

NOVATE  
VOBIS  
NOVALE

# FURROW

*The*

A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Andrew McMahon

## ‘New’ Ireland and Pope Francis

December 2018

# ‘New’ Ireland and Pope Francis

---

Andrew McMahon

‘While Pope Francis expressed contrition for the crimes committed by the clergy, the consensus is that he did not go far enough in terms of outlining the steps he intends to take to ensure that abuse is eradicated from the church’. These words were central to an editorial which appeared in the Irish edition of *The Sunday Times* on Sunday 2nd September.<sup>1</sup> Entitled ‘The taoiseach was right to put the Catholic church in its place’, it sought to evaluate the previous weekend’s papal visit. The reference to ‘the consensus’ in this context was, arguably, the most revealing aspect of the editorial. Not feeling obliged to offer specific evidence in support of so significant a conclusion, the writer seemed content to merely reference the prevailing ‘consensus’.

Whilst believing themselves pioneering, and keen to challenge accepted narratives, Ireland’s media offer the public little other than ‘consensus’ journalism around various contemporary issues. A certain ‘consensus’ is reached by opinion formers as to how particular matters will be conveyed to the populace and the parameters of the ‘national conversation’ are thereby carefully circumscribed. A Broadcasting Authority of Ireland report into a defamatory RTE documentary in 2011, on the very theme of clerical abuse, highlighted what it termed ‘group think’ in how programme-makers had approached the subject.<sup>2</sup>

## ‘GROUPTHINK’ IN IRELAND

‘Groupthink’ effects much more than the portrayal of clergy child abuse in Ireland. It frames public discourse around key subjects, especially those relating to sexual mores, and outside commentators are quick to spot its prevalence. Brendan O’Neill, a social commentator on both sides of the Atlantic, identified its corrosive influence in the campaign for same-sex marriage. He

1 *The Sunday Times* (Ireland Edition) 2 September 2018, p.12.

2 ‘the team had got into a position of ‘group think’ where all evidence was interpreted as pointing only in one direction’: BAI report into *Prime Time Investigates* ‘Mission to Prey’ (23 May 2011) issued 29 February 2012, p.27.

---

Andrew McMahon is a priest of the Diocese of Dromore. Address: ‘Rosemount’, 6 Scarva Road, Banbridge B32 3AR, Co. Down.

wrote, in April 2015, ‘The run-up to the referendum has been about as far from a fair and open debate as it’s possible to get. One side of the debate – the side that is critical of gay marriage – is demonized daily, treated virtually as heretics, almost as criminals. It’s accused of causing psychological harm, branded as ‘hate-speakers’ and frequently forced to make apologies simply for expressing its belief that marriage should be between a man and a woman.’<sup>3</sup>

This year’s referendum on the Eighth Amendment proved little better. London-based journalist Melanie McDonagh described ‘the suffocating consensus in print and broadcast media’<sup>4</sup> in Ireland in favour of deleting the Eighth, where ‘the Yes campaign had all the heavy hitters, the Taoiseach, the minister for health, the leader of the opposition, and they were faithfully followed by television coverage.’ Highlighting that ‘about a third of the electorate voted No’, McDonagh concluded that ‘the only surprise was that it was that many, given that this not insignificant minority had nil, zero, nada representation in either politics or media.’ She proposes that the referendum exemplified ‘the problem with democracy when the political and media establishment cohere on one side.’

Given this background, it was unsurprising that the Irish media’s approach to the World Meeting of Families and papal visit, in August, descended into another exercise in ‘groupthink’. Day in, day out, report after report cast the event against the backdrop of Pope John Paul’s 1979 visit and a commentary on how Catholicism’s influence in Ireland had since declined. The fruits of this decline were invariably recited as being the widespread availability of contraceptives, access to divorce and same-sex marriage, impending provision for abortion and the decriminalization of homosexual acts - often, misleadingly, described as the decriminalization of ‘homosexuality’ itself.<sup>5</sup> None dared question the worth of these developments, nor scrutinize their impact upon Ireland to date. Their wholesomeness was supposedly self-evident. It didn’t occur to the commentariat that there could be pitfalls in a country moving, within a relatively short space of time, from being the traditional kind of society they widely lamented it as having been.

