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## Reflections in a Distant Mirror: Observations on the Recent Merging of Irish Dioceses

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On April 10th of this year, the Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland, Archbishop Luis Montemayor, together with the five bishops of the Western province, announced to a group of people assembled for their regular weekday Mass in Tuam Cathedral that, after 900 years, two dioceses, Achonry and Killala, would be merged with neighbouring dioceses. Obviously, this came as a shock to those present in the congregation, but as a greater shock to the people and priests of the dioceses concerned, none of whom had been invited to attend. As an exercise in ecclesial administration and public relations it has raised many questions about how and by whom decisions are made in the Church; about how seriously the ecclesiological vision of Vatican II and its reiteration by Pope Francis is being taken; about how bishops relate and communicate with their presbyteriums and the faithful of their dioceses. In this short essay, a brief attempt will be made to glean some lessons from history, reflecting on the establishment of the dioceses in the 12th century. Then it will attempt to assess how the process of consultation and communication about the merging of Irish dioceses has been conducted so far, in the light of the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and the current reiteration of conciliar teaching proposed by Pope Francis. It is hoped that these reflections may help to facilitate an approach to restructuring diocesan boundaries that is more consonant with current ecclesiological thinking as it has emerged since Vatican II.

## LESSONS FROM A TWELFTH CENTURY REFORM

The twelfth century was one of great reforming activity, the culmination of the so called “Gregorian Reform”, begun in the mid-eleventh century when, through a process of papal reforms

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and widespread synodal activity, the Church wrested control from kings and princes across Europe and reclaimed the freedom to determine its own agenda. Reforming events in twelfth century Ireland were part of this wider European movement. During the twelfth century at least twelve national synods were held in Ireland. Three of them are of particular significance. The first, the Synod of Cashel in 1101, dealt with issues that were problematic elsewhere in Europe, including simony and lay control of Church governance and properties, as well as irregular Irish marriage customs.

Two other synods of this period are probably better known and are of particular interest here because they were concerned with the formation of Irish dioceses, the boundaries of which have changed very little in the meantime. The first of these was the Synod of Rathbreasail, convened in 1111. According to the *Annals of Ulster*, 'A Synod was assembled at Fiad-mic-Oengusa (Rathbreasail in the great central plain of Tipperary) by the nobles of Ireland around Cellach, coarb of Patrick and Mael Muire Ua Dúnáin, noble senior bishop of Ireland, with fifty bishops or a little more, together with 300 priests, 3,000 ecclesiastics around Muirchertach Ua Brian together with the nobles of half of Moga, to enjoin good rule and good conduct upon everyone, both layman and clerk.'<sup>1</sup> The Synod was presided over by a papal legate, the recently appointed Gilbert, Bishop of Limerick, which probably lent papal approval, as well as authority and prestige, to the arrangements being reached.

The Synod created two metropolitan sees, Armagh and Cashel. Armagh was assigned 12 suffragan sees and Cashel assigned 11. Although Gilbert's presence implied papal approval, yet it seems that it took until 1140 for the decrees of the Synod to be finally confirmed by the Pope, when they were presented to him by St Malachy. While Malachy requested the pallia for the two archbishops, the Pope refused to grant them until requested to do so by an Irish synod, indicating how seriously the Pope weighted synodal activity in the Church, notwithstanding other political considerations that might have been in play in Ireland at the time.<sup>2</sup>

Another important synod was convened at Kells in 1152. There had been significant political developments in Ireland since 1111. The O'Connors of Connacht had risen to the high kingship, which resulted in the Western part of the country becoming a metropolitan area, headquartered in Tuam and on the Eastern side, Dublin had distanced itself from Canterbury and was absorbed into the Irish system. Now four metropolitan sees were established. Armagh

1 Quoted in Liam Swords, *A People's Church - The Diocese of Achonry: From the Sixth to the Seventeenth Century* (Dublin: Columba Press, 2013), 21.

2 Patrick Corish, *The Irish Catholic Experience: A historical survey* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1985), 34.

was assigned 9 suffragan sees; Cashel now was given 12; the new metropolitan of Dublin was given 5; and Tuam was given 6. The arrangements arrived at during the Synod have remained substantially unchanged ever since, with a few mergers over the centuries.

