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everything to stay
the same, then
everything has to
change

*Pastoral and
Canonical
Reflections on
Parish
Restructuring*

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Pastoral and Canonical Reflections on Parish Restructuring

Albert McDonnell

THE LEGACY

J. Mary Rohan erected a memorial in Kildysart Church, Co Clare to her uncle Fr Michael Rohan shortly after his death in 1868. His footnote in local history is that he was the last parish priest of Kildysart and Kilfiddane parish in County Clare. Shortly after his death, Kildysart and Kilfiddane were erected as separate parishes. Several other parishes across Clare and beyond were divided in the same way during the nineteenth century as the impact of the anti-Catholic legislation faded, the numbers of churches and priests increased, and communal prayer moved from home to chapel.

In his history of the diocese of Killaloe Ignatius Murphy notes that ‘A person born in Killaloe diocese in 1890 could see little change in his parish during a lifetime lasting until the early 1960’s. The parish boundaries remained unaltered, while the number of curates in each parish was virtually the same throughout this period’.² Subsequent generations have had a different experience as the storms of social change blew the calm away.

The pre-1960’s Irish Church structure was based on the premise that Catholicism was the religion of the masses. Every corner of the country was covered by a network of dioceses, parishes, churches and priests. The religious congregations provided catholic education and healthcare in the towns. The network of pastoral and social care kept pace with the growth of urban Ireland. Shannon, one of the few new Irish towns, had four Catholic primary schools, two churches, an oratory at the airport and religious involvement

1 Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo* (1958) quoted by Pope Francis during his Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2019.

2 Ignatius Murphy, *The Diocese of Killaloe 1850-1904* (1995) p. 283.

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in its two secondary schools from soon after its foundation. Across Ireland, there were so many priests and religious available that they monopolised ministry.

‘NO NUN ON THE CORRIDOR, NO BISHOP ON THE BOARD’

Change, when it came, was dramatic. Direct involvement by religious in the delivery of education and healthcare was the first to go as vocations to the priesthood and religious life collapsed and many left ministry. A steady waning in Catholic involvement in the management of hospitals and schools followed. ‘No nun on the corridor, no bishop on the board’ was the lapidary phrase chosen by one commentator. Dioceses responded to the drop in the numbers of clergy by entrusted multiple parishes to a single parish priest. Later on, dioceses created pastoral areas to foster co-operation between the constituent parishes, not all of which had a resident priest. Some dioceses employ canon 517 to canonically underpin this association of parishes³. A small number of dioceses have entrusted the pastoral care of parishes to deacons or religious⁴ and several promote lay ministry founded on the sacrament of baptism.

The restructuring of the Irish Church to reflect the new reality of diminished participation in church life and reduced clergy numbers has, to date largely focused on the priest. The number of parishes and churches has remained substantially unaltered. The Vatican II vision of Church coupled with civil law compliance necessitate a considerable number of people playing active roles if a parish is to be viable. Fruitful liturgical celebrations require the voice of the priest to be accompanied by many other voices. People are needed to serve on pastoral and finance councils, safeguarding, liturgy, bereavement, music ministry, sacramental preparation groups, sacristy and so on. Compliance with safeguarding guidelines, the Charity Act and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) also consumes times and resources. Allowing for age, health, and other factors, the pool of available people to fulfil the various roles is often tiny. Many cultural Catholics turn to the parish at key moments in their lives but contribute little at other times. Even with enhanced collaboration between parishes the maintenance of all 1,365 Irish parishes represents an ever-increasing, administrative burden for the remaining active Catholics, be they lay or ordained.

3 Canon 517 §1 ‘When circumstances require it, the pastoral care of a parish or of different parishes together can be entrusted to several priests in solidum, with the requirement, however, that in exercising pastoral care one of them must be the moderator, namely, the one who is to direct the joint action and to answer for it to the bishop.’

