

# The Catholic Church in Ireland Today<sup>1</sup>

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In the middle of summer 2016, commenting on a controversy surrounding Ireland’s national seminary St Patrick’s College Maynooth, Ireland’s leading broadsheet *The Irish Times* had this to say in an editorial: ‘The Maynooth controversy would once have given rise to major public disquiet. That it no longer does so reflects the church’s recent history. Many Catholics have long since abandoned the institution – its princes, priests and politics – and are choosing to interpret the faith according to their own conscience’ (August 4, 2016).

Coincidentally, earlier in the same year, an academic study in the field of the sociology of religion was published with the title ‘Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland’.<sup>2</sup> The author, Gladys Ganiel, in explaining her choice of title, refers explicitly to an article written by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin in 2013 entitled ‘A Post-Catholic Ireland?’<sup>3</sup>

Ganiel defines a post-Catholic Ireland in terms of ‘a *shift in consciousness* in which the Catholic Church, as an institution, is no longer held in high esteem by most of the population and can no longer expect to exert a monopoly influence in social and political life’ (p 4). She argues that the future of faith in Ireland will depend on the development of ‘extra-institutional’ forms of religious expression (religion practised *outside or in addition to the institutional Catholic Church* – pp 21-24). Her analysis ties in with the frequently observed characteristic of modern Catholicism in Ireland – and indeed further afield – as becoming individualised and de-institutionalised. With the new emphasis on personal conscience as opposed to magisterial teaching, this is sometimes referred to as the ‘Protestantisation’ of the Catholic Church in Ireland.

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<sup>1</sup> The main focus of this article is on the Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, even if the Church itself is organized on an all-island basis and most of the analysis contained here applies also to the situation in Northern Ireland.

<sup>2</sup> Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland, Religious Practice in Late Modernity*, Oxford University Press, 2016

<sup>3</sup> Diarmuid Martin, ‘A Post-Catholic Ireland? Renewing the Irish Church from Within’, *America, The National Catholic Review*, 20 May 2013

Dr Martin himself has spoken and written frequently about the crisis confronting the Catholic Church in Ireland, warning that it ran the risk of becoming an ‘irrelevant minority culture’.<sup>4</sup>

I propose in what follows to describe briefly some of the background to this crisis and then to suggest some ways forward.

## **Background**

The traditional Catholicism which is now being superseded in Ireland had many distinguishing features.<sup>5</sup> It was a defining characteristic of Irish nationalism and identity, with a ‘monopoly on the Irish religious market’ (Ganiel, p3), a strong relationship with state power, elevating the status of cleric to extraordinary high levels and emphasising the evils of sexual sin. This was Catholicism with high levels of religious practice, a stress on rule-keeping and sin, a strong ethos of sacrifice and delayed gratification, a familiarity with austerity and a hope for fulfilment in the after-life. It was characterized by a deep popular devotion featuring the likes of the rosary, benediction, sodalities, indulgences and processions. It provided comfort and fuelled the spiritual and ethical imaginations of its adherents, and had a deeply committed, global missionary outreach. However, its un- and even anti-intellectual nature meant that it was ill-prepared for the challenges posed by a late-emerging Modernity in Ireland. It was a religion in which the voice of the priest, the bishop, and the pope could rely on its formal authority to get a serious hearing, not just from the faithful, but also from the politician. A paternalistic ethos reigned and was almost universally accepted. Apart from the popular devotion already mentioned, this was Catholicism deeply institutional in form, dependent on a type of clericalism which was vulnerable to a more critical culture.

