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A revolution in family life: the challenge for faith formation and family ministry in Ireland

The Republic of Ireland sits on the edge of Western Europe with a population of 4.76 million people.¹ This chapter explores the complex nature of family life in Ireland where approximately 84.2 per cent of the population are Catholic.² It profiles the revolutionary changes impacting on families over the last one hundred years and acknowledges that many of these changes, particularly in relation to the status of women, the welfare of children as well as overall levels of education, health and life expectancy, are positive. However there have also been changes which have challenged traditional

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¹ Central Statistics Office (CSO) 2016 Census Data, <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/pme/populationandmigrationestimatesapril2016/> (2016.11.04).

² CSO, 2011 Census Data.

family life and values. These include increased rates of cohabitation, same-sex marriage, lone parent families, marital break-down, as well as rising numbers of family units without children. Overall Ireland exhibits more complex and heterogeneous family structures than in previous generations. Indeed one might legitimately describe the changing structure and social and religious position of the family as having undergone unprecedented radical and momentous change. This chapter highlights the discontinuity between contemporary familial patterns in Ireland and those of the recent past. In so doing, it addresses the very real pressures and challenges facing families and asks how the Catholic Church relates to the needs of diverse families in contemporary Ireland and how families relate to the Church. Finally it explores the impact which changing religious practices and beliefs have on faith formation in families. It acknowledges that there are both considerable challenges and real opportunities facing the Catholic Church as it attempts to address the needs of families in Ireland and to live the Gospel in a manner that is relevant to 21st century life.

1. Then and now: family life in Ireland

Family is a fundamental cell of society. It is a defining feature of human life. For most people, family life, whether good or bad, shapes who they are as human beings. The Catholic Church supports and celebrates the family as “the original cell of social life”³ and recognises the centrality of family as the “school of [...] humanity.”⁴ *Amoris Laetitia* reminds us that “The Lord’s presence dwells in real and concrete families with all their daily troubles and struggles, joys and hopes.”⁵ Family is pivotal because it has the capacity to mould human beings and provide the initial space where humans learn

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 2207, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG-0015/_INDEX.HTM.

⁴ Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), 52, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁵ Post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* of the Holy Father Francis, 315, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia.html

what it is to live in community and how to engage in social interaction.⁶ There are a number of significant studies on family life in Ireland which provide insights into the complex and evolving nature of Irish families. While most of this research dates back to the middle of the twentieth century, it is noteworthy that a recent and highly significant government-funded *Growing up in Ireland* national longitudinal study of 20,000 children, provides a data-rich glimpse into family life through its exploration of children's lives and their development in Ireland's current economic, cultural and social climate.⁷ This study states, "The family is the primary social system involved in a young child's development and, within families, the parents have a pivotal role in influencing the nature and quality of their children's lives."⁸ It is important to acknowledge that not all family structures involve children, and while understandings of what constitutes a family as well as patterns of family life have changed radically over the centuries, in Irish culture family is of enduring and crucial importance.

2. Language and terminology

There are many words in the Gaelic language for family. These include *an chlann* which signifies one's children and descendants, or *teaghlach* representing those who share one's household or immediate family as well as *muintir* meaning one's people or extended family. Old Gaelic wisdom sayings about family life abound. These include *Mol an óige agus tiocfaidh sí* or "Praise the young and they will flourish;" or *Nil aon tinteáin mare*

⁶ Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) recognises the family as the fundamental group unit of society which is entitled to protection by the state and society.

⁷ The best-known studies that deal with the family in rural Ireland are Arensberg and Kimball, 1940/1968; McNabb, 1964; Humphreys, 1966; Hannan and Katsiaouni, 1977; Hannan, 1979; and Kennedy 2001. For a recent general overview of the family in twentieth century Ireland, see: J. Williams, S. Greene, et al., *Growing up in Ireland: national longitudinal study*, Dublin 2009. This is the largest and most complex national study that has ever been undertaken in Ireland. It has tracked the development of two groups of children (approximately 11,100 infants and 8,500 nine-year olds). The study aims to "examine the factors which contribute to or undermine the wellbeing of children in contemporary Irish families, and, through this, contribute to the setting of effective and responsive policies relating to children and to the design of services for children and their families."

⁸ *Growing up in Ireland...*, p. 24.

do thinteán féin meaning there is no fireside like your own fireside; or *An mháthair leis an mac agus an iníon leis an athair* suggesting the mother identifies with her son and the father with his daughter. The rich complexity of meanings of the words for family in Gaelic is also evident in the English language. The English word family, derived from the Latin *familia*, was originally a broad term which signified members of a common household and included workers as well as buildings. By the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, the English word “family” came to signify a network of relationships among household members connected by consanguinity (e.g. mothers and sons) or marital affinity (e.g. husbands and wives) as well as those who resided in the same household.

