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## Renewing Irish Parishes?

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‘Diocesan changes’ or clerical appointments will have been once again made, throughout summer and autumn, and those affected will be adjusting to their new realities. Arguably a feature of these appointments, nowadays, is how little significant change results from them. Fewer clergy in practice move to pastures new, as there are fewer to do so, and diocesan changes may be more given to notice of retirements. The virtual collapse in ordination numbers, over a quarter century now, has meant the gradual loss of curates from Church life. With parish priests, consequently, difficult to replace, the charge of a vacant parish will often be added to the duties of a neighbouring pastor. Meanwhile, outside a handful of larger parishes in most dioceses, the role of curate increasingly falls to the figure of the Pastor Emeritus. While parishioners may feel the loss these trends represent, there is an overwhelming air of acceptance, even resignation. Laity, like clergy, are unenvious of the task a bishop faces in keeping the wheels turning, with widespread recognition that the ‘numbers’ simply aren’t there.

## EMPTY PULPITS

Indeed, the numbers aren’t there - and they aren’t there at so many levels within the Irish Church. While this might seem obvious, it may be worth emphasising. The shortage of priests in Ireland can sometimes appear to be viewed in isolation from the wider decline of the Church, conveying an impression that it is an area of unique loss requiring, in the main, better vocations strategies. A related reaction can be the suggestion that if we could simply access more priests from abroad, we could work a way around our current shortage. That the loss of priests and candidates for priesthood is no isolated phenomenon - but symptomatic of something deeper - was perceptively conveyed by Northern journalist, Malachi O’Doherty, in entitling his 2008 book on religious decline in Ireland *Empty Pulpits*. Explaining his choice of title at that time, O’Doherty wrote ‘A community that really wants churches would not have

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empty pulpits. It would throw up enough clergy from itself to serve them. Ireland doesn't'.<sup>1</sup>

Neither is the experience of contraction here in any way short-term. We can mistakenly interpret it so, for the strength of the Catholicism we have traditionally known can make departures from it, even yet, seem like aberrations. Declining around us, for some time now, is a religious culture consolidated over a century and a half ago. Formidable and enduring it took Vatican II and other developments in its stride, constricting their capacity to threaten the established mould. No one middle-aged or older can remember otherwise - nor could anyone they would have ever known. Given its sheer longevity, this religious inheritance remains a point of reference for many Irish Catholics today, even though their own commitment to it may have waned and it be diminished in consequence. For these reasons the slow death of a certain model of Church which we are now witnessing can perhaps disguise itself, encouraging the supposition that 'things will come round again' - a reaction finding solace in the awareness that Catholicism historically overcame oppression on these islands.

#### GRADUAL DECLINE

An especially complex feature of our continued decline is its very gradual nature. Given its historic influence and appeal, the kind of Catholicism we inherited wasn't likely to surrender its hold easily or quickly. We find ourselves living, therefore, through a long period of transition which contemporary psychology might describe as '*liminal*'. Liminal spaces - or places in between - can engender experiences of freedom and creativity, as they often do in the life of the individual. They can also be breeding grounds for insecurity and crises of identity - a more likely tendency for large, unwieldy institutions. The overwhelming impression one gets is that the Catholic Church in Ireland is, for the most part, in this latter place - pervaded by uncertainty and lack of clarity of purpose. Two interconnected consequences are discernible. *Firstly*, the uncertainty prevalent gives rise to overwhelming caution. Significant innovation is eschewed, and the inclination is towards taking the accustomed and well-trodden route. *Secondly*, in the absence of clarity or conviction about newer ways forward, the weight of tradition behind the declining culture allows it, however weakened, to continue to assert itself.

While these dynamics can be seen at work in many situations, clerical appointments throughout the country, in the second half of

1 Malachi O'Doherty, *Empty Pulpits: Ireland's Retreat from Religion* (Gill & Macmillan:2008) p.243

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each year, provide an example of them in practice. The addition of a second or maybe even a third parish to a priest's area of responsibility, as a result of these 'changes', ensures primarily that a certain *status quo* is maintained. The basic configuration of the diocese remains as before, and local and parochial identities continue intact - with the priest concerned extending himself to facilitate this. The necessary work of rationalisation is thereby avoided. I say 'necessary', because the kinds of arrangements reached over recent years seem unlikely to constitute long-term solutions for Irish Catholicism.