From the 1960s on this more critical culture emerged in Ireland. The influence of television and other media, economic development and increased urbanisation, foreign travel, EEC membership, enhanced educational opportunities all conspired to open Ireland up to the waves of critical questioning and secularisation already well advanced in many other parts of Europe. Internally the Church was at best luke-warm in its reception of the Second Vatican Council – there was liturgical change which was received for the most part positively, some increased lay involvement not least in various Episcopal Commissions established in the wake of the Council, and a real energy around some issues of social justice (not least in the establishment of the still-thriving developmental agency Trocaire, affiliated to the Irish Episcopal Conference). But the deeper teaching

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<sup>4</sup> Diarmuid Martin: “‘Keeping the Show on the Road’: Is This the Future of the Irish Catholic Church?”, address to the Cambridge Group for Irish Studies at Magdalene College, Cambridge on 22 February 2011

<sup>5</sup> For what follows see Ganiel ch 2 and O’Hanlon, Vatican II as a source for the Renewal of the Church in Ireland, in D. Lane, ed, *Vatican II in Ireland, Fifty Years On*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2015, 219-236

and spirit of the Council (around baptism and the role of the laity, collegiality, critical engagement with the world and the separation of Church and State) did not sufficiently penetrate the still somewhat complacent ethos of Irish Catholicism.

The cracks became more visible from the 1980s on and have been widening and deepening since. In the 80s the constitutional reform agenda of the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister) included the introduction of civil divorce to Ireland (eventually carried in a second referendum in 1995). It became obvious that particularly in the areas of sexuality and gender the stance of the bishops was increasingly at odds with that of the population in general – culminating in 2016 with the passing of the referendum on same-sex marriage.

In the meantime Episcopal and ecclesial authority and reputation were fatally damaged among a large segment of the population by the revelations of various clerical scandals (most notoriously the sexual abuse of children by clergy) in the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium, and the initially poor handling of these scandals by those in authority as revealed in a number of scathing public enquiries and reports. While these reports were often characterized by a lack of historical context and socio-cultural analysis, the egregious crimes they noted were undeniable and the effects were devastating.

In the short term they led to an almost hysterically aggressive attitude towards the church, both in Ireland and universally, while in the longer term they have left a legacy of deep mistrust. It was after the publication of one such report (the Cloyne Report in 2011) that the Taoiseach Enda Kenny referred in the Dail (the Irish Parliament) to the ‘dysfunction, disconnection, elitism and narcissism’ in the Vatican, and there was a government announcement later that year that the Irish Embassy to the Holy See was being closed (it was subsequently re-opened in 2014). This was extraordinary from an Irish government and far from universally popular, but it was a sign of how far things had gone that the government felt free to use this kind of language and take this kind of action, satisfied that there would be sufficient popular support for doing so.

During this period (Ganiel, pp 25-53) while the figures of those self-identifying as Catholics remained high (84% identified as Catholic in the 2011 Census, in contrast to a peak of 94.9% in 1961), religious practice, particularly among young and working-class people, declined (Mass attendance, for example, declined from 91% in 1971 to 35% in 2012, according to some estimates) and it became clear also – as admitted by the Irish Bishops themselves as part of their response to the recent Synod on the Family<sup>6</sup> – that

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<sup>6</sup> See Statement of the Irish Catholic Bishops’ Conference regarding the questionnaire from the Synod on the Family, Thursday 13 March 2014, noting that ‘many of those who responded to the questionnaire expressed particular difficulties with the teaching on extra-marital sex and cohabitation by unmarried couples, divorce and remarriage, family planning, assisted reproduction, homosexuality.

increasing numbers of the faithful found difficulty with Catholic teaching in areas of sexuality and gender. Women in particular – the back-bone of the Irish Catholic Church – have long felt invisible and marginalised in their church, and in a culture which is increasingly influenced by feminism and ideas of equality this has seemed unconscionable to many.

The Letter of Pope Benedict to Irish Catholics in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis and the subsequent Apostolic Visitation of Seminaries and institutions of Formation, while undoubtedly well intended and welcome, were widely felt not to have hit the mark and to have had a demoralising effect.<sup>7</sup> Similarly the cautioning, and in some cases removal from ministry, of a number of Irish Religious has caused resentment in the Irish Church and public, not least by the perceived lack of due process. Vocations to the priesthood and religious life have sharply declined and various reform movements like the Association of Catholic Priests (ACP), the Associations of Catholics in Ireland (ACI), Pobal, We the Church and so on have sprung up.<sup>8</sup>