The rearrangement of ecclesial territories and jurisdiction was a significant development in a Church that had previously been heavily reliant on monastic provision for pastoral services and where dynastic families exercised considerable power over ecclesiastical appointments and offices. Moreover, the monastic communities themselves had to yield considerable power and material resources for the new dispensations to take effect. One might say, the creation of the diocesan structures was far from being ‘cost neutral’ at the time, demonstrating a certain magnanimity on the part of those involved.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that what was happening in Ireland was very much part of a wider European reform movement. The background influence of Lanfranc and Anselm was important in the Irish reform movement. Both men were Italians by birth and monks of Bec in Normandy, and who as archbishops of Canterbury were involved in the ordination of bishops of Dublin in the late eleventh century, just as the Gregorian reform was sweeping across the continent. They wielded great influence on the Irish situation. Each of them had urged Irish kings to effect reform of the Church in their kingdoms. Gilbert of Limerick, who was papal legate at Rathbreasail, had met Anselm in Rouen and had maintained correspondence with him. The influence of Malachy of Armagh (1129-36) the friend of St Bernard, who was familiar with the continental reforms of the period cannot be underestimated. His introduction of the Cistercians and especially his promotion of the Canons Regular of St Augustine created the conditions for the reception and implementation of the Gregorian Reforms and the consolidation of a proper episcopally governed diocesan Church.

In summary then, one can see that synodality was a reality that was taken seriously by both the reforming popes of the 12th century and by the local Churches in Ireland. Secondly, the decisions reached were taken by bishops, priests, religious and laity in synodal processes, wherein all participated. Thirdly, the decisions taken locally were consistent with a wider Church agenda of reform and were presented to the Pope for approval, which was given on the basis of the legitimacy of the synodal processes undertaken. Fourthly, it was a costly process and demanded the yielding of

3 See Adrian Empey, “Diocesan Creation and Reform in Ireland in the Long Twelfth Century” in Eugene Duffy, ed., *The Restructuring of Irish Dioceses*, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2022), 32-33.

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power and material resources on the part of long-established vested interests.

### APPLYING THE REFORMS OF VATICAN II

One could say that the 12th century reforms provide ‘a distant mirror’ for the Church in our own time. Just as the 12th century was a time of enormous change in the Church, the same may be said of the past sixty years or so. Vatican II inaugurated a radical reform of the Church’s self-understanding, with which it is still coming to terms. The pontificate of Pope Francis can be seen as the latest moment in that radical reform of the Church, implementing the vision the Council. The Council spoke of the Church as the People of God, and significantly in its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, it spoke of the whole People of God before it spoke of the hierarchy or any differentiations in ministries or governance. It was anxious to demonstrate the responsibility of all the members of the Church for its life and mission. Differentiations and ministries arise only in the service of its evangelising mission. When Pope Francis speaks of ‘decentralisation’ and ‘a synodal Church’, he is underscoring this point. The Church is only slowly and painfully coming to terms with this vision. As the Pope has said in his magna carta, *Evangelii Gaudium*, this demands a conversion of mindsets by all in the Church. In calling for this conversion, the Pope referenced the conciliar Decree on Ecumenism. He said:

The Second Vatican Council presented ecclesial conversion as openness to a constant self-renewal born of fidelity to Jesus Christ: “Every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity to her own calling ... Christ summons the Church as she goes her pilgrim way... to that continual reformation of which she always has need, in so far as she is a human institution here on earth”.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of the present discussion, two aspects of Pope Francis’s reform agenda are particularly significant, namely, decentralisation and synodality. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he said, ‘Nor do I believe that the papal magisterium should be expected to offer a definitive or complete word on every question which affects the Church and the world. It is not advisable for the Pope to take the place of local Bishops in the discernment of every issue which arises in their territory. In this sense, I am conscious of the need to promote a sound “decentralization”’.<sup>5</sup> Later in the same document he says, ‘The Second Vatican Council stated that, like the ancient

<sup>4</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, no 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, no 16.

patriarchal Churches, episcopal conferences are in a position “to contribute in many and fruitful ways to the concrete realization of the collegial spirit.”<sup>6</sup>

#### DECENTRALISATION

When the Apostolic Nuncio, Archbishop Montemayor, announced the merger of dioceses in the West of Ireland, it was quite clearly stated that the Pope was making episcopal changes that would have implications for the dioceses concerned. The Bishop of Killala, John Fleming, had reached retirement age and so the diocese of Killala was being placed under the apostolic administration of the Archbishop of Tuam, Francis Duffy. The bishop of Achonry, Paul Dempsey, was being transferred as an auxiliary bishop to Dublin, and Achonry was being placed under the apostolic administration of Bishop Kevin Doran of Elphin. He went on to note that eventually, following “assessment and consultation”, “the associated Dioceses may then merge fully under their Bishop”. It was quite obvious that these were decisions reached in Rome that were now being communicated to the various local Churches. It was a decision made at the centre and not at the peripheries and there was no indication in the statement that the episcopal conference or the bishops of the metropolitan area had petitioned for this arrangement. This can only be seen as anomalous given the emphasis that the current papacy attaches to bishops and episcopal conferences taking decisions that affect them directly and which in no way impinge upon matters of doctrine or morals. Indeed, it is in sharp contrast to how the creation of dioceses was managed in the 12th century.