3. Family in the Irish Free State and Constitution

Since the founding of the Free State in 1922, the family has been accorded powerful religious, social and legal status in Ireland. A classical study of Irish family life by the anthropologists Conrad Arensberg and Solon Kimball portrayed rural Irish family life in the early 1930s as predominantly hierarchical and patriarchal.⁹ In the early part of the 20th century arranged marriages, close networks of neighbours and a gender-based division of labour were not uncommon. The Irish Constitution, first adopted in 1937, guaranteed to protect the family from anything that might threaten it, since the family is “the necessary basis of social order” and “indispensable to the welfare of the Nation and the State.”¹⁰

For much of the twentieth century, family life was overwhelmingly “traditional” and usually consisted of heterosexual married parents with biological children. Families tended to be large and in 1962, 2,000 mothers had 10 or more children whereas by 1998, this figure declined to 55. Even in 1971, over 15,000 families in Ireland had six or more children.¹¹ Large numbers of children in families were a defining feature of family life in Ireland for

⁹ C. Arensberg, S. T. Kimball, *Family and community in Ireland*, Ennis 2001.

¹⁰ *Constitution of Ireland – Bunreacht na hÉireann*, article 41, Dublin 2004.

¹¹ A. Quinlan, *What’s Ireland’s big problem with big families?*, “The Independent”, 20 August 2015, <http://www.independent.ie/life/family/family-features/whats-irelands-big-problem-with-big-families-31464328.html> Accessed November 1 (01.11.2016).

much of the twentieth century. For every 10 first born children in families in 1960 there were over 15 children born as the fifth or more child in Irish families. “Children were born into families where having many siblings was common: it was understood that it was part of the responsibility of older children to take care of the younger ones. Women were increasingly attending hospital to give birth but home births with the assistance of local women were still widespread. Family and neighbours welcomed new-borns with gifts of knitted garments. The giving of a silver coin was believed to ensure that the baby would not endure poverty and would reach old age. Religious badges and medals were pinned around the pram and the cradle to protect the child. The ultimate protection of the Christening was usually within a week or so of the birth and unlike today most mothers did not attend as there was a ceremony called Churching which had to be undertaken before they were permitted to attend religious ceremonies.”¹²

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, families in Ireland tended to exhibit traditional gender roles. Women’s roles tended to focus on home-making and child rearing whereas men’s roles focused generally on working to provide financial security for the family. Child-rearing and house work was overwhelmingly considered to be a female activity. In an address to the Irish people on national radio on Saint Patrick’s Day in 1943, the then Taoiseach or Government leader, Éamon De Valera, presented an idealised version of life and families in Ireland. “The ideal Ireland that we would have, the Ireland that we dreamed of, would be the home of a people who valued material wealth only as a basis for right living, of a people who, satisfied with frugal comfort, 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, with the romping of sturdy children, the contest of athletic youths and the laughter of happy maidens, whose firesides would be forums for the wisdom of serene old age. The home, in short, of a people living the life that God desires that men should live.”¹³

¹² C. Doyle, *Rural childhood in the 1950s. A trip down memory lane*, http://www.ouririshheritage.org/page_id__46.aspx (01.11.2016).

¹³ E. de Valera, *On language and the Irish nation* Radio address on Radió Éireann, March 17th, 1943, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-icDyDHI29g> (01.11.2016); T. Fahey, C. A. Field, *Families in Ireland: an analysis of patterns and trends*, Dublin 2008, p. 15, <http://www.lenus>.

From the vantage point of the 21st century, De Valera's 1943 vision is notable for its idealised and imaginary representation of family life in Ireland as a rural and spiritual utopia which masked the reality of economic hardship and mass emigration at the time. In the 1930s as a consequence of a crippled Irish economy, Ireland due to economic war with Britain and rising emigration had a very high incidence of non-marriage. In the 1930s and 40s many people postponed marriage and married late in life or indeed did not marry at all. One in two people in the 30–34 age group were single and over one in four of those aged between 50–54 were unmarried in the 1930s.¹⁴ Family life was difficult and Adrian Redmond presents a counter narrative to De Valera's idealised 1943 vision. Speaking about conditions in 1949, Redmond provides a general profile of life in post-war Ireland: "The risk of death from tuberculosis and other infectious diseases was high. Very few people had telephones or cars. The radio was widespread, though the television had yet to be seen. Society was, by current standards, very conservative. Censorship was severe – George Orwell's *1984* was banned in 1949. There was little cohabitation, and births outside marriage were rare. Women, when they married, usually ceased working outside the home. We were still a mainly rural society: only two-fifths of the population lived in towns of over 1,500."¹⁵

In 1841 Ireland's population stood at 6.5 million. However the Great Famine (1846–1847) killed an estimated one million people and engendered subsequent waves of emigration. By 1901 Ireland's population had halved to just over three million people. Relative to other European countries from the 1950s onwards, Ireland's level of fertility was consistently high.¹⁶ For much of the twentieth century giving birth to a child outside marriage incurred a huge social stigma and condemnation from the Catholic Church, the state and society. An unmarried mother was often committed to asylums as a "woman who had children outside of wedlock or who was presumed to be promiscuous became classed as a prostitute, a seductress or deceitful."¹⁷

ie/hse/bitstream/10147/234297/1/Families+in+Ireland+-+An+Analysis+of+Patterns+and+Trends.pdf (30.11.2016).

¹⁴ <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj91/horgan.htm> (01.11.2016).

¹⁵ *That was then, this is now. Change in Ireland 1949–1999*, ed. A. Redmond, Dublin 2000.

¹⁶ T. Fahey, H. Russell, *Family formation in Ireland: trends, data, needs and implications*, Dublin 2002.

