



**Parish of St. Patrick's,
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Lent 2010

Dear Archbishop Martin,

Context

We, the Parish Pastoral Council of Donabate, Portrane and Balheary feel called to write to you at this time of crisis for our church. We wish to offer you our support in these very difficult times and to assure you that you are held in affectionate esteem by your people, who acknowledge your courageous work in opening up what had been concealed in relation to the scandal of child abuse in the Dublin archdiocese. Your desire for openness and integrity gives us confidence in speaking to you with the frankness envisaged by the Council fathers:

They should openly reveal to them their needs and desires with that freedom and confidence which is fitting for children of God and brothers in Christ. They are, by reason of the knowledge, competence or outstanding ability which they may enjoy, permitted and sometimes even obliged to express their opinion on those things which concern the good of the Church.
(Lumen Gentium, 4:37)

We intended writing to you to share our hopes and concerns for the Church even before the publication of the Murphy report. Our letter also reflects the thoughts and feelings of our parishioners in a number of parish assemblies over the past few months.

Murphy Report

With regard to the Murphy Report, our feelings undoubtedly are the same as your own – sorrow, shame, dismay, and anger. These feelings are echoed in the contributions of our parishioners, which we include as an appendix with this letter. We know that the failings exposed in the report are not confined to the Dublin archdiocese but have been replicated in other places including Florida, Boston and Vienna, and in the German church. The problem of clerical child sexual abuse and the subsequent covering up by church authorities is not confined to these contexts. ‘The prevailing culture’ that Bishop Moriarty said he should have challenged was not an exclusively Irish one. The Murphy report historically and expertly documents how that culture placed the reputation of the Church above the most fundamental human rights of vulnerable children. However, the leadership of the Church has been preoccupied for centuries with insulating the Church against being seen to be wrong. A great many courageous and principled Catholics, including bishops, priests and religious, have

been deemed disloyal because in good faith they raised questions about some element of how we are church. The credibility of the Church itself has not benefitted by this protectionist approach, rather it is cruelly ironic that the desire to avoid scandal gave rise to a monumental scandal that has dreadfully damaged the Church. While the Church must preserve the truth, it must do this with love and with respect for dialogue within the people of God. Indeed, it must model the highest standards of integrity, showing a respect for the truth that consigns concepts like ‘mental reservation’ to history.

Renewal

Even without these disastrous scandals, the Church has had a credibility problem in Ireland and Europe for some decades now. Millions of good, altruistic, idealistic and capable people have haemorrhaged from the church and very few younger people choose to play an active part. The transitory presence at our eucharists of the parents of candidates for sacraments conceals the lack. The truth is that the failure to implement the renewal called for by Vatican II has marked a kind of silent death for our church. In the years since the Council, those who called for this renewal were often made to feel disloyal by many bishops and clergy, as though they were hostile, when in fact they were attentive to the moving of the Holy Spirit and sensitive to the signs of the times. Why has there been such ambivalence to this renewal? Why has resistance to pastoral renewal at parish level been allowed to prevail? Some commentators suggest the Church is characterised by a dynamic of maintenance rather than one of mission. While there has been progress in the sphere of liturgical renewal, the failure to renew the people of God itself over the past forty-five years lends weight to this assertion.

Could it be that the Catholic Church fears an unmapped future, one that is not under the tight control of centralised authority, but that gives trust and responsibility to the wider Church? Might this explain why the role of lay women and men in the Church is still, to a great extent that of passive consumer rather than as partners in mission? The rich vision of the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity is still not communicated, let alone implemented. It must also be said that many women feel ‘second class citizens’ in the Church. We want, however, to acknowledge your own promotion of the role of lay people through the Parish Pastoral Councils. We are confident there is great scope for the further development of these councils to enrich the discernment of the church, to ensure accountability and to spearhead renewal. The pastoral councils however, need the ongoing guidance, encouragement and support of a dedicated diocesan agency.

A new future

We write to you, our pastor, out of deep concern for the future of the faith and the future of the Church. We see the great difficulty the Church has at winning the minds and hearts of our friends and indeed of our own children. This has been made all the more difficult by the recent scandals. While the Church needs to examine its failures in the various abuse scandals it must also ensure it has the highest child protection safeguards in place. We want to commend you Archbishop Diarmuid for your leadership to the Church in Ireland in this regard. As well as examining its responses to the scandals, however, the Church must also be open to considering all possible factors and causes of any kind of abuse or misuse of power. This should include a comprehensive examination of the theology and history of ministry,

including a consideration of the impact of mandatory priestly celibacy, the training of priests and the discernment of vocations.

