

A HISTORY OF SYNODS IN IRELAND

Salvador Ryan

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(ROUGH LECTURE NOTES)

When Bishop Brendan Leahy announced last September that a synod for the diocese of Limerick would be held in 2016, few would have realised that it has been over fifty years since such an event has occurred –and over seventy since there was a Limerick diocesan synod. Since then, both the Church in general, and the Irish Church in particular, has changed beyond recognition, not least owing to the seismic effects of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). Whatever can be said about the forthcoming Limerick Synod, one thing is certain: it will be a very different affair from any of its predecessors. For one thing, its 400 delegates will be drawn from all strands of life, and Bishop Leahy’s description of the event as “an opportunity to open up, look around us, see things from other points of view ... to dialogue with people” clearly takes its cue from the language of Vatican II. On the face of it, this looks like a radical departure from the sort of dry canonical legislation enacted by Irish ecclesiastics at diocesan synods over the centuries – legislation which bore little relevance to the daily lives of most men and women. And yet, while we may be inclined to draw an absolute contrast between what is to come and what went before, perhaps such a judgment is a little unfair to those who participated in such synods in the past. For, if we look a little more carefully at the preoccupations of some of these earlier Irish synods, they were not without either pastoral application or concern for the well-being of priests, religious and laity. In my paper this evening I’d like to present an overview of the history of synodal legislation in Ireland from the earliest times to the twentieth century. I don’t propose to cover every synod, of course – there are far too many – and for some we have very little information; but, rather,

to give you a flavour of the sorts of concerns that synods have had over the centuries. Despite the long distance in time between ourselves and some earlier synods, you might be surprised at how some of the legislation and the rationale behind it retains currency even today. Some of these synods concerned themselves with issues of church structure, property holding, jurisdiction and other legal issues. My focus will not be so much on these matters, as Bishop Brendan has already pointed out that our concern in the run up to the 2016 synod cannot remain simply at the level of church structures, and amending or adapting these for a new reality. My interest, rather, is at the level of the lived out religion of ordinary people – both clergy and laity – and what were deemed to be the most pressing concerns in this regard over the centuries. Finally, I will say something at the end of my talk as to how some of the concerns of earlier synods remain (albeit in different guises) in twenty-first-century Irish Christianity.

Councils and Synods

Since the very earliest days of the Christian Church, those in positions of Christian leadership had occasion to gather together to discuss the most pressing issues of the day. The earliest church “council” (that of Jerusalem) convened in apostolic times, when the question of the admission of non-Jews (Gentiles) was debated among figures such as Peter, James and Paul around 49AD. The decision taken at that meeting – not to require Gentiles to first become Jews (i.e. to be circumcised and adopt all the dietary regulations of Jews) before they could become Christians – was to transform the face of the Christian movement forever, as by the mid second century most Christians now came from a Gentile rather than a Jewish background, and this enabled, over time, Christianity to become a worldwide religion. If the decision had gone the other way, we might very well know as much about the Jesus movement – a tiny sect within Judaism – as we do about the Yazidis of Syria, whose desperate plight under the terror of ISIS came to the attention of the world some months ago.

In the early centuries, the Christian Church at a local or provincial level, took to dealing with issues of concern in the areas of liturgy, jurisdiction, pastoral practice, morality, ritual and church discipline, by means of local synods or councils. The directives issued by such bodies (called canons or rules) sometimes also tackled theological disputes and resulted in the formulation of local creeds or professions of faith. One good example of a local synod whose canons survive is that of Elvira in southern Spain, held around the year 306. This was

attended by 26 local priests and 19 local bishops. A quick perusal of some of its 81 canons gives us a snapshot of the state of the church in Spain in its day, and what it regarded as the most urgent issues that needed to be tackled. For instance, the prospect of a Christian's relapse into paganism is regarded as a real possibility – the first canon deals with how to deal with a baptised Christian who is tempted back to a pagan temple and becomes an idolater. The treatment of one's slaves (which aren't outlawed for Christians) is the subject of canon 5 – if a woman beats her slave so that she subsequently dies, then she is excluded from the church and needs to do seven years penance (if the deed was perpetrated willingly) and five years (if accidentally). Those Christians who kill others through the use of magic or sorcery are also to be deprived of the sacraments, even on their deathbed, as they were regarded as having dabbled in idolatry. Interestingly, too, the canons of Elvira give witness to what has been a more recognisable cancer within a proportion of our Catholic clergy in more recent times – that of abuse. Canon 18 declares that if bishops, priests or deacons are found to be sexual offenders, they were not to receive communion, even at the end of their lives, “on account of the scandal and heinousness of the crime”. Less serious, but nevertheless a concern, was canon 19 which spoke of bishops, priest and deacons abandoning their territories for commercial reasons, running around the provinces seeking after profitable business . This will not be the last time this issue arises, and will be a feature of Irish synodal legislation later on too. Most famously, canon 33 of Elvira, is the first reference that we have to a synodal or conciliar mandate for clerical celibacy: “Bishops, priests and deacons and all other clerics ... are ordered to abstain completely from their wives and not to have children. Whoever, in fact, does this, shall be expelled from the clerical state”.

