

The Travails of Contemporary Irish Catholicism from John Paul II to Pope Francis

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Published September 2023 (Chapter 16) in Alana Harris (ed.), *The Oxford History of British and Irish Catholicism, Volume V* (Oxford, 2023), pp 334-56

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198844310.003.0017>

In *Ireland awaits Pope John Paul II*, a pastoral letter read at Masses on 2 September 1979, the Irish bishops' conference emphasized the need for Irish Catholics to rededicate themselves so that Ireland might reach the twenty-first century 'with no diminution of her faith or her religious practice'.¹ Despite indications of faltering levels of doctrinal adherence, even the most pessimistic bishop could not have foreseen the magnitude of the crisis that engulfed Irish Catholicism as the twentieth century closed. Vocations, so plentiful in earlier decades, had dried up; the number of practising believers declined sharply; re-evangelization was the key church theme for 2000; and the institutional church's inept response to sex abuse scandals occasioned unprecedented public anger and a dramatic loss of credibility and moral authority. The scandal of sexual and institutional crimes and abuse dominated the two-day visit of Pope Francis in August 2018, during which the pontiff asked for 'forgiveness for the abuses in Ireland, abuses of power, of conscience, and sexual abuses perpetrated by members with roles of responsibility in the church'.²

Using the 1979 and 2018 papal visits as bookends, this chapter traces the trajectory of the Irish Catholic church during a period when a buoyant and confident Irish Catholic culture came to an end. For most of the twentieth century, Irish Catholicism was characterized by exceptional levels of popular religious practise, a vast institutional presence (including across the globe), strong allegiance to Rome, and a pervasive culture of clericalism, denominational loyalty and resistance to change. The displacement of this religio-cultural milieu and the movement towards a more individualized 'mixed religious market' in Ireland has been

¹ *Ireland Awaits Pope John Paul II* (Dublin, 1979), pp. 7-8.

² *Irish Times*, 26 Aug. 2018.

described as ‘post Catholic’.³ As this chapter argues, far from being a celebration of Catholic Ireland, Pope John Paul’s 1979 visit might be better viewed as an attempt to shore it up. Nevertheless, the scale of the church’s diminishment in the decades that followed was startling as indicated by dwindling clerical personnel and presence, religious practise, and self-identification on census returns. This picture has been both compounded and complicated by the role of the institutional church in the public square, in particular its advocacy for peace during the Northern Ireland Troubles and its social justice platform. Into the new millennium, Ireland’s ‘special relationship’ with institutional Catholicism is no longer notable, and the close embrace of church and state, Irish culture, and a Catholic imaginary no longer taken for granted.⁴

Concerns for the Future of Catholic Ireland, 1969-79

For a decade before the 1979 papal visit, the Irish bishops reflected at length on their pastoral priorities during two episcopal ‘think-ins’, at Maynooth in 1969 and five years later at Mulranny, County Mayo. ‘Ireland in the Seventies’ was the theme of the first gathering which considered pastoral, socio-economic, resource, and organizational questions. Many of the issues identified remained key challenges into the twenty-first century. Although the practise of the faith was deemed ‘very widespread and very deep’, there was concern about adherence to church doctrine, particularly among those under thirty and even among some priests.⁵ Cardinal William Conway, archbishop of Armagh from 1963-77, believed the number of lapsed Catholics, while relatively small, was increasing, especially in urban areas. Pastoral priorities were therefore identified around religious instruction; standards of preaching and liturgical celebration; and the establishment of pre- and post-marriage courses, staffed by qualified lay people and priests, to address increasing marital breakdown. In the socio-economic domain, the bishops expected that the state would play a more prominent role in the traditional church spheres of education, health, and social welfare during the 1970s against a

³ Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity* (Oxford, 2016), p. 42.

⁴ See Derek Scally, *The Best Catholics in the World: The Irish, the Church and the End of a Special Relationship* (Dublin, 2021).

⁵ Comment by Bishop Philbin of Down and Connor on state of Catholicism [Nov. 1969] (Kilmore Diocesan Archives, Austin Quinn papers, AQ/55); Minutes of a special meeting of the Irish episcopal conference: Maynooth, 24-28 Nov. 1969 (Dublin Diocesan Archives, John Charles McQuaid papers, Hierarchy Meetings 1969, XV/29/72).

background of increasing industrialization and urbanization.⁶ Indeed, several submissions to the 1969 special meeting recognized the need for clerical training and for pastoral planning to move beyond theological considerations and utilize sociological survey evidence. Two studies of religious practise were subsequently commissioned. The first surveyed 2,311 adults, the vast majority Catholic, in the greater Dublin area in 1972-3. It found that eighty-eight per cent attended Mass at least once a week, sixty-three per cent received Holy Communion at least once a month, and eighty-one per cent confessed a few times a year. The disparity between weekly Mass attendance and weekly Communion was striking, with only thirty per cent participating in the sacrament. The survey revealed the growing indifference of the young. One-quarter of 21 to 25-year-olds did not attend weekly Mass, thirty-seven per cent rarely or never went to confession, and almost twenty-nine per cent rarely or never received Holy Communion.⁷

The Dublin results were largely confirmed by a pioneering national survey of religious practise, attitudes, and beliefs in 1973-4. Behind astonishingly high weekly Mass attendance of almost ninety-one per cent, monthly confession was 46.5 per cent, and weekly Communion just twenty-nine per cent.⁸ Tellingly, while Pope John Paul praised 'Ireland's devotion to the Mass' in his Phoenix Park homily on 29 September 1979, he also emphasized that 'full participation in the Eucharist is the real source of the Christian spirit'.⁹ Just as in the Dublin survey, the adherence of the young was concerning. Some thirty per cent in the 21-25 age category, and a quarter of young single men and women aged 18-30 had abandoned the minimal obligations of weekly Mass and annual sacraments. Some 47.5 per cent of those aged 18-30 had difficulty with orthodox church teaching.¹⁰ Moreover, the national survey presciently forecasted that many parents of the next generation would not return to religious practise with marriage and middle age. For the bishops this was a bleak prognosis given that Ireland then had the youngest population in Western Europe. John Paul II addressed the issue at a youth Mass in Galway attended by 300,000. He warned that 'the religious and moral traditions of

⁶ Memorandum by Bishop Henry Murphy of Limerick on 'Ireland in the Seventies', n.d. [Oct. 1969], Minutes of general meeting of the Irish episcopal conference, 7-8 Oct. 1969 (Ibid., XV/29/59).

⁷ Mícheál Mac Gréil & Mícheál Ó Gliasáin, 'Church attendance and religious practice of Dublin adults', *Social Studies: The Journal of Irish Sociology*, 3(2)(1974), pp. 177-81.

⁸ Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 'Religion in Ireland: Preliminary Analysis', *Social Studies: Irish Journal of Sociology*, 5(2)(1976), p. 129.

