

Chapter 7

‘Return them to power with sufficient strength to complete their work’¹: the Roman Catholic Church and the 1923 General Election

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In his classic political science work on Irish elections, Cornelius O’Leary contends that the general election for the fourth Dáil in August 1923 was the first since 1910 ‘to be held in what approximated to normal political conditions’.² While such an observation was possible with the benefit of hindsight, few contemporaries in 1923 would have agreed. Given that the election took place just three months after the end of the Irish civil war with the Irish Free State still on a war footing, the campaign was inevitably dominated by the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921, fratricidal conflict, and the future political and social stability of the state. As Michael Laffan has observed, the government campaigned ‘on a “safety first” programme, associating itself with Ireland’s independence and democracy’.³ Bill Kissane goes further by suggesting the government’s chief ploy was ‘to frighten the voters’ into thinking that their interests and the safety of the state were at stake.⁴ The outgoing government was powerfully endorsed by the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the vast majority of Catholic clergy. At its most fundamental, an issue for churchmen was the need to uphold the authority of the state, to safeguard the stability of the political system, to place the arduous task of national reconstruction in capable hands, and to ensure that justice and peace would prevail after the sufferings of the civil war. Bishop Michael Fogarty of Killaloe claimed that ‘the issue really at stake in this election is national safety or national death’.⁵ The Catholic hierarchy and clergy were remarkably active during the election campaign. They championed the record of W. T. Cosgrave’s ministry and encouraged the electorate to pass a positive verdict on it.

That the Catholic hierarchy stood shoulder to shoulder with Cumann na nGaedheal was not surprising. Between the signing of the treaty in December 1921 and the 1923 General Election, the stance of the Catholic bishops was characterised by obeisance to the legally constituted government, advocacy of majority rule, support for order and social stability, condemnation of the partition of Ireland, and abjuration of republican political violence. Both

individually and collectively, the Catholic hierarchy were committed, in Patrick Murray's compelling phrase, to 'sustaining' and reinforcing the authority of a nascent Irish state and were committed to the survival of the treaty settlement.⁶ In April and October 1922, powerful statements were issued by the hierarchy that condemned the actions of the anti-treaty IRA. The October pastoral sought to strip the republican campaign of any legitimacy, to appeal for obedience to the legitimate government, to threaten the removal of the sacraments from those engaged in unlawful rebellion, and to appeal to republicans to pursue their grievances through constitutional means.⁷ During the civil war, there was no public episcopal condemnation of the government's execution policy (although several bishops appealed in private for clemency) or the conduct of the National army. Michael McCabe suggests that had the bishops overtly disagreed with aspects of the government's policy, it may have occasioned questions about its legitimacy or lent credence to the anti-treaty cause.⁸ The hierarchy faced significant criticism from republicans for its position, including an appeal to the pope.⁹

During the early months of 1923, several episcopal pronouncements emphasised the necessities of stable government, constitutional political action and unimpeded elections. For instance, in his Lenten pastoral in February 1923, Archbishop Thomas Gilmartin of Tuam urged, 'for the gun, the revolver, the bomb and the mine, substitute argument. For terrorism substitute an appeal to the dignity and intelligence of the voter'.¹⁰ The pastoral of Cardinal Michael Logue of Armagh was even more forthright. Describing the government as all that stood 'between us and absolute anarchy', he looked forward to the return of peace when the people would have the opportunity of making their electoral views known on a wide franchise. To be effective, such an election must be

free from violence, from coercion, from unfair devices, from absurd 'pacts' which would make it a selection, not an election. All parties should be free to advocate their principles in press, on platform, in committees by peaceful canvass, and by any other means legitimate in a lawful election.¹¹

As the end of the civil war came into view in May 1923, similar sentiments were expressed by Archbishop John Harty of Cashel. He prayed for a peace that will 'recognise the legitimate authority of the Government that is elected by the people', 'a peace that will ensure that the law of God shall be observed' and one where political controversies 'can be carried on without any personal ill-feeling and all public questions can be settled in the ordinary constitutional way, by a free vote of the people'.¹² In the event, Harty's prayers were answered as the election campaign was a remarkably peaceful one despite its proximity to the civil war.¹³

Cumann na nGaedheal's election manifesto emphasised the need 'to secure and to safeguard the status of national sovereignty to which you have attained ... by supporting with your united strength the party whose programme stands for the realisation of the immense possibilities the ratification of the Treaty and of the Constitution open up for our country'.¹⁴ That message reverberated in the electoral pronouncements of churchmen. The most common medium of episcopal comment during the election campaign was through letters addressed to election meetings. Four broad themes can be discerned in these statements: a concern for law and order, urging the continuation in government of the Cosgrave ministry, a fear of political fragmentation, and to a lesser extent engagement with the policy provisions in the Cumann na nGaedheal manifesto.