4 Canon 517§2.

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Attempting to do so is likely to result in many of our parishes becoming hollow structures barely kept afloat by a small group of often elderly people. Frequently, the same individuals fulfil multiple roles endangering the maintenance of appropriate standards and risking burn-out.

AN ACCUMULATION OF UNPLANNED CHANGES

The recent report prepared by archdiocese of Dublin contains the following insight:

Our Archdiocese and each parish have choices to make: we can continue on the current path, seeking to maintain existing structures and practices, until a reducing number of priests and an accelerating burden of cost produce increasing gaps, and an accumulation of unplanned changes results in a collapse.⁵

Our current parish structure was a response to nineteenth century realities and is *not* sustainable in the twentieth-first century. There is not enough energy available to maintain so many pastoral units. Change is unstoppable, but we can influence the form that it will take. It may develop into a collapse, if unplanned. Alternatively, if structural change is born of prayer, dialogue and reflection it may contribute towards revitalising our Church. As Eamonn Conway points out ‘from the very beginning the Church had to respond to challenges to which their memories of Jesus provided no clear or ready-made answers. They believed in the presence of the Holy Spirit and discerned together how to develop and adapt as required to remain faithful to the Lord.’⁶

While, canon law impacts parish structures, the discernment of what is best for each diocese rests primarily with its people, clergy and bishop. *How* we structure our parishes is largely in our own hands. Indeed, the Holy See urges bishops to use the full flexibility provided by canon law to adapt parish structures to current day needs⁷.

TIME IS GREATER THAN SPACE

Pope Francis frequently reminds us that time is greater than space. An episcopal decree redrawing the parochial map of a diocese

5 Building-Hope-Task-Force-Report.pdf (dublindiocese.ie) accessed on 24 September 2022.

6 Eamonn Conway, ‘Dioceses as Signs and Instruments of God’s Grace’ in Eugene Duffy (Ed.) *The Restructuring of Irish Dioceses* (2022), p. 155

7 Pope John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* #27 Cf Congregation for Bishops, *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops Apostolorum successores* (2004), #210 and Congregation for Clergy, Instruction “*The pastoral conversion of the Parish community in the service of the evangelising mission of the Church*”, (20 July 2020) passim.

without appropriate preparation would likely prove ineffective and further alienate many people. Canon law insists on prior consultation⁸ and in its absence the Holy See can reverse parochial amalgamations. Genuine pastoral conversations are essential if the re-structuring of our parishes is to result in a refreshed diocese. The cursory application of pre-cooked solutions is a betrayal of the true nature of our Church as people of God. Nevertheless, if discernment is to be fruitful it must lead to the identification of priorities and actions. Perhaps reflecting a cultural peculiarity, many Irish Catholics quickly grow tired of what they perceive as excessive consultation and debate and long for concrete decisions and plans. A delicate balance between process, discernment, decision and action is needed⁹.

The bishop is obliged to inform himself before making a final decision regarding the amalgamation of parishes. While the bishop himself decides what level of consultation is appropriate, there are guidelines. Parish priests will be impacted by the suppression of the parishes for which they are responsible and therefore must be consulted. The legitimate interest of parishioners is also recognised and protected by the Holy See. In some cases, there may be a religious congregation or perhaps a particular linguistic, ethnic or ritual group or apostolate which would be impacted by an alteration to parish boundaries and should be heard¹⁰. The relevant canon (canon 50) uses the phrase ‘insofar as possible’ to qualify the level of consultation which is regarded as reasonable. It not feasible to contact every member of a parish personally. Pastoral councils and people active in the life of the parish are obvious groups to consult. A well-publicised invitation from the bishop to the people to express their views on the proposed change is regarded as adequate. The bishop is required to consult the council of priests before he can alter parish structures¹¹.