⁹ *The Pope in Ireland: Addresses and Homilies* (Dublin, 1979), p. 11.

¹⁰ Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 'Religion in Ireland', p. 135.

Ireland, the very soul of Ireland, will be challenged by temptations that spare no society in our age' before famously declaring: 'Young people of Ireland, I love you.'¹¹

The preliminary findings of the Dublin and national surveys were considered by the bishops at a second 'think-in' in April 1974 which considered pastoral strategy for the remainder of the decade. The bishops took comfort in high Sunday Mass attendance and the positive standing of priests. Unlike the 1969 meeting, the views of clerical and lay experts were actively sought and thirty-one position papers on a wide range of subjects were prepared. Several recommendations echoed concerns raised in 1969. These included the need for greater lay involvement in the spiritual mission of the church; the continued education of clergy; and the acute need for adult religious education.¹² Some problems were subsequently addressed. The Catholic Communications Institute of Ireland developed a parish renewal programme and a family resource department. Refresher courses for priests became common. In April 1982, for example, over 230 priests of the Dublin diocese attended a week-long programme in Killarney, the third such course organized by the diocese.¹³ But on the more formidable challenges, as one participant at Mulranny put it, 'many of the decisions became lost in translation from aspiration to reality'.¹⁴

The *Irish Times* aptly described the character of the Mulranny meeting as 'conservationist'.¹⁵ Pastorally, the bishops hoped that high Mass attendance would maintain the Catholic church as a people's church. But large congregations once a week did not guarantee depth of religious engagement or internalized faith, nor avert the disengagement of the young. Just before the 1979 papal visit, to the hierarchy's alarm, a survey of university students found that one in seven who were raised Catholic no longer regarded themselves as such.¹⁶ Unsurprisingly then, pastoral revitalization was one of the main motifs of the first papal visit. In *Ireland Awaits Pope John Paul II*, the bishops counselled that 'one cannot be a Christian only on Sundays', underlined the responsibility of parents to hand on the faith to the young, and warned of the 'dangers of contamination by materialism'.¹⁷ Each of these

¹¹ *Pope in Ireland*, pp. 46-7.

¹² Clogher Diocesan Archives, 'Pastoral guidelines: Report of special meeting of Irish bishops, Mulranny: April 1974'.

¹³ *Irish Catholic Directory* (hereafter *ICD*) 1983, p. 331.

¹⁴ Edward Daly, *A Troubled See: Memoirs of a Derry Bishop* (Dublin, 2011), p. 59.

¹⁵ *Irish Times*, 29 Apr. 1974.

¹⁶ Liam Ryan, 'Faith under survey', *The Furrow* 34(1)(1983), p. 12.

¹⁷ *Ireland Awaits Pope John Paul II*, pp 7-8.

injunctions was addressed by the pope while in Ireland and subsequently by the Irish hierarchy. For example, in March 1980 a pastoral called *Handing on the Faith in the Home* highlighted the importance of the family in creating and sustaining faith commitment, with initiatives concentrated at parish level to promote better understanding of doctrine, pastoral care of marriage and family prayers.¹⁸ That all these concerns had been discussed in 1969 is striking. They were repeated frequently in the decades that followed.

The 1979 Papal Visit: A Peroration for Catholic Ireland?

Pope John Paul II was the first reigning pope to visit Ireland in 1979 and Britain three years later. Both visits were pastoral, and they drew extraordinary crowds. The 1979 visit stands as one of the great public events in the history of Irish Catholicism.¹⁹ An estimated 2.7 million people greeted the pope over three days in six centres in late September-early October. At the time, the choice of Ireland was viewed as a tribute to Irish Catholic fidelity. Despite the magnitude of the crowds and widespread sense of euphoria, the visit was less a salute to Catholic Ireland than an appeal, as the bishops' concerns and the pontiff's exhortations made clear, to reject the steady advance of materialism and secularism. The visit arose due to a confluence of circumstances: an episcopal conference diminished in influence and uncertain of how to address the erosion of Catholic belief and practise; a steady contraction of vocations and with it the presence of the institutional church; and a conflagration in Northern Ireland that showed no sign of abating. The papal visit may have slowed but did not forestall an increasing detachment from the institutional church and its teaching, which intensified as social change subsequently gathered pace.

Episcopal Immobilism?

The episcopal reflex to stocktake raises a question about the effectiveness of episcopal leadership between the papal visits. The bishops' conference exhibited a sense of uncertainty in the late 1970s. This was due, in part, to significant changes in personnel, none more so than the death of Cardinal Conway on 17 April 1977 at the age of sixty-four. As chairman of the episcopal conference, he combined vision with organizational skills, a zest for work and a

¹⁸ *ICD 1981*, p. 333; *Irish Times*, 17 Mar. 1980.

¹⁹ See Daithí Ó Corráin, 'Why did Pope John Paul II visit Ireland? The 1979 papal visit in context', *British Catholic History* 35(4)(2021), pp. 462-85.

desire for the broadest participation by his fellow bishops.²⁰ Cahal Daly recalled ‘a sense of anxiety’ as the episcopal conference ‘faced the future without the leadership which we bishops had depended so much upon’.²¹

There was no obvious successor as archbishop of Armagh and primate of all Ireland. Both the British and Irish governments favoured Cahal Daly because he was a northerner and because of his unflinching condemnation of violence in Northern Ireland. In the event, Tomás Ó Fiaich, president of Maynooth College since 1974, was appointed. He was the first cleric for 110 years to be elevated to Armagh without any prior episcopal experience, a decision which in retrospect looked deeply flawed at such a critical juncture for the Irish church. Ó Fiaich later recalled how he turned to Archbishop Dermot Ryan of Dublin for advice and support as he ‘knew absolutely nothing about the internal workings of the Episcopal Conference’ and depended on him ‘for the most elementary information’.²² By contrast, when Cahal Daly was installed as archbishop of Armagh in December 1990 he was the second longest serving member of the episcopal conference, having been first appointed a bishop in 1967.

In a perceptive obituary of Ó Fiaich in May 1990, following his death in Toulouse while leading a diocesan pilgrimage to Lourdes, it was suggested that for all of his qualities and personal warmth he did ‘not appear to have any strong ideas on how to tackle effectively the problems which beset the Church’.²³ During the 1980s there was an unmistakable sense of the hierarchy favouring a strategy of maintenance rather than mission, of clinging to the status quo rather than promoting an agenda of meaningful change, of routinely calling for greater lay involvement but doing little to give this any practical effect. This was despite an abundance of survey evidence that captured the waning triumphalist model of Irish Catholicism. One explanation for the apparent episcopal immobilism of the period was the type of prelate appointed. When the episcopal archives covering the late 1970s and 1980s are opened, it may be possible to discern whether there were deflected voices demanding real post-conciliar reform, a meaningful sharing of authority, honest confrontation of the emerging abuse crisis, or strategies for meaningful evangelism.

