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Learning from the Past

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As time passes there are fewer of us around who remember the confidence of the Catholic Church in Ireland before the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Perhaps it would be helpful to cast our mind back and ask where this confidence came from? Was the Church in Ireland always so sure of herself? Was there another time, analogous to our own, when the Irish Church was struggling in the wilderness, borrowing Joyce, “to forge in the smithy of (her) soul the uncreated conscience of (her) race”?

The late Emmet Larkin, one time professor of British and Irish history at the University of Chicago, wrote *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland 1850-1860*, which was published in America in 1980.¹ It is an astonishing record of the disagreements – ‘hostilities’ would not be too strong – among the Irish bishops at the time. Catholic Emancipation, in 1829, cleared the way for the evolution of a new way of being the Catholic Church in Ireland after the century of penal oppression. What character would the Irish church adopt now that it was free – to use the name of this journal - to plough a new furrow? In order to address this question we need to discover what the Catholic Church in Ireland looked like in the middle of the nineteenth century.

Free, at last, after centuries of hot and cold persecution when all energies went on survival, the Irish Church took stock of the situation it now inherited. There were three particular issues and one general one. The former were: The government’s educational policies, the role of the clergy in politics and the standardisation of pastoral practice.

And the general one was the relationship among the bishops themselves and with the See of Peter. The history of the church after the Reformation in the sixteenth century was marked, among other ways, by a tension between what we can broadly describe as ‘Gallican’ and ‘ultramontane’ tendencies. The former, taking

1 Emmet Larkin, *The Making of the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland 1850-1860*. Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1980.

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its cue from France (Gaul), stressed the national autonomy of the church in everything that was not strictly spiritual, doctrinal or liturgical. So, again broadly speaking, authority in the day to day affairs of the church lay with the local bishops. The latter, ‘beyond the mountains’ (the Alps), pressed the claims of papal authority in virtually every area of church life and practice. Inevitably, this model undercut the authority of the bishops in areas of policy while, of course, leaving to them the role of administering and maintaining their dioceses. Larkin insists it would be an over-simplification to reduce the struggle in the Irish Church in the 1850s to one between Gallicanism and ultramontanist, but, while there were many other particular issues, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this was the underlying factor. He painstakingly narrates a mighty battle between the bishops² and even has a crucial chapter with the title, “Battle Lines”!

The ultramontanes “won” and a century of confidence, based on close alignment with the pope, began. Paul Cullen opened the curtains on that century and John Charles McQuaid closed them. Both were archbishops of Dublin and both were intent on governing the local church in strict accord with the wishes of Rome.³ I will make no further reference to McQuaid here other than to say he shared the *weltanschauung* (view of the world) of Cullen which left little room for “the signs of the times”. This view, it can be argued, served the church well in the nineteenth century. It produced a disciplined unity that allowed the church to speak as one, for example, in discussions with the British government in matters of education. And, in general, one could say the cohesion of the bishops, and their strong sense of unity with Rome, enabled the Irish Church to find her identity anew at home, and preside over a wave of missionary activity abroad that echoed the early Celtic missions to England and the continent.

But was something lost that would eventually induce a resigned somnolence when faced with the changing times of the following century?

The struggle for the soul of the Irish Church in the mid-nineteenth century, as laid out by Larkin, is a gripping read. Two men stand out and, if it is too strong to say they detested each other, it is at least true to say they disliked and distrusted one another intensely. One was the “Lion of the West”, John MacHale, Archbishop of Tuam, (1834-1881); the other was Paul Cullen, Archbishop of Armagh (1849-52) and then Dublin (1852-78).

2 Archbishop MacHale of Tuam and Bishop O’Higgins of Ardagh published a pamphlet in England denouncing those bishops who disagreed with them over the Queen’s colleges as “wolves in sheep’s clothing.” Larkin p 6

3 I notice that Aidan Ryan referred to this simply as the ‘Cullen/McQuaid era.’ *Furrow*, Dec 2017 p 679.

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MacHale, born in 1791, attended a hedge school from the age of five. During the rebellion of 1798 he saw, while hidden in a stack of flax French troops marching through a mountain pass near Castlebar. Later he learnt that the priest who had baptised him was executed for “treason”. These events made a deep impression on the boy and after school hours he would study Irish history with an old scholar in the neighbourhood. When he was thirteen he moved to a school in Castlebar, where he learnt Latin and Greek. From there he went to Maynooth to study for the priesthood learning French, Italian, German and Hebrew from French migrant priests fleeing the Revolution. When he was consecrated bishop he was the first in hundreds of years educated solely in Ireland.