Several bishops stressed the debt owed to the outgoing government for upholding the authority of the state. In a letter to a pro-government meeting in Tralee in late July, Bishop Charles O'Sullivan of Kerry praised the 'exceptional tenacity, firmness, moral and physical courage' which Cosgrave's government 'brought to the self-sacrificing and unflinching performance of their duty', even at 'risk of grave unpopularity' as they 'unflinchingly held the Bearn Baoghail [the breach] for Ireland'.¹⁵ Bishop Fogarty of Killaloe, with whom Cosgrave stayed when campaigning in Ennis, claimed that the government had 'rescued our island from anarchy, and triumphantly vindicated public order and justice regardless of their own lives or popularity ... It now rests with the people to build a strong Ireland upon these foundations'.¹⁶ Bishop Patrick Finegan of Kilmore enjoined electors in Cavan to show gratitude to the government for vindicating 'the right of the majority to rule', thereby upholding 'the first principle of democracy'.¹⁷ One of the most ringing endorsements came from Bishop Patrick Morrisroe of Achonry in a letter to a meeting in Ballaghaderreen, County Roscommon on 19 August:

Every man and woman who has the vote should feel a conscientious obligation of recording it for the candidates who are most likely to promote the general good of the entire community. The late government have restored peace at imminent risk to their lives, they have brought order out of confusion. Their administration of public affairs has been marked by statesmanship of the highest order.¹⁸

These statements referred implicitly to the personal losses suffered by members of the government. Cosgrave's uncle was killed in September 1922 in what he believed was a personal attack and the Cosgrave family home was burned in January 1923.¹⁹ The following month Dr Thomas F. O'Higgins, father of Kevin O'Higgins the minister for home affairs and

vice-president of the executive council, was killed during a raid on his home in Stradbally, County Laois.²⁰

When Frank Aiken, IRA chief of staff, issued a final order for republicans to dump arms on 24 May 1923 there was no formal truce or surrender of weapons. Some prelates were concerned that as long as a considerable quantity of arms lay outside government control then in the words of Bishop Finegan, ‘a recrudescence of the terror is possible’.²¹ Archbishop Gilmartin also drew attention to the issue of arms in a letter to a Cumann na nGaedheal meeting in Castlebar on 5 August. This was a particular concern for him as low intensity anti-treaty IRA operations continued in parts of Connacht, particularly in Mayo, for the remainder of 1923. Gilmartin hoped that the forthcoming election would produce ‘a Government strong and able enough to complete the task of rescuing the country from anarchy, terrorism and commercial ruin’.²² He criticised those who had opposed the treaty for not forming ‘a constitutional opposition instead of organising an armed revolt’, which in the circumstances was a crime. For Gilmartin it was the duty of the electorate ‘to make the repetition of such a crime impossible’.²³ To that end, an essential precondition for peace was that all arms be brought under the control of the government. Notably, the 1923 Public Safety Act, passed at the end of September 1923 in one of the new government’s first actions following the opening of the fourth Dáil, contained detailed provisions on the control and licensing of firearms.²⁴ These were strengthened further under the Firearms Act in 1925.

Almost all of the bishops insisted on the need for the Cosgrave ministry to continue in government. This was not tantamount to an uncritical endorsement of the government’s record but rather a plea that the future of the Free State be placed in trustworthy hands. In this way, political and social stability could be consolidated and secured. At a meeting in Grand Parade in Cork city on 8 July 1923, attended by Cosgrave, Eoin MacNeill and Ernest Blythe, a large crowd heard a letter from Bishop Daniel Cohalan of Cork. Although the prelate ‘made it a rule not to interfere in politics’, nevertheless he stated his belief that Cosgrave’s ministry should be allowed to carry on.²⁵ The bishop counselled, presciently as it transpired, that time was required for all departments of state and the army, in particular, to be trained to submit to the civil authority:

In five years’ time, the great public departments and services won’t care who are the ministers of Government, but during the period which immediately follows a revolution the personnel of a Ministry counts for much in securing and fostering the loyal submission of all services and of all citizens to the civil authority.²⁶

Similarly, electors in Tipperary heard Archbishop Harty's conviction that a 'change of Government at the present moment would lead to instability and want of confidence in the stability of the young nation'. The archbishop hoped, therefore, that the poll would 'result in a majority for the Government which has successfully steered the ship of state into a safe harbour'.²⁷ Cardinal Logue warned of the dangers of mismanagement. He maintained that the safest course was to support the outgoing government which 'may have made some mistakes but have done wonders during the past year to reorganise the country, establish order, secure peace, and lay a solid foundation to build up the future prosperity of the country'.²⁸ In a letter to a Cumann na nGaedheal meeting in Mullingar, Bishop Laurence Gaughran of Meath warned that 'the work of the nation is yet only half finished'. Given that the most important portion of that work remained, he asked if it would therefore be 'folly as well as ingratitude to take out of the hands of men so capable the destinies of the country that they have so safely guarded?'²⁹

The 1923 General Election was the first election fought on a universal adult suffrage. It was also the first in which every constituency was contested with 375 candidates standing for 153 seats; some 19 groups competed for votes.³⁰ In some episcopal minds such a broad field might produce a fragmented and unstable political system. Cardinal Logue warned voters at a meeting in Dundalk to be 'on their guard' against 'so-called Independent candidates' who may be 'returned on false pretences'. His advice was not to 'follow too many particular interests' or 'run after Independents, however fair their promises may be'.³¹ The cardinal's letter drew a spirited criticism from Ralph Brereton Barry, a lawyer from a unionist family background and a future Fine Gael election candidate.³² He took issue with Logue's inference that independents were in reality in alliance with one political party or another. He maintained that independents stood in the belief that TDs were 'wanted in the Dáil who will offer a sane and reasoned criticism of the decisions and actions of the executive, who will not represent exclusively class interests nor act as voting machines in accordance with Mr O'Higgins' nod'.³³ Brereton Barry suggested that some of those who sat on the fence, in the cardinal's phrase, did so to avoid indulging in futile recriminations about the civil war. He closed his letter with the remark that 'His eminence will doubtless recall recent periods in Irish history when the fence was by no means so untenanted'.³⁴ Bishop O'Sullivan warned of the danger of particular economic classes safeguarding their own interests when it was paramount that a strong national government be established that would be 'sufficiently strong and independent to be able to refuse to subordinate national to purely section interests'.³⁵ Likewise, Bishop Fogarty took issue with independents and smaller parties that were capable

of detaching votes from Cumann na nGaedheal. He attempted to focus minds by suggesting that a robust ministry backed up by a strong parliament would not be achieved from ‘a Dáil of shreds and patches of broken interests’.³⁶ In an uncertain political climate, such episcopal concerns were not without foundation. As John Regan has argued, the ‘possibility of a large, even a majority, anti-treaty party entering the Dáil, coupled to the uncertainty surrounding the allegiance of many of the Labour party, Farmers’ party and even some of the treatyite deputies to the treaty settlement’ demanded a large and cohesive pro-treaty party in the Dáil.³⁷ From December 1922 de Valera and Austin Stack had busied themselves with the creation of an anti-treaty political organisation and ‘the cessation of the republican military campaign ensured that the considerable efforts of its proponents could now be focused on political agitation’.³⁸

A handful of bishops engaged specifically with the legislative record of Cumann na nGaedheal and the policy commitments outlined in the party’s election manifesto. Bishop Finegan of Kilmore was a case in point. In a letter to a Cumann na nGaedheal election meeting in Cavan on 5 August, attended by Cosgrave, Finegan gave prominence to the settling of ‘the long standing and vexed land question on terms just to the parties primarily concerned’.³⁹ This was a reference to the 1923 land act which aimed to complete the transfer of holdings begun under the British government in the nineteenth century. A bill was introduced in May and became law on 9 August, less than three weeks before polling day. Notably, those who had engaged in violence against the state were excluded from the provisions of the act.⁴⁰ Finegan also mentioned the boundary question and financial relations with Britain – vital issues that the incumbent government was best equipped to address and which should be the first consideration of the Cavan electorate. Bishop O’Sullivan of Kerry also made explicit reference to the boundary with Northern Ireland and fiscal relations with Britain. He suggested that the settlement of those policy areas involved not merely ‘national honour’ but ‘the whole economic development of our country’.⁴¹ This further buttressed his argument against the danger of electing a parliament representative of sectional interests. Bishop Gaughran also claimed that the government ‘deserves well of the country’ given the ‘amount of useful legislation enacted’.⁴²