It is widely known that following the Apostolic Visitation that took place in Ireland in 2012, the Visitators recommended a significant reduction in the number of Irish dioceses. The Irish bishops were twice asked to address the task themselves but have failed to do so. The current Apostolic Nuncio has reported that Pope Francis specifically asked him to address this issue as a matter of importance when he took up duty in Dublin. Now, on an ad hoc basis, it would seem, that as dioceses become vacant, or have their bishops translated elsewhere, the Dicastery for Bishops is taking the initiative and moving ahead on merging neighbouring dioceses. One might muse at how familiar personnel in a Roman curial office might be with the history, traditions and sensitivities of people on this island, with its long history and complex identities, and indeed one cannot reasonably expect a nuncio to master these matters in a matter of months.

6 Ibid., no 32

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Furthermore, one might expect local bishops to be sufficiently interested to ensure that such issues would be thoroughly researched and discussed in their dioceses before such historic changes are agreed. Once again, one may see some mitigating factors in their not doing so. In recent years there has been a Roman policy of appointing bishops from outside the vacant dioceses. Currently, only one Irish diocese has one of its own priests as its bishop. The policy of imposing bishops from outside has serious drawbacks, not just for the men appointed but for the dioceses as well. Despite Ireland being a small country, there are considerable regional variations in culture and traditions, even among dioceses. It takes quite a while for an incoming bishop to become familiar with the personnel and culture of a new diocese. Many of them find the transition personally disorientating and challenging. The result is that at best they become reasonable administrators without being able to give that deeper affection and loyalty that the office demands. Although loyalty is not without its shortcomings and can lead to coverups, it is a quality that deepens the attachment of a bishop to his priests and people of his diocese. The current policy has in many cases also diminished the loyalty of the presbyteriums to their bishops and indeed their commitment to diocesan policies. Although sometimes the case is made that by appointing a priest from outside his own diocese as a bishop, he would be more free to deal with issues of abuse and other irregularities, a quick review of how cases were handled in the past will not demonstrate that ‘outsiders’ handled issues any better than those who were appointed from within a diocese. The policy of appointing ‘outsiders’ to dioceses also indicates another aspect of a centralising tendency in Church governance. Until very recently, for the most part, the candidate for the episcopacy was the choice of the vacant see, not one determined solely by the Dicastery for Bishops.

When making his announcement in Tuam Cathedral, the Apostolic Nuncio stated that the new arrangements would “give added impetus and vitality to the communities concerned”. It is not entirely clear how this might be the case, apart from the fact that it lessens the burden on Nuncios in finding suitable candidates for the episcopacy. This has become a concern for Rome in recent years, compounded by the fact that there are significant numbers of candidates who refuse to accept an episcopal appointment.

## SYNODALITY

Apart from *Evangelii gaudium*, probably the next most important statement by Pope Francis about the nature of the Church was in the address he made to the Synod of Bishops in 2015, on the fiftieth

anniversary of the institution of the Synod of Bishops. There he outlined in clear terms what he understood a synodal Church to be.

A synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening “is more than simply hearing”. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the “Spirit of truth” (*Jn* 14:17), in order to know what he “says to the Churches” (*Rev* 2:7).<sup>7</sup>

Later in his address, he goes on to say that synodality is of the very nature of the Church:

*Synodality*, as a constitutive element of the Church, offers us the most appropriate interpretive framework for understanding the hierarchical ministry itself. If we understand, as Saint John Chrysostom says, that “Church and Synod are synonymous”, inasmuch as the Church is nothing other than the “journeying together” of God’s flock along the paths of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord, then we understand too that, within the Church, no one can be “raised up” higher than others. On the contrary, in the Church, it is necessary that each person “lower” himself or herself, so as to serve our brothers and sisters along the way.

