

An Exodus Vision

Author(s): Eugene Duffy

Source: *The Furrow*, Vol. 55, No. 9 (Sep., 2004), pp. 501-505

Published by: The Furrow

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27665012>

Accessed: 14-12-2018 12:10 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*The Furrow* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Furrow*

contemporary Irish Church. However I believe deeply that we have been brought here by the Spirit of God. We needed this purging. Had to face the blinding sun of our failures.

The one danger we face is the temptation to stay in the wilderness. To resign ourselves to have nothing to say to the world of today. To be privatized. To just do our own thing. To allow a new fundamentalism to slam shut the open windows of Vatican II. Or else to refuse to engage with new variations of the temptations. To accept that the Church echo the multinational business world, be more practical, businesslike, useful. Rather than a wild summons to justice and peace, to celebrate the divine in every living thing. To be a constant call, to itself and the world, to go beyond the limits of selfishness, profit. To risk all for the sake of All.

Meeting our class last night one felt a rare, deep joy. Laughter of the spirit. A group of people representing today's Ireland, the Americas, Africa, Asia and still saying 'Yes. Yes. I will. Yes.' Still blooming after all these years.

May the great Spirit of God who has led us to this desert time hold us, give us courage to find our way to the roads of tomorrow. Roads with victims needing shelter and healing in the ditches of our society: roads where strangers wait to be recognized in their dignity: roads that will sometimes lead to Calvarys, but also lead to a garden where the Risen One walks in his shroud. The desert become garden. And in both, Jesus Christ inviting us to the mystery of love.

### *An Exodus Vision*

---

Eugene Duffy

In an age of informality, proposing a formal toast is not something that one has to do very often. It is a matter of etiquette that needs to be checked out in advance. So, when I checked it out, I discovered that 'the toast is the medium through which such deep feelings as love, hope, high spirits and admiration can be quickly,

---

Eugene Duffy is a priest of the diocese of Achonry. He is Director of the Western Theological Institute, 16 University Road, Galway. This is the text of his toast to the Irish Hierarchy at the Maynooth Union Silver Jubilee Dinner on 15 June 2005.

conveniently and sincerely expressed'. When I have finished, you can judge for yourselves which of the criteria I have best fulfilled.

When we look back to our ordination day twenty-five years ago, it appears but a watch in the night. On the other hand, when we think of it in terms of what was going on in the wider world it seems like another age: Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister in Britain; Lord Mountbatten and Airey Neave were both killed by IRA bombs; the Shah of Iran was deposed and the Ayatollah Khomeini came to power; the Boom Town Rats were high in the charts; the Pope came to Ireland.

And of all of the diocesan bishops who were sitting here in June 1979, there is only one who is still *feliciter regnans*, the Bishop of Achonry, Tom Flynn. Later that year, Bishop Joe Duffy became bishop of Clogher. We congratulate him on the silver jubilee of his episcopacy.

Yes, 1979 and its headlines seem very far away now. It was another era and a very different Ireland. The Church and its hierarchy were still a very significant influence in Irish society. Sociologists could still deliver good news to the bishops: religious beliefs were strong; attendance at Mass was over 90% – the highest in Europe; all of the diocesan seminaries were functioning with healthy numbers; the religious congregations of men and women were still a strong presence. But all of that has changed dramatically, most rapidly in the past decade or so.

All of the seminaries, apart from Maynooth, have closed or no longer function as seminaries; clergy and religious are a fading presence in education and health care; divorce has been introduced and our abortion legislation is, to say the least, ambiguous, despite the best efforts of the bishops; a litany of scandals involving Church personnel – bishops, priests and religious – have been aired in the media, in documentaries and drama, all causing enormous pain and distress.

Nobody can deny that these past twenty-five years have been a most difficult time for those in leadership in the Church. Weaknesses and failures, of course! Pain and suffering for very many. But there have also been very significant developments that cannot be lost sight of amidst all the turmoil. The contribution of the bishops to the New Ireland Forum in 1984 helped to clarify and to charter a new relationship between Church and State in Ireland, one which allows the Church to pursue its mission in a freer and more prophetic mode.

Ecumenical relationships, despite occasional glitches, have been significantly improved, as witnessed by the presence of Archbishop Brady at the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland a few weeks ago. The quiet, steady work of the

bishops has contributed to the better political situation in Northern Ireland over recent years.

The Episcopal Conference has played an important role of advocacy for justice and fairness both at home and abroad. The work of Trócaire, the recent efforts on behalf of emigrants, the pastorals on social justice and the work of individual episcopal commissions bear ample testimony to the bishops' commitment to those most easily forgotten as we enjoy unprecedented prosperity.

The very building where we are now seated is just a symbol of so much that has improved in Ireland in the past twenty-five years. I still remember the drabness of this refectory on our first evening in the college, over thirty years ago. It seemed vast and inhospitable. That has changed, thankfully. Again, the refurbishment of the college buildings is a tribute to the work of the bishops and their fundraising endeavours on its behalf. And in this regard, too, the class of 1979 can salute the president, Monsignor Farrell, who began with us in September 1972.