With the exception of Bishop Fogarty, bishops generally refrained from *ad hominem* criticism of republicans. In a move that ultimately proved counterproductive in electoral terms, de Valera was arrested in Ennis on 15 August and subsequently lodged in Arbour Hill prison.⁴³ Four days later, Fogarty strongly condemned him in a letter to an election meeting in Ennis. He described de Valera as ‘the man of all others ... responsible for the shame, ruin and

bloodshed of the past 12 months, and who has the hardihood now to say he never stood for destruction'.⁴⁴ The bishop had been a staunch ally when de Valera, then a political novice, was first returned for East Clare in July 1917 and celebrated the funeral mass for republican hunger-striker Thomas Ashe in September 1917.⁴⁵ During the War of Independence, Fogarty was the bishop closest to Sinn Féin. However, relations with de Valera broke down over the treaty and civil war to the extent that Fogarty developed an almost pathological dislike of the future Fianna Fáil leader that mellowed little during his lengthy episcopacy. In what appears to have been a coordinated move, when Cosgrave addressed the Ennis meeting he was accompanied by Daniel F. Cohalan, the Irish-American nationalist leader and judge of the supreme court of New York who had clashed with de Valera during the latter's sojourn in the United States in 1919–20. In the event, de Valera was returned with 17,762 votes (more than two quotas) compared to 8,196 first preferences for Eoin MacNeill, the minister for education and the only Cumann na nGaedheal candidate elected in Clare. De Valera's massive surplus helped secure a second republican seat for Brian O'Higgins, even though he initially polled only 114 first preference votes and was in last place.⁴⁶ The remaining two seats in Clare went to Labour and the Farmer's Party.

A small number of bishops extended their involvement in the election beyond open letters to the public or subscriptions to electoral funds by recommending or nominating candidates. For example, Patrick Foley, bishop of Kildare and Leighlin, commended the candidacy of W. T. Cosgrave and Tom Bolger in the Carlow-Kilkenny constituency. The prelate and Bolger had been contemporaries at school. Foley confidently pronounced that the performance of the outgoing ministry provided 'a guarantee of future success which no other group of politicians who are seeking the suffrages of the electors can furnish'.⁴⁷ Bishop James Naughton of Killala went a step further by proposing Joseph McGrath, minister for industry and commerce, as a candidate in North Mayo.⁴⁸ This was a rare example of nomination papers being endorsed by a member of the hierarchy.

The clergy followed the lead of their bishops and were active in a variety of ways during the election campaign in support of Cumann na nGaedheal and the Free State. After the official launch of the party at a convention in the Mansion House in Dublin on 27 April 1923, attended by some clergy, priests were active as party officers and organisers.⁴⁹ For example, Fr P. J. Doyle, a curate in Naas, was one of 24 members of the general council of Cumann na nGaedheal.⁵⁰ When a branch of the party was set up in Bray in early May, Fr Joseph Hickey, the local curate, was elected president.⁵¹ In County Cavan there was a push to

establish branches in July ahead of the constituency convention on 7 August. Fr Martin Comey was elected president of the Killygarry branch and Fr John McDermott was elected chairman of the Belturbet branch.⁵² The party's constituency committee in Clare was chaired by Fr Charles Culligan, curate in Kilkee, with Fr P. J. O'Sullivan of St Flannan's College, Ennis, as honorary secretary. Canon William O'Kennedy, president of St Flannan's who had been imprisoned on Bere Island in 1921, was appointed director of elections.⁵³