Taoiseach Leo Varadkar was frequently proclaimed the very embodiment of this transformed Ireland. At many levels, it was a good analogy. Mr Varadkar stands out among national leaders in his capacity to perform a volte-face on critical social issues without

3 Brendan O’Neill ‘From Ireland to Indiana, the spread of gay-marriage groupthink’, 8 April 2015, [www.spiked-online.com](http://www.spiked-online.com)

4 Melanie McDonagh ‘What really happened in Ireland’s abortion referendum’, 26 May 2018, [blogs.spectator.co.uk](http://blogs.spectator.co.uk)

5 e.g. An *Irish Times* editorial discussing Ireland in 1979 claimed ‘Homosexuality was illegal’, 25 August 2018, p.13.

offering a credible explanation for doing so. He had explained, for example, his opposition to same-sex marriage as recently as 2010 and had strongly opposed the adoption of children by same-sex couples in the Dail that year.<sup>6</sup> Once in government, however, he abandoned such reasoned and child-centred positions and, in subsequent debates, berated those who held to the principles he had, meantime, discarded. Varadkar would perform a similar retreat on the question of abortion explaining, early in 2018, that his views had simply ‘evolved’.<sup>7</sup>

#### DEMONIZING THE WMOF

The demonization of traditional views of marriage and family, which Brendan O’Neill evidenced during the same-sex marriage campaign, re-surfaced as the World Meeting of Families approached. Professor Siobhan Garrigan, who holds the Loyola Chair of Theology and is Head of the School of Religion at Trinity College, Dublin, was especially outspoken. She described the WMOF as ‘a jingoistic propaganda machine for some very outdated ideas, ideas that have done a lot of harm.’<sup>8</sup> Of the Pope’s visit to it, Garrigan declared ‘He’s coming to celebrate an incredibly exclusive and outdated model and retrograde notion of family life and of Catholicism’. Former president Mary McAleese used RTE radio to label the event a ‘right-wing rally’.<sup>9</sup> The network afforded her an hour’s television to explore her own perception of Irish family life, which saw McAleese visit a small number of Irish households to illustrate her awareness of the growing diversity discernible today. Her reflections, while affirming, appeared highly subjective and not the result of any serious or objective analysis. Her conclusion amounted to an aspiration that the WMOF might reflect the ‘diverse, inclusive and loving’ approach to family in Ireland she believed she had experienced in making the programme.<sup>10</sup>

6 Mr Varadkar told the Dail, during the second reading of the *Civil Partnership Bill* on 27 January 2010: ‘My view on this is simple. Two men cannot have a child. Two women cannot have a child ... every child has a mother and a father and every child has a right to a mother and a father and, as much as possible, the State should try and vindicate that right’. In an interview with *Hot Press*, published 19 May 2010, he said: ‘I have no problem with civil partnership...I do think that marriage is separate ... And I would be of the view that it doesn’t have to be the case for everyone, but the preferable construct in a society is the traditional family and the State, through its laws, should protect that and promote that.’ [www.hotpress.com](http://www.hotpress.com)

7 ‘Taoiseach indicates that his previously espoused anti-abortion attitude has ‘evolved’” *Irish Times*, 25 January 2018 [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com)

8 ‘Misogyny found in every part of Catholic life, theologian warns’ *Irish Independent*, 22 August 2018, p.9.

9 ‘It’s always been essentially a right-wing rally’ on the *Marian Finucane Show*, RTE Radio 1, 18th August 2018.

10 *Mary McAleese’s Modern Family* RTE One, 22 August 2018.

Speaking to a conference in Denmark, on ‘Private and Family Life for LGBTI People’, Minister for Children and Young People, Katherine Zappone, had issued something of a warning to the WMOF. It was ‘coming to a country where people want marriage equality, where adoption by LGBTI people is government policy and where all families are fully respected’, said Zappone, ‘Organisers should reflect on that.’<sup>11</sup> Two years ago Zappone appointed campaigner, Una Mullally, ‘Independent Chair’ of a group to oversee her ‘National LGBT Youth Strategy’. Mullally used her column in the *Irish Times*, the week of the WMOF, to portray those attending as deluded. ‘You can’t pull the scales from people’s eyes, they have to fall themselves’ proposed Mullally ‘and for those who will celebrate the leader of the Catholic Church, those scales, presumably, remain intact.’<sup>12</sup> The departmental double-standard is surely striking: The Minister, abroad, pleads tolerance and inclusion. Her appointee, back home, fuels anti-Catholic prejudice. How, moreover, might a young attendee of the WMOF be expected to fare should they encounter Mullaney, in her government role, and declare themselves one of those misguided beings she had been so ready to publicly disdain?