¹⁷ A. M. Graham, *Unmarried mothers: the legislative context in Ireland 1921–1979*, [MLitt thesis for National University of Ireland Maynooth], Ireland 2012.

4. Contemporary family life in Ireland

Families are in a period of rapid transition with a plurality of family types and what might be termed the dissolution of traditional Catholic family structures and values. The traditional Roman Catholic emphasis on children being born and raised in married family structures has been weakened by a variety of factors including urbanization, secularization, the increasing social acceptability of cohabitation, the legalization of divorce in 1997 and greater emphasis on personal freedom and the right to self-determination in a highly educated society. The wide availability of artificial family planning meant that birth rates fell dramatically and very large families are no longer common. For every 10 firstborn children in families in 2005, only one child was born as the fifth or later child so that now very large families are notable and rare.¹⁸ The advent of divorce in 1997 was not as important a turning point as might have been expected, at least in the short-term. It did not give rise to a flood of divorce applications, nor was there a dramatic shift towards divorce as a way of resolving broken marriages.¹⁹ While marriage breakdown has devastating personal consequences on all family members, in his book *Men in crisis* the psychiatrist Anthony Clare focused particularly on men who often end up leaving the family home. It is interesting to note that Ireland has the third lowest divorce rate in the world and the lowest in Europe with just under 10% of marriages ending in separation or divorce.²⁰

If we take as our starting point a definition of family as a unit involving two heterosexual first-time married adults in a monogamous relationship, with children who are the biological off-spring of both of them (consanguinity), then many families in Ireland do not conform to this reality. Marriage is no longer seen as the exclusive gateway to family life and rearing children. In the last twenty years the family based on marriage is the least popular family type in Ireland. By the age of twenty five people in Ireland are twice as likely to cohabit as to be married although for many cohabitation is a prelude to eventual marriage. “A decline in marriage rates among young adults has been off-set to some degree by a rise in cohabitation. In general, however,

¹⁸ A. Dunne, T. Fahey et. al., *A social portrait of children in Ireland*, Dublin 2007, p. 15.

¹⁹ T. Fahey, C. A. Field, *Families in Ireland...*, p. 28.

²⁰ K. Holmquist, *Divorce, Irish style*, “The Irish Times”, 9 February 2016, <http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/divorce-irish-style-1.2068656> (30.11.2016).

cohabitation is more often either a transient arrangement that dissolves or a stage on the road to marriage rather than a long-term alternative to marriage. At the same time the divorce rate in Ireland today is low by international standards.²¹

In Ireland in all social and age groups, the birth of a baby among cohabiting couples increases their likelihood of getting married. Indeed in contemporary Ireland more people are getting married than in previous generations. While the general rate of marriage increased by ten percent between 2006 and 2011, the average age at which people get married has also increased. On average a man gets married at 34 years while for a woman it is 32 years.²² This can be explained by people spending longer in full-time education, their desire to travel before they settle down, the social acceptability of cohabitation, high costs of housing and the considerable financial cost of getting married.

Two out of three couples who cohabit do not have children. One third of families involve couples who are not in a first marriage relationship. Indeed one out of every eight people in Ireland lives in a one-parent family and the vast majority of these families are headed by mothers. Only 13.5% of one-parent families is headed by a father.²³ It is noteworthy that lone parent families have the lowest disposable income out of all households in Ireland and many experience economic and social hardship.²⁴ When it comes to offspring, one in four of all children under twenty one years of age live in a non-traditional family.²⁵

5. Diversity in families

Families in Ireland are characterized by increasing diversity of belief, ethnicity and nationality. It is interesting to note that there are more couples with

²¹ T. Fahey, C. A. Field, *Families in Ireland...*, p. 5.

²² CSO, *Marriages and civil partnerships 2012*, <http://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/mcp/marriagesandcivilpartnerships2012/> (04.06.2016).

²³ CSO, *This is Ireland part 1: highlights from census 2011*, Dublin 2011.

²⁴ Irish Social Science Data Archive, *Survey of income and living statistics EU-SILC 2010*, <https://www.ucd.ie/issda/data/eusurveyofincomeandlivingconditionseu-silc/> (03.10.2016).

²⁵ Cf. P. Lunn, T. Fahey, *Households and family structures in Ireland: a detailed statistical analysis of census 2006*, Dublin 2011, <https://www.esri.ie/pubs/BKMNEXT202.pdf> (30.11.2016).

different religious affiliations in Ireland than couples with different ethnicities or nationalities. Almost one in four couples aged less than thirty years is made up of one partner of non-Irish nationality or of non-white ethnicity. Ireland's population is growing rapidly and despite the steady decline in family size, Ireland has the highest birth rate of 27 European Union countries (fertility rate of 15.6 per 1,000 of the population).²⁶ The 2013 Central Statistics Office (CSO) figures show that 36.5% of all births in Ireland were registered outside of marriage. This number varies regionally and in the South West, Limerick City has the highest rate of 53%. Now Ireland is not unique in recording the rise of births outside of marriage. For example its close neighbours England and Wales have also witnessed a dramatic change in family structures where the nuclear family has become "a museum piece."²⁷ In 1979 11% of children in England and Wales were born outside of marriage. This rose to 25% in 1988 and it is estimated to reach over 50% in 2016. The Centre for the Modern Family in the United Kingdom states that four out of five people do not describe their family as traditional, i.e. a heterosexual married couple in a first marriage where both adults are the biological parents of children. Indeed for the first time since the census was founded in England and Wales in 1801, married couples are in a minority. Currently around 11 million people in England and Wales have chosen not to marry.²⁸ This appears to be a growing trend and the Marriage Foundation predicts that 47% of women and 48% of men in the United Kingdom aged twenty years old will never marry.

