

BISHOP DONAL MCKEOWN

IRISH FAMILY IN TRANSFORMATION

Most things in Ireland are changing at the present time – and I am quite sure that the people of Poland are experiencing a comparable tsunami of innovation. Much of the change is beneficial to both our peoples. There are now great opportunities to travel and to enjoy many of the good things of the earth. As the Second Vatican Council was clear, material progress is not to be seen as a merely negative phenomenon. People of faith were encouraged to recognise the reality of this „true social and cultural transformation”¹. And much of the progress was described as part of a process throughout history whereby „through his labours and his native endowments man has ceaselessly striven to better his life. Today [...] He has extended his mastery over nearly the whole of nature and continues to do so”².

However, the Council Fathers also recognised the deep questions that well up about the meaning of life, and were very clear that, in this world – which lives with the reality of original sin in each one of us – progress on one level never comes without a cost on another level. All social arrangements are based on a certain equilibrium of forces. When one of these forces changes the whole social architecture is remodelled. As Christians, we strive to both engage with changing social realities and maintain the ability to speak

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¹ Vatican II. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) no. 4.

² *Ibidem* no. 33.

with a prophetic voice, to seek to influence social structures but not to be seduced by the power that they often offer. And we face the constant challenges of living with the reality of change in an imperfect world and the need to engage with that world, for Jesus came not to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved (Jn 3:17). And we have to love with the challenge of distinguishing between what social constructs are of God and permanent, and those social structures which are changing and socially determined.

The family is a key area where we face huge questions about what is central to the Christian revelation and what is peripheral to it. Clearly, family structures in Nazareth two thousand years ago were not what they are now. Jesus was not part of modern nuclear family, going to be each night behind their locked door at number 2, Capernaum Street! Such levels of privacy were neither known nor desired then. Family structures in 19th Catholic Poland or Ireland would not be seen as acceptable nowadays. So I would like to look at just how the family is changing in Ireland and ask how we are seeking to respond to that social reality – and the cultural implications that come with it. After all, responding to changing social circumstances is not something known only to the Church of the 21st century. The Church in both our countries has had to do that for many centuries.

The most recent figures come from the 2006 Republic of Ireland census and I will indicate some of the changes evident there.

The traditional family unit is changing dramatically with divorce rates rising, family sizes shrinking and the number of unmarried cohabiting couples increasing.

A decade after divorce was introduced, the number of people availing of it has risen significantly; 59,500 people said they were divorced in 2006, compared with 35,000 in 2002, a 70 per cent rise in just four years. Separation is more common still, with 107,000 people describing themselves as separated or divorced.

A detailed breakdown of the 2006 census published shows that falling fertility is having a significant impact on family size, with the average number of children per family declining from 2.2 in 1986 to 1.4 in 2006.

Living arrangements are also changing with the number of cohabiting couples growing by more than 50 per cent from 77,600 in 2002 to 121,800 last year. This is also complicated by the fact that the lure of glamorous – and expensive – weddings risks making a wedding something that only the middle class can afford.

Sociologists, however, point out that our proportion of cohabiting couples (which now account for 11.6 per cent of all family units) is still low compared with Scandinavian countries.

The number of same-sex couples recorded in the 2006 census was 2,090, an increase from 1,300 in 2002. Two-thirds of these were male couples.

Lone parent families also increased by about 23 per cent to almost 190,000. Central Statistics Office (CSO) officials said the rise may be due to more precise data provided under a revised question.

The percentage of children born to unmarried mothers has risen from 5% in 1980 to 32% in 2005.

The average age for marriage is now 33 for men and 31 for women (each of these up three years in a decade).

Civil marriages now account for 22% of all marriages – five times more than in 1996. A percentage of these will, of course, be for second unions and between people who were not born in Ireland.

