

Discerning Parish Faith Through Testimony: Insights From Charismatic Renewal

Jordan Pullicino

Abstract

The synodal way invites the Church to understand itself as the People of God journeying together in faith. Giving testimony is proposed here as a way of reflecting upon that journey. The Charismatic practice of giving testimony is examined as a form of reflexive faith experience. Examined in terms of witness, desire and story, the faith experience of the individual is explored for its communal, ecclesial context, and the theological contribution it makes. The discernment that links personal, spiritual experience to communal faith and practice is then investigated in the light of conciliar teaching to propose, in conclusion, how this might be undertaken in a parish setting.

Keywords

Charismatic, testimony, story, witness, discernment

Introduction

Much of the discernment required to make a success of the synodal journey the Church is now on, will take place at the level of the parish, since this is the lived context for the vast majority of Catholics. This paper presents insights into testimony, as a practice of Charismatic Renewal and proposes how, as part of the synodal process, testimony may assist discernment. Also, how in wider context it can be understood as part of the ecclesial renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council, of which the path of synodality is a continuation, as stated in the Synod 2023 Preparatory Document: ‘this path of synodality... this journey, which follows in the wake of the Church’s “renewal” proposed by the Second Vatican Council’.¹

The account of the disciples on the road to Emmaus models much of what I understand here by the word ‘testimony’. In the Gospel account

¹ Synod 2023 Preparatory Document, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2021-09/text-read-in-english.html>, p. 1.

(Lk 24:14), the disciples on the road walked together, and ‘talked with each other about all these things that had happened’. By ‘talking with each other’, they were attempting to understand what they had recently experienced, that is, the ‘things that had happened’. This describes well how testimony is a process of verbalizing, in order to understand experience. In the Gospel account, it was while they did this, that Jesus met them, their hearts were kindled, and recognition of his presence followed at the breaking of bread.

In outline, this story is a paradigm for a reflective way of doing theology, which also, I argue, underpins giving testimony. It is an act of reflecting on what God has done, specifically in one’s own life. This reflection also endeavours to make sense of life as a whole. Talking with others about this, also renews the experience of divine encounter, as the speaker, recalling events, and finding the words to use, attempts to go deeper in understanding their own experience. These practices of reflection and sharing can be undertaken in any parish, and by people who would not necessarily identify as ‘charismatics’. They constitute key elements of giving testimony and are also, I will argue, expressions of ‘ordinary theology’, giving witness to faith, expressed in the narrative form of story-telling. From describing how these elements are constitutive of testimony, I will then conclude how, as a practice, testimony may be useful in discerning parish faith.

First, I will explain my understanding of charismatic testimony, and how, as a practice, it contributes to the discernment of faith within communities and is a genuinely theological source. I will do this by examining testimony as a form of ‘ordinary theology’, witness, and story. I will then turn to the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, examining extracts from *Lumen Gentium* and *Dei Verbum*, to give a theological contextualisation of these terms, and thereby explain my understanding of testimony in relation to discernment and faith. In this paper I have drawn upon research for my doctoral thesis² on testimony, including ordinary theology, witness, and story.

What then, is testimony? In Charismatic Renewal, testimony, often given in the context of a prayer group, is the account of what God has done in one’s life. It is presented as a transformative spiritual experience understood as an outpouring of the Holy Spirit, called ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’. This is manifested in the ongoing use of spiritual gifts. This is what I understand as specifically ‘charismatic testimony’.

The Scriptural account of Pentecost, in Acts Chapter 2, offers the ‘theological anchor’ for the contemporary experience of ‘baptism in the Holy Spirit’. The first Christians giving public witness to both an infilling of the Holy Spirit, and to the risen Lord is a paradigm for

² Jordan Pullicino, *A Theology of Charismatic Testimony: The Ecclesial Contribution of Marginal Voices* (PhD diss., Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge, 2018), British Library EThOS e-theses online service.

Christians today. For charismatic Christians giving testimony, baptism in the Holy Spirit, analogous to the Pentecost outpouring, is given as the foundation for witness, and the first Pentecost is accounted as its origin.

