**THE FUTURE CHURCH IS A CHOICE: THE BRISTOL SYNOD**

**James Carroll**

**Today, on this solemn 20th anniversary, may I dedicate these remarks to the thousands of Americans who died on 9/11, the hundreds of thousands of other people who have suffered and died in the riptide of America’s misbegotten response to those attacks.**

“We, the people of God, must lead the way toward an inclusive, safe, and loving Catholic Church.”

That watchword of the Bristol Synod, pointing in the lead-up toward a future Church, can be adjusted now, after the events of this week, to say, “We, the people of God, have already begun to embody an inclusive, safe, and loving Catholic Church.”

That is what you have done here, in Bristol; and here, in the global community that the Bristol Synod has convened. How deeply moving it has been to hear President McAleese and now Baroness Kennedy, each with her eloquent authority, affirm the centrality for the Catholic faith of basic human rights; to hear the righteous voices of other woman demanding an end to all forms of Catholic male supremacy; to imagine an entirely new theology centered on love instead of power; to reject all forms of hierarchy and clericalism that have, across decades, led Church authorities, popes and bishops alike, to protect predator priests instead of their victims. No to Catholic deceit. No to Catholic contempt for women. No to the Catholic addiction to power.

But even more powerfully this week: Yes to a reformed liturgical ministry. Yes to a new diversity. Yes to women in leadership today, as in the early Church; Yes to a reimagined moral theology. Yes to a revolution in understandings of authority. Yes to a faith that moves from the inner room and its healing presence of the spirit of Jesus Christ out into the streets of the broken world, a faith that carries the Gospel message of love and hope and a resolute determination to build the human future. In Bristol this week, that faith is alive; and that “inclusive, safe, and loving Catholic Church” is here.

So let me begin by saluting you all, and thanking you, thanking you especially for your “clarity and coherence,” in the phrase of President McAleese. I have myself been privileged to have been on this journey with you across these many months. Katharine Salmon, Pamela Perry, Penelope Middleboe, Colm Holmes, Sue Williamson, Mary Ring. You and the community you have gathered have renewed my own Catholic faith. You have given me an example of loving resistance that shores up my own determination to be Catholic in the way that you are Catholic.

This synod now presents to the Church its resounding call to action - The Bristol Text. You have all contributed to it, and women and men throughout the broader Church will receive it as a gift. This theologically compelling and pastorally inviting document, composed by the people and for the people, will serve in our time as a template of reform to be compared with the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

That is the Bristol Text.

But what is the Bristol context?

We must, with numerous speakers who proceed me, forthrightly acknowledge the context for this synod’s gathering. Our beloved Catholic Church - ours! - has been exposed in our time as grotesquely corrupt. As the Holocaust laid bare the ancient sin of Christian anti-Semitism, the Catholic sex abuse scandal, in all its facets, has laid bare a deformed gene in the DNA of our Church, one that despoils all matters having to do with sexuality, pollutes relations between men and women, scapegoats gay people, and underwrites, despite all claims to virtue, an ongoing Catholic alliance with despotism.

Our most sacred spaces - sanctuaries in which Jesus Christ himself is encountered - have been fenced in by robed men who claim to own such places. And if we behave, they might let us visit once in a while. They tell us to kneel before God, but really we are kneeling to them. The gates of heaven have been captured by clerics who will open them to us only if we grovel in guilt and shame. With the world desperately in need of a new defense of constitutional democracy, our Catholic Church clings to an ideology of empire. With women and girls at risk for discrimination and violence across the globe and across cultures, our Catholic Church promotes the denigration of females as the will of God. That deformed gene in our Church’s DNS is, above all, patriarchal misogyny.

