

Pope Francis' visit to Ireland

Entering the wound

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Pope Francis' recent trip to Ireland for the World Meeting of Families took place in a very difficult context, marked in particular by the scourge of sexual abuse and power. In this article, the Catholic bishop of Limerick, Ireland, reflects upon the Pope's pilgrimage undertaken in an attitude of humility and reparation, in which the Pope's discerning spirit was in evidence throughout his time in Ireland. Key moments of his visit included his meeting with survivor victims of abuse, during which he prepared a ceremony of forgiveness, and the Concluding Mass which began with this ceremony.

After three years of preparation for the World Meeting of Families, the build-up to the arrival of Pope Francis for the concluding events was intense. The Irish love the Pope. However, in a climate of epochal change in Irish society, and after twenty years of pain linked to a number of situations of abuse of power within the Church, the event was shaped by a veil of reticence, the result of turmoil that characterizes the collective soul of Ireland today.

Unfortunately, many have been wounded by abuse either personally or indirectly. In addition to sexual abuse by members of the clergy, there are also numerous tragic episodes linked to institutions run by male and female religious orders.

In the weeks preceding the papal visit, much of this suffering came to the forefront, not least of all through media coverage. In the eyes of the 1800 journalists accredited for the event, this visit would be "decisive" for the pontificate of Pope Francis. Much would depend on how he dealt with the issue of abuse and its cover-up by bishops and religious superiors.

The Pope's Arrival: A "Penitent" on a Journey

On the day of the Pope's arrival, the sun shone brightly. From the moment Pope Francis appeared, his humble, simple and serene attitude was striking. There was something of the "penitent" in his demeanour, wrote the English newspaper, *The Tablet*.

And so, his 36-hour journey in Ireland began. From his very first appointment at the residence of the President of the Republic, we could see a Pope listening and discerning. In greeting him personally, the minister for children mentioned a particular case that had caused much media sensation two years ago:

“I am responsible for the Tuam Mother and Baby Home. Children’s remains were found in a sewage system there... I hope the Church will make reparation for its part in this shameful chapter”. To some it may have seemed like a political move. But, commenting to journalists the following day, Pope Francis highlighted the minister's gesture, calling it “an example of constructive cooperation, [...] lamenting about what the Church may have favoured in the past. That woman had a great dignity which touched my heart.”

Meeting with Authorities, Civil Society and Diplomatic Corps

At the ceremony with authorities, civil society and the diplomatic corps, in responding to Prime Minister Taoiseach’s speech in which he referred to ‘the dark aspects of the Catholic Church's history’, Pope Francis spoke without hesitation, saying: “I am very conscious of the circumstances of our most vulnerable brothers and sisters. I think especially of those women and children who in the past endured particularly difficult situations, and to the orphans of that time. With regard to the most vulnerable, I cannot fail to acknowledge the grave scandal caused in Ireland by the abuse of young people by members of the Church charged with responsibility for their protection and education.”

He continued: “I was deeply moved by the words spoken to me by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs; I thank her for those words.” Recognizing the failure of Church authorities to adequately address crimes of child abuse, he referred to his *Letter to the People of God*, published the week before, saying he “reaffirmed the commitment, and the need for an even greater commitment to eliminating this scourge in the Church, at any cost.”

In concluding, the Pope said: “It is my prayer that Ireland, in listening to the polyphony of contemporary political and social discussion, will not be forgetful of the powerful strains of the Christian message that have sustained it in the past, and can continue to do so in the future.” The message was clear: yes, we must recognize the wounds, but we must also look beyond the wound in the belief that faith and love are stronger.

In Conversation with Young Couples and with the Homeless

In St. Mary’s Pro-Cathedral in Dublin, in the presence of young couples recently married or in preparation for marriage, the Pope paused in silence before the altar of St. Joseph, where for some years now a candle is constantly aflame, symbolising prayer for the victims of sexual abuse. Afterwards, the Pope addressed young couples present, speaking of a revolution of love, a revolution of tenderness: “By your example, may your children be guided to become a kinder, more loving, more faith-filled generation, for the renewal of the Church and of all Irish society.”

During his next visit to the Capuchin-run Day Centre for the homeless, where more than 1,000 meals are distributed daily, Pope Francis was visibly moved and happy to be with them. It seemed another way to express his desire not to stay “outside” social problems, but to enter into them. The Church must be on the side of the wounded in society. Addressing those present, and perhaps thinking of the institutions where so many forms of abuse occurred in the past due to a lack of charity and forgetting Jesus present in our brothers and sisters, the Pope said: “I thank you for the love and the trust that you have for the Capuchin brothers. Thank you because you come here with trust! Let me say one thing to you. Do you know why you come here with trust? Because they help you without detracting from your dignity. For them, each of you is Jesus Christ. Thank you for the trust that you give us.”

Meeting with the Survivor Victims

That same evening at the Apostolic Nunciature, Pope Francis met with eight abuse victims. A 30-minute

meeting was scheduled, but instead it lasted 90 minutes. The victims were struck by the fact that sometimes the Pope even put his hands to his head, such was the impact of what he was hearing. Later, speaking to the Jesuits, the Pope confessed that the meeting had made him suffer greatly: "I really was unable to believe the stories that I have seen well documented. I heard them now in the other room and was deeply upset." And, he gave an example of what shocked him: "I didn't know that in Ireland there were also cases where unmarried women had their children taken away from them. Hearing this particularly touched my heart".