By this I mean that in contemporary charismatic testimony it is either explicitly or implicitly understood that just as the first disciples and apostles experienced this spiritual infilling, the same outpouring has happened to the person testifying. Thus, in literature of the Charismatic Renewal, references to Pentecost are commonplace, associating contemporary events and personal faith experiences with the Pentecost event birthing the early Church.

The significance of Pentecost, in specifically Catholic circles, is also associated with the Second Vatican Council. These Catholic connections, it is true, also have other, deeper ecclesial historical roots. In 1897, Pope Leo XIII, through the encyclical *Divinum Illud Munus*, dedicated the twentieth century to the Holy Spirit. Also, Pope John XXIII, when convoking the Council in 1961 with the promulgation of the Apostolic Constitution *Humanae Salutis* asked that the Church pray that the Council be ‘a new Pentecost in the Church’,³ with a renewal ‘of wonders in our time’. Indeed, even before his election as pope in 1958, Roncalli expressed hope for the Church to experience a ‘new Pentecost... renewing its head, leading to a new ordering of the ecclesiastical body, and bringing fresh vigour in progress towards the victory of truth, goodness and peace’.⁴

It may be argued that the desire for a renewal of wonders and a new Pentecost, with consequent new ordering of the ecclesial body, and fresh vigour, would be most welcome fruit of the present Synod also. These historical references pre-dating the Council also identify a deeper Catholic context beyond the emergence of Catholic Charismatic Renewal as a movement in the Church dating from the late 1960’s.⁵

This briefly covers the modern Catholic background to the emergence of the Charismatic Renewal and its emphasis upon Pentecost as a pivotal ecclesial event. To also understand the potential of testimony for making an ecclesial contribution, as well as its openness to the working of the Holy Spirit, it is now helpful to consider how testimony can be described in a wider context. Although adopted by Charismatic Renewal, testimony has wide usage. It is a legal and even philosophical term, according to C. A. J. Coady, in his philosophical study of

³ Pope John XXIII, Apostolic Constitution, *Humanae Salutis*, 23. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-xxiii/la/apost_constitutions/1961/documents/hf_j-xxiii_apc_19611225_humanae-salutis.html.

⁴ Peter Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII: Pope of the Council* (London: Chapman, 1984), p. 278.

⁵ For more on the origins of Catholic Charismatic Renewal, see Edward O’Connor, *The Pentecostal movement in the Catholic Church* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1971).

the subject.⁶ As such, it is a reliable source of knowledge, memory, and evidence. It is also, according to the practical theologian Mark Cartledge, who has written extensively upon charismatic Christianity, at the heart of basic story-telling and in the exchange of knowledge.⁷ As he explains, testimony has both an inward and an outward dynamic and is also both personal and corporate, as it is shared by one person with many. From the personal, or ‘inward’ aspect, it draws from memory, religious experience, life experience, values, emotions, thoughts, and judgements.⁸ From the corporate, or ‘outward’ aspect, from its hearers, it draws on shared values and beliefs, as well as their attention, openness to hear, and willingness to accept what is heard as true.

The association of testimony with ‘witness’ finds its origin in the Greek *μαρτυρέω*, from which the English word, ‘martyr’, is derived. The witness of testimony is, however, an act that is also an explicitly *verbal and vocal* attestation to faith as a form of knowledge - ‘I know this is true, it happened to me, and I am communicating this fact’. This knowledge extends to reality beyond the self, that is, it is a form of witness to something, or someone, else.

There is, therefore, also a rationality of narrativity at work in testimony. It is a story, the telling of which attempts to make sense of the events recounted both to the hearer and to the speaker themselves. Inasmuch as this arises from a sense of faith, refers to God’s action, and reflects upon this, it is also theological. This is ‘ordinary theology’, as Jeff Astley describes it, being ‘the theology and theologising of Christians who have received little or no theological education of a scholarly, academic or systematic kind’.⁹

Key, though, in describing testimony as ‘theology’, is that it is articulated and reflected upon within the context of a faith community. In this way, personal faith is always contextualised within a larger context of shared belief, values, and doctrine. Indeed, Nicholas Lash, describing the proper task and context of the academic theologian, states that ‘*all facts and circumstances... require interpretation in the light of the mystery of Christ crucified and risen*’. To this end, he uses the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus as a parable for this task of Christian interpretation, relating the present to the past, and ‘religion’ to ‘life’.¹⁰

⁶ C. A. J. Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

⁷ Mark Cartledge, *Testimony: Its Importance, Place and Potential* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2002), p. 5.