A key function of a papal nuncio is to recommend to the pope candidates to fill episcopal vacancies. Gaetano Alibrandi, a Sicilian, presented his credentials in May 1969 and

²⁰ Cahal Daly, *Steps on my Pilgrim Journey* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 376-8.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 381-2.

²² Tribute to the late Archbishop Dermot Ryan by Cardinal Ó Fiaich, 21 Feb. 1985, *ICD 1985*, p. 355.

²³ *Irish Times*, 9 May 1990.

remarkably remained in Dublin until January 1989. He had served as counsellor in the nunciature in Dublin from 1953 until 1956 and his sepia-tinted conception of Irish Catholicism remained rooted in that experience, despite the rapid pace of social change from the 1960s onward. By advising on the appointment of thirty-one Irish prelates, Alibrandi had a significant influence on the composition of the hierarchy and the direction of the Irish Catholic Church.²⁴ By the end of his tenure, only three serving bishops had not been nominated by him.²⁵

Alibrandi's recommendations included no less than three archbishops of Dublin, Ireland's most populous diocese with just under 200 parishes by the early 1980s. All three appointees – Dermot Ryan, Kevin McNamara and Desmond Connell – had a deeply orthodox view of the church's traditional role and teaching, had little pastoral experience, and were probably happiest in the lecture hall. Ryan had been professor of Semitic languages in University College Dublin before succeeding John Charles McQuaid in 1972. Like his predecessor, Ryan had considerable organizational and administrative abilities and oversaw the establishment of fifty-six new parishes, but unlike McQuaid was a committed ecumenist. Although the Irish episcopal conference issued an agreed statement recognizing the right of each person to vote according to conscience ahead of the eighth amendment in 1983 (giving explicit protection to unborn life), Ryan issued a pastoral calling unequivocally for a yes vote.²⁶ In April 1984 he was appointed pro-prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, the first Irishman to hold such a senior Vatican post. Ryan died suddenly in February 1985 at the age of sixty and was given a cardinal's funeral at which the pope was the principal concelebrant. Outspoken in his opposition to contraception, divorce, and abortion, McNamara had been professor of dogmatic theology in Maynooth and vice-president of the College before becoming bishop of Kerry in 1976. Despite suffering from terminal cancer and disregarding significant disquiet among Dublin clergy at Alibrandi's lack of consultation, McNamara's translation to Dublin in November 1984 was largely in preparation for the anticipated referendum on divorce.²⁷ In an obituary, the *Irish Times* maintained that McNamara's 'spirited opposition' was a principal factor in the defeat of the divorce measure and that this gentle but

²⁴ This figure excludes auxiliary and coadjutor bishops.

²⁵ These were Bishops Michael Russell of Waterford (1965-93), Michael Harty of Killaloe (1967-94) and John McCormack of Meath (1968-90).

²⁶ Bridget Hourican, 'Ryan, Dermot Joseph', in James McGuire & James Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography* (Cambridge, 2009) <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a7861> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

²⁷ Joseph Dunn, *No Lions in the Hierarchy: An Anthology of Sorts* (Dublin, [1994] 2012), p. 34.

single-minded churchman accepted the sobriquet of an inflexible conservative on traditional values ‘with some pride’.²⁸ Connell, a professor of general metaphysics for thirty-five years in University College Dublin, became archbishop in March 1988 and a cardinal in February 2001. Theologically orthodox and frequently impolitic, he was profoundly ill-equipped to deal with the shocking scale of clerical child abuse. In an obituary in 2017, the *Irish Times* contended that Connell ‘will be remembered by history less for the brilliance of his mind and teaching, or for the case he made trenchantly on social issues from abortion to homosexuality to unemployment or the treatment of refugees than for the belatedness of his apology and appreciation of the pain created by abuse’.²⁹ Through these appointments across more than four decades, there was not only stasis but increasing intransigence around some of the key fault lines for the younger generations of Irish Catholics.

A Shrinking Institution

A plethora of further surveys made grim reading for the Irish bishops. In 1967, the Vatican requested that the Irish episcopal conference undertake a statistical study of vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The resultant report in 1971 revealed for the first time in the twentieth century a decline in the total number of priests, brothers, and nuns from 1968. The coincidence with the introduction of free secondary education in the Republic of Ireland was notable. By 1978 for every ten who entered all forms of religious life, seven others died and eight departed.³⁰ It was therefore unsurprising that while in Ireland John Paul II called for the fostering of vocations. The papal visit fleetingly boosted vocations before a pattern of long-term decline set in. This was particularly evident from the 1990s as deaths, withdrawals, and retirements far outstripped new entrants. At the time of the first papal visit, the average annual number of ordinations was seventy. This increased to seventy-five during the second half of the 1980s before dwindling to an average of eighteen for the period 2001-2005.³¹ In 2019 the national seminary welcomed thirteen new seminarians, which brought the number of full-time residential seminarians to thirty-three, of which twenty-seven were in formation for Irish dioceses.

²⁸ *Irish Times*, 9 Apr. 1987.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 22 Feb. 2017.

³⁰ Tom Inglis, ‘Decline in Numbers of Priests and Religious in Ireland’, *Doctrine and Life* 30(2)(Feb. 1979), pp. 81, 84.

³¹ John A. Weafer, *Thirty-Three Good Men: Celibacy, Obedience and Identity* (Dublin, 2014), p. 228, Table A3.

One manifestation of declining vocations was the closure of diocesan seminaries, such as St Kieran's in Kilkenny, St Peter's in Ferns, and St Patrick's in Thurles. Only the national seminary – St Patrick's College at Maynooth – now remains, along with the Irish College in Rome. Many prominent religious boarding schools and monasteries also announced their closure in the 1990s. A shortage of vocations forced the Carmelite Sisters to close their 174-year-old Blackrock monastery in Dublin in 1997 when only seven sisters remained.³² Loreto Abbey in Rathfarnham, where Mother Teresa of Calcutta spent six weeks as a novice, shut its gates in 1999 after 178 years.³³ Closures have continued unabated. In May 2019 the Franciscans bid farewell to Waterford city after an 800-year association with the closure of their friary and the departure of the last four elderly friars.³⁴

The implications for the church of a shrinking body of priests and religious have been stark. In 2015 there were 1,966 active priests assigned to parish ministry, a fall of 1,010 since 2000.³⁵ By the time of Pope Francis's visit, the average age of an Irish priest was sixty-seven and a reduction in the number of Mass services, the sharing of priests, the clustering of parishes, and an increased role for deacons had become commonplace. The first permanent deacons in Ireland were ordained in June 2012, over thirty years after their introduction in England and Wales. In the Diocese of Kerry in 2018 there were just fifty-four priests (including four non-diocesan clergy and two assistant priests) for fifty-three parishes, of which six had no resident priest, and only six diocesan priests were under fifty.³⁶ To meet the shortfall in personnel, many dioceses have sought priests from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, reversing a pattern explored in Fiona Bateman's chapter where Ireland was a net exporter of priests. The contraction in the number of religious has been even more pronounced. Between 1989 and 2012, the number of religious sisters fell from 12,981 to 6,912; brothers from 1,440 to 628; and clerical religious from 6,325 to 1,888.³⁷ Some orders will cease to exist, and many have withdrawn from traditional areas of activity such as education and health. A high-profile example was the decision of the Sisters of Charity to leave healthcare in 2017, one hastened by negative public reaction to reports that the order would own the new national maternity hospital and the subsequent decision to transfer the site to a new charitable body. The decline in

³² *ICD 1998*, p. 9.

