

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SOCIAL TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

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My reflections will be marked by some limitations. In the first place I have not been able to be present at the discussions of these days and must limit my comments to questions which emerged in the written papers which I received in advance. Secondly, in the years since I was last here at the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences my academic interest in the Social Teaching of the Church has been relativised by the daily pressures of my current activities as Archbishop of Dublin.

I thought therefore that my comments should take the form of a reading and interpretation of your papers by the busy pastor of the largest diocese in Ireland (about one third of the population of the Republic of Ireland lives in the Archdiocese of Dublin. It is also the Seat of Government, of the major newspapers and television networks and of five universities).

The busy pastor must of course be attentive to the social situation in which the Church is present, both on a local and on a global level.

The situation in Ireland is unique in many ways within Europe.

It is not, I hasten to add, the type of uniqueness of the Ireland of the past or indeed the uniqueness which many people imagine belongs to Ireland. People are shocked to find that religious practice in Ireland has dropped quite dramatically. In Dublin regular Mass attendance would overall around 20%, with a large number of parishes having practice rates of less than 5% and some at around 2%. I celebrated my first Christmas back in Ireland in a Church only one third full. Last year, for the first time in the history of the Archdiocese, there was not one single priestly ordination.

There are no reliable statistics concerning the percentage of younger people who practice. In many places there is anecdotal evidence that it is extremely low, though there are parishes where there is a vital presence of young people and there is a high interest of young university students around matters of faith.

Let us look at the current situation of children and the family in Ireland.

The Irish Constitution 'acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the Family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children'.<sup>1</sup>

It further stipulates that 'The State shall provide for free primary education and shall endeavour to supplement and give reasonable aid to private and corporate educational initiative'.<sup>2</sup>

Finally the Constitution notes that 'Legislation providing State aid for schools shall not discriminate between schools under the management of different religious denominations'.<sup>3</sup>

It is important to note that the Irish Constitution stipulates that the State shall *provide for* free primary education. It does not say that the State *shall provide* such education. Hence in the area of primary education all schools are owned and run by recognised patrons, mainly the major religious denominations. Overall in the Republic of Ireland 95% of primary education is provided under the patronage of the Roman Catholic Church. This means that I am patron of 460 primary schools within my diocese. Salaries and a high percentage of building costs are paid for by the State, but the State respects the specific religious ethos of these schools, as also of voluntary secondary schools. On the secondary level there are Community Schools and Colleges which are provided for by local educational authorities, but normally with a presence of a representative of the Bishop on the Boards of Management.

These Catholic Schools provide religious education as a normal part of the school curriculum. Preparation for the sacraments is also provided within the primary schools by regular teachers with a varied level of shared participation by parents and parish.

There are considerable pressures to change this situation. Various non-religious Patron organizations have emerged and the State has a policy of favouring a plurality of providers in new areas and is attempting to do so also in existing areas where demographic changes permit it. There is also a certain reluctance on the part of parishes to take on some of obligations in the area of management connected with Catholic schools. Teacher organi-

<sup>1</sup> Constitution of Ireland, Art. 42 #1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* art. 42, #4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* art. 44, #4.

zations stress that a growing number of teachers do not wish to be involved in religious education and especially in sacramental preparation. The evidence from the teacher training colleges, however, is of a widespread willingness among younger teachers to teach religion.

Finally the Constitution recognises that 'In exceptional cases, where the parents for physical or moral reasons fail in their duty towards their children, the State as guardian of the common good, by appropriate means shall endeavour to supply the place of the parents, but always with due regard for the natural and imprescriptible rights of the child'.<sup>4</sup> The Courts have generally given considerable attention to the rights of natural parents in disputed questions.

Participation rates in Irish Education are very high. Ninety percent of all Irish children take part in secondary education and 50% go on to third-level education. There is a growing number of schools that teach the curriculum through Irish (Gael scoileanna).

