

INTERVIEW

Archbishop Charles Brown Apostolic Nuncio to Ireland

What has been your experience of Ireland so far, and what are your hopes for your ministry here?

I have had a wonderful welcome in Ireland since I arrived here earlier this year. Prior to my appointment as Nuncio, I had not had a lot of experience of Ireland. My first trip to Ireland was when my father brought me for a visit when I was about thirteen years old. My strongest memory of that trip was visiting Kilmainham Gaol in Dublin. My father's grandmother had been born in County Clare, very close to the ruins of Kilmacduagh Monastery, and my father had a great interest in Irish history, especially in the history of the Easter Rising of 1916. We toured the gaol and saw the cells of the heroes of 1916. For me as a young person, it was a very powerful experience. I came back to Ireland for two short visits in the early 1980s when I was a student at Oxford. So, when the Holy Father decided to send me here as Nuncio, I felt that I had a lot to learn about the country and its people. I have been doing my best to visit different parts of the island since my arrival. There still remains a lot for me to see. Of course, for me some of the highpoints thus far have been my visits to the places of pilgrimage in Ireland: the Shrine of Our Lady at Knock, my short visit to Lough Derg, Mass at Our Lady's Island near Wexford and my pilgrimage to the top of Croagh Patrick on Reek Sunday.

As for my hopes for my ministry here in Ireland, my greatest hope is that, in some small way, I might be able to help the Church to flourish on this island where the Catholic faith has existed for some 1,500 years. I am the representative of Pope Benedict XVI – that is my job. I am not a Bishop in Ireland with the direct and weighty responsibility of



Photo: John McElroy

leading the Church here, but in my own role, I hope and pray that I can do some good.

In your introductory homily in St Mary's Pro-Cathedral, Dublin, you drew on the importance of the legacy of your ancestors' faith and how this influenced your own faith. The issue of passing on the faith is at the heart of the challenge facing Irish parents today. Do you have any thoughts on this vital responsibility?

I think I said that day that were it not for the faith of Ireland, I would not be a Catholic today. The Catholic faith was carried by Irish emigrants all over the world. In so doing, those emigrants, who faced unbelievably difficult situations, still handed on what was most precious to them, that is, their Catholic faith. Perhaps we need to ask ourselves why it was that prior generations were able to pass on their faith in situations of extreme hardship – in times of persecution, famine and even forced emigration – while, in our own time of relative comfort and ease, the faith is not always being

handed on. Some would say that this was because prior generations were more ignorant than we are or that they held on to their faith because they had nothing else. I have real problems with that kind of explanation. Could it be instead that the way in which we live in modern Western societies makes us less sensitive to spiritual realities? Could it be, for example, that filling every hour of every day with music or television or internet or video games or texting, leads to a kind of spiritual insensitivity or numbness? I do think that it is important for Catholic parents, who want to give their children the faith, to exercise some control over the quality and the quantity of the various forms of the entertainment industry to which young people are exposed, especially in their early years. All these forms of entertainment exercise a strong formative influence on young people, and that influence is often at odds with living a Catholic life. But, of course, the most important factor in the transmission of the faith to children is the example of parents. If parents practice their faith and teach their children to pray, it is very likely that their children will continue on the faith.

As the Year of Faith begins on 11 October, what impact do you think it will have on the life of the Church and how can we best celebrate the Year of Faith in Ireland? What role will *Share the Good News* play during the Year of Faith and beyond?

Saint Maximilian Kolbe, who gave his life to save another prisoner in the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz, diagnosed the spiritual disease of our times as indifference, which essentially means that it is a matter of indifference whether a person lives a life of Catholic faith or not.

Indifferentism is the idea that it really doesn't matter too much what a person believes. The Year of Faith has been called by the Holy Father in order to counteract that idea. What we believe is indeed important; in fact, it is of the highest importance. Faith is a gift by which we are able to believe in Jesus Christ and in what he teaches us, in and through his Church. There are a number of ways in which we can make this Year of Faith fruitful. One way is by deeper study of Catholic doctrine. *Share the Good News* is the National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland, prepared under the authority of the Irish Bishops' Conference, and it sets out priorities in a number of areas. In my view, one of the best suggestions of *Share the Good News* in terms of faith development is to recommend the study of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which was compiled during the Pontificate of Blessed John Paul II. The *Catechism* is really a treasure, as it presents in a single volume the teaching of the Catholic Church. I think that organised study groups for reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are a great idea. Similarly, for teenagers, there is the *YOUCAT* which is an excellent youth catechism. So I would likewise encourage priests and catechists to start *YOUCAT* groups of teenagers to read and discuss what it contains.