³³ *ICD 1995*, p. 12.

³⁴ *Irish Times*, 10 May 2019.

³⁵ *ICD 2001*, p. 284; *ICD 2016*, p. 329.

³⁶ 'The state of the Catholic Church on the island of Ireland today: special report', *Irish Examiner*, 3 Apr. 2018.

³⁷ *ICD 1992*, p. 229; *ICD 2016*, p. 329.

religious vocations reflected the growth in opportunities for careers in education and other prosocial fields outside religious life. Efforts by the hierarchy to encourage vocations by means of pastoral letter, advertising campaigns (such as the ‘Men in Black’ campaign in the Dublin diocese in 1997), vocations workshops, a vocations year from April 2008 to May 2009, the celebration of priesthood Sunday from 2008 onward, and the development of a vocations app in 2011 have not arrested the decline.

Being a Priest in Despondent Times

In his pioneering 2014 qualitative study, John Weafer has examined the lived experience of thirty-three Irish priests or former priests under the themes of celibacy, obedience, and identity. The sample is divided into three categories: pre-Vatican II priests in seminary before or during the Council, those ordained in the 1970s and 1980s, and those ordained in the 1990s and 2000s. Weafer posits that the diocesan priesthood, as opposed to the church, is not yet in crisis but does exhibit a division between competing paradigms of priesthood. The servant-leader model prevailed for about two decades after the Vatican Council before being challenged by a neo-orthodox model of priesthood.³⁸ A majority of those interviewed disagreed with mandatory celibacy; the older cohorts – ‘company men with attitude’ – were more pragmatic in terms of following the direction of their superiors and tended to devise pastoral solutions to individual problems as they arose, whereas the younger cohort were more unquestioningly obedient; all had a clear sense of their identity and mission.³⁹

The National Conference of Priests of Ireland was established in 1975 and grew out of the formation of diocesan priests’ councils. Until its disbandment in 2007, its annual meetings voiced clerical concerns. Pastoral renewal, partnership with the laity, and renewal of the clergy were perennial themes. From the 1990s, there was growing anxiety about the image of the church in the wake of various scandals and the stresses that this placed on individual priests who were deemed, in some quarters, as guilty by association. In 2010 Sr Marianne O’Connor, director general of the Conference of Religious of Ireland (CORI),⁴⁰ claimed her members ‘felt tainted by association. It’s not an easy time to be in religious life’.⁴¹ Weafer’s study and

³⁸ Weafer, *Thirty-Three Good Men*, p. 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-19.

⁴⁰ In 2016 CORI and the Irish Missionary Union merged to form the Association of Missionaries and Religious of Ireland (AMRI).

⁴¹ *Irish Times*, 19 Apr. 2010.

contributions by individual priests have highlighted the absence of adequate pastoral support structures for priests. This issue has been articulated by the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP), established in 2010 as a forum for debate which represents about 1,000 priests. It achieved prominence in 2011 for intervening in the case of Fr Kevin Reynolds who was notoriously libelled in a *Prime Time Investigates* programme. This was one of several cases of false accusations against priests who had to go to court to clear their names. The ACP has also drawn attention to the increasing workload on an ageing cohort of priests who feel increasingly isolated and despondent. It revealed in 2017 how eight priests had committed suicide over the previous decade.⁴²

Alongside this crisis of vocations, census data revealed a steady decline in Catholic self-description amongst the laity. In 1981 the proportion of the population self-ascribing as Catholic was ninety-three per cent, falling to 84.2 per cent in 2011 and more sharply to 78.3 per cent in 2016, the lowest on record. The absolute number of Catholics in 2016 (both Irish and non-Irish) also fell from 3.86 million to 3.73 million, the first such decline in half a century. The most noticeable finding in 2016 was that 9.8 per cent identified as ‘No Religion’ – the second largest group ahead of the next largest categories of Church of Ireland (2.8 per cent) and Muslim (1.3 per cent).⁴³ The 2016 figure of 468,421 under no religion, forty-five per cent of whom were aged 20-39, represented an increase of seventy-four per cent on the 2011 total of 277,237 and a seven-fold increase on the 1991 figure of 67,413.⁴⁴ The trends revealed in 2016 suggested a movement towards a loosely felt cultural Catholicism rather than a tight-knit, all-embracing habitus in which clergy and religion occupied a powerful and prestigious position.

Church and State

The post-conciliar landscape in Ireland already surveyed indicates that the influence of the Irish hierarchy in the public square was in decline long before the abuse scandals hollowed out its authority.⁴⁵ Between the papal visits a preponderance of episcopal statements in the domain of

⁴² Ibid., 10 Aug. 2017.

⁴³ Census of Ireland 2016: Profile 8 Religion: Religious Change, <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rrc/> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

⁴⁴ Census of Ireland 2016: Profile 8 Religion: No Religion, Atheism, Agnosticism <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8mraa/> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

⁴⁵ See Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (2nd edn., Dublin, 1998).

church and state concerned sexual morality, as Kelly's and Geiringer's chapter in this volume demonstrates. This had, in Dermot Lane's words, a 'negative impact on the image of the Church, putting it into a defensive mode and losing credibility in the public domain'.⁴⁶ Moreover, such interventions rarely proved decisive in influencing the outcome. For instance, Garret FitzGerald recalled that concerns about property rights rather than pressure from the pulpit led sixty-three per cent to reject divorce in 1986.⁴⁷

The next most frequent type of episcopal intervention concerned education and merits a brief comment. The Irish bishops faced nothing like the turbulent situation that prevailed in England and Wales during the 1980s with the imposition of a market-driven ideological approach and a movement against state funding of denominational schools. However, the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a flurry of education legislation by an increasingly interventionist and secular Irish state. For example, under the new primary school curriculum, introduced in 1999, there was a greater separation of secular and religious instruction than ever before. Under the 1998 Education Act, for the first time, the state recognized a variety of nondenominational schools such as *Gaeilscoileanna* (Irish-language schools) and multidenominational schools (which from 1984 came under the umbrella of Educate Together). In the present century there has been a growing state interest in providing a plurality of school types to serve the needs of a more culturally, ethnically, and religiously diverse population.

