

Why did Pope John Paul II visit Ireland? The 1979 papal visit in context

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Pope John Paul II's visit to Ireland in 1979 was an iconic moment in the history of twentieth-century Irish Catholicism. It has, however, received little detailed historical scrutiny. Based on state archival and hitherto unavailable diocesan material, this article contextualizes the visit by explaining the pastoral and leadership challenges that confronted the Irish hierarchy. Second, this article discusses how close the pope came to visiting Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles. This was of concern not just to the hierarchy but to the Irish and British governments. Third, the organization of the visit, which was closely tied to the pastoral concerns of the Irish bishops, is surveyed. Lastly, the pastoral impact of the visit is considered. If the Catholic hierarchy hoped that the papal visit might arrest the declining institutional influence of the Catholic Church, reverse a quiet but growing faith crisis, or hasten a cessation of violence in Northern Ireland, then those expectations were misplaced. Ultimately, the pastoral impulse of the 1979 papal visit to Ireland was to preserve rather than renew the Irish Catholic tradition at a time when Irish Catholics were fixed on future material advancement rather than fidelity to their spiritual past.

Keywords: Ireland, Roman Catholicism, Pope John Paul II, Northern Ireland Troubles

Papal visits were relatively rare before the papacy of John Paul II. During his long pontificate, he travelled to 129 countries at least once and became a global personality. His visit to Ireland in 1979, the first by any pope, stands as one of the great public events in the history of Irish Catholicism. An estimated 2.7 million people greeted him over three days between 29 September and 1 October amid, as one newspaper put it, 'outpourings of joy and fervour'.¹ Ireland was the new pontiff's third journey during his inaugural year but, as Peter Hebblethwaite, Vatican commentator and biographer of Popes John

* The author is grateful to the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Dublin City University for funding some of the archival research for this article. The author is indebted to David Bracken for his assistance in the Limerick Diocesan Archives, and to Dr Gerard Hanley, Professor James Kelly, Dr Mary MacDiarmada, and two anonymous referees for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

¹ *Irish Times*, 1 October 1979.

XXIII and Paul VI, noted, it was John Paul's first freely chosen one.² His visit to Mexico in January to open the third Latin American bishops' conference would have been in the engagement book of any pope, while a return to Poland for the ninth centenary of St Stanislaus in June 1979 was a visit that a Polish pope naturally had to make. At the time, the pope's choice of Ireland was viewed as a tribute to the country's Catholic fidelity. The background context was more complex, however. Over the previous decade, the Irish Catholic hierarchy had grappled with three grave challenges. The first was the need to adapt the Church to the demands of the 1970s against a background of a quiet but growing faith crisis among the laity and a marked fall in vocations. The second was significant leadership change among the bench of bishops, which, arguably, exacerbated a sense of post-conciliar uncertainty. Third was the tragedy of the Northern Ireland Troubles. Each was addressed by the pope while in Ireland. During his other visits in 1979, John Paul did not shy away from what his listeners may not have wanted to hear. In Mexico he warned radical Latin American priests to avoid confusing Marxism with social justice. In Poland he criticized the country's closed borders and exhorted his countrymen to press for more freedom. In Ireland he enjoined the crowds to renounce political violence and to remain faithful to the Church and its teachings by rejecting the advances of materialism and secularism.

The papal visit is mentioned routinely but relatively briefly in survey histories of twentieth-century Ireland and more specialized works on Catholicism, the Northern Ireland Troubles, and ecumenism.³ It has generally been regarded as a high point for Catholicism before social change gathered pace, altering the Irish religious landscape and the position of the Catholic Church within it. One influential commentary suggests that the pontiff saw 'nothing which disturbed the notion of "Catholic Ireland" as it had been formed in his mind and which could so easily be equated with Poland'.⁴ Such a reading is too uncomplicated. Despite its status as an iconic moment in twentieth-century

² Peter Hebblethwaite, 'Pope's Irish visit his first "free" journey abroad', *Evening Herald*, 9 May 1979.

³ For example, Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 530; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Ambiguous Republic: Ireland in the 1970s* (London: Profile Books, 2012), 652-6; Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2002), 237-8; Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Revolution and State Building* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005), 349-50; Daithí Ó Corráin, 'Catholicism in Ireland, 1880-2015: Rise, Ascendancy and Retreat' in Thomas Bartlett, ed. *The Cambridge History of Ireland IV: 1800 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 753-4; Maria Power, *From Ecumenism to Community Relations: Inter-Church Relationships in Northern Ireland, 1980-2005* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007), 34; Oliver P. Rafferty, *Catholicism in Ulster, 1603-1983: An Interpretative History* (London: Hurst & Co., 1994), 276; Margaret M. Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles, 1968-1998* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 94-6.

⁴ Keith Robbins, *England, Ireland, Scotland, Wales: The Christian Church, 1900-2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 407.

Irish history, the papal visit has not been sufficiently scrutinized. Utilizing state archival and hitherto unavailable diocesan material, the present article challenges the depiction of the papal visit as a celebration of Catholic Ireland and argues that it was ultimately an unsuccessful attempt to preserve it. Four aspects of the 1979 papal visit are considered. First, the visit is set against the pastoral and leadership challenges that troubled the Irish hierarchy. Second, the article discusses how close the pope came to visiting Northern Ireland at the height of the Troubles. This was of concern not just to the hierarchy but to the Irish and British governments. The latter was particularly keen to utilize the Vatican to support its broad policy towards Northern Ireland. Third, the organization of the visit, an impressive feat accomplished in less than two months, will be surveyed. This was an exercise in the working of episcopal authority from above with conspicuously little lay involvement. Lastly, the pastoral impact of the visit will be considered.

An incipient faith crisis and episcopal stocktaking

The papal visit came at the end of a decade during which the Irish hierarchy devoted increased attention to the challenges facing the Church in rapidly changing post-conciliar Ireland. Novel episcopal ‘think-ins’ in 1969 and in 1974 were the brainchild of Cardinal William Conway, archbishop of Armagh and primate of All Ireland since 1963, who believed it was necessary to establish the strategic objectives of the episcopal conference. ‘Ireland in the Seventies’ was the theme of the first ‘think-in’ at Maynooth from 24 to 28 November 1969. Although it was recognized that the practice of the faith was ‘very widespread and very deep’, there was concern about adherence to and knowledge of Catholic doctrine.⁵ The bishops maintained that considerable confusion existed among the laity, particularly those under thirty, and even among some priests on the essential teaching of the Church, between what was immutable and what was changeable.⁶ Conway suggested that the disquiet occasioned by Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Humanae vitae*, which reaffirmed traditional Church opposition to artificial means of birth control, and the impact of the permissive society were having an ‘unsettling effect’ on the young and ‘certain sectors of the “intellectual” classes’. Furthermore, he believed that the number giving up the practice of the faith, while relatively small, was increasing, particularly in urban areas.⁷ For the cardinal, the challenge facing the

⁵ Comment by Bishop William Philbin of Down and Connor on the existing state of Catholicism, n.d. [November 1969], Austin Quinn papers, AQ/55, Kilmore Diocesan Archives (hereafter KDA).

⁶ Minutes of a special meeting of the Irish Episcopal Conference, 24–28 November 1969, John Charles McQuaid papers, Hierarchy Meetings 1969, XV/29/72, Dublin Diocesan Archives.

⁷ Cardinal William Conway to Bishop Austin Quinn, 30 September 1969, enclosing a confidential memorandum: ‘Ireland in the Seventies’, Quinn papers, AQ/55, KDA.

hierarchy was to secure a deep personal commitment to the Catholic faith among the younger generation.