With the coming of Good Pope Francis, we saw the possibility of a new beginning for the Faith of our mothers and fathers, but His Holiness was soon shown, despite his large heart and benign intentions, to be a maestro, in the phrase of President McAleese, of “the exasperating U-Turn.” When he was shown to be imprisoned by the institutional sclerosis of male-supremacist clericalism, we saw the depth of Catholic corruption for what it actually is. Francis was a Pope beyond our hopes. Yet he’s as defensive of imperial Catholicism as any reactionary. The depravity runs that deep. The Truth will set you free, yes. But first it will break your heart. And yes, we are heartbroken. The despair of which President McAleese spoke so movingly.

All of that, my friends, is part of the context that lies behind the Bristol Text.

But there is more. The Bristol Text, this Bristol Synod, has come about because broken-hearted human beings are capable of doing more than grieving and raging and walking away. The decision to walk away from the Catholic Church, or even from belief as such, is one made in the deepest recesses of conscience and personal autonomy. Given the ways the corruptions of the clerical hierarchy have been laid bare, how can such exit choices made by many Catholics not be respected? I have drawn close to making them myself. So have many of you, I am certain. But perhaps the most significant aspect of the context for the Bristol text is that you - many of you, at least - have, until now, made a different decision.

Why? Is it because you sensed that simply to leave the Church is to leave its worst impulses unchallenged - and its better ones unsupported? The astounding generosity with which the broader world welcomed the large-hearted esprit of Pope Francis early in his pontificate showed the depth of an ongoing human longing for images of transcendence. For at bottom, that is what our religion is called to be. The faith is a set of words for what remains inexpressible; a language for what we cannot say; a way of drawing near to the innermost reality of life, and giving it a name. God.

Yes. We believe in God. There, I said it.

Like every word, our Catholic word falls short of what it means to say. Like every human institution, our Catholic institution has a built-in tendency to betray itself. That, in turn, always reminds us that our Church, despite its tendency to claim otherwise, is not God.

Yet because longing for what is not quite here defines us, we refuse to give up on this particular way of keeping that longing alive. And in the arrival of Pope Francis most of a decade ago, did we not sense that we are right in that refusal? In Pope Francis could be glimpsed, not only by Catholics but by a vast population beyond the Church, the possibility of recovery from the contemporary shattering of multiple structures - not just of authority, but of intelligibility. Even as a self-acknowledged flawed person, Francis upheld the common decency that is essential to democratic liberalism, and he renewed the conviction that the core virtues of Western culture are worth defending. Francis reminded the world that the human project has always been one of self-surpassing, the very definition of human hope. He made hope seem real again.

At the most practical level, a reformed, enlightened, hopeful Catholic Church is essential to the thriving - even to the survival - of the human species. The climate crisis makes the point, but so does the increasing threat of nuclear proliferation. And then, almost equally pressing, there is the plague of global inequality. Urgent change on these questions is a matter of moving small weights from one plate of the scale to the other, so that the balance can shift toward justice and peace. Governments have the large burden of that responsibility, but no non-governmental organization has more power to influence those outcomes than the Roman Catholic Church.

Pope Francis at his best has made that clear. Socially, religiously, educationally, and politically, the Church can move weights in every corner of the planet, among every population, in every board room, palace, seat of power, and union hall. In all such places, the negative weight of reactionary religion of various stripes is being felt, and Catholicism can be the counter-weight. That is why its struggle with itself matters so much. Will the Catholic Church go the way of fundamentalist Christianity? Anti-critical? Anti-historical? Anti-rational? Anti-female? Anti-human?

We have come here to the Bristol Synod asking, how can we not be part of that struggle? Each one of us is painfully aware of the limits of our ability to take on the great issues, but how could we possibly walk away from a source of far-reaching engagement that is not only available to us, but that, for most of two thousand years, despite itself, has kept alive for the world the memory of Jesus Christ, who is nothing if not an image of human self-surpassingness? Human self-surpassing even to the point, ultimately, of sharing in divinity. That, of course, is the promise of our Faith.