In his Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland, Pope Benedict XVI invites the faithful in Ireland to journey together on the 'path of healing, renewal and reparation'. Specifically he says that 'a new vision is needed to inspire present and future generations to treasure the gift of our common faith'. What are the key elements required to underpin this vision and allow or facilitate a renewal of the Church in Ireland?

Ireland has had and continues to have a unique place in the life of the Catholic Church, and has had an influence in the universal Church all out of proportion to its population. In my view, the renewal of the Church in Ireland needs to respect the two wellsprings of Irish Christianity. There are different ways of describing these two sources, but I would describe them as the

Celtic element and the Roman element. The Celtic element, I would see as the deeply spiritual, otherworldly, ascetical, monastic, penitential aspect which characterised men and women like Saint Columbanus, Saint Bridget and Saint Gobnait. Then there is the Roman or Petrine element which is characterised by aspects like unity, universality, continuity, rationality, internationality and – in my view – would be represented by figures like Saint Palladius and, I would dare say, even Saint Patrick himself. Both these elements need to be strengthened in the Irish Church, and in fact I would say that, in true complementarity, each element needs the other if it is to be authentically itself. In other words, the renewal of the Church in Ireland needs to promote the experiential element which is nourished by prayer, penance and love of neighbour and the rational element which is nourished the study of Catholic doctrine and adherence to the universal discipline of the Catholic Church. The Church in Ireland needs a new generation of saints!

In his Pastoral Letter, the Holy Father spoke of the difficulty survivors of abuse might feel in finding forgiveness or reconciliation with the Church. How can the Church best respond to the challenge as highlighted by the Holy Father?

I myself have met with survivors of abuse in Ireland, and I can testify that it is impossible to listen to their stories without feeling the deepest anguish and sorrow for what they have experienced. Human suffering takes different forms. The suffering of innocent young people is the most heart wrenching. Pope Benedict has addressed the survivors of abuse with great compassion and honesty. In his *Pastoral Letter to Catholics in Ireland*, he spoke to the survivors themselves and sought to make the connection between their suffering and the person of Jesus Christ. He wrote: 'Like you, he still bears the wounds of his own unjust suffering. He understands the depths of your pain and its enduring effect upon your lives and your relationships, including your relationship with the Church. I know some of you find it

difficult even to enter the doors of a church after all that has occurred. Yet Christ's own wounds, transformed by his redemptive sufferings, are the very means by which the power of evil is broken and we are reborn to life and hope. I believe deeply in the healing power of his self-sacrificing love – even in the darkest and most hopeless situations – to bring liberation and the promise of a new beginning' (*Letter to the Catholics of Ireland*, 6). The Holy Father's words are so powerful and so true. We must try to show that Christ himself has the answer, or better, that he *is* the answer to the tragedy of human suffering.

Do you have a message to the priests, religious and lay people of Ireland at this challenging time?

My message would be quite simple. It would be what Pope John Paul II said at the Mass which began his pontificate in October 1978: *Non abbiate paura!* Do not be afraid! The Catholic Church in Ireland has passed through periods of incredible trial in the course of her fifteen centuries on this island, and each time she emerged stronger, purified and ever more faithful to the Lord. All of us, priests, religious and lay people, need to be absolutely courageous in speaking about our faith in Christ and in his Church; we need to 'proclaim the word... in season and out of season' (2 Tim 4:2) without fear. I would also add that in the renewal of the Church in Ireland, priests will have a central role; indeed, real renewal depends upon them. Certainly priests, in particular, have had a difficult time in recent years. But one of the most gratifying aspects of my different trips around Ireland has been the experience of meeting the priests of the country – young and old, diocesan and religious, from North and South – who are serving the Lord and his people with amazing love and faithfulness, without fanfare and publicity. These are the men who have served the Church in a difficult period and I have the highest respect and admiration for them. When the history of our times is written, it will be these faithful priests who will be remembered and appreciated.