That may seem a negative picture – though as you will have noted these figures apply to a minority of the Irish, and the new Irish. Marriage, after all, continues to be popular with the number of marriages increasing by 110,600 (7.6%) over the past four years. However, the result of the two trends is that in 1999 there were 8 marriages for every divorce, while in 2005, there were 6 marriages per divorce. The trend is clear. Not surprisingly, the number of single people is also increasing, growing by 138,600 (10.5%) over the last five years.

Much of this may seem to be very gloomy in a formerly very traditional Catholic country. However, community cohesion – especially in rural areas – remains very strong and the continuing existence of largish family circles has helped to support families in their relationships. Children tend to be seen as a blessing rather than as a problem and the institution of marriage is still remarkably well thought of.

A very recent survey was conducted on behalf of **Accord**, the official Catholic marriage support service³. Its findings were based on interviews with more than 700 couples from all religious backgrounds married between 1999 and 2005. The survey worked on the assumption that the ‘seven year itch’ is a time when many couples feel that their marriage is under strain and the interviewees were thus young people, with an average age of 32. The

³ Accord provides pre-marriage courses throughout the country as well as counselling for couples. The report can be accessed on the web. Look for the link to *Married Life. The First Seven Years* on www.accord.ie.

results of the survey were quite encouraging for those who believe in the importance of the family for individual and social health.

The questions were very wide ranging. Interestingly, the most successful place for couples to meet was at the pub (23%)! The vast majority had not rushed into marriage, with over half (56%) having been romantically involved for over three years before marriage. Cohabitation before marriage was increasingly common, even among many church-going couples. In the survey $\frac{2}{3}$ had lived together – a considerable rise over seven years earlier. For many of these couples, living together was actually seen as the start of their marriage. Saving for the wedding day or to buy a house may have been the reason for not going through the church ceremony earlier. And the large majority of people suggest that they still believe that marriage is for life. The survey also suggested that most people were happy in their marriages and they appreciated the security and companionship that it afforded them. Couples reported the strong belief that fathers were as important as mothers in the proper development of children. As regards problem areas in married life, principal ones were balancing job and family, and financial pressures. Overall the survey suggested that:

- The vast majority of modern married couples understand marriage to be a lifelong commitment for those who make it;
- Marriage is a sufficiently rewarding experience that 9 out of 10 would recommend it to others;
- The traditional family arrangement of children being raised by both their natural parents is the one preferred by almost married couples in the survey;
- Co-habitation is an increasingly common occurrence before marriage for couples, and is seen as a stage leading to marriage rather than as an alternative to marriage;
- The incidence of severe marital difficulties in the first 7 years of marriage is relatively rare among the couples surveyed.

The survey drew the conclusion that healthy, happy marriages make for strong family life, and that strong families contribute to the economy and demand little from the taxpayer.

These are encouraging statistics – but the survey admits that it was carried out among married couples (while increasing numbers of couples do not marry) and that the respondents were mainly middle class. The data may thus hide some of the reality of life for people living in less advantaged areas and in unmarried families, or the situation for the increasing number of single parents.

I. POPULATION PROFILE

As with the majority of western countries, the population in Ireland is growing older, although it is still significantly younger than most EU countries. The average age of the population has increased by five months since the last census, rising from 35.1 years in 2002 to 35.6 years in 2006. The 2006 census also captures how large-scale immigration has changed the ethnic and religious profile of the State.

– Non-Irish nationals now account for 10 per cent of the population, the majority of whom are from the UK (112,548), followed by Poland (63,276), Lithuania (24,638), Nigeria (16,000) and Latvia (13,319).

– Muslims now represent the third largest religious grouping behind Catholics and Church of Ireland and ahead of Presbyterians. The number of Muslims rose by 13,400 to more than 32,500 since the last census four years ago.

