**Penelope’s speech, Saturday 11 September 2021**

**I want to tell you about the magisterium**

Those of you who, like me, enjoy Philip Pullman’s *Dark Materials* and *Book of Dust,* will know all about the ‘magisterium.’ It’s a dark and sinister kind of authority. A knot of grim-looking and conniving men in black, who meet in lofty buildings and run the world with an iron fist. They are concerned only with their own power.

In the Catholic Church there is, of course, no such thing as a dark and sinister authority, There never has been.

But, actually, there *is* such a thing in the Catholic church as the magisterium. I know because Sister Gemma Simmonds introduced us to it in her talk during our year-long journey of discernment. Sister Gemma is a Cambridge academic, an ecclesiologist, a theologian, a sister in the Congregation of Jesus.

**Now the first thing I want to say is this …**

You, Root and Branch, are a pilgrim people who have crossed the desert. Some of us are in exile like James Carroll. We have left behind what James Alison called ‘the strong belonging’ of ignorance and fear. You R&Bers have done the hard yards, completed your homework. We are dealing here not in claims but facts. Not protests. Not half-truths. *Not even new ideas*. Certainly *not heresies.*

The first thing for us as we go back to our parishes is that *we can cast off our fear.* There is nothing we’ve heard here that can take us away from Christ. We are in safe hands. Nothing we have heard is not Biblical. This, my fellow root and branchers, is the new mainstream. Mary McAleese called Root and Branch a miracle, showcasing what it feels like to be an equal citizen of the church, how to listen to each other, how to trust the voices of lay men and women, open to guidance of the Spirit.

She described it as ‘the biggest reset in Christian history.’ But it is a *reset.*

It is a call to rediscover *all that is wonderful* *about the Catholic Church* – as Newman put it in his hymn *Lead Kindly Light*, we are rediscovering ‘those angel faces, which we have loved long since, and lost awhile.’

**The second thing is that it *belongs to us.***

So what is it that belongs to us? Well, the *magisterium* does.

You see, the magisterium is the *teaching authority* of the church. The 1950s people have tried to make us believe that there is a *teaching church* – the bishops and our parish priests – and a *listening church* – us, silently in the pew. But as Sister Gemma told us, the decrees of the ecumenical council make it perfectly clear. The teaching authority of the church belongs to us all. Pope Francis’s International Theological Commission of 2014 declared that ‘the *whole church, laity and hierarchy alike*, bears responsibility for (and mediates in history) the *revelation* which is contained in the scriptures and in the apostolic tradition.’ You can’t put it more clearly than that.

Our panel on church authority showed us that historically, the church was a *democratic* organisation. Luca Badini points to that ancient precept of the church from the early middle ages – something that was regarded as essential to Catholicism until recently, and was brought back into focus by Pope Francis in 2015 - ‘what touches all should be discussed and agreed by all.’ Mary McAleese made exactly the same point – and added that anything else simply contravenes our human rights.

Our panel on liturgical ministry told us that, without any doubt at all, it is biblical and Catholic teaching that *all ministries should belong to all*. Not should. *Do belong to all.* Our panel on moral authority called not for tomes of regulations but teaching *on ways of thinking*. A prophetic, democratically governed church that can read the signs of the times and help the faithful to interpret them in their own complex lives.

What strikes me very strongly about the organisation of Root and Branch leading up to this weekend is the enthusiasm and commitment of the various young people who have worked with us. They have been full of thoughtfulness and love and a passion for justice. And they are almost all atheists. These are the people the traditionalist church, has completely let down. It has turned its back on them. But we don’t need to do this any longer. We can be the loving, creative church our young people want. We can start right now.

So don’t be afraid. The Church belongs to us all.Working out the best way to be the church is something that belongs – has always belonged - to *all the baptised faithful*, in every age and context. Whatever anybody tries to tell you, *nobody can ever have the power to take that away from the people of God.*

**The third and final thing is that we will not be silent**

We welcome our brothers, the bishops’ interest in our synod and in the Bristol Text. They are listening. We hope and we pray that, as Helena said, they will *hear* us*.* And in all Christian love, we shall not then let them try to *discern* it away. It is not *theirs* to discern*.* It remains to be seen whether, as the Bristol Text affirms, we have to find a way to elect representative bodies, or whether the bishops will follow the church’s teaching and simply welcome us, the faithful laity, into their discussions and decisions.

If, sadly our brothers the bishops find in the end that they are too afraid to take it on, then we shall send it directly to the office of the Synod in Rome. And if the office of the Synod will not listen, then we shall shout the good news from the rooftops. Around the world. In the highways and byways. We shall simply set the people of God free to be the wonderful Catholic Church we have always been called to be. Free in what James Alison called ‘the strength of weak belonging’. Not clinging together in ignorance and fear, but *talking* and walking together with Christ in love.

Mary McAleese told us that it is only Root and Branch and the German Synodal Way that are offering any sort of lay voice in *the entire world of the Catholic Church.* What we’re doing here, today, now, *truly matters*. This is an historic moment. The synodal genie, she said, is out of the bottle. The laity are inspired. It’s our church.

But first we have *the responsibility* to educate ourselves. We do not have to be told what to do and think. But we do need to put ourselves in a position where we can do and think for ourselves. It’s what Diarmaid O’Murchu called ‘a re-education in faith from the ground up.’

Martha Heizer presented us with a wonderful vision. Of ordinary people like us going about the business of being the church – blessing our children, blessing our bread, blessing our sick and dying, our harvests, our work

and our retiring, ‘blessing the many occasions in a woman’s life, that need a reinforcing ritual. You can,’ she said, ‘begin to renew the church around you. Praying, eating, discussing scripture together. Let’s decide on our own personal pace. Go slowly. But let’s GO, go implement our own ministry. There is so much to do and Jesus is waiting. ‘God’, said Martha, ‘will like to hear us.’

As we have heard plainly from our panel on sharing authority, that this is where the church began and this it is still how many other churches still function. In the small ‘base’ communities Luca Badini told us about in Argentina, and Virginia Saldanha in India. ‘Our faith,’ she said, ‘is best lived in our neighbourhood, where we can live the Eucharist and share the Eucharist.’

Our experience so far is that many, many parish priests would be thrilled to join us. ‘Base communities’ sounds academic. Let’s choose a better name. Meeting in this way is what Diarmaid O’Murchu called, in that extraordinary phrase that came, he said, from Jesus’s own Aramaic, the *companionship of empowerment*. James Alison called it ‘walking into being, alongside others.’

We must just do it. *We do not need anyone’s permission.* This is what reflects God’s self-revelation to every one of us. It is surely a high calling. It is simple and it is difficult. To be the Church where we are. Right now.

We will share our Bristol Text, proclaim it from the rooftops. We will come together in small communities, to learn and pray and be Christ in our neighbourhoods. These things are just first steps. Of that we can be sure. But where after that?

God alone knows where he will take us. As John Henry Newman went on, in that wonderful hymn, *I do not ask to see the distant scene. One step enough for me.*

The last word on this should go to a theologian. This is what Root & Branch has been about. Educating ourselves by calling on those who spend their lives thinking and living these issues. So I will hand you over to Tom O’Loughlin Professor Emeritus of Historical Theology at the University of Nottingham, and the Director of Studia Traditionis Theologiae, and a much sought-after speaker.