Consultation can never be mere *pro forma*. The bishop is required to provide relevant information to those whom he consults and to invite them to freely express their views. In the event of an appeal to the Holy See, the Dicastery for Clergy will verify if the information gathered by the bishop and the consultation conducted

8 Canon 50 applies to the amalgamation of parishes. It states ‘Before issuing a singular decree, an authority is to seek out the necessary information and proofs and, insofar as possible, to hear those whose rights can be injured’.

9 For a discussion of this point cf Noël Treanor, Alan McGuckian, Paola McKeown and Jim Deeds, ‘Creating Pastoral Communities: The Work of a Living Church’ in Eugene Duffy (Ed.) *The Restructuring of Irish Dioceses* (2022), pp. 209-211.

10 Eg Irish speaking communities.

11 Canon 515§2 ‘It is only for the diocesan bishop to erect, suppress, or alter parishes. He is neither to erect, suppress, nor alter notably parishes, unless he has heard the presbyteral council.’

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were adequate. While the pertinent canons speak of consultation rather than permission, in a synodal Church the bishop will seek to bring to light the insights contained in the information and views that he receives.

The emphasis on consultation contained in the provision of the 1983 Code of Canon Law regarding the alteration of parish boundaries in many ways anticipated Pope Francis' vision of a synodal church.

REASONS FOR AMALGAMATION

Parishes are presumed to be permanent structures and therefore a justification is required for their suppression¹². Church law and jurisprudence gives the clear impression that the reduction in the number of parishes should be the strategy of last resort when responding to problems such as a decline in the numbers of clergy and active parishioners, and financial challenges. Less extreme responses include entrusting the pastoral care of multiple parishes to a single or a group of priests, creating pastoral areas, promoting lay ministry, establishing the permanent diaconate and welcoming priests from abroad. However, in the Irish context it is becoming increasingly evident that while these initiatives are helpful, given the gravity of the situation, they are no longer adequate. In common with many dioceses in Western Europe and North America we have reached the point where a *reduction* in the number of parishes is inevitable.

Restructuring is complex. Fidelity to the mission given by Christ to his Church and the good of the people are the most important considerations¹³. The reasons for the alteration of the boundaries of a particular parish must be specific to that parish. While a bishop is always conscious of the situation pertaining to the whole diocese, he cannot choose parishes at random and decide to amalgamate them. There must be specific factors which suggest that the good of the people of the relevant parishes is best served by the change envisaged. The decree giving effect to the changes will contain a summary of these considerations¹⁴. While increased efficiency or the implementation of a pastoral plan are positives, they are not regarded by Rome as sufficient justification for the amalgamation of parishes in the absence of factors internal to the parishes themselves. Parishes with low levels of active participation and which are on the cusp of being unable to maintain normal parish

12 Canon 120§1.

13 Cf Congregation for Bishops, *Director for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops, Apostolorum Successores*, (9 March 2004) p. 214.

14 Canon 51 'A decree is to be issued in writing, with the reasons at least summarily expressed if it is a decision.'

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structures and comply with civil and canonical requirements are likely to meet the requirements for amalgamation envisaged by Rome.

STEPPING STONES

Pastoral areas may serve as stepping stones towards the necessary reduction in the number of parishes. The experience of working together as part of a pastoral area can ease the transition towards amalgamation as people build bonds and friendships. Nevertheless, the transition from pastoral area to unified parish is no small thing. While the code presents other options¹⁵, the most common solution chosen is the suppression of previous parishes and the creation of a *new* parish. The new parish requires a new name so as to avoid the impression that the largest parish is taking over the smaller ones. Money and property follow the people, so the new parish becomes the beneficial owner of the temporal goods held by the previous individual parishes and assumes responsibility for their debts¹⁶. A large parish could afford a central pastoral office to respond to requests from the people and assume responsibility for the keeping of records, financial administration, compliance and secretarial support for priests, other ministers and volunteers.

