The Church in Ireland: The Present State and the Path Ahead

“Consult not your fears but your hopes and your dreams."

St Pope John XXIII

When it was first published in 2003, the question mark in the title of *The End of Irish Catholicism?* was often overlooked, giving the (wrong) impression of a book bewailing the present state of the Irish Church. When I set out to write the book while on sabbatical in Boston, the question I posed to myself was: why has the Irish Church been unable to meet the challenges of the present with that courage, imagination and initiative which was the mark of early Irish Christianity and which in different ways continued down through the centuries, at least up to the 19th century? I concluded that so-called traditional Irish Catholicism –a cultural artefact – was a product of the special historical, social, economic and cultural circumstances of the second half of 19th century Ireland. Then it was a province of the United Kingdom struggling for national autonomy and identity, and the faith of our fathers played a central role in it. My somewhat surprising conclusion was that so-called traditional Irish Catholic culture was neither fully Catholic nor authentically Irish. Some readers were offended by this. The majority found it liberating.

But I also tried to show how a new Irish Catholic culture, more Christian, more genuinely Catholic, and more authentically Irish, might look – and what might be done to help realize that vision. In fact, that attempt to give signposts for the future makes up the greater part of the book. How should we, the Church, i.e. the body of believers, lay and clerical, respond to the challenges presented to it by modern, progressive and prosperous Ireland and by the option of our contemporaries for a more secular Ireland? To consult our hopes and dreams, we need to come to terms (i.e. to face up dispassionately and courageously) with what is negative in the past, but we also need, even more, to be inspired by what is overwhelmingly positive in that same past.

Evidently, no one – but the Lord Himself – has the answer to the many predicaments in which we find ourselves today as Catholics not only in Ireland but worldwide. All we can do at this stage is to ask: what mindset should we foster in our new situation in terms of faith and the practice of it? [[1]](#footnote-1) What can believers do in a modern Ireland that seems to have turned its back not only on the Church but, increasingly, on God? And by turning away from God, they are by that very fact turning their backs on his eternal design for our salvation, i.e. their real happiness, their true joy, in this life and in the next. That cannot leave us indifferent to their fate but should ignite, what Pope Francis calls, our true missionary spirit

There is no one key to the future but many. What I wish to propose for your consideration this evening, is what I think might be the key to the outside door of the house of authentic Christianity today, as it were: the front door that opens onto a long corridor inside with other doors leading to other spaces to be entered and explored – and to the treasures they contain. But it is a front door that must be approached through a long driveway. That key to the hall door, is, I think: Thanksgiving, festivity. Joseph Ratzinger once wrote: ‘The very purpose of the Church is to give us the experience of festivity.’ But what kind of festivity?

Modern Ireland has an apparently insatiable thirst for festivals, and most towns and villages have duly responded with festivals of every shape and hue, from different Fleadh Cheoil to the West Cork Chamber Music Festival, from the Wexford Opera Festival to the Limerick South American Culture Festival, from the Lambing Festival in Roscommon to Galway’s Arts Week, from the Yeats Festival in Sligo to the Ballydehob Summer Festival, at the core of which, incidentally, is an international Turnip Race! And that abundance is to be welcomed for various reason, not least of which is to remove the stigma on the simple pleasures of this world which stigma in various degrees marked traditional Irish Catholicism. That stigma was due, as far I can see, to a strange interpenetration of two cultural forces in the 19th century, namely Victorian Protestant prudery on the one hand and, on the other, an overly legalistic Catholic morality both of which saw pleasure as suspect, if not sinful. These festivals are a boost to the local economy, they give pleasure and fun to thousands, but they also offer an opportunity to take inspiration from the past, to provide suitable occasions to allow the extraordinary artistic, literary, musical and intellectual talent that abounds today in modern Ireland to flourish, inspire, and enrich us. They give colour to an otherwise humdrum daily round.

