

Proposing Speech for the Bill at the Special General Synod

Saturday 5 March 2012

To begin with what this bill is not, I would want the synod to be very clear that the bill makes no decision as to future episcopal ministry in the diocese of Tuam, Killala and Achonry. Nor does the bill make any attempt to preclude the status quo in the future - that Tuam, Killala and Achonry would remain as a distinct bishopric on the same terms as it has been since the 1830s, with what we might describe as a full-time resident bishop to itself.

What the bill does seek to do is to give breathing space so that the whole Church of Ireland in collaboration with the Diocese of Tuam may think through what the best pattern of episcopal ministry might be for that part of the Church of Ireland in the future. Nothing is ruled in, and nothing is ruled out. A group would be set up by the Standing Committee, which would make suggestions to the General Synod of 2012, which would then make a decision on the matter.

I would be very sorry if the clergy and people of Tuam assume that there is within this bill a nefarious plan for their future. The order of the General Synod which requested the holding of this special synod – the archbishops and bishops – have not discussed (either formally or informally) what that future might be. Nor, I suspect, would there be a common mind if they were to discuss the matter. What is intended is that there will be a full discussion on how episcopal ministry might best be exercised in that part of Ireland and again, I emphasise, with very substantial input coming from those most affected, the clergy and people of Tuam, Killala and Achonry.

It may be asked why the whole matter is not one for the people of Tuam Killala and Achonry alone. It cannot be so, and should not be so. One is not made a bishop simply for a diocese. One is made a bishop also for the whole Church of God. It is for this reason that a diocese does not have the sole right of appointment of its bishop. Having said that, the views of the people of Tuam, Killala and Achonry are of the utmost importance in the exercise of thinking through how the ministry of a bishop would best be fulfilled in that area.

The Bishop of Derry and Raphoe, who is seconding this bill, has (as chair of the Commission on Ministry) far more knowledge of the thinking that is already being undertaken in Tuam diocese with regard to ministry (and episcopal ministry is certainly part of that total ministry of the Church) and I leave that part of our combined proposal to him.

My role is to ask this Synod simply to take a little time to think about how episcopal ministry can best be done in the west of Ireland. We are not proposing a long delay. The diocese would be well cared for, I have no doubt, over the next 14 months. And there is a precise precedent. The Diocese of Meath remained without its own bishop for almost three years in the 1970s (following the sudden death of Bishop Robert Pike), while the necessary synodical arrangements were made for its future in a union with Kildare Diocese (which had previously been united with Dublin and Glendalough). I find it hard to believe that anything is to be gained by not taking a brief period of time – a little over a year - to consider the issue, even if the end result were to be the same. And the end result might be the same. I for one will not lose a wink of sleep if the Church of Ireland, after proper and careful consideration over the coming months, were to decide that the status quo for Tuam should pertain.

I have no idea as to what might emerge from further consideration of the matter. However, it seems to me that there are at least three possibilities but there may well prove to be four, five or six. One possibility (as I have said) is that the present configuration continues – that Tuam, Killala and Achonry remains as a distinct bishopric with its own full-time bishop. Another possibility is that the diocese would remain as a separate diocese, but that the role of its bishop would be combined with another role within the diocese, possibly in charge of a parish with the assistance of a non-stipendiary priest. A third is that the diocese would be joined to another diocese, or to other dioceses if it were to be divided.

For what it's worth, my own personal opinion is that the third option – that the diocese would be united with a neighbouring diocese or dioceses – would not be in the best interests of anyone inside or outside the diocese, nor of the Church at large. If anything, I think that the second option - that the diocese remains with its present territory, but that the bishop might fulfill another role within the diocese - looks the most attractive. But this is not a decision for me and it is not a decision for this synod. There may (as I have said) be several other possibilities, so let us take a little time to think the matter through, calmly and respectfully and (I would hope) humbly seeking God's guidance as to what will best serve that diocese; there would be nothing lost, and there may much to be gained, in the eternal providence of God, for Tuam and for the Church of Ireland as a whole..