⁸ Cartledge, *Testimony*, 5, referencing Robert Audi, *Epistemology: A Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 320.

⁹ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 56.

¹⁰ Nicholas Lash, *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM Press, 1986), p. xi.

What is necessary for any Christian testimony is a belief and expectation that God in Jesus Christ is really present through the Holy Spirit, and acting in and through other people, or events and that this presence is a grace and a gift, made fruitful by personal relationship and response to God, through the power of the Holy Spirit.

This belief underpins the sacramental economy, centred upon the incarnation, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and his sending of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is present, and speaks through *us*, as well as through the sacraments, in their physical form. Unfortunately, we, especially in the West, can be prone to think of the Holy Spirit as some floating force or power. Eugene Rogers reminds us, in his study of early Greek and Syriac texts, that for early Christians, all references to the Spirit are ‘tied to talk of holy places, holy people and holy things’.¹¹ Rogers contrasts this to the modern tendency to describe things of the Spirit as ‘float[ing] free of bodies altogether’.¹² All experience of the Spirit is necessarily mediated. This is the basis of the sacramental economy. Testimony reinforces the consciousness of the physically grounded context for experiences of the Spirit, prompting reflection upon the implications and consequences in personal life, and in that of the faith community, the parish.

Certainly, what Astley proposes is a precarious way of ‘doing theology’. One might question the adequacy of personal formation and catechising to support such activity. Astley himself notes the gaps and possible dissonances between the beliefs of individuals and the formal beliefs of a denomination. In my research, some of these gaps and dissonances were noted in the testimonies examined. However, I believe, and will argue, that testimony can make a very positive theological contribution as a practice expressing faith for personal and community upbuilding and that even the gaps and dissonances can be understood as creative. Understood as a Spirit-led process of discernment, testimony hermeneutically links past to present and message to meaning. Seen through the interpretive lenses of Scripture, Tradition, and doctrine, the personal story of faith is both comprehensible and a contribution to the wider context of the story of the Church itself.

Testimony as Witness

As a general, pastoral observation, we Catholics are not in many cases able to, ‘always have [y]our answer ready for people who ask [you] for the reason for [y]our hope’, as I Peter 3:15 exhorts. This is despite the fact that as early as 1975, in the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii*

¹¹ Eugene Rogers, *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources Outside the Modern West*, (London: SCM Press, 2006), p. 1.

¹² Rogers, *After the Spirit*, p. 1.

Nuntiandi,¹³ Pope St Paul VI stressed not only the importance of Christian witness, but also stated that ‘this always remains insufficient... *if it is not explained, justified*’.¹⁴ In other words, witness of life is not enough; we need to also be able to articulate our faith *verbally*. This verbalization should also, I suggest, be in a suitably mature and contemporary manner to be understood by its hearers and thereby communicate some content of faith. Testimony, when undertaken within the community of faith, is an excellent practice to both develop and effect such verbal witness.

Much could be said about this, but here, I suggest three significant aspects helpful to understanding testimony as an expression of witness. Two are identified by Paul Ricoeur in his work *The Hermeneutics of Testimony*.¹⁵ The first is, its divine origin, and the second, the orientation of testimony to proclamation. Ricoeur identifies both with bringing an ‘irruption’ of new meaning.¹⁶ which he associates with the prophetic and kerygmatic character of Scripture. The third aspect of witness is that it is an expression of desire, and this will be explained after Ricoeur’s definitions are explored in greater detail.