The creation of new parishes is an opportunity to implement Pope Francis' synodal vision. Pastoral and finance councils are central to parish life and need to be representative of each community that was formerly an individual parish. The pooling of resources facilitates enhanced standards in the delivery of pastoral care, liturgy, sacramental preparation, governance and compliance. People with a flair for liturgy or sacred music from all the constituent communities could form a central group that would support the celebration of the liturgy in each church. The same could be done for safeguarding and other matters of common interest. Sacramental preparation, particularly for the sacraments of initiation, is usually best provided for in a central location. This will become ever more important as sacramental preparation moves from school to parish.

A COMMUNITY OF COMMUNITIES

Some people fear that the reduction in the number of parishes will mark the death knell of small communities where the church may be the only remaining focal point. Heretofore, particularly in rural Ireland, many parishes consisted of two or three communities

¹⁵ Cf Canon 121, 122, 123.

¹⁶ Canon 121.

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each centred on their own church within the parish. Often each community had its own school, community centre and sometimes GAA club. The centralised parish administration did not undermine the separate identity of each constituent community or ‘half-parish’. In a similar manner, parishes based on the previous pastoral areas could function as a community of communities. An informal local group could care for each individual faith community and building. The support of a central pastoral office and parish councils would considerably reduce the burden of administration on each church group.

SUNDAY EUCHARIST

The weekly celebration of Sunday Eucharist in every church is becoming increasingly difficult as the number of clergy declines. Canon law restricts each priest to the celebration of three Sunday Masses.¹⁷ This limitation seeks to safeguard the wellbeing of the priest and promote prayerful liturgy. The episcopal decree establishing the new parish would designate a parish church where Sunday Eucharist would be celebrated at a fixed time every week. This would provide people with certainty regarding participation in Sunday Mass. The rota for the celebration of Sunday Eucharist in churches apart from the parish church would be developed by the priests, pastoral council, local church groups and people working together in a synodal manner. In consultation with the bishop, it may be appropriate to celebrate a ‘Sunday Mass’ in some churches on a weekday as already happens on some of our offshore islands. On those Sundays when it is not possible to have Mass in a given church, the local church group may be able to provide a lay-led liturgy in that church for those people unable to travel to a church where Mass is celebrated.

OUR CHURCHES

The issues of the number of parishes and churches are separate though related. It is very *unlikely* that all our churches will continue in use. Indeed, a small number did not re-open after the COVID-19 pandemic. The ultimate decision to close a church and to allow it to be used for an appropriate secular purpose belongs to the diocesan bishop. Prior to taking this decision the bishop must consult the council of priests and ensure that the good of the faithful is not harmed by the closure¹⁸. The process resembles that required for the amalgamation of parishes. A failure to adequately

¹⁷ Canon 905§2.

¹⁸ Canon 1222§2.

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consult can result in successful recourse to the Holy See. The civil law regarding historic structures may also be relevant. The factors which prompt the amalgamation of parishes may *also* suggest the closure of some churches. However, people's bonds with their churches, especially older buildings which are the store houses of so many memories, tend to be even stronger than their affection for parishes.

Church law permits the closure of churches as places of worship in particular circumstances. This includes situations where the building has sustained severe physical damage and there is no possibility of it being restored¹⁹. The parish may not be able to afford the restoration work needed. Equally, the parish community may not be able to pay for the heating, insurance etc of all its churches even though they are in reasonable repair. The future use of closed churches is limited to 'secular but not unbecoming use'²⁰. The synodal process promoted by Pope Francis provides the best way forward as parish communities including its pastors discern together with their bishop how many and which churches should be retained.

CONCLUSION

The restructuring of our dioceses and parishes would represent a powerful statement of the Irish Church's commitment to keeping the memory of Christ alive in our land. In this change of epoch²¹, structural reform is needed so that energy may be released for the building of a missionary, synodal Church.

19 Canon 1222§1.

20 Canon 1222§1 and

21 'what we are experiencing is not simply an epoch of changes, but an epochal change'
Pope Francis, Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia, 21 December 2019.