### PRIEST AND PARISH

In the first place, it is not how the Church envisages things should be. While it makes provision for alternative scenarios, Canon Law is clear that 'A parish priest is to have the parochial care of one parish only'<sup>2</sup>. And while it acknowledges the newer kinds of arrangements increasingly observable in Irish dioceses, a recent Instruction on parish from the Congregation for the Clergy<sup>3</sup> is careful to reiterate this basic principle. 'Ordinarily', it notes, 'it is good that the Parish Priest, where possible, have the pastoral care of only one Parish'<sup>4</sup>. Secondly, the typical Irish parish was designed to operate around its own resident clergy and, moreover, for most of its history has done so. That being the case, the more dioceses find themselves unable to fulfil this convention, the less effective those parish structures inevitably become and the need for reorganisation must present itself.

In the absence of necessary streamlining, dioceses will likely continue assigning to priests the charge of *more* than one parish. While he will be glad to help as required, the carrying of parallel responsibilities for distinct entities will inevitably divide a priest's focus and, to some degree, duplicate his work. This may be manageable in the short-term, but will become impractical and unsustainable, for the most part, as clergy increase in age and further diminish in numbers. One hopes that this would register clearly in the consciousness of Irish bishops today, given - interestingly - that a growing number of them are now below the average age of the priests in their dioceses. Our seeming inability to meaningfully address a changed environment has left bishops conceiving all kinds of intricacies, on an annual basis, to continue staffing a parochial system designed for a different age. Ironically, it has left the shrinking presbyterate more consumed than ever

2 *The Code of Canon Law* (1983) Can.526

3 Congregation for the Clergy, *Instruction: The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish community in the service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church*, 20th July 2020

4 *Instruction*, 70

with the work of ‘*maintenance*’, to the detriment of ‘*mission*’ and, perhaps, other essential aspects of priestly ministry. It has resulted, too, in a continued deviation from the Church’s understanding of the proper relationship between parish and pastor.

‘A NEW EXPERIENCE OF PARISH’

When, therefore, that new *Instruction* emerged from Rome this summer, focused on the renewal of the ‘parish’, it seemed timely indeed. What’s more, the *Instruction* - in beginning - does not mince words. It tackles head-on the ‘territorial configuration’ of parishes, arguing how in a time of ‘increased mobility’ and of ‘digital culture’ this matters much less. It decries parish cultures ‘more interested in preserving a nostalgia of former times, as opposed to looking to the future with courage’. It calls for ‘a new experience of Parish’, adamant that ‘the current Parish model no longer adequately corresponds to the many expectations of the faithful’ and demands ‘the renewal of “traditional” Parish structures in terms of mission’.<sup>5</sup>

The spirited language evaporates, however, once the *Instruction* gets down to practicalities. It declares its attitude to ‘restructuring’ to be guided by the principle of ‘*gradualism*’ - an approach which may have helped considerably deaden Church life already. No urgency is envisaged and ‘one should not act “hastily”’, it warns, ‘to bring about immediate reforms by means of generic criteria’. This frowning upon the ‘generic’ is a consistent theme. ‘Every plan’, in contrast, ‘must be situated within the lived experience of a community and implanted in it without causing harm, with a necessary phase of prior consultation’.<sup>6</sup> While clear that ‘the suppression of Parishes’<sup>7</sup> has long been canonically valid and can be ‘enacted by the diocesan Bishop’, it is firm that ‘the requisite motivations must be directly and organically connected to the interested Parish community’.<sup>8</sup>

Those lamenting a bishop’s reluctance to redraw the diocesan map will gain insight here into the serious obstacles he may face.<sup>9</sup> While highlighting the measures available to him and stressing the need ‘to individuate new structures’, the *Instruction* appears, in

5 Ibid. 8, 13, 16 & 20

6 Ibid. 36

7 The *Instruction* speaks, in this regard, of ‘extinctive union’ whereby ‘one Parish merges into another, being absorbed into it and losing its individuality’ or of ‘a true and proper fusion’ which ‘gives life to a new and unique Parish, resulting in the suppression of the existing Parishes’ (48).