One of the characteristics of the schools in the Dublin area is their growing multi-cultural identity. The Irish economy has a great need for workers and thus in a very short period of time Ireland has moved from being a country of emigration to one of immigration. In my two years as Archbishop of Dublin I have opened 'quasi parishes' for Polish, Lithuanians, Latvian, Rumanian, Nigerian and Syro-Malabar Rite Catholics.

A recent survey of the ethnic and religious mix in the schools in North and West County Dublin produced interesting results. It noted that there are children of 104 different nationalities in these schools and in one deanery the percentage of 'international children' generally reached figures of around 30%, with peaks of 60% and in one case 80% of the children'.<sup>5</sup> The Catholic schools in Dublin have played an extremely important role in introducing young people from many different ethnic and religious backgrounds into a new understanding of Irish identity and avoiding the creation of immigrant ghettos.

In Ireland today the birth rate is below replacement level but high compared to some European countries. Immigration exceeds emigration. A large number of the immigrants are Irish nationals and given their age profile it would appear that many of them are families with young children.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* art. 44, #5.

<sup>5</sup> Survey seeking information on International Students, in the Primary Schools in the deaneries of Fingal North, Finglas and Maynooth, Archdiocese of Dublin.

The net change in the population in 1999, taking account of natural increase and migration showed a population increase of 1.1% leading to the highest population since the census of 1881.<sup>6</sup>

The birth rate fell for the first time to below replacement level in 1989 and apart from a slight rise in total period fertility in 1990 to 2.10 it has remained below replacement level since then. There are currently 14.47 births/1,000 population (2005 est.). It is estimated that 21.3% of the population is aged between 0-14 years, while 11.4% are 65 and over.

Accompanying the dramatic drop in the birth rate there has been an equally dramatic rise in non-marital births. For most of the 20th century up to the 1970s the percentage of births outside of marriage remained relatively constant at less than 3% of all registered births. By 1999 this percentage had risen to 30.9%.<sup>7</sup> Almost three-fifths of these births are to women in the age range 20 to 29 years with less than one-fifth to women under the age of 20 years.

The participation of mothers in the active labour force has dramatically changed over the past few decades. This change is found both in the number of women and the number of mothers in employment. In 1971 the female participation rate was 28.2. By 1999 this had risen to 48.5.<sup>8</sup>

In addition, the highest concentration of married women in the labour force according to the 1999 figures is the age group 25 to 34 years (Statistical Bulletin, 2000: 233).<sup>9</sup> These figures show that employment coincides with women's childbearing and childrearing years.

Let me come now to some reflection on children and young people in Ireland today and to try to draw out from these some reflections for the social teaching of the Church.

I will begin with one of the most shocking statistics about Ireland today, namely, that Ireland has the fastest-growing rate of youth suicide in the world and almost one in four suicides occur among those aged between 15 and 24. Suicide has become the most common cause of death among young men today.

<sup>6</sup> *Statistical Release*, (1999), 'Population and Migration Estimates, April 1999', Central Statistics Office, Government Publications, Dublin.

<sup>7</sup> *Vital Statistics*, (2000), Central Statistics Office, Government Publications, Dublin.

<sup>8</sup> *Statistical Bulletin*, (2000: 228), Central Statistics Office, Government Publications, Dublin.

<sup>9</sup> *Statistical Bulletin*, (2000: 233), Central Statistics Office, Government Publications, Dublin.

In the Dublin area, where about one-third of the population of 3.6 million lives, about 200 people call the Samaritans every day, many of them to discuss their possible suicide. In 2002, over 8,500 people were treated in hospital for self-inflicted injuries, with some of them in their pre-teens. At any given time 300,000 people in Ireland suffer from depression.

A Government task force reported earlier this year that the rate of suicides of males between 15 and 24 was about 19 per 100,000 people, higher than that in most European countries and apparently growing.