Several bishops recognized the need to base pastoral planning on sociological survey evidence. Following a request from the Vatican in 1967, a survey of vocations to the priesthood and religious life in the Irish Church was already in hand. Reporting in 1971, this survey revealed that for the first time in the twentieth century a decline in the total number of priests, brothers, and nuns was recorded in 1968. That this was no passing trend was confirmed by two further studies: 'Irish Priests and Religious, 1970-75' by Mícheál Mac Gréil SJ and Tom Inglis, and the annual vocations survey. Between 1966 and 1974 annual vocations to the priesthood and religious life fell from 1,409 to 547. Vocations to the brotherhood and sisterhood declined by 73 per cent and 70 per cent respectively, whereas diocesan vocations declined by 30 per cent. More alarmingly, by 1978 for every ten who entered all forms of religious life, seven others died and eight departed.⁸ The implications for the Church of a shrinking body of priests and religious were alarming.⁹

The 1969 'think-in' prompted the hierarchy to commission two studies of religious practice. The first surveyed 2,311 adults in the greater Dublin area in 1972-3. It found that 88 per cent attended Mass at least once a week, 63 per cent received Holy Communion at least once a month, and 81 per cent confessed a few times a year. The disparity between weekly Mass attendance and weekly Communion was striking, with only 30 per cent participating weekly in the sacrament. The survey revealed growing disinterest among the young. One-quarter of 21 to 25-year-olds did not attend weekly Mass, 37 per cent rarely or never went to confession, and almost 29 per cent rarely or never received Holy Communion.¹⁰ The Dublin results were largely confirmed by a national survey of religious practice, attitudes, and beliefs in 1973-4. Beyond astonishingly high weekly Mass attendance of almost 91 per cent, monthly confession was 46.5 per cent and weekly Communion just 29 per cent.¹¹ Just as in Dublin, the adherence of the young was weakening markedly. Some 30 per cent in the 21-25 age category and a quarter of young single men and women in the 18-30 age bracket had abandoned the minimal obligations of weekly Mass and annual sacraments. Another alarming trend

⁸ Tom Inglis, 'Decline in Numbers of Priests and Religious in Ireland', *Doctrine and Life*, 30:2 (1979): 81, 84.

⁹ The classic account of the declining influence of the Catholic Church remains Tom Inglis, *Moral Monopoly: The Rise and Fall of the Catholic Church in Modern Ireland* (2nd ed. Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 1998).

¹⁰ Mícheál Mac Gréil & Mícheál Ó Gliasáin, 'Church Attendance and Religious Practice of Dublin Adults', *Social Studies: The Journal of Irish Sociology*, 3:2 (1974): 177-81.

¹¹ Máire Nic Ghiolla Phádraig, 'Religion in Ireland: Preliminary Analysis', *Social Studies: The Journal of Irish Sociology*, 5:2 (1976): 129.

for the bishops was that 47.5 per cent of those aged 18-30 had difficulty with orthodox Church teaching.¹² When this issue was further investigated, it was found that 63 per cent of respondents disagreed that artificial contraception was always wrong, 46 per cent agreed that priests should be able to marry, and 43 per cent agreed that homosexuality should be decriminalized.¹³ While the overall levels of belief and religious practice in Ireland were uniquely high by international standards, there were worrying signs about the future. The national survey forecast, with considerable accuracy, that many parents of the next generation would not return to religious practice with marriage and middle age.

The preliminary findings of the Dublin and national surveys were considered by the bishops at a second 'think-in' in Mulranny, County Mayo from 21 to 27 April 1974 which considered pastoral strategy for the remainder of the decade. The bishops took comfort from the positive standing of priests and high Sunday Mass attendance. Unlike the 1969 meeting, the views of clerical and lay experts were actively sought and thirty-one position papers on a wide range of subjects were prepared. Edward Daly's memoir provides a rare episcopal insight into Mulranny. It was his first bishops' meeting which he later described as the most stimulating and exciting of his twenty-year episcopal career.¹⁴ Daly was then the youngest member of the hierarchy. He became prominent nationally and internationally following Bloody Sunday when thirteen unarmed civil rights demonstrators were shot dead on 30 January 1972. In a defining image, Daly, then a 38-year-old curate in St Eugene's parish in Derry, was photographed courageously waving a bloodied white handkerchief while escorting Jackie Duddy, a mortally wounded teenager to whom he had administered the last rites. Subsequently, Daly powerfully articulated his community's horror at the events on television in Ireland, Britain, and the United States.¹⁵ In February 1974 he succeeded Neil Farren as bishop of Derry.

Several recommendations at the Mulranny meeting echoed concerns raised in 1969. These included the need for greater lay involvement in the spiritual mission of the Church, the continued education of clergy, and the acute need for adult religious education.¹⁶ Ecumenism was not discussed in 1969 but was prominent at Mulranny.¹⁷ Greater ecumenical contact at a Church leadership level was symbolized by the historic first inter-church meeting at

¹² *Ibid.*, 135.

¹³ Mícheál Mac Gréil, *Prejudice and Tolerance in Ireland: Based on a Survey of Intergroup Attitudes of Dublin Adults and Other Sources* (Dublin: College of Industrial Relations, 1977), 411.

¹⁴ Edward Daly, *A Troubled See: Memoirs of a Derry Bishop* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2011), 59.

¹⁵ See Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles*, 49-50, 56.

¹⁶ 'Pastoral guidelines: Report of special meeting of Irish bishops, Mulranny: April 1974', Clogher Diocesan Archives.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

Ballymascanlon in September 1973.¹⁸ A sequel was scheduled on 1 May 1974, four days after the conclusion of the Mulranny gathering. The astonishing absence of a press and information office for the Catholic Church in Ireland as a whole was rectified at Mulranny. Under the guidance of Bishop Edward Daly, who had been religious affairs correspondent with RTÉ (Raidió Teilifís Éireann, Irish state television) before becoming a bishop, a Catholic Press and Information Office (CPIO) was established in February 1975.¹⁹

Mulranny did not signal a radical reorientation of outlook or policy by the bishops. The character of the meeting was ‘conservationist’.²⁰ Pastorally, the bishops hoped that high Mass attendance would maintain the Irish Catholic Church as a people’s church. Large congregations once a week did not guarantee spiritual vitality, however. Both the Dublin and national surveys raised fundamental questions about the depth of religious engagement and an absence of internalized faith. The author of the national survey concluded that ‘Irish religious practice is sustained to an inadmissible extent by rule and law, social custom and a sense of duty, a framework of authority and sanction rather than by a personal commitment of mind and heart’.²¹ Episcopal stocktaking was all very well but implementation of recommendations was another matter. In the view of one participant, ‘many of the decisions became lost in translation from aspiration to reality’.²² Revealingly, an information booklet prepared by the hierarchy for the 1979 papal visit was candid about the ‘immense challenges’ that the Church faced. Referring to the national survey, the booklet instanced the incongruence of high Mass attendance and poor Holy Communion rates. It also referred to the sharp decline of vocations, and a survey of university students which found that one in seven no longer regarded themselves as Catholic – an alarming finding given that half the Irish population was then under twenty-five.²³ In light of the growing weight of survey evidence, there was a clear sense that the bishops hoped that the papal visit might forestall the decline of family prayer, the growing disengagement of the young,

¹⁸ For an overview of ecumenical developments in the late 1960s and 1970s, see Power, *From Ecumenism to Community Relations*, 17-26; Daithí Ó Corráin, *Rendering to God and Caesar: The Irish Churches and the Two States in Ireland, 1949-73* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 209-29. On ecumenical dialogue in the 1980s and 1990s, see Maria Power, ‘“Of some symbolic importance but not much else”: The Irish Inter-Church Meeting and Ecumenical Dialogue in Northern Ireland, 1980-1999’, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 43:1 (2008): 111-23.

¹⁹ *Irish Catholic Directory* (hereafter *ICD*) 1977: 344; Daly, *Troubled See*, 60.

²⁰ *Irish Times*, 29 April 1974.

²¹ Cited by Peter Connolly, ‘The Church in Ireland since Vatican II’, *The Furrow*, 30:12 (1979): 757.

²² Daly, *Troubled See*, 59.

²³ Information booklet for the papal visit [1979], Department of the Taoiseach (hereafter DT) 2009/84/2, National Archives of Ireland, Dublin (hereafter NAI).

and the increasing societal detachment from the institutional Church and its teachings.

