Conference on Irish Catholicism on Trial
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'Understanding Post-Catholic Ireland: Does Religion Still Matter?'
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First of all, let me offer my sincere thanks to Eamon Maher for the invitation to speak this afternoon. I've recently written a book called *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity,* which prompted the invitation.[1] Post-Catholic, of course, conveys a sense that the churches have lost their political influence and their social importance. 'Secularization' appears to be winning out over the life of faith– whatever winning might mean. People no longer trust institutions, especially church institutions. So at a conference concerned with 'the current crisis in Irish Catholicism and what the future holds,' I think it is especially important if we stop and ask ourselves this question: In a post-Catholic Ireland, does religion still matter?

My talk today offers some perspective on whether religion still matters. First, I will argue that Ireland should be described as post-Catholic, charting declines in religious practice and the rise of people who say they have 'no religion' across the island. Then, drawing on the three-year research study on which *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland* was based, I will argue that the Catholic Church continues to frame the way that not only former Catholics, but also people of other faiths, think about and practice their religion. Religion matters to the extent that the Catholic Church is something that people define themselves against. But religion also matters to people whose actions continue to be motivated by faith. In particular, religion matters to people who practice what I call 'extra-institutional religion' – religion that is practiced *outside or in addition to* the institutional Catholic Church. I argue that these extra-institutional expressions of faith have greater potential than the *institutional* Catholic Church to 'matter,' based on the evidence of how they have enriched the lives of individuals and motivated them to work for the greater good.

To put it in the terms of this conference, if Irish Catholicism is on trial, the 'institutional' Catholic Church seems to have been condemned, resulting in a 'post-Catholic Ireland.' But extra-institutional forms of Catholicism are sources of life and vitality for many people. How those people live out their faith will shape the future of Irish Catholicism for generations to come. And that future depends on two factors: the extent to which extra-institutional expressions of Catholicism remain engaged with the institutional church; and the extent that Catholicism can capture the imaginations of a generation of under-35's who are rapidly leaving religion behind.

A Post-Catholic Ireland

In 2013, the Archbishop of Dublin, Diarmuid Martin, wrote an article for *America: The National Catholic Review,* which was simply titled: 'A Post-Catholic Ireland?'[2] With those words, Archbishop Martin confirmed that almost all idealized visions of a 'holy, Catholic Ireland' have long since passed. Archbishop Martin's article ended with a question mark. In his article he presented various ways to measure the decline of Catholicism, but I do not think he really answered the question.

[1] My talk today draws on Gladys Ganiel, *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland: Religious Practice in Late Modernity,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); and 'Christianity as a Vocation: The Rostrevor Benedictines and the Renewal of Faith in Ireland,' in *Festschrift for Geraldine Smyth,* ed. John O'Grady, Jude Lal Fernando, and Cathy Higgins, (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 2015).
[2] Diarmuid Martin, 'A Post Catholic Ireland? Renewing the Irish Church from Within,' *America: The National Catholic Review,* 20 May 2013.

But my answer is that yes, post-Catholic is an appropriate way to describe the island of Ireland. For me, post-Catholic is a descriptive, empirical concept rather than an epochal one. I am not saying that the island of Ireland was once Catholic, and now it is not. Rather, a dominant, traditional form of Irish Catholicism is being displaced. This is the Catholicism that was a defining characteristic of Irish nationalism, that had a 'monopoly' on the Irish religious market (at least in the Republic and among the minority Catholic community in Northern Ireland), had a strong relationship with state power, elevated the status of the cleric to extraordinary high levels, and emphasized the evils of sexual sin. Even if Ireland has largely moved beyond this form of Catholicism, the Catholic Church continues to loom large over the whole island. It retains some social and cultural privileges vis-à-vis other expressions of Christianity, other religions, and secularism/atheism. And as Eamon Maher pointed out in an article in last week's *Irish Times,* 'the cultural legacy of Catholicism in Ireland is still very much alive. One encounters it in the language and customs of the people (phrases such as "God bless", "Jesus, Mary and Joseph", or making the sign of the cross when passing a church or cemetery, are still commonplace); in the rituals of marriage and death, and in the large number of crosses and churches one encounters all around the country.'[3] But pushing beyond that, I argue that a post-Catholic Ireland involves *a shift in consciousness* in which the Catholic Church, as an institution, is no longer held in high esteem by most of the population and can no longer expect to exert a monopoly influence in social and political life. People from a variety of religions, including Catholicism, now often define their faith in opposition or contrast to Catholicism.