Since 1987, the number of Irish people who have killed themselves has doubled, to about 500 a year, and men are responsible for four of five of those deaths. These figures may indeed be somewhat lower than the actual number of suicides because police in rural areas often report suicides as accidents to spare the feelings of relatives.

It is difficult to determine why so many Irish people, particularly young men, find themselves in such a state of distress and hopelessness that the only way they can see of resolving their confusion and pain is by taking their own lives. Experts say that while alcoholism, depression and other serious illnesses are still major causes of suicide, other broader changes in Irish society may also be contributing.

The recent rapid changes in Irish society are difficult for some to adapt to and are presenting challenges they feel they cannot withstand. Job security is a thing of the past with people required to work longer and at a more demanding pace than ever before. Many young people are required to leave their communities and find themselves isolated in urban environments. The pressures to achieve very high standards in examinations required for university entrance are stressful. Added to this, many young people are abusing alcohol or illicit substances which can have a devastating effect on one already struggling with depression.

During my meetings with young people in universities or youth groups, or during the World Youth Day and its preparations, the two questions which come up most regularly are about suicide and about the Church's attitude to gay and lesbian people, this latter looked on exclusively as a 'justice issue'.

Why is it in an Ireland which today has unprecedented opportunity for young people that young people are so fragile? Each year, the diocese of Dublin brings about 200 invalids to Lourdes and about 250 very talented young men and women, from the final year in secondary school or the first year at university come as helpers. It is interesting to note that the demand among the young people far exceeds the numbers we can take. There is

great goodness in these young people. The dynamic of the interaction between the young people and the sick is fascinating to observe and the one comment which many of the young people full of promise make to me about the sick is 'Archbishop, these people are happier than we are'.

One of the factors which contribute to this lack of hope is the change in Irish society – but the same could be said also for other societies – from one in which religion served as a basis for a cohesive moral viewpoint within society, even when there was not always agreement on all of the particular conclusions. Today, as the influence of the Church wanes, there is no other institution which is able to carry out this role in society. A nation needs a soul and not just economic success.

I was struck by a comment on German television by Gregor Gysi, leader of the German 'Left Party', successor to the East German Communist Party. Asked about his fears for the future of society he replied 'Ich fürchte eine Gottlose Gesellschaft', 'I fear a society without God'. It was not the declaration of a conversion to religion, but the recognition by a rather cynical atheist that the roots of many of the values which bring cohesion to society are to be found the Christian tradition.

It is hard to deny that there is a sense then in which our Western societies even when they appear to be de-Christianized still retain vestiges of a Christian culture which possesses a unique capacity for moral cohesion. No other philosophical or political basis has ever done so quite so well.

The answers of alternative sources of spirituality do not seem to provide the fundamental anchor needed to provide social cohesion. Spirituality, despite the seemingly obvious meaning of the word, may in fact be entirely material, with no true openness to the transcendent. I remember at the UN Conferences of the 1990's we would have debates on the appropriateness of UN documents containing references to spirituality and spiritual values. In general, the pluralist European countries were not enthusiastic, as they feared that this might imply some positive reference to religion (which would be a secularist mortal sin). On the other hand, the Russia of the early Gorbachev administration was appealing for spirituality and even the Chinese supported the requests of the Holy See conceding that their system admitted spirituality: 'Chinese socialist spirituality', the Ambassador hastily added.

There is something fundamental in human yearning that seeks the spirit, meaning and hope. There is something in the human spirit which aspires to ask deeper questions about the meaning of life and to identify what are the deepest realities.

Many will find their path in secular spirituality and they will live out their worldview with dedication, idealism, generosity and satisfaction. For others, seeking spirituality may indeed be a sign of seeking the transcendent and be a first opening to faith. The originality of faith is however that it is not of our construction, it is response to a personal action of God. It is response to an invitation made to me in my personal situation. Christian faith, as opposed to other spiritual visions, is above all the recognition that God loves me personally.

