

## THE NEW CATHOLIC IRELAND

*Précis. Spiritual directors see a profound change in Irish life. Surveys and studies confirm a decline in belief in God and in religious practice. The decline is dramatic, even drastic. Ireland is now mission territory and the Church must seek out the lost. The Centre takes the approach that Annotation 18 exercises will help, and tries to connect them to people's needs through lay people highly connected in both worlds. Marketing is crucial and the mission must be clear.*

**A**t a recent training weekend for spiritual directors at the Jesuit Centre of Spirituality in Dublin, we invited participants to reflect on why “spiritual guidance” might be relevant to people’s lives today. An interesting analysis of current changes in Irish attitudes and values emerged from that discussion. The following points were noted.

The Celtic tiger “roar” had plunged many people into a wave of hyper-activity; life had become busy, busy, busy and very stressful. Time for family, friends, and relaxation had become restricted and this produced a degree of nervous tension hitherto unknown. More recent downward trends in the economy had compounded stress, especially since many now had life-styles that demanded constant monetary re-fuelling. Shopping centres had become “the cathedrals of the modern age” where people found meaning – the underlying philosophy being “I buy, therefore I am” or, as one wit put it in view of shopping malls, *tesco*<sup>1</sup>, *ergo sum* – and, in many cases also, Sunday solace. In these cathedrals, people mingled in the vacuous din of virtual community while they virtually ignored the neighbour next door, who remained, by choice, just another suburban stranger. A certain superficiality in life and relationship was noted, leading – inevitably – to a feeling of emptiness, dissatisfaction, lack of peace. No wonder, it was observed, that people hungered for

“spirituality”, i.e. for meaning, direction, inner peace, fulfilment. This search tended to take the consumerist line, i.e. “the answer” could equally be found in Tai Chi or Aikido or in Christianity, according to personal taste and desire. In fact, any institutionalized or church-based spirituality tended to raise the eyebrows of suspicion and distrust and was, therefore, easily ignored or dismissed. The Catholic Church’s credibility in particular had been shaken to its foundations by internal scandals and a concerted media agenda against it. By contrast, and perhaps in compensation for the loss of religion, the popularity of New Age beliefs, therapies and practices had mushroomed. Public displays of institutional corruption in politics and business, brought to light by investigative tribunals, had highlighted a deep-rooted ethical confusion in society which had, in turn, given rise to an anxious quest for personal advisors, mentors and guides. People were seeking out “life-coaches” in the secular sphere and gurus of one sort or another in the spiritual sphere.

This was the socio-cultural and religious context in which the *need* – apart from the *desire* – for spiritual directors of the type we were forming at our Centre was readily discerned. Although we could see that we were answering a critical need, it was also felt that our image and our language failed to capture the imagination of our “customers”. Hence, we had a huge marketing problem.

These impressionistic observations of changing attitudes and beliefs in Irish society seem well attested and corroborated by recent studies<sup>2</sup>. The most recent survey – hot off the press – from The Irish Times / Taylor Nelson Sofres market research bureau of Ireland youth poll of 15-24 year-olds, reveals that the vast majority of young people believe in God, although most do not go to Mass. Some 86% believe in God and 14% do not. Belief in God declines somewhat with age, falling from 89% among 15-17 year-olds to 87% among 18-22 year-olds to 81% among 23-24 year-olds. Mass attendance by the young falls steeply with age, with 59% of the 15-17 year-olds going, 40% of those aged 18-19, and 38% of those 20 to 24. These figures show that the Catholic religion as provider of overall meaning is in decline. The same survey also found that more than half of the young people in the state know someone in their age group who has committed or attempted suicide. The steady upward trend in suicide among 15-24 year old Irish males published by the World Health

Organization in 1992, cited by Michael J. Kelleher in *Suicide and the Irish*<sup>3</sup>, has continued to rise. Kelleher, reflecting on these figures, suggests that “the change in *weltanschauung* or general outlook on life, from the religious to the secular, must affect how we Irish respond to stress. As religion loses its hold, its capacity to allow sublimation of troubles and disappointment diminishes” (p. 28). In addition, he points out that Catholicism’s unambiguous condemnation of suicide as sinful exercised a restraining influence on Irish people in the past, but now that the sense of sin has diminished, this check no longer holds sway. This is certainly borne out by the figures.

These impressions and statistics describe some features of the “soil” we are called to cultivate and enrich with the gospel, in particular through the sieve of the Spiritual Exercises ministry. Our contribution will be a

modest one but ought also to be an informed one – one that knows how to read the signs of the times, analyze “the soil” or dispositions of those hearing the Word, and attempt to respond appropriately.

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The observations about Annotation 18 made in Fr Tetlow’s report to the past congregation (#104, p.18) seem particularly apt and relevant to our situation. Research findings on religious practice and attitudes in Ireland<sup>4</sup> would suggest that the more appropriate

pastoral *entrée* into the lives of young (and now, not so young) people is that of Annotation 18, i.e. helping people to order their lives according to basic Christian norms. The suicide trends among young males – equaled by crime trends in the same age group, often alcohol related – point, perhaps, to a sort of individual and group “desolation”, due – in the light of Ignatian wisdom – to “tepidity, laziness or negligence in the exercise of piety” (*Sp Ex* 322). A certain “anomie” or normlessness, with loss of overall meaning and direction, explains the ache for spirituality among all age-groups. As one person put it, it is not more *money* that people need, but more *meaning*. Surely this is a challenge to us – I speak of the Jesuit Centre of Spirituality here in Dublin – to present boldly and creatively the Principle and Foundation and the First Week of the

Exercises along with the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits of the First Week.