6. A revolution in family life

Family life is changing so rapidly in Ireland that people often speak of a "revolution" taking place. Indeed in 2008, in an attempt to profile and respond to the extraordinary changes impacting on families, a conference explored the theme of "Family Life Today: The Greatest Revolution?" It is unsurprising that when compared with the preceding hundred years, changes impacting on contemporary family life are in many senses revolutionary. In the past

²⁶ EU average = 10.4, see: Cf. P. Lunn, T. Fahey, *Households and family structures in Ireland...*, p. 77ff.

²⁷ H. Wallop, *Death of the traditional family*, "The Telegraph", 15 April 2009.

²⁸ J. Bingham, *Britain's married minority*, "The Telegraph", 12 October 2013.

Ireland's population was mostly rural and largely uneducated whereas Ireland's contemporary population is largely urban, highly educated and the status of women has changed almost beyond recognition. In contemporary Ireland there is a move away from the more traditional cohabitation of multi-generational family members in the one family home. More and more people are living in cities in smaller family units. As a democratic multi-belief society, Ireland's electorate has voted for two female Presidents and its Dáil or Parliament is home to a relatively small but growing number of elected female members. The status of women in society has improved dramatically. Many of the changes impacting on family life have been positive. It seems incredible that before the Succession Act of 1965 one spouse was legally entitled to exclude the other from benefiting from his or her estate. Since men owned the majority of property in Ireland at this time, women were often in an insecure legal position and a husband could disinherit his wife in favour of another person. Furthermore before 1976 a husband could sell the family home without the knowledge or consent of his wife. It is sobering to note that rape within marriage was only recognized as a crime in Ireland in 1990.

Education is highly prized in Ireland and over one million people (over 20%) are involved in full-time education. Interestingly, more than 50% of Irish women in the 25 to 35 age group have a third level qualification and are more highly educated than men.²⁹ Furthermore, the legal and social status of children in families has changed. Irish society is child-friendly and there is a growing respect for children's place in society and in the family. The old adage that "children should be seen and not heard" is totally at odds with the 2012 amendment to the Irish Constitution which ensured that children were recognised as autonomous right holders. Furthermore, a Children's Ombudsman was appointed to promote the rights and welfare of children.

Overall one can say that contemporary Irish families are heterogeneous, dynamic and complex. Indeed the understanding of what constitutes a family and a marriage in Ireland has undergone radical redefinition. Marriage is no longer a legal institution available only to heterosexual couples. In the United Kingdom same-sex marriages became legal on March 29, 2014. In

²⁹ Cf. CSO, press release *Women and men in Ireland 2013*, <http://www.cso.ie/en/newsand-events/pressreleases/2014pressreleases/pressreleasewomenandmeninireland2013/> (30.11.2016).

May 2015 a referendum was passed in Ireland which changed the constitution to enable same sex couples to marry in Ireland.

7. Family life and the Catholic Church

The nature, status and condition of family life have never been a matter of indifference to the Catholic Church. As the first sentence of *Amoris Laetitia* proclaims “The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church.” One might argue that the converse of this is equally true. Anything that impedes and undermines the flourishing of human families is of grave concern to the Church. Pope Francis placed the family at the heart of his ministry. Yet, the Church’s concern for the family is neither a new departure in Catholic theology nor a recent phenomenon.

Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew scripture, introduces readers to the sacred narrative of the first symbolic human couple, Adam and Eve. Their story locates them in the paradise of God’s profound love for them and their reciprocal love. However, through their own greed and desire for power they rupture this relationship. The story of the first human couple introduces the theme of divine and sublime love as well as the vicissitudes and challenges of family relationships (Gen 3). The narrative of the Hebrew and Christian scriptures is a narrative of “families, births, love stories and family crises.”³⁰ In the ancient world, parents fretted over the welfare of their children much as they do today. In second century BC the scribe Ben Sira ruminates over whether he will be able to get a good husband for his daughter (Sir 25:12–26:18). The Decalogue reinforces an understanding of the family involving husband, wife and children as the basic unit of society and the covenant partners with God (Ex 20; Deut 5). Parents should be honoured and wives and husbands should not commit adultery. Children are seen as a precious gift from the Lord (Ps 127:3) and a wife of noble character is worth more than rubies (Prov 31:10). Husbands are called to live joyfully with their wives (Eccl 9:9). In ancient Rome, family was often a socially mixed grouping that might include freedwomen, slaves, freedmen, wealthy aristocrats, and everyone else who lived and worked together in the one residence. In the

³⁰ *Amoris Laetitia* 8.