Catholics now number 3.6 million (an increase of 218,800 since 2002) while there are 125,600 members of the Church of Ireland (an increase of 10,000). It is not always easy to assess just how many people are regular churchgoers. Nationally it is reckoned to be about 40% now, though that varies widely between old and young people, between urban and rural areas and across the social classes, with the poorest areas have the lowest levels of participation in parish life. Nevertheless, church services are still very much in demand for sacramental occasions (Baptism, First Communion, Confirmation and marriage) as well as for funerals. However, there is also the increasing trend to see such occasions as important family occasions where the family believe that they are there to celebrate their ceremony and that the parish priest is simply offering a service of which they wish to avail. Thus couples will want to structure their wedding ceremony in their way (for example, with secular music) and some people will wish to see funerals, not as a faith community gathered in prayer to ask God's grace and forgiveness on the deceased, but as a chance to celebrate the person's life with eulogies, poetry, secular symbols and the deceased's favourite songs. This can be particularly true when the person had died young or tragically, and where there was little contact with the parish. The refusal of priests of allow the ceremony to be taken over can cause great offence and misunderstanding. This presents huge challenges to parishes who wish to gather as a faith community but who speak a different language to that understood by some of the bereaved – many of whom will have seen public and state funerals for famous people, such as Princess Diana. This decreasing sense of parish community and of some people's links with Church culture leads to an assumption that the Church is there, offering a service, but where people are the customers or consumers who

can demand a product that suits their current taste. We also had the situation in NI where members of the IRA who were killed in combat wanted to have the Irish flag placed on the coffin in Church, sometimes with a black beret and dark glasses. This was portrayed by grieving families as simply the recognition given to any soldier in any state – and was also used to discredit clergy and bishops in the eyes of ‘the people’. That privatised use or abuse of community celebrations of faith will be an increasing one, matching the growing weakness in the links that many have with religious language.

The religious grouping with the highest proportion of non-Irish nationals was Orthodox Christian, with its members mainly from Eastern Europe.

In the area of ethnicity, 95 per cent of people were white, followed by Asians (1.3 per cent) and blacks (1.1 per cent). In the North, immigration has not reached the same levels – but that too is coming.

II. CHALLENGES TO MARRIAGE

Clearly, these changes will continue to be reflected in problems that arise from couple who seek to have their marriages annulled. Of course, the numbers seeking annulment are now falling, not because marriages are more stable, but because increasing numbers no longer seek a Church marriage and some of those, whose marriages fail, simply remarry civilly and do no worry about a Church process.

A. *Divorce*

After two bitter referenda in the Republic, civil divorce was readily available only little more than a decade ago. In a referendum in November 1995, the electorate had voted by a margin of 50.3% to 49.7% to allow for an amendment to the 1937 Constitution („No law shall be enacted providing for the grant of a dissolution of marriage”) that would permit divorce. A referendum in 1986 had shown that only 36.5% of the electorate favoured such a constitutional change. The new law provided for divorce under certain circumstances⁴. There has not been a huge rush but nevertheless a steady

⁴ Under the terms of the Fifteenth Amendment of the Constitution Bill, 1995, a court may grant a decree of divorce in circumstances where: (i) at the date of the institution of the proceedings, a couple have lived apart from one another for a period of, or periods amounting to, at least four years during the previous five years; (ii) there is no reasonable prospect of a reconciliation; (iii) proper provision having regard to the circumstances exists or will be

rise in the numbers of people who declare themselves as divorced. The number rose by about 40% between 2002 and the 2006 census.

The Catholic Church authorities remained quite clear about their belief that, while there was the real problem of not having a legal mechanism to cope with broken marriages, the introduction of divorce legislation would simply introduce a greater problem, namely the consumerist assumption that marriage was essentially a temporary arrangement and should not be taken too seriously. Rates of divorce in Ireland remain much lower than those in Britain⁵. However, it remains to be seen whether the traditional social cohesion and high levels of religious conviction will continue to influence these figures in an upward direction.