Pope Benedict XVI stresses the relationship between faith and reason in the social context in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (#28). 'Faith by its specific nature is an encounter with the living God – an encounter opening up new horizons extending beyond the sphere of reason. But it is also a purifying force for reason itself. From God's standpoint, faith liberates reason from its blind spots and therefore helps it to be ever more fully itself. Faith enables reason to do its work more effectively and to see its proper object more clearly. This is where Catholic social doctrine has its place'.

In that sense faith is always surprise and risk. It is the surprise that God has sought me out personally and asks me to respond. That relationship was described by Pope Benedict XVI in his inaugural address in Saint Peter's Square now some months ago: 'We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary. There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ'.

Our communities if they wish to help young people in the struggles and searching for meaning must be communities of mature faith, but they should not become elitist ghettos. The Church by its nature must be open and it must open a path of welcome for those who are still journeying, who are still seeking, of those who are still weak, of those who are sinners.

Ireland's economic success has brought with it great changes. I have mentioned the large numbers of immigrants. Ireland is a society with 5% annual economic growth, and with unemployment at 4.3%. If there is emigration it is emigration by choice. Many Irish young people go abroad to study and to enjoy themselves when the finish studying.

In the current Irish economic situation the reflection of Pope John Paul II in *Centesimus Annus* (#39) is particularly relevant: 'the economy is only one aspect and one dimension of human activity' and that 'economic freedom is only one element of human freedom'. If economic life is absolutised, if the production and consumption of goods become the centre of social life

and society's only value, not subject to any other value, economic freedom looses its necessary relationship the human person, and ends up by alienating and oppressing.

Despite all the positive economic indicators and amidst the public demonstration of pride and satisfaction, there is in Ireland also uneasiness, and a search for a more secure national identity.

Economic prosperity has not brought with it even those elements of social progress that one could legitimately have expected. There is a crisis in health care provision. There is not enough investment in education. There is a permeating fear that jobs are in the long run not secure in the face of competition from other economies that are today doing what Ireland did twenty years ago through exploitation of cheaper labour costs.

There is a growing instance of marital breakdown in Ireland and this is having a serious effect on the lives and psychological health of children. On many occasions teachers tell me that they would almost need to have a lawyer present at parent/teacher meetings to see who is legally responsible for some of the children. These children then grow up within an extremely conflictual network of relationships of various fathers and mothers.

The question of an ageing population is also one to which more attention must be given. People have a right to be able to live their human potential to the fullest degree possible for the longest time possible. This will require enabling older people to remain on in their homes or localities and also in some cases to be able to work in some fulfilling role, either with or without remuneration, in retirement. The increase of chronically ill older people will give rise to greater institutionalisation.

Greater attention needs to be given to the quality of care that such institution can provide. One group in Dublin visits elderly people who have no relatives of their own in a large Dublin geriatric hospital but is not allowed to take these older people out for a drive on a summer's day because the insurance costs would be excessive.

Grandparents play an enormous role in passing on values and traditions to their grandchildren and very often substituting the parents who are both working. But in the near future non-working grandparents are also going to be a rare species and socialization will be handed over to professionals.

There is a felt need for greater solidarity, but people are too busy to have the time to take on that challenge themselves. Yes, there are examples of extraordinary solidarity in Irish society. The largest Conference of the Society of Saint Vincent de Paul in Ireland is in what was traditionally the Protestant University, Trinity College Dublin. Irish development aid is aim-

ing to reach the UN target of 0.7% within this decade. The Irish are among the most generous per capita donors in voluntary development aid. A single collection in the Churches in Dublin last year for the victims of the Tsunami produced 4.5 million Euros in one day.

A number of papers have stressed that solidarity begins within the family. Professor Schooyans has referred to how changes in the perception of the family can reduce the capacity of the family to generate solidarity. He notes how within then family today the 'child can become itself the object of a choice between a child and other goods in relation to which the child is not perceived as essentially different'. And he adds the 'child is frequently perceived as an object to which one has a right'. This is quite different from the Christian vision in which the child is considered as both 'gift' and as the expression of mutual self-giving, thus recognising the newness and originality of each new life with all its human potential.