Tomás Ó Fiaich becomes archbishop of Armagh and cardinal

That the sense of urgency evident at Mulranny faltered was due in part to the declining health and death of Cardinal Conway on 17 April 1977 at the age of sixty-four. In Cahal Daly's view, 'nearly every major initiative in Church life in Ireland in the 1970s was originated by him, or at least owed its promotion to his support'.²⁴ Conway had also been front and centre of the Church's condemnation of violence during the Troubles. Most of the statements issued by the six northern bishops, whose dioceses straddled the political border or were located entirely in Northern Ireland, were drafted by the cardinal.²⁵ Daly recalled how 'a sense of anxiety' descended on the episcopal conference without Conway's leadership.²⁶ There was no obvious successor. Press speculation centred on Tomás Ó Fiaich, the Armagh-born president of Maynooth College since June 1974, and on Cahal Daly, a native of Antrim and one of the foremost intellectuals in the Irish Catholic Church. Daly was appointed bishop of Ardagh and Clonmacnoise in 1967. He became the hierarchy's most prolific commentator on a broad range of subjects, but foremost, from 1969 onward, was the theme of political violence.²⁷ Bishop William Philbin of Down and Connor, the senior prelate in the ecclesiastical province of Armagh, was considered too close to retirement. Furthermore, as Oliver Rafferty has discussed, there was considerable disaffection among clergy and people given his response to the Troubles.²⁸ Edward Daly of Derry was deemed too young.

Despite the absence of any *locus standi* in the matter, both the British and Irish governments communicated their thoughts on Conway's successor to the Vatican. The British minister to the Holy See emphasized the social and political importance of the archbishop of Armagh.²⁹ Garret FitzGerald, Irish minister for foreign affairs, wondered if there should be consultation between the governments. He intimated to the British ambassador to Ireland his government's desire for a northerner and that Cahal Daly was its preferred

²⁴ Cahal Daly, *Steps on My Pilgrim Journey* (Dublin: Veritas, 1998), 377.

²⁵ The dioceses of Clogher, Derry, Kilmore, and Armagh straddle the border, while both Down and Connor and Dromore are located entirely within Northern Ireland. For a comprehensive analysis of Conway's statements during the Troubles, see Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles*, 24-92.

²⁶ Daly, *Steps*, 381-2.

²⁷ See Maria Power, *Catholic Social Teaching and Theologies of Peace in Northern Ireland: Cardinal Cahal Daly and the Pursuit of the Peaceable Kingdom* (London: Routledge, 2021).

²⁸ Rafferty, *Catholicism in Ulster*, 268.

²⁹ Brief for secretary of state on primate of all Ireland, 24 May 1977, CJ 4/1546, The National Archives, London (hereafter TNA).

candidate.³⁰ Daly was also favoured by the British government because of his record of unflinching criticism of the IRA, whereas Ó Fiaich was regarded as ‘a powerfully convinced nationalist’ and ‘an unknown quantity’.³¹ On 6 July 1977 the secretary of state for Northern Ireland took the unusual step of providing Archbishop Bruno Heim and Cardinal Basil Hume with an aide memoire on the qualities the British government would like in the new archbishop. These included experience of Northern Ireland, unequivocal denunciation of violence, a positive approach to inter-church co-operation, and a forward-looking approach on social issues such as education.³² As an apostolic delegate, Heim had no official diplomatic standing but played an important role in explaining British government policy on Northern Ireland to the Vatican. Heim considered Daly the ablest of the Northern Ireland candidates, but Hume expressed some doubts about his lack of charismatic qualities.³³ The views of the two governments appeared not to have influenced the appointment because Ó Fiaich was unveiled as the new archbishop on 22 August 1977. Subsequently, the Irish ambassador was given to understand that Gaetano Alibrandi, papal nuncio to Ireland since 1969 and regarded as a ‘devious Sicilian’ by members of the Vatican secretariat, had been instrumental in the appointment.³⁴

Ó Fiaich was the first cleric for 110 years to be elevated to Armagh without any prior episcopal experience. He later recalled how he turned to Archbishop Dermot Ryan of Dublin for advice and support as he ‘knew absolutely nothing about the internal workings of the Episcopal Conference’ and depended on Ryan ‘for the most elementary information’.³⁵ Furthermore, the death of Francis Lenny, the auxiliary bishop of Armagh, in July 1978 removed a key source of support and knowledge from the new archbishop. Marianne Elliott has contrasted Conway’s cautious ‘political reticence’ with Ó Fiaich’s often ill-considered frankness on the questions of national unity and British withdrawal from Northern Ireland.³⁶

During the twentieth century the cardinal’s biretta was customarily conferred on the archbishop of Armagh. In 1978 there was intermittent press speculation that the British government, aided by Heim and

³⁰ Minute by W. R. Haydon (British ambassador), 11 May 1977, CJ 4/1546, TNA.

³¹ Brief for secretary of state on primate of all Ireland, 24 May 1977, *ibid.*

³² Brief for secretary of state’s meeting with Cardinal Hume on 6 July 1977, *ibid.*

³³ Confidential note of a meeting between the secretary of state and Cardinal Hume and the Apostolic Delegate, 6 July 1977, *ibid.*

³⁴ Report of conversation between Ambassador David Donoghue and Audrys Backis (Council for the Public Affairs of the Church) on 1 Dec. 1977, Department of Foreign Affairs (hereafter DFA)/2009/22/26, NAI. On Ó Fiaich’s appointment, see Oliver P. Rafferty, ‘The British Government and the Appointment of Tomás Ó Fiaich as Archbishop of Armagh’, *Seanchas Ard Mhacha*, 25 (2014): 27-62; Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles*, 91.

³⁵ *ICD 1985*: 355.

³⁶ Marianne Elliott, *The Catholics of Ulster: A History* (London: Penguin, 2000), 473.

Hume, actively opposed the elevation of Ó Fiaich to the sacred college. While the reports of the British minister to the Holy See do not bear this out, the British government was critical of the tenor of Ó Fiaich's statements on the Northern Ireland situation. A confidential paper suggested that he was 'hailed neither as a man of prayer and deep spirituality, nor as an ecumenist . . . but for the strength and firmness of his commitment to the cause of Irish nationalism'.³⁷ In January 1978 Ó Fiaich suggested in a newspaper interview that the British government should issue a declaration of intent to withdraw from Northern Ireland.³⁸ To the consternation of the British government on 1 August the archbishop visited the Maze Prison, where republican prisoners had been engaging in a 'dirty protest' (which later became a hunger strike). He condemned 'the inhuman conditions' which he compared to the slums of Calcutta and maintained that the prisoners were in 'a different category to the ordinary'.³⁹ Roy Mason, then secretary of state for Northern Ireland, was 'sickened by the irresponsibility' of the statement.⁴⁰ Heim raised Ó Fiaich's remarks with the Irish ambassador in London before offering a corrective in his reports to the Vatican by emphasizing the prisoners' own responsibility for the conditions in the Maze. This mirrored the stance of the British government.⁴¹

In late November 1978, a report in the *Irish Independent* speculated that Heim and Hume were part of British diplomatic efforts to prevent Ó Fiaich's elevation.⁴² Hume wrote to the editor to express his distress at the suggestion, his regard for the Irish hierarchy, and to point out that the appointment of cardinals was the prerogative of the pope alone. He also telephoned Ó Fiaich to assure him that the report had no veracity.⁴³ Heim used his first audience with the new Pope John Paul II on 8 December to brief the pontiff on Northern Ireland and on what he considered a smear campaign against him. Furthermore, he told the pope that to deny Ó Fiaich a red hat would anger the Irish people.⁴⁴ In the event, Ó Fiaich was one of fifteen new cardinals created at John Paul II's first consistory on 30 June 1979. The archbishop of Armagh's elevation was regarded in diplomatic circles as

³⁷ Adrian Turner (Overseas Information Department (hereafter OID)) to D. G. Blunt (Republic of Ireland Department (hereafter RID)), 5 Jan. 1979, enclosing a confidential memorandum 'Position of the Catholic Church in Ireland', Foreign and Commonwealth Office (hereafter FCO) 33/4251, TNA.