B. *Breakdown*

The following points are exclusively from a canonical i.e. nullity process perspective which will only represent the 'darker side' of marital breakdown. These are the trends noticed by our marriage tribunal over the years and they are not in any hierarchical order:

Pre-marital pregnancy: This is not as prevalent as in previous generations. With single motherhood no longer having any social stigma, the pressure to marry is insignificant, except for certain groups. Thus, where particular families have very close connections with the Church or live in very traditional communities a degree of pressure and/or parental pressure can still leave one or both parties with no free choice but to marry.

Immaturity: Lack of adequate practical preparation for marriage; lack of sufficient time for parties to get to know one another before marriage; a purely sexual base to a courtship relationship often leads to unforeseen problems in marriage; the need for security or age driven motivation for marriage can lead to insurmountable problems in marriage.

Incapacity: Pre marital gambling and/or alcoholism undermine trust, spontaneity and love within a relationship; paramilitary associations during „the Troubles” have often superseded the responsibilities of marriage; and many men who went to prison when they were young and spent many years there have come out with appreciable difficulties in establishing relationships; Irish society has also become aware of the prevalence of child sexual abuse in

made for the spouses and any dependent members of the family, and (iv) any other condition prescribed by law has been complied with.

⁵ In 2005, the divorce rate in the Republic was 0.83 per 1,000 existing marriages, 1.37 in Northern Ireland and 2.95 in England and Wales.

communities and families and the effect of this on children can be to make it very difficult for them to establish long term committed relationships.

Infidelity: Adultery and moral weakness, though not a ground of nullity, can seriously undermine a marital relationship and often lead to irretrievable breakdown. Again, the fact that many families were broken up during the thirty years of civil conflict led to an appreciable incidence of adultery, during the absence of husbands in prison.

Divorce mentality: Society at large is very tolerant of divorce and many nominal Catholics have little difficulty with it. It can infect a way of thinking and is used as an excuse to give up when the least little problem emerges in marriage. In mixed marriage cases that have come before the Tribunal it would be fair to say that non-Catholics see divorce as the easiest answer to insuperable marital problems and quite a few then see a Church nullity process as irrelevant to them and, consequently, refuse to take part in any canonical investigation; a significant number of cases (the highest in Ireland) requiring the grant of a Dissolution of the natural bond of marriage in Favour of the Faith (*in favorem fidei*) from the Holy Father have come from our diocese. Usually, but not exclusively, this occurs when a person who is free to marry meets a non-baptised person or a person who is baptised and has been married to a non-baptised person. Quite a number of our cases have involved Muslim or Hindu medical staff now working in Northern Ireland.

C. Abortion

The struggle between those opposed to and those in favour of legalised abortion has been an ongoing one in Ireland – and in many other countries. Abortion has been illegal in Ireland since 1861 and in 1974, the Supreme Court ruled that abortion, as well as being illegal, was against the Constitution. In 1983, after a referendum, an explicitly anti-abortion clause was actually inserted into the Constitution, giving equal protection to the right to life of the unborn and to the right to life of the mother. The Irish Government also insisted that a protocol be inserted in the EU Maastricht Treaty of 1992, stating that nothing in the constitution of the European Union would have any bearing on Ireland's abortion laws. In 1992 there was also a famous case that was taken to the Irish Supreme Court. This case involved a state injunction against a 14-year-old rape victim and her parents, to prevent them from obtaining an abortion in Britain. The Court decided that, because the girl was considered suicidal as a result of the trauma of pregnancy, her constitutional equal right to life meant that she was free to travel to Britain for an abortion. A referendum to strengthen the state's ban on abortion to was defeated by

a very small margin in 2002 (50.4% against 49.6%). The vote was lost, partly because of a split within the Catholic vote over the implications of a Yes or a No vote. Abortion remains comparatively unknown within the Republic though official figures suggest that some thousands of Irish residents simply go to England for an abortion.