early Church, Christians had a distinct set of values that was different to the practices of the people in the surrounding Roman Empire. The Gospel of Matthew affirms the value of marriage and forbids divorce (Mk 10:2–12; Mt 19:1–9). Jesus was immersed in the life of his own family and in the families around him. He did not have unrealistic or naively positive visions of family life. He gave real support to people in times of crisis. “Jesus visited homes, listened to the concerns of parents and responded to the needs of family members. Jesus knows the anxieties and tensions experienced by families and he weaves them into his parables; children who leave home and seek adventure (cf. Lk 15:11–32), or who prove troublesome (Mt 21:28–31) or fall prey to violence (Mk 12:1–9). He is also sensitive to the embarrassment caused by the lack of wine at a wedding feast (Jn 2:1–10), the failure of guests to come to a banquet (Mt 22:10), and the anxiety of a poor family over the loss of a coin (Lk 15:8–10).”³¹

At a time when children’s status was low, Jesus’ attitude to children was countercultural. He showed that they were not to be barely tolerated, or treated as marginal and rendered invisible. Rather he proclaimed that they were to be welcomed as models of faith and humility for the kingdom belongs to them (Lk 18:15–17; Mt 19:13–14; Mk 10:13–16.). The New Testament abounds with a range of references to husbands, wives, children and marriage (Eph 5:21–6:8; Col 3:18–4:1; 1 Tm 2:8–15; Pt 2:18–3:7). Early Christians were called to abstain from divorce and not to engage in infanticide or abortion (1 Cor 7:10–11; Didache 2.2; 5.2). As God is love (1 Jn 4:8), the self-giving love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit becomes the blueprint for all human relationships which sustains family life (1 Cor 13).

8. The Synod on the Family

The Vatican’s Extraordinary Synod on the Family (2014), followed by the Ordinary Synod on the Family (2015), focused on “the vocation and mission of the family in the Church and the modern world.” Both Synods built upon key concerns with the family which run through Catholic theology and social teaching. Indeed Saint John Paul II stated that he wished to be known as the

³¹ *Amoris Laetitia* 21.

pope of the family. His writings testify that the family is a sign of Christ's presence in the world and his theology of marriage and family life in *Original unity of man and woman* (1981), *Familiaris Consortio* (1981) and *Letter to families* (1994) presents a rich theology of the body and of the evangelizing mission of the family. When Saint John Paul II visited Ireland in 1979 he spoke on the theme of the family. He emphasised that "To hand on to your children the faith you received from your parents is your first duty and your greatest privilege as parents. The home should be the first school of religion, as it must be the first school of prayer."³² Inspired by this, just months after this papal visit, the Irish bishops wrote a pastoral letter on the family where they described the family home as "the first Church where children know, and in which they are reminded of God and helped to pray by what they see around them. Religion begins at home."³³

9. Pastoral and theological supports for the family in Ireland

The Church in Ireland is engaged in a serious attempt to address the needs of diverse types of families and to present meaningful social, practical and spiritual supports to them. There are many positive changes occurring in Ireland relating to family ministry. There is excitement that families all over the world will come to Ireland for the 2018 World Meeting of Families taking place in Dublin.³⁴ Although on a small scale, a recent initiative involves the introduction of Cana Retreat Week to married couples in Ireland "to strengthen their marriage and deepen their spiritual life. It includes talks, prayer, time together as a couple, relaxation and times of celebration as well as activities for children."³⁵ At a structural and organisational level, the Episcopal

³² John Paul II, Homily in Limerick, 1 October 1979, https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/1979/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19791001_irlanda-limerick.html (13.10.2016).

³³ Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Handing on faith in the home*. Pastoral letter for St Patrick's Day 17 March 1980, <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/1980/03/17/handing-on-the-faith-in-the-home/>.

³⁴ World Meeting of Families, Dublin, Ireland 22–26 August, 2018 on the theme "The Gospel of the Family: Joy for the World", <http://www.worldmeeting2018.ie/> (13.10.2016).

³⁵ Irish "Cana week" for families was held in the Esker Retreat Centre in Athenry, County Galway, see: <http://www.irishcatholic.ie/article/couples-offered-spiritual-retreat-whole-family> (13.10.2016).

Commission for Pastoral Care oversees the Council for Marriage and the Family in Ireland.³⁶ The Council for Marriage and the Family assists the Bishops' Conference to respond to contemporary issues relating to marriage and family life. In a recent initiative, it produced *The Family Prayer Book* to support the faith life of families.³⁷ "Accord" is the Catholic marriage care service which supports couples getting married in the Catholic Church. It also provides inter-Church marriage preparation as well as marriage and relationship counselling to couples.³⁸ CURA is the crisis pregnancy agency of the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference. It is a voluntary service which offers confidential non-directive counselling and support to anyone facing a crisis pregnancy.³⁹

The recent founding of I-Catholic,⁴⁰ an internet television channel designed to publicise Catholic teaching and respond to topical issues, has generated a host of programmes on current theological and pastoral topics of interest to families. Furthermore, there are numerous websites and on-line resources designed to support Catholic parents in their task of faith formation. The *Jesse Box* is another new Irish-generated pastoral resource for families that aims to facilitate inter-generational faith transmission in families. It provides a physical toolkit in the form of a story telling box which comes with printable and downloadable resources based on key biblical stories. This enables the family to explore biblical stories with children in a kinaesthetic manner.⁴¹

Other initiatives include the Family Caring Trust in Newry which has developed a range of programmes for parents entitled *From pram to primary school* (age 0–5) and *What can a parent do?* (age 5–15) and *What can the parent of a teenager do?* The ideas behind these programmes is that parents come to these to learn skills of negotiation, supporting homework, diet and faith development as part of overall parenting skills. This very practical initiative has developed from the bottom up, and attempts to support non-traditional families in the act of good parenting.