But if, instead of by self-surpassingness, Pope Francis turns out to be as gripped by institutional self-servingness as any corporate leader - then reasonable expectations of creative solutions for problems as varied as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and mass migration are doubly dashed. That is why the success of Francis, and what he has already promised with his first instinctive moves, is so important. And that success depends overwhelmingly on what Catholics say, think, and do, not only while Francis lives, but also as he is succeeded by a next Pope, who can advance his positive purpose or thwart it. We must hold Francis to the high standard of change he did set, no matter the U-turns. We must hold his successors to that standard, too. Nothing less than the human future is at stake.

That future will arrive, at least in part, in ways determined by the actions of human beings. Against the accumulating weight of evidence that bleak outcomes are unfolding in every sphere, that ground of responsibility remains the key to destiny, and lays bare the primal source - not of optimism, but of hope. For hope is a choice. And the future church, as the servant of that hope, is itself a choice.

The Bristol Synod invites the choice for hope. It has made the case for another way to respond to the present crisis of faith than by simply walking away. The Bristol Synod has reclaimed the Vatican II insistence that the Church is the people of God, period. And if I could presume, without speaking for you, to add my own declaration of what all of this means, I want to insist that the so-called magisterium of the Church is a culture-bound creation of an imperial governance with no connection to the Gospel, despite its claims to the contrary. And didn’t President McAleese make the corruption of that magisterium vivid?

Catholics should not yield to clerical despots the final authority over our personal relationship to the Church. We should refuse to let a pervert-priest or a complicit bishop rip our faith from us. We should refuse to obey a Canon Law that denies our rights. Indeed, we should ignore it. And even as we insist on love as the key to our vision for the Church’s future, and, with Francis, on mercy as God’s calling card - still a fierce spirit of resistance must energize reform-minded Catholics now. We must be ferocious anti-clerics - inside the Church.

There it is: anti-clericalism from within. If there are like-minded, anti-clerical priests and bishops, and even an anti-clerical Pope - as one still hopes Francis and his successor could be - then we will make reforming common cause with them. But also, we know that to stand in opposition to the Catholic Church establishment from within the Catholic Church is to be a kind of internal exile - a poignant life on the ecclesial inner margin, from which an eye is ever cast toward the center as of an unforsaken home, still beloved. One imagines inmates of internal exile like us as figures in the back of the church, where, in fact, some dissenting priests and many free-spirited nuns can be found as well. Think of us as the Church’s conscientious objectors. We are not deserters.

But such distancing from the formal institution must always involve deliberate performance of the works of mercy that define the Catholic faith: feeding the hungry, caring for the poor, visiting the sick, striving for justice - finding Jesus “in the least of these.”

As we have seen so powerfully on display here this week, such chosen forms of faith may involve, for many, unauthorized expressions of prayer and worship—egalitarian, authentic, ecumenical; having nothing to do with diocesan borders, parish boundaries, or the sacrament of holy orders. That may be especially true in so-called intentional communities that lift up the leadership of women. And as he have been privileged to see this week, these communities already exist, everywhere. No matter who presides at whatever form the altar takes, such adaptations of Eucharistic observance return to the theological essence of the sacrament. Christ is experienced not through the officiant but through the faith of the whole community. “For where two or three are gathered in my name,” Jesus said, “there am I in the midst of them.”

In what way, one might ask, can such institutional detachment square with actual Catholic identity? Are we talking about a mere withdrawal by elites as a mode of resistance against unsophisticated “popular” religion? Absolutely not. Indeed, popular religion, the true and simple faith of millions that always exists on the margins of magisterial authority, firmly upholds the sacramental imagination that defines the best of Catholicism. It does this through devotions and prayers and rituals that will continue the tradition in many forms, even as the imperial structure of Church governance shrivels.

This week, we have had vivid reports of a range of specific actions of renewal taken by legions of common-sensical believers - from base community organizers, to deacons in priestless parishes, to parents who band together for religious instruction of youngsters, to social activists who take on injustice in the name of Jesus Christ - all insisting on the Catholic character of what they are doing. We have heard from practitioners of exactly these forms of Catholic faith - the Catholic Women’s Ordination movement; A Call to Action; Hildegard Haus; Women’s Wisdom in the Church; Australasian Catholic Coalition for Church Reform; We Are Church, Austria; the Indian Christian Women’s Movement; the Global Network of Rainbow Catholics; and on and on - speaking of rainbows, a glorious display of the colors of hope.