This opposition to Catholicism is striking because the island of Ireland has long been one of the most religious locations in Europe, exhibiting unusually high levels of religious identification, practice and belief when compared to the rest of Europe – especially among the majority Catholic population. But even as long ago as 2009, Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig wrote: 'The extent, of the most recent levels of decline, signals the crossing of a new threshold, perhaps comparable to the projected melting of the polar ice caps. Does this signal an inevitable 'disappearance of religion' or simply mark a new phase of religiosity in Ireland?'[4]

The latest Census figures for Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (ROI) have produced even further measures of religious decline; specifically, more people than ever before are choosing the categories of 'no religion' or 'not stated.' The figures stand at 17 percent in Northern Ireland in 2011, up from 13 percent in 2008 and nine percent in 1998. The latest figure for the ROI is 12 percent in 2016, up from eight percent in 2011 and six percent in 2006.[5]

Other studies have confirmed the decline of priestly and religious vocations, church attendance, and religious belief on the island.[6] There are even some indicators that religiosity is declining more rapidly in the Republic than elsewhere in the world, and given its demographics, this decline is likely to be happening among Catholics. The *Global Index of*

[3] Eamon Maher, 'Catholicism's Influence is very much alive in Ireland,' *Irish Times,* 16 September 2017, https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/catholicism-s-influence-is-very-much-alive-in-ireland-1.3233376, accessed 29 September 2017.
[4] Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 'Religion in Ireland: No Longer an Exception,' ARK Research Update No. 64, December 2009, p. 3
[5] The ROI Census also includes categories of lapsed Catholic, atheist, agnostic, and lapsed Church of Ireland, which I have added to the categories of 'no religion' and 'not stated.' If only 'no religion' and 'not stated' are calculated for the ROI, the figure is just under 10 percent.
[6] Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism Snice 1950: The Undoing of a Culture,* (Dublin, Gill and Macmillan, 2004); Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Ireland,* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2nd ed, 1998).

Religion and Atheism concluded that 'the Irish are losing their faith fastest among western nations', citing figures of 44 per cent who say they are not religious and ten per cent who say they are convinced atheists, 'putting Ireland among the top ten nations with the largest number of convinced atheists.'[7]

In addition, as is common in other Western countries, people who identify as 'no religion' are more likely to be young: 45 percent of those who chose 'no religion' in the 2016 Census were between the ages of 20-39.[8] In 2013, the Student Marketing Network carried out a survey of 1,146 students, chosen at random from more than 30 third-level institutions in the ROI. While the random nature of the sample and the education/class status of the students mean that this survey is not representative, the results are stark. While 57.8 percent claimed to be Catholic, only 37.5 percent of students said that they believe in God. The top response was that 41.5 percent are unsure if there is a God. The second-largest group was atheists at 20 percent. Sixty-six percent 'don't believe that religion makes the world a better place.' Students regarded 'looking good' (5th) as more important than 'religious beliefs' (6th), with friends and family at the top of the list. Finally, 78.7 percent said the scandals have negatively affected how they perceive the Catholic Church.[9] While the random nature of the survey means these results should be viewed with caution, they nevertheless depict a young generation for whom religion – and even God – has very little value.

When faced with this evidence, we are brought back to the question: does religion still matter? My research has found some evidence that it does.

How Religion Still Matters: Extra-Institutional Religion

The research I conducted for *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland* indicates that religion continues to matter, but in different ways than before. The concept I've developed to explain how religion matters is called 'extra-institutional religion.'

Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland was based on a three-year research project conducted with colleagues at the Irish School of Ecumenics. I developed the concept of extra-institutional religion through reflecting on the sociological research I conducted for the project, including surveys, in-depth interviews, and observations. I conducted two 'Surveys of 21st Century Faith' in 2009, the first of which canvassed 4,005 faith leaders I strove for a universal sample of faith leaders on the island, and 4,005 was as many as my research assistant Thérèse Cullen could track down. 710 responded. The second was an open, online survey for laypeople, to which 910 responded. The in-depth interviews and observations were carried out as part of eight case studies of 'expressions of faith' between 2009–11, including the Parish Pastoral Council of the Parish of Good Counsel in Ballyboden, Dublin; *Slí Éile /Magis* Ireland, a Jesuit young adult ministry; Abundant Life, a Pentecostal congregation in Limerick; St Patrick's United Church, a combined Methodist and Presbyterian congregation in Waterford; Jesus Centre Dublin, a congregation of the Redeemed Christian Church of God; Holy Cross Benedictine Monastery in Rostrevor, Co. Down; the Fermanagh Churches Forum; and a sample of individuals from faith traditions other than Christianity. In total, 113