³⁶ <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/family/> (13.10.2016).

³⁷ Irish Episcopal Conference Council for Marriage and Family, *The Family Prayer Book*, Dublin 2012.

³⁸ <http://www.accord.ie/services/marriage-preparation> (02.11.2016).

³⁹ <http://www.catholicbishops.ie/cura/> (02.11.2016).

⁴⁰ <http://www.icatholic.ie/> (13.10.2016).

⁴¹ <http://thejessebox.com/> (01.11.2016).

Another recent development in Ireland has been the founding and mission of The Iona Institute. It promotes “the place of marriage and religion in society” while stating that “all children deserve the love of their own mother and father whenever possible... We also promote freedom of conscience and religion.”⁴² Through these and other initiatives there is undoubtedly an air of energy and urgency about the need to support and represent Catholic families in the media and in public debates in Ireland.

10. Major challenges ahead

To state that there is no crisis in responding to the complex needs of diverse types of families in Ireland would be to grossly misconstrue the situation. There are whole cohorts of people in families who have little or no contact with the Church. One could say that the Church is not utilising adequately social media to connect with teenagers and young people. Sometimes divorced or lone parent families feel ignored or conspicuous and unwanted in the Church. Those in same-sex relationships sometimes say that the Church is not adequately ministering to their family’s spiritual needs with love and compassion. When surveying family faith formation in Ireland, it is striking that while everyone is agreed on the rhetoric of cradle to grave catechesis, there is a lack of vision and an insufficient investment of time, energy and resources in the faith development of families. In the Irish context, the main focus of faith formation has primarily been placed on the school and the parish to the neglect of adult faith formation and family pastoral care in the home. The reality is that once children become adults and step outside the school sphere, there is a noticeable lack of Irish-generated resources and support for their continued pastoral and faith development in family life. Frequently parishes do not provide whole family catechesis and the needs of diverse family groups such as lone parent families and divorced family members may not be addressed. While the home-school-parish model of catechesis which suffuses the National Catechetical Programme in primary schools is undoubtedly worthwhile, in reality parents are often unfamiliar

⁴² <http://www.ionainstitute.ie/> (24.10.2016).

with the programme and Church leaders tends to speak a religious language which people do not understand.

The enormous challenge which faces the Catholic Church in Ireland and all over the world is to address the needs of changing family structures and to preach and live the Gospel in a manner that is relevant to 21st century family life. Indeed Thomas Groome says that the challenges of handing on faith in contemporary family life are “unprecedented.”⁴³ Groome suggests that the difficulty for families is compounded because contemporary Western society does not encourage faith. Indeed the post-modern emphasis on individual choice, the rejection of authority and the replacement of traditional metanarratives places Catholic teaching in a framework where it appears irrelevant or unappealing and outdated to many people. In this context, religion is out of sync with more individualised and randomised world views and more “attractive” but less demanding alternatives to faith.

For many, the Catholic understanding of marriage characterised by exclusivity, indissolubility and openness to life seems totally at odds with neo-liberal understandings of the individual’s right to self-determination and individualised morality. Put simply, many people in Western society cannot see the point of belief in God in a world characterised by what Charles Taylor describes as “exclusive humanism.” Even in elementary school young children ask “Where is the evidence for God? Why would anyone live a religious life? What is the point?” Religious worldview and language and ritual makes little or no sense to many. In a more secular age, the theological language used to talk about family seems disconnected from many people’s lived experience of family life. The Church appears to be disconnected from a variety of types of family in society as well as from contemporary culture. In a world where the language of the economy or technology makes ultimate sense, people ask “Why would I bother with God or religion in my family life? What can it offer me?”

11. Boom and bust: Pressures on family life

Ireland’s economy has just gone through a financial boom in a period of unprecedented expansion and affluence in the early noughties followed by

⁴³ T. Groome, *Will there be faith? Depends on every Christian*, Dublin 2012.

a spectacular bust since 2007. In the post-Celtic Tiger era, many families struggled to survive the collapse of the Irish property market, rising unemployment, dependence on social welfare and negative equity on properties bought during the economic boom. Unemployment rates “increased from 4.6 per cent in 2006 to 15 per cent in 2012, with youth unemployment rate increasing from 9.9 per cent to 33 per cent.”⁴⁴ During these difficult recessionary times, ten per cent of young people emigrated. Families were fragmented as parents increasingly lived and worked abroad in an attempt to pay for the education of their children and keep up repayments on their family homes. In the popular imagination, this economic crisis with its attending hardships including bankruptcy, business failure, unemployment, enforced emigration and repossession of homes was inextricably linked to Ireland’s high suicide rates. Ireland has the fourth highest rate of youth suicide in Europe. However when one examines that data, it is interesting to note that suicide rates peaked during the years of economic boom and the data shows that there is no clear cut link between the recessionary economy and rising suicide rates. The number of suicides reported in Ireland has risen enormously over the decades from when just 76 deaths were recorded in 1950 to a peak of 554 in 2011. These stark figures hide an enormous societal shift during which suicide itself was decriminalised in 1993 and some of the stigma of talking about it was removed.⁴⁵ The Church has not been silent on these issues and many Church-based charities provide vital front-line support and practical assistance to those who are homeless, bereaved, suicidal, disabled, in prison, old and impoverished etc.⁴⁶

In Ireland’s market-driven economy, as the cost of housing increased, a great financial burden was placed on families. For many families the day-care needs of children, or the care of elderly parents or of those with disabilities are often met by professional bodies outside the home. This can be both financially costly and guilt-inducing. People are living longer with the consequence that the population of those aged over sixty five has increased by almost fifteen per cent between the censuses in 2006 and 2011. Family

⁴⁴ <http://www.thejournal.ie/esri-report-great-recession-1919516-Feb2015/> (01.11.2016).

