

# Editorial

## Between Gospel Truth and Pastoral Fact

Fr Chris Hayden  
Editor



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The image of priest moving, in the space of a couple of hours, from a tragic funeral to a baptism, captures a great deal of what pastoral ministry is about. The effort to be all things to all people means that any sense of emotional dissonance has to be suppressed for the time being, to be visited later on, perhaps, in quiet prayer or in conversation with a trusted friend. That's by no means the only instance of the dissonance that can be part and parcel of parish ministry, and recently I was struck by another instance, also involving a baptism.

I was celebrating a christening on a Sunday afternoon, and the weekend's congregations had been more remarkably childless than usual. There was a marked contrast between the morning's ageing congregations and the afternoon baptism, at which many small children – siblings and cousins of the infant candidate – were present. It wasn't just a visual contrast: at the baptism there was movement, noise, a welcome sense of disorder.

That's not in any way to slight the more mature and recollected congregations at Sunday Mass. God bless each and every one of them! However, a childless congregation is a dying congregation and a childless church does not have a future. If more than a few priests in Ireland today have a sense of presiding over slow obsequies for the local church, that's not because they are being morose or alarmist: it's because of what they are seeing – and not seeing – at the weekend.

Numbers may vary from place to place, and we're not playing a numbers game in any case, yet there's no denying that at the coalface, things can look worrying. Our Lord once looked with compassion on the crowds because they were 'harassed and dejected, like sheep without a shepherd' (Mt 9:36). Perhaps he looks with similar compassion on priests, many of whom are increasingly like shepherds without sheep.

There are no simple solutions, no editorial-length manifestos, no pastoral or evangelical silver bullets. Yet we must at least acknowledge the reality. Self-flagellating responses such as 'we've become irrelevant' are unhelpful. Indeed, it's only when we lose sight of the absolute and abiding relevancy of the Gospel that we ourselves become irrelevant. To renew our focus on the Gospel is not to 'spiritualise' (less still 'spiritualise away') the challenges we face.

If there are some flagstones on the way forward, they surely include a renewed understanding and proclamation of the Gospel, and a continued acknowledgment of the pastoral reality – particularly the fall-off in practice and the virtual absence of young people from large swathes of the Irish church.

Attempts at renewal often, and quite rightly, begin by making an inventory of our blessings and strengths. There's no conflict between this and a frank acknowledgment of challenges, as a clear assessment of where we are is itself a strength. It's really not a question of whether we take an optimistic or pessimistic view of things – those are largely qualities of constitution or temperament. If we're willing to be stretched between our conviction of the relevancy of the Gospel, on the one hand, and some hard social and pastoral facts, on the other, then at least we may be open to a deeper realism than mere constitutional optimism or pessimism can offer.

Meanwhile, thank God for the words of two Popes who are not, as far as I know, very often quoted together. *Let us thank God that He makes us live among the present problems. It is no longer permitted to anyone to be mediocre.* [Pius XI]. *Let us not say, then, that things are harder today; they are simply different.* [Pope Francis].

Finally, I'd like to extend a warm welcome to a new member of the *Intercom* team, Oisín Walsh. Oisín replaces David Macken, whom I thank for his excellent work and support since I began as editor.



Photo: istockphotos.com