In this testing environment the Irish Episcopal Conference has found it difficult to respond in a way that shows confidence in its ability to supply the strong and wise leadership that is required in a situation of crisis. Theologian Eugene Duffy quotes from Karl Rahner's assessment of the German church in 1971 and says that his description describes well the current situation in Ireland: 'The Church's public life even today (for all the good will that is not to be questioned) is dominated to a terrifying extent by ritualism, legalism, administration, and a boring and resigned spiritual mediocrity continuing along familiar lines'.<sup>9</sup>

The Catholicism that has been displaced in the use of the term 'post-Catholic' as applied to Ireland was the traditional one described above, in which a deep faith took the form of a strong institutional church with significant social and political prestige whose paternalistic governance and teaching were carried out and received in a relatively uncritical way. Faith does not disappear overnight, of course, and its traces remain over generations, and yet it can be seen that, especially among the young in Ireland, secularism has already made deep inroads and even their undoubted social idealism often remains unconnected to the person of Jesus Christ, much less to the institution of the Church. Some have argued that a way forward is to return to the more traditional form of

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The church's teaching in these sensitive areas is often not experienced as realistic, compassionate or life-enhancing'.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Jim Corkery SJ, *The Reception of Vatican II in Ireland Over Fifty Years*, in D. Lane, op cit, 97-119 at 116

<sup>8</sup> See Brendan Hoban, *Who will break the bread for us?*, Dublin: Banley House, 2013; Gabriel Daly OSA, *The Church, Always in Need of Reform*, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2015

<sup>9</sup> Eugene Duffy, *Reimagining the Church in Ireland in the Light of Vatican II*, in Niall Coll, ed, *Ireland and Vatican II*, Dublin: Columba Press, 2015, 113-129 at 126

Catholicism, even at the risk of becoming culturally irrelevant. This nostalgic turn, they would say, respects the mission of the Church to be counter-cultural and respects the fragile identity of younger Catholics in a post-modern world who require greater certainty. However, true tradition surely knows how to read the signs of the times, in fidelity with what went before, and to discern what in the culture is to be respected and used to reform the Church and what is to be rejected?

Others place their hope in a religion that is entirely 'extra-institutional', putting their faith in Jesus and not the Church, and sharing the anti-institution and establishment culture so prevalent in many other areas of contemporary life in the West. But, as the findings of social anthropologists indicates, institutions are necessary for human living and even 'extra-institutional' movements soon seek some institutional form, are in a sense parasitic on the existence of institutions. The existence of the institution of the church for Christians can be understood as altogether compatible with the law of the Incarnation and faithful to the teaching of Jesus Christ.

The classical debates within modern Catholic theology around the relationship between institution and charism (von Balthasar and Rahner), local and universal (Ratzinger and Kasper), centre and periphery (Congar and Liberation Theology), and indeed the legacy of the Second Vatican Council, offer a more hopeful reference point for a renewal of the Irish Church in a way that may be both faithful to tradition and open to the signs of our times, culturally relevant. How then might we envisage this renewal, given the leadership on these matters by Pope Francis? In addressing this issue I give particular attention to the thinking of some Irish theologians (who themselves are in dialogue with the wider theological community), since it is clear that the 'heavy lifting' for this challenging project comes most appropriately from those with intimate knowledge of the Irish situation.

## Conversion

The Church does not exist for its own sake. It is for the Kingdom and is rooted in an encounter with Jesus Christ, continuing his mission (given by the Father) through the power of the Spirit. Eugene Duffy notes that the sacramental and Trinitarian roots of the Church hold in proper tension two distinct elements: ecclesial visibility on the one hand, and the hidden nature of the church on the other. He draws on the insight of Joseph Ratzinger who states: 'One could very concisely define the Church as *People of God resulting from the Body of Christ*'.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Duffy op cit 114-115, referring to J. Ratzinger, *Fundamental Speeches from Five Decades*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012, p 122

This starting point underlies the foundational place of faith, prayer, liturgical celebration for the life of the Church. Real conversion is required here: Irish Catholicism runs the risk of becoming cultural Catholicism only, devoid of personal conviction, a far cry from the universal call to holiness of the baptised articulated by the Second Vatican Council and the well-known post-conciliar, prophetic call of Karl Rahner that the Christian of the future needed to be a mystic.

