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APOSTOLIC NUNCIO IN IRELAND

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN IRELAND AND POPE FRANCIS:

LEGACY AND TRANSFORMATION

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Allow me to begin this evening by saying what an honor it is for me to be delivering the Terrence R. Keeley Vatican Lecture in this, the tenth year of its existence. I am personally very grateful to my friend and Notre Dame classmate, Terry Keeley, for having conceived the idea of this series, and for having made it financially possible over the last decade. I am convinced that both Notre Dame and the Holy See owe him a great debt of gratitude. The purpose of the series is, as we have heard, to explore questions involving Notre Dame's Catholic mission with representatives of the Holy See, and when I look at the list of eminent personalities whom the Nanovic Institute has invited to deliver these lectures, we can be certain that, present speaker excluded, the series has achieved its aim.

I will speak this evening on the topic of the Catholic Church in Ireland and Pope Francis: Legacy and Transformation. I suppose it is standard for speakers at the outset of their address to announce that they approach their topic with a certain amount of trepidation, and that is surely true for me for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that the question of the Catholic Church's role in Irish society, and in particular the history and evolution of that role, is a question of daunting complexity, impervious to easy analysis or prosaic formulations. And to continue my disclaimer, I must say also that I have only been in Ireland for three years, hardly enough time to grasp fully the profundity and complexity of the issues about which I will speak. Then, of course there is the question of the context in which I speak today: the University of Notre Dame, a

preeminent – perhaps the preeminent – institution associated in the minds of many, if only because of the name of our athletic teams, with what has come in the last twenty-five years to be called the “Irish diaspora.” We need always to be aware of how a consciousness of Irish-American identity will shape the way in which we view the reality of Ireland today.

So that you can better understand where I am coming from on these questions, let me tell you why I find myself in Ireland. As you have heard, I am the Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland, which means that I am the Ambassador of the Holy See to the country of Ireland. I am one of about fifty-five resident Ambassadors in Dublin, representing countries from all over the world. The Holy See currently has full diplomatic relations with about 179 nations, Ireland being one of them. The first Papal Nuncio to Ireland arrived from Rome in 1645 in order to support the Catholics of the Confederation of Kilkenny in their struggle against English Protestant rule. The first Nuncio’s name was Giovanni Battista Rinuccini and, by all accounts, his mission was a bit of a failure, memorialized now chiefly by an Italian restaurant named for him in the lovely city of Kilkenny. Fast forward two-hundred and eighty-four years to 1929 and the period of the establishment of the Irish Free State – the Holy See appointed an Irish-American Franciscan, Paschal Robinson, a mediaevalist who had no formal training as a diplomat, as the first Nuncio to the newly independent nation. His arrival in Ireland in January 1930 was described by *The New York Times* as “the final act in the long drama of Catholic emancipation in Ireland” (NYT, 26 January 1930) and was greeted with rejoicing in the country among everyone save perhaps some Bishops, a few of whom it seems were not terribly excited about the idea of having a representative of the Holy See in their own backyard as it were. The Irish government however was delighted, and provided the new Nuncio with what had been one of the three official residences of the British governors in Ireland, that of the British Under-Secretary for Ireland. That residence, in the center of the Phoenix Park in Dublin, became the Nunciature, just as

shortly before, the Chief Secretary's Lodge in the Phoenix Park had become the residence of the American Ambassador.

In a letter to the Irish Ambassador to the Holy See written in late November 1929 just before the arrival of Archbishop Robinson in Ireland, Joseph P. Walsh, the Secretary of the Department of External Affairs of the Irish Free State, noted that "the occupation by a Papal Nuncio to an Irish Government of one of the three principal official residences of the old Regime cannot but strike the imagination of the people as a symbol of a very great change indeed" and went on to say that the "healthy air of the Park would no doubt be an argument which would appeal to Monsignor Robinson himself" (*Letter*, 30 November 1929). I think of that line by Joseph P. Walsh about the healthy air of the park when I pass the site of the old Nunciature on one of my runs in the early evening. I should explain that the Nunciature was moved out of the Phoenix Park in 1978 to our present, more humble location next to a petrol station on the Navan Road. Paschal Robinson served in Dublin for eighteen years, until his death in August 1948. Since Paschal Robinson, there have been twelve Nuncios, three of whom, like Paschal Robinson, have died in office, a fact which at times gives me pause for thought...