The paper of Professor Fumagalli Carulli drew attention to a particular challenge presented to the Social Teaching of the Church by certain international documents on the rights of the child and in particular concerning the relative rights of parents and children. This has been a subject of much discussion and controversy since the publication of on the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Article 5 of that International Convention deals with the rights of parents. It affirms:

'States Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents...to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the present Convention'.

I remember the negotiations which took place around the application of this question during the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (ICPD) in 1994 and the World Conference on Women and Development held the following year in Beijing. The question was the possible conflict between the rights of parents and the rights of children and adolescents regarding the provision of reproductive health services and the interpretation of the term 'the evolving capacities of the child'.

The relevant paragraph of the ICPD (7.45) is a classic product of prolonged negotiations, allowing sufficient vagueness for the text to be interpreted in various ways:

Recognizing the rights, duties and responsibilities of parents and other persons legally responsible for adolescents to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the adolescent,

appropriate direction and guidance in sexual and reproductive matters, countries must ensure that the programmes and attitudes of health-care providers do not restrict the access of adolescents to appropriate services and the information they need, including on sexually transmitted diseases and sexual abuse. In doing so, and in order to, *inter alia*, address sexual abuse, these services must safeguard the rights of adolescents to privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent, respecting cultural values and religious beliefs. In this context, countries should, where appropriate, remove legal, regulatory and social barriers to reproductive health information and care for adolescents.

All the elements in the discussions are mingled into the text. The more libertarian groups were fighting for measure which would 'not restrict services for adolescents', the notions of 'right to privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent' by the adolescent have been added and an appeal was made to 'remove legal, regulatory and social barriers to reproductive health information and care for adolescents'. The more conservative groups placed their hopes on terms like 'recognising the rights, duties and responsibilities of parents' and 'respecting cultural values and religious beliefs'.

One year later the Beijing Conference on Women and Development produced a new formulation (Par. 108 e), using the same concepts but changing the order and therefore reducing the place assigned to the rights of parents:

...especially information on sexuality and reproduction, taking into account the rights of the child to access to information, privacy, confidentiality, respect and informed consent, as well as the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents and legal guardians to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and in conformity with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

In this new formulation the rights of the child to privacy and confidentiality move to first place and come before any reference to the rights of the parents. Even there the traditional order 'rights, responsibilities and duties' is changed to 'responsibilities, rights and duties'. The concept of the best interests of the child is stressed as a primary consideration.

Such consensus documents of International Conferences may not have legal weight, but they become part of 'soft law' and influence public opinion as to how the International Conventions should be interpreted.

One reproductive health lobbyist wrote after the Beijing Conference that 'An avalanche of conditional language asserting parental rights in sections of the Platform relating to reproductive and sexual health education, information and services for children and adolescents was streamlined. The final agreement recognized the primacy of adolescent rights, over the duties, rights and responsibilities of parents, thereby taking into account the evolving capacity of the child. This language is true to the basic premise that the needs of the child come first, as expressed by the international community in the 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child'.

Whereas the Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church does address the question of the rights of the child, it does not get into any analysis of the potential clash between the rights of the child and those of parents, presuming that the parents will normally be the best judges of what the best interests of the child might be.

In today's culture of judicial litigation there is a real danger that courts will overrule the right of parents and will stress more and more the space open to public authorities to substitute themselves for the parents.

The Compendium (#245) looks at some of the particular violations of the rights of the child 'due to the lack of favourable conditions for their integral development despite the existence of a specific juridical instrument for protecting their rights'. It mentions explicitly 'lack of healthcare, or adequate food supply, little or no possibility of receiving a minimum of academic formation or inadequate shelter'. It also mentions the specific problems of 'trafficking in children, child labour, the phenomenon of street children, the use of children in armed conflict, child marriage, the use of children for commerce in pornographic material'. It notes that 'it is essential to engage in a battle at the national and international levels against them violations of the dignity of boys and girls caused by sexual exploitation, by those caught up in paedophilia, and by every kind of violence directed against these most defenceless of human creatures'.