#### PENNSYLVANIA AND ITS AFTERMATH

Alongside the negativity generated within Ireland, the lead-up to the WMOF was significantly affected by the release in Pennsylvania, on 14th August, of a ‘Grand Jury Report’ into child abuse over a seventy-year period by Church personnel. It led, within days, to Pope Francis himself addressing a letter to the ‘People of God’ on the scandal of clerical child abuse.<sup>13</sup> Irish media outlets, understandably, covered the Pennsylvanian report extensively. One observable feature of that coverage, however, was the inclusion of reprints – the carrying by Irish newspapers of items already appearing in U.S. dailies. These would be ‘first-hand’ accounts of reactions emerging from places connected with the report.<sup>14</sup> Irish journalism could not easily capture what may have convulsed

11 ‘Church families gathering in Dublin must be inclusive - Zappone’ *Irish Times*, 2 March 2018. It has recently emerged that Katherine Zappone wrote to the Tanaiste insisting that State funding not be allowed towards the WMOF and ‘not be used to support views and events which do not represent Government policy’ *Irish Times*, 2 November 2018 [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com)

12 Una Mullally ‘Irish Catholics should question their loyalty to flawed church’ *Irish Times*, 20 August 2018, p.12.

13 ‘Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the People of God’, 20 August 2018, available at [www.vaticannews.va](http://www.vaticannews.va)

14 e.g. ‘Pennsylvania reels as beloved priest named in report’ *Irish Times*, 20 August 2018, p.9, is a reprint of a New York Times article of 18 August 2018. ‘As Catholics we have to ask if we have wasted our lives’ *Irish Independent* ‘Review’, 25 August 2018, p.6, is a reprint of a Washington Post article of 19 August 2018.

Pennsylvania and the U.S., over those days, and ‘local’ reportage would obviously have been helpful. Nonetheless, the direct republishing of American experiences and reactions helped create an impression, here in Ireland, that clerics abusing children was very much a live and unaddressed issue. To offset this, Irish coverage of the scandal could have emphasized more clearly the historic nature of the report and, also, the strong child protection regime long since operating across the U.S. Church. More pertinently, perhaps, it could have highlighted the comprehensive measures in place within the Irish Church for safeguarding the young. Just as the Pennsylvania story was raging, however, the *Irish Times* conducted an interview with Ian Elliott, former head of the Church’s National Board for Safeguarding Children and published his negative perceptions of the Irish hierarchy’s performance in this field.<sup>15</sup>

‘Looking back’, we learnt, Ian Elliott considers the Irish Church’s safeguarding efforts to have amounted to ‘a lot of lip service’. There had been ‘very limited commitment.’ According to the interview, Elliott believes he may not have had access to ‘all relevant files’ when undertaking child protection reviews of several dioceses. He did not, however, offer any evidence in support of such serious claims. The interview revolved around Elliott’s impressions and suspicions. It concluded with his perception that, on assuming office, he was treated warily around Maynooth ‘because I was a Northerner’. North of the border, he believed, his identity also impacted ‘negatively’ – because he was a Presbyterian. While his reflections could be viewed as a very personal take by Elliott on his time in office, the interview seemed an important piece of strategy by the *Irish Times*. Having Ian Elliott cast aspersions on the work done in safeguarding here was guaranteed to undermine, at a critical moment, whatever public confidence the Irish Church had garnered in this area. The ‘relevant files’ remark, meanwhile, impacted where it mattered most: Within days of the interview’s publication, the lead story of the *Irish Mail on Sunday* was reporting how ‘The Taoiseach said all relevant sex abuse files in Ireland should be handed over to the State’, when he had spoken with the newspaper the previous day.<sup>16</sup>

Commentators were correct in emphasizing how, during his visit, Pope Francis could not avoid the scandal of clerical abuse, within Ireland or abroad, and the fall-out from the US report heightened the importance of it being fully acknowledged. However, the way in which the Pennsylvania story had been profiled here and

15 ‘Bishops ‘resisted attempts to protect children’ *Irish Times*, 16 August 2018, p.4

16 ‘Taoiseach says all files should be released’ *Irish Mail on Sunday*, 19 August 2018, pp. 1&6.

