

*The Irish Institute for Pastoral Studies,  
St. Patrick's College Campus, Thurles,  
MIC Limerick.*

Pastoral Conference  
**THE FUTURE OF THE IRISH PARISH**  
Lessons from around the world  
*Tuesday 28 and Wednesday 29 August, 2018*

Notes compiled by Fr Oliver Crilly, Diocese of Derry

**Four presentations:**

1. New Zealand, 'Launch Out' Project:  
Lay pastoral leadership roles.  
(Cardinal John Dew, Archdiocese of Wellington, New Zealand.)
2. South Africa, 'The Parish as a Community of Communities'.  
(Bishop Michael Wüstenberg, Bishop Emeritus, Aliwal, South Africa.)
3. Liverpool, 'Witness to Team Ministry, Widnes'.  
(Fr. Matthew Nunes, Archdiocese of Liverpool.)
4. Canada, 'The Role of the Clergy and the Laity, Parish Pastoral Council,  
Toronto.  
(Dr. Margaret Lavin, Regis College, Toronto.)

**Process**

Each presentation led to an interactive process, based on **See** (*hear the story*); **Judge** (*reflect on the project presented*); **Act** (*discern what it might mean for our own situation, leading to "Applying the Learnings" on the final afternoon.*) This process was facilitated by Martin Kennedy and Dr. Jessie Rogers, and involved sharing in small groups, followed by individual sharing in the full hall.

I. NEW ZEALAND

The setting is the Archdiocese of Wellington, in the context of strategic pastoral planning. The challenges are recognisable by an Irish audience. The initiatives were undertaken by Cardinal John Dew's predecessor, but he was closely involved and can speak first-hand.

They looked at various options for renewal and evangelisation, including ways to re-structure parishes, the possibility of the permanent diaconate, and approaches to Confirmation and the order of celebration of the Sacraments of Initiation.

Following consultation, they felt that superficial re-structuring or clustering of parishes would not achieve what was needed. They rejected the permanent diaconate, not just because of the issue for women, but because they didn't want to create a further clerical level. The approach to Confirmation didn't seem to promise radical renewal either.

They decided to begin with the study of Church documents. They paid particular attention to Pope John Paul II's *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. They responded especially to Pope John Paul's emphasis on the spirituality of Communion: the Church being together and walking together.

It seemed to provide the basis for Christian Ministry and Christian Leadership, developing a programme including prayer, formation and study. This would lead to the formation of pastoral teams.

The process was given the name "Launch Out", which echoed Pope John Paul's exhortation: "Duc in Altum" — Launch out into the deep (Lk 5:4).

Formation would be needed for the pastoral teams. This could not be just an academic formation, nor could academic qualifications be set as essential criteria for candidates. Candidates would need to be people of faith and commitment, willing to participate in training and formation.

Formation was structured to include:

- prayer and spirituality;
- study (including Scripture, and the understanding of Christ and the Church);
- pastoral practice.

Candidates were asked to do 4 pastoral projects. All candidates were assigned a mentor. They were asked to complete 18 papers (over several years). They had monthly spiritual direction and 3 prayer days and 1 weekend Retreat each year. There was continuous discernment in relation to each one's role.

There was a Formator/Manager leading the "Launch Out" process. At the end of the formation process there was Commissioning of the individuals, and formation of Pastoral Teams. Arrangements were made to ensure the stability of each Pastoral Team within the structures of the local Church. The new arrangements don't take ministries from others who are already in place. On the contrary, a central role of the Pastoral Team is to involve others.

## II. SOUTH AFRICA

The context was the challenge of transformation in the Church, and imagining and creating leadership for transformation. The need for transformation arose out of the perception of the existing situation in the Church:

It was a passive Church, structured as a Service Provider. Many people were happy with that style of Church:

"It is nice; it is life,  
but it is not adult life".

Bishop Wüstenberg spoke of seeing a book about St. Thérèse of Lisieux. When he first saw the book he read the title as 'Holy Darling', and dismissed it as sentimental hagiography. But then he looked again and saw that the title was 'Holy Daring'. It was a challenging book.

It took 15 years to devise a pastoral plan. 1989 was a *kairos*. Nelson Mandela was released. Everything seemed possible. "Everything was calling for change and development".

The slow process followed a pastoral cycle:

1. See (examine the present situation);
2. Analyse;
3. Theological reflection (Scripture, Doctrines);
4. Develop an ecclesiology beyond the 'provided-for' Church.

There was a lot of reflection on co-responsibility. In the existing structure, many priests simply said: "You are under me". There was a real caricature: 'The Community of Christ the King', — under Father So and So!

The momentum developed, until there was a critical mass, saying: "Let us give it a try!" People began to meet in small groups, small Christian communities. The meetings were based on Gospel sharing. They became familiar with the Scriptures.