8 Ibid. 48

9 Bishops may be mindful, too, of controversy in dioceses such as Trier, Germany, where major restructuring has been challenged by Rome: ‘Vatican halts German diocesan plan to turn 800 parishes into 35’, *CNA*, 10th June 2020 [www.catholicnewsagency.com](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com)

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practice, to greatly *curtail* the bishop's scope. A 'single provision aimed at producing a reorganisation of a general character' is considered 'contrary to canonical norms', whether for 'the entire Diocese, a part of it, or a group of Parishes'. The Instruction is, furthermore, explicit that 'the scarcity of diocesan clergy' or 'the general financial situation of a Diocese' are 'not sufficient' reasons to merge parishes.<sup>10</sup> Many would consider these not just plausible, but wholly responsible reasons for a diocese to review and rationalise its operations. One wonders what would amount to a crisis from the perspective of the Congregation for the Clergy! One also wonders what has happened to the Church's emphasis upon 'dioceses' as 'Particular Churches'<sup>11</sup> and Vatican II's expectation that parishes would understand themselves within this context.<sup>12</sup>

### VOICE OF THE LAITY?

A perception that the *Instruction* strengthens the hand of the laity around parish mergers or church closures was an initial reaction on its publication.<sup>13</sup> In principle, of course, this is to be welcomed - but is not without its difficulties. Who, for a start, speaks for a parish community in today's Ireland? How is that voice to be articulated? How might the community be defined? What, moreover, does 'prior consultation' amount to? The question has beset the process around episcopal appointments for decades. Obliging plans, meanwhile, to win the approval of the most local unit of community may be somewhat idealistic. Communities tend to fight the closure of facilities, or pooling of resources, in favour of wider composites. School or hospital mergers are routinely opposed, yet better provision in education or healthcare often requires these. The *Instruction* appears to lack such practical awareness. It proposes, for example, that were a parish to be merged 'it is necessary to ensure that the Church of the suppressed Parish remains open to the faithful' unless serious reasons suggest otherwise. Yet again - remarkably - 'lack of clergy, demographic decline or the grave financial state of the Diocese' are *not* considered to constitute such reasons.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Instruction*, 44, 48 & 49

<sup>11</sup> *The Code of Canon Law*, Can.368

<sup>12</sup> cf. 'Let the lay faithful constantly foster a feeling for their own diocese, of which the parish is a kind of cell, and always be ready at their bishop's invitation to participate in diocesan projects' *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*, 1965, 10. 'All diocesan priests should be united among themselves and thereby develop a pressing concern for the spiritual welfare of the whole diocese.' *Decree on the Bishops' Pastoral Office in the Church*, 1965, 28.

<sup>13</sup> 'Vatican warns bishops to consult laity on reform' *The Irish Catholic*, 23rd July 2020, p.1

<sup>14</sup> *Instruction*, 50-51

On the matter of Vatican finances, former head of the Prefecture for the Economy, Cardinal Pell, recently remarked ‘They can’t keep losing money at the rate they are, forever’. He added, ‘I haven’t seen any suggestions that would really address what is a significant challenge, if not a radical one’.<sup>15</sup> In continuously contracting circumstances, the Catholic Church cannot afford the luxury of disregarding economic realities. An urgent challenge for the Church in Ireland is to face the material consequences of its reduced circumstances and the implications for a physical infrastructure now greatly in excess of its needs.