First Synod of Patrick

But enough about Elvira and the Spanish church. This just gives you a flavour of some of the issues (there are many, many more) covered by an early provincial synod. What of Ireland? Did synods meet in the early Irish church – and what were their concerns? One of the earliest examples whose canons still survive is the so-called “First Synod of St Patrick” which survives in a single manuscript from around the year 900. The synod itself (which claims to date from Patrick's time and associates itself also with some of Patrick's assistant bishops, Auxilius and Isserninus) has been dated variously from the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries. Most scholars today do not believe that it is as early as the fifth century and

Patrick's time and prefer to see it as representing the state of the church in Ireland by the late seventh or early eighth century. It contains thirty-two canons or rulings – and they make for interesting reading. For instance, one of its canons suggests that the prohibition on clerical marriage hadn't yet become enforced in an Irish setting:

Whatever cleric, from porter to bishop, has been seen without a tunic and does not cover the shame of his belly and his nakedness, and if his hair has not been cut after the Roman fashion [the tonsure], and, if his wife has gone about with her head unveiled, they shall equally be held in contempt by the laity, and let them be separated from the church.

While there may not have been a prohibition against clerical marriage, nevertheless there were some concerns regarding the propriety of relations between monks and nuns: “A monk and a nun, he from there and she from elsewhere, shall not stay together in one guesthouse, nor shall they travel about in one carriage from settlement to settlement, nor shall they engage eagerly in conversation together”. Clerics (presumably who are living within a monastic setting) and who do not come to morning or evening prayer are to be considered excommunicated – except if they have a good excuse. But the only good excuse mentioned in the canon is: “unless it happens that he has been held in the yoke of slavery”! There was also a prohibition against clerics engaging in physical conflict. In one of the canons, it states that a cleric who has stood surety for a heathen and hasn't been repaid the debt is forbidden from engaging “in armed combat with the man”. In another canon, however, it seems that rows between two clerics could reach much higher levels of violence, for the canon states that if one or two clerics who are at odds with each other hires an enemy of the other as a hitman, “it's appropriate that he [the offending cleric] should be called a murderer”. Other canons of this synod are concerned with the phenomenon of wandering clerics and state that these are not to be allowed to function without or to administer the sacraments without the permission of the local bishop. In one of the more bizarre canons of this synod, an issue of popular belief is raised: “A Christian man who has believed that there is such a thing in the world as a *lamia* – that is to say, a vampire – is to be excommunicated – whoever has cast that slur upon a living soul”. A ruling which may have a more contemporary ring (when understood in a modern light) is that concerning the gifts which the local church is allowed to accept – and, more importantly, those it is not allowed to accept. For instance, it states that “it is not permissible for alms offered by heathens [gentiles / non-Christians] to be received into the church”. In other words, be sure of who your donors are and what their background is, lest you bring scandal upon the church.

Twelfth-century Reform

Although, as we have seen, there were earlier synods held in Ireland, perhaps the most well-known of the medieval synods were those of Cashel (1101), Ráith Bressail (1111) and Kells-Mellifont (1152). These laid the foundations for both the reform of the church in Ireland – asserting papal and episcopal authority and tackling issues such as simony, hereditary clerical dynasties and clerical concubinage – and the establishment of the diocesan system. There were, in fact, at least twelve national or provincial synods held between the years 1101 to 1179, many of which we know little about. The annals record some twelve national or provincial synods in the period between 1101 and 1179, yet for even some of the most important of these, for instance, Cashel (1101) and Ráith Bressail (1111), the only records surviving are found in eighteenth and seventeenth-century sources respectively.

It was Lanfranc, archbishop of Canterbury who urged the convocation of bishops and ecclesiastics at Cashel to institute reform. The Synod of Cashel of 1101 would be presided over by the king of Munster, Muirchertach Ua Briain, along with the Bishop of Munster, Mael Muire Ua Dúnáin. Ten years later, the synod of Ráith Bressail, which created the blueprint for Irish dioceses, had Gilbert of Limerick as its central figure, a friend of Anselm. In Gilbert's work *De Statu Ecclesiae* ('On Church Order') he argued for a decoupling of secular and monastic clergy and episcopal and abbatial rule: the parish should remain under its priest and the monastery under its abbot. Bishops' dioceses should contain not less than ten and not more than a thousand parishes/monasteries. Provinces should be comprised of no less than three and no more than twenty bishoprics. The primatial see should have at least one archbishopric but not more than six within its jurisdiction. Ecclesiastical governance was to be ceded to bishops. As there were no delegates present from Connacht or Leinster at Ráith Bressail just two metropolitan sees were created – Armagh and Cashel. Each would have twelve dioceses.

Later, the synod of Kells (1152) would expand this number to four metropolitan sees, now including Dublin and Tuam. Some sixty bishops attended the synod, at which only 26 dioceses were allocated. Clearly there was going to be disappointment. Also, as political power fluctuated between Ráith Bressail (1111) and Kells (1152), so too would diocesan boundaries. The arrangements of Ráith Bressail were submitted to the Pope by Malachy for approval almost thirty years later. The Pope asked for a national synod to be called, which

only convened after Malachy's death in 1148; it met at Kells in 1152. Here, two further metropolitan sees were created – Dublin and Tuam. There were now some thirty-eight dioceses and some churches, such as Mungret and Ardmore claimed episcopal status.