³⁸ Rafferty, *Catholicism in Ulster*, 275.

³⁹ Haydon (Dublin) to FCO, 1 Aug. 1978, FCO 97/827, TNA; *Irish Times*, 2 August 1978; Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles*, 92-3.

⁴⁰ Roy Mason, *Paying the Price* (London: Robert Hale, 1999), 210-11.

⁴¹ On this see, Daithí Ó Corráin, 'The pope's man in London: Anglo-Vatican relations, the nuncio question and Irish concerns, 1938-82', *British Catholic History*, 35:1 (2020): 77.

⁴² *Irish Independent*, 29 November 1978; *Sunday Press*, 3 December 1978.

⁴³ Hume's press secretary to editor *Irish Independent*, 4 December 1978; *Guardian*, 6 December 1978; *Irish Times*, 8 December 1978.

⁴⁴ Geoffrey Crossley (Holy See) to David Goodall (FCO), 11 December 1978, CJ 4/4530, TNA.

a precursor of a possible papal visit to Ireland. At a reception in the Irish College in Rome in his honour, Ó Fiaich was asked if a decision had been reached on whether the pope would visit Ireland. The new cardinal suggested that there was a 50:50 chance.⁴⁵ In fact, the odds were closer to certainty.

Inviting the pope to Ireland

The idea of inviting the pope to attend the centenary celebrations of the appearance of the Blessed Virgin at Knock, County Mayo was promoted by Archbishop Joseph Cunnane of Tuam. Writing to the Taoiseach in August 1978, he sought government support for a commemorative stamp and, in passing, mentioned that the pope might attend. It was believed that an invitation had been issued to John Paul I.⁴⁶ The Irish government heard nothing more about a papal visit to Ireland until December 1978 when Alibrandi had a private audience with Karol Wojtyła, the new Pope John Paul II. It was believed that the nuncio conveyed an invitation from the Irish hierarchy to attend the Knock centenary.⁴⁷ Press speculation about a papal visit intensified when Ó Fiaich also had a private audience later that month.

Both the Irish and British governments kept the matter under close review as neither had been notified officially. A papal visit posed a delicate conundrum because the island of Ireland was divided politically into two states but was not partitioned ecclesiastically. The normal protocol was for the pope to stay with the primate when visiting a particular country. That would necessitate the pontiff crossing the Irish border into Northern Ireland to stay in Ara Coeli, the archbishop's residence in Armagh, which raised concerns for the British government. A further consideration for the Irish government was that it was due to assume the presidency of the European Community on 1 July 1979 and wanted to know as soon as possible if the pope intended to visit in August.

Several months elapsed before the two governments could establish if there was substance to press speculation which oscillated from certainty about the visit to a conviction that it would not take place in 1979 at all. Under Vatican protocol, papal visits were not announced very far in advance. Consequently, there was little contact between the Irish Catholic hierarchy or Alibrandi and the Irish government. On St Patrick's Day 1979, Father John Magee, private secretary to Paul VI, John Paul I, and John Paul II, informed John Molloy, the Irish ambassador, of the pontiff's definite desire to visit Ireland.⁴⁸ Magee, who was from Newry in County Down, was confident that a suitable

⁴⁵ *Irish Times*, 3 July 1979.

⁴⁶ Cunnane to Jack Lynch, 25 August 1978, DT/2009/135/505, NAI.

⁴⁷ Irish Embassy (Holy See) to DFA, 13 December 1978, DFA/2012/58/3, NAI.

⁴⁸ Report from Molloy, 17 March 1979, *ibid*.

programme could be devised that would surmount any political difficulties. He suggested that a stop in Drogheda, County Louth would ensure that the pope visited the archdiocese of Armagh without having to cross the political border.⁴⁹ It remained unclear to the Departments of Foreign Affairs and the Taoiseach if Magee expressed just a personal opinion.

In early May Archbishop Cunnane confirmed that John Paul II, a fervent devotee of the Virgin Mary, had accepted an invitation to Knock.⁵⁰ Subsequent press reports were sufficiently detailed to suggest that they had been informed by Church sources. Frustrated at the absence of definite notification, the Department of Foreign Affairs instructed the ambassador to 'make informal soundings' on the matter but the Vatican secretariat of state claimed, however, to have 'no knowledge' of a papal visit to Ireland; Alibrandi also remained tight-lipped.⁵¹ By early July, the visit was confirmed and the standing committee of the Irish hierarchy began to devise a structure to oversee preparations on 11 July.⁵² Ten days later, the Vatican announced that John Paul II would make a 'pastoral tour' to Ireland between 29 September and 1 October, while en route to address the General Assembly of the United Nations. The news was greeted with predictable enthusiasm by the Irish press. The Taoiseach, hurriedly briefed by Alibrandi, promised that 'every facility necessary will be provided to ensure that the Holy Father's visit will be a memorable and successful one'.⁵³

Organizing the papal visit and the conundrum of including Northern Ireland

The arrangements for the papal visit were drawn up in just eight weeks and were tightly controlled by the hierarchy. Ultimate responsibility was vested in an ad hoc bishops' committee which met weekly from late July. It comprised the four archbishops and the bishops of Meath, Derry, Dromore, Kilmore, Galway, and Limerick; the papal nuncio also attended several meetings. Below this was a national or central executive committee chaired by Bishop Francis McKiernan of Kilmore with Father Michael Smith as executive secretary. It was tasked with implementing the decisions of the bishops' committee, administering funds, organizing insurance, liaising with local committees, and appointing specialist committees such as those on liturgy

⁴⁹ Molloy to DFA, 20 March 1979, *ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Irish Independent*, 9 May 1979.

⁵¹ DFA to ambassador, 14 May 1979, DFA/2009/78/4; Molloy to secretary DFA, 26 May 1979, DT/2009/78/5, NAI.

⁵² Minutes of the Standing Committee of the Irish Episcopal Conference, 11 July 1979, Henry Newman papers, Box 289(2), Limerick Diocesan Archives (hereafter LDA).

⁵³ Statement by the Taoiseach, 21 July 1979, DFA/2010/35/2, NAI.

and the media.⁵⁴ Prominent agencies such as Bord Fáilte (tourism), RTÉ (television), Aer Lingus, the police, and the Department of the Taoiseach were represented on the central committee. Four organizing committees with responsibility for arrangements at centres due to be visited by the pope were also established. The absence of lay leadership in the organization of the papal visit was particularly striking. It seemed an incongruous throwback to a clericalist pre-conciliar age and went against widely articulated calls for greater lay involvement in the Church.

Two themes dominated the bishops' planning and indeed the visit itself: spiritual renewal, and peace and reconciliation. When Ó Fiaich and Archbishop Ryan of Dublin met Jack Lynch, the Taoiseach, on 23 July to discuss arrangements it was made clear that a state reception was not appropriate given the pastoral nature of the visit. The state's formal involvement included the ceremonial at Dublin airport, attendance by the president and the government at the principal religious ceremony in the Phoenix Park, and transport and security arrangements. Lynch was informed that the pope would visit Dublin and the North on the first day, the west on the second, and the south on the third day.⁵⁵ The draft itinerary proposed six major liturgical celebrations in Dublin, a venue in the cross-border diocese of Armagh, Knock, Galway, Limerick, and Maynooth. This was to allow as many people in as many centres as possible to see and hear the pope. The itinerary was subject to the approval of Archbishop Paul Marcinkus, who personally inspected the sites in August on behalf of the Vatican.

