

General Synod 2021: Presidential Address

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Brothers and sisters in Christ,

Well here we are again. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that we are not *here* again; here being wherever the General Synod was meant to meet. I'm afraid I'm losing track. However, at least this year I can come off the "not enthroned" list, and now can sit on the most comfortable seat in St Patrick's Cathedral, Armagh, with a clear conscience.

When we met as a General Synod online in December of last year, I believe very few of us thought that we'd be doing so again in 2021. But the Cassandra's were right. Covid-19 was not an aberration to be managed or got around. It has turned out to be a much longer term symptom or manifestation of a deep seated dislocation in our relationship with the created order and now also with one another as take baby steps on making physical human connections again.

If we were ever tempted to forget it, social distancing and the poverty of physical closeness has reminded us that to be human is to be with other people in close connection. To be human is to be in community. The sheer joy which I have encountered as people have been returning to Church worship has been wonderful to see, and was almost worth the wait.

Last year I had said that the response of Church of Ireland parishes and people to the very severe early lockdown had made me proud to be Church of Ireland. This year, the way people knuckled down for the longer haul has made me no less so. Our opening up will necessarily be gradual, and there may well be another winter in this virus, but what we have been doing has been sensible, painstaking and gradual.

In all that we have done to both keep people safe and also to continue to offer the unceasing worship of Almighty God we have been scrupulous in our planning at parish level. We owe an enormous debt of gratitude to all those in parishes who have donned the high viz vests, or the old clothes to steward,

clean, direct, cajole and encourage people who have returned to worship and to other parish functions. You have my heartfelt thanks.

We have worked as closely as we have been able with public health authorities in both jurisdictions as we have either had to close down or restrict in church worship, and now to cautiously open up again. I know that in both jurisdictions we are regarded by such authorities as responsive and responsible partners in the work we do.

The impression I have is that the partnership and liaison which was established between the Northern Ireland Executive, the public health agencies and the Churches was a little more systematic and regular and helped iron out the inevitable supplementary issues which inevitably arise. It may simply be a difference in polity and culture but I think it is worth raising the question if another look at how this sort of liaison is handled (this will not be the last public health crisis) in the Republic of Ireland might be helpful all round?

Regardless of what may happen in this regard, this has been a torrid time to be in government especially for the complex Coalition governments as we have on this island. No doubt there will be reviews and commissions and Inquiries to come, but I don't think there is any doubt that politicians have been subjected to unprecedented pressures and demands. They should be able to look to us in the Churches as encouragers and be completely assured of our prayers.

Relationships and reconciliation

I said last year that I was concerned about certain currents and developments in diplomacy and politics in and between these islands which had the potential to eat away at many of the gains, particularly in Northern Ireland, secured, for instance, by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, and agreements on Legacy. Those pressures remain and have, if anything intensified. And they will continue to do so as long as Northern Ireland is governed by policies which primarily respond to the needs of places other than Northern Ireland, wherever they may be. Indeed the whole of Ireland is beginning to be redolent of how it was in the seventeenth century, with the warring super-powers of Europe slugging it out for supremacy, but leaving behind social and political divisions which will be found difficult to heal.

Nowadays the weapons are not made of iron and steel but of bitter words and the manipulation of facts and emotions. Sometimes opposing sides can pull so hard at either end of the diplomatic rope that the knot becomes so tight that it is very difficult to untie. This matters to those whose primary

allegiance is to the God of Peace whose Apostle urges us to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace in this island we inhabit.

I hope the Synod won't mind, if at this point, and in the spirit of what I have just said, if I pay a public tribute to the late Pat Hume, who died at the beginning of this month. Her quiet, utterly unseen, steely, consistent and life long work for peace and good relationships on this island and between these islands was of incalculable value and I thank God for every remembrance of the work she did and the influence she had and, pass on our deepest sympathy and the assurance of our prayers to her family.

In public discourse on these islands we have been in danger of reverting to a situation where we look on someone with whom we disagree as (to borrow a phrase) "an Amalekite to be smitten hip and thigh". Strong feelings are inevitable, they well up in us. Strong and misleading words are not; we can control them and be careful with them. In God's creation words are ordered to truth. And the truth always ages well.

Above all, good Anglo-Irish relations matter more than ever before. It has not been unusual for me in episcopal ministry to have been in a parish in Northern Ireland in the morning praying for Her Majesty the Queen and in a parish in the Republic of Ireland in the afternoon praying for the President. Indeed it is one of the great privileges of ministering in an all-island Church to do so. But if it is to mean anything and have any integrity, then I must not just pray, but also *work* for the good of both places.

However, the Covid-19 pandemic has, I think broadened our horizons. It is a world-wide crisis; a global pandemic. And the Church of Jesus Christ is a world religion. "For God so loved the world..." gives some faint indication of the breadth and depth of His love.