A later synod of Cashel, convened in 1172 affords us an interesting glimpse into an issue of sacramental practice: one source speaks of it outlawing the practice of baptising children at home without recourse to a priest, in addition to a curious custom in which the rich were accustomed to baptising their children in milk (perhaps as a status symbol) while the poorer families used water. At this time, baptism was routinely performed by full immersion (three times), a practice which would survive in Ireland up until the seventeenth century when it was proscribed by the synods of Dublin (1624) and Tuam (1631) respectively.

Provincial Synod of Cashel (held at Limerick in 1453)

The canons of the provincial synod of Cashel in 1453 (a synod which was held, incidentally, at Limerick) survive and provide a good snapshot of what were regarded by the higher clergy as the most pressing contemporary issues concerning priests, people and parishes. One concerned church furnishings:

The parishioners of every parish should have in their parochial churches, at their own expense, for the proper celebration of the divine offices and the administration of the sacraments, a Missal, silver or gilt chalice, an amice, alb, cincture, maniple, stole, chasuble, surplice, a baptismal font of stone neatly constructed and well covered, and a suitable vessel for keeping the chrism for the use of the sick. The church, in nave and chancel, in roof and walls, inside and outside, should be well constructed, and kept clean according to the means of the people, corn and animals and such things belonging to the laity should be excluded, and that men and women of whatever description, whether married or single, should not cohabit therein under pain of mortal sin and excommunication ...

Another stipulated that every parish church was expected to possess a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a crucifix and a statue of the patron saint of the church, suggesting that many churches had not already fulfilled this minimum requirement. Furthermore, cemeteries were to be kept clean and walled in, at the expense of the people. Clergy were to be free from all temporal taxes and no clerics were to be tried in a secular court (rather, they should be dealt

with by ecclesiastical courts). There were also regulations outlawing begging or mendicant friars such as the Franciscans from seeking money on feast days on which collections from the secular (or diocesan) clergy were taken up. The element of competition between the secular and regular clergy concerning the collection of funds would be a long-running sore over the centuries.

It also strongly stated that clerics should live chastely and abstain from usury and games of chance, should not wear a beard on their upper lip and should cut their curls, and, more importantly, under pain of excommunication, should abstain from thefts, plunder and violence – which raises questions of its own! Furthermore, clerics should wear a becoming dress, different from the people. Proper procedure regarding the administration of the sacraments was also to be observed: when carrying the Eucharist to the sick, priests were to wear an alb and be preceded by a bell “in order to stimulate the piety of the faithful”. Likewise, the sacred vessels in churches were to be of fitting quality and the churches themselves kept neat and clean.

The Synod of Cashel constitution of 1453 was also expected to be in the hands of every priest and explained to the people in their native language four times a year (on the Sundays before Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and Michaelmas).

Synods after the Council of Trent

In the wake of the decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-63) and decades of war and turmoil in Ireland, the provincial synods of the early seventeenth century demonstrate an effort to implement the reforms of Trent in an Irish setting, while also allowing for the turbulent nature of the times. In this period, simply legislating for the celebration of the sacraments in a parish church was not always practical. Therefore, the synod of Dublin in 1614 admits that “because the awful circumstances of the times oblige us frequently to celebrate the divine mysteries under the open air” only the most suitable locations are to be selected and the altar should be, in so far as possible, be sheltered “from the inclemency of the weather”. It also allowed for a scarcity of priests when it stated that prisoners who desired the Eucharist could have it brought to them by a layman; however, if the prisoner himself was a priest, he should handle the host himself. At this synod, too, the number of godparents was reduced to two (in line with Trent). Before this, multiple godparents were routinely chosen by the Irish who

sometimes saw Baptism as a means to establish key social and political alliances, often with quite unhappy results, as christenings could often turn violent – and, indeed, fatal. Synods at this time made every effort to promote a more spiritual approach to the sacrament. It recognised, however, that baptism was not always possible in a church and, therefore, legislated that a font should be provided at the house where the priest usually resided. It also ruled that priests who charged the poor for the performance of baptism would be fined four times the amount by his bishop. The synod also encouraged priests to catechise wherever they went and, even when on a quick visit to a parishioner, to make sure to teach them the Creed, the Lord’s Prayer or a point of doctrine. This was crucial, for it also laid down knowledge of the articles of faith and basic prayers such as the Our Father and Hail Mary as prerequisites for the reception of the Sacrament of Penance.