[7] Quotes from Vladimir Kmec, 'Religion and Migration: Exploring the Religious Identities of Young Migrants in Ireland and Young People of Migration Background in Germany,' Ph.D. Dissertation, Trinity College Dublin, 2015, p. 109; WIN-Gallup International 2012.
[8] Central Statistics Office 2017
[9] Patsy McGarry, 'Major Disconnect between Irish students and Catholic Church, a random poll has found, *Irish Times,* 17 August 2013, http://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/religion-and-beliefs/major-disconnect-between-irish-students-and-catholic-church-a-random-poll-has-found-1.1497605, accessed 29 September 2017; and 'Nationwide Survey Reveals Surprising Facts about Irish Student Attitudes Toward Religion,' Spirituality Ireland blog, 19 August 2013, http://www.spiritualityireland.org/blog/index.php/2013/08/nationwide-survey-reveals-surprising-facts-about-irish-student-attitudes-towards-religion/, accessed 27 April 2017.

people were interviewed from across these eight cases, by me and by research assistants Richard Carson and Fred Vincent.

What struck me as I analysed the interviews and the surveys was that people could not stop talking about the Catholic Church. They might no longer, nor have ever been, part of the Irish Catholic Church, but it was clear that it mattered to them. The seemingly steady demise of 'traditional' Irish Catholicism was casting a long shadow over the research project. Unprompted, Irish converts to Pentecostalism spoke about the Irish Catholic Church. As did Protestants, north and south of the border. As did immigrants of various religions from all over the world. And, of course, Irish Catholics themselves. Some even used the term 'post-Catholic' to describe Ireland.

So this concept of extra-institutional religion captures how people's experiences and practices were so often described not only as outside or in addition to the Catholic Church (extra), but also in the Irish Catholic Church's own terms (institutional). It conveys how people still used the Catholic Church as a reference point or a resource, even as they critiqued it or tried to escape from it.

In the book, I argue that people from traditions other than Catholicism are practising extra-institutional religion. But given that today it is Irish Catholicism that is on trial, I will focus on examples of how it is that Irish Catholics are practising extra-institutional religion. The main case studies which included Catholic perspectives were the Parish Pastoral Council in Ballyboden and *Slí Éile* , which were entirely Catholic; and the Holy Cross Benedictine Monastery and the Fermanagh Churches Forum, whose participants included Catholics and Protestants.

What I found in these cases was that Catholics whose faith really mattered to them were disillusioned with the institutional church. All were appalled at the way the institutional church had responded to the clerical abuse scandals. Others thought that every day parish life reduced faith to an uninspiring lowest common denominator, and that in order for their faith to be nourished they needed to seek out spaces *outside* the institutional church. In some cases – like *Slí Éile* and Holy Cross – it might look like they were deeply embedded in the institutional church. *Slí Éile* and Holy Cross were Jesuit and Benedictine, after all. The people on the parish pastoral council were stalwarts of local parish life. But it was clear when I talked to people that they *perceived* these spaces as somehow outside, and different from, the institutional church of the Vatican and the Irish bishops. For them, religion *mattered:* it shaped and nourished their inner lives and in some cases, inspired them to work for a better world. You might say that they had put *institutional* Irish Catholicism on trial, found it wanting, and created new forms of Irish Catholicism that to varying degrees rejected or engaged with the institutional Church.

To give you a sense of what this looked like, I want to let these people speak for themselves. To demonstrate how religion matters for individuals, I will share with you the stories of three Irish Catholics with a deep faith, but who found their spiritual nourishment in extra-institutional religion. To demonstrate how religion matters socially and politically, I will discuss how *Slí Éile* inspired young people to engage in social activism.