## THE FURROW

the constructing, alongside it, of a potentially damaging story around safeguarding in Ireland combined with predictable effect: Before Pope Francis ever reached the country, the news agenda in Ireland had become fraught with panic around child abuse and the question of what Pope Francis was going to do about it. Thereafter, virtually every politician interviewed would respond on cue, declaring they weren't interested in 'words' alone from the Pope and wanted 'action'.<sup>17</sup> All the talk became of the need for nothing less than a range of new initiatives. A Vatican spokesman talked down the likelihood that 'in 36 hours, or 32 hours on the ground', as he put it, the Pope would be announcing any kind of far-reaching plans.<sup>18</sup> As that *Sunday Times* editorial went on to - rather honestly - concede, 'Even if he had done so, it is arguable that people would have refused to believe that he is capable of following through.' In other words, the Pope had been effectively boxed into a corner from which he could be portrayed as failing, regardless of how he performed here. The media presentation of his visit, in consequence, allowed it to unfold as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy from which the 'consensus' - that the Pope 'did not go far enough' - could be easily reached.

### AN TAOISEACH'S ADDRESS

It was the Taoiseach, rather than the Pope, who ended up the real hero of the papal visit, judging by the adulation he received throughout the Irish media for his words at Dublin Castle on Saturday 25th August. Mr Varadkar has been widely credited for a perceived fairness, on this occasion, in acknowledging both the historic and ongoing contribution of the Church to Ireland's well-being, while not shying away from more troubling aspects of its legacy. The picture he painted of the country's past and Catholicism's role within it was somewhat superficial nonetheless. A fundamental shortcoming was its failure to address the colonial framework from which 20th century Ireland had emerged. This would have helped explain the paucity of public services, to which Varadkar referred, and the over-dependence upon Church which inevitably followed.

Ireland's historic debasement, at the hand of its neighbour, was the most critical factor in Catholicism acquiring the place it occupied in the decades after independence. It also helped determine the heavily institutionalized character of that Catholicism, with its

17 e.g. In a comment piece, with reference to the Pope's letter of 20 August, Tanaiste Simon Coveney made the rather sweeping statement: 'They must be more than words and Pope Francis must do what his predecessors have failed to do and put them into action' *Irish Independent*, 21 August 2018, p.25.

18 Vatican spokesman Greg Burke, in an interview with RTE News, 24 August 2018 [www.rte.ie](http://www.rte.ie)

attendant defects. Well before independence, indeed, the Church was effectively developing a state within a state, with sorely limited resources and, in the background, haunting memories of famine. These factors were critical to what emerged. The Sunday before the Pope’s arrival, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin told a Pro-Cathedral congregation that he repeatedly asks himself ‘what it was in Irish Catholicism that led to such a level of harshness’.<sup>19</sup> It’s a complex question, but unless the lingering impact of Catholic Ireland’s own lengthy subjugation is acknowledged, answers are likely to remain incomplete.

Public figures, however, if they are to retain a favoured place in national discourse, may be reluctant to push their analysis very far. That would require an honest appraisal of our history and a defiance of the maxim that we don’t talk about the past in a way that could conceivably offend the British. It’s not the result of any great maturity in Anglo-Irish relationships, as is often pretended, but rather an indicator of how thoroughly colonized, in thought and perspective, the Irish Republic continues to be. The very occasional commentary around the papal visit drew parallels between the country’s expectations of Pope Francis and what it was willing to accept from Queen Elizabeth a few years previously. Her Majesty, visiting in 2011, was nowhere called to account for her country’s destructive record in Ireland. She was lauded, rather, for her somewhat oblique references to ‘our troubled past’ and a conclusion that, with the benefit of hindsight, ‘we can all see things which we would wish had been done differently, or not at all.’<sup>20</sup> Those who opposed the royal visit were written off as dinosaurs and those who organized protests afforded little air-time. While one wishes the monarch no ill, and improved relations between Britain and Ireland are very welcome, the comparison provides a useful insight into the dynamics of today’s Ireland and how selectively it seeks to deal with its own past.