Ricoeur describes testimony to the divine in terms of being ‘a faithful witness’.¹⁷ Such witness has its origins in the One to whom it testifies. As he puts it, ‘It comes from somewhere else’, since the one who testifies is sent to do so. It is therefore also true that since testimony originates from God it has a universal, human application too, because it is Godself ‘who is witnessed to in the testimony’.¹⁸

Ricoeur is talking explicitly about the witness of the testimony in sacred Scripture. It is reasonable to ask if the terms ‘prophetic’ and ‘kerygmatic’ can appropriately be applied to contemporary Christian testimony as a form of witness. To do this, we need to return to Ricoeur’s exposition, and develop his conclusions theologically.

Ricoeur notes that early Christians never perceived any fundamental difference between the eyewitness testimonies of the life of Jesus and the encounter with the risen Lord. Thus, he concludes, ‘there is no intrinsic difference between the facts and gestures of Jesus of Nazareth or between the appearances of the resurrected Lord and the manifestations of the Spirit in the Pentecostal communities’.¹⁹ In that sense, the story and actual presence of Christ continues in his witnesses, both

¹³ Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html.

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.22.

¹⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *The Hermeneutics of Testimony: Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of Testimony*, pp. 130-131.

¹⁷ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of Testimony*, p. 129.

¹⁸ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of Testimony*, p. 129.

¹⁹ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of Testimony*, pp. 135-136.

within Scriptural accounts, and beyond, in the lives of early Christians and their communities, and beyond, even to this day. Indeed, the continuing presence and authority of this witness we acknowledge today in the Catholic Church as what makes it ‘apostolic’ and is what underpins Catholic Tradition. It also affirms the revelatory and normative status of Scripture for Christian faith. I will return to this point later.

Within the context of the New Testament, the continuity of identity in testimony-witness ‘proceeds from [the] direct engagement of the prophetic inspirations attributed to the living Christ and the memories of the eyewitnesses’. This, Ricoeur explains, is what gives rise to the distinctive feature of this form of testimony, whereby there is an ‘integration of fact to meaning, of narration to confession’.²⁰ The coherency of fact and meaning is evident in the two inseparable aspects of testimony thus understood: it is both a testimony of the sense, as eye-witnesses to events, and at the same time has the interior, reflexive aspect of the engagement of the witness with what they attest.

Witness as Desire

It is this latter aspect that underpins the next characteristic of testimony to be examined, namely, that of desire. Desire is the drive which underpins the inward turn of testimony, as well as its outward articulation. Pope Saint John Paul II, in *Dominum et Vivificantem*,²¹ gives an assessment of faith as being ‘in its deepest essence... openness of the human heart to the gift: to God’s self-communication in the Holy Spirit’. The openness is itself an expression of expectation, having within it a forward orientation of hope.

One is open ‘to’ someone or something, and this is also ‘for’ something, based on a need or desire, even if this is not identified as such. For Gerald O’Collins, in his study on revelation,²² openness presupposes the mutual interaction of knowledge through revelation, with ‘loving and the imagination of hope’. The desire for God is consistent with our knowledge of God only as mystery, that is, as a disclosure, or the unfolding of a truth too great to completely grasp. This is divine revelation as a verb, rather than a noun. It is a disclosure that, sought in love, is realised in the lives of persons who receive it, as O’Collins puts it. Thus, the openness of faith is an orientation and expectation of desire by which we receive the Holy Spirit as God’s presence, and

²⁰ Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics of Testimony*, p. 135.

²¹ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_18051986_dominum-et-vivificantem.html, n.51.

²² Gerald O’Collins, *Revelation: Towards A Christian Interpretation of God’s Self-Revelation in Jesus Christ* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 89.

self-disclosure to us, and by which we ourselves come to share in some sense in God's own mystery, as an unfolding disclosure in our lives, of God's transforming presence and grace.

Richard Bauckham's study of the Gospels as eye-witness testimony²³ reads the implications of this for the apostolic witnesses by describing them as 'people *whose on-going engagement with what they had witnessed* qualified them to speak with authority about its significance'. I emphasise the '*on-going engagement with what they had witnessed*', because this describes the sustained nature of personal reflection required to make sense of faith experience. Each 'speaking out' of what has been experienced increases, though never exhausts, the knowledge and understanding of it to the speaker, as well as their hearers.