The role of the Nuncio is two-fold: to be the representative of the Pope to the local Catholic Church in the geographical area of his responsibility, as well as to represent the Holy Father to the governmental authorities there. Like any Ambassador, a principal element of his work is to keep his own government informed about the situation in the country where he is their representative. The publication in 2010 and 2011 by Wikileaks of confidential diplomatic cables from American Embassies gave an idea of the day-to-day work of any Embassy in informing their own government (in that case, the American State Department) of the situation in the nation where the Embassy is located. Gathering information and relaying it to one's own Ministry of Foreign Affairs is a major part of the work of any Ambassador, as is communicating information from one's own government to the state where one is resident.

I was appointed as Nuncio in Ireland in late November 2011, and arrived in the country in January 2012. One of my priorities upon my arrival was to try to be as open and accessible as possible to the people of Ireland, naturally in order to make the Holy See present and visible among them, but also so that I would be able to learn from them about the country, the Church, and the needs of the Church at this very critical time in Ireland. I felt that there was no way I would be able to do that by remaining enclosed in the Nunciature, so I began to accept as many invitations as I could to visit parishes, schools, universities, religious communities, hospitals, really anywhere where it would be possible to come in contact with people in order to come to a deeper understanding of the country. That three year experience, as limited as it surely has been, provides the background for my reflections this evening on the Catholic Church in Ireland and Pope Francis.

To approach that question, I would like to mention something which happened relatively recently. Last November, one of the senior and most respected Bishops in Ireland, Archbishop Michael Neary of Tuam, preached a homily at a Mass for the Association of Papal Orders in Ireland. It was a homily which produced considerable comment. Indeed, almost a month later it was still being discussed in Irish newspapers. Why was it so significant? Well, take this passage for instance:

“Our priests tell me of measurably declining congregations and a steady, if still quite gentle, dropping in contributions. They see few teenagers in their churches. They feel, intuitively, that the temporary lapsing noticeable here from about the seventies is changing. They fear that those falling away in recent years will not return. I can see the same with my own eyes in our Cathedral parish. Even the outright hostility we had been experiencing from sections of the media, the political establishment and some of the public has curiously abated. This, if I am right, is not because the depth of our piety and the brilliance of our arguments have made them think again. This is because the whole society, like an Irish village of fifty years ago, knows and is tacitly acknowledging something that

hardly needs to be said. That a great struggle, social, political, intellectual and profoundly cultural, has been fought. And that we have lost.”

This paragraph which I have just read was by far the most cited in the Archbishop’s homily. And like any passage, it needs to be understood in context. Archbishop Neary, at the outset of his reflection, makes a crucial distinction, which was not noticed by all the commentators on his sermon. And that distinction was between Christendom and Christianity; the first (Christendom) signifying a “shared set of assumptions about life and its purpose, reflected in use of language, in culture and in the law” that is, Christendom as Catholic culture or Catholic society. The second category is Christianity; faith in the person of Jesus Christ and in his Church, which can exist and indeed usually does exist without the support of an explicitly Catholic society. One remarkable element of Archbishop Neary’s homily, which wasn’t commented upon in the media, but which immediately struck me, was that what the Archbishop was pointing to, that is, the *disappearance of Christendom* in a European nation in the twenty-first century, was itself quite remarkable and unusual. Not because the disappearance of Christendom is something unique in itself. Indeed, Catholic culture in the sense of a pervasively Catholic society, in which social institutions, customs and mores are publicly Catholic, has been disappearing in European countries now for centuries. *But rather because this disappearance was happening in our own time.* From my point of view, it has been the existence or better, the persistence of Christendom in Ireland in our own lifetimes which is something that is truly remarkable. And here perhaps we begin to grasp an element of the uniqueness of the situation of the Catholic Church in Ireland. Ireland is one of the very few places in the world where a pervasively Catholic culture has existed within living memory. People in Ireland today who are in their fifties would have grown up, especially those who lived outside of Dublin, in a society which was thoroughly Catholic in its external manifestations. Where something like 90% of the population was at Mass every Sunday, where saints’ days, sacraments, and visits to holy places structured the public and private life of the community, where a large number of young men would

