

Transcript of Pádraig Ó Tuama's reflection
on the Charter Process
to the Federation Leadership Meeting, 21 April 2021



“ I am so pleased to be with you all. I am in the northwest of Ireland; I am from Cork. There's a community in Cork, and I know that some of you will have had connections, along with Maria, with that community. I am a poet and a theologian, and have spent most of the last 20 years working in conflict resolution in Belfast. So that conflict resolution was split really into two particular areas. One area was working in the aftermath of the British Empire and the partition of Ireland, and everything that has happened in Ireland - in the north of Ireland - in the last hundred years. With the violence and murder and trauma that comes with all of that. And then the second part of that was particularly working with lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people (I'm a gay man myself) and our relationship with Church authorities. Looking at the fallout of exorcisms and prejudices, as well as trying to create a situation where people can have very very serious arguments about how they disagree, and help folks - who are not affected personally by the opinions they seek to hold - engage with what it's like to be affected personally- so to look at the impact of power disparities. I'm fundamentally uninterested in common ground, because usually common ground reduces everybody to a common denominator, and often that is a cause of further conflict rather than in any way solving or alleviating conflict. And to keep me going in all that, poetry is the blood of my life. I need poetry every day, and so I write it and read it; and then in the last few years I have moved from working in conflict resolution, to mostly broadcasting and writing about poetry, and that has been a great joy- to move away from conflict.

I have never been a member of L'Arche, but I have been around L'Arche communities I suppose for 15 years, and have been really moved by knowing the communities. Some of my housemates were members of the L'Arche community in Belfast, so I've gotten to know a lot of the L'Arche community here. And then I was involved with Pat Favaro and with a variety of others at the Federation Assembly a few years ago, as well as some events in London recently and some events that are coming up in the States over the summer.

So, what strikes me when I think about the Charter Process, is that it's written into your practice that there - every 12 or 15 or 17 years - would be some kind of process for reflecting on: is the story we tell about ourselves- are we telling it to ourselves in the right way for now? And this, I think, is a very wise thing to do. It is a secular thing to do. Secular has nothing to do with spirituality or not; secular comes from the French *siècle* meaning 'century' and therefore paying attention to: what does it mean to be here, now, in this time? It is a revisiting of a process, it is saying: looking at where we are now, and looking at what we can see now, and looking at what we know now, are we telling our story in the way that is true, now? It isn't about revisionism or revolution. It is however about truth, and doing that with the wisdom that has been gained since the last time. And I think that L'Arche has a practice of this, it seems to me to be very wise. I think a lot of organisations could do with it.

I am from a place that has been impacted by conflict, and the impact of the British Empire in Ireland has a long and unchangeable impact- it's important to say that. Wars do things that no peace process can undo. You cannot change the past. And I've worked in conflict resolution for about 20 years. Often I recognise that empires think that they ended when the empire crumbled. That's a luxury of people in power, to think that once they think: oh, our empire finished 50 years ago, it's fine. Anybody who lives in the aftermath of empire knows: oh, it's not. Empire continues on, after its crumbling, in the lives of people who are impacted by it; in the language that was stolen from us; in the governances that were stolen from us, etcetera. Empires leave echoes that erupt in chaos and crisis and riots for decades - even centuries - afterwards. We have riots in Belfast at the moment, these last few nights. So far I think 80 police officers have been injured; thank God nobody's dead yet- I hope nobody is dead. But these are the ways within which going into other places and changing languages and saying: this is ours now, here's your new god- this erupts situations in a way that doesn't end with a peace agreement.

A peace agreement starts something. And a peace agreement is usually signed during a moment of urgency, and that urgency I think creates a sense to say: we need a process for reflecting regularly on who we are. And when you're in urgency, and you agree to this process, everybody agrees, for good reason. And maybe you say: every ten years we are going to have a process, and the first time you come back to that after ten years, it's fine, my God- everybody still remembers. The second time people are going: do we need this process? Because it's a lot of paperwork and I'm tired and I have 300 emails that need to be answered. And then the next time, and the next time. There are processes that are urgent and that are necessary and important, even though they're probably annoying. And it occurs to me that the Charter Process in L'Arche is probably one of those. I imagine that if I worked for L'Arche, I would genuinely be hoping that I could empty my inbox rather than be in meetings. But I also recognise, as somebody who's totally outside, that I envy L'Arche and your Federation for having it written in that you have these processes for examining yourself through the lens of the story you tell, over and over. And I think that's wise.

And peace will always come with meetings. And with processes, and with things that are annoying. But here's the thing: when we follow these processes, fewer people die. This is what we know in peace studies. When I have worked with clergy to examine the language they use about lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, fewer people die by suicide. And so I'm really happy for meetings, and I'm really happy for processes and really happy that people examine themselves - not in their own self-narration of their story - but examine themselves through the lens of those who are impacted by their story, because our own self-narration of story is usually self-deceptive. What we need is the brutality of an examination that is painful, that faces us with what we perhaps suspected to be true, but really wish was not true.