From the Northern Ireland Troubles to the St Andrews Agreement

The most significant moment of the 1979 papal visit, and one that attracted international media attention, was Pope John Paul II's speech at Drogheda. This addressed building peace in Northern Ireland, reconciliation based on justice, and an unequivocal renunciation of violence. It was largely drafted by Cahal Daly. He and Cardinal Conway were the towering figures in the church's response to the first decade of the Troubles along with Bishop Edward Daly of Derry and to a lesser extent William Philbin of Down and Connor.⁴⁸ Numerous individual priests and religious also ceaselessly condemned violence and warned that its consequences were the opposite of what was intended. A native of Belfast and anguished over the violence,

⁴⁶ Dermot Lane, 'Vatican II: The Irish Experience', *The Furrow*, 55(2)(2004), p. 72.

⁴⁷ Garret FitzGerald, *All in a Life: An Autobiography* (Dublin, 1991), p. 631.

⁴⁸ Margaret Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles, 1968-1998* (Oxford, 2019); Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (London, 2000), pp. 416-28; Gerald McElroy, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Crisis, 1968-86* (Dublin, 1991).

which he vigorously condemned, Conway penned most of the joint episcopal statements during the opening years of the Troubles. These emphasized that the conflict was not a religious war, that the Catholic community had legitimate grievances, that the IRA campaign had no legitimacy and disassociated the vast majority of the nationalist community from it, that all violence (paramilitary or state-sanctioned) should be excoriated, and that efforts to seek reconciliation should be lasting.⁴⁹ As discussed in Power's chapter in this volume, the Troubles had a galvanizing effect on Christian Church leaders and Conway was to the fore in organizing the first official inter-church meeting at Ballymascanlon in September 1973. The period also witnessed joint intercessions for peace and reconciliation by the Catholic churches in Ireland and Britain, often on St Patrick's Day such as in 1988 and 1989.

From the early 1970s, World Peace Day on 1 January became an occasion for Irish bishops to appeal for peace in Northern Ireland as ever more people were killed and maimed. Daly, who became bishop of Down and Connor in 1982 and archbishop of Armagh in 1990, frequently preached on the need to foster cross community dialogue by transcending denominational divisions and political divergences.⁵⁰ Frequently criticized by republicans, he 'was often contrasted with the more ebullient and outspoken Cardinal Tomás Ó Fiaich, perceived as having more republican sympathies'.⁵¹ Daly's views formed the basis of the church's oral submission in February 1984 to the New Ireland Forum, established by the Irish government as a means of finding a democratic solution to the Northern impasse. He made clear that the hierarchy ardently sought peace and justice, that it rejected the concept of the confessional state, that it was 'acutely conscious of the fears of the Northern Protestant community' and 'would raise our voices to resist any constitutional proposals which might infringe or endanger the civil and religious rights and liberties cherished by Northern Ireland Protestants'. He also emphasized that the bishops in no way sought to have their church's moral teaching enshrined in civil law but wished to fulfil their pastoral duty.⁵²

⁴⁹ See Daithí Ó Corráin, *Rendering to God and Caesar: The Irish Churches and the Two States in Ireland, 1949-73* (Manchester, 2006), pp. 145-69.

⁵⁰ Maria Power, *Catholic Social Teaching and Theologies of Peace in Northern Ireland: Cardinal Cahal Daly and the Pursuit of the Peaceable Kingdom* (London, 2021).

⁵¹ Patrick Maume, 'Daly, Cahal Brendan' in McGuire & Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a9877> (accessed 13 Dec. 2020).

⁵² *Irish Times*, 10 Feb. 1984.

Unsurprisingly, the Catholic bishops and other church leaders supported the peace process during the 1990s. Catholic and Protestant clergy played an important role in appealing to politicians in both parts of Ireland and in Britain, and paramilitaries to help end the violence. The decade witnessed a number of powerful inter-church moments. In February 1993 the leaders of the four main Christian churches spent a week in the United States to explain the nature of the conflict and promote economic investment by American companies.⁵³ Two years later, Cahal Daly joined Robin Eames (Church of Ireland archbishop of Armagh) in a historic ceremony at Canterbury Cathedral.⁵⁴ In September 1997 the first official meeting between an Ulster Unionist delegation and representatives of the Catholic Church took place in Armagh on political developments in Northern Ireland.⁵⁵ The hierarchy welcomed the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 as balanced and providing for a constructive and peaceful resolution of the conflict. Seán Brady, who succeeded Daly in 1996, was deeply committed to the implementation of the agreement which faced a succession of difficulties from policing to decommissioning which were renegotiated through the St Andrews Agreement in 2006. A statement by the hierarchy in June 2003 captured its position on the need for ‘a shared future for the people of Northern Ireland based on the principles of equality, shared responsibility and devolved government established by the Good Friday Agreement. This shared future must be agreed in dialogue, founded on respect for diversity and held together by trust’.⁵⁶ An unassuming and warm man, Brady worked tirelessly until his retirement in 2014 to deepen such trust between the churches.

Conscience of Society

The church’s conservatism on moral issues has tended to obscure its social justice agenda or, as Liam Ryan put it, its role as the ‘conscience of society’.⁵⁷ From the 1970s, the church developed a more critical view of the state’s social policy shortcomings, particularly in relation to inequality and poverty.⁵⁸ This reflected the influence of John XXIII’s *Mater et Magistra* (1961), which overturned church suspicion of state involvement in social provision, and the

⁵³ *ICD 1994*, p. 9.

⁵⁴ *ICD 1996*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ *ICD 1998*, p. 11.

⁵⁶ *ICD 2004*, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Liam Ryan, ‘Church and Politics: The Last Twenty-five Years’, *The Furrow*, 30(1)(1979), pp. 3-18.

⁵⁸ On this see Carole Holohan, ‘The Second Vatican Council, poverty and Irish mentalities’, *History of European Ideas* 46(7)(2020), pp. 1009-26.

continuing reception of the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes* (1965). Three other factors were significant. The emphasis on charity of earlier decades gave way to an ethos of participation and empowerment. Second, Irish membership of the EEC became a locus of economic and social policy change in the shape of the European Social Action Programme.⁵⁹ Thirdly, the contraction of religious in increasingly state-run social services facilitated a stronger critique of those services.