⁴⁵ <http://www.rte.ie/news/investigations-unit/2015/0309/685748-suicide-the-figures/> (01.11.2016).

⁴⁶ Such organisations include the Vincent De Paul, The Legion of Mary, The Simon Community, The Knights of St. Columbanus, L’Arche Ireland, among others.

members benefit from improved medical and health services, better diet and increasing standards of living. However overworked parents, at the end of their wits to pay for mortgages and keep up with the cost of living, can sometimes feel guilty about not spending enough time at home with the children. Parents who are not digital natives sometimes have difficulty understanding or monitoring the socialisation and education of children in a digital age. From a very early age, in a consumerist and digital culture, family members are socialised into desiring and acquiring digital and other products that are ubiquitously advertised. Growing appetites for rapidly changing clothing trends, ever new digital devices, a perceived need for regular entertainment and leisure opportunities has put increased pressures on the family. Elżbieta Osewska shrewdly notes that our postmodern society often “proclaims every human being’s aspiration and obligation to happiness”⁴⁷ and family members who expect a family to be a source of happiness may experience profound crises when the family does not meet their emotional, social, spiritual and financial expectations. In fact the reality of family life does not always live up to the ideal. One British book on what it terms “toxic childhood” suggests that “the more parents work, the more the children stay at home and are not playing outside with friends.”⁴⁸ While it is unhelpful to characterise childhood as toxic or to blanket blame working parents for their children’s inactivity, in Ireland it is notable that obesity rates are rising right across the population and in particular in childhood. For instance the *Growing up in Ireland* study showed that in 2011 one in five of nine-year-olds were overweight and a further seven per cent were obese.

12. The Francis effect

Pope Francis’ papacy is notable for the manner in which it has championed the family as a key theme and concern and he has shown a pastoral and theological

⁴⁷ Cf. *Religious education/catechesis in the family. A European perspective*, eds. E. Osewska, J. Stala, Warszawa 2010,

⁴⁸ S. Palmer, *Toxic childhood: how the modern world is damaging our children and what we can do about it*, London 2007, p. 3. The author argues that in a “global culture whose citizens are wealthier, healthier and more privileged than ever before, children grow unhappier every year”, p. 2.

concern to support families while realistically appreciating their complexity as they exhibit both “lights and shadows.”⁴⁹ His inspiring response has been sensitive and compassionate and he has no desire for “simply decrying present day evils, as if this could change things” while appreciating that the Church needs to be humble and acknowledge that “at times the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today’s problematic situation.”⁵⁰ At World Youth Day in 2013 he said “Not only would I say that the family is important for the evangelization of the new world. The family is important, and it is necessary for the survival of humanity. Without the family, the cultural survival of the human race would be at risk. The family, whether we like it or not, is the foundation.” The Extraordinary Synod (2014), and the Ordinary Synod (2015) on the Family in Rome as well as the apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* on love in the family (2016) have strengthened the Church’s appreciation of and support for the family. Francis has set a loving pastoral tone which is not defensive or “wasting pastoral energy on denouncing a decadent world without being proactive in proposing ways of finding true happiness.”⁵¹ Notwithstanding this positive approach, Pope Francis clearly recognises the growing trend among those who say that marriage is out of fashion. “Today, as we all know, the family is in crisis, it is in crisis worldwide. Young people don’t want to get married, they don’t get married or they live together. Marriage is in crisis, and so the family is in crisis.”⁵²

13. Compassion

The 2011 *National directory for catechesis in Ireland* “Share the Good News” (SGN) has also adopted a very compassionate, supportive and invitational

⁴⁹ *Amoris Laetitia* 32.

⁵⁰ *Amoris Laetitia* 35–36.

⁵¹ *Amoris Laetitia* 38.

⁵² Papal interview with journalists on Monday 26 May, 2014. https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/may/documents/papa-francesco_20140526_terra-santa-conferenza-stampa.html See also: Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* on the proclamation of the Gospel in today’s world, 66, https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