We have a lot to be thankful for in contemporary society. In his collection of essays, *Twenty-First Century Ireland: A View from America*, Professor John McCarthy of Fordham University, NY, has a refreshingly new view of ourselves and of recent developments. He seems to believe in us, more so than we do ourselves. There is much in modern Ireland to be criticized, to be improved, etc., but there is also much to be appreciated. One example of Professor McCarthy's positivity is his assessment of our achievement as a relatively new, modern democratic independent State which in the second quarter of the twentieth century, when Ireland was most consciously Catholic, did not collapse into dictatorship as Germany, France, Italy, Spain and Portugal did. From inauspicious beginnings after the War of Independence and the Civil War, the fledgling Free State learned to play its part on the international stage as a sovereign nation with its own distinctive identity as a Catholic State. There is much to be criticized in modern politics – the media is full of it each day – and in society in general, but there is also much to be grateful for, including much of the transport services and, indeed, much of the public health service – admittedly, once one gets off one’s trolley and on to a bed in a hospital. They are not perfect; they can and must be improved. Much of what is good is due to our Catholic heritage – and also, we must admit, much of what is negative (e.g. our conformism, lack of moral courage, lack of theological reflection). But let us be thankful for what is good.

Gladys Ganiel, a sociologist in QUB in an article in the Autumn 2019 issue of *Studies*, critiques the general impression (as given in the previous issue of *Studies* dedicated to the aftermath of the last year’s Papal Visit) that the Pope’s presence in Ireland did little to counter the sense of beleaguerment felt by many Irish Catholics today, in particular the clergy. This beleaguerment is due to sense of being continually under attack by the media – coupled with a sense of powerlessness with regard to overcoming the abuse crisis. She concludes her article: “… my survey revealed that sizeable minorities of the general population, and especially practising Catholics and people under thirty-five, are open to a more favourable view of the Church, and more engagement with it through changing religious practices, than might be expected.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

At this stage, I am tempted to ask the question: is it possible that there may be more genuine Catholics today trying to live out their faith in a largely secularized Ireland than at the time when Ireland was renowned as a Catholic State, indeed *the* Catholic State? God only knows. But there are some outward signs of renewal in the Church in Ireland, especially at parish level and among youth groups at national level, which can be inspiring. With one or two exceptions, what is absent is a strong and convincing public voice at the hierarchical level of leadership, but that will come in time, and perhaps sooner than expected.

Battered and bruised by the collapse of so many institutions today, including above all the Church, we need to be reminded ever so often that there is much in our history not only what makes us ashamed today but also achievements of which we can be proud both as Irish and as Catholics. It seems to me that we as Church should begin to celebrate the remarkable achievements of the past – from early Irish Christianity represented by the Book of Kells, the Ardagh Chalice, the Cross of Cong and the monastic cities that produced them – Iona, Clonmacnois, and Bangor in Northern Ireland – down through the mediaeval period represented by the great cathedrals, now Church of Ireland, and many majestic ruins like Boyle Abbey, and down to the flourishing of new cathedrals and parish churches in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century, like Armagh and Cobh Cathedral, or the Sacred Heart Parish Church, Roscommon. These are great artistic achievements that echo the vitality of a church that brought joy into peoples’ lives – authentic joy that no suffering or disappointment in life can eradicate. That missionary outreach in the early centuries of our history was only equaled in the modern missionary movement that sent Irish Catholic men and women to bring the faith and education to countless millions all over the world. Even more significant, perhaps, were the generations of our ancestors who were persecuted, reduced to poverty and disenfranchised for over two hundred years who kept the faith, as witnessed by the Mass Rocks that dot the countryside, not to mention the ca. 250 named martyrs who died for their faith and are largely forgotten today. But they can become an inspiration for the next generations.