The mooted visit to Armagh was the most contentious aspect given the diplomatic, security, and public order ramifications. Despite Vatican advice that the visit be confined to the Republic, Ó Fiaich and Ryan made clear to Lynch their desire that the pope visit the North. Lynch wholeheartedly agreed because not to visit would 'highlight the existence of the border and would be regarded as a victory by [Ian] Paisley', the evangelical Presbyterian minister, Democratic Unionist Party MP for North Antrim, and MEP.⁵⁶ The Department of Foreign Affairs was also in favour for three reasons, provided the pontiff's security could be guaranteed. There was a danger of creating an impression of a Catholic south and a Protestant north which could, it was maintained, be exploited by extremists. At the same time, any gesture implying support for Irish unity had to be studiously avoided. Second, as the queen visited Northern Ireland in 1978 there was a risk that this would contrast sharply with a papal non-visit. Third, not to visit Armagh risked

⁵⁴ Standing Committee, 11 July 1979; Committee of bishops, 25 July 1979, Newman papers, Box 289(2), LDA.

⁵⁵ Minute of meeting between the Taoiseach, Cardinal Ó Fiaich and Archbishop Ryan, 23 July 1979, DT/2009/135/505, NAI.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

offending northern Catholics, who might direct their ire at the cardinal and the Dublin government.⁵⁷

Unionist politicians reacted predictably to press speculation about whether Northern Ireland would feature on the papal itinerary. James Molyneux, Ulster Unionist Party MP for South Antrim, warned Humphrey Atkins, secretary of state for Northern Ireland, that a visit to Ulster would be ‘calamitous’ and tantamount ‘to treating Ulster . . . not as a part of the United Kingdom but as a part of Ireland’; furthermore, it would encourage the IRA.⁵⁸ Ian Paisley launched a noisy campaign to defend Protestant Ulster by keeping the pope out of Northern Ireland. By contrast, the leaders of the Church of Ireland, Methodist Church and some Presbyterian ministers welcomed the prospect of the pope’s visit.⁵⁹

Throughout 1979, the British government was keen to establish whether a visit to Northern Ireland was contemplated. A political priority for the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) was that the British government should first be consulted and that any visit to Armagh should be at its invitation.⁶⁰ On 26 July the Vatican substitute secretary of state told Geoffrey Crossley, British minister to the Holy See, that suggestions of a visit to Northern Ireland were ‘pure speculation’.⁶¹ However, the Irish hierarchy announced publicly that the possibility remained open.⁶² During August the NIO became increasingly anxious that pressure was building to have the pope pay a brief visit to Armagh. Crossley subsequently learned that new proposals about Armagh had been received from the Irish bishops on which the pope had not yet taken a decision. An invitation from George Simms, Church of Ireland archbishop of Armagh, was a further complication.⁶³ To compound matters, Alibrandi made an ill-considered statement in Rome on 23 August that it was more than probable that the pope would go north. When Crossley raised this with Achille Silvestrini, deputy foreign minister of the Vatican, the latter was ‘extremely angry’ at such a ‘stupidity’, if true.⁶⁴ The Irish nuncio subsequently denied making the statement attributed to him.⁶⁵ Agostino Casaroli, secretary of the sacred council for the public affairs of the church, agreed to Crossley’s request that there should be no comment on the programme

⁵⁷ Minute by Seán Ó hUiginn for secretary DFA, 24 July 1979, DFA/2012/58/3, NAI; Memorandum by Andrew O’Rourke (secretary DFA) ‘Pope’s visit to Ireland’, 25 July 1979, DT/2009/135/505, NAI.

⁵⁸ Molyneux to Atkins, 26 July 1979, CJ 4/3837, TNA.

⁵⁹ *Guardian*, 23 July 1979; *Irish Times*, 24 July 1979.

⁶⁰ ‘The Pope’s Visit to Ireland’, 25 July 1979, FCO 33/4251, TNA.

⁶¹ Crossley to FCO, 27 July 1979, FCO 33/4251, TNA; *Guardian*, 28 July 1979.

⁶² *Irish Press*, 28 July 1979.

⁶³ Ewen Fergusson (Europe) to RID, 24 August 1979, FCO 33/4252, TNA.

⁶⁴ Crossley to FCO, 24 Aug. 1979, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Crossley to FCO, 25 Aug. 1979, *ibid.*

until it had been approved by the pope.⁶⁶ Atkins informed Margaret Thatcher that he was willing to contemplate a brief symbolic gesture – such as praying for peace and reconciliation at the grave of Cardinal Conway – but not an open visit ‘as the risks would go much wider than the Pope’s own safety’.⁶⁷

On 27 August, Ó Fiaich, Archbishop Ryan, Bishop Edward Daly and Fr Michael Smith travelled to Rome to finalize plans for the visit with the pope, Casaroli, and other Vatican officials. On the same day, the IRA killed Lord Mountbatten (Queen Elizabeth II’s cousin) and three others off the coast of Mullaghmore, County Sligo; later that day eighteen British soldiers were killed at Warrenpoint, County Down, close to the Irish border. This immediately ended any prospect of the pontiff visiting Northern Ireland. The pope and Ó Fiaich condemned the violence and expressed condolences.⁶⁸ The cardinal appealed for calm in Ireland before the pope’s arrival and asked that ‘the pastoral preparation for this historic visit be undertaken with a new intensity and urgency’.⁶⁹ On 29 August the Vatican press office issued a statement which indicated that a decision in principle had, in fact, been taken to incorporate a visit to Armagh, but ‘with deep regret due to the dreadful murders of recent days it has now been decided not to include a venue in Northern Ireland’.⁷⁰ The Irish bishops then activated their contingency plan of a papal address in Drogheda near the border with Northern Ireland and in the cross-border diocese of Armagh.

The work of the Dublin organizing committee, chaired by Bishop Joseph Carroll, auxiliary bishop of Dublin, was the most extensive of the four local committees. It oversaw arrangements for an open-air mass in the Phoenix Park, the largest set-piece event on the itinerary. Second, John Paul II stayed as a guest of the papal nuncio in the nunciature in Dublin. The committee was responsible for the accommodation in convents and religious houses of visiting prelates and other VIPs and their transportation needs. All Irish-born bishops, the hierarchy of England and Wales and Scotland, presidents of the episcopal conferences of Europe, and bishops with any historical or missionary association with Ireland were invited. The committee comprised over twenty members with representatives of, among others, the Department of the Taoiseach, the Office of Public Works (OPW),

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ J. G. Pilling (NIO) to Bryan Cartledge (private secretary to the prime minister), 24 August 1979, FCO 33/4252, TNA.

⁶⁸ Text of pope’s telegram to Queen Elizabeth as published in *Osservatore Romano*, 29 August 1979, DT/2009/78/4, NAI.

⁶⁹ Statement by Ó Fiaich, 29 August 1979, DFA/2010/35/2, NAI.

⁷⁰ ‘Extract from statement issued by the Secretariat of State of Holy See on 29 August 1979’, DFA to all missions, 30 August 1979, DT/2009/102/15, NAI.

Dublin Corporation, the police, the Irish army, transport agencies, and architect Ronald Tallon of Scott Tallon Walker.⁷¹

The site for the papal Mass in the Phoenix Park was the same as that used during the Eucharistic Congress in 1932 but the altar faced south to cater for television. Tallon's design was on a grand scale. The podium of the altar covered an acre and was designed as a classical pyramid structure with an imposing 25-metre 30-ton cross in the centre. Construction work began on 10 August. Curragh Carpets in Newbridge fulfilled the contract for an acre of carpet and had to seek additional supplies of yarn in Northern Ireland.⁷² To cater for an anticipated congregation of 750,000, the park was to be serviced and divided into sections of 12,000, subdivided into blocks of 4,000 with roped off areas for groups of 1,000. It was estimated that thirty miles of post and rope barriers were required.⁷³ As it was not feasible to provide lighting, the Mass would have to begin no later than 2 p.m. to allow two and half hours to clear the park safely after the ceremony.⁷⁴ In the event, the Mass was scheduled for 12.30. The scale of the Phoenix Park operation was vast. The committee sought 10,000 stewards, who were recruited at a parish level and through organizations and sports clubs. Two-thirds of the Irish police force were involved in security arrangements and 1,500 priests were to distribute Holy Communion.