tone. It is less prescriptive and more dialogical in orientation and tone than previous iterations. In 1980 in a pastoral letter for Saint Patrick's Day, the Irish Bishops noted: "It is a sad thing that in the days of religious freedom some of the homes of Catholics have no sign or symbol, no picture of statue, which would show that they are Christians, and which would remind them of God and help them to pray."⁵³ Today, their focus is not on religious iconography in the home but on the very survival of faith in the midst of family life. The *National directory for catechesis in Ireland* acknowledges that "Families come with all kinds of problematic questions: loneliness, separation, self-interest, addiction, abuse of one kind or another as well as love, support, play, care and loyalty. They can carry positive and negative connotations, depending on a person's family story. Family is the reality within which we speak of faith integrated with life as it is lived."⁵⁴ This directory outlines a ten year plan for faith formation in Ireland which takes into consideration the complexity and rapidly changing nature of family life. It outlines faith development objectives as well as indicators of achievement. These include the parish having "an established support system for family catechesis, helping parents/guardians, grandparents and young people to speak and pray together in the light of their everyday experience." Furthermore, the Parish Faith Development Plan will support those who are "experiencing family, financial or other difficulties."⁵⁵ This includes ease of access to parish centres and buildings for those with special needs, migrants experiencing hospitality, those living with illness receiving special attention, and ecumenical, intercultural and inter-religious outreach being essential to family life.⁵⁶ Diocesan Faith Development Services are pledged to focus on family ministry, youth ministry, special needs and structures to support home, parish and school working in partnership.⁵⁷

Further recent developments include the publication of an *Irish Catholic catechism for adults* (2014) as a support for Catholics as they live their faith in everyday family life.⁵⁸ Another successful development is the introduction of

⁵³ Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, *Handing on faith in the home...*

⁵⁴ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News. National directory for catechesis in Ireland*, Dublin 2010, pp. 118–119 (henceforth SGN).

⁵⁵ SGN, pp. 194–195.

⁵⁶ SGN, p. 196.

⁵⁷ SGN, p. 197.

⁵⁸ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Irish Catholic catechism for adults*, Dublin 2014.

a National Grandparents Day in Schools (2008) which takes place as part of the annual Catholic School's Week at the end of January each year. The Catholic School's Week is designed to increase the link between home and school and parish and to support and make explicit the Catholic mission and ethos of schools. They celebrate the unique contribution of Catholic schools to the life of the parish, the larger community and the ongoing faith development of children in the family. In 2015 a new *Catholic preschool and primary religious education curriculum for Ireland* (2015) was published to respond to the shifting cultural and educational context in Ireland. The RE curriculum works "collaboratively with parents/guardians in the religious education of their children." This curriculum is the first ever formal published religious education curriculum on the whole island of Ireland (North and South). It is based on the vision of the National directory.⁵⁹ The curriculum acknowledges the crucial and foundational role of the family in education and faith transmission.

"Parents/guardians are the primary educators of their children in faith. In the home they can introduce young people to the lived reality of faith through prayer, moral formation, everyday expressions of love and reconciliation, good example and simple sharing of the faith journey. They also contribute appropriately to their children's formal instruction in and initiation into the faith by participating in parish-based catechesis."⁶⁰

In 2015 a new programme called *Grow in love* was developed as a resource to help teachers implement the new Primary Religious Education Curriculum in primary schools in Ireland. This new *Grow in love* (GIL) programme emphasises that the school works in partnership with the home and the parish so that "cooperation between home, parish and school is essential in encouraging young children in coming to know who they are and to whom they belong."⁶¹ The GIL series seeks to "make regular, concrete links with the children's family, and strives to ensure that parents are enabled to support their child's religious education."⁶² With this in mind, the series contains a workbook and is designed in such a way that each weekly lesson includes

⁵⁹ Irish Episcopal Conference, *Catholic preschool and primary religious education curriculum for Ireland*, Dublin 2015.

⁶⁰ SGN, pp. 91–98.

⁶¹ See: SGN, p. 15.

⁶² Irish Episcopal Conference, *Grow in love. Junior infants primary I. Teacher's manual*, Dublin 2015, p. 16.

a take-home activity to be completed by both the parent and the child. The activities include parents and children chatting together about topics, praying together as well as activities and games that parents and children are invited to complete together.

14. Conclusion

The Catholic Church has a much weakened influence on public opinion and family life in Ireland. Overall one can say that the Celtic Tiger economy and its demise, rising secularism, and a more intercultural and religiously plural society have contributed to new understandings of family life in Ireland. The chasm between Church teaching and the reality of family life is growing. This is part of a much larger religious and cultural crisis that results from weakening family bonds and changing family structures. It poses a major challenge to the worldwide Catholic Church and to the Church in Ireland. For as Osewska states, the family is “the place where the future of religion in society is guaranteed or destroyed” and she suggests that we are witnessing the “end of the family as a foundational institution.”⁶³ The Church needs to continue to work harder to support and reach out to diverse types of families in contemporary Ireland. While it has begun to use digital media, it needs to continue to speak the language of digital natives and to present its teaching in a clear, accessible, positive and joyful manner. The Irish Church has invested heavily in the faith development of children through its formal school system. Indeed its prioritisation of school-based catechesis means that as long as children remain within the school system, they benefit from a well-resourced and structured approach. However there is need for a much greater range of support structures, resources and initiatives for all family types but most especially for non-traditional families. There are many interesting and positive recent initiatives and the National directory and other programmes have adopted a welcome, compassionate and supportive tone for families. Church-based voluntary organisations continue to do stellar work in supporting families. However, for many families there are not enough points of pastoral support and opportunities for connection with the Church. In

⁶³ *Religious education/catechesis in the family. A European perspective*, p. 12.

Ireland the Church has exciting opportunities to reap a great harvest but in reality its workers are few (cf. Mt 9:35–38).

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