The decrees of the synod of Dublin (held at Kilkenny in 1614) were interesting in many other ways. The fasting practices of the Irish were brought in line with those of the universal Church. Whereas the Irish Church traditionally observed three days of fast, namely from meat on Wednesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, and also from other animal products such as eggs, milk, cheese and butter on Fridays and Saturdays, the synod now recommended a more lenient observation, based on a Papal Bull of Clement VIII in 1598. In addition, the laity was prohibited to engage in disputation with heretics lest they become infected with their doctrines. Clergy were also advised to avoid such contact. In the period of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations the Bible became an ever more contested text – and issues surrounding the nature of its authority were vigorously debated. The increasing availability of vernacular bibles and the disputations that this engendered, prompted Catholic authorities, in their writing, preaching and legislation, to warn individuals against entering into debate with Protestants. The potential for the ordinary Catholic faithful to become confused if they debated Scripture with Protestants was such a concern that five Irish synods between 1614 and 1632 explicitly forbade disputes with “heretics” and the reading of heretical material. Indeed, often it was the view of Catholic authorities that a little knowledge was a very dangerous thing and might expose the bearer to error. Better that the average Catholic know his or her basic prayers (enough to gain them access to the sacraments) and profess to believe all that the Catholic Church believes, rather than enter the choppy waters of doctrinal dispute. Nonetheless, both the synods of Dublin in 1614 and Armagh (held at Drogheda in the same year) forbade recourse to the Sacrament of Penance without the penitent knowing the articles

of faith, the doctrines of the Trinity, Incarnation and Crucifixion, and the Our Father and Hail Mary.

The professionalization of the priesthood, effected through the reforms of the Council of Trent and the establishment of seminaries for training candidates, reinforced the need to set priests apart – and this was reflected in the clothes they should wear, both within and outside a liturgical setting. The synod of Kilkenny in 1624 indicated that every priest was required to have “a long black-coloured tunic, a biretta, surplice, which, in the performance of his duty, he will be able to use”. In one review of Alison Forrestal’s study of *Catholic Synods in Ireland, 1600-1690*, the reviewer in question uses Forrestal’s material to take a more contemporary swipe. He says: “Ms Forrestal’s observations on synodal ordinances concerning clerical education, spirituality, general deportment and dress sense, not to mention the edification of clergy and laity through dignified liturgy, eloquent and learned preaching, good quality vestments and altar equipage, are recommended by this reviewer to the particular attention of present-day Catholic clergy”!

Popular Piety in Early Modern Synods

Many synods of this period also attempted to address aspects of popular piety or, indeed, popular ritual, that they considered to be superstitious, injurious to the faith, or unfitting in a Christian. The synod of Dublin (held in Kilkenny in 1614) condemned as superstition the practice of lay people carrying relics and dipping them into water or sprinkling them over humans and animals for protection. The provincial synod of Armagh in 1632, in a broadside against sorcery, magic, demonic pacts and fortune telling, also mentions the practice of “superstitious prayers”. Likewise, it condemned inappropriate behaviour at holy wells and stated that such devotional visits are no excuse for not attending mass on Sundays. A synod of Ossory in 1676 legislated that inappropriate “images or statues with unpleasant or disfigured appearance” be destroyed.

Rituals surrounding the dead – especially customs at wakes – also came in for censure. In 1676 a synod of Waterford and Lismore condemned “drinking and silly stories” at funerals; a synod of Dublin in 1686 likewise ordered that parish priests punish those who sing “disgusting songs” on these occasions and that they must not “allow buffoonery to advance and the memory of the dead to be made light of”. Levels of alcohol consumption had become so high that a provincial synod of Armagh in 1670 prohibited the attendance of anyone but

family and close friends at funerals to reduce the levels of disorder and forbade the holding of all-night vigils from sunset to sunrise over the corpse.

However, some synodal legislation could be remarkably even-handed. For instance, an earlier synod of Armagh, held in 1642, some months after the outbreak of the 1641 rebellion, declared “all murderers, thieves, unjust plunderers, robbers and extorters ... and their patrons, harbourers and ... assistants” excommunicated and, in addition, “all usurpers of *either* Catholic or Protestant land”.

But if synods held the laity to account, they expected even higher standards of the clergy. Priests were expected to be model pastors and teachers in line with the norms of Trent. A diocesan synod of Waterford and Lismore in 1677 stated that they should abstain from “alcohol, taverns, gambling ... and secular pursuits”, administering the sacraments with “an intelligible voice and distinct pronunciation”. The diocesan synod of Meath of 1686 legislated that priests who failed to catechise their parishioners on Sundays and feast-days would be fined five shillings for a first offence, would be suspended if this occurred three weeks in a row, and if he failed to exercise his duty over six weeks, he would forfeit his parish. It also stated that regular catechesis was necessary in order “that the sheep may not hunger”. Priests were expected to remain in their parishes and not to leave them for more than three days without the permission of their bishop.

Returning to the competition between regular (or order) clergy and their secular (or diocesan) counterparts, the practice of laying out corpses in religious habits is also prohibited by the synod of Dublin in 1670 (to curb the influence of regular clergy over parishioners). Relations between secular and regular clergy were not at their best at the time. Archbishop Oliver Plunkett wrote in 1669 of the religious order priests celebrating three or four masses a day in order to prevent people from going to their own parish priests and he also refers to their muscling in on funeral rites (to the exclusion of the parish priest) if the deceased has been found to be wearing a cord of St Francis, or the scapular or rosary, which might identify them as a devotee of one of the orders.