The on-going scandals of the involvement of priests and religious in crimes of paedophilia are not something which has brought honour on the Church. Hard lessons are still being learned about how Church authorities should deal with allegations of abuse.

This should however not lead to a situation in which the Church, which due to its own sad experience has acquired a certain expertise in dealing

with the matter, should not be an advocate in the fight against the societal plague of child sexual abuse, which in some cases would seem to be far more prevalent in society than it was traditionally presumed.

The emphasis on the rights of the parents is however not just to be seen within the terms of a possible clash between the rights of parents and these of the child, but above all within the context of the principle of subsidiarity, in which the rights of parents should be protected over and against an over invasive state. It is about an entire vision of how society and its principal actors should be structured.

Intergenerational solidarity must find its roots in the attitude of people. One can look at all the economic and social factors affecting the decline in births in Europe, but one also has to ask why has a Europe which is enjoying unprecedented prosperity become somehow fearful or unwilling to pass on life from one generation to the next and to ensure that values and traditions are passed on with generosity. A generation which closes in on itself is one which lacks one of the fundamental dimensions of humankind, namely, looking to a future with hope.

Again there are indications that a purely materialistic understanding of the economy can be a contributing factor to such a closed mentality. Pope John Paul II stressed 'that man commits himself in work not only for his own sake but for the sake of others. Every person collaborates in the work of others and for their good'.

The economy of the 'New Ireland', like that of many other regions, has yet to find a practical balance between individualism and solidarity. Naturally everyone is anxious to provide for *their* children, *their* parents and *their* pension. But solidarity requires more.

Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* has stressed in particular the contribution of the concept of Christian love to the building of true intergenerational solidarity. He stresses that 'This love does not simply offer people material help, but refreshment and care for their souls, something which often is even more necessary than material support. In the end, the claim that just social structures would make works of charity superfluous masks a materialist conception of man: the mistaken notion that man can live 'by bread alone' (*Mt* 4:4; cf. *Dt* 8:3) – a conviction that demeans man and ultimately disregards all that is specifically human'.

Further (#30) he stresses that involving young people directly in works of solidarity 'constitutes a school of life which offers them a formation in solidarity and in readiness to offer others not simply material aid but their very selves. The anti-culture of death, which finds expression for example

in drug use, is thus countered by an unselfish love which shows itself to be a culture of life by the very willingness to “lose itself” (cf. *Lk 17:33 et passim*) for others’.

He addresses the doubts which assail young people about the meaning of their lives reminding us that the believer, ‘immersed like everyone else in the dramatic complexity of historical events’ can ‘remain unshakably certain that God is our Father and loves us, even when his silence remains incomprehensible’.

The recognition that God is Love transforms our impatience and our doubts into the sure hope that God holds the world in his hands. ‘Love is the light – and in the end, the only light – that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working’.

The contribution of the Social Teaching of the Church to the creation of a culture that is open and generous in the transmission of life is one of creating a new confidence in humanity as such. It is one which stresses the need to create a society in which people know that they can realize their human potential fully, and not just in the sphere of economic life.

The Social Teaching of the Church must be made appear in our modern world as an overwhelming vote of confidence in the human person. Young people need to be enhanced in their own self esteem so that they can overcome the doubts and insecurities which economic progress may indeed even have enhanced.

Curiously the contribution of the Social Teaching of the Church to the challenge of preparing our young people to build a just and sustainable society for tomorrow, for themselves and for others, will be one marked by a recognition that fullness of life comes not just from having but from the ability to give. Recognizing that life is a gift the young person can take the risk of faith in following the path of Jesus, who gave himself for us, so that we could have life to the full.