Special challenges today come from within Irish society and culture. Over the past four decades, Irish public culture has been transformed from within leading to indifference and even explicit anti-Catholicism, sometimes expressed in blasphemous ridicule served up as humour (e.g. a comedy act called “Three Hail Marys”, or a non-alcoholic bar entitled ”Virgin Mary”). The depth of that transformation is illustrated by the huge majority of voters who voted Yes, first to so-called same-sex marriage and then to abortion on demand. However, I want to enter a caveat here. I have argued elsewhere that, paradoxically, the same majority was in all likelihood moved by traditional Catholic sympathy for the pain of others due to a feeling of exclusion or desperation at finding oneself in a so-called unwanted pregnancy.[[3]](#footnote-3) Much of the propaganda before each referendum appealed to those basically Catholic Christian emotions, emotions decoupled from reason, alas, and so ultimately destructive. But the most profound reason for that transformation, it seems to me, is the general absence of God (or at least the absence of an awareness of His immediate presence) in people’s lives, a lack of faith.

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The challenges facing the Church in Ireland must also be seen against the backdrop of the secularization of Western civilization. At a conference in London on 21 February 2014, the **head of the Department of External Relations of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate, Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, reminded his hearers that:** "A world without God, without absolute moral values rooted in divine revelation, irrevocably turns into the realm of the rule of slavery and lawlessness*."* In Ireland, such a statement would be taken as a form of fundamentalism. **The Metropolitan was not quoting theory but was speaking from the experiment that was the atheistic Soviet Union. He concluded his talk with the comment:** "The Russian Church, which has paid in millions of lives for the godless Soviet experiment, can and must testify before the adherents of militant secularism to the fact that a society torn from its spiritual roots and faith has no future’.

To overcome the sense of beleaguerment and powerlessness, in a word demoralization – or, to use Fr Brendan Hoban's strangely accurate term,[[4]](#footnote-4) the disenchantment – that seems to characterize both clergy and faithful in Ireland today is the greatest challenge facing the Church today. I propose that it can only be overcome by what I would like to call theological means -- i.e., theological not in the sense of a scholarly discipline but in the broad sense of trying to see reality from God's point of view. This recovery of a truly theological view might require an examination of conscience as to what happened in so-called traditional Irish Catholicism that made Ireland, in the words of Karl Marx, the cradle of modernity.[[5]](#footnote-5) Beginning with James Joyce, many of our greatest writers revolted against what they saw as the narrow-mindedness and sense of oppression, which, they claim, characterized so-called traditional Irish Catholicism. Edna O'Brien was once quoted as saying: "I rebelled against the stifling and coercive religion into which I was born and bred. It was very frightening, and all pervasive. I’m glad it has gone." However, she went on to comment: "But when you remove spirituality, or the quest for it, from people’s lives, you remove something very precious. Ireland is more secular, but it went to their heads: a kind of hedonism. They’re free, yes, but questions come with freedom. What about conscience? Conscience is an essential thing." [[6]](#footnote-6) We will return to this later.

For many people, especially our writers, traditional Irish Catholicism was “stifling and coercive”, and this may indeed have been responsible for much negativity, indeed inhumanity, as revealed in the recent scandals and, above all, in institutional abuse. And yet, how can one account for that which so impressed Heinrich Böll in the 1950s, when he first visited Ireland and fell in love with the place, and above all the people, namely their warmth, wit and self-deprecatory ways? It must have been that underground current of authentic spirituality rooted in the Cross. It was that same spirituality which inspired thousands of men and women to dedicate their lives to God, though admittedly there were also other more human, sociological factors at work, which to a great extent account for its weaknesses. Nonetheless, it was they who built our first hospitals, selflessly tended the sick, and founded the world-wide hospice movement in Dublin at the end of the 19th century. The same Irish nuns and Religious brothers and priests who educated a largely impoverished Ireland and brought faith, education, and health care (not to mention a heroic engagement on justice issues) to millions abroad in what were mission territories. An undercurrent of authentic Irish Catholic spirituality rooted in the Cross enabled generations of impoverished Irish men and women at home and abroad endure discrimination and the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune for countless generations[[7]](#footnote-7)

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The big question today is: how do we recover and foster the faith that give rise to thanksgiving and joy: It is very simple, yet profound: we must rediscover the essential point of Christianity, and that is: God. To quote one theologian: “[…] the essential point of Christianity is, not the Church or man, but God. Christianity is not orientated to our hopes, fears, and needs, but to God, to his sovereignty and power. The first proposition of the Christian faith and the fundamental orientation of Christian conversion is: ‘God is’.”