We are now called as citizens, and as Christians to respond to the challenges of creating a new world based on a new set of relationships. Relationships matter. The path which Jesus Christ opened up for us to enter into a new relationship with his Father, and the implications that has for all other relationships.

Over eighteen hundred years ago a Christian writer summed it up this way:

For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines.

But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners.

As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers... They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives.

They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonoured, and yet in their very dishonour are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life... yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred. (Epistle to Dionetes)

Perhaps our relationships with one another in church are a good place to begin to reclaim that life. A life of simplicity and truth and forbearance which is a life of service in the places where we live. We are a family, and as I never tire of saying, families get their vigour and interest from where brothers and sisters differ from one another, rather than where they are similar.

Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic initiative

Which brings me to the little project which arose out a rather insensitive mis-step I made in my first year as a Primate, and which I mentioned in last year's Presidential Address. I said then that I had brought together clergy and readers from the Church of Ireland who came from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds, a rich ethnic diversity of perspectives and backgrounds which now make up our Church. That initial encounter with the group had been very positive although it was a little troubling to hear about how we had not drawn anything like deeply enough on the rich diversity of backgrounds in our Church. The meeting had also helped me to understand how difficult it can be to be a person of colour on this island and even, at times in our Church. As I said last year, it was a very joyful and encouraging encounter, but I felt that it would benefit all of us in living truly as the Catholic Church if the meeting was followed up on.

As a result I have commissioned a small piece of research to be carried out by a professional researcher who has a very strong track record of both research and activism in this area (and who also happens, by good fortune to be a member of this Synod) – Dr Lucy Michael of the Diocese of Dublin and Glendalough.

The research project has been designed in collaboration with the group of ethnically diverse clergy who have now met on a further occasion, and will, along with other strands, examine and make recommendations on how the Church of Ireland can become truly a place of welcome for those from every ethnic background, both lay and clergy, rather than be “stuck in the continuous loop of the visitor experience”. Already in their discussions the group have also highlighted the positive experience of giving and receiving, but there is much will to do if we are to be the place which not only includes, but also celebrates, the God-given difference of the Catholic Church which we stand on our hind legs and proclaim ourselves to be in the words of the ancient Creeds. Sunday by Sunday.

Inevitably any research project will require an element of questionnaire-based work and I would urge anyone who is asked to participate in this to respond with generosity.

Representation Bill

There is another piece of business which we will conduct today which will reflect, one way or another, on how we value each other, across the dioceses of this island. That is the General Synod Representation Bill. I won't say anything about its structure and substance, which will no doubt be

dealt with very well by the Proposer and Secunder of the Bill. However, I do want to congratulate those, particularly the Honorary Secretaries of the Standing Committee and the General Synod, for how the provisions of this Bill have been worked out.

And that was by a long process of consultation involving representatives from each diocese and also bringing the draft Bill back to the Standing Committee as the work progressed to ensure that there was consensus at every stage. It meant a lot of hard work for a lot of people and I know there must have been disappointment last year when we were nervous of presenting such a complex and comprehensive Bill at our first attempt at an online General Synod. Now that we are no longer baby zoomers, the Bill can be presented this year and I want to thank all those involved in the work.

Limerick and Tuam

There is another Bill and another set of circumstances which I'd like to mention in this Presidential Address. The Bill in question is intended to fill a gap in the Episcopal Electoral process which hadn't been anticipated last year in the legislation providing for the uniting of the Dioceses of Tuam, Killala and Achonry and Limerick and Killaloe.

This union will now take place on 1 November this year, and I know the Synod will join me in wishing the dioceses well in the months and years ahead as they work in the same spirit of mutual respect and cooperation which has characterised their journey so far. May God continue to prosper the work.

It also gives me an opportunity to thank two very highly valued episcopal colleagues, Bishop Patrick and Bishop Kenneth. I won't dilate now on the specifics of their contributions, but say only that they will leave an unparalleled gap in the House of Bishops. Unparalleled not only because of their irreplaceable gifts, but in the reduction of the number of bishops to a footballing eleven rather than an apostolic twelve. We will sort out our shirt numbering in due course, although I intend to remain in goal.

As this is their last General Synod I will wish Bishop Patrick and Bishop Kenneth a happy, long and fruitful retirement.

Centenary

As a Church with members throughout this island, we have a vocation to model how to maintain a sort of non-political unity in the face of those forces; of differences within the family. To give one example, this centenary year of the founding of Northern Ireland and of Saorstát Éireann had the potential to be divisive with differing interpretations of those momentous events becoming flashpoint for bitter words and a hardening of attitudes.