Leadership emerges from the small Christian communities: 'The subject of vocation is the community of faith'.

Vatican II: The Constitution on Divine Revelation, chapter 2: God wants to talk, to converse, as to friends, with the people of the Church:

'Thus God, who spoke in the past, continues to converse with the Spouse of his beloved Son. And the Holy Spirit, through whom the living voice of the Gospel rings out in the Church — and through it in the world — leads believers to the full truth and makes the word of Christ dwell in them in all its richness.'  
(*The Constitution on Divine Revelation, chapter 2, section 8.*)

Deep freezer:

"The fire of the Holy Spirit is frozen. It is our task to free it again."

The intention was to implement Vatican II: participation, not just in liturgy but in life. To create a community serving humanity, self-ministering and self-sustaining, empowered with the three 'munera':

- priesthood;
- prophetic ministry;
- royal ministry.

Men and women.

'Your task is to open the space where everyone can unfold their gifts'.

Cross-fertilisation.

To be a Catholic means to need a backbone.

"My wish for you is  
that you be very daring people".

NB: The Senate of Priests met every quarter for three and a half days.

III: LIVERPOOL

The context is the town of Widnes, a town of 63,000 people. There were 8 parishes with 10 churches (link back to Cardinal Heenan, when priests were plentiful). The average age of priests in the Archdiocese of Liverpool was now 72. There was need for radical renewal and restructuring. Clustering of parishes was discussed, but it would be inadequate, and never a long-term solution.

Parishes began by doing things together: e.g. RCIA Programme for receiving converts; Marriage Preparation; Services of Reconciliation; The Easter Triduum.

What could happen?

Fr. Matthew Nunes showed an American icon of Jesus knocking on the door: "Behold I stand at the door and knock". Traditionally we said we should open the door and let him in. But maybe he wants us to open the door and come out, to step out beyond our comfort zone.

The process of exploration and consultation began. It was unavoidably extended when the incumbent Archbishop died, and a few years followed when no radical change could be introduced "sede vacante" — while the See was vacant.

It was 2015 before change happened, but it was radical change. All 8 parishes were closed. One new parish was established. Of the 10 churches, 6 were closed, leaving 4. Three priests were appointed as parish priest 'in solidum' — meaning they were all parish priest together. One priest in his turn takes on the role of Moderator, but he is not in charge. They work together.

In keeping with that collaborative ministry, team ministry was established, covering each area of the parish. An overall Coordinating Group was set up, composed of clergy and laity, usually with a lay Chairperson. Significant decisions were made by this group. They met each week for two hours, beginning with half an hour of prayer (with a *lectio divina* format, based on the following Sunday's Gospel).

The change wasn't only in the structures. The organisational change facilitated a move away from simply managing decline, or crisis management. There was a tangible sense of discerning together, and a real sense of co-responsibility. Sharing prayer together built community and gave a great strength: "When things get tough, I'm not on my own". People could play to their strengths and let things evolve.

The project was looked at from the outside with a mixture of envy and suspicion. It is a work in progress.

#### IV. CANADA

The context is the working of a Parish Pastoral Council in the East End of Toronto, around St. Brigid's Church, with an established Irish community, beside St. Catherine of Siena's Church, with a later Italian community. The specific challenge is about decision-making and the role of laity and parish priest.

In comparison with the other stories we have heard, the strength, and the weakness, of the Toronto parish is that it is richly resourced, both financially and with professional people and the availability of input from nearby university colleges and religious institutions.

The other examples we heard (New Zealand, South Africa, Liverpool) were about developing structures and processes for transformation and evangelisation. The Toronto presentation seemed to be based on the existing parish structures, which were highly developed and included a parish pastoral council. The initiative described (from 2015) centred on defining the roles of clergy and laity, and developing a constitution for the parish pastoral council which would ensure genuine co-responsibility and would clarify the roles of the pastor and the lay members. Dr. Lavin's husband, who had significant management and I.T. skills, was a key player in the development process.

The organisational chart of the parish was both clear and all-embracing. Finance and pastor sit at the top of the chart, overlapping. Then the Chairperson of the parish pastoral council occupies a line above the other structures, which include six divisions which cover the life and work of the parish: Liturgy, Catechesis, Family Life, Outreach, Groups and Movements, and Communications. The heads of these divisions (ex officio) form the Executive Council. Each grouping contains up to seven sub-committees.

The Constitution's purpose was 'to secure the continuity' of the parish pastoral council, by clarifying the relationships, roles and methodology, and ensuring real co-responsibility.

The theological underpinning was about a collaborative Church: clergy and laity working together. The ethos appeared to be professional, with clearly defined management roles, supported by strong academic resources available from university colleges and religious institutions.