Michelle, Holy Cross Benedictine Monastery

Michelle was 55-years-old at the time of her interview and said that while she comes from a Northern Irish Catholic background, she thinks of herself as a Christian rather than a Catholic.[10] She credited Holy Cross with helping her return to faith, but a faith that was more

[10] All names have been changed to protect anonymity and confidentiality.

authentic, intellectual and mature than what she had found in the Irish Catholic Church. Michelle said that when she 'began to ask questions about spirituality and wider questions' that she would 'go along to mass purposely to see if I could hear anything. I'm sure I might as well have been sitting out in my back garden, because I wasn't hearing it. And I became quite annoyed at not hearing it'. She says of the Irish Catholic tradition, that the satirical sitcom Father Ted was 'spot on'. She described mass this way:

> What used to piss me off, going to mass before, was it was like the McDonald's experience, fast food. … They could get through the Our Father in five seconds. That used to horrify me. I didn't know an awful lot, but one thing I knew was that the Our Father was the prayer that Jesus had taught.

Michelle first heard about Holy Cross Monastery from a friend who, knowing her interest in music, said: 'I'm surprised you don't go to those monks. Like you of all people.' She says she told her friend: 'That's all I bloody need, running along to monks. I'm already having difficulty with the church, so please, spare me'. Nevertheless, she lives in the area so one evening she went out for a walk and called in to vespers. She said, 'I could tell you that moment I realised I was in the right place'.

Michelle said that she now tries to structure her day on the Benedictines' rhythm of life, including morning and evening prayers. She tries to attend mass or vespers several times a week, and goes to the monastery for mass on Sundays. She also is considering lay oblation. She too finds the monks' homilies more intellectually engaging than what she found in the 'Father Ted' or 'McDonalds' masses that she used to attend. She has been especially encouraged by the bold stand the monks have taken in apologising for and praying for the victims of abuse in the Irish Catholic Church. She said the monks also have called for a 're-formation' of the Irish Catholic Church, although they have not in their homilies gone into any specifics of what this might look like. Michelle said that their critique has meant that some Catholics she knows have stopped attending mass at the monastery, because they do not want to hear the church criticised.

Michelle said the education she has received through her personal study and her time at the monastery has convinced her that the Benedictines' mission in Ireland is to simply educate laypeople. She said that the education of Irish Catholic laypeople is especially lacking, and that any re-form of the church must be centred on a Christ-centred, biblically-informed, spiritually-balanced style of Christianity, as modelled by the Benedictines.

Patricia, Parish Pastoral Council, Ballyboden

Patricia was 62-years-old at the time of interview, married with three grown-up children and active on the parish pastoral council at the Parish of Good Counsel in Ballyboden. She described a conventional Irish Catholic upbringing in a rural village. Her family were regular mass-goers and 'maybe four nights out of seven the rosary would have been called for . . . mumbling it around the fireplace'. Patricia was in secondary school during the Second Vatican Council and remembers the enthusiasm with which the nuns who taught her implored the students to read the documents. She said:

> I saw the nuns get out of their gear and have hair again. I think that [Vatican II] had a big impact on me, looking back. It was the hope and expectation of the time. . . . The nuns at the time had fantastic hope. And that's probably what has kept me [in the faith] to my last.

Patricia explained that reflecting on how Vatican II placed 'responsibility' on the laity stayed with her over the years, and was a key motivation for maintaining her faith.

> At that stage up till then [Vatican II] we [laity] didn't have a function. We just went and it was done to us in church. . . . It was a seed that was sown way back . . . it did change something in me. . . . It was the symbol that the laypeople had responsibility in the church, and . . . we weren't totally passive, which I would have said we were until then.

The Parish of Good Counsel is under the care of the Augustinian order. Patricia arrived there in 1976. She said that over the years the priests had organized 'extra' activities, such as courses, lectures, and *lectio divinia* Bible reading and prayer groups, which also nourished her faith. Like many Irish Catholics, Patricia distinguished between the 'good' priests who served in her parish, and the institutional church and its hierarchy. While once Vatican II might have inspired her to hope for change in the institutional church, she now perceived it as distant and perhaps even unchangeable. Indeed, Patricia described how she disconnected her personal faith from the institutional church. Part of this seemed to be a defence mechanism that was a result of the clerical abuse scandals. Another part of this seemed to be a result of her belief that the wealthy institutional church had abandoned the message of Jesus to love everyone and help the poor. She said:

> I don't think it's [the institutional church] part of what Jesus had any involvement in. . . . There was a lot of church, but not a lot of God, about that religion [Irish Catholicism].