Several election candidates were nominated, seconded or assented to by priests. While this was not restricted to those running for Cumann na nGaedheal, the party's candidates attracted greater clerical backing than other parties. In the County Dublin constituency Kevin O'Higgins was proposed by Fr Peter Dunne, parish priest of Howth, for Cumann na nGaedheal and in the same constituency Canon Christopher Grimes, parish priest of Rush, proposed John Rooney for the Farmer's Party.⁵⁴ A similar pattern obtained in the constituencies of Leix-Offaly, Monaghan, and Wexford. In Leix-Offaly, Seán Kelly of Cumann na nGaedheal was proposed by Monsignor J. Murphy, parish priest and vicar-general of Maryborough, and seconded by Fr Patrick Doyle, a curate in Maryborough, whereas Fr John Gorman, parish priest of Philipstown (now Daingean), proposed Patrick J. Birmingham for the Farmer's Party.⁵⁵ Neither candidate was elected. In the Monaghan constituency, Ernest Blythe was proposed for Cumann na nGaedheal by Thomas Toal and seconded by Canon Andrew Maguire, parish priest of Carrickmacross. His running mate Patrick Duffy was proposed by Senator Bernard O'Rourke and seconded by Fr Philip Mulligan, parish priest of Tydavnet. The Farmer's Party candidate, Hugh Maguire, was also nominated by a priest as was James Johnston who stood as an independent.⁵⁶ In the Wexford constituency, clergy nominated Osmond Grattan Esmonde and Thomas McCarthy for Cumann na nGaedheal. The two Farmer's Party candidates – Michael Doyle and Michael Jordan – were proposed by Fr J. Quigley, parish priest of Tagoat, and Fr A. Forrestal, parish priest of Newtownbarry, respectively.⁵⁷ Remarkably, in Limerick four of the five Cumann na nGaedheal candidates – James Ledden, John A. Smyth, John Nolan and Patrick Walsh – were proposed by priests; Dr Richard Hayes, who topped the poll for Cumann na nGaedheal, was the exception.⁵⁸

There are also examples of clerical support for republican candidates. Among those who nominated James Colbert, brother of the 1916 martyr Con, in the Limerick constituency were Fr Thomas Wall, a curate in Foynes, and Fr Cornelius O'Sullivan, a curate in Monagea.⁵⁹ Colbert won the fourth seat. In the Galway constituency, Barney Mellows was proposed by Canon Patrick Moran, parish priest of Claregalway, and seconded by Fr James

Kelly of Spiddal; they also put forward papers for Louis O'Dea and Frank Fahy.⁶⁰ All three republican candidates were elected. In addition, the republican Colm Ó Gaora was proposed by Fr Thomas Burke, a curate in St Joseph's, Rahoon in Galway city.⁶¹ At the Cumann na nGaedheal selection convention in Clare on 30 July, Canon O'Kennedy's resolution that Eoin MacNeill be invited to stand for Clare was passed unanimously. When MacNeill agreed he was proposed by Fr John McNerney, parish priest of Kilrush and vicar-general.⁶² Not to be outdone, de Valera was proposed by Patrick Keran, parish priest of Ballyvaughan, who also nominated Michael Comyn and Brian O'Higgins as anti-treaty candidates.⁶³

Clergy, and especially parish priests, were prominent at election meetings where they chaired proceedings, introduced speakers and openly endorsed the Cosgrave ministry. A meeting in Claremorris on 1 July addressed by W. T. Cosgrave, Kevin O'Higgins, and Patrick Hogan, minister for agriculture, was chaired by Dean Thomas F. Macken, the local parish priest and vicar-general.⁶⁴ When Cosgrave attended a meeting in support of the government in Tralee on 22 July the clergy came out in force. Among the platform party were David O'Leary, parish priest of Tralee and dean of Kerry, who chaired the meeting; Fr T. J. Lyne, administrator of Annascaul; Fr Timothy Trant, parish priest of Ballymacelligott; and Fr P. J. Brennan, parish priest of Castlemaine.⁶⁵ When Cosgrave visited Cavan on 5 August, Fr Martin Comey chaired the meeting and eulogised Arthur Griffith as the father of Irish freedom. He was joined on the platform by Fr Peter Lynch, parish priest of Crossdoney, Fr Bernard Brady, parish priest of Belturbet, and Fr John O'Reilly, a curate in Cavan town.⁶⁶ At a local level, hundreds of election meetings were chaired by priests.