The Pope provided a glimpse into his own thoughts as to how the Church has reached such a tragic point, saying: "There is something I have understood with great clarity: this drama of abuse...has behind it a Church that is elitist and clericalist, an inability to be near to the people of God. Elitism, clericalism fosters every form of abuse. And sexual abuse is not the first. The first abuse is of power and conscience."

Despite the pain he must have been feeling for what he had heard and experienced, Pope Francis had to continue on his way. Seventy thousand people were waiting for him in the large stadium hosting the Festival of Families. Clearly making a great effort to go beyond this suffering he greeted those eagerly welcoming him as he was driven around the stadium, and then listening to the testimonies of five families from various parts of the world ...

In the Marian Shrine of Knock

Joy and celebration were the hallmarks of the Festival of Families in the stadium. But the Pope could not forget the meeting he had with the victims. So, the next morning, in weather that had turned foggy with wind and rain, he travelled to the Marian shrine of Knock, where he prayed intensely in a silence that touched everyone. In his address before reciting the Angelus, the Pope spoke as someone who was deeply moved by his encounter with the victims: "None of us can fail to be moved by the stories of young people who suffered abuse, were robbed of their innocence, were separated from their mothers, and were left scarred by painful memories". And he concluded: "I ask our Blessed Mother to intercede for all the survivors of abuse of any kind and to confirm every member of our Christian family in the resolve never again to permit these situations to occur. And to intercede for all of us, so that we can proceed always with justice and remedy, to the extent it depends on us, such violence."

The Culmination: The Ritual of Forgiveness

The climax of the Pope's visit was the rite of forgiveness during the Concluding Mass held in Phoenix Park in the presence of some 200.000 faithful. At the beginning of the celebration, in order to bear witness to the discerning journey he had undertaken, the Pope proposed the very significant gesture, saying: "Yesterday I met with eight persons who are survivors of the abuse of power, the abuse of conscience and sexual abuse. In reflecting on what they told me, I wish to implore the Lord's mercy for these crimes and to ask forgiveness for them". Reading a text he had prepared together with the survivor victims, Pope Francis expressed himself in moving words, seeking forgiveness.

We ask forgiveness for the cases of abuse in Ireland, the abuse of power, the abuse of conscience and sexual abuse on the part of representatives of the Church. In a special way, we ask forgiveness for all those abuses that took place in different kinds of institutions directed by men and women religious and other members of the Church. We also ask forgiveness for cases in which many minors were exploited for their labour.

We ask forgiveness for all those times when, as a Church, we did not offer to the survivors of any type of abuse compassion and the pursuit of justice and truth by concrete actions.

We ask forgiveness for some members of the hierarchy who took no responsibility for these painful situations and kept silent.

We ask forgiveness for those children who were taken away from their mothers and for all those times when so many single mothers who tried to find their children that had been taken away, or those children who tried to find their mothers, were told that this was a mortal sin. It is not a mortal sin; it is the fourth commandment!

May the Lord preserve and increase this sense of shame and repentance, and grant us the strength to ensure that it never happens again and that justice is done. Amen.

It was impressive to see how the crowd gathered for the mass welcomed the Pope's gesture with warm, powerful applause. It was a moment of clarity, honesty and, it was hoped, healing.

Conclusion: Speaking from the Heart

Shortly before his departure for Rome, at the conclusion of his visit, Pope Francis met with Irish bishops. It was a brief but very fraternal meeting: "A recurrent theme of my visit, of course, has been the Church's need to acknowledge and remedy, with evangelical honesty and courage, past failures – grave sins – with regard to the protection of children and vulnerable adults. Among these, women who were mistreated."

The Pope acknowledged how, in recent years, Irish bishops had taken many steps in the area of child protection and wanted to encourage them. He also shared with them a personal conviction: "As Saint John of the Cross teaches us, it is in the dark night that the light of faith shines purest in our hearts. And that light will show the way to the renewal of the Christian life in Ireland in the years ahead." Paradoxically, the wounds can provide an impetus for interior renewal of the Church, indicating new ways to imagine her life and mission: 'Whenever you and your people feel that you are a "little flock" facing challenges and difficulties, do not grow discouraged...'

The light of which Francis spoke is one born from suffering. So he felt it his duty to remind the bishops, who have endured any humiliations, of *The Humiliated One*: Jesus Crucified and Abandoned: "We have been saved by the humiliation of the Son of God and this gives us courage. The wounds of Christ give us courage". We discover how the wound contains the resurrection, the new beginning, the third day.

Then, on the very day when Archbishop Viganò's declaration was released and creating quite a sensation worldwide, the Pope recalled the maternal presence of Mary. His parting words to the bishops of Ireland were a personal sharing and wise advice: "I am close to you: keep moving ahead with courage! The Lord is very good, and Our Lady is watching over you. When things get a little difficult, pray the *Sub tuum praesidium*, because the Russian mystics say that at moments of spiritual turmoil, we should go under the mantle of the Holy Mother of God".