But how can the Irish Church facilitate this faith encounter with Jesus which transformed so many lives according to the Gospel narratives? Dermot Lane is clear about the challenge involved.<sup>11</sup> Drawing principally on the analysis of Charles Taylor, Lane notes that the process of secularisation (now well advanced in Ireland) has resulted in the emergence of a purely 'immanent frame' of reference, an 'exclusive humanism', a 'disenchanted universe' without reference to the Transcendent (p 30-31). Within this new 'social imaginary' there has emerged, anthropologically, the notion of the modern 'buffered self', closed off from any transcendental horizon, increasingly critiqued by a post-modernity which, however, often fails to discover any objective traction and flounders in a fragile subjectivity. A common characteristic of modernity and post-modernity is a high esteem for freedom, often, however, limited to a reductively liberal notion of 'freedom from' without much agreed content for what a 'freedom for' might look like. We are faced then, in Ireland, with the increasing cultural reality of a 'God who is missing but not missed', of a culture that is betimes indifferent and hostile to Christianity and, in particular, to the institution of the Catholic Church. The challenge is to re-awaken the need for salvation and the Good News of the Gospels within a culture which experiences no such need.

Lane goes on to indicate some of the intellectual resources available to Christianity and Catholicism in facing into this dominant culture – for example, a reconstruction of anthropology along the lines of the human as relational, dialogic, embodied and linguistic, no longer living in an anthropocentric universe. It will be part of the mission of the Irish Church of the future to take seriously the intellectual and educational challenge involved in the development and communication of a new language of faith more attuned to modern ears, and perhaps the increased emergence of theology in the setting of the university is a hopeful sign here.

But the pastoral challenge is also immediate. Duffy addressed this issue along the lines of a more intense focus on the Church as a 'school of prayer and discernment', offering helpful ways (such as retreat houses, spiritual direction and accompaniment, *lectio divina* groups and so on) 'in which people can begin to discover the desire of God at work

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<sup>11</sup> Dermot Lane, *Catholic Education in the Light of Vatican II and Laudato Si'*, Dublin: Veritas, 2015

today, to discover the love of God in their lives' with the prospect of achieving a 'level of inner peace and freedom that the secular alternatives can never give' (p 116).

What is common to these approaches is a conviction that far from being a fear and rule-based religion, buttressed by a kind of blind and unquestioning conformity to formal authority, Catholicism is essentially (and can be in reality) a liberating reality, that, to use a perhaps surprising term, the gospels are (before their time) truly documents of radical Enlightenment, showing a way to the kind of love that is not illusory, self-created or oblivious of human suffering and evil – the joy of the gospel. However, what also emerges is that for this reality to be seen as liberating requires ongoing and open dialogue and conversation with our culture, in order to be sensitive to where the Good News of God's merciful love in Jesus Christ can resonate with human need and desire.

I would add that for some – perhaps for many young people in particular – the breakthrough concerning the radical importance of a life of faith and that encounter with Jesus which inspires it may not, in the first instance, be brought about by direct experiences of prayer. This may occur, instead, through the kind of social idealism which is so characteristic of younger people and which is central to the mission of the Church in its preaching of the Kingdom. This has been a particular point of resonance between the words and practice of Pope Francis and many young people throughout the world and in Ireland – 'a poor Church for the poor', the centrality of ecology to issues of poverty – all this young people 'get' and the challenge then is to create spaces in which they may begin to explore that side of things with what they find more difficult in our secularised culture – the link with the full mystery of the person of Jesus Christ, more than just a human exemplar but the image of the Father and the gate into a world of transcendence that, deep down, they experience a yearning for. This kind of approach, again, has already been adumbrated by, among other, Rahner in his notion of mystagogy- a way of uncovering, through dialogue and conversation, the deeper layers of common human experiences like happiness, success, joy, suffering, illness, bereavement, death.