Patricia's harsh analysis of the Irish Catholicism of her youth was accompanied by an ambivalent attitude about the decline in mass-going among the younger generation, including her own children. On the one hand, she said, 'I just wish that young people would see that what they're searching for is available in the gospels and in the church.' Yet at the same time, she judged the younger, non-mass-going generation to be 'more Christian' than her own generation:

> Personally I think they are an awful lot more Christian. They really care about each other. . . . I don't worry about [their lack of mass attendance] because I see the goodness of them. They're always there to help each other, and they never go into this condemnation of this one isn't doing that, or whatever. There isn't the same keeping up appearances bit. They are much more honest with each other. So I don't have any fears for their spiritual health.

In addition, Patricia said that the Scripture readings for mass often proved personally meaningful for her, especially if she took the time to read them during the week as part of her preparation for mass:

> I read the Sunday gospel and ask myself, where am I in this story this week? It helps me to keep in touch. . . . If I was just relying on going to mass and hearing the sermon and saying prayers, it wouldn't be the same. I find that actual gospel words, and thinking them, is important. It's very important to me and it's more important to me than any of the brass hats or gold braid. . . . I don't see any of the brass hats or gold braid in the gospels. . . . Sometimes I wonder do they [the institutional church] have copies!

So rather than trying too hard to entice the younger generation back into the institutional church, Patricia said she had 'the faith the Holy Spirit would see it right,' adding that the institutional church was now largely irrelevant to her everyday spiritual life. As she put it: 'I choose to ignore it [the institutional church] as best I can.'

Ben, Slí Éile

At the time of interview, Ben was a 25-year-old postgraduate student involved with initiatives organized by the Jesuits' young adult ministry. These included gospel mass at Gardiner Street Church in Dublin, and activities through *Slí Éile /Magis* Ireland, a collaborative lay-clerical initiative centred on the values of spirituality, justice, and community. The organization was called *Slí Éile* at the time of research, later changed its name to *Magis*, and ended its operation in 2014. He said his parents went to mass in the local parish, he had a religious education in school, and at university he continued to go to mass 'now and then'. But he did not begin to take his faith seriously until an experience in a history class at university. He described it this way:

> I was doing the history of history, so how history is written. I remember the lecturer saying that around the times of Jesus, he was mentioned in history books. Some Roman mentioned him. There was this disturbance in wherever and this guy Jesus was involved. And for some reason I went, oh shit, actually Jesus was a real person. . . . I was 21 at this stage and in my head he had always been a mythical figure.

Around the same time, a friend who knew of his interest in music suggested he attend the Gardiner Street gospel mass, which was fast gaining a reputation for the music of its multi-cultural choir. Ben said that in his first week at Gardiner Street, 'I was literally standing at the back of the church.' He enjoyed the music, so he went back the next week and continued to stand at the back of the church. The week after that, he said:

> I started listening to the homilies, and thought, that's very interesting. That's very practical in the context of what's happening in Ireland now, and I remember I actually took a seat.

The week after that, he sat closer to the front. And eventually, 'I literally went from standing at the very back of the church to being involved in running the mass.' For him, becoming involved with mass was a natural progression of what he observed at Gardiner Street: a collaborative process through which laity and clergy organized the mass together, and where laity would at times 'reflect on the gospel or the homily and give their own reflection, which was quite refreshing'. Ben was also impressed that Gardiner Street distributed questionnaires to the mass-goers to solicit suggestions about how to improve the mass.

Ben described a range of activities he had participated in through *Slí Éile* , including taking courses for a certificate in 'social spirituality,' going on retreat, volunteering in the Zamcraft fair trade initiative, which sells Zambian handcrafts in Ireland, and helping organize and publicize the Gardiner Street mass. In all of this, Ben refused to separate his faith from 'social justice,' going so far as to say, 'I think to be honest if there wasn't an element of social justice [in the church] I don't know how relevant [church-going] would be for me.' But he also did not see his church activities as an optional extra to his social activism; rather, he believed that in order to be sustainable, activism must be rooted in a deeper faith.

At the same time, Ben said that his upbringing in the institutional church had not equipped him to make the links between faith and social justice that he now saw as so important. Nor had the institutional church led him to a personal experience of God or of fellowship with others in Christian 'community'. He said that this meant that the scandals that have so damaged the church have not really affected his faith, but it also meant that he did not perceive the institutional church as being relevant to him. Accordingly, Ben looked forward to a time in Ireland when 'we'll be talking less about the Catholic Church'.