have habitually gone to the seminary to become priests and where an even larger number of girls would have entered the convent to become nuns. It was a world of large-scale pilgrimages to places like Lough Derg (a penitential island on a lake just south of the border with Northern Ireland), Croagh Patrick (the holy mountain of Saint Patrick in County Mayo) and of course, the Shrine of Our Lady of Knock (where the Mother of God had appeared to villagers on a rainy August evening in 1879).

I recently had a conversation with a religious sister in Ireland who would have entered religious life in the 1940's. She is from the west of Ireland, and went to one of the convent schools run by the Sisters of Mercy in a village on the Atlantic coast. She spoke to me with great affection about what it was like to grow up in rural Ireland in the 1940's. She told me, for example, that of the twenty girls who graduated with her at her school, fifteen of them entered religious life as sisters. She recounted to me how her grandfather on their farm in South Galway would semi-silently pray the litany of Our Lady of Loreto as he planted the seeds in his fields. Every seed, a different title of the Mother of God; *Virgin most merciful*, *Virgin most faithful*, *Mirror of justice*, *Seat of wisdom*, *Cause of our joy*. It was a rural society which in most respects had not changed in a thousand years. I might mention also in parenthesis that it was this continuation of the living tradition of Christendom into our own time, which, as late as 1976, led Professor John Senior of the University of Kansas to establish a semester of his remarkably successful Integrated Humanities Program on Inishbofin, a small island off the coast of Galway. His idea was that there on an island of farmers and fisherman in the North Atlantic, American students, coming from their deracinated and sterile suburban cultures, might still come in contact with the ancient Catholic rural life of Europe. But as Archbishop Neary, whose Archdiocese interestingly includes Inishbofin, mentioned last November, by the 1970's things were beginning to change in Ireland.

There are many reasons for that change, and they have been analyzed far better than I can do by people like Father Vincent Twomey and Mary Kenny in their books respectively entitled *The End of Irish Catholicism?* and *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*.

But the factors which preserved Catholic culture in Ireland well into the second half of the twentieth century would include not only the predominantly rural and agrarian culture of much of Ireland, with its inherently conservative outlook, but also the legacy of resistance to British rule. The relationship between Irish nationalism and Catholicism is, like everything in Ireland, far more complicated than what is commonly believed, especially in the Irish diaspora; it bears noting, for example, that several of the most prominent and influential Irish nationalists were from Protestant, not Catholic backgrounds, people like Wolfe Tone and Charles Stewart Parnell. It might also be pointed out that two of the most famous women Nationalists were born as Protestants, and later became Catholic; Maud Gonne in 1903 and Constance Georgine Gore-Booth, better known as the Countess Markievicz, in 1917.

But having noted the fact of Protestant nationalism in Ireland, there can be no doubting that during the long centuries of British rule in Ireland in which there were periods of brutal persecution of, and discrimination against Catholics, to remain Catholic was seen as an act of resistance to a foreign power. Catholicism was the faith of the indigenous people, the poor and the oppressed. And indeed, the conversion to the Catholic faith of Countess Markievicz was in part due to her desire to identify completely with the common people of Ireland.