#### ‘GROUPING’ PARISHES

Given the complexities this *Instruction* attaches to mergers, it would seem to prefer the kind of ‘grouping’ where parishes ‘retain their own identity’, even if sharing clergy.<sup>16</sup> As noted already, Irish dioceses have overwhelmingly taken this option and it is the ‘modus operandi’ for a growing number of parishes. There is acknowledgement, too, of those wider groupings or diocesan sub-divisions, which the *Instruction* details as ‘Vicariates Forane’, ‘Pastoral Units’ and ‘Pastoral Regions’.<sup>17</sup> While these have long existed - under one title or another - within Irish dioceses, there have been efforts to revive and reconfigure them in recent years, often as launchpads for parish ‘clustering’ initiatives. While the cooperation and teamwork which these entities may enable is both necessary and desirable, their new prominence amounts to a tacit admission that the parish system is struggling. Care should be taken, therefore, that a renewed emphasis upon vicariates, or similar concepts, does not distract from addressing this more fundamental reality and become a thinly veiled attempt to paper over the cracks.

The *Instruction* outlines a further range of options whereby, ‘due to a shortage of priests’ a bishop ‘may entrust the pastoral care of a Parish to a deacon, to a consecrated religious or layperson, or even to a group of persons’. Those responsible under any such arrangement ‘will be directed by a priest’ who will act ‘as “Moderator of Pastoral Care” with the powers and functions of a Parish Priest’.<sup>18</sup> This arrangement is described as ‘extraordinary’ and only ever ‘temporary’. In demanding ‘strict adherence’<sup>19</sup> to

15 CNA, 17th August 2020, [www.catholicnewsagency.com](http://www.catholicnewsagency.com)

16 *Instruction*, 47. The *Instruction* explains that ‘the care of a number of neighbouring parishes can be entrusted to a single Parish Priest’ (70) or ‘a number of parishes together can be entrusted to several priests jointly’ (76)

17 *Ibid.* 52-61

18 *Ibid.* 87- 88

19 *Ibid.* 89

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such conditions and insisting on the ‘moderating’ priest in these circumstances, the *Instruction* has attracted notice for appearing to limit the potential for lay leadership.<sup>20</sup> While the distinctive contribution of the deacon, of consecrated men and women and of the lay faithful are each respectfully acknowledged, there is an unmistakable emphasis on the ultimate place of the *priest* in the care of a parish community. There is a discernible anxiety, indeed, lest this be overlooked, with phrases noting ‘the competencies of a priest alone’ and ‘the distinct sacerdotal ministry of a Parish Priest’.<sup>21</sup> How easily this emphasis might sit alongside Pope Francis’s repeated concerns about ‘clericalism’ is not immediately obvious.<sup>22</sup>

### ‘AN ACTUARIAL CLIFF’

Moreover, whatever about the impression conveyed, it is an emphasis which is utterly *impractical* - at least for the Church in Ireland. A vision for pastoral leadership revolving so resolutely around the figure of the priest is simply unrealistic for this country. In respect of priestly numbers, no less a figure than our previous Papal Nuncio was prepared to admit ‘We’re at the edge of an actuarial cliff here and we’re going to start into free fall’. Archbishop Charles Brown also expressed concern about the age profile of priests still serving. ‘Some are in their 80s’ he noted.<sup>23</sup> While affirming procedures for the resignation of a PP at 75, this *Instruction* proposes that a bishop ‘consider the possibility of leaving him in the office of Parish Priest’ beyond this age ‘if the personal condition of the priest permits and if it is pastorally feasible’. It advises, furthermore, that ‘the Bishop may entrust a smaller and less demanding parish to a pastor who has resigned’.<sup>24</sup>

Given the implicit assumption, therefore, that priests will not just serve but continue to lead as their energy levels decline, the expectations this *Instruction* places upon them seem remarkable. ‘Parish Priests’, it insists elsewhere, ‘must resolutely grasp the need for a missionary reform of pastoral action’.<sup>25</sup> Perhaps. But

20 Joshua J. McElwee, ‘Vatican reiterates: Catholic parishes should be led by priests, not laypeople’ *National Catholic Reporter*, 20th July 2020

21 *Instruction*, 80, 84-85, 89 & 95-96

22 ‘In some cases, it is because lay persons have not been given the formation needed to take on important responsibilities. In others, it is because in their particular Churches room has not been made for them to speak and act, due to an excessive clericalism which keeps them away from decision-making.’ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, 102.

