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Albert McDonnell

How Many Dioceses do we Need?

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Church structures are at the service of pastoral care. The *raison d'être* of parishes, pastoral areas, dioceses is the promotion and living of the gospel and the celebration of the sacraments so that Christ may find a dwelling place in our hearts. These arrangements are not part of divine law. They are a strategy, a choice the Church has made as part of its mission to preach and live the Gospel.

On 16 November 2021 the bishop of Clonfert and the bishop of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora announced:

that in the near future the Holy Father Pope Francis intends to appoint a single Bishop to the Diocese of Clonfert and the Diocese of Galway, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora.

This form of union of two dioceses under one Bishop is not an amalgamation and does not suppress either of the two dioceses. Both dioceses will continue to maintain their own integrity and autonomy as is but will work closer together, where possible, through the person and ministry of a single Bishop (*in persona episcopi*).

As the Holy See continues its consultations on the matter, we will be organising meetings at various levels in each diocese to inform the People of God and talk to them about it.

We pray God's blessings on our respective dioceses at this important time and we look forward to a closer working together towards a new springtime of faith within each of our diocesan and parish communities.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE IRISH DIOCESAN STRUCTURE

The structure of the Irish Church has evolved over the centuries. Monasteries were once the focal point to be replaced by dioceses and parishes. The current boundaries of our dioceses owe much to twelfth century synods especially those held at Rathbreasail (1111 AD) and Kells (1152). These synods reflected the political realities of their world in their placing of diocesan boundaries.¹ While the

¹ Patrick Corish notes 'Inevitably, the dioceses would have to coincide with civil territorial divisions if they were to be viable units' *The Irish Catholic Experience* (Dublin, 1985) p. 32.

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civil administrative boundaries evolved over the centuries, the twelfth century diocesan borders proved resilient.² The expansion of English power led to the division of the country into counties. The thirty-two counties gradually became central to Irish people's identity and loyalty. However, they bore little relationship to the dioceses. The 2021 edition of the Irish Catholic Directory suggests that Monaghan is the only county located entirely within one diocese while the diocese concerned (Clogher) encompasses portions of four other counties.

Some change did occur as the second millennium progressed. Rathbreasail had established two metropolitan sees (the archdioceses of Cashel and Armagh). However, Cardinal Paparo, the papal legate arrived at Kells bearing four *pallia*³ and so Tuam and Dublin became archdioceses.⁴ Kells recognised thirty-eight dioceses⁵ (including metropolitans) while today we have twelve fewer. Paparo did not regard the map drawn at Kells as set in stone. He envisaged that 'when the bishop of a very small diocese died, his territory should, if possible, be incorporated into a larger neighbouring bishopric'.⁶ Post Kells many smaller dioceses were indeed amalgamated with neighbouring dioceses. Some survive today as part of the title of the enlarged diocese (Kilfenora, Kilmacduagh, Emly, Ross, Down, Leighlin, Lismore).⁷ Others morphed into the ecclesiastical curiosity of titular sees (Kells, Inis Cathaigh, Glendalough, Roscrea, Dulleek, Kells, Mayo, Clonard). Three new dioceses emerged post Kells *viz* Meath⁸ (1174) Dromore (1192) and Galway (1832). The names of some dioceses evolved over time.⁹

The reformation resulted in the historic cathedrals passing to the Church of Ireland. Nevertheless, most Catholic dioceses still retain

2 Regarding Kells, Corish writes 'the synod's greatest achievement was the establishment of a diocesan system that with minor changes has lasted to the present age' *Ibid* p. 35.

3 The distinctive vestment worn by a metropolitan archbishop.

4 Corish describes the arrival of the Cardinal Paparo bearing four *pallia* as a 'surprise'. The additional metropolitans were in recognition of the rising power of the O'Connors in the west and the absorption of Dublin into the Irish system cf. *Ibid*. p 35.

5 A list of the dioceses recognised by Kells is given in Benignus Millett, OFM 'Dioceses in Ireland up to the 15th Century' *Seanchas Ardmhacha: Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, Vol. 12 No. 1 (1986) p. 13.

6 *Ibid*. p. 15.

7 Cf *Ibid*. pp. 37-40.

8 Clonard ceased to be an episcopal see and evolved in essence into the diocese of Meath Cf *Ibid*. p. 20.

9 The diocese of Kilkenny became known as Ossory, it being the diocese for the *Ostaige*. Several dioceses changed names when the seat of the bishop moved, sometimes more than once *e.g.* the diocese of Louth became Clogher, Ráth Luráig became Derry, Dair-inis (Darnth) became Kilmore. *Ibid*. pp. 14-15.

