

## Remarks for the Irish Inter-Church Meeting

### Discerning the Signs of the Times

Reconciling ourselves to the fact that things have changed is one of the hardest tasks facing Christians in Ireland.

I think Christians have largely made peace with the remarkable decline in the centrality, influence, status, and size of the churches on this island. If anything, I worry that we have so absorbed the narrative of decline that we might be blinded to see the facts that lay plainly before us. A few years back, I felt after the 624 pages of Fintan O'Toole's memoir, I never need to read another page about the decline.

The ground is cleared in places for us to start experimenting with a new narrative.

In these short remarks, I want to articulate some sense of the reconciling task that stands before us, particularly in the realm of environmental justice. I will reflect on things the churches are doing well. And I hope to close close by suggesting emphases that might warrant our attention in the years to come.

### The Environmental Challenge

My colleague and I, Dr Ciara Murphy, wrote a book a few years back called *Parish as Oasis*. Ciara is an ecologist, whose PhD explored microbial communities in intertidal sedimentary systems.

She is a real scientist.

I... Well let's just be clear that I am certainly not a real scientist.

But we still believe that the conceit of *Parish as Oasis* was worthwhile. It is a book about climate breakdown and the biodiversity collapse that never – until an epilogue – mentions the climate breakdown or the biodiversity collapse.

Our basic claim, informed by her grounding in the biological sciences and my perspective informed by moral theology, is that Christians should be concerned with questions of creation care, ecological sustainability, and environmental justice even if we didn't face a crisis.

But that we face a crisis only heightens our responsibility to tend and cultivate the good creation God has gifted us.

While much of our popular discourse thinks about the need for reconciliation in our society in terms of social crises – crime or inequality or prejudice or what have you – the fundamental source of disintegration is environmental. I doubt the facts need to be recounted at length to you. You might not know the details around what we might call the cutting edge. The trajectory most relevant to Irish people is that the sea surface temperature of the North Atlantic is, to use the evocative phrase from NASA, running a fever. Month on month for the last year and a half, the waters that surround us have been careening through records that had been long established.

Kevin Hargaden. November 13, 2024.

This is especially relevant for us because Ireland is at the same point of latitude on the globe as many places that seem to us as basically Arctic. The reason our climate is temperate is because of complex oceanic currents that originate in the Gulf of Mexico and cycle past Iceland before arriving with us. If the stability of those currents begins to disintegrate, all bets are off. Increasingly accurate models – hypothetical I grant you – are now realistically predicting this could happen within a generation.

Dublin is hundreds of kilometres north of South Bend, in Indiana, where Suzanne works. This is her first year living there, but she can report back in the spring about whether we are ready for the winters that might be coming our way.

The climate models are existentially depressing. But it is the biodiversity loss that causes Ciara and I to lie awake at night most commonly. The majority of Irish native plant species are in decline. It is reliably estimated that globally, wildlife populations have declined by an average 69% in the past 50 years. Even the most technocratic enthusiast for human ingenuity must grant that our way of life assumes that there are other creatures to keep our life systems intact. We are in the midst of a mass extinction event. This was not caused by a meteor, but by fossil capitalism. And the lack of concern about this is terrifying to us.

What can we say theologically? It is fitting considering the ecumenical nature of this meeting that I can come as a Presbyterian theologian and tell you that the Bishop of Rome is our intellectual guide. *Laudato Si'* turns ten next year and it is still all too under-appreciated in Christian circles. For us, in the Jesuit Centre for Faith and Justice, Francis' greatest contribution in that letter is his concept of "integral ecology". I cannot tell you how often we have shared this idea with secular activists and it has been epiphanic for them.

What Francis insists is that the divide that I presented earlier in this talk – between "social disintegrations" and "environmental disintegrations" – does not really exist. They are two sides of the same coin. As the Pope puts it:

We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature. (*LS'* §139)

What can we say about this ecclesially? Well, to borrow the words of the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres at the opening of this week's COP meetings in Baku, "This is a story of avoidable injustice. The rich cause the problem, the poor pay the highest price."

This, then, is the first reconciliation that I present to you. We must reconcile our ecological conversion with our struggle for social justice. One achieves the other as the other lays the foundation for the one.

Or, phrased in terms I am familiar with from the Jesuits, the faith that does justice is now a green faith.

### Areas of Strength

How do we meet this challenge?

I want to suggest there are areas of strength from which we can work.

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I want to preface my comments by admitting my pitifully partial perspective on the expressions of Christianity in Ireland.

There are about 20 churches in just the small area that makes up the North East Inner City around where our offices. Irish Christianity may well be in dramatic decline, but at the same time, it harbours niches of astonishing vibrancy.

I am no expert, especially in this room. But to whatever degree that I do get to visit churches and talk to Christians from across this island, it is clear that there are deeply fertile fields out there. In *Parish as Oasis*, Ciara and I compiled twenty different examples of creation care that we called experiments. They ranged from efforts to puncture Christmas consumerism to madly ambitious community-enabled retrofits of 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings to make them fit for the 22<sup>nd</sup> century. We found churches that were going out of their way to make cycling to worship much easier and churches that were using flower beds to make flooding less likely. Immense creativity and commitment.