What are some of the implications of that most basic affirmation? In the first place, we must remind ourselves that the renewal of the Church is first and foremost God’s work, his initiative moving in the hidden depths of men’s souls. The Holy Spirit is at work in Ireland today. We are dealing with the living, transcendent God in our midst. And at the core of our faith is not a body of moral principles or abstract ideas but the encounter with a person: Jesus Christ, the human face of God.

The second thing to stress, it seems to me, is that the Church is not just a human institution, so that renewal could be achieved simply by changing her structures, devising new ministries, setting up commissions, even holding synods and assemblies at parish, diocesan or universal levels, useful though they may be. The Church is a divine institution, God working through human instruments, men and women of faith. The Church is the sacrament of God’s effective presence in the world, the Body of Christ, who is encountered in the seven sacraments, which themselves are rooted in the most fundamental human experiences of birth, coming of age, marriage, repentance, and the ever-present threat of death, now transformed in Christ.

The third thing to stress is the primacy and efficacy of conscience – what Newman called the voice of God in our hearts. Conscience is the door by which God enters and transforms humanity. I am reminded of a remark made by St John Henry when he addressed English Catholics living as a minority in a hostile, indeed anti-Catholic environment: "Your strength lies in your God and your conscience; therefore, it lies not in your number. It lies not in your number any more than in intrigue, or combination, or worldly wisdom. God saves whether by many or by few ...."[[8]](#footnote-8) For this reason, Christopher Dawson, the great English cultural anthropologist once said that it only takes one Christian, who truly is a Christian, to change the world.

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In a statement he published in an obscure German clerical magazine that took the world by surprise last April, the retired Pope Benedict offered his analysis of the crisis in the Church throughout the world as a result of clerical sexual abuse of children and minors. The main causes he singled out were the sexual revolution in the 1960s coupled with the collapse of traditional Catholic moral theology and the inadequacy of the hierarchical Church’s response, including that of Rome. But that sketch was only an introduction to his proposal for a way forward. It covered almost half of the paper, and it was generally ignored in the controversy that it occasioned. His proposal is as simple as it is profound: we must recover the primacy of God, the affirmation that “God is”. In other words, we must learn again the awesomeness of God ever present to us, the wonder of his self-revelation as the God of love, who became man so that we could become God, his design for our true happiness written into the fabric of our being, his moral order, and the marvel that is the Eucharist, where God gives us himself to nourish us on our way back to Him and to eternal Joy. The real root of recent clerical sexual abuse is the lack of faith among its perpetrators, a lack that was blasphemous and did not shy away from misusing the sacraments.

But above all, he argues at the conclusion, we must not allow ourselves to fall for the devil’s temptation to see the Church itself as dirty, as evil, because of the heinous sins, indeed crimes, of the perpetrators. In the Creed, we confess that we believe in the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church. In doing so, we make an act of supernatural faith in the face of our experience of the Church as all too human (in the negative sense of weak and sinful, including the sin of clericalism). He recalls Jesus’ two parables depicting the Church: the fishing net catching good and bad fish, and the field where weeds sprung up among the wheat that was originally sown in it. The Church is a mixture of good and bad. Nevertheless, the field is still God’s field, he fishing net is God’s fishing net. The devil, the accuser before God (Rev 12:10) wants us to doubt the fundamental goodness, holiness of the Church. “The Church of God also exists today, and today it is the very instrument through which God saves us. It is very important to oppose the lies and half-truths of the devil with the whole truth: Yes, there is sin in the Church and evil. But even today there is the Holy Church, which is indestructible.” The holiness of the Church is seen above all in her martyrs. The Church today throughout the world is a Church of the Martyrs and in this way a witness to the living God.

