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# The FURROW

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## Looking To The Future

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Recently, I enjoyed a summer break in the South-West of Ireland. Paying a random visit to a tiny parish church by the ocean's edge, the overpoweringly pungent smell of damp and mildew which pervaded the building's interior, assaulted our senses like the stench of rotting cabbages. The former Papal Nuncio to Ireland, Archbishop Charles Brown, spoke frequently about the green shoots of renewal which he discerned in the Irish Church. In this particularly far-flung corner of the emerald vineyard, we sensed mainly decline.

Everywhere we went, within relatively restricted geographical areas, we encountered not single churches but several. Clusters of church buildings standing in close proximity, within a few square miles of each other. Concrete testimony to a bygone era of clergy abundance and church building frenzy. Churches everywhere. Around almost every corner, practically behind every hill. It seemed that many of them had fallen on hard times. Judging by the Mass schedules flutteringly forlornly in the windswept and largely deserted porches, the celebration of Eucharist was an occasional liturgical event, in most cases weekly. In one lonely outpost, monthly.

This pervading pattern of too many churches and too few priests, is not confined to our own western seaboard but is generally characteristic of large swathes of the Church in North America and many parts of Western Europe including Great Britain and Ireland, North and South. In our own northern Diocese, we have churches standing empty, out of liturgical commission for most of the time: church buildings where nothing much happens except at weekends when some overwrought parish priest or curate, (a once common species, now close to extinction) arrives wearily in his dusty car to celebrate Mass, maybe for the second or third time on the same Sunday.

The system is creaking at the seams. The existing parish structures are clearly broken or at breaking point. The solution

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according to current wisdom, is to give priests more work. A priest friend, aged 80, in the southern Dutch province of Limburg, now finds himself pastoring six parishes. The number of bell-towers and congregations for which he has pastoral and administrative responsibility, seems to increase inexorably with the passing of the years. Priests in Ireland it seems, are heading down the same pastoral cul-de-sac, straddling a growing number of parishes in some never-ending game of clerical Christmas Twister. Some are now routinely running more than one parish, in some cases two or three.

In the short term, it seems, this clearly unsustainable trend is set only to expand and accelerate, with detrimental consequences for the health and well-being of priests, and with the provision of consequently thinner and more patchy pastoral service at parish level. Priests driving themselves into the ground, meeting themselves coming back, running themselves ragged: these are some of the dreary idioms which this sad scenario conjures up, not least I suspect, in the worried minds of an ever-ageing and over-stretched priesthood.

On reflection, the current strategy whereby ageing priests are spread ever more thinly across multiple parishes, is at best a short term solution, at worst geared towards propping up a priest-centred system that is destined eventually to fail. It cannot stand long into the future while priest numbers continue to decline at the present rate.

Various solutions have been proposed to the looming and growing clergy crisis, most consistently in Ireland by the Association of Catholic Priests: ordaining married men, optional celibacy, the bringing back of those priests who have left active ministry in order to marry, the ordination of women. Many, if not all of these changes will happen within our Church. The sooner the better. The movement towards a more inclusive model of priesthood cannot be resisted or thwarted forever. It is not entirely surprising however, given the Church's eternal perspective, that she is said to think in centuries. Change and reform do indeed come dropping slow. But drop they do and come they will. As clearly as day follows night, these surely are the directions in which we will eventually move under the influence of the Spirit.

The Spirit however, blows where it wills. Sadly, I sense no breath of wind in these pastoral sails just yet. Probably not in the foreseeable future or even in our own lifetimes. In the meantime, however long-term or short-lived this turns out to be, the challenge is to keep moving towards an entirely different model of ministry rooted in Baptism rather than Holy Orders. The principle has been conceded for fifty years and more, since the Second Vatican

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Council in the early 1960s. Progress has been made in the various liturgical and other roles now played by men and especially women at parish level. But the drastic reduction in clergy numbers that we now face calls for a paradigm shift towards involvement and decision making at every level.

A striking painting by the Belfast Artist, George Campbell, a painting of Claddaghduff Church near Clifden, Co Galway, is currently in the care of the Ulster Museum. The grey edifice dominates the scene. In the centre of the painting, almost invisible, are two shawled women of the district. Once the eye is drawn to them however they are virtually impossible to ignore. They, not the church building, are truly Church.

The grey stone church commands the hill  
above the rock-strewn shapes  
that pass for fields in Connemara.  
After Mass, on the winding lane  
two shawled women of the district  
have stopped to talk.

Once the eye is drawn to these two souls among the dry-stone  
walls, they are impossible to ignore.

They are truly Church, these two,  
their rough shawls, like tabernacle veils, concealing divinity.

The challenge is self-evident: to move finally from the bricks and mortar model to the flesh and blood model of Church. Parish Pastoral Councils, Finance Councils and those men and women still active and willing in local parishes, must now be delegated radically more freedom to minister to the particular needs of their fellow parishioners, before the remaining reservoir of good-will shrinks any further.

Taking their lead from the parish priest or simply doing his bidding, is not the kind of participation that is now called for. Something more radical and far-reaching is required, if clergy are not to be crushed beneath oppressive workloads and parish communities are not to wither on the vine, through inactivity and the absence or near absence of effective local ministry.

Policy documents and guidelines may be necessary but the real challenge is to move beyond the seemingly endless and at times circular discussion, which we seem to have been engaged in for years. Time for clergy to let go, relinquish the instinct to control, abandon the deeply embedded tendency to set every agenda, attend every meeting, sign every cheque and approve or obstruct every proposal that comes from any source other than ourselves. Many of

our parishes are priestless already. Others are destined to become priestess in the coming months and years.

Bishops and priests clearly have a role in managing this transition. But maybe it doesn't matter that much anymore whether we participate in the process or not. Events, specifically the collapse of vocations to ordained priesthood in the western world, have overtaken us. Change is coming whether or not we choose to welcome or delay it.

When a Chinese priest reached the Korean Peninsula in the middle of the eighteenth century, he found 4000 Catholics who had not known the pastoral care of a priest for the best part of 40 years. There had been no priestly ministry in the region for that period of time. The faith of the people however remained intact and strong.

The future of the Catholic Church as we have known and experienced it in Ireland, is not guaranteed. While clerical structures within the Church in Ireland may be floundering, faith on the ground is remarkably, surprisingly and thankfully more robust. For this reason, I do not agree with the Archbishop of Dublin's recent statement that Church goers in Ireland are a dying breed. The breed that is surely dying, however, is that of home-grown parish clergy. As clergy numbers decline, men and women in Irish parishes are being called by events, and more crucially by the Spirit working through these events, to step forward to provide ministry.

Those of us clergy who remain, will still have our specific roles to play, but it seems clear that our contribution will be more focused, more concentrated on those areas of pastoral need which specifically require ordained ministry. Thankfully, we will no longer be expected to do everything. Instead, the shrinking numbers of us still left in the vineyard, will be required to do a few things well.