The example of activist priests in raising awareness of social justice issues in the 1960s was continued between the papal visits. Many priests and religious became household names for their work in championing those on the margins. Brother Kevin Crowley founded the Capuchin Day Centre in 1969 to provide food, clothing, and care facilities for those in need. The centre was visited by Pope Francis in 2018. Donal O'Mahony, another Capuchin, founded Threshold in 1978 to address housing inequality, deprivation, and insufficient legislative protection for tenants. It assisted almost 3,000 people in its first two years and celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2018.⁶⁰ During the 1979 papal visit, a planned stop in the socially deprived Seán McDermott Street was cancelled as the pontiff was behind schedule. This slight had a profound impact on Peter McVerry, a Jesuit priest.⁶¹ In 1983 he founded the Peter McVerry Trust to tackle homelessness, drugs, and social disadvantage. He is arguably the best known and most outspoken advocate of greater equality and social inclusion. In 1985 Sister Stanislaus Kennedy ('Sister Stan'), a member of the Sisters of Charity, was a co-founder of Focus Ireland, a housing charity. She later established the Immigrant Council of Ireland and in 2014 was voted Ireland's greatest woman.⁶²

The 1980s was a particularly grim decade. The national debt was 129 per cent of GNP in 1986, inflation was rampant, unemployment never fell below fifteen per cent, social services were reduced, social welfare payments were inadequate, and 206,000 more people left Ireland than arrived with a peak of 44,000 departures in 1989. A survey of poverty in Ireland in 1981, *One Million Poor*, by Sister Stan suggested that thirty per cent of the population lived below the breadline. She drew attention to the absence of reliable data on poverty and income distribution. This led in 1986 to the establishment of the Combat Poverty Agency as an

⁵⁹ Mairéad Considine & Fiona Dukelow, *Irish Social Policy: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin, 2009), p. 56.

⁶⁰ Turlough O'Riordan, 'O'Mahony, Donal', McGuire & Quinn (eds), *Dictionary of Irish Biography* <http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a9868> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

⁶¹ 'The Sunday Interview: Peter McVerry', *Sunday Business Post*, 25 May 2014.

⁶² *Irish Independent*, 20 Sept. 2014.

independent body. Voluntary organizations led by religious or under religious patronage such as the Society of St Vincent de Paul were in the vanguard of public commentary on socio-economic issues. Poverty may have been 'rediscovered' by sociologists in the 1960s, but in an Irish context the St Vincent de Paul sodality had been working quietly to ameliorate the consequences of poverty since the 1840s. The best-known Irish Catholic lay organization of social concern and action, in 2014 it had 10,500 members and 1,500 auxiliary members in 1,235 conferences active in every county in Ireland.⁶³ It should also be stated that Trócaire, the bishops' overseas development agency established in 1973, paralleled these efforts through aid to the developing world. In 1984, despite the economic crisis, church collections for Trócaire, with its distinctive Lenten collection boxes, raised £5.7 million for famine relief in Africa. Irish Catholics have continued to support its efforts and in 2017 Trócaire raised €29.1 million, one of the highest figures in its history.⁶⁴

Clergy, religious, individual bishops, and the episcopal conference helped raise public awareness about the interlinked problems of poverty, long-term unemployment, and emigration, as well as the inadequacy of Ireland's social infrastructure. Although there was no money to address this, the 1980s did witness a raft of reports around the needs of older people, the disabled, the Travelling community, and the implications of large scale emigration.⁶⁵ Between 1983 and 1986, a Commission on Social Welfare, which included Sister Stan and Bob Cashman, a former Society of St Vincent de Paul president, carried out the first review of the social welfare system.⁶⁶ Due to the prevailing economic situation, most of its recommendations were postponed until the 1990s. While often associated with the 1950s, episcopal concern for the welfare (material and spiritual) of Irish emigrants, especially in Britain and the United States, was a perennial issue. The episcopal conference played a significant role in a variety of campaigns in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries to regularize the status of the undocumented in the United States, to have the Irish government fund emigrant services, and to support the Irish abroad, particularly the elderly and those without family.⁶⁷

⁶³ Bill Lawlor & Joe Dalton (eds.), *The Society of St Vincent de Paul in Ireland: 170 Years of Fighting Poverty* (Dublin, 2014), p. xx.

⁶⁴ *ICD 1985*, p. 355; *Irish Times*, 11 Aug. 2018.

⁶⁵ Considine & Dukelow, *Irish Social Policy*, pp. 61-2.

⁶⁶ *Irish Times*, 15 Sept. 1983.

⁶⁷ Breda Gray, 'The Politics of Migration, Church, and State: A Case Study of the Catholic Church in Ireland', *International Migration Review* 50(2)(2016), pp. 315-51.

The episcopal conference regarded unemployment as the greatest social evil confronting Irish society in the 1980s and early 1990s. In December 1992 it published a considered 100-page pastoral, *Work is the Key: Towards an Economy that Needs Everyone*, which placed the responsibility for creating Irish jobs on Irish shoulders, welcomed ‘those analyses which have refused to sanction a fatalistic outlook or to lay the blame for our high unemployment and emigration at the door of Brussels or the world economy’, and called for a clear long-term programme for job creation.⁶⁸ The bishops consistently offered a positive assessment of Irish involvement in the European Community because of its emphasis on peace and stability, fundamental rights, and greater economic development and prosperity. In Dublin, Archbishop Connell frequently addressed unemployment; tackling its attendant ills lay behind the relaunch of the Catholic Social Service Conference as Crosscare in 1993. The bishops of the west of Ireland were proactive in commissioning a major jobs and regional development study to stem unemployment and emigration; this was published in 1994 as *Crusade for Survival*.⁶⁹ It led to a public campaign and the establishment three years later of the Western Development Commission as a government agency. Aside from economic issues, members of the hierarchy addressed a broad range of social problems, including, among others, drug abuse and alcoholism, the commercialization of Sunday, responsible advertising, suicide, and discrimination against the Travelling community.

Between 1994 and 2007 Ireland experienced an unprecedented economic transformation: annual GDP grew by an average of 9.4 per cent between 1994 and 2000, and 5.4 per cent between 2001 and 2006; the number at work grew from 1.23 to 2.05 million; unemployment fell to 4.5 per cent by 2006; the Celtic Tiger was lauded around the globe. The community and voluntary sector played an important role in lobbying for greater resources to address social exclusion. From 1997 organizations representing that sector, including CORI and the St Vincent de Paul, participated in the national social partnership talks which served as a national framework for industrial relations and wage bargaining until 2009.⁷⁰ To the frustration of the community and voluntary pillar, economic rather than social progress was prioritized.⁷¹ Some successes were recorded. For instance, in 2002, the government

⁶⁸ *Irish Times*, 9 Dec. 1992.

⁶⁹ *ICD 1995*, pp. 8-9.

⁷⁰ Both organizations were parties to the negotiations that led to *Partnership 2000* (1997-2000), *Programme for Prosperity and Fairness* (2000-2003) and *Sustaining Progress* (2003-2005).