Slí Éile and Social Activism

In the Irish language, Slí Éile means 'another way.' This name succinctly captures how those involved with the group were attempting to live out their faith – in a way that was different

from stereotypical, traditional Irish Catholicism. Slí Éile began in 2000 as a joint initiative between the Irish Jesuits and young laity (ages 18-35), and was overseen by a lay director, Pádraig Swan. The principle of lay-clerical collaboration was embedded in the organisation from the start, and it received significant material support from the Jesuits: at its peak between 2008 and 2010, Slí Éile had 16 staff members and offices in Gardiner Street, Dublin; Ballymun, Dublin; and Galway. Slí Éile organized a range of programmed activities including retreats, courses on spirituality, and overseas immersion trips to Colombia, Zambia, South Africa, and Jamaica. Slí Éile's activities were centred around three themes: spirituality, community and social justice. The people I interviewed brought up these themes themselves, without my prompting, to explain how Slí Éile had been significant in their lives. Some spoke about finding a vital, life-giving spirituality through Slí Éile – something that had been missing in their experiences of parish life or Catholic schools. While 'spirituality' is often conceived as facilitating individualised, inner experiences, Slí Éile's spirituality encouraged personal development for the sake of a wider common good. Slí Éile offered a 'certificate of social spirituality' which linked inner spirituality with working for social justice – becoming involved in projects that would address the root causes of poverty. It also used a 'discover' model of small group sharing around spiritual themes, which linked inner spirituality with community experience. Action came in different forms, such as helping to plan the gospel mass, volunteering in programmes to address homelessness or child poverty, or volunteering for an overseas social justice mission.

The young people who linked their spirituality with social action were convinced that faith could transform society for the common good. For them, religion mattered because it could really make the world around them a better place. It may seem curious that the example I am choosing to profile as so effective in prompting both personal *and* wider social, cultural and political transformation has ceased to exist. But I do not think that *Slí Éile's* demise undercuts my argument. Rather, I would argue that while the work of *Slí Éile* demonstrates how religion can matter in a post-Catholic Ireland, other extra-institutional spaces must emerge or be revitalized if religion is to continue to matter in these ways.

The Future of Irish Catholicism

If we can agree that religion still matters on the island of Ireland, at the very least we can say that Irish Catholicism has a future. I put forward a similar version of this argument in an article in a special issue of *Studies* on 'The Future of Irish Catholicism'.[11] Fr Gerry O'Hanlon SJ wrote the lead article for the special issue on 'The Catholic Church in Ireland Today,' engaging with my arguments. He concluded[12]:

> Post-Catholic Ireland need not fall prey to the dominant trend of de-institutionalisation and individualisation, with an extra-institutional religion that is practised with vitality only outside the institutional Catholic Church, and an institutional remnant that is culturally irrelevant.

I do not go so far as to say that the Catholic Church is 'culturally irrelevant,' but that is one possible path for the future – as O'Hanlon recognizes, arguing that: 'without serious commitment to reform and renewal, that seems the likely future.'

As remedy, O'Hanlon recommends a synodal form of Church at all levels. What this means is a church that rejects hierarchical pronouncements and practices communal discernment,

[11] Gladys Ganiel, 'Ireland as a Post-Catholic Religious Market?: The Role of Extra-Institutional Religion, *Studies*, V. 106, No. 421, Spring 2017, pp. 31-38

[12] Gerry O'Hanlon, 'The Catholic Church in Ireland Today,' *Studies*, V. 106, N. 421, Spring 2017, pp. 18-19

taking into account the perspectives not just of the hierarchy but equally those of all people in the church. New structures are required to tap into the wisdom of all the baptised faithful. He identifies opportunities that have been proposed (though not yet capitalised upon)[13]:

> A few years ago the recently retired Bishop of Ossory, Séamus Freeman, promised the beginnings of a 'structured dialogue' at a national level within the Irish Church, in response to Pope Benedict's Letter to Irish Catholics. The Association of Catholic Priests, in a meeting with representatives of the Irish Episcopal Conference in May 2016, offered to help organise a national synod of the Irish Church. It would be wonderful if the bishops could offer such leadership, perhaps in tandem with preparations for the World Meeting of Families due to be held in Dublin in 2018.