To some extent the restrictions required to control the spread of Covid-19 have blunted the edge of any extravagant commemoration of these events. Of course, that doesn't relieve us of the responsibility to reflect critically about them, and to do so within a particularly Christian frame of reference. And the foundational principle of that frame of reference for us is "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". In any case, as the late John Hume often said: "A country is its people."

It was for that reason that the Church Leaders Group (Ireland) tried to make a modest, although I think important contribution to the year in our St Patrick's Day Statement. In that Statement (and in broadcasts and other events since) we were able to acknowledge the shortcomings and failures of ourselves as churches but also point to the good things we had inherited in this prosperous part of the world. Let me quote something from that Statement:

"[Churches] have an opportunity, in marking these events from our past, to be intentional in creating spaces for encounter with those different from us, and those who may feel marginalised in the narratives that have shaped our community identity. That will require us to face difficult truths about failings in our own leadership in the work of peace and reconciliation. As Christian Churches we acknowledge and lament the times the times we failed to bring to a fearful society that message of the deeper connection that binds us, despite our different identities, as children of God, made in His image and likeness. We have often been captive churches: not captive to the Word of God, but to idols of state and nation ... Churches, alongside other civic leaders, have a role to play in providing spaces outside political structures that give expression to our interconnectedness and shared concern for the common good."

We were able to write and work together in this way because we had taken the time (and to some degree the pandemic had provided us *with* the Zoom time) to meet together and to share our stories and reflections. Although each of us undoubtedly has some sort of political leanings, we tried to consider these important historical events simply as disciples of Jesus Christ, who have been called to a particular form of leadership in the service of the Kingdom: our first and ultimate allegiance.

I don't want to exaggerate what we have been doing or what we have achieved. We were talking together and to a degree also working together; we weren't governing together, as we ask our political leaders from different traditions to do. Nevertheless it was an honest attempt to respect differences. And "respect" is the key. When you respect someone and they know that you are listening to their words without passing judgement on what you can't hear or see (the intentions and secrets of their hearts) then, over time, a genuine communion develops and the differences seem not to matter as much as the bond of peace.

Later in the year we will be holding a Service of Hope and Reflection, here in Armagh to allow a very wide range of people from north and south, young and old, and from different ethnic backgrounds to come together to reflect on the differing narratives of our shared history but multiple experiences of the partition of Ireland and the founding of the state of Northern Ireland. The preacher at that service will be the President of the Methodist Church in Ireland, Dr Sahr Yambasu, originally from Sierra Leone, and who will bring the fresh insights of "the new Ireland" to us.

Climate change

There is also an enormous task of reconciliation to be carried in our relationship with the created order. It is something which the generation represented at this General Synod (myself included) have given little enough thought to. Perhaps Churches in general have focussed so exclusively on Jesus Christ's work of redemption that we have almost completely forgotten God's work in creation and the gift it is to us.

We entered into a "goodly inheritance", none of it the fruit of our own labour or our own devising. And we have asset stripped that bequest and are in grave danger, indeed grave and imminent danger of having only trouble to hand on to our own grandchildren. It can no longer be seen as jumping on a bandwagon to say that our most urgent social task, as worshippers of the God who caused the earth to be and who breathed into the dust of the earth to give us life, is to face up to our responsibilities as individuals and as a Church.

In some ways we have made a good start as a Church, completing our divestment from the extraction of fossil fuels by the end of this year, therefore meeting its target date of 2022. This fulfils a commitment made in resolution of the General Synod in 2018, to the effect that the Representative Church Body (RCB) – the Church's central trustees – would "continue the positive work of

collaborative engagement, increasing investments in renewable investments and reducing exposure to fossil fuel producers, so that by 2022, companies where more than 10% of turnover is derived from fossil fuel extraction, will be excluded.”

The RCB’s Investment Committee will continue to monitor and review companies that appear not to be aligned with the long-term transition to a low-carbon economy and engage and/or divest as considered appropriate. The RCB is also a member of the Church Investors Group (CIG) and the Institutional Investors Group on Climate Change (IIGCC), which provide investors with a collaborative platform for engagement with public policy-makers and the exchange of expertise on climate change issues. It is also a founding signatory and supporter of the Climate Action 100+ initiative which engages with the world’s largest corporate greenhouse gas emitters with a view to curbing emissions, strengthening climate disclosures, and improving climate governance.

We may hear more about this in the debate on the Report of the Representative Body. It is very commendable and we should be proud of it and thank those, particularly in the Investment Committee who have worked very hard to achieve it.

But this is not the whole story. Far from it. Investments are one thing, and difficult enough to get right in this regard. The whole life of the Church, particularly in our parishes, where our main work and witness takes place is quite another. Not least if we are to be responsible ancestors, never mind have any credibility as the People of God with the younger generation, we will need to bake environmental sensitivity and action into our everyday life as a Church. To ensure that a carbon footprint assessment of our parish and personal activities is as natural too us as an Easter Vestry return and that we act on its results.

