

On Friday January 20th Pope Francis met with all the Irish Bishops in the Vatican as part of their visit *Ad Limina Apostolorum*. It lasted the best part of two hours. For me it was an unforgettable day. I did not bring a notepad with but here depend on memory to give a few personal reflections on this wonderful encounter with the Successor of Peter who is loved around the world by people of all faiths and none.

Archbishop Eamonn Martin of Armagh on behalf of all of us thanked the Holy Father for his warm welcome and conveyed our deep appreciation for the big impact his ministry is having on the Church in Ireland and worldwide. He was praised especially for his faith leadership and prayerfulness, the many simple and profound gestures he so often demonstrates, for the joy, humility and happiness that exudes from his unique style as pope. In reply, Pope Francis emphasised that intimate prayer with Jesus and following him is the heart of what we do as Christians. He apologised for his poor English which he tried to learn for three months in Dublin! But he told us that if we spoke slowly he could understand. He spoke to us in Italian. (A priest from South Africa was at the Holy Father's side for translation which he did very well.)

Throwing in the Ball!

During our meeting Pope Francis used a number of sporting images. He said he had just thrown in the ball at the start of our conversation, that he had no set agenda and wanted to hear and learn about the Irish Church and listen carefully to what we had to say. It was up to us, he said, to claim the ball and run with it for the duration of the meeting! He told that we could speak in any order and make what points we wished or ask questions and make comments including criticism!

Being "Goalkeepers" for the Treasure of the Faith

One of the bishops raised the question of faith practice in Ireland and gave a brief description of the challenges facing us and of the continuing loyalty and dedication of so many, despite all that has happened in recent years. Serious concern was

also expressed at the sharp decline of faith practice more obvious in urban areas, but now encroaching on rural areas as well. Again returning to the sporting image, Pope Francis spoke of committed members of the Church as the guardians of the treasure of the faith like goalkeepers, protecting something unique and special. We do this mainly by the example of being people of faith and by our everyday lives. Like goalkeepers we have the job of protecting the faith from all angles and responding to questions that can come from many sources. Again he commended the efforts of evangelisation to the work of prayer and the providence of the Lord.

Vocations

The steep decline in religious vocations in Ireland and the Western World was raised by another bishop as a matter for concern and much effort and prayer is needed in this area along with authentic witness of the lives of good priests, religious, lay people along with encouragement of parents. Pope Francis said that a joyful and faithful priest was what attracts young men to the priesthood more than anything else. In relation to the appointment of bishops the Holy Father prayed that good priests all over the world would continue to have the courage to say yes to such a difficult and challenging ministry in the Church.

Women in the Church

The role of women in the Church is a much discussed and debated issue not only in Ireland but in worldwide. This topic was brought up by a number of the bishops. Pope Francis emphasised the importance of having women involved in the decision making processes at many levels in the Church. He emphasised the scriptural and theological "Marian Profile" or feminine character or charism of the Church. He spoke of St. Paul's vision and image of this and the development of this in the Church documents of the Second Vatican Council. In relation to the suggestion that women should be ordained – the Holy Father made the simple point that while Our Lady was the most important person in the upper room at Pentecost her role did not extend to the celebration of the Eucharist.

Youth Ministry – "Apostolate of the Ear"

One of the biggest challenges in the Church today is trying to attract young people to practice the faith on a regular basis. Young people have so many other

distractions and competing ideologies and it is not easy to come up with new and effective ways of encouraging and engaging them. The Pope spoke about how so many young people in recent times have almost become enslaved in forms of technology and he gave the example of families being together and not really engaging with one another as persons because of their immersion in phones or ipads.

The Holy Father was commended for the way he has of appealing to young people by his various public gestures in getting through to young people, his obvious concern for the weak and vulnerable, for his balanced use of modern technology, social media and his joyful presence at public events, not least World Youth Day events. Pope Francis emphasised the importance of listening carefully to young people. He encouraged what he called "the apostolate of the ear" to constantly be available to listen and encourage young people and keep them on board in different aspects of faith practice. Even if we find this tiring, he said, we must continue to listen carefully. He himself, throughout our meeting, listened very intently to each speaker.

Education and Catechesis

After being briefed on the education situation in Ireland Pope Francis spoke about the importance of good religious education, solid catechesis and the centrality of passing on the message of the faith. In response to the situation in Ireland where there is an increasing demand for divesting of patronage – the Holy Father encouraged Catholic schools to be places of genuine welcome and to continue to be known for that the great quality of education imbued with a concern for all through good educational ethos that cares for all.