A further new case recently came before the Dublin High Court. The Court was asked to rule whether an unmarried 17 year old girl from a dysfunctional background, in the case of the Health Services Executive (HSE), should be allowed to travel to Britain for an abortion, not on the grounds that she was suicidal – which she was not – but on the basis that, because the child was diagnosed in the fourth month of pregnancy as being anencephalic and thus probably unable to survive any more than a couple of hours after being born. A legal crisis was avoided by the court deciding that the HSE was not entitled to stop the girl from travelling. However the case brought back to the surface much of the bitterness that has existed over the last decades between the pro-abortion and the pro-life groups. And during the case, Catholic writers and speakers kept asking whether an abortion was the only assumed answer to the girl's tragic situation.

There is no real argument in moral theology circles about the morality of abortion and most Irish people appear to have no enthusiasm for it to be made readily available in the country. However, as the people of Poland know, European legal decisions can have serious implications for domestic law. You have had your own legal precedent in last year's Tysiac decision about the woman whose eyesight suffered damage – and implications for the importance of her human rights vis a vis the rights of the unborn child.

However, IVF treatment has given rise to more moral quandaries for secular society. Thus, for example, the status of embryos remains unclear in Irish law. In a recent case, the High Court (not the Supreme Court) has ruled that the constitutional protection for the 'unborn' did not apply to frozen human embryos. The judge ruled that, when voters opted to accept a 1983 constitutional amendment, defending the life of the 'unborn', they were thinking only of the foetus in the womb.

III. RESPONSES

How have the Irish Bishops responded to these questions? For the last number of years, there has been a Day For Life on the first Sunday each October. This has been a joint celebration organised by the three Episcopal

Conferences of Ireland, Scotland, and England and Wales. It has provided an opportunity for some joint thinking and agreed pastoral statements on subjects such as people with disabilities, older people, suicide, dying, and the wonder of life. Furthermore the documents have been written from a positive and pastoral perspective, rather than in the situation of having to react to initiatives from other sources. In 2005 the Bishops also made a substantial response to the Dublin Government's Commission on Assisted Human Reproduction. Earlier in 2000 and 2003, there were also substantial Episcopal statements on this area. All of these statements are clear explanations of Catholic moral teaching in these areas – and it is a sign of the times that at least the 2006 Day For Life statement was published in English, Irish and Polish!⁶ However, the strong secularising trend is moving very much in the direction of solutions that are based on practical reasoning (e.g. IVF), making regulations that accept and regulate changing social norms, a Human Rights based approach to morality and the consequent confrontational use of the Courts to vindicate rights and set legal precedents.

Britain has, since 1967, had very liberal abortion laws, requiring only the signature of two doctors for an abortion to be sanctioned. However, there has been the recent phenomenon of an increasing numbers of doctors feeling very unhappy with the situation, the casual nature of the request for many abortions – and they have been refusing to sign. A poll, published earlier this month by the doctors' newspaper Pulse, said 19 per cent of GPs believe abortions should be illegal. Some 24 per cent of the 309 doctors surveyed said they refused to sign abortion referral forms and 55 per cent said they thought the 24-week limit for terminations should be reduced. It may be surprising that this is a natural backlash against liberal abortion laws, and much of it is not based on religious convictions. This may contrast sharply with the situation in some parts of the USA where, because of vocal opposition to abortion, 'pro-choice' doctors are actually seen as heroes – whereas in Britain many doctors are now indicating that they would not want to either perform abortions or even sanction one.

A. Scanning the horizon

Thus, as the title of this talk suggested, the family in Ireland in transformation. We are not in a position to say that we have had enough change and

⁶ All these statements are available on the website of the Irish Catholic Church. Cf. www.catholiccommunications.ie/PastLet/index.html

that the process of transformation should come to an end. The pressures for change – whether they are motivated by economic forces, secular agendas or other forces – will continue, and they will tend to go in a particular direction as long as liberal capitalism dominates both the market and intellectual debate. Thus, in Ireland, we need to look at what is happening in our near neighbours. This is not done in order to seem fatalistic about future changes or to assume that we cannot escape from European trends. Ireland does have its own traditions and resources – and it seems to me that it is precisely by maximising the strengths of those traditions that we can develop in ways that do not simply mimic what has happened in Britain.