Such an education prepared him for the struggle for emancipation and indelibly marked him as a passionate champion, ecclesiastically and politically, for all things Irish. He became closely associated with Daniel O’Connell in the struggle for Catholic Emancipation and went along with the Liberator’s “unique kind of political machine (which made) the priests his local election agents in the parliamentary constituencies.”⁴

Paul Cullen, on the other hand, spent almost thirty years in Rome, first as a student and later as a lecturer and rector of the Irish College. He came from a “strong farmer” family fearful of the social unrest that produced the 1798 rising. He was moderate, cautious, “distrustful and suspicious.”⁵ Newman wrote to his good friend Ambrose St John, “Poor Dr. C, I should not wonder if he is dragged down with anxiety. The great fault I find with him is that he makes no one his friend, because he will confide in nobody, and be considerate to nobody. Everybody feels that he is emphatically *close*.”⁶ Larkin comments that Cullen “had been trained in the Roman school of ecclesiastical politics, where the technique of dissimulation had long been practiced as a high art”!⁷

But Cullen was a gifted leader who took every opportunity to align the Irish Church more closely to Rome in the belief that this was what was in her best interests at that time. Pius IX saw him as a loyal servant of the Church who could resolve the perceived differences among the Irish hierarchy and weld it more closely to Rome. Cullen was appointed Archbishop of Armagh and primate of all Ireland in 1849 and was also made Apostolic Delegate with wide powers to exercise Rome’s authority in Ireland.

MacHale, of course, accepted the pope’s authority over the Irish Church but he wanted it defined: what was the pope’s role and what

4 Larkin, p 170

5 Ibid, p 448

6 Ibid, p 361

7 Ibid, p 449

was the role of the local bishop? A rather modern question! Cullen had no patience with such distinctions: for him Rome simply had supreme power in every area of church life.

THE SYNOD OF THURLES

Cullen's first major act, on arrival in Ireland, was to organise a Synod involving all the Irish Bishops in Thurles (1850). He wanted to make a statement about unity with Rome and was at pains to impress people with the grandeur of papal ceremony. "Ten thousand people gathered to watch the procession of bishops and clergy from St Patrick's College to the Cathedral," Larkin tells us, and he quotes one of the Rome-educated priests present as writing, "all the arrangements were made as far as possible on the plan of the papal chapels ... I thought I was in Rome amongst the Cardinals once more."⁸

The bishops began with education and there was a convergence of views. MacHale and Cullen, together with most of the other bishops, were in broad agreement that the education of Catholic children should be under the control of the Church. The government in London wished to use education as a way of promoting unity in the kingdom, to which Ireland then belonged, and were not averse to weakening the grip of the Catholic Church on the Irish. In their view 'Catholic' and 'rebel' were almost synonymous and the Irish bishops might use their new found freedom, after emancipation, to support the political agenda of Daniel O'Connell for the repeal the 1800 Act of Union between England and Ireland. They had a point because O'Connell did try to build on his success with Emancipation by trying to enlist the bishops and priests in this very cause. But the clergy drew back seeing this as overtly political. A further, and related, irritant for the British government was the resurgence of Catholic confidence with the restoration of the hierarchy in England in 1850.

In 1845, London proposed to promote tertiary education in the main cities of Ireland through a system of third-level institutions known as the Queen's Colleges, which would be run on non-denominational, that is, "mixed" lines. Most of the bishops were opposed to the proposals but Archbishop Murray of Dublin was inclined to see the positive aspect of the scheme. Cullen was vehemently against it and won over a majority of the bishops to his view. "It (the liberal virus) is no longer," he said in his closing address to the Synod of Thurles, "a single heresy, or an eccentric fanaticism ... but a comprehensive, all-pervading, well digested system of unbelief, suited to every capacity and reaching every

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intellect that corrupts and desolates the moral world.”⁹ These words have a modern ring to them and it is not hard to imagine them on the lips of our bishops today in their response to the “secular agenda”.

The bishops were impressed by Archbishop Cullen’s performance at the synod and, however uneasy this might make many of them, they realised they now had a man among them who had the authority and the ability to mould the Irish Church after the mind of Pius IX. Cullen, for his part, was scandalised by the degree of opposition among them to what he considered was the mind of the pope. Fifteen voted to condemn the Queens’s Colleges but thirteen voted for them. An exasperated Cullen wrote to Rome, “The Holy See must vindicate her authority. Otherwise the faith is lost in Ireland.”¹⁰

One way of “vindicating her authority” was for Rome to appoint bishops who were disposed to do the papal will and Cullen let no opportunity pass in the years that followed to advise Rome who to appoint as the dioceses of Ireland fell vacant. Writing in October 1850 to Cardinal Frasoni, the prefect responsible for submitting names to the pope, Cullen told him the Archbishop of Dublin was “more than eighty-three, ... the Bishop of Killaloe has dropsy, ... the Bishop of Dromore is totally deaf ... and the Bishops of Down and Connor and of Kerry are very ill.”“If the Sacred Congregation will take great care in the choice of new Bishops, within three years the condition of things will be totally changed in Ireland.”¹¹ Cullen was proving to be “the staunchest of all the ultramontanes in the pontificate of Pius IX”¹² and the pope rewarded him with his confidence though he delayed for some years before making him a Cardinal.