Some of this is going on already within the Irish Church for younger people – one thinks of somewhat unique events like pilgrimages, World Youth Day, Taize visits – and more ordinary every day features such as gospel choir masses, peer retreats (like the *Kairos* retreat used in some Irish schools), the now defunct *Magis* organization of the Irish Jesuits (combining elements of prayer/liturgy, community and social action).<sup>12</sup> Similarly for older people there are some opportunities for a deepening of their prayer and faith lives. However, there is still something missing, something crucial, because the overall feeling is one of fighting a losing battle, of mediocrity. How might the organization of the Catholic Church in Ireland be transformed in such a way that it might come alive

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<sup>12</sup> For an account of *Magis*, see Ganiell, op cit, 102-118

spiritually, in creative fidelity to its foundational faith in Jesus Christ, so that its missionary impact might be culturally relevant, addressing issues like secularisation, socio-economic issues and inequality in a way that Pope Francis clearly envisages?

## Church Renewal and Reform

I take my cue here from the clearly expressed preference of Francis, in word and deed, for a synodal Church, a pathway ‘that God expects from the Church in the third millennium’ (Address to commemorate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Synod of Bishops, Oct 15, 2015).

One of the principal reasons for this approach is that it takes account of the culture of today, while being true to the Church’s own foundational principles. Today’s culture, as already indicated, is one which values freedom, including freedom of speech, and views the exercise of authority and power in a much less deferential way, demanding participation and dialogue as part of how governance is exercised. Michael Lacy contrasts the pre-modern mode of governance in civil society (characterised by the rights of formal authority and the demands of unquestioning obedience) with the modern situation in which, when rules and decisions are taken, ‘grounds are prepared and references, rulings are accompanied by reasons and reassurances that relevant matters have been investigated, appropriate bodies of knowledge have been tapped, interested parties have been canvassed, and the likely consequences of the rule are understood and have been prepared for’. He goes on to say: ‘These are now among the customary duties of rule in civil society, and the need for something more closely comparable to them within the church is becoming increasingly evident’.<sup>13</sup>

A synodal church at all levels – papacy exercised in collegiality with fellow bishops, dioceses commission, councils and regular synods appropriately representative of all the baptised, parishes with representative parish council- is not simply a concession to the democratic spirit of the age, but is a practical outcome of the meaning of baptism and was part of church practice over long periods. As theologian Susan Wood articulates in a liturgical context, the baptismal call to laity for active participation in the church ‘...is not a democratic principle but a liturgical one and, when applied to ecclesial life, it suggests a theology of conciliarity and synodality inclusive of laity’.<sup>14</sup>

So, it is entirely orthodox and in line with tradition that the Church, at all levels, moves to retrieve some structural and institutional expressions of the revelation that through baptism all the baptised share in the three-fold role of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet

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<sup>13</sup> Michael Lacy, *The Problem of Authority and its Limits*, in Michael J. Lacy and Francis Oakley, eds, *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity*, Oxford University Press, 2011, 1-25 at 9

<sup>14</sup> Susan K. Wood, SCL, *Liturgical Ecclesiology*, in Richard R. Gaillardetz and Edward P. Hahnenberg, eds, *A Church with Open Doors*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 138-158, at 156



(teacher) and king (ruler). In the areas of teaching this is not to denigrate the specific role of Pope and Bishops as authoritative ecclesial teachers: rather it is to retrieve the notion that Magisterium functions best in reality when it is part of a three-fold process in which bishops engage discerningly with theologians and the ‘sense of the faithful’ (in particular those who are poor and including the popular devotion of the faithful). This is part of what Ladislav Orsy described as the ‘search for better balances without damaging vital forces’.<sup>15</sup> In this context – as evidenced in the recent Synod on the Family – the sense of the faithful can function well as an impulse to new ways of looking at thorny issues and as a gauge of the extent to which current teaching is well received in the church. This more active notion of reception – Jim Corkery, drawing on Ormond Rush, speaks of the faithful ‘making sense’ as well as ‘finding sense’ in church teaching<sup>16</sup> – enables the church to be more faithful to the intuition of the Decree on Revelation in the Second Vatican Council that God’s truth is first an encounter with the mystery of Jesus Christ and only then a propositional reality, itself always capable of deeper penetration and development. It also enables the church to take due account of public opinion in the positive and discerning way advocated in its own teaching of the subject.<sup>17</sup> And what applies to teaching also applies to governance – one thinks, for example, of the desire of Pope Francis that women be better represented in decision-making roles in the Church.