This sense of solidarity and resistance, combined with the astonishing charitable and educational efforts of Catholic religious orders and Bishops during the time of British rule, meant that when Ireland became an independent nation in the second quarter of the twentieth century, the Catholic Church had built up an enormous amount of goodwill among the Irish people, goodwill which immediately translated into significant political power and social prestige for the Church in the newly founded Irish state, reflected for example in the decision of the new government of Ireland to provide a very prestigious residence for the new Nuncio, Archbishop Paschal Robinson. The result of this reservoir of goodwill was that from the 1930's until the 1960's a Catholic ethos dominated the life of Ireland as a nation; there were stringent laws regarding censorship of books and films;

the Catholic Church was given an enormous role in primary and secondary education; the social legislation of the nation followed Catholic principles. We should remember, for example, that civil divorce only became legal in Ireland in 1995 as the result of a popular referendum. When approximately ten years earlier in June of 1986 the possibility of legal divorce had been put to the nation it was resoundingly defeated by a large margin of close to two-to-one. Civil divorce eventually prevailed in Ireland only as recently as November 1995 and by a margin of only about 9000 votes out of a total participation of 1.6 million voters. That tells us something about the persistence of a Catholic culture and ethos in Ireland, and quite strikingly confirms what Archbishop Neary implies about the perdurance of Christendom in Ireland well into the second half of the twentieth century.

There are other factors which have contributed to the transformation of Irish society. Certainly the phenomenon of emigration has been an influence. The twentieth century made it possible for emigrants to return to Ireland in numbers which would have been impossible in previous times. Returning emigrants brought their experience of secular societies to Ireland. Another factor which led to the changes which we have seen in Irish society will appear to many of you as more surprising. And that change was electricity. Bringing electricity to rural Ireland only really got underway in earnest in the 1950's, at a time when hundreds of thousands of Irish households in the countryside lacked electric power. The electrification program took decades to reach everyone. The Irish rural electrification scheme, as it was called, only ended in 1979. With electricity, of course, came radio and television. And with radio and television came not only the values, if we can call them that, of the media industry, but also a profound transformation of the ancient rhythms of rural life, including household prayer which had played such a role in many families. As a personal aside, since I arrived in Ireland three years ago, I have discovered second cousins with whom I am related through my great-grandmother, who emigrated to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, from a place in County Clare beside the ancient monastic site of Kilmacduagh. There one of my cousins was a bachelor farmer who steadfastly resisted electrification of his farm up until his death in 1995.

The impact of radio and television on the values of Catholic Ireland came to be exemplified in the famous “nightie episode” when, now virtually a half-century ago in 1966, during a broadcast on the national, state-owned television network RTE of the Late Late Show, a kind of talk show, the host Gay Byrne asked a woman what color her nightie was on her wedding night, to lots of laughter among the studio audience. The question upset the Bishop of Clonfert and led him to protest that RTE was undermining Christian values in Ireland. Not surprisingly, the Bishop came out the loser in the controversy, even though RTE eventually apologized for the incident.

Another factor, in addition to the influence of emigration, electrification and the media was certainly the gradual economic improvement of life in Ireland in the last fifty years. This gradual economic growth was certainly a factor in the transformation of the consciousness of the nation. That economic advance and transformation was itself assisted considerably by Ireland’s entrance into the European Economic Community in 1973 and reached its peak in the period now known as the Celtic tiger from about 1997 until 2007.

Finally, another more recent factor in the transformation of the position of the Church in Ireland, and one which is painfully well known to all of us, is of course, the multitude of scandals which engulfed the Church in Ireland beginning in the 1990’s, most notably and tragically the horrific crime of sexual abuse of minors by members of the clergy. The legacy of the scandals was recently assessed very well by David Quinn in his article in *First Things* (January 2015) entitled “Anti-Catholic Ireland” who points out how the dominance of the Bishops’ voice on moral issues in Ireland from independence in the 1920’s up and through the 1980’s created a situation in which the revelation, beginning in the 1990’s, of the crimes of some members of the clergy and the negligence of some Church authorities in addressing those crimes, was met by absolute outrage and open hostility towards the Church. It was that combination of vigorous moral teaching by the Bishops through the 1980’s and the uncovering of scandals shortly thereafter which, I believe, would be the background to Archbishop Diarmuid Martin’s recent