⁷¹ Paul Teague & Jimmy Donaghey, ‘The Life and Death of Irish Social Partnership: Lessons for Social Pacts’, *Business History*, 57(3)(2015), pp. 418-37.

benchmarked the lowest social welfare rates at 30 per cent of gross industrial earnings. During the Celtic Tiger era, many church figures, such as Fr Seán Healy and Sr Brigid Reynolds of the justice office of CORI,⁷² criticized the neo-liberal approach to economic growth and the dominance of the market and the individual over society. In *Prosperity with a Purpose: Christian Faith and Values at a Time of Rapid Economic Growth*, a wide-ranging pastoral in November 1999, the bishops stressed that economics should serve society and the common good.⁷³ The document received little media attention because the church struggled to communicate its message in the secular realm. Two principal reasons for this can be advanced. The first was growing mistrust due to the mishandling of clerical child abuse. Secondly, between the papal visits the media became the chief supplier of alternative value systems and intensely critiqued religious institutions that were once above public scrutiny.⁷⁴ During the post-2008 recession, the bishops addressed the financial turmoil and associated societal disaffection, while also highlighting the appeals of Catholic social justice groups for an end to the austerity policies that characterized Irish budgets in the early 2010s.

A shortage of labour during the Celtic Tiger was remedied by immigration and a rapid transformation to a multi-ethnic country. The proportion of non-Irish nationals increased from just under six per cent in the 2002 census to twelve per cent in 2016, or 535,000 persons from 200 different countries. Polish nationals were the largest group with 122,515 arrivals and Polish was the second most spoken language in the country. Only a minority of Poles left during the post-2008 economic crisis.⁷⁵ The percentage of Catholics born outside Ireland grew from 7.2 per cent in 2002 to twelve per cent in 2016.⁷⁶ For the Irish church, this meant a rapid reorientation from being a sending church since the nineteenth century to becoming a receiving church. This reversal was captured in the diocese of Kildare in 2005 when the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, Mother of Christ missionary order was invited to develop a ministry to the large migrant population.⁷⁷ The order was first established in Nigeria in 1937 by Charles

⁷² In 2009 CORI Justice became a secular body called Social Justice Ireland.

⁷³ *Irish Times*, 4 Nov. 1999.

⁷⁴ Susie Donnelly & Tom Inglis, 'The Media and the Catholic Church in Ireland: Reporting Clerical Child Sex Abuse', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25(1)(2010), pp. 1-19.

⁷⁵ Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp8iter/p8iter/p8rroc/> (accessed 13 Dec. 2020); Bryan Fanning, *Migration and the Making of Ireland* (Dublin, 2018), pp. 222, 230.

⁷⁶ Census of Population 2016 – Profile 8 Irish Travellers, Ethnicity and Religion.

⁷⁷ *ICD 2006*, p. 9.

Heerey, the Irish-born and educated first archbishop of Onitsha. A study of migrant chaplains in the 2000s revealed an uneven level of inclusiveness, initial fears of segregation instead of integration, and a gradual readjustment of the Irish Catholic church.⁷⁸ In 2018 there was an African, Brazilian, Filipino, French, Italian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Polish, and Romanian chaplaincy; the Brazilian and Filipino were the most extensive in terms of multiple centres outside Dublin. In recognition of the level of change, the bishops' conference restructured its commission on emigration in 2008 to comprise a council for emigrants and a council for immigrants. The latter has produced several resources to assist parishes such as a guide to develop a ministry of welcome, and prayers and blessings in different languages. Moreover, the hierarchy has regularly organized conferences to raise awareness of racism, the plight of asylum seekers, those in direct provision and human trafficking. At a civil society level, numerous well regarded pro-migrant organizations such as the Immigrant Council of Ireland and the Migrant Rights Centre Ireland owed their foundation to Catholic clergy or religious, primarily returned missionaries and diaspora chaplains.⁷⁹

Institutional Dénouement

The Irish church experienced a historic nadir in 2009 with the publication of the devastating reports of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (Ryan report) in May and the Commission of Investigation into Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin (Murphy report) in November. Diarmuid Martin, permanent observer of the Holy See at the United Nations, succeeded Desmond Connell as archbishop of Dublin in 2004. He set a strong example by cooperating fully with the Murphy Commission. By the time of his retirement in December 2020, Martin's courageous leadership in the areas of child safeguarding and confronting the past altered the culture of the church at home and served as a template for dioceses across the world. He was succeeded in February 2021 by Archbishop Dermot Farrell. The depth of anger at the revelations of the Murphy report was unprecedented: at the Vatican for instructing bishops to treat the matter as an offence (or delict) under canon law instead of a criminal offence; at the police for appearing to collaborate in suppressing investigations; at the hierarchy for trying to cover up such crimes in the 1990s and for failing to meet their responsibilities.

⁷⁸ Breda Gray & Rita O'Sullivan Lago, 'Migrant Chaplains: Mediators of Catholic Church Transnationalism or Guests in Nationally Shaped Religious Fields?', *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 19(2)(2011), pp. 94-110.

⁷⁹ Gray, 'Politics of Migration, Church, and State', p. 335.

The focus of public attention subsequently switched to the Vatican. In mid-February 2010 the Irish bishops were summoned to discuss the crisis with the pope and members of the curia. The bishops offered their own observations and suggestions, spoke frankly of the depth of anger, betrayal and shame expressed to them, and outlined the significant measures taken to ensure the safety of children and young people.⁸⁰ The following month, Pope Benedict issued a pastoral letter to the Catholics of Ireland in which he shared ‘in the dismay and the sense of betrayal that so many of you have experienced on learning of these sinful and criminal acts and the way Church authorities in Ireland dealt with them’.⁸¹ For many, however, the letter did not go far enough because it was silent on the culpability of the Vatican. The letter announced an apostolic visitation to Ireland ‘to assist the local Church on her path of renewal’. It took place in the early months of 2011 with particular emphasis on child safeguarding standards, seminary training, and doctrinal discipline. In February 2011 the Irish bishops launched the Towards Healing Counselling and Support Service, with a commitment of €10 million over five years, to meet the support needs of survivors of abuse and their families.⁸² It replaced Faoiseamh which had operated between 1996 and 2011. By the end of the 2010s, both counselling services had supported 5,470 people.⁸³ In April 2011 Limerick became the second diocese after Dublin to appoint a director of safeguarding to oversee all aspects of child protection in church-related activities.⁸⁴ The practice also developed in the 2010s of the publication of annual reviews of safeguarding practice in individual dioceses.