Cullen discreetly but decisively intervened in many episcopal elections. After Catholic Emancipation (1829) and up to his time there was a standard procedure of choosing bishops. The priests of the diocese met to choose, by voting, a list of three names in order of preference: 1) “most worthy”, 2) “more worthy” and 3) “worthy”. The bishops of the province then met to consider the list of three names and often approved the list as it stood and sent it to Rome. Sometimes they would make an alteration but in general the priests’ opinion was followed. Rome would then, normally, appoint the person at the head of the list. But Pius IX encouraged greater scrutiny of the list and opinions were sought outside this normal channel. Cullen encouraged these inquiries and his views were

9 Ibid, p 34

10 Ibid, p 31

11 Ibid, p 42

12 Ibid, p 57

listened to. Over time the choice came to depend on the attitude of the candidate to Rome's way of thinking, as understood by Paul Cullen. Larkin cites examples where the views of the local priests were ignored. Of the 38 priests' votes for the vacancy in Ardagh, for instance, in 1852, the most worthy candidate received 23, the more worthy 7 and the worthy 4. Two other candidates receive 3 and 1 vote. Through the influence of Cullen the one who received just one vote became bishop!¹³

Larkin gives – at least to the modern eye – a disturbing list of factions among the Irish bishops in 1850. MacHale of Tuam had 8 followers, Murray of Dublin 11 and Cullen himself 6.¹⁴ When Cullen succeeded Murray in Dublin he inherited some of his followers - like a medieval earl inheriting the knights of his fallen rival – and, in time, the statistics became much more favourable to him. MacHale, to continue the military metaphor, was gradually outmaneuvered and isolated.

Opposition to the Queen's mixed colleges led to the desire to have a Catholic college for Catholics. Cullen proposed setting up a Catholic University under the bishops' control and, when this was accepted, he invited John Henry Newman to run it. MacHale balked at the idea of an Englishman coming over to run an Irish university and passively resisted the proposal. Cullen doggedly pursued the plan but never trusted Newman with full autonomy. Eventually Newman became frustrated and resigned. But the university survived its troubled birth and eventually morphed into the successful institution we know today which has 1,482 faculty and 32,000 students, with five Nobel Laureates among its alumni. Now known as "University College Dublin, National University of Ireland", it claims Newman as its founder.

It would take many more words to give a nuanced description of Cullen's achievements and influence as recorded for us by Larkin in his 500 pages. We can look back on the hundred years of "confidence" Cullen gave to the Irish Church as a blessing or a setback depending on our point of view. Irish Catholics who saw it as a blessing did not resist the long reach of Rome into every aspect of their lives. They had been isolated too long and now basked in their strong relationship with the "panting heart of Rome." When, as school boys at St Gerard's, Bray, in the 1940s, we participated in the Corpus Christi procession through the town, we tasted this triumphal bond and relished it. But now the relationship is being "deconstructed" and we are searching for new ways of being the Catholic Church in Ireland. Rome, as represented by Archbishop Cullen, could not live with the centrifugal forces Archbishops

13 Ibid, p 162ff

14 Ibid, p 150

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Murray and MacHale represented. In that fragile revolutionary and “enlightened” age the Church, represented by Pius IX and Cullen, felt the need to strengthen unity with the centre if she were to face the perceived hostility of the time.

AND TODAY ... ?

Now things are different. It is amazing to ponder just how different. The irrepressible confidence of Pope Francis is nudging us to look positively at what is before our eyes. We may be as fraught with worry about the Church as our ancestors were 150 years ago but there is no reason why we should fail in confidence, even though it is a confidence of a very different sort.

I began with a reference to the confident Church of the 1950s and posed the question: Was the Church in Ireland always so sure? Was there another time, analogous to our own, when the Irish Church was struggling to find her way? I went on to describe the crossroads the Church found herself at in the 1850s and the direction she eventually took under the leadership of Cullen. That direction was perhaps the only one possible in the context of that time, but we can at least reflect that things could have been different over the intervening years if the Irish bishops had felt free to make decisions locally. The reason for such a reflection is not to berate the past but to learn from it.

I have referred to Archbishop MacHale’s desire to have the Pope’s authority in Ireland defined or “constitutionalized.” Up to the 1850s there was a degree of “subsidiarity” – a word given currency by Pius XI in 1931 in his social encyclical *Quadagesimo Anno* – in the Irish Church. Gregory XVI, in 1841, “left it to each Irish bishop to do as he thought best in his own diocese with regard to the national system of education.”¹⁵ Encouraging local responsibility – “Irish solutions to Irish problems” – could have been the way the Irish Church developed. My point here is not to suggest that the Church took a wrong turn in the 1850s – it might have been premature at that moment to choose otherwise – but to suggest that the present movement towards devolution and synodality, which Pope Francis is promoting in the face of some opposition, is not something wild and new. We should not panic: we have reached crossroads before. What we do need to do is to make careful, imaginative and courageous decisions. And, with the help of God, we will.

¹⁵ Ibid, p xx