comments during a lecture at Fordham University, in which he said: “Much of the heritage of Catholic-dominated Ireland still entraps us from being free witnesses to the Christian message within a secular society that is seeking meaning” (“A Post-Catholic Ireland?” *America*, 20 May 2013). This problem becomes evident when in contemporary Ireland a Catholic Bishop attempts to speak – or for that matter, when any Catholic voice is raised – regarding the critical issues of the day. The inevitable response from those opposed to that perspective is that the Bishops want to return Ireland to the clerical domination of the past, to censorship and enforced doctrinal orthodoxy, a past in which politicians were fearful, in that typically Irish phrase, of “the belt of the Bishop’s crozier.” And for good measure, those opposed to the Church’s position on any given issue will add that the Church authorities were negligent in dealing with sexually abusive members of the clergy, so how dare they speak to us about morality!

So it is clear from what I have been saying that the Church in Ireland faces unique challenges in society today. But having said that, one must say that the Church in Ireland also possesses unique resources. Attendance at Sunday Mass, while certainly nothing like what it was thirty years ago, is still significantly higher than in other European countries. The deeply held faith which permeated daily life is still within the living memory of the people. And crucially there is a growing dissatisfaction with the superficiality and emptiness of secularism. There is, as Archbishop Diarmuid Martin has said, a search for meaning in life. There is an awareness that relative economic prosperity and being able to spend your vacation (they would say your holidays) in places sunnier and warmer than Ireland are not enough on their own to provide a sufficient reason for living. Finally, there is what we might call the spiritual geography of Ireland. No one who travels the land and comes to know it can remain unaware of and unaffected by the hundreds, if not thousands of ancient Christian sites. Places like Kilmacduagh and Clonmacnois and Skellig Michael, the amazing monastic island off the coast of Kerry; places where, for centuries, male and female ascetics sought – as Pope Francis recently reminded the members of the Roman Curia – the “better part” (Lk 10:42), the *unum*

necessarium, that is, the contemplation and adoration of the Lord. That sense of the spiritual world, the unseen world of saints and angels, has always been an element of the Irish consciousness. It was expressed well by Maud Gonne, the Irish feminist and nationalist whom I mentioned earlier, and who is perhaps best known also for her extremely complicated relationship with William Butler Yeats. Reflecting on her conversion to the Catholic faith, she writes:

“I never doubted the existence of spiritual forces surrounding us, some friendly, some hostile, more completely blind to human needs, pursuing their own existence with the same disregard of us as the birds or the insects. I knew it was possible to break the dividing barrier which separates us from this world and once had been eager to do so in the hope of gaining power to further the cause to which I had devoted my life. Then I had realised the danger of playing with forces without sufficient knowledge, – danger to one’s own sanity and still more danger to those one loves and may be unable to protect. I looked on the Catholic Church as the repository of spiritual knowledge and sometimes I longed for its protection and guidance.

I believe every political movement on earth has its counterpart in the spirit world and the battles we fight here have perhaps been already fought out on another plane and great leaders draw their often unexplained power from this. I cannot conceive a material movement which has not a spiritual basis.

It was this that drew me so powerfully towards the Catholic Church...”
(Maud Gonne, *A Servant of the Queen* [University of Chicago Press Edition, 1995], 336).

Maud Gonne wrote those words in 1938. Her awareness of the spiritual dimension of reality was what brought her into the Catholic Church. Today, that awareness is still present among Irish people, although in our present time it may take various and even unusual forms.

So while it would certainly be very mistaken to suggest that there is in Ireland today any great nostalgia for the Catholic Ireland of the 1950's, there is a palpable desire in Irish people for an understanding of life which goes beyond the merely material and visible. There is a hunger and thirst to encounter the truth of our existence, a truth which liberates because it enlightens. Certainly, these are desires which exist in every human heart, but I do not think that I am mistaken if I suggest that in Ireland today there continues to be a singular awareness of the need for a vision of human life that goes beyond the merely material and physical.

