

Ireland should look at Baltimore history

Catholicism is in crisis all over Old Europe. Nowhere is that crisis more pronounced than in Ireland, where clerical corruption and disastrous episcopal leadership have collided with rank political expediency and a rabidly anticlerical media to produce a perfect storm of ecclesiastical meltdown. The country whose constitution begins “In the name of the Most Holy Trinity...” is now thoroughly post-Christian. And while there has been no one cause of that radical secularization, the church in Ireland had best look to itself, its sins, its errors and its unbecoming alliance with political power as it considers how to begin anew.

That reconsideration would be aided by dramatic Vatican action that includes a major downsizing of the Irish dioceses. There are currently four metropolitan sees and 22 dioceses in Ireland, for a total of 26 ecclesiastical jurisdictions. Ireland’s total population is some 4.6 million which is about the total Catholic population of the archdiocese of Los Angeles. That there are 26 dioceses in Ireland is manifestly absurd.

So one step toward the reform of the church in Ireland will be to rationalize what has become an irrational ecclesiastical structure: an overgrowth that has, over time, become an impediment to the church’s mission. And rationalizing, in this instance, means downsizing. It’s not a matter of retribution. The point is to create structures through which the new evangelization in Ireland, which is going to be a struggle in any case, can flow.

The downsizing should not be symbolic, but deep, mirroring the deep reform to which the church in Ireland is called. Halving the number of current Irish dioceses by combining some sees and suppressing others would put an average of 354,000 Catholics into each restructured Irish diocese. That’s still less than half the Catholics in Pittsburgh, so no complaints ought to be heard from Irish clergy or bishops about “draconian measures,” should the Holy See make a dramatic reduction in the number of Irish dioceses.

Then there is the question of replacing bishops. That many Irish bishops are resisting proposals for downsizing the number of Irish dioceses confirms the impression that the present Irish episcopal bench must be cleared: again, not as a matter of retribution (although in some cases deposition for malfeasance would certainly be warranted), but as an essential prerequisite to re-establishing a foundation of public confidence for the new evangelization of the Emerald Isle. And in considering candidates for a reduced number of episcopal chairs in Ireland, the Holy See might well look outside, as well as inside, Ireland for candidates.

Michael Joseph Curley, the archbishop of Baltimore who confirmed my father, came to Baltimore as successor to Cardinal Gibbons in 1921. Curley was a native Irishman; he was ordained for what was then mission territory in Florida, where he served as a circuit-riding priest before becoming bishop of St. Augustine at age 34. Seven years later, he succeeded the most important Catholic churchman since John Carroll. If this native of Athlone, educated in Limerick and Dublin, could become the archbishop of the premier see of the United States at a moment in American history marked by deep anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudices, it is not clear why (to take hypothetical examples) a native of Los Angeles educated in Denver, or a New Orleans native educated in Washington, D.C., could not become a bishop in Ireland today.

Twenty-first century Ireland is mission territory. The damage of recent decades has been so severe that it is not so much a matter of reforming the church as of re-founding it: and re-founding it as a vibrant evangelical movement, not as a clericalist institution. That re-founding will require institutional downsizing in the service of radical evangelization. That re-evangelization, in turn, will require bishops on fire with the Gospel, men who can make the Christian proposal compelling again amidst widespread cynicism and bitterness. Men of that caliber can come from anywhere. Serious Irish Catholics will welcome them, whatever the place-of-birth recorded on their passports.

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