As we move toward the future church we have chosen, our principal organizing event will continue to be the communal experience of the Mass, the structure of which—-reading the Word, breaking the bread—will remain universal; and as we have seen here, it not need to be celebrated by a member of some sacerdotal caste. Now is the time to make this ascendance intentional, and to accelerate it. The pillars of Catholicism—-gatherings around the book and the bread; traditional prayers and songs; retreats centered on the wisdom of the saints; an understanding of life as a form of discipleship—-will be unshaken.

The Vatican itself may take steps, belatedly, to catch up to where the Church goes without it. Fine. But in ways that cannot be predicted, the exiles themselves will become the core, as exiles were the core at the time of Jesus. We will take on responsibility and ownership—-and, as responsibility and ownership devolve into smaller units, the focus will shift from the earthbound institution to its transcendent meaning. This is already happening, in front of our eyes. Tens of millions of moral decisions and personal actions are being informed by the choice to be Catholics on our own terms, untethered from a rotted ancient scaffolding. The choice comes with no asterisk. We will be Catholics, full stop. We do not need anyone’s permission. As anticlerical Catholics, we will simply refuse to accept that the business-as-usual attitudes of most priests and bishops should extend to us.

The future will come at us invisibly, frame by frame, as it always does—comprehensible only when run together and projected retrospectively at some distant moment. But it is coming. One hundred years from now, there will be a Catholic Church. Count on it. If, down through the ages, it was appropriate for the Church to take on the political structures of the broader culture—imperial Rome, feudal Europe—then why shouldn’t Catholicism now absorb the ethos and form of liberal democracy? This may not be inevitable, but it is more than possible.

The Church that is coming into being with the Bristol Synod will be governed by laypeople, although the verb *govern* may apply less than *serve*. There will be leaders who gather communities in worship, and because the tradition is rich, striking chords deep in human history, such sacramental enablers may well be known as “priests.” They will include women and married people. They will be ontologically equal to everyone else. They will not owe fealty to a feudal superior. Catholic schools and universities will continue to submit faith to reason—and vice versa. Catholic hospitals will be a crucial part of the global health-care infra-structure. Catholic religious orders of men and women, some voluntarily celibate, will continue to protect and enshrine the varieties of contemplative practice and the social Gospel. Jesuits and Dominicans, Benedictines and Franciscans, the Catholic Worker Movement and other communities of liberation theology—all of these will survive in as yet unimagined forms. The Church will be fully alive at the local level, even if the faith is practiced more in living rooms than in basilicas. And the Church will still have a worldwide reach, with some kind of organizing center, perhaps even in Rome for old times’ sake. But that center will be protected from Catholic triumphalism by being openly engaged with other Christian denominations. The ecumenical movement - the Vatican II project of Christian reunion - will be fulfilled.

The view ahead from Bristol shows that the Church, whatever else it may be, will be the community of memory, keeping alive the story of Jesus Christ. The Church is an in-the-flesh connection to Him - or it is nothing. Therefore, the Church will imitate the Prince of Peace, standing with the dispossessed, and against weapons. With Jesus, the Church will accompany suffering to change suffering’s meaning. Without platitudes, the Church will offer trustworthy consolation at the time of death. The Church will uphold the hope that humanity will continually surpass itself, until it finds its truest home, the opposite of exile, in the fulfillment of a purposeful history, a final recognition of the Creator’s blessing never lost. And the Church will be, still, the fellowship - to repeat the definition given at the very beginning of the Jesus movement - of “those that loved Him at the first and did not let go of their affection for Him.”

Yet the larger point will be - won’t it? - that He, faithful and true, did not let go, despite everything, of His affection for us.