

## Irish teenagers just don't 'do religion'

### *Ireland's young Catholics*



Irish teenagers just don't 'do religion': Will Pope's Dublin visit bring renewal of faith to young Catholics

There are hopes that Pope Francis' arrival in Dublin next year will bring renewal of faith to lapsed young Catholics. Yet many worry that they may now be lost to the Church for good.

The buzzword in Irish pastoral circles these days is “renewal”. If you were to take Mass attendance as the criterion by which to measure the health of the Church in Ireland, anyone seeking to renew Irish Catholicism faces an uphill struggle. In 1990, 81 per cent of those identifying themselves as Catholics attended Mass at least weekly. This had fallen to 48 per cent in 2006 and, by 2011, weekly Mass attendances in the Dublin area had plummeted to 14 per cent.

The falling away from church attendance among Irish teenagers and young adults is particularly striking. The 2016 Census revealed a rising number of young people in and around Dublin who identified themselves as having “no religion”. Gerard Gallagher, pastoral co-ordinator in the Archdiocese of Dublin, who has worked with young people for more than two decades, told me that this group just does not “do any religion” and most are very unlikely to return to the Church. They regard religious faith as something for older people. “It can be difficult to nurture a young Church when we only experience an ageing one. Ireland is becoming a country with older and less religious people.”

In a recent article in the independent Irish Catholic journal *The Furrow*, Sean O’Conaill points out that teenagers lose interest in the Church when they no longer see its relevance. The Church’s leadership in Ireland is “failing to confront ... the challenges of faith formation in what is now a post-Christendom

society”. Compounding this, according to O’Conaill, is a lack of an authoritative body of data on faith formation in Catholic schools – and the reason for that is the fear that research would reveal how “the Irish Catholic school system is not in most cases forming a faith that can withstand even the challenge of adolescence”.

Against this disturbing backdrop, Anna Keegan has just been appointed by the bishops to a new role as project officer for the Council for Pastoral Renewal, Adult Faith Development and Youth Ministry. Bishop Donal McKeown of Derry, who is chairman of the Episcopal Commission for Worship, Pastoral Renewal and Faith Development, told me that the bishops recognise that some national co-ordination is necessary in youth and vocations ministry, and in response they have funded a national office for vocations and this full-time role in pastoral renewal and youth ministry.

It is a bold move. The hope is that the appointment will have an impact on youth ministry in Ireland in the run up to the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October next year, which will focus on young people. But is it too late? According to Gallagher, “Youth ministry in Ireland has been in decline for many years.”

A generation of young people has grown up in Ireland hearing little else about the Catholic Church than the stories of clerical and institutional abuse that have dominated coverage of religious affairs in the media since the early 1990s onwards. To make matters worse, Gallagher says the Church is stuck in a sort of “maintenance denial”, focusing its diminishing energies on “keeping things going rather than creating a model of Church fit for twenty-first-century Ireland”.

For Gallagher, whose book *Are We Losing the Young Church?* was first published more than 10 years ago, youth ministry was once one of the most exciting ministries to be involved with in Ireland. But today many involved in pastoral ministry steer clear of work with young people. Unease over revelations of the extent of Church-related abuse of young people is certainly partly responsible.

“In theory, everyone encourages youth ministry. In reality, most want nothing at all to do with it,” says Gallagher. “This would sum up the difficulties some youth ministers experience today. There’s a ‘leave it to others’ attitude. Parishes lament the absence of young people, but most are comfortable and don’t want to be disturbed.”

So the lack of enthusiasm among young people for Catholicism is mirrored by a wariness within the Church for engagement in a ministry to youth. A source told me that this is clearly demonstrated by the poor response to the online consultation that took place earlier this year in preparation for the 2018 Synod on Youth. Of the 26 dioceses across the island of Ireland, 10 did not get a sufficient number of responses to “The Big April Ask” to file a diocesan response. The uptake was significantly lower than the surveys conducted in preparation for the two synods on the family in 2015 and 2016, begging the question as to why the bishops were so much more active in promoting the survey on the family.

The Catholic Communications Office failed to respond to *The Tablet*’s request for information on the level of response across the country to “The Big April Ask”. However, a spokesman told me that a number of youth directors across Ireland had already undertaken a web-based consultation with young people to complement other local diocesan youth initiatives. He added: “The bishops recognise that the upcoming synod offers a valuable opportunity to review youth ministry throughout Ireland”, and to

develop “a focused conversation with young people about their contribution to the life of the Church”.

Asked about the survey, Bishop McKeown says: “It is fair to say that dioceses’ commitment to youth ministry is mixed across the country.” The main point of the process, he says, was not the gathering of data – as the answers could be easy to predict – but to “try and develop a greater level of conversation and to promote different ways of engaging young people, not only church-going”.

In an address given in Limerick as part of the preparations for the World Meeting of Families to be held in Dublin next year, which Pope Francis is confidently expected to attend, Gallagher highlighted “an urban myth” that circulates in Church circles that claims that young people are not interested in being part of their local parish, saying, “Maybe this is because some parishes struggle to reach out to young people or have inconsistent youth ministry programmes.” Gallagher does not believe young people have abandoned their faith or the Church: “Many parishes became preoccupied with maintaining pastoral programmes that did not include young people. As a result, young people find other ways of using their time.”

Gallagher insists that young people are willing to be part of a Church where they feel welcomed. He quotes Pope Francis’ observation: “Young people are the windows through which the future enters the world.” To Gallagher, this means “we have to create the material and spiritual conditions for their full development”.

Even though, one year ahead of a papal visit, the Irish Church appears to have no coherent plan for youth ministry, a committed team of youth leaders around the country continue to reimagine youth ministry in local settings. According to Bishop McKeown, “There is much good work going on locally and I am excited that we are on the cusp of something. Am I depressed about youth ministry? Not in the slightest. It is from subversive little groups that new life is coming into the Irish Church. I hope that the post of national co-ordinator and the conversations around the preparations for the World Meeting of Families and the Synod of Bishops in 2018 will enable us to offer a sharing of good practice and an encouragement for many local initiatives.” With an optimistic flourish, McKeown adds: “And then we have World Youth Day in Panama in January 2019!”

Br Martin Bennett is vocation promoter for the Irish Capuchins as well as chaplain to St Francis College in Rochestown in Cork, a secondary school with 700 boys. During the last five years he has collaborated with the Office for Evangelisation in the Archdiocese of Dublin to help them design, develop and deliver a number of Gospel-centred programmes for young adults. He has also been involved in World Youth Day (WYD) preparation programmes. Last year, he travelled with 300 young people to WYD in Krakow, where they were joined by another 2,000 pilgrims from Ireland. “It can be easy to let this great work go unnoticed and to feel that we are not engaging with young people, when in fact we are,” he says.

As a school chaplain, Bennett engages with students every day. It is “a frontline ministry and often the only point of contact a young person has with somebody who represents faith in a tangible way. If we wish to make a deep and meaningful connection with young people, a connection that will lead them into a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, then we must invite them to reflect upon their own experiences in light of the Gospel message.”

St Paul's Church on Arran Quay, Dublin, has been reimagined as a centre for pioneering youth outreaches. It offers young people spaces in which they can encounter other young people in a faith context. Recently, St Paul's hosted Fortify, a conference reflecting on youth ministry. It drew more than 400 young adults, many in positions of voluntary leadership, to spend time reflecting on the role of young people within the Church.

As Gallagher told me, "It really was a tonic to hear about all the various initiatives that are taking place in 'the young Church' throughout the country."

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