‘AN IMPORTANT PLACE’

Looking ahead, meanwhile, Leo Varadkar had mainly words of assurance for Catholicism and its place in the future order of things. We were now a ‘different country’, according to the Taoiseach, and if religion ‘is no longer at the centre of our society’, he believed it could still have ‘an important place’ in the new dispensation.<sup>21</sup> As in

19 ‘As we await the visit of Pope Francis...’, Homily, 19 August 2018, available at [www.dublindiocese.ie](http://www.dublindiocese.ie)

20 Full text of her address available at *Daily Telegraph* [www.telegraph.co.uk](http://www.telegraph.co.uk). As the newspaper’s Chief Reporter, Gordon Rayner, noted, the Queen ‘stopped short’ of offering an apology in Ireland. *Daily Telegraph*, 18 May 2011.

21 Full text of Taoiseach’s address available at *Irish Independent*, 26 August 2018 [www.independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie)



his summary of the past, the Taoiseach words were again celebrated as indicative of the accommodating Ireland he symbolizes. When assessed against the evidence, however, Varadkar's portrayal of this new scenario also appears misleading. One need look no further than the Taoiseach's own party, during recent months, to witness a kind of anti-Church sentiment unworthy of a mature democracy and unbecoming in its office holders.

One could recall Senator Catherine Noone's much publicized annoyance at a priest's temerity in speaking about abortion during Easter Sunday Mass.<sup>22</sup> Or Minister John Halligan's attack upon his diocese, in May, after advice that being a Confirmation Sponsor conflicted with his stance as an atheist.<sup>23</sup> In July, Minister Helen McEntee was advising (in light of Minister Josepha Madigan's 'Vigil Mass' controversy) that the Church 'modernize itself' or face becoming 'less and less relevant'.<sup>24</sup> In August, there was the Health Minister's 'Please just make it stop!' remark – an attempted rebuke to a bishop for voicing opinions on contraception and family life.<sup>25</sup> The Sunday preceding the Pope's visit, we had the Agriculture Minister using his Beal na Blath oration to 'salute former President McAleese for her tackling, head on, the Vatican'.<sup>26</sup> Mr Creed explained how 'Many of us, closer to the back door than the front door in the church, are encouraged to find ourselves in such exalted company on matters of faith.' The Taoiseach appeared gracious in his words to Pope Francis. If, however, he is to convince the wider Catholic community that he genuinely appreciates either the extent of their past service, or the value of their contribution for the future, he has much work to do. He might begin by recognizing that the record of his own administration, to date, has been far from compelling.

What's more, if the Taoiseach is to assure those who see the world differently from himself that he is capable of modelling the respectful and inclusive society he so fervently speaks of, his own performance might more consistently reflect that. For many listening to him, their most recent memory of Leo Varadkar at Dublin Castle would have been his joining in a vulgar display of triumphalism last May, on realizing a majority of voters had been persuaded to endorse the killing of the unborn. Leading Unionist

22 'FG politician criticized over 'offensive' tweet on priest's pro-life homily' *Irish Catholic*, 5 April 2018 [www.irishcatholic.com](http://www.irishcatholic.com)

23 "'I'm no hypocrite' says Halligan as he accuses bishop of 'petty tactics'" *Irish Independent*, 21 May 2018 [www.independent.ie](http://www.independent.ie)

24 'It's not right that women can't give views on Church' *Irish Examiner*, 2 July 2018 [www.irishexaminer.com](http://www.irishexaminer.com)

25 'Please just make it stop!' Minister responds to bishop's comments on contraception' *Irish Times*, 5 August 2018 [www.irishtimes.com](http://www.irishtimes.com)

26 'Minister praises McAleese for standing up to Vatican', *RTE News*, 19 August 2018 [www.rte.ie](http://www.rte.ie)

figures in the North were among those who looked on aghast and, quite properly, termed it all ‘distasteful’.<sup>27</sup> It was no place for a Taoiseach, a needless affront to the sensibilities of the pro-life population and a demeaning of the office with which Mr Varadkar has been entrusted. Elsewhere in his address, the Taoiseach sought to impress upon Pope Francis the limited worth of rhetoric alone: ‘We must now ensure that from words flow actions.’ Whatever the value of such advice for Pope Francis, Leo Varadkar would do well to reflect upon it himself, if the noble vision he outlined for Irish society is to have the remotest chance of becoming a reality.