The situation there is disturbing. One in four British children lives in a single-parent household, suggesting that there is no end to the flight away from marriage there. In some parts of the country, the majority of children are born out of wedlock – and statistics in every country suggest that children born to co-habiting parents are more likely to find themselves eventually in a single household. Furthermore, other figures suggest that half of British divorces were the result of one of the partners asking a private investigator to check whether the other partner was having an adulterous relationship and a third of all divorces were adultery-related⁷. These statistics are a challenge to all who regard the unique relationship of man and woman in marriage as the best foundation for family life.

Britain – along with many other countries – has discovered that indiscriminate support for households with children can easily become an incentive towards single parenthood. Since the great majority of single-parent households are headed by women, the rise in their number also indicates a decline in the role played by men in the raising of their own children. The importance of a good male role model for boys can hardly be exaggerated. But the trend in the opposite direction – the rising number of ‘reconstituted families’ where the man in the household is the stepfather to his partner’s children – presents new problems. As part of a series of policies to protect children, British law makers recently suggested that a single woman with children should be able to check with police whether a prospective partner – and therefore possible stepfather – has convictions for child abuse. This may sound bizarre at first – but it does show the extent to which British society is moving into uncharted waters.

⁷ T. P r e n d e r g a s t. *Temptations of the Flesh*. „The Tablet” of 28 April 2007 p. 11.

B. Responses:

Accord: As a national body this seeks to offer: Marriage and relationship counselling; Marriage preparation and enrichment programmes; Natural Family planning programmes; Programmes for schools. Accord is widely recognised as a very competent organisation and makes an important contribution to raising awareness of issues and skills to do with supporting committed relationships, in the interests the spouses, any children and wider society.

Family Ministry Commission. Our diocese established a Family Ministry Commission some ten years ago. It has taken as its core priorities: to strengthen and nurture family relationships; to foster family faith development; to encourage and equip parishes to offer appropriate faith and relationship to their families; to promote and protect the rights of the family. And the Commission seeks to carry this out by: providing support and formation at every stage of the life cycle; organising general programmes which aim to foster strong family and faith relationships; working with clergy and parish pastoral councils to help develop a parish-based strategy which supports family life; providing training and formation at diocesan level; raising awareness of family issues at government and policy level.

IV. DEFENDING AND SUPPORTING THE FAMILY

All of this suggests that, as Church people, we need to be very vigilant and prophetic in commenting on the effects of legislative changes on the whole fabric of society. The temptation is sometimes for Catholics to be so focussed on specific moral questions such as gay partnerships and gay adoptions that we actually miss the opportunity to help society reflect on the social fragmentation that is happening on many sides. That is a change from an earlier assumption that the law of the country had to support Catholic moral teaching. This is increasingly impossible to sustain in a secularised and pluralist culture. But the prophetic voice can – and should – increasingly be heard in terms of arguing for the Common Good. If the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath (Mk 2:27), then it seems important that we maintain that great Christian of speaking from the edges of society and on behalf of those who risk being crushed by the economic juggernaut which tells us that, since we have so much more money, we must be happy.

That prophetic role is, it seems to me, a vital one if we are to be faithful to the message and ministry of Jesus. While we may work for, and dream of, a Christian society, that dream also contains the seeds of its own destruction

through the potential to develop merely a social Christianity. It was Francis Fukuyama who talked about ‘instrumental religion’, „that is the practice of religion that is sustained not by dogmatic belief in revelation but rather because religious teachings constitute a convenient language in which to express the community’s existing moral rules”⁸. This is a chilling understanding of how an established religion, at the centre of power in a society, can allow itself to be abused in the service of other agenda. That would be the sort of religion – as in Classical Rome – where the state divinised itself and simply used and changed religious language, ceremonies and teachings in order to support the power structures.