How could this inform contemporary understandings of testimony, of believers who are not New Testament eye-witnesses, but who nevertheless claim to be able to attest to the truth of the Gospel through their lived experience? Who are, in other words, able to give an account for the hope they have? For surely, this hope cannot rest on repeated facts, learnt by rote, but only on a living relationship with Jesus as risen Lord, who is professed to be encountered in Word and sacrament, in other people, members of His body, *imago dei*, and, indeed, all creation. How might these lived, Christian experiences be articulated in terms of testimony described in these ways?

Testimony and Scripture, in Community

For a practical account that starts to open-up the theological and pastoral contexts of testimony, I turn to a Pentecostal example, this time of a group Bible study, explained by Jackie David Johns and Cheryl Bridges Johns.²⁴ In this context, testimony is an element of a community-situated model, in which encounter with God is the primary source of knowledge of God, mediated by the Holy Spirit. The encounter takes place in the context of community, in which testimony is shared, Scripture is searched to discern God's word and those gathered 'yield to the Spirit', since the Holy Spirit is the agent of divine encounter.

'Yielding' to the Spirit, or, in terms more familiar to Catholics, 'docility to Holy Spirit', gives rise to conviction, understood as 'the

²³ Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008) p. 24.

²⁴ J. D. Johns, and C. B. Johns, 'Yielding to the Spirit, A Pentecostal Approach to Group Bible Study', *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 1 Vol. 1:-2 – (Jan 1, 1992), p. 109-134. The passage cited here is taken from Mark Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology* (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010) pp. 6-7.

response to the call to live in [God's] presence, resulting in transformation'.²⁵ From this process a *new* testimony emerges, now being also a testimony of the *community gathered*, in which *all* 'confess what we have seen and what we have heard and what we are compelled to be and do'.²⁶ In this context, testimony is therefore communal as well as personal, and is made possible by the shared prayerful, reflective engagement with Scripture, which is expectant that the Holy Spirit works equally between all three elements – persons, community and Scripture.

What I find of great significance from this example, is that the individual experience of divine encounter shared in testimony, is 'translated' - both moved and interpreted – into the context of an ecclesial community. As Johns and Johns explain, the emergence of 'a new testimony' takes place in the context of 'shared critical reflection and thereby contribute[s] to the corporate testimony of the group and community'.²⁷ Thus, personal testimony becomes *communal ecclesial testimony*. I will explain further the theological and ecclesiological significance of this last point after presenting the final aspect of testimony to be examined, which is that it is a 'story'.

Testimony as Story

A key quality of testimony is its narrative form, a form of first-person history. Recounting what happened to *me*, or what *I experienced* is most naturally recounted as 'story', or sequence of events. Clearly, as such, it is not intended to be presented or heard as fiction, or fantasy, which is a certain bias that can cling to the use of the word 'story'.

This was anticipated by the social historian Anne Muir in her oral history of the early years of the Iona Community.²⁸ She used the narrative testimonies from the memories of the founding members, incorporating the anecdotes they recounted and stories of community. In so doing, however, she was mindful of the objection that these could be discounted as '*just* stories'. Defending these accounts, she states in the preface to her book, that, 'stories are all we have'.²⁹ Citing St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians where he says, 'now we see through a glass, darkly' (I Cor 13:12), she identifies in *εν ἀνίγμῳ* - often translated as 'darkly' - the root meaning for stories. Thus, she holds, for the present, stories and metaphor reflect the world and the

²⁵ Johns and Johns, *Yielding to the Spirit*, p. 134.

²⁶ Johns and Johns, *Yielding to the Spirit*, p. 134.

²⁷ Johns and Johns, *Yielding to the Spirit*, p. 135.

²⁸ Anne Muir, *Outside the Safe Place: An Oral History of the Early Years of the Iona Community* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 2011).

²⁹ Muir, *Outside the Safe Place*, p. 7.

human condition for us. In other words, it is only through stories that we have knowledge of ourselves and reality.

Such a justification informs my presentation here of testimony as a form of constructive narrative theology. In this understanding, testimony as a form of story-telling is reflexive. The one who testifies ‘re-lives’ the experience recounted by remembering and re-telling. Thus, both conceptually, as remembering, and as practice, through its performative dimension, testimony is generative of new meaning. This is because the story is more deeply understood with each re-telling.