#### HEARING POPE FRANCIS?

Pope Francis, for his part, was crystal clear about the evils which, through the wrongdoing of its own personnel, had blighted the life of the Church in Ireland and elsewhere. It was central to his addresses on three key occasions during his visit, culminating in that very poignant Penitential Act at the closing Mass.<sup>28</sup> The details he included were significant in acknowledging other serious hurts inflicted in Church-related settings, often appearing eclipsed by a persistent focus on the scandal of sexual abuse of children.

The Pope also referred, at the outset, to those children in the womb who, in our ‘throwaway culture’, can find themselves ‘deprived of the very right to life’ and later identified them as among those most vulnerable, whose rights could be overlooked when they ‘seem to impinge upon our own sense of freedom’. These observations, while not strongly stated, would have been important for an Irish audience to hear and consider in light of recent developments. As it turned out, they were either downplayed or totally ignored afterwards – reinforcing the illusory nature of ‘new’ Ireland’s alleged open-mindedness.

Ignored, too, was most of what the Pope had to say, except that which pertained to past wrongs on the part of the Church. The most striking illustration of this was the media’s lack of engagement with the Pope’s homily at the closing Phoenix Park Mass. Not having explicit references to abuse scandals, it went largely unacknowledged in the moments after it was delivered and in the hours and days following. Pope Francis had spoken about the challenges of being a disciple today, the promise of the Spirit and of the Christ who beckons us, having alone ‘the words of eternal life’. None of this seemed worth pondering to either presenters or panellists. Invariably the focus returned to the aforementioned

27 ‘DUP leader Arlene Foster says celebration of abortion referendum result was ‘distasteful’ *Daily Mirror*, 3 June 2018 [www.mirror.co.uk](http://www.mirror.co.uk)

28 Papal addresses & Penitential Act & Homily of Phoenix Park Mass available at [www.worldmeeting2018.ie](http://www.worldmeeting2018.ie)

## THE FURROW

Penitential Act - frequently mistaken for the 'homily' – and the Pope's pleas for forgiveness therein.

One sensed, ultimately, that key elements within today's Ireland hadn't listened that much. They had heard, in the main, those things they wanted to hear and principally sought assurance that the Pope appreciated *their* priorities and concerns. Pope Francis had come to a country whose officialdom, at least, came across as possessed of the notion that it had much to say and very little to learn. This highlights a major challenge facing the Church in Ireland, going forward: How it can carry out its mission and mandate authentically, attentive to *genuine* concerns among its people, while stopping short of becoming another vehicle for furthering the agendas of politicians, media and pressure groups. While contesting, to some degree, the figures in attendance, media commentary on the papal visit was at pains to acknowledge that Catholicism here was far from obsolete. The realization was accompanied, nonetheless, with counsel that the Church must change to more closely reflect the values of the society around it. 'New' Ireland still appreciates Catholicism, it seems, but a Catholicism that operates strictly on its terms and readily fulfills the functions that Leo Varadkar and others would delegate to it. Underlying such presumption are attitudes which go to the heart of the growing tension between Church and State in Ireland today – a tension unlikely to lessen, for all the Taoiseach's talk of 'a new covenant'.

### MAKING THE MESSAGE 'ACCEPTABLE'

When Melanie McDonagh, Brendan O'Neill and others lament the absence of healthy or meaningful debate in Ireland today, they help highlight not only the real limitations to democracy here, but also the difficulties in developing an appropriate relationship between faith and civic culture. For where public discourse coheres around an 'approved' interpretation of almost every complex matter facing society, alternative approaches can simply cower and withdraw or, more dangerously, re-mould themselves to become more acceptable to that dominant voice.