And this recognition that there is a deep desire on the part of people in Ireland to rediscover the spiritual basis of human life leads me to reflect on the figure of Pope Francis, who, I am convinced, provides us with a way forward in this respect. While there are many ways in which we can understand the unique contribution of this Pope, I think that one relatively overlooked element in his teaching in these last two years provides us with a key to evangelization in today's Ireland. That key is the concept of freedom, so central to the thought of Pope Francis. In his programmatic document, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis reflects on the notion of freedom, and his insights are particularly relevant to the contemporary situation in Ireland. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, he focuses his attention on the *kerygma*, that is, on the initial announcement, proclamation or communication of the Christian message, and it is this: "Jesus Christ loves you; he gave his life to save you; and now he is living at your side every day to enlighten, strengthen and free you" (EG, 164). This is the heart of the Christian message. This is what people must hear, because it is the essence of the truth of Christianity. The Pope insists that the centrality of this message requires whoever seeks to communicate the truly good news of Christianity to stress "those elements which are most needed today" (EG, 165). The communication of the message must, in Pope Francis' words "express God's saving love which precedes any moral and religious obligation on our part; it should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom; it should be marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness and a harmonious balance which will not reduce preaching to a few doctrines which are at

times more philosophical than evangelical. All this demands on the part of the evangelizer certain attitudes which foster openness to the message: approachability, readiness for dialogue, patience, a warmth and welcome which is non-judgmental” (EG, 165).

Certainly, we see these qualities in Pope Francis – a warmth and a welcome which is non-judgmental – and it is these qualities which make him such an attractive figure to the world. But his fundamental point is this: Catholic faith is truly liberating, truly freeing. And freedom cannot be imposed. If it is, it is no longer freedom. It has become something else. The transmission of Catholic faith, he says, “has to express God’s saving love which precedes any moral and religious obligation on our part.” Of course, there are moral and religious obligations which Christians have. But these moral and religious obligations are the consequence of, and not the prerequisite for faith. In the end, the truth which liberates cannot be imposed; it needs to be freely received as the good news which it truly is. And this message of Pope Francis, basic as it is, has been extremely well-received in Ireland, where in the minds of many the truth of Catholic teaching has been associated with control and perhaps at times even coercion; where, in words quoted by Pope Francis himself in *Evangelii Gaudium*, the Church has been “perceived as promoting a particular prejudice and as interfering with individual freedom” (EG, 64).

This focus on the freedom of the follower of Christ is twofold: there is the freedom in which the essential message of the Church needs to be proposed to people in an inviting and attractive way, and there is freedom understood as the effect of the reception of that message in a person’s life, a freedom that gives joy. Indeed, the first two sentences of *Evangelii Gaudium* express the connection between joy and freedom: “The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness” (EG, 1).

But we would be guilty of misrepresenting Pope Francis' message regarding freedom were we to end the discussion simply by affirming the freedom with which the Christian message needs to be received. Pope Francis is also very clear on the fact that personal freedom cannot be an excuse for a self-centered, narcissistic superficiality. True personal freedom is found in God, the source of our very existence. The Pope writes: "Although it sounds obvious, spiritual accompaniment must lead others ever closer to God, in whom we attain true freedom. Some people think they are free if they can avoid God; they fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, homeless. They cease being pilgrims and become drifters, flitting around themselves and never getting anywhere. To accompany them would be counterproductive if it became a sort of therapy supporting their self-absorption and ceased to be a pilgrimage with Christ to the Father" (EG, 170). And perhaps this observation by the Pope is the counterpoint to the perception that the Church in the past has at times imposed, rather than proposed the truth of Christ. Pope Francis is very strong in warning us against making freedom, detached from God, some kind of absolute good. He cautions us constantly against self-absorption and self-centeredness, reminding us that we live in an age "when a new self-centered paganism is growing" (EG, 195). This is a very valid point for all of us in Western countries and Ireland is no exception to what the Pope is warning us about. There is a tendency, or rather a temptation, to want to create a society in which the spiritual values of the past are jettisoned, so that presumably men and women can be free to live lives of personal enjoyment and gratification. It is this phenomenon, so widespread in Western societies and certainly not absent from Ireland today, which leads Pope Francis to observe, as I quoted above, that: "Some people think they are free if they can avoid God; they fail to see that they remain existentially orphaned, helpless, homeless" (EG, 170). The problem of existential homelessness and emptiness is widespread in Western societies today, and it can be said that the richer the society, the more acute the problem (cf., EG, 52). Freedom understood as freedom from God does not create joy. Instead it leads one into an ever more narrow alley of self-absorption.