Ultimately we have to strike some sort of balance between incarnating the Church and Gospel values in society, and yet not being seduced by the inevitable compromises which this will involve. On the other hand we cannot simply stand outside, critical, self-righteous and unconcerned. We seek to act in the name of the God who so loved the world and who sent his Son not to condemn the world but to save it. And the human desire for power and control that is in all of us needs to meet the conviction of St Paul that God’s power is at work in weakness. Thus crises have been most helpful and grace filled times for the Church down through the ages. However, one Irish theologian recently noted one important point.

The Christian Church has shown from the start that it can thrive on crises as long as these crises are genuinely religious or moral. If they are predominantly institutional, however, the situation is much less healthy⁹.

The friendship of the state, and people saying nothing but good about the Church – these does not sit easily with the ministry of Jesus. But it is equally important that we work within the Church to counteract another threat, not just to the life of the Gospel but to the Common Good.

Pope Benedict XVI in his Encyclical letter *Deus Caritas est* gives good guidance as to how we might handle situations such as this regarding public policy. It is true that the Holy Father was writing regarding the involvement of the Church in areas concerning justice and charity. However, the principles

⁸ F. F u k u y a m a. *The Great Disruption: Human Nature and the Reconstitution of Social Order*. London 1999. Quoted in: G. D a l y. *Liberal Democracy: Crisis and the Christian Vocation*. In: *Religion in Ireland: Past, Present and Future*. Ed. D. Carroll. Dublin 1999 p. 141.

⁹ *Ibidem* p. 146.

still hold true. The Holy Father was clear that the Church is only one of the different living forces in society¹⁰. A monolithic domination by church of a pluralist society is no longer seen as a positive value. In the following paragraph, Pope Benedict further expands on the specific contribution of the Church to the formation of public policy.

We have seen that the formation of just structures is not directly the duty of the Church but belongs to the world of politics, the sphere of the autonomous use of reason. The Church has an indirect duty here in that she is called to contribute to the purification of reason and to the reawakening of those moral forces without which just structures are neither established nor prove effective in the long run¹¹.

That danger lies in the privatising of religion, for this contributes substantially to the fragmentation of society and the promotion of individualism. In fact, the Church in western societies can actually contribute to that dangerous sort of religion. It may mean that life is quiet and free from attacks from hostile media. Such a religious expression will not attract criticism from the powerful or from the proponents of allegedly neutral secularism because it is harmless. But there is not future for the Church if it seeks peace by encouraging the pieties of Church life by an ever dwindling church membership. This would amount to an abandonment of the Church's commission to preach the Gospel, in season and out of season. And it would be untrue to the Catholic tradition of emphasising the corporate nature of the Church, which has remained one of its great strengths as distinct from the more individualist and pietistic approach of many of the traditions which sprang from the Reformation.

CONCLUSION

None of us chooses the time in which we are born. Your country has gone through enormous changes in a couple of decades. My generation grew up, hearing the inspiring stories of Cardinal Wyszyński. That must seem a long time ago to most of you. And Ireland has changed in many and frightening ways over the same period of time. But as Timothy Radcliffe – former Mas-

¹⁰ Cf. B e n e d i c t XVI. *Deus Caritas Est*. The Vatican 2006 no. 28.

¹¹ *Ibidem* no. 29.