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the name of the location of its medieval cathedral. In the longer term, despite their cultural value, the loss of the historic seat may have benefited the Catholic diocese. Many of these centres declined in population and assumed the status of a village or small town. From the early nineteenth century onwards, Catholic dioceses enjoyed new freedoms resulting from the repeal of anti-Catholic legislation. This permitted them to establish their cathedrals and centres of administration in the larger centres of population¹⁰.

DEMOGRAPHIC AND SOCIAL CHANGE

During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Ireland became increasingly urbanised, and its centre of gravity moved eastwards. In 1834 Tuam archdiocese had a catholic population of 411,467 which exceeding that of Dublin archdiocese (391,006).¹¹ Today, Tuam has shrunk to 147,001, while Dublin has grown to 1,093,095.¹² The imbalance between dioceses has resulted in several rural dioceses having a population that is only slightly greater than some urban pastoral areas.¹³ In 2019, the then archbishop of Dublin Diarmuid Martin commented ‘I could give you 10 parishes in Dublin and they’d become the second largest diocese in Ireland’.¹⁴

From the 1960’s onwards, social change proved to be even more impactful than demographics. Engagement with religion in Ireland has ebbed and flowed over the centuries. Attendance at liturgy peaked during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The gradient has proved much steeper on the descent than the ascent. Today, every tangible indicator of active involvement in church life signals decline. Priests and parishioners alike are older and fewer. The structures that once served and were sustained by communities with extremely high levels of engagement in Church life, are now struggling to survive. Bishops are unable to staff their parishes and are experimenting with the formation of pastoral areas, entrusting multiple parishes to a single priest or group of priests, inviting priests from abroad and enhanced lay ministry. Increasingly, churches attended by small congregations participate in a rota for the celebration of Sunday Mass.

10 For example, the cathedral for the Catholic diocese of Elphin is now in Sligo, Raphoe’s cathedral is in Letterkenny, Killaloe’s is in Ennis etc.

11 These figures are contained in Ignatius Murphy *The Diocese of Killaloe 1800-1850*, (Dublin, 1992) p. 247.

12 Cf. *The Irish Catholic Directory* 2021 p. 318.

13 On his appointment as bishop of Achonry, *The Irish Times* remarked that Paul Dempsey in his previous role as a priest in Kildare and Leighlin had responsibility for the pastoral care of c. 30,000 people while as bishop of Achonry he would oversee 34,826 people. Cf *The Irish Times* 27 January 2020.

14 *The Irish Times* 22 April 2019.

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Adjusting structures to reflect a changing Church is not a new challenge. Cardinal Paparo was conscious of it at Kells in 1152. The Second Vatican Council stated:

the welfare of the people of God must be served as perfectly as possible. All this demands, then, a proper determination of the boundaries of dioceses and a distribution of clergy and resources that is reasonable and in keeping with the needs of the apostolate ... Concerning diocesan boundaries, therefore, this sacred synod decrees that, to the extent required by the good of souls, a fitting revision of diocesan boundaries be undertaken prudently and as soon as possible. This can be done by dividing, dismembering or uniting them, or by changing their boundaries, or by determining a better place for the episcopal see.¹⁵

All these options have been employed by the Holy See at various times. Several large city dioceses across the world have been reduced in size through the creation of new suburban dioceses.¹⁶ New dioceses have been erected to accommodate the growth of young churches in Africa and Asia. By contrast, western Europe is experiencing a reduction in the number of dioceses as secularism advances.

There has been an extraordinary growth in the number of Catholic bishops across the world since Vatican II. This increase is principally due to the fact that bishops now retire at the age of seventy-five. Pope Francis seems convinced that some places, including parts of western Europe and north America and the Roman curia, have too many dioceses or bishops. Within the Roman curia Pope Francis has appointed lay people, religious or priests to some positions formerly held by bishops.

CONTEMPORARY IRISH DIOCESAN STRUCTURE

The average Irish diocese has a population of 176,813 or 140,162 if you exclude Dublin archdiocese.¹⁷ In Germany the equivalent figure is 926,000 and 600,000 in Spain.¹⁸ In all cases the drop in active participation in the life of the Church and in the numbers of clergy impacts further on the reality.

15 *Christus Dominus, the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 28 October 1965, #22.