As Richard Bauckham, in his work on the Gospels as eye-witness testimony,³⁰ explains of testimony, it is a *re-calling of events*, spoken of with conviction of their significance. It is also, for those who testify, a form of ‘speak[ing] out of their ongoing attempts to understand’.³¹ As such, it is not closed to the generation of meaning, since each re-telling progresses its understanding for both speaker and hearers.

This links the reflexivity of faith as both experienced and reflected upon by the speaker to the listening and discerning community who receive and respond to it. In this sense, testimony becomes an action and element also of the life of a community, and therefore, also part of its ongoing experience. The listening and discerning community will, as noted above, in reference to the example of a Pentecostal prayer group, test and evaluate the personal testimony against the context of Scripture and the community’s practice and belief. In a Catholic context, this would include our sacramental practice, Tradition, and doctrine.

I wish to add one more quality to the aspect of testimony as story. This arises from the necessary contextualisation of testimony within a discerning and interpreting community of faith if it is to be truly understood as a testimony of faith. How this may be so, and the dynamics and relationships it generates can be described, can be found in a literary critical device called ‘*mise-en-abyme*’. This French term literally means ‘cast into the abyss’. As a literary technique it is the situation of one story within another, as a form of ‘self-reflexive repetition of a text’.³² So, for example, the play within a play, in Hamlet. Visual examples also exist: in heraldry, it refers to the device of an escutcheon containing a smaller escutcheon. A more mundane example may be the old Quaker Oats box which showed a figure holding a box of Quaker Oats.

Andre Gide, who is generally credited with the modern revival of *mise-en-abyme*, described the experience of looking at a work of art,

³⁰ Richard Bauckham, *The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2008).

³¹ Bauckham, *The Gospels*, p. 24.

³² M. Gray, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, 2nd Edition (London: Longman, 1992), p. 181.

observing both the function of relation and scale of the whole to itself. As he put it, 'I rather like to find transposed, on the scale of the characters, the very subject of that work'.³³ He adds that this 'establishes the proportions of the whole'. The images Gide cites are paintings of the early renaissance and later interior scenes which include 'a small convex and dark mirror [which] reflects the interior of the room in which the scene of the painting is taking place'. One such example would be 'The Betrothal of the Arnolfini' (1434) by Jan Van Eyck, in the National Gallery. A young couple are standing in their bed chamber. They are shown full length and frontally, being slightly turned toward each other. A convex mirror is visible on the back wall, shown in the space between them, which is bridged by their extended, lightly touching hands.

The mirror at the back of the room provides a totally different perspective of the subjects standing in the foreground, and even includes a glimpse of the artist at work. The smaller image in the mirror is thereby offering *another view of the picture*, and not a mere repetition. Almost like an event, which, witnessed by different people, is inevitably presented variously, suggesting varied perspectives, values and priorities.

There is also the issue of scale. Gide holds that this smaller image in the mirror 'throws a clearer light... and establishes the proportions of the whole'. In other words, the smaller image is not merely derivative from the larger, contextual image but in some sense conditions the very identity of the larger picture, conferring on it, according to Gide, truer proportions and clarity. Added to this is the relationality established between the parts by which each discloses and metaphorically 'holds' the other. Each needing the other to create the complex and relational whole that exists '*en abyme*', in the infinite interplay between them.

This is somewhat reminiscent of how Pope Francis has several times used the image of the polyhedron to describe the relation of parts to the whole.³⁴ Francis uses this image to describe the infinitely varied, and cumulatively beautiful contributions made by the ecclesial presence of each person and their inculturated and personal identity. But it also has resonances with *mise-en-abyme*, speaking of parts which reflect the whole and exist in connection while maintaining their distinctiveness. The whole is acknowledged as greater than the sum of parts, but Francis also emphasises the importance of what seems little or insignificant,

³³ Cited in L. Dällenbach, *Le Recit Speculaire: Essai sur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), p. 30.