It doesn't matter where - it wasn't Ireland - but a few weeks ago a friend of mine was at a city meeting. And everybody in the city meeting - it was convened by the local city council - they were speaking about their area of interest and the work that they do. And there was somebody from L'Arche there at this city meeting. And this person was asked to take 15 minutes to tell the story of L'Arche to everybody who was there, because not everybody knew about L'Arche. And my friend who was there knows about L'Arche, and said to me what was so interesting is that this L'Arche person told the story of L'Arche, about three weeks ago, without once mentioning Jean Vanier. And I think that is very very interesting, and it is really worthwhile taking a small moment to think about that. It doesn't matter who they were or where they were, because this is something true: not just true that it happened, but also true because it's telling us some true things. You mightn't like it - or you might like it, I don't know - but there's something true there. Because what the person, I think, was trying to do, was trying to tell a story that didn't start in shame. And they were trying to tell a story for the future. And they were trying to tell a story for now also; and the version of the story that they were telling had some editing in it of course, and some denial maybe- I don't know their motivation. It might also have been a story of reclaiming and protest, because they might have been

saying: actually I'm uninterested in the big story, I'm interested in the small story here. It also was a story of desire. And it's a story of a certain part of truth that they wish to quieten, and another part of truth that they wish to amplify. So all of these things are true in this little experience that happened the other week. And one of the things I think in this secular project - this project of the *siècle*, of the decade even, that you're in now - is to examine: what is the truth of the story we tell, and how does it function? And how does it work for what we know now, for *who* we know ourselves to be now, and for how we want to take the next few steps over the next ten years or twelve years until we do this process again? I'm from outside your organisation, and I say it is a wise thing that you have this repeating process every 12/15/17 years. I envy it.

What is the purpose of a Charter? I think on the one level it is a profound reminder to us of what we already know. And what is the purpose of a Charter? It is a profound reminder in how we should tell the story now. That will take some courage, some comfort, and some discomfort. And what is the purpose of a Charter? It is to help people grow the story we tell, together with the things we know now. It creates a little bit of space for movement. Lots of you I'm sure will be familiar with the psychotherapeutic concept of containment. When you can tell a story in the context of therapy and your therapist doesn't freak out, doesn't say: oh my God, I can't believe you told me that, that's awful, I need a break! When the therapist can hear your story and go: OK, yeah. When the therapist can say: I can hold your story more easily than you can, that gives the person who's in therapy the capacity to say: oh, they are capable of holding it, of containing it; therefore I might be too, eventually.

And I see that the Charter has the capacity to be a container for the story that L'Arche is seeking to tell now. Because there have been some changes, there have been some processes- not necessarily all new things, but there are some ways within which you will wish to say: here's what's possible, and here's what's possible without it causing devastation, and here is how we do this. And that can provide great courage for people who are wondering: if I tell this story will I be a renegade or a traitor? What you are doing is providing a pastoral response to the stories that people know they need to tell. And there are of course things about the L'Arche Federation that are not going to change: communities of people with different abilities, ages and backgrounds, sharing life in trust and learning and joy and sorrow, of course. With work, with living, with all kinds of arrangements as to where people live and what the shape of community looks like, and the Charter will support this by saying: yes, of course, that is true and is safe and will continue to be true. And that's a vital function actually, 'cause people will regularly wonder: are we slipping? And that can be a very helpful revisiting of that.

And then there are things about now that need support, and the Charter will help this. And, as a complete outsider, I know that there will be anxieties about how the story that incorporates reflection on the truth of the inquiry can be told. And the Charter might be able to give some simple language; not by being the first, or the final, or the most comprehensive document, but certainly by being another demonstration to say: this is the way to say this now. Other people, I think, will probably have other anxieties about how the Federation is changing- when it comes to religion or not religion; when it comes to the Federation's different relationships to the requirements of compliance in different countries... Within the tension that I'm sure is there about L'Arche as a service provider or L'Arche as a community - or a community of communities - and all the tensions that come there. And the Charter is not going to be a policy document on any of these individual areas, but it will provide some kind of vessel for saying: here's the new shape of this, to hold what we know we need to look at now.

And I suppose there's also areas of growth that the Charter can support in little nods. How will the story of your founding be told? How can L'Arche find a way to be courageous there, that is not about denial, but also it isn't about- well it's not about denial of what you know from the inquiry, but it's also not about amplifying that as if that's the only true story. It's about holding multiple truths

together. And how can this story of the demonstration of integrity and investigation be told- how can that be seen as a revelation of something that is also true about L'Arche? And the Charter is not the first or the final or the most comprehensive word in this, but it is a way of reminding L'Arche about how now the story can be told with simplicity, and with neither deception nor dismay about the great gift that L'Arche is, as well as your own griefs as an organisation.