Ultimately, for all the synodal legislation that was passed over these centuries, much of it was too difficult to enforce, and some of it fell on deaf ears. The proof of this, of course, is seen in how often the same or similar issues appear in subsequent legislation through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Synod of Thurles 1850

By the time the nineteenth century arrived, the penal laws in Ireland had, for the most part, been relaxed, and a spate of church building was already well under way across the country. The achievement of Catholic Emancipation finally in 1829 gave the Catholic population of Ireland a much-needed increase of confidence. But the nature of Irish Catholicism was about to be changed beyond recognition over subsequent decades (not least owing to the effects of the Great Famine and the ensuing Devotional Revolution which occurred roughly between 1850 and 1875, as suggested by Emmet Larkin in a famous article in the 1970s, a thesis that has since been modified in many ways). One of the most significant synodal markers of the period is, of course, the Synod of Thurles in 1850, at which Archbishop Paul Cullen, the architect of so much religious change in Ireland, presided.

It was attended by the four archbishops, and twenty out of twenty-three of the other bishops (three - Kerry, Kilmacduagh and Kilfenora, and Achonry - were absent through illness). There were also six provincials of the regular clergy, the visitor of the congregation of the missions (Vincentians), and the abbot of Mount Mellary. Each had one vote. Each bishop was also entitled to have a theologian as adviser, except the primate, who was entitled to two. The synod also had three secretaries to record the minutes. Two sessions were held each day (morning and afternoon), with the exception of Sundays. Decisions were made by majority vote in the afternoons. This was the first national synod in several centuries and the immediate cause of its meeting was to decide on a uniform approach to Catholic education, especially in the wake of the government's primary school scheme (Education Act of 1831) and the establishment of the Queen's Colleges. Other national synods would follow in 1875, 1900 and 1927. Here I am going to focus not so much on its deliberations on the question of education, but on its more pastoral and catechetical concerns.

Proselytism was one of the burning issues of the day when the synod met. To counteract this it was decreed that good preachers were to be sent into areas where the proselytisers were at work – and missions by Jesuits or Vincentians were to be established and also sodalities to shore up the defences of the Catholic laity. Good Catholic books were also to be circulated among the laity. In an approach reminiscent of that adopted during the seventeenth century,

Catholic lay people were instructed not to engage in discussions with non-Catholics about religion and forbade both priests and laity to avoid public disputations. Various classes of people were seen to be at particular risk: Catholic servants in Protestant households, and Catholics in the army or the navy, and also Catholics about to emigrate. Furthermore, Catholics were forbidden to assist at the sermons or services of “heretics”. These decrees were restated in the national synod at Maynooth in 1875 and also in 1900, but are omitted by the time we come to the national synod of 1927.

On the issue of the sacraments: it was stated that the administration of the sacraments should take place in churches and not in private houses, as had become the practice for many of the sacraments during the days of persecution – especially baptism, penance and matrimony. There was some resistance to outlawing the celebration of sacraments in private homes. Archbishop Slattery of Cashel, for one, was not in favour of the complete proscription of this practice. Paul Cullen was quite frustrated with Slattery and, in one letter, stated that “he is almost the only bishop ... who has done nothing about what was prescribed in the Synod of Thurles ... Baptisms and confessions remain as they formerly were, and they also celebrate marriages in private houses”. The four provincial synods held in 1853-4 in the aftermath of the national synod also upheld the ban, except in cases of grave necessity, such as those were in danger of death.

Also up for discussion was the Irish practice of the “station” masses twice a year – before Christmas and during Lent – and the hearing of confessions of men and women without a confessional. In the early nineteenth century, on account of the scarcity of clergy and the joining of parishes, plus the poverty of the people, distances between functioning churches became very great. But the synod fathers were greatly concerned about the hearing of women’s confessions in private houses without the protection of the confessional. Confessions were to be heard in churches or at least in places where the doors are left open in fitting fashion. Archbishop Paul Cullen was not satisfied with this and wanted confessions of women heard only in the confessional. And it was finally agreed that this would be the norm except in cases of great necessity. Rome was particularly worried about priests hearing women’s confessions in private houses and asked eventually that if it were absolutely necessary that a fairly bulky portable screen should be used and should be carried to the houses in question. Archbishop Cullen was landed with selling this to the other bishops and priests who thought that it was all a little mad and indeed when the newly appointed coadjutor in Kerry, David Moriarty,

presented the idea to his priests, there were some choice comments about the prospect of transporting bulky confessional screens to some of the areas they routinely held stations in!

There was also a decree passed against the celebration of the sacrament of marriage in private houses, except in cases of grave necessity. This was forbidden, in the first instance, not because it was contrary to the general law of the church, but because of abuses associated with the practice, such as clergy seeking large offerings of money if they were to assist at celebrations in private houses, sometimes receiving as much as £40 in a single collection from those gathered at the event. The synod very strongly decreed that sacraments were never to be denied to people who could not make an offering for them. Especially, no offerings were to be accepted on the occasion of the administration of the last rites.