The make-up of the 'Executive Council' from the existing heads of department assured the clarity of the line management, and the professional hands-on experience of the key personnel, but at the same time perhaps at the expense of flexibility and openness both to new personnel and to an ongoing dynamic of transformation.

## CONCLUSION: APPLYING THE LEARNINGS

At first glance the various international settings seemed very different, and the initiatives almost random:

- lay pastoral leadership roles;
- small Christian communities listening to the Word of God;
- formation for Team Ministry;
- a Constitution for co-responsibility.

And yet, the starting points were very similar. The processes rang bells for us in Ireland. The difficulties sounded familiar. And the criteria for eventual success and for continuity and re-energising were particularly instructive.

### **Starting Points**

The starting points in every case were based on felt need. In Wellington, New Zealand, the need was for renewal and strategic pastoral planning. The first

approach to this was through searching. When various options were rejected as unsatisfactory, the search began again, looking at Church documents. Pope John Paul II's *Novo Millennio Ineunte* was a key resource. It responded to a hunger, and inspired action, moving out beyond apathy and hesitation. Pope John Paul said: 'Duc in altum' — launch out into the deep. The project was called "Launch Out". It involved learning by doing, discovery, trial and error, trust and openness.

Similarly, in South Africa the impetus for exploration came from dissatisfaction with the passive Church, the 'provided-for' Church. Again there was searching, and the gift of 'holy daring', and persistence, even though it took 15 years. The intention was to implement Vatican II.

In Liverpool, the need for radical renewal was felt because of the change of culture. Crisis management was no longer an option. Again there was searching: 'There was a tangible sense of discerning together.'

In Toronto, there already was a structure, but there was frustration and a felt need for clarity and co-responsibility.

### **The Processes**

The common factor is that there was no ready-made solution that could be imposed from above, or from outside. People struggled together. They first reached a consensus that to do nothing was not an option. They were prepared to research other situations and key Church documents. And they eventually were prepared to make the effort: 'Let us give it a try'. They were prepared to spend serious time in working together and listening to one another.

### **The Difficulties**

The biggest difficulty is to move beyond the familiar. The icon that was pivotal in the Widnes experience was the icon of Christ knocking on the door. To invite him in was comforting. To open the door and step out to him, to step out beyond our comfort zone — that was difficult. That was experienced in a very acute way over the issue of lay involvement — not just about lay involvement itself, but about the form that lay involvement could take: could it go as far as sharing in decision-making? This can involve a serious role change for both priests and people.

### **Criteria for Success and Continuity**

The first element in the successful projects was genuine commitment to lay involvement. Neither lay pastoral leadership, nor small Christian communities, nor Team Ministry nor a successful parish pastoral council can happen without real partnership between laity and clergy: what Pope Benedict XVI called co-responsibility.

The second element in success and continuity was formation, and a formation that was not purely academic. The starting point is faith and openness to the Holy Spirit, not a certificate of third level achievement, and the formation needs to include at least prayer and spirituality, study (including Scripture and the understanding of Christ and the Church), and pastoral practice. A key factor in collaborative ministry is discernment. Pope Francis highlights this in *Gaudete et Exsultate*, and he goes on: 'It

requires no special abilities, nor is it only for the more intelligent or better educated. The Father readily reveals himself to the lowly' (cf Mt. 11:25).  
(*Gaudete et Exsultate*, paragraph 170)

The third element is that formation and practice need to be informed by Church documents (Vatican II, the writings of the Popes, The Catechism of the Catholic Church, and policies, including of the National Bishops' Conference and of the local Diocese).

The fourth, and hugely significant, element in success and continuity is that those leading and involved in the projects were affirmed and commissioned by the local Bishop, who was seen to initiate and accompany the pastoral development. This was clear in all four projects. It was highlighted in New Zealand by the continuity from Cardinal John Dew's predecessor to his own enthusiastic embracing of the ongoing process. Perhaps there was an even more striking witness when the process in Liverpool was paused on the death of the Archbishop, and then proceeded with renewed momentum when his successor was appointed.

The fifth and very practical element in success and continuity relates to the process being owned and resourced by the Diocese as a priority. If it is seen just as one option among many, or as the private enterprise of a few, it will have no chance.

There is another element in success and continuity which is hard to quantify. It is the energy which comes from faith and in a special way from the sharing of faith. It was felt as the between-the-lines message of the speakers at the conference in St. Patrick's, Thurles. Sometimes it became explicit: "The fire of the Holy Spirit is frozen — it is our task to free it again". Or: "Your task is to open the space where everyone can unfold their gifts". Or again: "My wish for you is that you be very daring people". That energy of faith is sometimes felt in a special way when laity and clergy are gathered to speak and to listen and to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit. Chiara Lubich, foundress of the Focolare Movement, used to say: "Jesus among us makes Jesus within us grow".