The first area of strength that I want to suggest we can build from is that the churches are leading on the ecological transition. We have many examples to cite but I want particularly to highlight the visionary commitment of the Irish Catholic bishops to set aside 30% of church land for biodiversity. This one move helped Ciara and I sleep better. The next government seems likely to not even have a ministerial portfolio that touches on biodiversity and yet that most maligned group, the Irish bishops, are busy cultivating it in every corner of the island.

If I had more time I would talk about the efforts in divestment, initiatives like the Sustainable Energy Community established by the Dublin Catholic diocese, and the simple fact that half of the founding members of the Stop Climate Chaos coalition were faith-based organisations and still, to this day, it is religious people who show up to make things happen in terms of ecological activism.

More could be said but I will propose another area of strength where the church is leading the wider society in reconciling itself towards justice and truth. This second field has already been unpacked somewhat by Philip – it is integration. Things are not perfect, but for many communities around Ireland, the three places where you will find real social and cultural integration are the GAA, the car parks of the German supermarkets, and church.

This should be an explicit emphasis of your mission going forward. In a culture where fear-filled voices shout absurdities about Ireland being full, the church always has space to welcome.

My two examples, you will notice, reconcile the two elements of Francis' integral ecology – the environmental crisis and the social challenge should be met together, as distinct but overlapping concerns, utterly integral to the Gospel.

### [Reconciling Ourselves to a Future of Mission](#)

Ciara and I begin *Parish as Oasis* with a theological preface. We recount the narrative of decline I referenced at the start of my address but we frame it as something that isn't entirely negative. It is certainly the case that the church has been displaced from its prominent position in Irish life. But we ask, "What if we are being invited to engage in an experiment in faithfulness that is possible only from the margins?"

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That is fundamentally our effort to relocate our thinking about mission into a place where it can learn from ecology. In the book we illustrate what we have in mind by reference to the oasis churches of Ethiopia, which famously resist the encroaching Sahara by marking out a space and letting life flourish within the boundaries of small stone walls. People who insist salvation comes from Galilee should be comfortable with seeking out fecundity in the margins.

The climate breakdown will accelerate. There will be more extreme weather. Our cities will flood. We will have droughts. Populations of our neighbours, the other creatures, will continue to plummet. And while each of these changes is hard to conceptualise and impossible to appraise, they add up to a political reality that is less stable, meaner for the most vulnerable, more exposed to extremism, and having to face hard decisions over the long run in the exact moment when we are busy forming ourselves to prefer easy compromises with a short-term gain.

If that description is at all accurate, the edge of a desert isn't a bad place from which to theologise, from which to preach, from which to pastor and to bear witness to the God who saves us from the flood and makes dry bones live.

Repeatedly, through his ministry, Joseph Ratzinger was drawn to reflect on the missional potency of beauty. In comments made in 2002 he said:

I have often affirmed my conviction that the true apology of Christian faith, the most convincing demonstration of its truth against every denial, are the saints, and the beauty that the faith has generated. Today, for faith to grow, we must lead ourselves and the persons we meet to encounter the saints and to enter into contact with the Beautiful.<sup>1</sup>

I have always been moved by this line of argument. But I want to close by suggesting that on the edge of this potential desert – environmental, cultural, ecclesial – we must reconcile our idea of beauty with the substance of Jesus' life. The true is beautiful. But so too is the just.

When the church commits itself to experimenting with what it looks like to bear witness to Christ's resurrection in the mode of things like ecological conversion or intercultural encounter, we tend our little patches in just that way that is hospitable to new life.

A few years before Fintan O'Toole wrote his memoir, a much younger public intellectual emerged. A detail of Sally Rooney's first novel, *Conversations with Friends*, seemed to pass many readers and all critics by. In the years since she has drawn attention to it – it is her obsession with Jesus.

We might expect her characters to be post-secular proponents of apathy towards religiosity, but they read the bible and pray and, in moments of distress, find themselves in the church. They are not devout. But they are attracted by – as Frances, the narrator of *Conversations with Friends* put it – the possibility that she could “love everyone and even include bad people?”

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20020824\\_ratzinger-cl-rimini\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020824_ratzinger-cl-rimini_en.html)

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So, this is my “wisdom from the next generation<sup>2</sup>, as best I can compress it in 15 minutes. The radical proposition that Christianity presents to the world continues to be that God loves everyone and even includes the bad people. This literally saves the world.

Irish Christian leaders have to start reconciling themselves to the fact that the settled narrative of decline and irrelevance is itself in retreat. The ground is clearing to start some small, new, humble interesting things. I suggest to you that integral ecology is a framework for directing those efforts and Sally Rooney’s work is proof that those efforts already have an audience.

Thank you.