And there is much goodness in people, much holiness in so-called ordinary people, since an authentic Christian, as Newman put it, is someone who “has a deep, silent, hidden peace, which the world sees not... The Christian is cheerful, easy, kind, gentle, courteous, candid, unassuming; has no pretence... with so little that is unusual or striking in his bearing, that he may easily be taken at first sight for an ordinary man.”[[9]](#footnote-9) That quote is from the homily preached by Pope Francis at the canonization of St John Henry Newman.

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What, then, should we do? What path should we as Church follow?

First and foremost, there is the need for repentance, both personal and communal. Only this will bring lasting healing. The abuse scandals have left a trail of devastation and suffering behind, which only God can heal. Repentance begins with the courageous facing-up to the past and the frank acknowledgment of wrongdoing. This is a long-term task for historians, but in general the various reports, Ferns, Murphy, Cloyne and Ryan give us a good though grim indication, even though they may in the future be subject to more critical scrutiny than they have been given to date. In this week commemorating the liberation of Auschwitz, we can learn from the Germans as to how they faced up to their horrendous past, e.g. by creating monuments and museums lest they be forgotten – and so possibly repeated. To quote the Spanish philosopher George Santayana, “Those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it..[[10]](#footnote-10) God forbid. These are initiatives taken by the German State. I would like to propose that one or other of the institutions mentioned in Ryan (Artane, Letterfrack, Goldenbridge) should be turned into a public memorial to that dark chapter by a combined effort of both Church and State. We must not forget, even though we might like to do so. The German Church went one important step further than preserving the camps and erecting monuments, like the impressive memorial to the holocaust erected in the capital by the State; Carmelite convents were founded just outside the walls of Dachau and Plötzensee, Berlin, to make reparation for the sins of their ancestors committed in those concentration camps and prisons.

There is a great need for us to make reparation. On way would be an annual day of public fast and abstinence on the part of us priests and religious in reparation for both clerical and institutional abuse. One day at the beginning of Lent – perhaps the first Friday in Lent – could be designated as a Day of Reparation. On that day the clergy (Religious as well as secular) would undertake a day of fasting and prayer, and go to confession, culminating in an evening Prayer Service of Reparation and a Celebration of Reconciliation in every Cathedral in the country.[[11]](#footnote-11) It should be a cry from the heart for God’s infinite mercy and forgiveness, and include prayers for the inner healing of the victims, for the damage done to their faith and to the credibility of the Church, but also prayers for the conversion of the perpetrators.

But reparation must be matched by more festive celebrations of the gift of God among us, as well as celebrating the lives of men and women of faith, who down to our own day devoted their lives to education and the care of the sick both at home and abroad.[[12]](#footnote-12) The past achievements of Irish Christianity, above all, but not only, the saints, have to be recognized as sources of pride and inspiration.[[13]](#footnote-13) Pilgrimages on foot to the holy wells and other sacred sites, such as Clonmacnoise and Clonfert need greater attention, especially for the youth. We also need to celebrate the faith of our fathers as it found expression is the spirituality of former generations. we need to honour the astonishing artistic and intellectual achievements of the past[[14]](#footnote-14) – and future generations need to know and appreciate them. And the annual national Culture Night needs to be embraced by the Church, for example by reminding our contemporaries of the wonders of 19th/20thcentuary Catholic architecture and sacred music. This could be achieved, for example, by illuminating the churches from the outside,[[15]](#footnote-15) guided tours within, and by holding recitals of sacred music on Culture Night.[[16]](#footnote-16) We need desperately to revive, in a suitably modern way, prayer services and Devotions, such as May and Advent devotions which, appealing to the emotions and the deeper sense of worship[[17]](#footnote-17) – or create new Church services which appeal to the heart as well as the mind.[[18]](#footnote-18)

