

04 The Importance of Truth Telling for the Health of Society

Fáinche Ryan

My current research is engaged with the phenomenon of post-truth and its widespread proliferation in today's society. Post-truth was announced as the Oxford Dictionary's Word of the Year 2016, with great fanfare. The concept 'post-truth' is defined as denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief. Widespread social usage of this concept seems to favour the expediency of result over the importance of truth telling.

This research prompted a return to earlier work on the concept of virtue, with a focus now on the virtue of truth telling. As previously, my first port of call was the theologian Thomas Aquinas. Developing Aristotle's philosophy, Aquinas understands virtues as being the skills, or the learnt dispositions of character, that enable humans to live well in society, and that enable human society to flourish. The virtue of justice governs our relationships with others - specifically, it denotes a sustained or constant willingness to extend to each

person what he or she deserves. It is significant that for Aquinas the virtue of truth telling is embedded in the larger topic of the virtue of justice. Justice is what we owe to one another and what is owed to us in a flourishing society. Aquinas' argument is that it is owed to me as a member of society that others speak truth to me - otherwise I cannot flourish. Similarly I owe it to you that I tell the truth to you. For Aquinas a persistent failure in truth telling is first and foremost an act of self-corruption, and thereby an act of societal corruption. Furthermore, unless we are truth telling, we cannot trust one another, and without trust, society crumbles.

The objective of my research is to demonstrate that contemporary complacency with the concept of post-truth, in both politics and media, needs to reckon with these arguments about the centrality of the virtue of truth telling for individual and societal flourishing.

This academic year I have presented papers on this topic at two international conferences, leading to fruitful discussion. I am currently working on an

article for publication in a peer-reviewed journal. The objective of this article is to contribute to society's debates on issues that are arising around the concept of post-truth.

Truth telling and ecclesial institutions

Truth telling is crucial to the health of institutions, no less to that of church. In this regard my research is focused on the locus of authority within the institutional Church. My work here involves the study of the lost memory of the leadership of women as well as seeking new authentic expressions of ecclesial leadership. I have completed a chapter on this theme for a book entitled *Social and Political Roles for Church in Contemporary Pluralist Society*.

My ongoing research combines these interests in ecclesial leadership and the importance of truth telling. I continue to present and publish papers on these topics, with a book length study as my medium term goal. My objective is to make a significant contribution to widespread contemporary interest in the area of ecclesial leadership, as well as to influence change.

Fáinche Ryan holds a BA from the Kimmage Mission Institute, an MA from Milltown Institute and a PhD from the University of St Thomas Aquinas (Rome). Her first academic appointment was at the Margaret Beaufort Institute in the Cambridge Theological Federation. In 2013 she joined Trinity's Loyola institute as Assistant Professor in Systematic Theology and is the current Director. Her publications include *Formation in Holiness. Thomas Aquinas on Sacra Scriptura* and *The Eucharist. What do we believe?* She was President of the Irish Theological Association from 2012 to 2017.

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