The Synod of Thurles in 1850 also moved on the issue of mixed marriages, stating that in the future a dispensation from the Holy See was needed, that guarantees had to be given that the Catholic party could continue to practise the faith and that the children would be brought up in the Catholic faith, and that the ceremony be performed without any sacred rites. A dispensation from the Holy See was not required across the water in England (the first provincial synod of Westminster in 1852 thought it sufficient for a priest to grant the dispensation) and wealthier Irish Catholics who wished to avail themselves of the less harsh discipline across the water, often travelled to England if they wished to marry a Protestant. The legislation laid down at the Synod of Thurles in fact anticipated by more than fifty years the universal teaching of the church as laid down in the *Ne Temere* decree of 1908 issued during the pontificate of Pope Pius X. In practice, though, the legislation passed at Thurles was regularly ignored and it was, indeed, customary, for boys to be brought up in the faith of their fathers and girls in the faith of their mothers.

The lives and conduct of priests also came under Thurles' spotlight. It was decreed that they should avoid secular company, intemperance, public dances, race-meetings, card-playing, public theatres, and should have great care for the preservation of their chastity. No parish priest was allowed to hold more than 15 acres and curates were forbidden to hold any land. This was to counteract the tendency among many Irish priests to double-job as farmers from which they could make a considerable amount of money. It also ruled against parish priests publicly announcing and denouncing from the pulpit those who had been excommunicated by the local bishop.

Education

On the issue of primary education the bishops neither approved nor disapproved the National School system set up in 1831, but it did lay down the following stipulations: (1) Objectionable textbooks were not to be allowed in the schools (2) In the Teacher Training Colleges the lectures on religion, morals and history were to be given to Catholics by a Catholic lecturer. (3) The practice of teaching the fundamentals of Christian doctrine to both Catholics and Protestants together was regarded as dangerous (4) The school houses and property was always to be held in the name of the Bishop or the parish priest and not owned by the National Board of Education. (5) In schools attended by Catholics all books (including secular text books) were to be approved by the Bishop (6) Catholic children should always be removed from non-Catholic instruction. Yet, of course, the national synod had no authority whatsoever to implement what it laid down.

Synod of Maynooth 1875

In a letter from Cardinal Barnabo, prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith from 1856-74, to Cardinal Paul Cullen, the rationale for the holding of the Maynooth Synod of 1875 was outlined: for preserving the Catholic faith and for protecting the morals of the faithful, placed in great danger on account of the calamities of the times. He also highlighted the lack of ecclesiastical spirit among Irish clergy and a lack of awareness of the obligations of their state. He also notes the complaints of Irish lay people about the greed of the clergy.

Attendees were twenty seven bishops, the abbot of Mount Mellary (the only mitred abbot in Ireland), nine provincials of religious congregations, twelve procurators of chapters and twenty-five theologians. Also there were three secretaries. Subjects covered included the faith and its protection, the sacraments and offerings made on the occasion of their administration, the avoidance of disputations, the Queen's Colleges, "stations", provision for sick priests and priests addicted to alcohol. It prescribed the holding of Sunday schools in churches throughout the year as the best way to instruct the young in the Maynooth Catechism issued after the synod ...

Maynooth Synod 1900

There was much from the 1875 synod that was simply repeated verbatim in 1900. But there were also some other interesting features. Those being prepared for parish ministry were to undergo oral and written examinations which required the candidate to explain in an oral exam some question drawn from the catechism and that the form of speech should be accommodated to the understanding of children. In other words, they had to be able to break down the relevant points of doctrine so that they could be easily understood. Also they were required to write in the vernacular a brief sermon on a text in sacred scripture.

Great importance was given to the visitation of primary schools by the local priest. The synod decreed that priests who neglected to visit schools for four consecutive weeks were to be struck with due penalties by the bishop. It also commended the practice in national schools of setting aside the half hour which immediately preceded midday recreation, or which follows it, for the teaching of Christian doctrine.

The 1927 Synod at Maynooth

Its significance was that it was the first national synod to be held after Irish independence, but also the first to be held after the new Code of Canon Law was completed in 1917. So it was concerned with bringing local rules and customs into line with the new Code of Canon Law. As early as 1927 it was suggested that boys and girls be brought together on Sundays for a mass (called the “Children’s mass”) in which an instruction, accommodate to their capacity to understand, shall be given, some prayers in common and a suitable song.

Limerick Diocesan Synods (1887-1937)

Some of the issues dealt with at Limerick diocesan synods over the fifty years between 1887 and 1937 were as follows:

1887: regulations concerning catechesis, collections, drinking at funerals and the requirement that priests, with the assistance of curates, should annually examine all pupils of the primary schools and write up a report on each.

1892: prescriptions relating to the ownership of pews in churches by private persons.

1895: After the last mass on a Sunday, boys and girls of even an advanced age were to be present in church for an hour and the parish priest would impart to them something of Christian doctrine.

1898: among the statutes was the recommendation that a five minute sermon be preached at the eleven o’clock mass every Sunday in all city churches.

1906: Dealt with issues such as requiem mass and ecclesiastical burial, athletic events on Sundays, maintenance and insurance of churches, the establishment of an Association of Christian Doctrine in each parish.

1907: priests' wills, mass stipends, marriage, synodal examiners, diocesan curia, etc.

1908: parochial property, registration of marriages, the stipend that a cleric gets for accompanying a corpse to the grave.