³⁴ See Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html, n.236; also, Post Synodal Exhortation, *Querida Amazonia*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html, n.28; also, Encyclical, *Fratelli Tutti*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html, 145, 190, n. 215.

namely, the poor, and local dimensions; things, that is, that are on a smaller scale. This image is also inclusive of diversity, as Francis puts it, ‘Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked’.³⁵ All of these for Pope Francis are therefore *loci theologici*.

Holding this, I propose that interpreting individual testimony as witness and as one story of the individual told within the larger context of another, namely the Church, can be understood theologically to contribute to the larger, ecclesial context of the story of the Church, as an exercise of the prophetic office of the baptised.

To do this I turn first to passages from two Conciliar documents, *Lumen Gentium*,³⁶ and *Dei Verbum*,³⁷ before presenting a brief examination of discernment and how testimony exemplifies aspects of discernment.

Lumen Gentium

Lumen Gentium Chapter 2, paragraph 12 describes how the holy People of God (that is, all the baptised) share in the prophetic office of Christ. In the first paragraph that prophetic office is described as ‘a living witness’ to Christ of a life of faith, love, and praise, offered by each of the baptised and by the ‘whole body of the faithful’, who thereby ‘have an anointing’. This refers to the anointing with chrism at baptism, receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This anointing is used to explain the ‘supernatural appreciation of the faith’ the *sensus fidei*, held by individuals and the whole Church. The unity of faith which this sustains in matters of faith and morals is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of Truth, and informed by the word of God and guided by the apostolic teaching of the magisterium. Thereby, each person is able to adhere to faith, ‘penetrat[ing] it more deeply with right judgement, and applied more fully to daily life’.

It is also significant that the next part of paragraph 12 explains how this life in the Spirit is lived and expressed through the exercise of charisms and spiritual gifts. These are diffuse and given widely, though in varied ways, according to the free gift of the Holy Spirit. To be ‘charismatic’, in this sense, is therefore expected of every baptised person.

³⁵ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n.236.

³⁶ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html, n.8.

³⁷ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html.

This description in *Lumen Gentium* of the progress and experience of faith is also an exposition of Catholic understanding of the basis and dynamic of Tradition served by the *sensus fidei*. The Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, elaborates this in Chapter 2, and especially clearly in paragraph 8.

Here, Tradition - as apostolic preaching preserved in Scripture, and through apostolic succession, in doctrine, life, and worship, - is understood to 'make progress', with the help of the Holy Spirit by the '*growth in insight* into the realities and words that are being passed on... through the contemplation and study of believers who *ponder these things in their hearts* (Lk 2:19 and 51, italics added) and also '*from the intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience*'. The next paragraph goes to say that holy Scriptures themselves are also, by this same Tradition, ever 'more thoroughly understood and actualised in the Church'.

In both these Conciliar texts, the pneumatic dimension of the transmission of faith and growth in insight, is joined to an expansive context: it is not only taking place in the work of the hierarchy, but includes *all* the faithful, in the context of their lives and prayerful reflection. This prayerful reflection is a form of spiritual discernment.

Discernment

Finally, how can what I have described as testimony be understood to assist discernment, if it is to be useful in parishes? For my response to this, and to both focus and circumscribe an understanding of discernment, I draw from the work of Ladislav Örsy SJ on communal discernment, entitled 'Probing the Spirit: A Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment'. Admittedly, this work was written to assist discernment in communities of religious orders, but some insights can be transposed to a parish context.

By way of definition, Örsy describes discernment as that which, 'in its proper sense means to perceive or to recognise an inspiration of grace',³⁸ and 'the articulation of a contemplative insight into the working of God's grace'.³⁹ Intriguingly, Örsy also uses the example from the Acts of the Apostles, of the meeting of Council of Jerusalem (15:1-35), which includes several note-worthy observations. First, that the judgement of matters could not be made by reasoning and logic alone, to decide between 'apparently conflicting testimonies'.⁴⁰ The light of the

³⁸ Ladislav Örsy, *Probing the Spirit* (Denville, New Jersey: Dimension Books, 1976), p. 32.

³⁹ Ladislav Örsy, *Probing the Spirit*, p. 13.