Even before the papal visit was confirmed, a publicity coordination committee was established, comprising representatives of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Bord Fáilte, RTÉ, and various transport bodies. There was a desire among state bodies and by the Dublin government to exploit the unique global publicity opportunity occasioned by the papal visit. In a publicity coup, Aer Lingus would fly the pontiff, who normally flew with Alitalia, to Ireland and to the United States.⁷⁵ Ford provided a fleet of twenty Granada cars for the papal party and two specially constructed high platform trucks for the pope's public appearances.⁷⁶ As a matter of urgency, the Irish embassy in Rome sought a suitable selection of attractive photographs to meet requests from newspapers preparing special editions about Ireland. The embassy's stock of materials was dated and limited in scope.⁷⁷ George Waters, director-general of RTÉ, was anxious to be involved in the early planning stages. Coverage of the papal visit on television and radio was the 'biggest single production and engineering project' in

⁷¹ Minute on the membership of the Dublin committee [July 1979], DT 2009/135/505, NAI.

⁷² *Irish Times*, 11 August 1979.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 22 August 1979.

⁷⁴ 4th meeting of the Dublin committee, 3 August 1979, DT/2009/135/509, NAI.

⁷⁵ *Irish Times*, 23 August 1979.

⁷⁶ *Irish Independent*, 15 August 1979.

⁷⁷ Irish embassy (Rome) to DFA, 13 August 1979, DT/2009/98/60, NAI.

the broadcaster's history.⁷⁸ He estimated that coverage would be taken up by about 100 foreign countries. In the event, forty TV camera crews, some using equipment borrowed from the BBC, were deployed by RTÉ which also set up a 24-hour communications centre.⁷⁹

Jim Cantwell of the CPIO joined the publicity coordination committee in August.⁸⁰ His office, regularly briefed by Edward Daly on behalf of the committee of bishops, played a prominent role in media arrangements and liaised with the Vatican press office. It was proposed to use the European Community press centre at Dublin Castle for the papal visit and to have additional telephone facilities installed. Journalists were to be accredited by the CPIO, while RTÉ would accredit radio and television personnel. By mid-September, 790 journalists and 390 photographers had applied for accreditation.⁸¹ Press centres were also established at each of the centres outside Dublin to feature on the papal itinerary. The CPIO prepared a basic press kit in four languages and this was complemented by Bord Fáilte colour booklets about the papal itinerary and about Knock shrine. Bord Fáilte also arranged transport for visiting journalists. Emphasis was also placed on domestic publicity to ensure a high turnout. A special pull-out page with practical information on the ceremonies was published in three Sunday newspapers on 23 September.⁸² Nothing, apart from finance, was left to chance.

Although the papal itinerary and local arrangements were planned in minute detail, the costing was conspicuously vague. The bishops estimated that £2,000,000 was required on the basis that John Paul II's final day in Cracow in June 1979 cost about £500,000.⁸³ A national collection on 9 September yielded £1.69 million, contributions from companies, individuals, and groups raised £294,000, and £42,000 was donated from diocesan funds. Some parishioners helped defray the costs in other ways. In Dublin's Sallynoggin parish twenty women held a 'sew-in' to make fifty chasubles for concelebrating prelates at the Phoenix Park Mass. This saved the hierarchy £3,500.⁸⁴ Nevertheless, in November 1979 when the accounts were audited there was a deficit of £300,000 which each diocese was expected to pay on a per capita basis. For the diocese of Limerick, for instance, this amounted to £10,141.⁸⁵

⁷⁸ George Waters to H. J. Dowd (assistant secretary DT), 24 July 1979, DT/2009/135/505, NAI.

⁷⁹ Minutes of publicity coordination committee, 4 September 1979, DT/2009/90/21, NAI.

⁸⁰ Minutes of meeting between the publicity coordination committee and CPIO, 3 August 1979, DT/2009/102/15, NAI.

⁸¹ Committee of bishops, 14 September 1979, Newman papers, Box 289(2), LDA.

⁸² Committee of bishops, 21 September 1979, *ibid*.

⁸³ Committee of bishops, 3 August 1979, *ibid*; *Irish Times*, 13 August 1979.

⁸⁴ *Irish Independent*, 24 August 1979.

⁸⁵ Circular by Bishop Francis Gerard Brooks on behalf of the Finance & General Purposes Committee of the Episcopal Conference, 13 November 1979, Newman papers, Box 289(2), LDA.

In financial terms, the Irish government treated the papal visit as a state visit. It estimated an outlay of between £2.5 and £3 million to cover the cost of security measures (which accounted for the bulk of expenditure), improvement works by the OPW, and expenditure on promotional materials. Reimbursement was only sought for goods and services normally provided on a commercial basis such as telex and telephone services which came to £350,000.⁸⁶ The cost of the papal visit is worthy of comment for two reasons. First, although diocesan archives are not available, one may reasonably speculate that the outlay on the papal visit inhibited investment in pressing aspects of pastoral renewal such as adult religious education and the further training of clergy. Second, from the state's perspective the scale of the underwriting of the security costs was enormous at a time when the second oil shock resulted in a severe economic downturn.

Papal warnings and a plea for peace

That the survey findings in the 1970s were to the forefront of the hierarchy's calculations was clear from the emphasis placed on pastoral revitalization in the weeks before the papal visit. Revealingly, a draft pastoral letter, circulated in early August, placed special significance on a section labelled 'Come Back to the Church'.⁸⁷ The pastoral – *Ireland Awaits Pope John Paul II* – was sent to priests, convents, and religious houses on 24 August and read at Masses on 2 September. It emphasized the two central themes of the visit. The bishops prayed that the visit would 'speak to the hearts and consciences of all those engaged in campaigns of violence and bring them back to awareness . . . of the absolute sacredness of human life'.⁸⁸ In terms of spiritual preparation, the bishops emphasized that 'one cannot be a Christian only on Sundays', the responsibility of parents to hand on the faith to the young, the 'dangers of contamination by materialism', and the need for Irish Catholics to rededicate themselves so that Ireland might reach the twenty-first century 'with no diminution of her faith or her religious practice'.⁸⁹ Pastoral and spiritual preparations were to take place on the four Sundays preceding the visit so that, in Archbishop Ryan's words, the pope's words would 'not fall on stony ground'.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ 'Recoupment of expenditure by departments in connection with the papal visit, 18 September 1979'; Memorandum by the Tánaiste, 20 September 1979, DT/2009/135/510, NAI.

⁸⁷ Committee of bishops, 3 August 1979, 17 August 1979, Newman papers, Box 289(2), LDA.

⁸⁸ *Ireland Awaits Pope John Paul II: A Pastoral Letter from the Archbishops and Bishops of Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 1979), 7.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 7-8.

⁹⁰ Ryan to the priests of the Dublin diocese, 20 August 1979, DT/2009/135/509, NAI.