A notable feature of the 1923 General Election not replicated to the same extent in subsequent contests, for various reasons as explained below, was the clerical inclination to pronounce their pro-government partisanship. Examples abounded. At an election meeting in Clonmel in early July, Fr Daniel F. Walsh, the local parish priest, wrote to state that the fate of Ireland was in the balance and that 'it was the duty of the people to stand by the Government which had done so much in such a short time against such dreadful odds'. Similar sentiments were expressed by Innocent Ryan, parish priest and dean of Cashel, who urged 'all lovers of a free and independent Ireland to rally to the support of the people's government'.⁶⁷ Canon T. Cummins, parish priest of Roscommon, presided at a meeting in Market Square, Roscommon in August where Cumann na nGaedheal candidates opened their campaign. He told those assembled that his advice was the same as that of Cardinal Logue 'to vote for the Government every time' because:

This election was not a choice between candidates: It was a choice between the questions whether Ireland was to live or die. The Republicans had done their worst already by rifles and bombs and the petrol can, and they asked people to add to that destruction by their votes ... Mr de Valera wanted them to destroy the liberty they had won because of the shadow of a name. This modern Samson, blinded by folly, having pulled down the pillars of the State and involved himself in the wreck of fifty million pounds, wanted their votes to resurrect him.⁶⁸

When Fr P. Gaynor, a curate in Birr, presided at an election meeting addressed by Cumann na nGaedheal candidates Francis Bulfin, Patrick Egan and Seán Kelly, he stated that one of the reasons that led him to support the treaty was that it held out more hope of achieving a north-south unity than did a republic.⁶⁹ His colleague Fr Joseph Houlihan, chaired a subsequent meeting in nearby Kinnitty where he served as curate. He pronounced that his bishop Dr Fogarty, his parish priest and himself would each vote for the government.⁷⁰

Some priests published letters in the press in support of particular candidates. For example, on 27 August, polling day, the *Freeman's Journal* published a letter from Fr Patrick Daly, parish priest of Castlepollard, which endorsed Patrick W. Shaw, a Cumann na nGaedheal candidate in the Longford-Westmeath constituency. The priest trusted that the voters would have the patriotic spirit to recognise what the government candidate represented:

You stand for ordered government versus anarchy. You stand for the protection of life and property; you stand for the building up of the ruins that strew the country; you stand for the resurrection of Ireland, for its restored moral and financial status; you stand, in fine, for the Government that has, in face of obstacles almost insurmountable, given us in these days a taste of the liberty and prosperity for which our father sighed.⁷¹

Despite such emphatic clerical support, the poll was topped by republican Conor Byrne who secured 5,299 first preferences to 5,147 for Shaw in second place.

The result of the poll in Longford–Westmeath raises the broader question of how significant the support of the Catholic Church proved to Cumann na nGaedheal. While it is impossible to provide a definitive answer, some observations can be advanced. The election result was somewhat disappointing for Cumann na nGaedheal, notwithstanding its rather offhand approach to electioneering and underdeveloped branch structure. It secured 39 per cent of the vote and 63 of the 153 seats. Despite the manifest difficulties that they faced, not least the fact that as many as 10,000 were interned at the end of the civil war, republicans

secured 27.5 per cent of the vote and 44 seats.⁷² In fact, the republican share of the vote had increased since the 1922 election by 6 per cent, despite the warnings of hierarchy and clergy, whereas that for Cumann na nGaedheal rose by just 0.5 per cent.⁷³ Labour won 14 seats and the Farmer's Party secured 15. The church's warnings against returning independents to the fourth Dáil did not prevent 63 candidates from seeking votes under that banner. Independents secured 15 seats and 9.4 per cent of the total vote. The number of seats retained by them remained relatively steady until the snap election of 1933.⁷⁴ The election result suggests that the political influence of the church was not particularly decisive, although the ruthless excesses of the government's prosecution of the civil war and the fact that all constituencies were contested on a wider franchise than 1922 must also be taken into account when considering the magnitude of the republican vote.

In many respects the outcome of the election and manner of the contest eased the anxieties of the hierarchy. The result endorsed the treaty, the constitution and the Irish Free State which the bishops had vehemently defended during and after the civil war. The principle of majority rule invoked in 1918 and defended in 1922 was secured in 1923. Second, the abstentionist policy of republicans ensured that Cumann na nGaedheal possessed a commanding majority in the Dáil, thereby delivering the hierarchy's cherished aim of political stability. In September 1923, Archbishop Edward Byrne of Dublin sent invitations to Cosgrave and to members of the Oireachtas to attend a solemn votive Mass to the Holy Spirit to ask Divine guidance on their deliberations. This took place in the Pro Cathedral in Dublin on 3 October.⁷⁵ It signalled a return to a normality of sorts.