The ecclesial emergency we face demands courage and creative initiatives. It also requires open, honest debate at all levels of the Church. The stifling of debate at synods of bishops on difficult issues and the undermining of the principle of collegiality between Pope and the bishops must be accepted no longer. We fully support the rightful authority of the bishop, but we recognise that bishops are experienced as remote figures by most Catholics. The rightful connection between bishop and people needs to be re-established, as the current method of choosing a bishop is selection rather than election. We would call for a return to the ancient ecclesial tradition of allowing all the people of God in a diocese a say in the election of their bishop.

Symbolic Gestures

While we recognise that few bishops nowadays see themselves as ‘princes of the Church’, is it not time for an end to the many titles assigned to church leaders that are not only anachronistic but also unbiblical? These include referring to a church leader as *my lord, your grace, your eminence, reverend, very reverend* and *most reverend*, even *your holiness*. Such titles are symbols of inequality and in no way reflect the variety of function or ministry. They damage the reputation of the Church and should be abandoned. We believe that you could make a powerful statement of your commitment to a renewed Church by announcing that these will no longer apply in your diocese. There are surely opportunities to radically improve the communication with, and delegation of responsibility to auxiliary bishops, priests and lay people that enhance the effectiveness and witness of the Church and which do not necessitate medieval, worldly titles.

We are only too aware that the structures of the wider Catholic Church make the process of significant change slow and difficult to achieve. Nonetheless, we must aspire to, and strive for that change when it is necessary so the Church can be faithful to the Gospel. If significant change is not possible in the short term at national or global level, important steps can still be taken at diocesan level that would give leadership and witness to the wider Church.

We would respectfully call for the putting in place of structures of extensive and meaningful consultation with lay people. That consultation might form part of a wider process of consultation involving priests and religious also, culminating in a diocesan synod at some point in the not too distant future. This would be a credible response to the lack of accountability and communication highlighted both in the Murphy Report and by many voices in its aftermath, and, more importantly, show that the role of lay women and men as co-workers in the mission of the church is recognised in practice as well as in the documents that articulate the vision for the Church.

All the laity, then, have the exalted duty of working for the ever greater spread of the divine plan of salvation to all, of every epoch and all over the earth. Therefore may the way be clear for them to share diligently in the salvific work of the Church according to their ability and the needs of the times. (LG: 4.33)

We see the upcoming International Eucharistic Congress in 2012 as an opportunity for the Church in Ireland to meaningfully mark our sorrow and make reparation to the abused. This event should reflect a communitarian theology of Eucharist and project a humble Church that

is seeking to be faithful to the model of service given by the Lord at the Last Supper. To that end, a programme of preparation needs to be put in place so that the whole People of God is focused on the call to renewal implicit in such an event. We know that renewal challenges us all to real holiness and demands much greater commitment from lay women and men than is currently asked of them. However, we also need strong pastoral leadership from our Archbishop, and from those who assist you in leading your people. Meaningfully engaging with the entire people is not just a token gesture but a necessary step towards the awakening of the entire Church, something that should have happened a generation ago. A generation has been lost to the Church in that time and there will be no 'quick fixes' to the problems the Church faces. However, we believe that you will find many willing and generous laity ready to respond to the call to renewal because the Holy Spirit has instilled in them an instinctive hunger for that renewal. We must all have confidence in the power of God's Holy Spirit to guide and help the Church establish itself as never before. We are a Resurrection people; a community that believes life can spring from disaster. Our tradition tells us however that such faith must also be matched with courageous action.

We want to assure you once more, Archbishop Diarmuid, of our affection and our support in these difficult times. You are constantly in our prayers and thoughts. We trust that you discern hope as well as concern in these passionate words as writing to you is ultimately a testament to our faith and confidence in you, and in your fellow bishops. We know you are extremely busy but we would welcome a response to our letter at some point in the future.

Yours faithfully,

Fr. Paddy O'Byrne (President)

Pádraig Haran (Chairperson)

Members of the Parish Pastoral Council:

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