ter General of the Dominicans – asserted „the one thing that the Bible tells us about the future of the Church is that it has one”¹². So, in the midst of the rapid changes in family life and structures in Ireland, our question has not to be, „How can we get things back to the way that they used to be?”, but rather „Where and how is God calling us to speak the truth, support the weak and serve the Common Good?”. As Jeremiah, Isaiah, Amos and the great prophetic figures of the Old and New Testament tell us, the speaking of the truth in love is not an easy task. But it is precisely in the desert that it needs to be proclaimed, if the flowers are to bloom there. Like the prophets and the apostles, we will feel frightened of speaking in God’s name. But it is the truth alone that will set people free (John 8:36). The family – however its structures evolve over the next decades – which will remain the core of how society hands on its value and how it introduces a new generation into human and spiritual growth. Our commitment to the family is based not just on some idealised picture of the family of Nazareth, but in the revelation that God is made known to us as Abba/Father and that Jesus repeatedly – especially in John’s Gospel – speaks of the love of the Father. This all responds to the human insight that we are essentially relational beings, our growth is through a dialectical process of engaging with others and with reality. Our proclamation of the potential of the family is based on the scriptures and on the equally clear insights from the empirical sciences that both the male and the female are vital influences on our finding our place in the world. That does not mean that we condemn those who, for whatever reason, find themselves in objectively imperfect family situations. They need to be helped to believe that God’s grace is equally at work and available in their lives. But we also talk, with humility, of how God’s foolishness is wiser than human reason, and how God’s weakness is stronger than human strength (1 Cor 1:25). To our secular society we have to keep reflecting the fact that „the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ”¹³.

There is no place for self-righteous condemnation in the Christian vocabulary, only for the compassion of the one who came not to condemn the world

¹² Quoted in *A Church with a Future. Challenges to Irish Catholicism Today*. Eds. N. Coll and P. Scallan. Dublin 2005 p. 9.

¹³ *Gaudium et Spes* no. 1.

but so that through him the world might be saved (Jn 3:17). Our challenge in Ireland is to support people in the development of faithful, committed relationships, in developing their emotional intelligence and in presenting models of generous, self-sacrificing love to an age that is tempted to expect only pleasure.

And the Lord will keep reminding the Irish Church that it is only people who are developing a deep spirituality that will be able to survive in the often barren secular wasteland. We are called again by your former staff member, and late Pope, to develop all our communities as schools of prayer, nourished by a spirituality of communion¹⁴. He was aware of the huge social pressures on the family and was very clear: „At a time in history like the present, special attention must also be given to the pastoral care of the family, particularly when this fundamental institution is experiencing a radical and widespread crisis. In the Christian view of marriage, the relationship between a man and a woman – a mutual and total bond, unique and indissoluble – is part of God’s original plan, obscured throughout history by our „hardness of heart”, but which Christ came to restore to its pristine splendour, disclosing what had been God’s will „from the beginning” (Mt 19:8).

On this point the Church cannot yield to cultural pressures, no matter how widespread and even militant they may be. Instead, it is necessary to ensure that... Christian families show convincingly that it is possible to live marriage fully in keeping with God’s plan and with the true good of the human person – of the spouses, and of the children who are more fragile¹⁵.

The message of Christ does not seek to destroy human nature but to heal and enhance it, so that it can be more clearly seen that we are made in God’s image and likeness and redeemed by the grace of Christ. That was always the challenge of the Gospel. We ask not for an easy time – but only that the grace of God can be allowed to work in our time.

¹⁴ J o h n P a u l I I. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. The Vatican 2001 no. 43.

¹⁵ *Ibidem* no. 47.

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TRANSFORMACJA IRLANDZKIEJ RODZINY

S t r e s z c z e n i e

Spółeczeństwo od wieków katolickiej Irlandii w ostatnim okresie doświadcza głębokich przemian, co szczególnie dotyczy małżeństwa i rodziny. Liczne dane statystyczne potwierdzają, że coraz bardziej upowszechnia się kruchość więzi małżeńskiej, jak i tendencje zmierzające do redefinicji koncepcji małżeństwa i rodziny. Towarzyszy temu narastający brak wrażliwości na świętość ludzkiego życia. Wobec tej rzeczywistości Kościół katolicki podejmuje liczne wysiłki duszpasterskie, by bronić i wspierać rodzinę, szuka nowych dróg wychowania ludzi młodych do dojrzałości i odpowiedzialności, wpisując to w nowy wysiłek ewangelizacyjny.

Key words: family, marriage, Ireland.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina, małżeństwo, Irlandia.