To a degree not previously known, the themes of the pope's addresses in Ireland were decided in advance by the Irish hierarchy in consultation with the pope and carefully choreographed. The worrying trends identified in surveys and discussed by the Irish hierarchy since 1969 were woven into John Paul's homilies. The pope specifically requested that someone with deep knowledge of the Irish Church be made available to the Vatican committee responsible for preparing his speeches. This was Bishop Cahal Daly.⁹¹

John Paul II arrived in Dublin airport on an Aer Lingus 747, fittingly named St Patrick, at 10:00 on 29 September. For reasons of time and security, a helicopter conveyed the pontiff to the nunciature for a short rest before taking him to the Phoenix Park. The schedule did not permit a visit to a poor Dublin parish, although Seán MacDermott Street, where the remains of Matt Talbot are venerated, had been mooted.⁹² A crowd of 1.25 million gathered in the Phoenix Park to hear the pope speak on the theme of the Eucharist and Ireland's devotion to the Mass, before warning that 'pervading materialism imposes its dominion ... with an aggressiveness that spares no one'.⁹³

The papal visit focused the attention of the world's media on Northern Ireland and there was no escaping its political significance. The British government was therefore eager to influence the content of any statements by the pope that touched on Northern Ireland. In this respect, Heim's reports proved influential. It was no coincidence that following Heim's first meeting with John Paul II in December 1978 the pontiff made specific reference to 'the virus of violence in the form of terrorism and reprisals' in Northern Ireland during his first address to the diplomatic corps.⁹⁴ Three months later, in a telegram to Cardinal Hume, the pope denounced the 'cowardly and senseless' murder of Airey Neave, the Conservative MP, and sent a message of sympathy to the family.⁹⁵ Ahead of the Irish visit, the British government was keen to avoid any misstep by counteracting the views of Alibrandi, in particular, and to a lesser extent those of Ó Fiaich.⁹⁶ On 4 September the secretary of state for Northern Ireland indicated to Heim that the pope should avoid the subject of Irish unity and 'appeal

⁹¹ Committee of bishops, 31 August 1979, Newman papers, Box 289(2), LDA.

⁹² Matt Talbot (1856-1925), a reformed alcoholic and noted pietist, became the subject of a devotional cult after his death and a candidate for canonization. In 1975 the title 'venerable' was bestowed on him, the second stage in the canonization process. His tomb in the church of Our Lady of Lourdes on Seán MacDermott Street became a site of pilgrimage and devotion. Lawrence William White, 'Talbot, Matt' in *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, online edn 2009 [<http://dib.cambridge.org/viewReadPage.do?articleId=a8451>]. Accessed 18 June 2021].

⁹³ *The Pope in Ireland: Addresses and Homilies* (Dublin: Veritas, 1979), 10.

⁹⁴ Crossley to FCO, 15 January 1979, FCO 33/4251, TNA.

⁹⁵ *Daily Telegraph*, 2 April 1979.

⁹⁶ M. J. Newington to Crossley, 26 July 1979, FCO 33/4251, TNA.

to those who used violence, supposedly for political ends, to abandon this hopeless course'.⁹⁷ Heim promised to help and stated that he and Hume would 'continue to try to curb Cardinal O'Fee's [Ó Fiaich's] nationalistic behaviour'.⁹⁸ Unofficial channels were also utilized to influence the potential utterances of the pope. With the backing of the foreign secretary but acting in a personal capacity, Roy Jenkins, then president of the European Commission, stressed the importance of speaking out against terrorism during a papal audience on 11 September. He emphasized the necessity to influence 'the sizeable minority who gave passive support to violence'.⁹⁹

A further concern for the Irish and British governments was that the protest in the Maze Prison would obtain publicity during the papal visit. This was given substance by police reports that Alibrandi – described by Lord Carrington, the foreign secretary, as 'notorious for his Provo sympathies' – had meetings with the families of republican protesters.¹⁰⁰ The Irish police instructed TV crews to ignore any protest banners.¹⁰¹ In a memorandum for the Holy See, the Irish government raised its concerns, which were privately shared by some bishops, about Alibrandi's meetings with 'representatives of illegal organisations'.¹⁰² John Molloy, the Irish ambassador, conveyed the danger of any contact with families of republican protestors or any statement by the papal party touching on the Maze protest, the self-inflicted nature of conditions in the prison, and the exploitation of the protesters.¹⁰³ In a further effort to close down any possible reference to the Maze protest, the Foreign Office facilitated the sending of a private message from Gerry Fitt, the founding leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party and Westminster MP for West Belfast since 1966, to the pope on 27 September. Fitt wished the pope a successful visit to Ireland but urged him 'to make no mention of the 'H' Blocks, the Maze Prison, Long Kish [sic]: this is an explosive issue in Northern Ireland and touching on such a sensitive question would alienate the Protestants and divide the Catholics'.¹⁰⁴ On the same day, Molloy reported to Dublin that all the speeches had been prepared and that no references to the protest would be made.¹⁰⁵ The British legation

⁹⁷ Note of meeting between the secretary of state and apostolic delegate, 4 September 1979, FCO 33/4249, TNA.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Roy Jenkins, *European Diary, 1977-1981* (London: Collins, 1989), 499; UK representative in Brussels to FCO, 13 September 1979, PREM 19/128, TNA.

¹⁰⁰ Carrington to Crossley, 24 September 1979, FCO 33/4252, TNA. For a detailed account of the Catholic Church's position on the various prison protests, see Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles*.

¹⁰¹ P.W.J. Buxton (NIO) to Newington (RID), 19 September 1979, FCO 33/4252, TNA.

¹⁰² Memorandum on the papal visit [September 1979], DT/2009/78/5, NAI.

¹⁰³ Neligan to ambassador to the Holy See, 24 September 1979, *ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Carrington to Holy See, Dublin, NIO, 27 September 1979, PREM 19/128, TNA.

¹⁰⁵ Molloy to Neligan, 27 September 1979, DT/2009/78/5, NAI.

later reflected with considerable satisfaction on the absence of diplomatic incident during the papal visit which might have embarrassed the British government.¹⁰⁶

On the afternoon of 29 September John Paul II travelled to Killineer, near Drogheda in the Republic but within the ecclesiastical diocese of Armagh. An estimated 300,000 people assembled to hear the most significant address of the itinerary. The pope made explicit reference to the invitation by Ó Fiaich, Archbishop Simms and members of other churches to visit Armagh. That 'truly fraternal and ecumenical act' was, the pontiff maintained, 'a testimony that the tragic events taking place in Northern Ireland . . . is not a religious war'.¹⁰⁷ The pope forcefully addressed the problem of building peace and reconciliation based on justice. Famously, he implored those engaged in violence: 'On my knees I beg you to turn away from the paths of violence and to return to the ways of peace . . . violence only delays the day of justice'.¹⁰⁸ He enjoined the young not to listen to those who spoke 'the language of hatred, revenge, retaliation'; those in positions of leadership to respect members of a different tradition; and political figures to act for 'just change' and to prevent a political vacuum in which violence thrives.¹⁰⁹ The pope's powerful message of peace was unanimously welcomed by the press, in the north and the south. It was also applauded by Margaret Thatcher, who hoped it would 'help to create a new spirit of cooperation and understanding among all the people of Northern Ireland and . . . help to free them from terrorism and fear'.¹¹⁰

Predictably, the Provisional IRA dismissed the pope's appeal and Paisley criticized the pontiff for giving 'fuel to the IRA' by referring to injustice and social discrimination.¹¹¹ Written by Cahal Daly, the long-term significance of the Drogheda address lay in its condemnation of the IRA's use of the doctrine of a just war and its advocacy of reconciliation based on justice.¹¹² As Maria Power has powerfully demonstrated, Daly argued that the IRA was 'damaging the common good by denying the human rights of the very community it argued it defended'.¹¹³ Daly subsequently succeeded Philbin as bishop of Down and Connor in 1982 and 'on the ground he began seriously to combat the growing challenge to church authority posed by the rise of

¹⁰⁶ J. H. Callan (Vatican) to S. Hilton (FCO), 15 October 1979, FCO 33/4252, TNA.

¹⁰⁷ *Pope in Ireland*, 18.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 23-4.

¹¹⁰ Statement by prime minister, 1 October 1979, PREM 19/128, TNA.

¹¹¹ *Irish Times*, 3 October 1979.

¹¹² Christopher Hrynkow and Maria Power, 'Are the Popes Leaving Behind Just War and Embracing JustPeace?', *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 31:2 (2019): 243.

¹¹³ Power, *Cardinal Cahal Daly*, 141.