Apart from the collective projects of the episcopal conference that have won admiration, I think it is fair to say, as can be said of the clergy generally in Ireland, at a local level they are held in high esteem. There is still a warm affection for the local bishop as he visits the parishes of his diocese in the course of his pastoral duties, despite media commentary that may create a different impression. Most dioceses around the country, under the leadership of the local bishop and with his support, are attempting to put in place pastoral plans that will address the needs of the Church over the coming years.

So much for the love and admiration!

What of the hope? One of the great temptations of the clerical culture is that it becomes locked in the past and runs scared of the future. A few years ago, a Church of Ireland canon, Maureen Ryan, had this to say:

We do not ache for development: we are afraid of it, for it takes great courage and imagination to appreciate that God is not only to be found in our past but is there in the future waiting for us to catch up.

We are certainly facing a very unfamiliar future, one that will demand of you, the hierarchy, genuine courage and imagination. Those priests who are golden jubilarians this year can take credit for having been the men who worked with the bishops in the past, guiding the Church in Ireland through the changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council. They were educated and trained for another kind of Church. After ten years into their ministry they had to take on board a renewed theology, a vernacular liturgy and a new pastoral style. They and their contemporaries have done a

## THE FURROW

great job. We salute them today, and among them Bishop James McLaughlin of Galway.

Think, too, of that younger generation who are here today: those celebrating five years of priesthood. It is their first Union function and our hope is that they will be as responsive to the demands of change as were today's golden and diamond jubilarians. They are the priests who will have to work with you, the bishops and your successors in shaping a Church that will be capable of adapting to the changes already pressing upon us.

SILVER JUBILEE, MAYNOOTH, 2024

So, for a moment let us project ourselves forward twenty years, to the year 2024. My hope would be that when those now five years ordained come back here in twenty years time the one proposing the toast to the hierarchy will be saying something like this.

- Over the past twenty years you and your predecessors have led us through a time of unprecedented change in the Church in Ireland. You faced the challenges of a growing secularization; the privatization of religion, the declining influence of the Church on the public life of the country. You worked closely with the other Churches and Christian communities in bearing witness to the vision and values of God's Kingdom.
- I hope that the speaker on that day will be complementing you for having tapped previously underused resources in the country: for having entered into dialogue with the thousands of people who had been studying theology over the years. He will note that you listened to their insights worked out not just in lecture halls but sharpened by their experiences of family life, by engagement with their local communities and by their participation in the workforce; you were not afraid to encourage local parishes to employ the best of them to ensure that Christian communities were supported in living the gospel with confidence.
- I hope that the speaker in 2024 will be saying that you saw the ageing profile and the rapidly declining numbers of clergy. You didn't panic. Rather, you worked consistently and patiently with your councils of priests and diocesan pastoral councils in addressing the situation. He will say that you worked with us and our communities, putting in place long-term plans that eased our anxieties and smoothed the transition from a very priest-centred Church to one that is now much richer in ministries and more collaborative in style.
- My hope goes further: I hope that will say that you modelled for us as hierarchy, a collaborative and participative style of leadership drawing the best from those leading and those being led. You supported us as we formed communities of communities,

where previously independent parishes vied and competed with one another with almost tribal mentalities.

- I hope that he will be saying that you have at times been demanding. You have enabled us to put in place systems of accountability, with which previous generations of priests did not have to contend. Your biannual reviews of the state of mission and ministry in our communities require that we keep abreast of best practice, that our theology is up to date, that our liturgies are carefully prepared and well celebrated, that we have the skills to animate the other ministries within our communities, that we have availed ourselves of the spiritual, intellectual and material resources that you have put in place for us to meet the challenges of the moment. Thank you for your high expectations of us priests, it shows your awareness of your genuine appreciation for our potential.
- Finally, I hope that he will be saying: yes, over the past twenty years you have shepherded us through a time of great transition, but you rose to the challenge and challenged us, too. Thanks to your efforts we now have a Church that is a source of pride for those who belong and a beacon of hope in a country once again finding fresh inspiration in its Christian heritage. Our churches are vibrant centres of prayer and worship for the greater part of our population; they are places of welcome and encouragement for all who find life trying or burdensome.  
That's the hope.

#### A NEW PLACE

My dream is not too fanciful, I hope. Back to the present. We need a vision. We need a sense of hope. The change will come not by upheaval but by a long, slow journey; by joining together and marching. We are in a time of exodus and we need an Exodus vision. There is a new future beckoning us. Like Israel of old, we might be tempted to despair. We might long for a misremembered past, an idealized Egypt that we have lost. The Israelites reached sight of the Promised Land by coaxing and persistence. Yet Moses, who led them, did not live to cross the Jordan with them. An old rabbi said, 'it is not given to you to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it'. Our hope is that you will live long and that you will summon the courage and confidence, and that you will lead us, your priests and people, to a new place, a renewed Church, once more confident and competent to shape our common future. Contemporary Ireland is waiting for no less.

Reverend Fathers, your glasses are filled, please rise and drink with me a toast to the Irish Hierarchy.