16 E.g. In 1966 three new dioceses were created using territory taken from the dioceses of Paris and Versailles.

17 Cf. *Irish Catholic Directory 2021* p. 318.

18 Cf [La riduzione delle diocesi in Italia muove i primi passi \(avvenire.it\)](#) accessed on 21 November 2021.

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Some people maintain that small dioceses permit bishop, priests and people to know each other well and not be separated by layers of bureaucracy. The contrary argument holds that small dioceses struggle to comply with statutory regulation in areas such as data protection, education, safeguarding and charity law. Small dioceses also find it difficult to identify or resource people to serve in specialised ministry (e.g. ministry to the sick, young, minority languages, education, liturgy, canon law etc.). Consequently, their ability to assist their parishes in their ministry is limited. The sharp decline in ordinations to the priesthood has resulted in fewer suitable candidates being available for appointment as bishops. The advocates of the existing structure respond that ministries and resources could be shared between dioceses as already happens in areas such as marriage tribunals and school management. Whichever side of the big/small diocese debate one might come down on, it is clear that the smaller Irish dioceses are extremely small and getting smaller.¹⁹

IN PERSONA EPISCOPI

Only the Holy See can erect, suppress, or unite dioceses.²⁰ In uniting Galway and Clonfert in the person of the bishop (*in persona episcopi*), it has chosen the mildest form of association. One bishop will be given responsible for both dioceses.

In persona episcopi gives the bishop full, ordinary, episcopal responsibility for each of the two or more dioceses that are entrusted to him. He is one man doing two or more jobs, akin to a priest being responsible for the pastoral care of multiple parishes.²¹ Appointing the one man as bishop of a second or third diocese does not result in the creation of any new structure or in the abolition of any existing structure, canonical or otherwise.

The two or more dioceses entrusted to the single bishop will each continue to have their own incardinated clergy. The priests will remain priests of the dioceses they were ordained for or incardinated into. Therefore, unless by way of special arrangement, they can only be given pastoral appointments within the diocese where they are incardinated. Newly ordained deacons (be they transitional or permanent) can only be incardinated into one of the

19 Killala is likely to have no more than six priests available to minister in its 22 parishes by 2037. Cf [‘Placing Hope in Faith’ – a listening process in the Diocese of Killala | Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference](#) accessed on 20 November 2021.

20 Code of Canon Law (1983), canon 373.

21 The papal nuncio in Italy Monsignor Emil Paul Tscherrig noted that in assigning more than one diocese to a single bishop, the Holy Father is mirroring what is already happening within dioceses where priests frequently have responsibility for several parishes Cf [Cronaca dell’Arcidiocesi di Oristano 2019 - Pagina 12 \(cattoliciromani.com\)](#) assessed on 24 November 2021.

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dioceses. The pre-existing arrangements regarding the ministry of priests, including remuneration, in each diocese will continue to apply, unless they are altered in the ordinary way. Each diocese will continue to have its own cathedral and follow its own pastoral plan and policies. Each diocese will retain its own staff, diocesan pastoral council, finance council, college of consultors, council of priests, vicar general, vicars forane, etc. The diocesan consultation bodies will function as before. Each diocese will remain a separate charity and retain responsibility for its own property and finance. Should the bishop retire, resign, be translated or die, each individual diocese will elect its own diocesan administrator (unless the Holy See appoints an apostolic administrator).

What will change in Clonfert and Galway? The life of the bishop will. He will have a lot more meetings to attend, decisions to make, consultations to carry out and, especially, more people, priests and religious to pastorally care for. He will be the legal representative for both dioceses. He can only reside in one place, but his time will be divided between all the dioceses entrusted to his care. The obligation of the bishop to carry out pastoral visitation will apply to all the dioceses in his care.²²

WHERE WILL THIS PROCESS LEAD?

We don't know for sure where this process will take us. The bibliography is sparse. It will result in fewer diocesan bishops but in the same number of dioceses, at least in the short term. Without providing details, the bishops of Galway and Clonfert referred to both dioceses working more closely together through the ministry of their single bishop. One could envisage dioceses united *in persona episcopi* co-operating in the area of compliance e.g. safeguarding, education, charity act, GDPR etc. Shared pastoral programmes could also develop. A middle management serving both dioceses may emerge. Might enhanced co-operation lead to ever greater *union*?

Appointing a single man as bishop of two or more dioceses is well established in Italy and to a lesser extent in Canada and Spain. In June 2021, the bishop of Pitigliano in Tuscany was also given responsibility for Grosseto. The Grosseto diocesan website states that 'The union of the two dioceses in the person of the bishop represents the first decisive step towards the full union of the two churches into one diocesan church at a time to be decided by the Holy See'²³. The papal nuncio in Italy has described *in persona*

²² Code of Canon Law (1983), canon 396§1.