1926: ecclesiastical buildings, the upkeep of sick priests, masses for deceased clergy.

1937: statutes under six titles: clerics, pastors, and curates; sacraments; divine worship; ecclesiastical burial; ecclesiastical goods. It was noted that nothing is more instructive than the life and example of those in the ministry. Also, in treating of the first commandment, the parish priest shall try to eradicate superstition.

By the twentieth century Irish Catholicism had been utterly transformed. For instance, in 1800 there were about 120 religious sisters in Ireland; this had risen to 8,000 by 1900. The numbers of convents also increased, of course, from only 11 in 1800 to 368 in 1900. The numbers had become so great by the 1890s that one Good Shepherd sister remarked "The labourers are many but the harvest is lacking" – in her own congregation, it seems, there was not enough work for everyone to do! By the end of the nineteenth century the figures for Mass attendance in Ireland had increased exponentially and in 1931, on the eve of the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, we find an incredible statistic relating to practice in the city. Apparently, the Society of Vincent de Paul visited 70,000 Catholic households in the city and found only one persistent non-attender.

So what's our situation today?

We can recognise a number of different trends:

1. There is, first of all, the huge fall-off in attendance at Sunday Mass at parish level. Many who continue to attend, might not necessarily do so every Sunday and some will attend only on certain special feast-days or at Christmas or Easter.

2. At the same time, there are some aspects of Catholic life that are still quite popular and draw huge crowds. One of these, of course, is the phenomenon of Solemn Novenas. Some people make these occasions their annual religious “fix” while remaining absent from Sunday Eucharist in their parishes. And yet they are drawn to these gatherings of faith, to the hymn-singing (which they will even join in with), to the candles, to the Benediction, to the devotion to the Mother of Perpetual Help, to the theme-based preaching (as of yore), and, indeed, even to the Confessions. Some of the most moving elements of some novenas are when the presiding priest reads out a selection of petitions placed before the image of the Virgin. All human life is here: estranged relationships; the newly-married husband or wife who has just received news of cancer; the terminally-ill child; the couple who have both lost their jobs and cannot think how they will continue to support their children; the dark labyrinths of addiction into which both addicts and family members are sucked. There’s hardly a breath drawn in the church as these petitions are read out; there is a connection to something real here; the lives and loves of a congregation have been stuffed into that petition box before the Virgin’s shrine. What happens in church and what happens in life intersects.
3. The other great draw is Healing Services (for understandable reasons). And why not? Yet, we haven’t always been the best at praying with people for bodily healing. At times, as Christians and as Catholics, we have placed such an emphasis on the salvation of the soul that we have neglected the well-being of the body. And yet more than a fifth of the gospel stories are devoted to his healing ministry. Why have we been so reluctant to pray for healing in our own parishes almost as if the age of Christ’s healing closed with the New Testament? The people in the pews do not believe this for a second – and they vote with their feet in seeking out healers elsewhere – either within the Church or without.
4. Connected with this, of course, are the relatively large numbers who still attend the ritual of the blessing of the throats on the Feast of St Blaise.
5. The traditional practice of pilgrimage is still in a very healthy shape – and even among young people. Witness the numbers who attend Lough Derg to pray for exams or, indeed, undertake the Camino de Santiago (even if the motivation is not always purely religious initially).

6. And religious gestures retain a currency in our culturally Catholic Ireland – witness the number of people, even young people, who still make the Sign of the Cross when passing a church (even without realising that they are doing it)
7. The other area of Irish Catholic life that remains in relatively good health is how we deal with death – and rituals concerning death. The wake, or the removal to the Church. The sense of community. The quiet murmuring of the Rosary. A number of years ago Vincent Browne wrote a piece in the *Irish Times* about his re-connection with this kind of Catholicism at a funeral in Broadford.

But we are also falling down in some areas ...

1. For many, the Sunday Mass no longer nourishes them. This can be due to a number of factors but it does come down to one principal consideration – if one is being nourished and fulfilled by something, one usually continues to attend.
2. So where are we going wrong? Well, the challenge of building community is one huge area. We are saying one thing in the Words of the Eucharist, and going to receive Christ's body as his Body the Church. And yet we may know very few of the people's names in the pews behind or in front of us. There is an essential liturgical schizophrenia at work here. We are saying one thing, but the reality is very different.
3. So how are people responding? Well one response has been to seek out other more closely-knit religious communities, where there is a greater chance of you knowing the person worshipping beside you. Within Catholicism you have the increased attraction of new ecclesial movements where a greater sense of belonging is often felt – groups such as Focolare, the Neo-Catechuminate, the Parish Cell Movement, Communion and Liberation, and so on. Belonging to a smaller group is also often taken as a supplement to the weekly parish worship on a Sunday. Of course, this sort of thing has been happening for centuries; people preferring to attend their local Franciscan friary, for instance, instead of their parish church. But here, too (despite the obvious advantages) there can also be some pit-falls. These smaller groups can become churches within

churches and the temptation to worship exclusively with a group of like-minded people has the danger of undermining the Church's catholicity. As James Joyce called Catholicism "Here's comes everybody" it is often very healthy to worship with the "Everybodies" if we are not to become closed in on ourselves. There's not likely to be exclusive lounges in Heaven ...