While appreciating its unquestionably edifying aspects, many saw a desire for such acceptance discernible in the proceedings of the WMOF. At its opening ceremony, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin referred to families 'in the variety of their expression' and suggested that 'there are those who would look at the world meeting as some sort of ideological gathering to celebrate a type of family which probably does not exist'.<sup>29</sup> The acknowledgement of 'variety' was sensitive and truthful. Truth and sensitivity also

29 Homily, WMOF Opening Evening Prayer, 21 August 2018, available at [www.dublindiocese.ie](http://www.dublindiocese.ie)

require, nevertheless, an acknowledgement that there remains a vision for family at the heart of Church teaching – a vision which, however imperfectly, continues to be reflected within very many Irish homes. The growing number of ‘unorthodox’ families can be respectfully acknowledged, but the stability of society continues to depend upon the nurturing of traditional family units. Societies can accommodate alternatives to the norm, without disintegration, only to the extent that they simultaneously maintain, as their foundation, that which has been tried and tested over time. In his address to the WMOF, Archbishop Eamon Martin was clearer in articulating this.<sup>30</sup>

Although worthy matters in themselves, many topics which featured during the WMOF - such as technology in home life, the downsides of social media, renewing relationships after conflict or sustaining our environment - could be found in the ‘lifestyle’ sections of most weekend newspapers. In striking contrast, the WMOF avoided exploring the destructive and far-reaching implications for family life and children’s welfare of recent developments here in Ireland: most especially the Children and Family Relationships Act 2015 and, alongside it, provision for same-sex marriage and abortion. Such exploration would, presumably, have left the gathering at variance with Mr Varadkar’s Ireland and its cheerleaders. The ultimate consequences of such timidity, at a moment of real opportunity, will take some time to manifest themselves. As the year draws to a close, however, there is already a growing sense that WMOF 2018 may be fading from popular memory without very much trace.

#### CHALLENGING ‘NEW’ IRELAND

‘New’ Ireland, meanwhile, has still some distance to travel to become the secure environment for the young it proclaims itself to be. Underlying the Taoiseach’s words to Pope Francis was an unspoken assumption that the State had reached a definitive wisdom in these matters. The main work outstanding was to put the past on trial, according to the maxims of these ‘enlightened’ times. No need, it seemed, to pause and interrogate our newer realities or contemplate their perils. Yet Ireland’s young remain

30 ‘We believe that the Church’s proclamation of the family - founded on a circle of faithful loving between a man and a woman which is open to the gift of children who are the fruit of that love - is Good News for society and the world... We must work together with all people of goodwill to encourage the State to support the family, and especially the uniqueness of the faithful and exclusive union between a married man and a woman as a cherished space for the bearing and upbringing of children. In doing this, the State is not only caring for its citizens, but it is also strengthening and nurturing the foundations of society itself.’ Keynote address, WMOF Pastoral Congress, 22 August 2018, available at [www.catholicbishops.ie](http://www.catholicbishops.ie)

## THE FURROW

vulnerable at many levels. And, while it doesn't appear to enter the imagination of men like Leo Varadkar, the causes he and others have so thoughtlessly championed will have detrimental consequences for generations to come. 'New' Ireland may well - given time - face the wrath of adults aggrieved, having suffered childhoods confused and lives disoriented by the instability born of its latest experiments in marriage and family life. But, for the moment, it cannot countenance this. And arguably it encountered, in August past, a Church so abashed by its own failings that it was prepared to look the other way.

The concerns articulated by Sydney-based writer, Barbara Cameron-Smith, seem pertinent: 'As a society, we are quick to judge past practices, but can we second guess the policies that will become the present generation's skeletons in the cupboard? Or do we only learn by our mistakes and hence find ourselves looking back in puzzlement or anger? In other words, what are the 'sleeper' issues, which might give us grief decades from now?'<sup>31</sup>

These questions could well check Ireland's new-found confidence. But how will it begin to hear them?

31 Quoted by Alan Gill in *Orphans of the Empire: The Shocking Story of Child Migration to Australia* (Sydney: Random House Books, 1998) p.821

### **Gospel inspired nonviolence.**

In the first centuries after Jesus, the church nourished a culture of spiritually grounded nonviolence through the corporal works of mercy, the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation, resistance to the culture of violence, and preparing its members to face the consequences of their nonviolent resistance, including persecution and martyrdom. The witness of early Christian martyrs was often recorded and recited when the community celebrated Eucharist together as a way to encourage one another in their gospel nonviolence.

– MARIE DENNIS, [ed], *Choosing Peace*, Orbis Books, 2018. p.126.