As a church universal we are still very much in learning mode as we adjust to this new emphasis on the ancient truth of synodality and conciliarity. We need, in particular, to learn how to do communal discernment.<sup>18</sup> And, as Francis has indicated, we may be helped by the experience of other Christian ecclesial communities which have retained a synodal tradition down through the years. However, it seems to me, the approach offers great hope to the situation of our church in Ireland. The crisis is so grave that we need ‘all hands on deck’, we need to come together to tap into all the resources available – clerical and lay – to find a way forward. There have already been a number of ‘listening’ exercises conducted by different dioceses within Ireland, including Down and Connor and Killaloe. And earlier this year (2016) there a synod in the Diocese of Limerick, well prepared over an 18-month period, with a clear sense of renewal and hope as part of its outcome. We need to pursue this path more systematically and with more conviction – and Bishops as well as faithful need to come to the point where they see consultation as real and not just token, capable of tackling neuralgic issues, reaching out to the young

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<sup>15</sup> Ladislav Orsy, *Receiving the Council*, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2009, 12

<sup>16</sup> Jim Corkery, op cit, 101-102

<sup>17</sup> See G. O’Hanlon, Free Speech in the Church, *Studies*, 105, Summer 2016, 199-211, with reference in particular to church teaching in the documents *Communio et Progressio* (1971) and *Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church, 2014

<sup>18</sup> G. O’Hanlon, Discernment and the Synod on the Family, *Doctrine and Life*, 65, September 2015, 9-20

and disaffected and not just the already committed who tend to come from a predominantly middle-aged and older demographic.

Bishops can be tempted to view this approach as too onerous, involving many organizational problems and prefer to 'go solo'. And laity may share some of the disparaging remarks of some bishops about the proliferation of mere 'talking shops', without real consequences. But the recent Synod on the Family, in a modest but real way, illustrated how thorny matters can be discussed, often with considerable conflict and disagreement, and still with a discerning love which resulted in concrete results for the situation of the divorced and remarried in particular. Similarly many women – and men – will have been encouraged by the establishment of a Commission to study the issue of female deacons, in response to considerable representation on the issue. The recent Synod in Limerick fits into this evolving framework: it enabled a deeper renewal and conversion within the Diocese, part of which was due to the skilled and prayerful way in which open debate was allowed to flourish.

## Conclusion

The maxim of Francis that 'time is greater than space' (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, pars 222 ff) encourages us to engage in processes that are more likely to lead to long-term change that is durable rather than short-term quick results that are often the result of power-plays. This seems absolutely the right approach for the Irish Catholic Church, faced as it is by the crisis that has been described here. A few years ago the recently retired Bishop of Ossory, Seamus Freeman, promised the beginnings of a 'structured dialogue' at national level within the Irish Church, in response to Pope Benedict's Letter to Irish Catholics (*Irish Times*, 28 December, 2010). The Association of Catholic Priests, in a meeting with representatives of the Irish Episcopal Conference (May 2016), offered to help organize a National Synod of the Irish Church. It would be wonderful if the bishops could offer such leadership, perhaps in tandem with preparations for the World Meeting of Families due to be held in Dublin in 2018.

Post-Catholic Ireland need not fall prey to the dominant trend of de-institutionalization and individualization, with an extra-institutional religion that is practised with vitality only outside the institutional Catholic Church, and an institutional remnant that is culturally irrelevant. However, without a serious commitment to reform and renewal that seems the likely future. Pope Francis is giving a pointer to a different model of church, based on deeper conversion to Jesus Christ, missionary in its approach to the great issues facing humanity and our world, respectful of both personal conscience and Magisterium, and entailing a synodal form of church at all levels. This must surely be the way forward for the Irish Church, as many have long argued. It would be wonderful if the bishops could give this type of leadership.