Sinn Féin' after the hunger strikes of the early 1980s.¹¹⁴ He presided over almost every funeral of Catholic victims of the Troubles in his diocese and used his homilies to condemn all forms of paramilitary violence, to seek reconciliation, and to urge Northern Irish politicians to engage in dialogue.¹¹⁵ Notably, Daly was chief spokesperson for the hierarchy at the New Ireland Forum in 1984 at which he made clear the Catholic bishops' rejection of a confessional state and its acute awareness of the fears of the Northern Protestant community.¹¹⁶ In 1990 he succeeded Ó Fiaich as archbishop of Armagh during a period dominated by the IRA ceasefire and the Northern Ireland peace process, and a series of explosive sex scandals in the Church.

On the evening of 29 September, the pope called on the president in Dublin and at 21:00 held a short meeting with the government, diplomatic corps, and leaders of the opposition parties. A long day ended with three short meetings with representatives of the three main Protestant churches and other churches, visiting bishops, and journalists at the Dominican convent in Cabra.¹¹⁷ The underwhelming ecumenical dimension of the pope's Irish visit contrasted sharply with his visit to Britain in 1982 when three symbolic meetings were held: with Archbishop Robert Runcie in Canterbury Cathedral, with the moderator of the Church of Scotland, and with Queen Elizabeth II at Buckingham Palace. The papal visit to Britain took place against a growing acceptance of British Catholicism in national life and the harmonization of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and London.¹¹⁸

Pope John Paul II's schedule on day two of his Irish visit was equally demanding. Shortly after 07:00 he met children with disabilities and then the Polish community. A crowd of 25,000 greeted him at Clonmacnoise, the sixth century monastic site and major European centre of learning, before he continued to Ballybrit racecourse in Galway for a youth mass attended by an estimated 300,000. Seen as one of the highlights of the papal visit, it is remembered more for the pope declaring: 'Young people of Ireland, I love you' than for his warning:

the religious and moral traditions of Ireland, the very soul of Ireland, will be challenged by temptations that spare no society in our age . . . a society that . . . has lost its higher religious and moral principles will become an easy prey for manipulation and for domination by the forces which, under the pretext of greater freedom, will enslave it even more.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁴ Elliott, *Catholics of Ulster*, 474.

¹¹⁵ Scull, *The Catholic Church and the Northern Ireland Troubles*, 154.

¹¹⁶ *Irish Times*, 10 February 1984.

¹¹⁷ *ICD 1980*: 357.

¹¹⁸ See Ó Corráin, 'The pope's man in London': 83-4.

¹¹⁹ *Pope in Ireland*, 46-7.

That afternoon an estimated 450,000 turned out in the rain at Knock where the key theme was Our Lady. The day ended with a meeting with the Irish hierarchy in Cabra.

On Monday 1 October John Paul II blessed the foundation stone of the new college library in Maynooth and spoke to seminarians, priests, and religious. Calling on them to be courageous, he warned that the 1980s 'could be crucial and decisive for the future of the faith in Ireland. Let there be no complacency'.¹²⁰ At 10:45 the pope arrived at Greenpark racecourse in Limerick where the Christian family was the subject of his homily to an estimated 400,000 people. He highlighted the decline in faith that had accompanied material progress before challenging his audience to choose between 'giving excessive importance to economic growth and material possessions', or fidelity to 'the things of the spirit'. He emphasized the importance of the Christian family, 'the indissolubility of the marriage bond', the 'sacredness of human life', and encouraged parents to ensure that 'the home should be the first school of religion'.¹²¹ The whirlwind papal tour, which saw John Paul greeted in overwhelming numbers, ended with a farewell ceremony at Shannon airport at lunchtime.

Did the papal visit matter?

On the first anniversary of the papal visit, two episodes offered a portent of the future of Catholic Ireland. Neither the hierarchy, facing a shortfall on the cost of the papal visit, nor the government, battling economic recession, could afford to create a museum at the site of the papal cross in the Phoenix Park as originally envisaged. To save on maintenance costs the Office of Public Works proposed demolishing the papal cross but it was saved by an all-party campaign in September 1980.¹²² Public concern had been sparked into life by the appearance of graffiti on the concrete bunker at the base of the cross: 'If men got pregnant contraception & abortion would be sacraments'.¹²³ While contraception had been introduced on prescription to married couples (the so-called 'Irish solution to an Irish problem') just weeks after the papal visit, bruising constitutional referendums took place on giving explicit protection to unborn life in the eighth amendment in 1983 and divorce in 1986. In both campaigns, lay Catholic conservatives, emboldened by the papal injunction to adhere strictly to Church teachings, took the lead rather than the bishops. In that sense, as Brian Girvin has noted, the papal visit 'provided a potent

¹²⁰ *Irish Times*, 2 October 1979.

¹²¹ *Pope in Ireland*, 77-81.

¹²² *Irish Independent*, 12 September 1980.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 6 September 1980.

stimulus to antiliberal sentiment'.¹²⁴ Ultimately, change in this domain was postponed rather than prevented. The referendums of the 1980s exposed a widening divergence between Church teaching and acceptance of it by significant sections of the population. In 1995 divorce was narrowly approved, same sex marriage was legalized in 2015, and the eighth amendment of 1983 was repealed in 2018. The second episode took place at Dublin airport on 13 November 1980, when Albert Reynolds, minister for transport, unveiled a commemorative plaque. In a revealing speech, the Catholic Church was not referred to at all. Instead, Reynolds drew attention to the collective display of national joy, the organizational achievement, the charisma of the pontiff, and how the visit occurred at a time of great change in Ireland. On the last point the minister reflected:

In recent years we have seen acceleration in the transition from a predominantly rural-based society to one marked by increased industrialisation, higher material standards, and greater urbanisation. That transition ... has produced stresses and strains in Irish society ... The most significant development of all is, perhaps, the change in our sense of values and it is in that area that the greatest challenge lies for the future.¹²⁵

Inevitably, so it proved.

The final words uttered by Pope John Paul II were: 'Ireland *semper fidelis*, always faithful'. If the Catholic hierarchy hoped that the visit might arrest the declining institutional influence of the Church, reverse a quiet but growing faith crisis, or hasten a cessation of violence in Northern Ireland, those expectations were misplaced. When the euphoria surrounding the visit passed, the sense of a Church in recession resumed well before the scandals of the 1990s hollowed out the institution's credibility and moral authority. For all the emphasis placed on pastoral revitalization, notwithstanding local efforts, the hierarchy demonstrated little initiative in attempting meaningful renewal in the aftermath of the papal visit. In a discerning obituary of Cardinal Ó Fiaich in May 1990, it was suggested that for all his qualities he did 'not appear to have any strong ideas on how to tackle effectively the problems which beset the Church'.¹²⁶ Neither, it appears, did his brother bishops. Until diocesan archives for the 1980s become available the precise reasons for this remain unclear. Perhaps the achievement of the papal visit in terms of the size and enthusiasm of the crowds was too successful and generated an inflated

¹²⁴ Brian Girvin, 'Church, State, and Society in Ireland since 1960', *Éire-Ireland*, 43:1 & 2 (2008): 85. On divorce see Diane Urquhart, *Irish Divorce: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 215-34.

¹²⁵ Speech by Albert Reynolds at Dublin airport, 13 November 1980, DT/2009/135/507, NAI.

¹²⁶ *Irish Times*, 9 May 1990.

and misleading sense of optimism. Atypically high Mass attendance in Ireland may have been another factor in this immobilism. In 1990 the figure was 81 per cent. Attendance then fell sharply for all age groups over the next decade as rapid economic development altered the social context of Ireland. The decline was particularly marked among the 18 to 26-year-old cohort. The papal visit provided a brief fillip for vocations which increased by a fifth in 1980 before subsequently resuming a downward trajectory. The vocations crisis prompted the bishops to issue a pastoral in April 1989 which appealed to parents not to discourage children from entering the priesthood or religious life.¹²⁷ In the Phoenix Park, John Paul warned that ‘we cannot live on the glories of our past Christian history’.¹²⁸ The pastoral impulse of the visit was to preserve rather than renew the Irish Catholic tradition at a time when Irish eyes were fixed on future material advancement rather than fidelity to a spiritual past.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 15 April 1989.

¹²⁸ *ICD 1980*: 356.