Safeguarding of Children

The painful and crucial issue of the abuse of children in the care of the Church and the important work of the safeguarding structures of same have been to the forefront of the Irish Church for the last quarter of a century and the Holy Father was all too well aware of that. He spoke of the terrible effects of the evil of abuse. He spoke of the profound sadness he has felt in meeting victims and survivors of abuse and reiterated that there is no place in the Church for

perpetrators of such crimes to minister or have anyone in their care. He spoke of the efforts currently underway in this area at international level and commended the current efforts in that area in Ireland and the importance of ensuring that there would be no complacency for the future. Pope Francis was briefed on the Harte report that came out the same morning. He indicated his sorrow, sadness and prayerful support for the survivors and encouraged cooperation with the recommendations of the report.

World Meeting of Families

In thanking the Holy Father for choosing Ireland as the venue for the World Meeting of Families he was formally invited to visit Our Lady's Shrine at Knock and the North of Ireland, if he was coming to be part of that occasion. Pope Francis did not comment on whether he would be in a position to attend or not, but did speak at length about the importance of family as a basic unit in Society and Church. He spoke about the crucial role that parents have in spending quality time with their children, despite the pressures of modern life and the essential role also that Grandparents have in passing on the faith. One of the interesting questions he says he always asks parents along with having an interest in their faith lives – "do they set time aside each day to play with their children". He felt that a very important thing for parents to do in establishing a bond of genuine friendship and love with them.

Care of Clergy

The difficult circumstances of many clergy in Ireland was outlined to Pope Francis, the increasing work-load and pressure they are under with declining numbers of priests. He expressed profound appreciation for the great work so many priests do and keeps them in the prayers daily. He insisted that the relationship of a Bishop with his priests should be one of "closeness". It should be the closeness of a father to his son. That closeness should be like the closeness we have at our meeting with the Holy Father himself.

Poverty, Homelessness, Refugees

The issue of homelessness, poverty and caring for displaced people was mentioned as a result of the economic down-turn and the trouble in many areas of the

world. The Pope spoke of his concern for these important issues arising from the preferential option for the poor that Jesus so clearly teaches in the Scriptures. We spoke later of the Pope's own reaching out to migrants and his efforts having moved many to act.

Laudato Si – Care for the Environment

Care for the earth, a spirituality of an appreciation of God through the beauty of the world around us was spoken of and Pope Francis was thanked by some of the bishops as it is an attractive, interesting and relevant issue for many of the students preparing for Confirmation and done in conjunction with Green Flag initiatives in Primary Schools.

Overall impression of the meeting

Overall, our meeting with Pope Francis was one of genuine openness, genuine respect and open dialogue. He was very much a father being with his sons. He listened very attentively and offered comments and ideas and suggestions after points were raised.

The Importance of Gestures

Pope Francis is well known for his profound symbolic gestures! At one point in the meeting the translator got a bit hoarse. Immediately His Holiness sprang up and hurried off to a cupboard in the library from which he got a glass of water for his assistant, an impressive gesture of service. It did not go unnoticed by us and we joked after that we will have to do the same for our secretaries from now on.

Unhurried, unrushed meeting

At another point when the meeting had been in progress for over an hour it must have looked like we felt we should be departing. Pope Francis assured us that he was in no hurry and that we were welcome to stay longer and that he was enjoying the meeting and listening to us. I was amazed he had so much time he spent with us. As he had already received a delegation from Ghana earlier and God only knows how many more engagements and issues he had that day.

"Please pray for Me"!

Another impressive gesture, that I had already encountered at the new bishop's course in September of 2015, when I met Pope Francis for the first time, was the request of the Holy Father to each of person to pray for him!

Overall Impression

My overall impression was that we had experienced graced moments with the Successor of Peter. Some bishops, like myself, were just happy to sit and listen and be carried away by the spirit of this extraordinary man who is also so down to earth and full of common sense. He is completely genuine in his love for Jesus but he also feels the weight of the office. Though he was full of life when he was with us I had heard that the following day at the Mass to celebrate the closing of the 800 celebration of the Dominican Order he was tired and his voice weak. That is why I think he continually asks for prayers and spiritual support. He showed us that the essential element in building up the Church is for each individual to be holy and to have a real and living love of Jesus Christ. That is where he starts from himself. That is what he encourages in us all.

Long may Pope Francis continue to inspire us and lead and guide us to be genuine disciples of the Lord.