At the heart of the Church is the Mass, the Eucharist, the very meaning of which is thanksgiving. We give you thanks for your great glory! The Eucharist is the source and summit of the entire Christian life, as the Second Vatican Council taught. According to Vatican II, “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle” [Cf. *Apoc*. 21:2; *Col*. 3:1; *Heb*. 8:2] (SC 8).Here we can examine our collective conscience. To what extent is the Sunday Mass in particular a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy? It seems to me that we in Ireland are still caught up the pre-Vatican II legalistic approach to celebrating the liturgy, in particular the so-called Holidays of Obligation. How can what appears to many to be but a legal obligation imposed the faithful by the clerical institution be transformed into an obligation arising out of love, i.e. arising out of the need to give thanks to God for His gift of divine life within us. One unfortunate, but understandable result of that pre-Vatican II mentality, is the “quickie Mass”. But that is a topic for further discussion. What is needed, to begin with, is basic catechetics for all, clerical and lay, in order to rediscover the wonder, the spiritual richness of all the sacraments but, above all, the mystery that is the Mass. Do we take the Mass too much for granted? I appreciate the concern of some colleagues who want to ordain married men and women to provide the needed services, but I fear that it reflects, it seems to me, an understanding of Church as a service-station, which is there to fulfil our various religious obligations. Is such an attitude to the Mass and the sacraments the last vestige of that cultural artefact we call traditional Irish Catholicism? To overcome present passivity (indeed boredom), both minister and faithful need to be awakened to the dense meaning of every word, every gesture. The more we try to plumb the depth of their sacral significance, the more will we be able participate actively [i.e. with mind and heart] in the celebration of the Mass, indeed in the celebration of all the sacraments.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In addition, the actual liturgical celebration (of all the sacraments, not just the Mass), including sacral music and ritual movement, need to be enhanced as ritual – as distinct from a form of entertainment. But that is a vast topic for another occasion, perhaps.[[20]](#footnote-20) Suffice it to say that training (including elementary theological training) is urgently needed for all those more actively involved: sacristan, altar servers, choir, lectors, ministers of the Eucharist, etc. Everything must be understood as meaningful, and should be as fine and beautiful as possible.

And why is Sunday as a whole not a day of the Lord, a day of rest and recreation, a day of the family, as it should be? Why do so few seem to want to dress up for Sunday Mass? When we go to some special event – even a match or a racing event – we dress up, but dressing down seems to be “in” for Sunday Mass! Be that as it may, also God wants us to rest and relax during the rest of the day – that is the meaning of the Third Commandment! – he wants us to enjoy ourselves. Dare I say: he wants us to have fun[[21]](#footnote-21) – since we have been touched that morning by the Source of all joy: His Real Presence. We have been fed on the Bread of Angels. In addition, having tasted the goodness of God, his love, having had our hearts lifted up in prayer, we can face the coming week, indeed the future with confidence and the strength that only God can give. Again, the Second Vatican Council teaches that “… the Lord's day is the original feast day, and it should be proposed to the piety of the faithful and taught to them so that it may become in fact a day of joy and of freedom from work. Other celebrations, unless they be truly of greatest importance, shall not have precedence over the Sunday which is the foundation and kernel of the whole liturgical year” (106). As an aside, I should mention that it is the mark of an authentic Catholic culture to appreciate the central place of sport, not least in its capacity to enhance Sunday as a day of rest and recreation. However, the place sport (especially GAA games) plays in Ireland today might need closer study and critique. An outsider could get the impression that in our country sport has become the dominant religion with its attendant rites and vestments (colours), which now takes priority over faith and its celebrations.