I mentioned earlier the influence of what we might call the *spiritual geography* of Ireland, the influence – even today – of an archipelago of holy places in Ireland. But, of course, holy places were made holy by holy people, and here Ireland has an almost unique antidote to the affliction of existential homelessness and emptiness which Pope Francis describes. That antidote is the living tradition of holiness, with its astonishing riches of fifteen hundred years of Irish sanctity, from Saint Patrick and Saint Brigid in the fifth century, to people like Matt Talbot, the Dublin-dwelling ascetic who died in 1925, or Edel Quinn, one of the original members of the Legion of Mary, who died as a lay missionary in Nairobi in 1944, people who, in the stunningly beautiful words of Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium*, show us that “we become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being” (EG, 8). This is the radiant witness to which authentic freedom ought to direct us, the beauty of holiness: “we become fully human when we become more than human, when we let God bring us beyond ourselves in order to attain the fullest truth of our being.” This formulation expresses the essence of Pope Francis’ idea of the essentially missionary character of the Christian life; we need to go out of ourselves, or better we need to allow God to bring us beyond ourselves to become fully human by becoming more than human.

This call by Pope Francis for a missionary transformation of the Church by “going forth” is a theme which resonates very deeply in the Irish spirit, which has sent missionaries all over the world for more than a thousand years. Pope Francis is indeed asking the Church herself to be missionary in the sense of going forth to present the face of Christ to the world, but he also conceives of this missionary dynamic in a more personal, existential sense as our individual “going forth” from our own areas of comfort and security whatever these may be. And here we see the particular relevance of Pope Francis’ summons for the Church in Ireland. As Archbishop Neary explained in his speech about Christendom and Christianity in Ireland, a society thoroughly Catholic in its cultural manifestations is a thing of the past in Ireland, but in a not so paradoxical way,

the disappearance of the societal supports and rewards for being a member of the Church may well usher in a new period in Ireland in which Catholics see themselves not primarily as representatives of an ambient homogenous Christian culture, but as something different, as people who have freely accepted the liberating gift of faith in Jesus Christ and his Church. The freedom of their decision to follow the Lord and to live their faith in him will be only the more evident because of the divergence that decision will entail with regard to the manner of life proposed by secular Western European societies today.

The transformation of Irish society in the last thirty years also means that in speaking about issues of public policy in Ireland today, questions like the right to life of all human beings or the reality of marriage as a unique relationship between one man and one woman or on important elements of economic justice, the contribution of Catholics today needs to be based in the first instance on what it means to be human. We should not allow ourselves to be caricatured as seeking to impose or re-impose some kind of sectarian Catholic religious law on the wider pluralistic society.

And so, perhaps this is the preeminent value of Pope Francis' message for the future of the Church in Ireland: to resist the temptation of looking back in nostalgia to a time of apparent security, and instead to be supremely confident that the truth of Christ, which as Pope Francis writes, sets us free from "sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness" – *Christianity as distinct from Christendom* – will continue to infuse the hearts of Irish people with courage, compassion and joy in following the Lord in our own time. I am convinced that this is the case, because I have seen it with my own eyes in the Ireland of today. And that makes me confident in saying that in spite of everything the history of the Catholic Church in Ireland continues and will continue into the future. *Thank you.*