

This dodgy deal may not be for the best

AND so, it seems a deal between Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil has been done. After eight weeks of the most unseemly flirting and wrangling in the history of the State, ironically including the celebration of the Rising that led to its birth, the parties that emerged from the subsequent Civil War finally look on course to come together once again.

The problem is that Fianna Fáil has only agreed to keep a Fine Gael minority government in power by not voting against it – but it will not vote with it. The larger party still needs the support of at least eight Independents, though that would leave them without a safety net, so realistically, they will have to seduce 12 to their cause.

Should this minority government actually be formed, there will be a lot of relief among the electorate. We face many serious issues, not least homelessness, the health service, and the possibility of a British exit from the EU, and we have no more time for distractions.

But the formation of such a government will potentially create as many, if not more, problems than it will solve.

As former minister Dermot Ahern points out today in this newspaper, it is hard enough already to get a policy approved by Cabinet when all the ministers are on the same side but a Cabinet consisting of Fine Gael TDs with a number also selected from the ranks of the Independents could, in theory, fail to agree on anything at all.

A very serious spectre looms: such a government could find that making difficult policy decisions is impossible. Even easy ones might face unexpected challenges.

Speaking on Raidió na Gaeltachta, former government chief whip and Fianna Fáil TD Pat Carey warned that the demands of a few Independents could, as we have seen in the past, be excessive and incessant. Keeping a dozen of them happy might well prove far beyond the reach of Fine Gael.

For its own part, Fianna Fáil has said it will support three budgets but will reserve the right to challenge any and all other policies; that's the sort of sabre-rattling that suggests the very first conflict might lead to the premature collapse of this little arrangement anyway.

It certainly makes real structural reform impossible. How, for instance, could you carry out a root-and-branch reform of the HSE when so many fingers would be in the pie, all arguing for the retention of local hospitals or the provision of new regional services?

The first casualty would be long-term planning, already the Achilles heel of every government since the Lemass era. Instead, interest groups would be queuing up for the only thing they understand and need – money, money, money.

Bearing all this in mind, it is hard not to look afresh at the other option and ask, what harm would another election do? After all, we know a lot more about all the parties than we did on February 26. We now know who they are prepared to deal with and just how pliant they are when asked to compromise on the allegedly sacred totems of their manifestos.

We also know the TDs who will always prefer to be the hurlers on the ditch, and we know those who are prepared to take to the field. The current fudge means that no matter what is decided by the government, detractors will always be able to look back and say the decisions had no mandate, and they would be correct.

So we genuinely need to ask ourselves honestly which we would prefer. Is it the proposed horrible, unworkable fudge that places party and local interests before those of the country at large? Or, despite the inconvenience and annoyance of having to do it all over again, is it a second chance to award a real mandate to the next government?

IN 2011, I published a book entitled *Why Be A Catholic?* Shortly afterward, I was interviewed by Matt Cooper on The Last Word radio show. Also on the panel was a man who had sought in vain to renounce his Catholic religion. According to the man, the Church would not permit him to do so because he had been baptised and, baptism being a sacrament, it cannot be undone by human hands.

That man was representative of so many Irish people who have become disillusioned with their faith. They may not be able to undo the sacraments but they have chosen to stop attending church. While the census of 2011 showed that 84% of Irish people still regard themselves as Roman Catholic, many of them are Catholic in name only.

It is anticipated that last weekend's Census 2016 will reveal a decline in the number of people prepared to call themselves Catholic, in that a great many more people will have opted for the 'No Religion' box on the Census form. This is already reflected in empty church pews, the Church's loss of influence in Irish society and the fact that we, as a nation, are becoming solidly secular. It seems that we have finally said goodbye to Catholic Ireland.

Much of the blame for this lies squarely with the Irish Church itself. The horrors perpetrated by so many religious over so many years has left a grievous wound which is hard to heal. It is true that the Church has acted admirably in attempting to atone for the crimes of its members. For many people, however, it is too little, too late.

And yet, despite all this, there is still a terrible hunger for spiritual consolation in Ireland. In particular, many young people have a deep yearning for something that shallow secularism simply cannot supply. They want depth, meaning and a sense that there is something more to life than the latest gadget or luxury.

THAT so few of them look to the Catholic Church for fulfilment can be explained, not solely because of the abuse crisis, but because they do not believe it can satisfy their spiritual needs. They want 'enlightenment', holiness and a life lived from the depths of their soul. As they see it, the Church is overly rigid, formal and spiritually shallow.

In an age when young people are so well-educated and informed, you cannot sell them something they perceive as fake. What young people want but rarely get in the Church, is a genuine encounter with holiness. This is not to say that holiness and spiritual depth is not available in the Church, but only that it rarely reveals itself.

This is one reason why so many now flock to the East in search of spiritual solace. They travel to Asia and India in order to visit the Buddhist and Hindu temples, to pray with the monks and to make meditation and contemplation central to their lives. Others opt for New Age enlightenment, where a distilled version of those Eastern religions is seen as a pathway to lasting peace.

Why isn't the Church fighting to save itself?

Last week, millions of us marked out a census form. The numbers of Catholics will fall again: so our leading Catholic writer asks why the hierarchy is doing so little to appeal to the people on whom its future depends

SATURDAY
ESSAY



by Dr Mark
Dooley

I spoke to one young lady who said that her time with the monks of Asia was a profoundly life-changing experience. Many others who have sampled the fruits of Buddhist and Hindu meditation, have radically transformed the way they live. No longer exhausted or stressed, they now exist for others in simplicity and goodness.