4. And yet this attraction of smaller and more intimate settings tells us something very important about the poverty of our parish communities at times. And it also explains why many Catholics have chosen to join other churches such as Baptists or Pentecostals for their greater sense of belonging and welcome, perhaps even for the preaching or the greater sense of identity. In today's world, life is busier than ever for many people. And the reality is that the Catholic Sunday liturgy often leaves many people uninspired and quite a few frustrated. Given the busy-ness of life and the growing element of choice, many feel that if they are in need of inspiration and fellowship, they need to choose more wisely rather than wasting valuable time on mediocrity.
5. We really have to ask ourselves the question: At a parish level, are we really interested in building community anyway? And how do we go about doing this? Is it important for us to know the names of people around us at Mass?
6. There are other ways of spending Sunday mornings – and those who do not attend church have a myriad of ways of doing so, many of which involve some form of community activity and sense of belonging. A group of friends or colleagues who choose to meet religiously for coffee on a Sunday morning will undoubtedly experience a greater level of community in their encounters than the vast majority of those who come together as the Body of Christ on a Sunday. And yet, the Eucharist is supposed to represent so much more.
7. Of course in Ireland we don't mark parish identity in the same way as elsewhere. Oftentimes it is thought of more in sporting terms, as in the shared support of the local GAA club. But we certainly don't print tee-shirts with the name of the parish on it in the same way as many Americans do. The culture is different. And of course the question continues to be raised – are our parish structures still fit-for-purpose? And how, for

instance, has the phenomenon of clustering in many dioceses affected how we view our communities?

8. Meanwhile we are now returning to levels of practice and religious knowledge that would have been common in earlier centuries. And also returning to the idea that to be Christian is to be counter-cultural (there is also the persecution complex). Yet we need to be wary of this as it is not always our most attractive face. Christianity is supposed to be the leaven in culture – that makes it rise – it's supposed to go into everything. But we have to ask ourselves – what difference does being Christian / does being Catholic / make in our lives? If people didn't already know we were Christian, what would the tell-tale signs be?
9. **Would we miss it if it was all gone away in the morning?** The answer may be frightening. In fact, many people don't. But we should. Surely if one leaves a sumptuous table and abstains from that delectable fare, one must starve? But that's not the case. Why? Well perhaps the food was not so sumptuous after all?
10. It is not inevitable that Ireland remains Christian - many other countries have had Christianity extinguished over time. It could happen here.
11. But Christianity should be its own appeal. It should reach out to all. Are those who have left it missed? That becomes a dent in our universality, our Catholicity. Many remark on how nobody came after them to ask why they left. And for many it's not that Christianity has failed but that it was never tried (G.K. Chesterton).
12. How we enjoy many features of an older Christianity *extra ecclesiam*, so to speak. Gregorian chant, angels, etc.
13. Many are still living off the fumes of Christianity - the church as vehicle, sacraments as fuel.
14. Many who have left often do not fully miss it because the vestiges are still to be seen in the culture - and in familial ties (Rolheiser's idea of touching the hem of Christ's garment). The sense of security that one gets from parents and their faith, etc - asking

a mother or grandmother to pray or light a candle - because that's what the older generation does. But not having the confidence to take ownership of it oneself. But what will happen when this older generation passes away. What will the coming generations live off then?

15. Reference the lack of Francis effect on Mass attendances in Ireland. However there is an effect in other countries - the depth of our wounds in Ireland (still too raw). Like an “ex” with whom one has recently had a very ugly break-up. In contrast to other countries where the break-up occurred a much longer time ago.

Some questions for discussion in preparation for the Limerick Synod of 2016:

How do we speak to the culture today?

What has the Limerick Synod of 2016 to say to the Gaming Community, for instance?

Or to those who are finding fulfilment in Mindfulness techniques?

How can it connect with the thousands of people who are drawn to compelling modern-day morality tales such as the phenomenally successful TV series, *Breaking Bad*, which raises profound moral questions about the acting human person? What has it to say to those who happily engross themselves in worlds such as that presented by the series of books and TV phenomenon that is *Game of Thrones*?

Why do the profound questions that Christianity raises about the human person and our place in the world not resonate with more of our thirty- and forty year-olds?

Where are the C.S. Lewises and the J. R. Tolkiens of our day? Where is our Catholic imagination?

But to also identify what is working – what does appeal to people. For instance, the rediscovery of our Christian heritage in ancient mass rock sites, ancient pilgrimage routes, dawn masses, etc.

And yet some things re-appear in different guises – we don't speak about having disputations with Protestants today (the ecumenical movement has shown us just how much we now share in common), but, perhaps, more often with New Atheism. How do we acquit ourselves in this regard?

And what of earlier synods' concern for fitting vessels for churches, etc. Could we, today, perhaps focus our minds on fitting church art, fitting church music, excising the “tyranny of the tape” (or, more frequently today, CD) in our liturgies, appeal more to the senses of the congregation, rediscover once again the important of aesthetics and the beautiful. If we can rediscover beauty, beauty is its own reward – and it attracts.

This paper has drawn on some of the following works:

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