Over and over and over again, what I have heard in all the years that I've been around some L'Arche communities, and in this whole process too, is regularly, over cups of tea or meals, I hear stories of community meals and beautiful and profound stories of experiences of funerals. L'Arche knows what it means to send somebody into death in such a way that the living also are given something moving. You know that possibly better than others. I'm from a culture in Ireland that does funerals well- we really do, thank God. I am grieved when I'm around people who don't know how to grieve. But when I see L'Arche, I see that L'Arche also knows this- internationally, profoundly. Of course, there's different cultural expressions of that in different places, but there's something beautiful in how you know how to look grief in the face. And what does grief look like now? In terms of grief of the story that was once told that is changing a bit, and maybe certain innocences are dying, but also there is a great wisdom of saying: and here is what integrity has been in the middle of that. That is a quite an extraordinary thing that you know.

I'll talk a little bit about whiskey- I hope that's ok. Whiskey is one of the words in English, and in French I think, that comes from Irish. I heard somebody say at the start that you hoped I wouldn't speak in Irish. I love Irish, it's a language I learnt from the age of two. Whiskey: the word in English comes from *uisce beatha* [pronounced: *ishka ba-ha*] which means 'water of life', and the first part - *uisce* - got brought into English and French and other languages to mean 'whiskey'. So whiskey is made primarily from barley and water. And then it's spread out and turned and dried and mixed with hot water, and mixed with yeast, and then fermentation happens and it's put in a pot, and then it's distilled and fermented again and it's left- sometimes for 8 years or 12 years or 15 or 17, or 25 if you've got a lot of money! And ultimately what you're doing in this whole distillation process is trying to figure out: how can we taste the authenticity of the land where this water and this barley came from? The whole difficult process of distilling whiskey is to return to the authentic source. And it takes a long time and a lot of skill and a lot of patience and needs to be returned to over and over.

I think sometimes there can be an anxiety in organisations and in countries and in peace processes that to return to something is somehow seeking to rewrite the past. No. To return to something is to *discern* the past. That's a very different thing. And it requires all kinds of patience in us, sometimes to realise: my God, this wound has been with us from the beginning- look at that; we could only see it now. That is a returning to the past to distil, to see and to learn. It has always been there. It isn't something new. It takes a very long time, in the process of distillation for whiskey, to find the indigenous taste of the local water and the barley that has grown in the local field. The best whiskeys (I do like whiskey, this won't surprise you)- the best whiskey is the whiskey where the water and the barley have come from a very local area, and where you can taste the earth and smell the earth and smell the water and smell the mountain, and even smell the smoke of the land. It's a little taste of the particular indigenous area from which this whiskey comes.

And that process of distillation, I think, is something that this Charter Process is doing. It is to return to the locality of the organisation that you are, to think: what is there? How can we reflect on this? How can we do the long process of waiting, and finding a way to return, in order to seek again and again how what is most indigenous to us can be something that is elevated to the surface? And the impurities are not denied, but we find a way to pay attention to them. This isn't a revolution - it's not a revision either - and it's not a stripping away or even adding-on at this late stage, but I think it is a discovery about what has always been there and which, with our attention, might be something that could save us from ourselves. And that, I think, is always going to be a powerful thing. The awful thing that I think in religion is not that there's no devil - I don't believe in a devil - but that we might

be it. It's much easier to have a devil that you can hate and exorcise than to think that I might be one. And I might be the source of my own wound. And that I might be the one who is doing the work of the devil in me and around others. And therefore I think that's always going to require difficult questions.

Origin stories and wounding stories and critique of institutional life for people with learning disabilities are all part of some of the ways within which you've told your story to yourselves. I read through - I don't know - 15 or 16 of the documents of L'Arche telling its story to itself over the last while; and the origin story and the story of woundedness and the critique of institutional life were all there. In the '90s, I saw the introduction of language to do with rights coming in. There were all kinds of ways within which language that almost romanticised weakness came in; and I know that you are very aware of the dangers of that language and I've seen that language being changed over the last number of years.

Over and over again, I see this word 'God' coming in, and I see that the word God, in a certain sense, is a key. It isn't saying a piece of dogma, but what I see is that the word God is for you a key to open up a room of flourishing and dignity of all people, and that room is the invitation that you speak about over and over. I suppose what you're facing is: what does it mean to recognise that there's different keys for different doors, all leading into that same room, and how can you celebrate and honour that, in a way where people who love the door that is called God don't feel disrespected when other people enter into that room through a different door? Even though you all end up in the same place, the door and the keys are all different.

But I think the destination that you know is at the heart of your communities, which is communities of celebration and trust and lamentation. Communities that are a sign not only to the world but to yourselves, because I think you know this very deeply. I think the mystery around which L'Arche is gathered is the mystery of human dignity. And you also know that the mystery around which L'Arche is gathered is the mystery of human brokenness and human damage. And this is a tension that you hold in yourselves, which I am moved by to watch. And how can L'Arche be a sign in this time of post-inquiry about what it means to live with that tension?

The word 'God' certainly makes less noise in L'Arche's documents now than it did before. But the word- what the word God is doing, today and 50 years ago, hasn't changed. The word God for all of you, it seems to me, has been used - by those of you who love it, and those of you who definitely don't - the word God has been used to speak about the dignity of community and something powerful being established together when people come together in forms of community and co-working. I think that's the end of what I want to say.