⁴⁰ Ladislav Örsy, *Probing the Spirit*, p. 16.

Spirit was required, and for this the disciples looked for the witness of life, the ‘cleansed hearts’, as well as signs and wonders. The proposed solution offered by the apostle James Örsy describes pithily as ‘based on the words of the prophets, on the signs of the times, and on some shrewd wisdom’.⁴¹ In other words, as with testimony as I have explored it, discernment takes place within the context of faith based upon revelation (Scripture, or as here the ‘words of the prophets’), taking into account the contemporary context.

Testimony as described in this paper resonates with aspects of discernment noted by Örsy. It is based upon faith experience within a community of faith, undertaken prayerfully and reflectively, is a spiritual activity which also enjoins the faculties of reason, memory, and imagination. The desire to recognise the workings of grace in life, is also an expression of the desire to be obedient to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and to thereby come to increasingly know and love God in Jesus Christ. The generation of narrative to create a personal faith story is at the service of this end. Speaking it out, its ‘articulation’, as Örsy puts it, does not preclude its contemplative foundation. It should, in fact, increase it, as truths pondered increase both desire and knowledge for their divine goodness, and beauty, by which Christ is recognised.

As well as speaking out, there is also the need for listening, both within, and by the community. This is truly a dialogical, active listening, which, as a form of reception strengthens the bonds of individuals to community. It is a sounding-post, so to speak, at grass roots of the *sensus fidelium*, whereby the faith of each person resonates within the ecclesial community. In this process, as in the working of *mise-en-abyme*, likenesses, new images, new relationships and connections to the faith of the wider church will emerge and be tested. This testing will be made today, even as it was in the early church ‘on the words of the prophets, on the signs of the times, and on some shrewd wisdom’.⁴²

Conclusion

In conclusion, testimony, as I have described it, clearly has a lot of potential and capacity to contribute to the synodal process in parishes, through the discernment and sharing of faith. However, the preferred contexts for the sharing of charismatic testimony - prayer-groups, or conferences – are not generally familiar practices for many Catholics. Other alternatives are needed if the giving of testimony is to have more uptake in parishes. Some adult faith formation programmes have scope for this. For example, those published by the Catholic Faith Exploration

⁴¹ Ladislav Örsy, *Probing the Spirit*, p. 17.

⁴² *Ibid.*

charity CaFE, also encourage the sharing of faith in small, café-style groups, where, including hospitality, people can talk informally about their experience of faith.

This brings me back to the example cited at the beginning of this paper, of the disciples on the way to Emmaus. Returning to that story now, it can be seen to illustrate features of testimony examined above. As a story, it exists as a form of *mis-en-abyme*: the story of the disciples meeting Jesus exists and can be read within the larger contexts of the Passion narrative, Gospel, and Scripture as a whole, in each case, resonating with and reflecting those wider, narrative contexts. The disciples themselves reference the ministry and Passion of Jesus, to which they were witnesses, as ‘all that had happened’ (Lk 24: 15). In order for them to have a fuller understanding, Jesus cites ‘Moses and the prophets’ (Lk 24:27). The action of breaking bread together, elicits not only their recognition of Jesus, but also the *recollection* of the passion and desire stirred up within them through the breaking open of the word of God in Scripture as they walked together, and a growth in insight as to the significance of that experience. It is this that they share on their return – ‘Then they told their story of what happened on the road’ (Lk 24:35). The whole account can be read as an exemplar of the transmission of faith through witness given in testimony.

Perhaps a prayerful shared reading of this Gospel story within parish groups may inspire similar growth of insight into how we today continue on that same road of faith, each of us contributing to the wider ecclesial story. As for the Synod pathway being a journey in faith, the contribution of testimony to it may be part of what Pope St John Paul II wished for the Church in the new millennium: that it may ‘remember the past with gratitude, ... live the present with enthusiasm and ... look forward to the future with confidence’.⁴³

Jordan Pullicino

St Mary's College,

Oscott CIO West Midlands

United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland

jordan.pullicino@oscott.org

⁴³ Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/2001/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20010106_novo-millennio-ineunte.html 1.