Tom Inglis' article on 'Church and Culture in Catholic Ireland' provides a counter-balance to O'Hanlon's cautious hope for religious renewal.[14] While I have argued for the potential for renewal among those committed to their faith and living it *outside or in addition to* religious institutions – Inglis' work seems to indicate that such 'extra-institutional' people are few and far between.

Inglis shares some of the findings from his important 2014 *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland* study.[15] His findings overwhelmingly point to religious decline as people find meaning and significance in other sources, including family, the local community and sport. As he writes[16]:

> Religion is not in the heart, in the minds or on the lips of Catholics. … the institutional Church and Catholic language, beliefs and rituals are no longer significant webs of meaning in everyday life. … When I explored the meanings of their lives, even among traditional, orthodox Catholics, there was little or no reference to god, religion or the Church until I deliberately raised these issues towards the end of the interviews. I asked them what it meant to live a good life, how they decided what was right and wrong and whether they had suffered any major illness, tragedy or loss. I thought that these would be precursors to asking them if they believed in God. However, very few mentioned God, or religion generally, in answering these questions.

What I took from O'Hanlon's and Inglis' contributions is that the Irish Catholic Church desperately needs the contributions of people (primarily laity) whose gifts have been unrecognized or neglected. But at present it is an almost miraculous achievement if such people have found the resources, energy and imagination to contribute to the future of Irish Catholicism.

I will conclude by returning to what I said during the introduction of this talk. The future of Irish Catholicism depends on two factors: the extent to which extra-institutional expressions of Catholicism remain engaged with the institutional church; and the extent that Catholicism can capture the imaginations of a generations of under-35's who are rapidly leaving religion behind.

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[13] Ibid., p. 18
[14] Tom Inglis, 'Church and Culture in Catholic Ireland,' *Studies,* V. 106, No. 421, Spring 2017, pp. 21-30.
[15] Tom Inglis, *Meanings of Life in Contemporary Ireland: Webs of Significance,* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[16] Inglis, *Studies*, pp. 23-26

On the first factor, I do not think there is much evidence that the institutional church is interested in engaging with those people on the margins who are practising extra-institutional religion. Maybe I am wrong, and others here can set me right. On the other hand, many of the people who I interviewed for the book are not all that interested in the institutional church either. They are getting on as best they can by ignoring it, to borrow Patricia's words. But I think the future of Irish Catholicism will be a richer one if both the institution and those on the margins work together for renewal.

On the second factor, there is some evidence that there is indeed a 'lost generation' of Catholics—those under age 35. In addition to the survey evidence I presented earlier, in the research for *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland*, there was anecdotal evidence that young people are largely absenting themselves from Catholic practice. For example, members of Ballyboden's parish pastoral council described how their own children no longer attended mass, and noted the general lack of people under the age of 35 who were involved in local parishes. The case study of Holy Cross also highlighted the absence of young Catholics: the monks there told me that 90 per cent of those under the age of 35 who visit the monastery regularly are from Protestant traditions. In our exploratory survey for laypeople, just nine of the 910 respondents were Catholics between the ages of 18–35. This surprised me, given that I expected people under 35 to be more comfortable than older people completing an online survey, and given the large Catholic population on the island as a whole. I have given you some account of how through *Slí Éile*, some young Catholics disillusioned with the 'institutional' church encountered Jesus through spiritual disciplines, life in community with one another, and social justice activism. Young people, more than other generations, are unlikely to perpetuate religious institutions in their current form. But they just might be open to creating their own extra-institutional religious spaces – spaces where their inner lives are nourished and they feel strengthened to go out and serve others. I will conclude by stating the obvious: it is this generation that must become energized if Irish Catholicism is to have a future at all.

Biography: Dr Gladys Ganiel is Research Fellow in the Senator George J Mitchell Institute for Global Peace, Security and Justice at Queen's University Belfast. She specializes on religion in Ireland and has authored/co-authored four books and more than 30 articles/ chapters, including *Transforming Post-Catholic Ireland* (Oxford University Press 2016) and *The Deconstructed Church: Understanding Emerging Christianity* (co-authored with Gerardo Marti, Oxford University Press, 2014). Her current research includes an Irish Department of Foreign Affairs-funded project on how Presbyterians responded to the Troubles in Northern Ireland; and the biography of Fr Gerry Reynolds, a peacemaking priest from Clonard Monastery.