Third, republican candidates and voters embraced constitutional politics in a largely peaceful campaign. In this sense, as Bill Kissane argues, the election proved to be a 'mechanism of deradicalisation' because it marginalised political violence and revealed a consensus on the primacy of democratic politics.⁷⁶ During the largescale republican hunger strike in October 1923 episcopal appeals to the government instanced republican adherence to constitutional methods. Writing privately to Cosgrave, Archbishop Edward Byrne of Dublin stated that any deaths from hunger strike would be 'a downright calamity for the country' and would cause 'such revulsion as to shake the very foundation of the state'.⁷⁷ Cardinal Logue was even more forthright when he intervened publicly the following month. Doubting the morality of the republican protest, he appealed to them to abandon it in favour of a 'more reasonable, natural and lawful means of ... advocating their political views'. But the cardinal also urged the government, which did not yield, 'not to do things by halves and by dribbles, thus prolonging the agony' and to release the untried and unconvicted because the 'leaders of

the so-called Republican party have declared that they are prepared to abstain from violence and seek to secure their political aims by constitutional means'.⁷⁸ The embrace by republicans of constitutional politics satisfied the episcopal desire to draw patriotism away from the gun. By the end of 1923 the vast majority of republican internees had been released and all had been freed by the autumn of the following year. Furthermore, an amnesty was declared for crimes committed during the civil war. For these reasons Kevin O'Higgins told the Oxford Union in October 1924 that the country was now more 'normal' than at any time since 1912 or 1913.⁷⁹

Widespread clerical involvement in politics and the comingling of democracy and popular Catholicism stretched back to the era of Daniel O'Connell, its original architect. Although the decrees of the plenary synod of Maynooth in 1900 forbade priests from entering political disputes at public meetings and in the press, it was largely ignored during the tumultuous years of the Irish Revolution. Between 2 and 15 August 1927, a plenary synod was held at Maynooth to bring Irish ecclesiastical decrees from earlier synods into conformity with the new code of canon law promulgated in 1917.⁸⁰ The new decrees received the sanction of the pope in June 1928 and were promulgated by the Irish Catholic hierarchy on 17 November 1929.⁸¹ In communicating the decrees to the laity, the hierarchy highlighted a medley of dangers that imperilled the faith and morals of Catholic Ireland: 'the dance hall, the bad book, the indecent paper, the motion picture, the immodest fashion in female dress'.⁸² Their lordships also made reference to politics. While welcoming 'party zeal and frank criticism' in public affairs, the hierarchy appealed to the people 'to cast out for ever the spirit of rancour and animosity, wherever it has found a lodgement ... and put in its place a 'spirit of forbearance and conciliation'.⁸³ The Maynooth synod also made it clear that 'political addresses, election harangues and all such discourses in church' – set down in canon 139 of the code of canon law – were forbidden on pain of suspension.⁸⁴ Increasingly from the mid-1930s, secular and political matters not touching on faith and morals were left to the laity. By 1937, 'the Church had disengaged itself from active participation in the electoral process in the South'.⁸⁵

In a letter read in churches in Cork on the morning of the 1923 General Election, Bishop Cohan suggested that the electors should vote for those who would cooperate in establishing statehood and stable government in the country, for those who would give security to life and home and property, and who would restore social life in the land in conformity with God's commandments.⁸⁶ The Catholic hierarchy and the vast majority of clergy naturally invested in the political party that promoted the vista of a Catholic

democratic state. Tom Garvin suggests that at a time when the legitimacy of the state remained in dispute the government was reassured by ‘the superabundant reserves of political legitimacy enjoyed by the Catholic Church’.⁸⁷ W. T. Cosgrave appears to have agreed. In a letter to his friend Bishop Fogarty in December 1923, he ascribed Cumann na nGaedheal’s success to the support of people in ‘high and important positions throughout the country’.⁸⁸ He could afford to indulge episcopal *amour propre* because the result of 1923 General Election vindicated the triumphant alliance of the church and his government.