23 Pasty McGarry, ‘Very serious decline in numbers becoming priests in Ireland’, *The Irish Times*, 17th March 2017

24 *Instruction*, 74

25 *Ibid.* 35



how likely is this in a culture where leadership is expected from - among others - those advanced in years? The *Instruction* decries, at the outset, 'mere repetitive action' and what it characterises as a 'sterile attempt at survival' at parish level.<sup>26</sup> While valid concerns, these would seem natural and predictable outcomes given the human realities involved and this teaching's limited vision for alternative ways.

#### EVANGELISING COMMUNITIES

At another level, however, the document's vision is far from limited. Indeed, the image of parish it offers is truly edifying. It wants parishes to be communities ever more 'conducive to an encounter with Christ'. It envisages a parish which 'encourages and trains its members to be evangelisers'. It seeks parishes 'where the faithful have a more extensive experience of the Word of God'. In short, it holds out a vision of parishes renewed, where membership 'is less a question of birthplace, much less where someone grew up' but rather 'about being part of a community by adoption'.<sup>27</sup> Communities which, in an authentically Catholic fashion, are to be found primarily 'gathered around the Table of the Word and the Eucharist'.<sup>28</sup>

This *Instruction* certainly has a vision which inspires and goals which are compelling. It is a matter of real regret, therefore, that the approach it advocates and the measures it outlines seem unlikely to further that vision, in realistic ways, for Irish Catholicism. In fact, the 'gradualism' it commends may merely allow us to further defer the rationalisation we need and hamper the possibilities of genuine renewal. *New* approaches to parish may remain unexplored, an outdated system lingers on and the remnant of Irish clergy see out their days absorbed in maintaining the Church of yesteryear.

#### 'HOLLOWED OUT FROM WITHIN'

'There is a deep fatigue within the Irish Church'<sup>29</sup> wrote commentator Breda O'Brien, in the wake of the Pope's visit two years ago. 'It may be in a worse state than it realises', she surmised. While sizeable numbers can still be seen in such customary things as 'presenting for sacraments', O'Brien suspects that 'the faith is being hollowed out from within' in a way appearances disguise. Writing around the same time, economist David McWilliams

26 Ibid. 17

27 Ibid. 3, 12 & 18

28 Ibid. 6

29 Breda O'Brien 'Young People and the Future of the Irish Church', *Studies*, vol.108, No.430 (Summer 2019), p.187

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seemed to confirm O'Brien's misgivings. Identifying a continued social role for the Church in his native Dun Laoghaire, McWilliams remarked 'Here the locals have been baptising and confirming their children for years, without believing a word of it.' They are 'still culturally Catholic', he explains, 'loving the big day out'.<sup>30</sup>

Afraid to countenance the call to 'pastoral conversion' and slow to 'read the signs of the times',<sup>31</sup> the Church in Ireland may well continue to cling to old forms. If so, parishes will increasingly run the risk of fulfilling a *social* function in the main - something which has historically been an aspect of their role in Irish life. And while providing a framework for local identity or community endeavour may be a worthy service in itself, it is less likely, in a secularised Ireland, to correspond with the essential 'mission' of the Catholic parish.<sup>32</sup> Colonised, rather, by that secular environment, parishes may well expend themselves around rituals and traditions which merely bolster a cultural Catholicism, convenient and reassuring, but ill-suited to the task of 'evangelisation'.<sup>33</sup> For the challenges of change can be daunting indeed and, maybe, it's 'better the devil you know' in lean and uncertain times.

The 'Parable of the Talents' may be apt to consider at this moment in the life of our Church.<sup>34</sup> Fearful of getting it wrong, the one who had little played safe but went on, as we know, to forfeit even that. *Caution*, literally, cost him everything. Might our caution, and our clinging, be denying Irish Catholicism the possibility of fresh life - and renewed structures - anytime soon? Perhaps the faith in Ireland is being 'hollowed out from within' at more levels than we realise.

30 David McWilliams 'We have witnessed the Dun Laoghaire-isation of Ireland', *The Irish Times*, 27th October 2018

31 *Instruction*, 1-3 & 11

32 *Ibid.* 13, 20, 41-42, 85-86 & 109-110

33 *Ibid.* 122-24

34 Matthew 25:14-30