The liturgical year needs to be fully celebrated with due and proper festivity, as it were, at least with regard to the great Solemnities of Christmas, Easter, and the great Solemnities of Mary, such as March 25th and August 15th, which are among the so-called Holy Days of Obligation. This will mean moving on from treating the Church precept re Sunday and Holy Days as a mere duty to be fulfilled but as festive celebrations to be anticipated as life-affirming. Further, I would like to see each diocese and each parish hold a bigger festival once a year preferably on or near the feast-day of the patron saint of that diocese or parish church. This feast day should be celebrated not only with a beautiful Mass with good music, singing and even incense, but also with what I might call the liturgical “overflow”: a festive celebration outside the Church after Solemn Mass, with good food, music, dance, sport and entertainment. Such festive days were the case up in Ireland to the 19th century, namely the Pattern Days at the Holy Wells; they are still the case in the more Catholic parts of Europe, such as Bavaria, Austria, Italy and Spain. All would be welcome to the street party, as it were, whether or not they count themselves among the faithful. It would also be an opportunity to tap into the enormous talent of our young people and give them an opportunity to show us what they are so capable of doing – all to the honour and glory of God.

Let me end with a quotation by Flannery O'Connor: "Only if we are secure in our beliefs can we see the comical side of the universe.” Only when we believe in God, can we really enjoy ourselves and face the future. Commenting on that quotation, a friend remarked to ne: “I think myself that there is a certain way of not taking oneself too seriously that is available only to the true believer.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

