. I remember verbatim my reply. ‘What else can I write? I can't just write I pray for you to get better.’ And her impatient response, ‘tell him you're a good girl and...’ she floundered around for an and, ‘... and you help your Mummy with the washing up’. Then she sent me back to my desk.

Well I didn't. I didn't help my Mummy with the washing-up. I never had done. We'd lived in Kenya where the dishes were washed up by the cook in the stand-to kitchen to the side of our modest house. And now we were in England and my father had only just found a job after 9 months, we were living four of us (my parents, brother and I – and a Siamese cat with a litter tray) in very sad little hotel where they served either tinned spaghetti on toast or beans on toast for most of our meals. So no, I'd never helped my Mummy with the washing-up.

Imposter

My hand wrote the letter my teacher wanted, and my imposter body put the letter on the teacher's desk. She read it and just as the bell rang slipped it into the envelope. I remember feeling very sad. I felt I'd failed the Pope. I had wanted to comfort him and now I'd written praying that his torment would continue. To make matters worse I had garnished it with a lie about being good and helping Mummy.

Everything in me rebelled at the hypocrisy I had been forced into. I didn't want the Pope to read my cruel letter. I came home and exploded at my Mother. Why didn't my teacher understand about Heaven? I remember realising then that I would have to keep on doing my own thinking about these important things.

“My real prayers had been listened to. Pope John XXIII was with Jesus. He might even know the truth about my letter and forgive my white lie”

A few weeks later in assembly the headmistress, also a nun, read out a letter from the Pope's office thanking us for our very kind letters. She paused for us to comprehend the significance of hearing from the Vatican. It was in fact a very dull and stuffy letter written by some secretary. Then she continued. Sadly Pope John XXIII had died before our kind letters reached him. Gasps of disappointment ran around the hall.

That afternoon I jumped off the school bus into my Mother's arms to deliver the good news. My real prayers had been listened to. Pope John XXIII was with Jesus. He might even know the truth about my letter and forgive my white lie.

My prayers today for Pope Francis couldn't be more different. I pray that he has the strength to continue his revolution here on earth a while longer. And only now do I understand the nun who couldn't bear the thought of losing the revolutionary John XXIII.

i Penelope is the author of two history books, *We Shall Never Surrender* (Macmillan 2011) and *Edith Olivier* from her journals: 1924-48 (Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1989). She was *Script and Series Editor* on animated films aimed at making cultural heritage accessible for HBO, BBC and SAC/Channel 4. She co-produces a podcast *HistoryCafe.org* with 100+ episodes to date.



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