The merging of dioceses is a major issue in the life of a local Church. It impacts on all the people of the dioceses concerned because ultimately the nature of pastoral provision will be affected by whatever new arrangements are put in place. Furthermore, it is the people at large who provide the financial and other resources to ensure that the necessary services are available in a diocese. Mergers affect the priests in a unique way because, as Vatican II stated: “In the care of souls, however, the first place is held by diocesan priests who are incardinated or attached to a particular church, for they have fully dedicated themselves in the service of caring for a single portion of the Lord’s flock. In consequence, they form one presbytery and one family whose father is the bishop.”<sup>8</sup>

If synodality is now to be understood as constitutive of the Church, surely one might reasonably expect that such a radical change in the status of dioceses would be the subject of a

7 Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, Address of Pope Francis, 17 October, 2015 ([https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco\\_20151017\\_50-anniversario-sinodo.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html))

8 *Christus Dominus*, no 28.



synodal process, involving both priests and parishioners across the dioceses concerned. One could also reasonably expect that a bishop concerned would seriously discuss such a prospect with his presbyterium, diocesan pastoral council and the people of the diocese over a period of time. Even more, when such an event actually happened, one might expect that the bishop or bishops involved would immediately communicate with their presbyters about matters that concern them so intimately. Vatican II says of the relationship between bishops and their clergy, “bishops should regard priests as their brothers and friends” and “They should gladly listen to their priests, indeed consult them and engage in dialogue with them in those matters which concern the necessities of pastoral work and welfare of the diocese.”<sup>9</sup> This does not seem to be the way of proceeding on this agenda.

The current efforts at merging Irish dioceses show no signs of a genuinely synodal process. The Archbishop of Tuam noted at the press conference announcing the mergers of dioceses in the West that there were ‘consultations’. The Nuncio visited each diocese very briefly on one occasion to meet with a small, pre-selected group of people, priests and people. There was an invitation to priests to make written submissions, if they wished. This could not in any reasonable sense be described as a synodal process; it bore no resemblance to the synodal processes that had been put in place in preparation for the Synod on Synodality (2021-2024). One might remember, again, in that address to the Synod of 2015, Pope Francis quoted the ancient Church maxim, so conveniently forgotten for the most part, ‘according to a principle dear to the Church of the first millennium: “*Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus tractari debet*”’ (‘that which affects all must be managed by all’). When one reads these magisterial statements and then compares them to the actual practice, one sees a significant discrepancy between the rhetoric and the reality. This in turn leads to a diminishment in the Church’s credibility and particularly in the office of the bishop. In the current climate, it also seriously compromises the efforts of those who are working hard to promote a synodal Church at both parish and diocesan levels.

If the process of rationalising Irish dioceses is to continue, then there is need for a much more synodal approach to be taken. It is significant that although it was known by the bishops to be an issue it did not appear in the National Synthesis as an item that might have been added by them before its submission to Rome last year. Perhaps, at this stage the brakes might be put on the process until such time as it can be discussed in the context of whatever national synodal processes are planned. In a recent publication

<sup>9</sup> *Presbyterorum ordinis*, no 7.

on the restructuring of dioceses, significant lessons were offered about mergers of ecclesial entities. One was an account of how the Church of Ireland managed a major process of rationalisation, which involved slow, patient and respectful conversation over a period of time, leading to a very radical change but which was warmly accepted by most people concerned.<sup>10</sup> The second showed how, in the context of a religious Order, when decisions were made by central authorities, rather than locally, the outcome generally led to long term problems and resentments.<sup>11</sup>

#### HIERARCHICALISM

Clericalism is now a very familiar theme of Pope Francis and features regularly in his addresses. During an intervention at the Synod in Rome, last October, he made an intervention one day in which he specifically and graphically denounced clericalism. It is worth quoting at length:

And when pastoral ministers take this second path, the Church becomes a supermarket of salvation, and priests, mere employees of a multinational company. This is the great defeat to which clericalism leads us – with great sorrow and scandal (it is enough to go into the ecclesiastical tailor shops in Rome to see the scandal of young priests trying on cassocks and hats, or albs and lace robes).

Clericalism is a scourge, it is a blow. It is a form of worldliness that defiles and damages the face of the Lord's bride; it enslaves the holy, faithful people of God.

And the people of God, the holy, faithful people of God, go forward patiently and humbly, enduring the scorn, mistreatment and marginalization of institutionalized clericalism. How naturally we speak of the princes of the Church, or of episcopal promotions as getting ahead career-wise! The horrors of the world, the worldliness that mistreats God's holy and faithful people.<sup>12</sup>

While clericalism is a scourge, it is but one aspect of an even greater problem in the Church, namely, hierarchicalism. James Keenan, has written about this in the context of the handling of the abuse crisis. He notes that the culture of the hierarchy is even more problematic

10 Kenneth Kearon, 'Uniting Dioceses: A Church of Ireland Story from the West and South West', in Eugene Duffy, ed, *The Restructuring of Irish Dioceses*, 82-93