Visit any bookstore and you will see an abundance of titles by the Dalai Lama and the Vietnamese Buddhist master Thích Nhất Hạnh. Their simple message of love, joy and peace is made real by lives of deep contemplation and religious authenticity. Being in their presence is, for many, to experience saintliness.

The only Christian figure whose popularity compares with these Eastern monks is Pope Francis.

That is because the Pope exhibits a form of authentic spirituality that is lived out in practice. Through his Christ-like actions, he has shown how the

Church can continue to be a vital force in the world.

That being the case, why is the so-called 'Francis effect' so obviously absent in Ireland? Francis has been Pontiff for three years, during which time neither Mass attendance nor vocations increased. In fact, there are now only two priests under the age of 40 in the Dublin archdiocese.

The answer, it seems to me, is that the Irish Church has simply thrown in the towel. At a time when they should be screaming their message from every street corner, they have retreated to a self-made bunker. Instead of examining why they are rapidly losing ground, they have simply surrendered the ground.

This was vividly brought home to me recently when I attended Mass in a neighbouring parish.

This church is in the enviable position of having two full-time priests and, by current standards, a large and enthusiastic congregation. Unlike so many

other parishes, it can be relatively certain of its future.

Standing before a full church, the priest began his homily by saying that, due to the vocations crisis, the Church would have to change. I expected him to announce a full programme of renewal. Instead, he told a stunned congregation that there would, from now on, be fewer Masses, fewer confessions and less of a priestly presence in that parish. So, in a relatively successful parish with two permanent priests, the answer to the crisis is to shut up shop.

In normal circumstances, if a business is failing, the managers do not issue a statement saying: 'We've gone through a bad period so we're closing down.' On the contrary, they will pull out all the stops and fight tooth and nail for their corner of the market.

Instead of retreating, what that priest should have said is something like this: 'The Church may be going through a difficult period, but here the doors are always open, the light is always on and we are always here to talk, pray and help in whatever way we can.'

With two priests, they should have more, not fewer, Masses, more of a priestly presence and more of everything that will exhibit the essential beauty and



Hope: Pope Francis has given new purpose to the Catholic Church

richness of the Catholic faith. You do not, in other words, respond to a crisis by battering down the hatches.

Rather, you must dig in and hold your ground. And you must do so by being readily available to your flock. Even more importantly, the hierarchy needs to wake up to the fact that there is a great spiritual hunger to be satisfied.

They need to see this as a golden opportunity rather than a mortal threat. And they need to respond to that hunger by asking why so many people are opting for Eastern religions and New Age rather than Catholicism.

Even at a PR level, this should be an obvious strategy. What, in other words, have those religions got that the Church seems to lack? As it happens, they don't have anything which is not already an essential element of the Church's ancient traditions.

If people are drawn to Eastern spirituality, it is because they find there a deeply contemplative dimension which nourishes their spiritual yearning. It is an experience of intense holiness exemplified by monks who are not ashamed of their religious identity. For most Western people, it is their first real experience of that peace which surpasses all understanding.

The irony is that you don't have to go elsewhere in search of that profound peace. Here, for example, are the words of the great medieval mystic monk, Meister Eckhart: 'There is nothing so much like God as silence.'

That basic idea has been at the core of Christian monasticism since its inception. Silence, contemplation, peace – all these are at the heart of our monasteries, places where Catholic monks exist in true holiness.

In a world of ceaseless noise, the contemplative lives of these monks show what can be gained when silence becomes prayer.

That is one reason for the enduring fascination with the beautiful Latin liturgy, a rite which has become so integral to many contemporary monasteries. For this is a liturgy of silence, one in which we are led through chant and prayer to a mystical stillness.

There is nothing so much like God as silence, and yet in most of our churches all we get is noise. The divine peace promised by Christ is nowhere to be found. A sacred ritual that was formed from wonder is often experienced now as something banal.

I know so many good, decent and holy priests in whose churches the sacred is at home. In fact, most Irish priests are doing their very best in the worst

of circumstances. And they do so, more often than not, without the full support of the hierarchy.

INDEED, it is primarily the Irish bishops who need to realise that, should the Church continue on its current course, its future in this country is very much in doubt. Instead of continually apologising for their existence, they need to start asking why so many young people, if they are religious at all, are choosing to ignore Catholicism. That will not involve doing anything radically new, but simply rediscovering and actively marketing what the Church already possesses in abundance.

Put simply, the Church desperately needs a new vocation to holiness. It needs to reach out to young people by showing them why they do not have to go elsewhere in pursuit of spiritual peace. They need to show that the Catholic tradition of contemplation has as much if not more to offer than the religious traditions of the East.

It is a simple truth that the Irish Church has lost its sense of identity. A once-dominant institution in the life of our

country has become a remnant of its former self. This, however, is no justification for pulling down the shutters in despair.

Now more than ever, the Church must dust down its ancient traditions and let them shine for all to see.

Instead of hand-wringing and navel-gazing, it must promote the fact that you don't have to go elsewhere in search of spiritual consolation, silence or peace.

For that is something which, although often neglected or ignored, is at the very heart of Catholicism.

'Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, do I give to you.' Those words are at the very core of the Gospel, and yet in so few of our churches can you savour such peace.

I do not say that this alone will secure the future of the Irish Church. However, unless it can rediscover its ancient call to holiness, unless it can offer young people something life-changing, it will struggle to survive.

While it may never be what it once was, the Church can remain a significant spiritual force in this country. It will only do so, however, when, following Mother Teresa, it finally awakens to the fact that 'silence gives us a new outlook on everything'.



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