1. Where, in addition, the term „Catholic“ has lost its original meaning (universal, all-embracing, inclusive) and, due to historical circumstance in Ireland in particular, evokes in people’s minds today exclusivity, narrowmindedness, and sectarianism. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Surveying Ireland after the Pope: Grounds for Cautious Optimism?”, Studies 108 (2019), 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As Celts, we are passionate by nature; perhaps we need to pay more attention to the Anglo-Norman element of our collective DNA, as it were, namely that orderly reason needed to temper our passions! [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. "Disenchanted Evenings - the mood of Irish Diocesan Clergy" in *The Furrow* 64 (Nov. 2013), 604-19. This article is a harrowing account of what Hoban claims in the mood of the diocesan clergy. I just wonder how much this "disenchantment" stems from the loss the traditional status priests enjoyed in Irish society and how much stems from false expectations roused by what Hoban calls the "Great Council". [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marx moved to London in 1849, and remained there until he died. His move there coincided with the start of the second industrial revolution. The industrial cities of Britain were being invaded by impoverished Irish immigrants in the wake of the Great Famine (1845-1847) seeking some means of bare survival. In the intensely anti-Catholic atmosphere of the time, and equipped with only the most rudimentary grasp of English, they were seen as the dregs of society, but they were also used as cheap labour in the industrial behemoth. It seems that, for Marx, the Irish represented the classical proletariat. And central to that condition was the experience of radical alienation – alienation being the quintessential character of modernity. This alienation was later reflected in the literature of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, and the art of Francis Bacon. Today Catholics in Ireland and elsewhere in a secularized society experience another form of alienation, no less challenging, finding themselves today “strangers in a strange land”, to quote the title of Archbishop Charles J. Chaput’s remarkable book: *Strangers in a Strange Land: Living the Catholic Faith in a Post-Christian World*, 2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. William Doino, Jr, "Ireland: A Country without a Conscience", *First Things*, 6.1.2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In his essay: "Ireland, Secularism, and Europe”, Professor McCarthy draws attention to another form of the same displacement of God: the close linking of the Catholic Church with nationalism which in the long-term undermined religion by making the spiritual subservient to the temporal. There is yet another factor, namely the subservience of the Church to nationalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as a result of which, McCarthy claims, "many in the succeeding generations ... were nominal in their adherence to religion, though never turning against it" - especially when it was to their material advantage (op. cit.,102). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. "Duties of Catholics towards the Protestant View" in *Newman Reader*, 292. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, V, 5. He was still an Anglican Vicar at the time. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I first read this in Dachau, where it was displayed in the exhibition at the entrance to the concentration camp, if my memory serves me right. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This would take the shape of prayer and adoration after a reading of a relevant section of one or other of the Reports. This should not be a one-off event, but an annual one, as an essential part of each Holy Week, since, as fallen human beings, we too will continue to offend God and the faithful entrusted to us, even if in other ways [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. The debt modern Ireland owes to generations – indeed centuries – of selfless dedication by those heroic women and men who carried on the pioneering work in education and healthcare initiated by such giants as the Venerable Nano Nagle, the Venerable Mary Aikenhead, and Blessed Edmund Rice, should be repaid with some kind of local and national recognition., however token it may seem. Apart from monuments and plaques in their memory, each town or city with former convents or monasteries could commemorate their memory in a more appropriate way by organizing annual events such as concerts, lectures, and conferences held in their name or the name of their Religious Congregation. Such events could also mine this rich Irish-Christian heritage to inspire our contemporaries as well as to give thanks for all the almost incalculable good they did but now, sadly, overshadowed by the crimes of some of their members. The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones. It is time that that good is not forgotten. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. The hierarchical Church must give greater attention to the beatification of these saints, such as some 250 martyrs of the 16th and 17th century, the founders of the great Religious Congregations, the missionaries, lay and clerical, who gave their lives to bringing hope into the lives of millions throughout the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See, for example, Thomas Finan, “Hiberno-Latin Christian Literature: Context and Beginnings” and “The Trinity in Early Irish Christian Writings” in his *Collected Writings* (Dublin, 2019), 223-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Indeed, not only the interiors but also the exteriors of all churches should be cleaned/painted and lit-up at night – or, where there are large, good-quality, stained-glass windows, illuminated from inside! [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. A considerable body of Irish mediaeval sacred music has been recovered thanks to the efforts of musicologists such as Ann Buckley in Trinity [cf. <https://www.tcd.ie/medieval-history/expertise/ann-buckley.php>]. And we have seen a flowering of liturgical music by contemporary composers before and after Vatican II. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. We held May Devotions in Donamon this year with traditional hymns, and an abundance of flowers, candles and incense, on the four Sundays of the month to mark the 80th anniversary of our coming to Ireland; they were well-attended and greatly appreciated. We also held Advent Recollections (hymns and readings) around the Advent Wreath in candlelight each Sunday to prepare us spiritually for the great Feast of the Birth of Christ. Lenten Reflections around the Cross in preparation for the greatest Feast of all, Easter, can also be included. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Special attention needs to be paid to the *Vigil of All Saints* (Halloween). In my youth, it was a family occasion (fruits, nuts, sweets, with simple fun-and-games, such as snap-apple). Then it became commercialized with the emphasis on witches, ghosts and scary masks, trick-a-treat. Now it is descending into the so-called Celtic world of (mostly evil) spirits (see <https://www.irishtimes.com/advertising-feature/embrace-your-spirit-and-enter-the-other-world-of-p%C3%BAca-festival-1.4055090>). It seems to be part of a larger revival of so-called pre-Christian Celtic “spirituality” – pure fantasy in fact. But it is far from harmless (especially when linked to the “darker arts”) either for those involved or, indeed, for Ireland today in search of a new identity to fill the vacuum left by the public rejection of our traditional Irish Catholic identity. The Vigil and Feast of All Saints celebrates the triumph of good over evil in the lives of the countless saints (known and unknown) down through the centuries. It could perhaps become primarily a warm, family celebration – a celebration of the domestic Church – as well as one of the whole Family and Household of God, one that is marked by joy. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. The new Code of Canon Law (1220 §1) stipulates: “Those responsible are to ensure that there is in churches such cleanliness and ornamentation as befits the house of God, and that anything which is discordant with the sacred character of the place is excluded.” The fitting cleanliness and ornamentation must include the best vestments, clean albs and altar linen, as well as the highest quality chalices and patens. The poverty of the parishioners should not be an excuse for anything less than the most precious to adorn the worship of God. The Curé of Ars, it is said, journeyed to Lyons to purchase the costliest vestments and altar plate, despite the poverty of his parish and his care for the orphanage he founded. *Deus providebit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. I deal with this in detail in my paper "Rubrics and the Sacrificial Nature of the Eucharist" in Gerard Deighan (ed.), *Celebrating the Eucharist: Sacrifice and Communion* (Wells, Somerset: Smenos Publications, 2014), 249-62. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Fiona Lynch email, 20.11.2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)