11 Aidan McGrath, 'The Franciscan Experience of Merging Provinces', in *Ibid.*, 132-146.

12 <https://www.osservatoreromano.va/en/news/2023-10/ing-043/clericalism-defiles-the-face-of-the-church.html>

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and unknown than clerical culture. He says, “Just as clericalism is different from a culture that promotes servant priests, similarly hierarchicalism is different from the culture that promotes servant bishops.” He goes on to say that, “What we are only beginning to see is that hierarchalism and its lack of accountability and ability to act with impunity will be harder to dismantle than clericalism and in fact will guarantee the survival of clericalism, for the former is the father and promoter of the second”.<sup>13</sup>

In the context of the announcement of the merger of the dioceses in the West, the bishops of the province assembled with the Nuncio in Tuam Cathedral. They addressed the historic announcement to a regular weekday Mass congregation, who were probably bemused by their appearance. None of the people or priests from the dioceses about to be merged were invited to the event nor were any representatives from the Diocesan Pastoral Councils. It was an entirely hierarchical event. Ideally, the announcements could have been made in the cathedrals of the two dioceses most affected by the mergers in the presence of the presbyterates and lay representatives from around the diocese, as happens when a new bishop is being appointed – even before he takes possession of the see. The imagery projected on the day was one of unselfconscious hierarchalism. Even the image of three bishops during a press conference with pectoral crosses blindingly reflecting the camera lights added to the impression of rank and superiority.

## CONCLUSION

The manner in which the process of merging the dioceses in the West of Ireland has occurred once again exposed the sharp disconnect between the rhetoric of magisterial teaching and the reality of ecclesial life in practice. Just as people and their priests were beginning to raise their expectations about the emergence of a more synodal style of church, their hopes have been undermined. Instead of a model of deep conversations in the Spirit, involving all concerned in shaping the direction of pastoral provision, a centralised, hierarchical institution comes to the fore, as if nothing had changed. Perhaps, one might have to accept the reality that, in fact, nothing has changed. The change, however, is ahead, but it is one in which the currency of episcopal ministry may have less cache than it has even now.

One can only imagine if a more transparent and accountable way of proceeding, consistent with the synodal consultative processes

<sup>13</sup> “Vulnerability and Hierarchicalism”, *Melita Theologica*, 68/2 (2018), 135. See also his article, ‘Hierarchicalism’ in *Theological Studies*, 83.1 (2022) 84-108. This issue is also highlighted in Pat Jones, Marcus Pound, Catherine Sexton, *The Cross of the Moment*, (Durham University: Centre for Catholic Studies, 2024), 149-156.

being undertaken in preparation for the Synod on Synodality (2021-2024), had been used to explore how best to reconfigure the diocesan boundaries then a richer experience of Church would have been modelled for all. Each diocesan pastoral council in all of the dioceses concerned might have been invited to look at the issue. These in turn could have invited parish pastoral councils to give their opinions. Similarly, the presbyteral councils in each of the diocese could have been asked to discuss the possibilities for reordering the dioceses. This was and remains a real question for a synodal process, given that it touches everybody in each diocese to some extent. What concerns all should be managed by all.

If such a systematic and genuinely synodal approach to the reorganisation of the Irish diocesan boundaries were undertaken, then a much more imaginative and more meaningful reorganisation might emerge. The merging of current dioceses makes no sense to those living within their boundaries because they are based on medieval political and territorial alliances. Most people today identify with their counties as the next most significant boundary beyond the parish level.<sup>14</sup> The creation of dioceses that aligned with the county boundaries would make far more sense from a social perspective than merging dioceses, some of which now extend over five counties. As a case in point, if the Western ecclesiastical province were to be reordered following county boundaries, with Mayo and Galway each being a diocese, and Roscommon and Sligo combined forming a third diocese, these would have a much stronger sense of identity and belonging for those within them. Furthermore, each would have a very similar population of approximately 144,000 people. The current merger of Achonry and Elphin will encompass five counties! Vatican II recommended that in the revision of diocesan boundaries “the limits of civil boundaries should also be taken into account where they occur, as well as the special characteristics – psychological, economic, geographical or historical – people and regions”.<sup>15</sup> The most recent process of merging dioceses, then, does not indicate that these criteria were seriously considered, if at all. One might hope that they would be considered when further reorganisation of boundaries is being undertaken.

14 Finola Kennedy, *Local Matters: Parish, Local Government and Community in Ireland*, (Dublin: Institute of Public Administration, 2022), 8.

15 Decree on the Pastoral Office on Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, no 23 (1).