These positive developments were overshadowed by the publication in July 2011 of the Cloyne report into the handling of allegations against nineteen clerics. Damningly, the diocese of Cloyne was found to have ignored the church’s own guidelines on child protection. The fallout sparked a sensational attack in the Dáil. Speaking as a practising Catholic, Taoiseach Enda Kenny alleged the report exposed ‘an attempt by the Holy See to frustrate an inquiry in a sovereign, democratic republic as little as three years ago, not three decades ago. In doing so

⁸⁰ Press release on the meeting of the Holy Father with senior Irish Bishops and members of the Roman Curia, 16 Feb. 2010, <https://www.catholicbishops.ie/2010/02/16/press-release-on-the-meeting-of-the-holy-father-with-senior-irish-bishops-and-high-ranking-members-of-the-roman-curia/> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

⁸¹ Pastoral Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of Ireland, 19 Mar. 2010, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

⁸² *ICD 2012*, p. 9.

⁸³ <https://towardshealing.ie/history/> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

⁸⁴ *ICD 2012*, p. 9.

the report excavates the dysfunction, disconnection and elitism that dominate the culture of the Vatican to this day'.⁸⁵ He demanded a considered response. It was later revealed that during a private meeting with Irish president Mary McAleese in 2003, when inquiries in Ferns and Dublin were ongoing, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, secretary of state, had floated a concordat with Ireland to protect Vatican and diocesan archives. McAleese described it as one of the 'most devastating moments' of her presidency.⁸⁶ Within a month of Kenny's condemnation, the Holy See recalled its nuncio and in September issued a 25-page response.⁸⁷ In November 2011 the Irish government decided to close its Vatican embassy on economic grounds; it was subsequently reopened in 2014 and relations improved. The imposition of the new missal in 2012 without consultation, and the disciplining of some Irish priests and theologians by the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for their views on women's ordination and LGBTQ+ increased disillusionment with the papacy of Benedict XVI.

Twilight or Adaptation?

Side by side with appeals for forgiveness, episcopal statements since 2000 frequently referenced the need for renewal. In December 2005 a new commission for pastoral renewal and adult faith development was created. It was an overdue acknowledgement of the changed environment in which the church's primary task took place. In June 2012 Dublin hosted the 50th International Eucharistic Congress, eighty years after it held the 31st Congress in 1932. It was regarded by church leaders as a means of encouraging renewal. A significant but largely neglected move in this direction occurred a year earlier with the launch in January 2011 of *Share the Good News*, the first Irish national directory for catechesis. National catechetical directories had been issued in France, Belgium and other countries even before the end of the Second Vatican Council but in Ireland, catechesis remained narrowly school-oriented for decades. *Share the Good News* set out a ten-year plan for evangelization, for catechesis, and for religious education, particularly of adults.⁸⁸ Diarmuid Martin described it as a recognition of the changed religious culture of Ireland in which 'we can no longer assume faith on the part

⁸⁵ *Dáil Debates*, vol. 739, no. 3 (20 July 2011) https://www.oireachtas.ie/en/debates/debate/dail/2011-07-20/19/#spk_559 (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

⁸⁶ *Irish Times*, 7 Aug. 2018.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 5 Sept. 2018.

⁸⁸ *ICD 2012*, p. 8.

of young people who have attended Catholic schools nor indeed young people who come from Catholic families'.⁸⁹

Since the turn of the present century there have been numerous listening exercises by individual bishops, consultative assemblies of religious and laity, diocesan assemblies, and in Limerick in 2016 the first diocesan synod in over half a century. Much has been written on a desire for change in the domains of church teaching, leadership, participatory structures, gender, and ministry, among others. As Eugene Duffy argues, the missing vital element has been agreed instruments of accountability for the implementation of renewal for all concerned, but in particular the local bishop.⁹⁰ The example of the Limerick synod, which was shaped by an eighteen-month listening process involving 5,000 people across the diocese, may provide a template for other dioceses. The narrative of decline and this chapter's focus on the institutional church should not obscure the fact that a critical mass of believers remains, that religion retains a public salience, and that developments at a local grassroots level and youth movements such as Youth 2000 (which began in Ireland in 1993) have prioritized greater lay involvement and a more evangelical church. An analysis of EVS surveys of 22 countries in 2014 and 2016 found that 36 per cent of Irish adults attended a religious service at least once a week, whereas the average was 12.8 per cent. Even those aged between 16 and 29 – Ireland's least religious cohort – were more likely to pray than other Europeans: fifty-four per cent identified as Catholic, twenty-four per cent attended church and forty-three per cent prayed on a weekly basis; only Portugal and Poland recorded higher Mass attendance.⁹¹

Conclusion

Pope Francis visited Ireland on 25 and 26 August 2018 as part of the ninth international World Meeting of Families. In May 2018 two-thirds of Irish voters favoured the repeal of the eighth amendment, prompting some commentators to pronounce the end of the Catholic church in Ireland. Yet, the following month half a million tickets were booked for the closing papal Mass on 26 August. In the event, the number who braved the inclement weather was much lower than predicted. The most significant episode of the papal visit was a 90-minute meeting

⁸⁹ Press release on launch of *Share the Good News*, 5 Jan. 2011.

⁹⁰ Eugene Duffy, 'Assembly or Synod? – some theological considerations', *The Furrow*, 63(6)(2012), pp. 299-300.

⁹¹ Stephen Bullivant, *Europe's Young Adults and Religion* (2018), <https://www.stmarys.ac.uk/research/centres/benedict-xvi/docs/2018-mar-europe-young-people-report-eng.pdf> (accessed 11 Dec. 2020).

between Francis and eight survivors of clerical abuse.⁹² Although hastily arranged, after strong entreaties from the archbishop of Dublin, the meeting shaped the penitential rite for the papal Mass when a repentant pope sought forgiveness. Strikingly, the pontiff was reminded throughout his visit of the need, as Taoiseach Leo Varadkar put it, ‘to ensure that from words flow actions’. Given that reform and renewal have been the hallmarks of his papacy, it will be fascinating to see what, if anything, the ‘Francis effect’ on Ireland will be.

Two months after the 2018 papal visit, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin celebrated the final Mass in the Church of the Annunciation in Finglas. Opened in 1967, it was one of the largest churches in Ireland with a capacity for almost 3,500. In the intervening decades, its massive concrete and steel structure deteriorated, and its congregation waned to a fraction of what it had once been. The building was approved for demolition. In its place a new church one tenth of the size and a parish centre will be built, while the remaining land is earmarked for housing the elderly. This closing vignette encapsulates the extent and texture of the decline experienced by the institutional church between the papal visits (Figure 16.1). It might also serve as a fitting metaphor for the church and the ongoing challenge of adaptation it faces if it is to speak convincingly to the needs of contemporary Catholic Ireland.



⁹² *Irish Times*, 1 Sept. 2018.

Figure 16.1: Waving crowd as Pope John Paul II flies over Phoenix Park, Dublin, 1979. Photograph with permission of Tony Murray and reproduced in *Holy Pictures* (Dublin, 2020), p. 136.

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