It is becoming increasingly clear to us, through our contact with lay people and especially the young, that a basic catechesis is often what is needed first and foremost. To this end, many of our initiatives are propaedeutic. We invite lay people to come for an evening, a day, perhaps a few days, simply to reflect on their lives, learn to pray, get in touch with the issues that may be troubling them, talk to a spiritual guide, etc. We have also included in our programme weekend retreats and seminars for young men; for those estranged from the Church; and for active, busy people in search of a more solidly rooted spiritual life, etc. We continue to train spiritual directors in a solid Ignatian approach and our hope is that these directors will bring their skills to bear in their local situations, especially in parishes. (They will also be equipped to give the Exercises under supervision).

The Annotation 19 retreat continues to be a fitting instrument in the formation of lay leaders. We, at Manresa, are currently reflecting on how best to promote this form of the Ignatian retreat.

Manresa House is at a stage of transition from a mainly religious to a mainly lay clientele. This change is itself a necessary adaptation to the changing needs of our times. As a strategy to facilitate the transition, we proposed, first and foremost, to “build bridges” from our Centre to those constituencies where we felt the greatest need would be served and the greatest fruit and the more universal good might be realized. We would have to be faithful to our Ignatian charism, deeply rooted in our tradition, yet also open to the “new world” around us and ready to adapt to a rapidly changing reality. We have been fortunate to find committed lay people deeply knowledgeable of and sympathetic to our tradition who were also “connected” with a whole constituency that we – otherwise – would find difficult to reach. One such person, for instance, is a practicing barrister who runs a prayer and spirituality centre in Kilkenny. He is working closely with us to draw people from his own profession to

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our Centre. We also engaged the services of a business consultant and author who worked with the team on an initiative directed at business CEO's and Human Resources professionals who explored with us the role spirituality plays — or ought to play — in industry, a subject of increasing interest to business leaders<sup>5</sup>. We hope to pursue this initiative over the coming years. We are also in negotiation with a team of lay people who are spearheading a project for the spiritual formation of teachers nationwide. These are just some examples to illustrate a pastoral strategy, namely, that of linking our Ignatian “product” with the needs of particular interest groups through people who have a foot firmly in both camps.

Effective advertising and marketing are crucial at this stage of transition. We are attempting, through the medium of print and the world wide web, to develop a fresh image which we hope will entice more lay people to our Centre. (See, for instance, our new website: [www.jesuit.ie/manresa](http://www.jesuit.ie/manresa) and our colourful brochure *Opportunities 2003*). Drawing on the success of the Sacred Space website<sup>6</sup>, we are now advertising a Sacred Space Retreat Day at Manresa: “*New @ Sacred Space: A Sacred Space Day. Making the virtual real, we aim to bring together visitors to the Jesuit prayer site ([www.sacredspace.ie](http://www.sacredspace.ie)) for a day's quiet prayer and meditation in the lovely grounds of Manresa, the spiritual home of Sacred Space*”. Running concurrently with this day, we will offer a retreat on line for those who cannot travel. I cite this initiative merely to illustrate our attempt to project ourselves into the future and reach out to the women and men of our time.

Ireland, like most European countries, is now mission territory. The “new evangelization” requires that we “launch out into the deep”<sup>7</sup> with renewed courage, creativity, and determination. In the not too distant past, the flock came to us. Now the situation is reversed: many are lost and confused and seeking direction without knowing where to find it. We have to go out in search of the lost and point them decisively towards the Good Shepherd who hears their cry and answers their need. The Spiritual Exercises in all their adapted manifestations can help people to “hear his voice” and follow him to that place of peace and consolation they so desperately seek. This is our challenge. This is our ministry.

Let me finish with our Mission Statement — the compass which we have set to guide our decisions and choices into the future.

The Jesuit Centre of Spirituality at Manresa is open to everyone – lay, religious, clergy, people of all denominations, traditions and beliefs. It offers a peaceful atmosphere in which to seek God, attend to one's experience in prayer and discover one's unique place and calling in life. Aided by skilled listening and respect for God's direct communication with each person, we hope to facilitate an experience of God who is present and active in our lives. A significant part of our ministry is that of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola. These make possible a deeply personal encounter with Jesus who gives meaning and direction to human life. Operating in and for the Church, we also provide a formation in Christian life and leadership and the opportunity to grow in a faith that hungers for justice.

#### NOTES

1. Tesco is a supermarket chain with major outlets in the U.K. and Ireland.
2. See, for example, James P. Mackey & E. McDonagh, eds., *Religion and Politics in Ireland at the turn of the millennium*, Columba Press, 2003; and John Scally, ed., *A Just Society? Ethics and Values in Contemporary Ireland*, Liffey Press, 2003.
3. Michael J. Kelleher, *Suicide and the Irish*, Mercier Press, 1996, p. 20.
4. See Mícheál McGréil, S.J., *Religious Practice and Attitudes in Ireland*, Maynooth, 1991.
5. See Catherine McGeachy, *Spiritual Intelligence in the Workplace*, Veritas, 2001.
6. This is an on-line prayer site conceived and developed at the Jesuit Communication Centre in Dublin.
7. *Duc in altum*, John Paul's rallying call in *Novo Millennium Ineunte*.