Last year I spoke about the challenge to governments and policy makers in giving priority to the intergenerational redistribution of resources to allow our younger people to feel confident about the future. That task has barely begun and, in my view at least, needs to be much more radical and we (the people in this Synod Hall and those like us) will need to be prepared to have less so that another generation may have something.

We cannot honestly challenge governments without also challenging ourselves. The Church of Ireland cannot solve the climate crisis. However, unless we take seriously how we can do what little we can to contribute to that solution, whether that’s making zero carbon a parish target (and asking young people to help us do so) or changing our personal life style, our credibility with another generation depends on our willingness to do so.

I know that the Church and Society Commission (CASC) are in the process of giving that effort some organising principles in tools in a conference being planned for the spring of next year, and I wish them well in that.

Safeguarding

One of the more disconcerting experiences of being Archbishop of Armagh, at least at the outset, is to receive many letters and emails from inside and beyond the Church which begin, “We wish to congratulate you on your appointment and welcome you as the Chair of ...”

One such email I received was in relation to the Safeguarding Board of the Church of Ireland, of which, even as a Bishop I’m ashamed to say, I had only the shallowest idea of its existence, never mind its work. Of course I was very well aware of the work of Safeguarding in dioceses and parishes. However, the Safeguarding Board is there to make sure we have a consistent approach and relevant policies regarding both children and young people and adults who may be vulnerable.

It was brought into existence, not because all organisations are under increasing scrutiny in this area, but because we have a vocation from God to care for children and those who are vulnerable at any stage in their lives. Apart from the input of a wide range of people within the Church of Ireland, and the professionalism of our Safeguarding Officers, the Safeguarding Board also includes a number of nominees from beyond the Church of Ireland, to help ensure that we are not simply satisfying ourselves about the policies and practices we are developing, but also having them subjected to a degree of external scrutiny. The contribution of people like Paul Stephenson of NSPCC and Barbara McDermott (recently retired from the Catholic Diocese of Down and Connor) and Gearoid Ó Maoilmhichíl of the GAA have been invaluable, and I would like thank them for their expertise, hard work and enthusiasm.

I would also direct you to the website which the Safeguarding Board has created which will give you a much better flavour of its work in helping the Church of Ireland to be a place of safety, warmth and openness for everyone who crosses our thresholds.

An Bíobla Naofa

Just before some concluding remarks, I would like to mention one other small piece of work which fell to my lot during the year. It may seem rather “niche” compared to global warming or

Safeguarding, but in a way it was one of the most heartwarming and positive little projects that I had the privilege of working on; co-writing, with Archbishop Eamon Martin an introduction to the latest edition of An Bíobla Naofa, the Irish language Bible. Although not a new translation, this edition provides the Bible in Irish in a size and format for personal, rather than liturgical use.

Given the controversies between the Christian traditions in Ireland on the subject the Irish language since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, it was a real joy to draft that short introduction with Archbishop Eamon and to see it on a printed page, beautifully translated into Irish by the rector of Killiney. The publication is the joint work of Cumann Gaelach na hEaglaise and Cumann Saggart and they are to be thanked and congratulated for this witness to the universality of the Gospel.

Conclusion

Behind all of what I have said (climate change, ethnic minorities, safeguarding, relationships) lies the deeper question of “What way do we want to live?” Here is an answer, but not *the* answer, from an unusual source, at least for a Northern Prod. In a subsequently much parodied and derided radio speech which he made on St Patrick’s Day, 1943, Eamon De Valera talked about the island he and his generation had dreamed of. It would be, he said:

“... the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who were satisfied with frugal comfort and devoted their leisure to the things of the spirit: a land whose countryside would be bright with cosy homesteads, whose fields and villages would be joyous with the sounds of industry, the romping of sturdy children the contest of athletic youths, the laughter of comely maidens; whose firesides would be the forums of the wisdom of serene old age. It would, in a word, be the home of a people living the life that God desires that men should live”

The language is dated and over-gendered, but in a more modern version, what is wrong with returning to a much simpler way of life in view of the spoliation of the earth’s resources and the exploitation of poor people in poor countries to keep us richly secure?

Is it not desirable that our happiness does not consist in the things we possess and consume, but in the durability of what we produce and of what makes us content?

Is there not a very immediate imperative to have homes and a way of building and exchanging them that doesn't distort the economy from top to bottom and strands a whole generation or more in a weird state of modern homelessness?

And who wouldn't want their children to be healthy and to be relieved of the persistent worry as to what will happen to them if they get sick or when they grow old?

To live in an integrated society of men and women, living at peace with themselves and their neighbours, and who have had their humanity deepened and not stunted by living the life that God desires.

Why, as a Church, would we not move heaven and earth to play our part in achieving these things?

ENDS