

FRANCIS IN IRELAND – THE MOST CHALLENGING VISIT OF HIS PONTIFICATE

“*Young people of Ireland, I love you ...*” were the words of Pope John Paul II in Galway on September 1979. The applause lasted 16 minutes, Ireland was in a state of sheer euphoria. During the first ever visit by the bishop of Rome, to the then very Catholic Ireland, over 1.8 million people, almost half the country’s population, turned up to see him.

Four decades later, Pope Francis, who spends just a day and a half in Ireland to assist at the **World Meeting of Families**, will be hosted in a different kind of Ireland than that of the late 1970s. It’s no exaggeration to say that the church in Ireland has been living a real *via crucis* for the past 30 years, where one scandal is hardly over before another one emerges.

Many date the profound crisis of the church in Ireland to 1992 when Eamon Casey, while Bishop of Galway, resigned after a newspaper revealed that he had fathered a child and had paid his mistress with church funds. Faithful Catholics were heartbroken and scandalised, but fathering a child by a bishop was just the tip of the iceberg. The paedophile scandals which followed rocked the church to its core. A whole series of reports, commissioned by the government, indicated that the problem of paedophilia was endemic both among diocesan and religious clergy. Sisters’ congregations were also found to have abused children in their care. The Madeline Laundries and the Tuam babies scandal still haunt the minds of many. The horror of what happened will not go away. It’s almost like living a thirty-year nightmare, one commentator admitted.

Could this be the result of a church which was nearly as powerful as the State or where, particularly in areas of education and healthcare, it had almost total control? Even today, approximately 80 % of primary schools are still, in theory, managed by the Catholic church where children are ‘taught’ for the sacraments, first communion and confirmation, but many rarely see the door of the church after the ‘big day’. Thirty years ago, there were 7 major seminaries in Ireland. In September 2017, only the national seminary in Maynooth remained open with just 41 seminarians studying for the 26 dioceses in the island. This is thought to be the lowest number since the seminary was founded in 1795.

The different crises experienced by the church can also be reflected in the passing of legislation which many see as being contrary to official church teaching. It was in 1980 that a law was passed enabling anyone over the age 18 to have access to contraception. The divorce debate in the 1980s then followed. In 1986, the first attempt to remove the constitutional prohibition on divorce failed, but 10 years later in 1996 the referendum was passed and divorce became legal. The tight conditions of the law obliged the couple seeking a divorce to live apart for four of their five years of marriage. A new referendum is awaited in November 2018 which will reduce this waiting period to just two years, thus making divorce all the easier. Probably the most highlighted media attention which gained worldwide coverage was the associated with the ‘Equality Referendum’ in 2015, allowing homosexual couples to marry civilly. This was the first “people’s referendum” to take place in the world, given that similar laws in other countries, such as in France, were simply passed by a vote of parliament.

The 2018, a referendum opening the door for abortion on demand up to 12 weeks was passed with a huge majority of 63%. While 78% of the population considers itself Catholic, according to the 2016 census, it was a shock to many Catholics that Irish people would vote so overwhelmingly against this fundamental Catholic teaching.

The World Meeting of Families and the Pope's short visit to Ireland must therefore be seen in an Irish society which has undergone tremendous social and political change since the 1970s. The challenges facing the Church for the next 50 years are thus immense. The Irish church as in rest of Europe, will have to concentrate in forming faith communities composed of laypeople who can 'carry' the wounded church forward. The biggest challenge will no doubt be the transmission of faith, the question of education and catechesis, while the church loses its privileged place in the Catholic education sphere with new legislation calling for the divestiture from catholic schools. With an ageing clergy and few structures in place, there is fear that future generations of young people will not be catechised.

On a more positive note, there is an ever-increasing investment and commitment by lay Catholics who devote a lot of volunteer time to the parish or who sometimes are called to replace the priest for liturgies when none is available. Forty years after the ordination of permanent deacons in the Americas and Europe, permanent deacons are now being formed and ordained in Ireland. There is an acceptance among the laity that parish priests, who are very often advanced in years, will soon have 5 to 10 churches to care for, particular in rural areas. Irish Catholics are very generous to the church at home and also in supporting the missionary church abroad. Despite the fall in the numbers of people practising on Sundays, pilgrimages to shrines such as Knock (where Our Lady appeared in 1879) Lourdes, Medjugorje, Fatima or to the Holy Land still continue to draw relatively large numbers, especially among the elderly and the sick. Generally speaking, Pope Francis' simplicity, love for the poor and frank speak is seen as a breath of fresh air to many Irish Catholics, both practicing and non-practicing alike. But his battle will surely be an uphill one, as he seeks to bring hope to a nation which has become secularised, 'modern' or even anti-Christian. The transition for Irish Catholicism from the 19th to the 21st century in 30 short years has been a painful one. In this pain, will the Argentinian pontiff be able to bring some solace?

Francis may not be able to do miracles, but some will see his visit to Ireland like that of a doctor's to a field hospital. It is there, as he finds suffering, injury and pain where his words of hope will be listened to and surely be felt as a healing balm.

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