²³ Cf [Cosa significa che due Diocesi sono unite nella persona del Vescovo? | Diocesi di Grosseto](#) Accessed on 22 November 2021.

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episcopi as a step towards full unification²⁴. This progression has already occurred in some dioceses. For example, Todi and Orvieto dioceses were united in the person of the bishop in 1972 and became a single diocese in 1986.

Canonically, the movement from unity *in perona episcopi* to amalgamation is not inevitable. The Holy See could reverse the process and appoint an individual bishop to each diocese. Amalgamation requires a new decision and a new decree from the Holy See. Vatican II envisaged episcopal conferences playing an important role in the process leading to the amalgamation of dioceses²⁵. In a synodal Church, the episcopal conference would in turn consult the laity and clergy of the dioceses concerned. The bishops of Galway and Clonfert spoke of consultation and by implication listening, in their joint statement. In Canada, the full amalgamation of the archdiocese of Ottawa and the diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall was announced by the Holy See on 6 May 2020. These dioceses were united in the person of the bishop in April 2018. The unification of these dioceses followed ‘years of study, reflection and consultation’.²⁶

CONCLUSION

The union of Galway and Clonfert in the person of the bishop is likely to mark the *beginning* of a sustained period of rationalisation of Irish dioceses. This new arrangement for Galway and Clonfert is almost certainly a transition towards full union. That is the direction of travel in Italy where the process is now embedded. The duration of the transition period is hard to predict. However, it is difficult to envisage the single bishop of both Galway and Clonfert carrying a double administrative workload for very long. The gradual increase in co-operation at all levels between the dioceses will no doubt facilitate the transition to full union. Feelings of attachment to the original dioceses are likely to endure.

24 Cf. [Cronaca dell'Arcidiocesi di Oristano 2019 - Pagina 12 \(cattoliciromani.com\)](#) assessed on 24 November 2021. Monsignor Tscherrig cites evangelisation as the motivation for the reduction in the number of dioceses. He also refers to the appointment of a bishop as apostolic administrator of a neighbouring diocese as a precursor to union *in persona episcopi* leading to amalgamation. Two Irish bishops are currently apostolic administrators of neighbouring dioceses. The Archbishop of Armagh administers Dromore and the Bishop of Kildare and Leighlin is responsible for Ossory.

25 *Christus Dominus, the Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops*, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on 28 October, 1965, #24.

26 Cf. [Amalgamation of Archdiocese of Ottawa and Diocese of Alexandria-Cornwall into new Archdiocese of Ottawa-Cornwall and Announcement of Episcopal Appointments - Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops \(ccc.ca\)](#) assessed on 22 November 2021.

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Perhaps, consultation regarding our future diocesan structures will form part of the synodal pathway on which the Irish church has embarked.

Uniting our existing dioceses will leave the twelfth century boundaries largely intact. The disconnect between counties and dioceses will endure and diocesan boundaries will continue to divide towns and villages in a manner that seems arbitrary to our eyes. Perhaps, dismantling Kells and starting with a *tabula rasa* redrawing diocesan boundaries to better reflect county borders and other contemporary priorities would prove to be too great a task. Complex decisions would be required regarding the allocation of personnel, resources and liabilities. The presence of two political jurisdictions in Ireland creates its own sensitivities.

Structures, diocesan or otherwise only have value in so far as they promote the living of the Gospel. Celebrating the charisms and responding to the needs of every person matters above all else. The Pauline image of earthen vessels applies also to communities. The bishops of Galway and Clonfert look forward to a ‘new springtime of faith’ born from their communities working together. No matter how we organise ourselves as Church, only Christ can illuminate our steps. New realities call for new structures in the service of the people of God.

The importance of the Martyrs. Christian martyrs are men and women who in their lives bore witness to Christ and his Gospel to the point of dying at the hands of their adversaries. The Forty Martyrs represented a cross-section of secular and religious priests, and lay men and women, many of whom, such as Edmund Campion and Robert Southwell, were gifted scholars, poets, writers, or people of outstanding virtue and courage like Henry Morse, who in other circumstances might have graced the culture of their times.

– DUDLEY PLUNKETT, *Strangers and Nomads: Catholic Martyrs of England and Wales*, (UK: Gracewing) 2021, p.6